

A Study of Some Myanmar Proverbs in Myanmar Culture

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to solve the problem of why some Myanmar proverbs should be accepted in today's society. The answer to the question will be provided by showing that Myanmar proverbs can be regarded as intellectual and cultural resources of human society. In this paper, the descriptive, experimental and evaluative methods are used. The theory of knowledge consists of relation between the knower and the known, the subject and the object. Different men have different ways of thinking, their experiences and beliefs. This paper will contribute to realize that Myanmar proverbs cultivate Myanmar ways of thinking and Myanmar culture. There are many proverbs and folktales featuring plant life, trees, flowers and animals that behave like human beings to give moral lessons. The stability, peace and harmony of social relationship in society can be found in Myanmar Proverbs.

Key words: Proverbs, Culture and Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Human beings live in the natural world. Since ancient times, Myanmar has a great love of nature and gets close to nature. In Nature, there are plants, trees and wildlife that are most strongly reflected in proverbs. There are many proverbs and folktales which are interactive and related to human beings and nature. These are moral lessons reflected on the values of life, kindness and generosity to human society.

The essence of some proverbs defines the practical experience, reason and testimony, etc., which are concerned with knowledge of human life. In the epistemology of western thought, there are various kinds of knowledge. The important problem of epistemology is the origin and the ultimate source of human knowledge. Modern epistemology generally discusses rationalism and empiricism. According to empiricists, knowledge is obtained through experience. The rationalists hold that knowledge can be acquired through the reason. And then, testimony is one of the sources of knowledge. This knowledge plays an important role in ordinary daily life.

Firstly, some Myanmar proverbs in Myanmar culture were clarified by means of the experimental method and descriptive method. Then, the resulting principles were evaluated from the philosophical point of view. The purpose of this paper is to study some Myanmar proverbs in that Buddhist culture cultivates Myanmar traditions and Myanmar ways of thinking. In Myanmar, philosophical thought is based on Theravāda Buddhist culture. So Myanmar proverbs can be regarded as one of the intellectual and cultural resources guided to be good life in human society.

The Significance of Proverbs in Myanmar Cultural Society

The Meaning of Proverbs

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The word 'proverb' is derived from the Latin word 'proverbium', 'pro' means forth and 'verbium' means word. A proverb is called a brief popular saying. Some define proverb as short wise saying. A proverb is short and full of meaning to the point. A proverb expresses the practical experience of mankind. Proverbs help us to improve human life or thought. The function of a proverb is to convey practical knowledge, to enhance the way of living and to demonstrate universal truth. Many proverbs have their origins in oral traditions but some have their origin in literature. The synonyms of proverbs 'adage', 'saw' and 'byword'. Proverbs reflect the cultural values including the way of thinking, and the physical environment from which they arise. For instance, island cultures have proverbs about sea, and highland culture has proverbs about mountains.

The Meaning of Culture

Culture of a society implies its general way of life. A society is an organized group of individuals. For systematic living, for an organized system of mutual relationship and for peace and happiness, different societies of the world have evolved into their own different cultures. Culture implies a general behavior pattern of a society. Thus customs, beliefs, languages, ways of thinking, feeling and acting are involved in the culture of a society. Culture is a value concept. True culture leads men to live an organized life. The scholar, T.S. Eliot mentioned in the following:

Culture is more a way of life than merely a sum of several activities. The culture of an individual is always dependent upon the culture of a class or community, and the culture of a class remains dependent upon the culture of the whole society.¹

Culture is the social behavior and norms found in human societies. Some aspects of human behavior, social practices such as culture, expressive forms such as art, music, dance, ritual, religion, and technologies such as tool usage, cooking, shelter, and clothing are said to be cultural universals found in all human societies. The concept of material culture covers the physical expressions of culture such as technology, architecture and art, whereas the immaterial aspects of culture such as principles of social organization, mythology, philosophy, literature, and science comprise the intangible cultural heritage of a society.

The Relation of Proverbs and Culture

The sources of Myanmar proverbs are traditional legends, myths, folklore, historical accounts and Buddhist literature such as the Buddhist Birth Stories and *Dhammapda*. In fact, it can be said that there are two sources of Myanmar proverbs; one is Buddhist tradition and the other is the Myanmar way of life. Myanmar proverbs are categorized into two kinds, namely, zagabone (pum;yHk) and hsoyoe (qdk½dk;). Zagabone means word picture or story. A study of Myanmar proverbs will show that there are certain significant ideas and concepts that characterize Myanmar thought. A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, morals, and traditional views in the metaphorical, fixed and memorable form which is handed down from generation to generation.

Culture gets transmitted through various agencies but family is the most important one of these agencies. When family life fails to play its part in the transmission of values, the culture as a whole starts declining. It is the moral duty of family members to introduce young children to the cultural norms of the society, and it is the social obligation of the community to create cultural consciousness among its members. Moreover, proverbs reflect the value of

¹ Dev Rajbai. (1989). *Introduction to Philosophy*. New Delhi: Published by sterling publishers Pvt.ltd. p. 121.

knowledge and enhance the culture of society. So, it is said that the proverbs can improve epistemological value to a cultural society.

The Epistemological Value in Myanmar Some Proverbs

What is Epistemology?

Epistemology is one of the branches of philosophy. The word “epistemology” comes from ancient Greek “Episteme” and “logos”. The former means “knowledge” and the latter means “discussion” or “study”. Therefore, Epistemology means discussion about knowledge or theory of knowledge. Epistemology seeks to answer basic questions about what the valid source of knowledge is. There are various kinds of knowledge in epistemology such as perceptual knowledge, reason knowledge, intuition and testimony in epistemological views. Among them reason knowledge, perceptual knowledge and testimony are propounded in this paper.

Reason or Conceptual Knowledge

Man is a rational animal which distinguishes man from other animals. The consciousness of man has testimony, perception and reasonable knowledge. Some people give priority to reasonable knowledge. Reason is the capacity for consciously making sense of things. Reason, like habit or intuition, is one of the ways by which thinking comes from one idea to a related idea. For example, it is the means by which rational beings understand themselves to think about cause and effect, truth and falsehood, and what is good or bad.

The rationalists are Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz in the West. Rationalism is not a uniform position. Some rationalists will simply argue that some truths about reality can be discovered through pure reason and thought. For example, truths of mathematics, geometry and sometimes morality are included. Other rationalists will go further and argue that all truths about reality must in some way be acquired through reason, normally because our sense organs are unable to directly experience outside reality at all. Reasoning generally comes in two forms which are deduction and induction. Deduction is the kind of reasoning usually used in mathematics. On the other hand, induction is usually used in science. So reasoning can be leading as various forms of knowledge. Rationalists believe that reason is the only valid source of knowledge.

In Myanmar proverbs, it can be found rationalistic views of social relationship. There are some proverbs used by the great philosophers of the East and the West. Myanmar people usually live together in proverbs that express the ideas of reason knowledge. They can be expounded as Myanmar words and English words by Hla Thamein as follows;

‘ရေမြင့်လျှင်ကြာတင့်’

“Where there are high waters, the lotus flowers look more graceful”. (The corresponding effect)

‘သတိမမူရမမြင်၊ သတိမမူမှမြူမြင်’

If there is no attentiveness even a cave cannot be seen. If there is attentiveness, mere a tiny molecule can be seen.

‘ကြာရိုးကြာဆွယ်မြင်သဖြင့် ရေတိမ်ရေနက်သိ’

By scanning the length of lotus stalk, one can discern the depth of the water. (True picture can be noticed in its reflection.)

‘ပါးစပ်ဟ အူအကုန်မြင်’

Just the mouth is opened, and then the colon inside abdomen can be seen. (Just for a word spoken, the speaker's inner-feeling can be cleverly discerned.)

‘ပညာရှိတွေကြည့်တာက ပြေးကြည့်တာထက်မှန်’

A wise man can speculate more correctly and definitely than what a commoner can observe as he runs out to the spot. (A wise thinking is better than a blind observation.)

‘ပေါင်းတော်ညိုတံစိတ်တော်သိ’

If a superior nods his head, the follower should know well what his boss has in mind. (A good follower should know how to oblige his master)

သတိတမန်ဥာဏ်မြေကတုတ်၊ ပညာစွမ်း၊ ချွန်နဲ့ကဲသို့၊ အုပ်’

Make use of the attentiveness as reconnoiter, the commonsense as a fortification, and wisdom as a weapon.

‘အကြံကောင်းတစ်ချက်၊ အနေကောင်းတစ်သက်’

The right idea leads to a good chance. The right attitudes lead to a good life.

‘ခရုမှာအဆံ၊ လူမှာဥာဏ်’

A shell has its inner organisms. A man has his wisdom. (Every living creature has something to lead its life.)

‘ပညာရှိအမျက်၊ ပြင်မထွက်’

The fury of a Wiseman does not peep out. (A wise and sensible man can restraint his anger.)

‘လိုလျှင်ကြံဆ၊ နည်းလမ်းရ’

If one needs, he may think of and he will surely get an idea. Where there is a will, there is a way.

The above reason knowledge mentions that the process of using known facts can get new facts. In this way reason can help us gain new knowledge. Reason is the capacity for consciously making sense of things. To apply our knowledge, universal propositions are required. Reason knowledge helps to distinguish between good from bad and right from wrong in doing an act. In daily life one can offer arguments or proofs for one's beliefs, convictions and attitudes regarding social, political cultural religious and moral.

Empirical or Perpetual Knowledge

On the other hand, we know information from the senses. It is called empirical knowledge and empirical beliefs that are fundamental source of all knowledge in our senses. Our senses are exploratory organs. For example, candy is sweet, and so are sugar, jam, and honey. Lemons are not, and onions are not. The sun is bright and blinding. Empiricists, all agree that knowledge about reality requires experience and interaction with reality.

Perception is a cognitive process in which information processing is used to transfer information into the mind where it is related to other information. The empiricist trend is represented by Lock, Berkeley and Hume. Empiricists argue that the ultimate source of knowledge is experience. This way of knowing is known as Empiricism. In fact, reason and perception are dependent on each other.

Perceptual knowledge is directly known by our sense organs. It can be called direct knowledge. That knowledge can give us knowledge from external world. Some proverbs that express the same ideas of perceptual knowledge the same are as follows;

‘ခဲမှန်ဘူးသောစာသငယ်ရှယ်ရုံနှင့်လန်.’

A young sparrow once hit by a pallet is easily frightened by a mere raise of arm. (A person who has suffered knows the danger thoroughly.)

‘မှားဘူးမှမှန်ကြုံဘူးမှရ’

One finds the right way after passing the wrong way. One wins the courage after covering the first attempt. (To be wrong is to be right again.)

‘ပြောမယုံကြုံဘူးမှသိ’

One may not believe on mere information. However he will perceive when he personally witnesses. (Seeing is believing.)

‘ငရုပ်သီးမှန် ခုနှစ်လံရေငုပ်စားစပ်သည်’

The real chili is still pungent even if it is eaten under the water twenty-eight cubits deep. (The true nature of a person or an object always prevails. The truth is every time and everywhere the truth.)

‘မမြင်ဘူးတော့မှူးမြစ်ထင်’

One who has never seen a river may mistake a creek for it. (One who is not accustomed to a wealthy life may feel too much elated if he gets into it.)

‘လူဆိုးလူကောင်း ပေါင်းကြည့်မှသိ’

Only by getting into an association, one can distinguish a good and a bad person.

‘လှိုင်းကြီးလှေအောက်၊ တောင်ကြီးဖဝါးအောက်’

“The big waves may come under the boat. The big mountains may come under the human feet.”

‘ပန်းတိမ်မတက်ခင် ရွှေခိုးသင်’

Before one is acquainted with the art of goldsmith, one learns to exploit gold while making ornaments. (One learns the secondary things rather than the primary one.)

‘မသိမေး မစင်ဆေး’

If something is not known, raise a question for it. If something is dirty, wash it off cleanly. (Do if the deed be needed.)

Experience is the general field in which life goes on. It is a futile one. The solution of the most pressing human problem, the problem of living together, is a perceptual process. Only experience can give direct knowledge to the relation between individual and other living beings about how man ought to behave in a good life. Consequently, testimony from some Myanmar proverbs is propounded in this study.

The Meaning of Testimony

Testimony is also acknowledged as a source of knowledge. Other people are continual sources of information. Such information however is always second-hand knowledge. It is “hearsay”. All of our historical knowledge is acquired in this way as it is most of our knowledge of the sciences. If it is not the experience in the past or personally repeated in every experiment, then it must be trusted and accepted by the specialists but not blindly, the discoveries must be recorded.

Testimony is also one of the branches of epistemology. Testimony is gained by learning. This knowledge can be learned from others by reading books or listening to sermons or lecturers. The followings are some proverbs that express the ideas of testimonial knowledge.

‘သက်ကြီးစကားသက်ငယ်ကြား’

What the elders folk said, the younger generation accepts and passes on. (The tradition is up kept by generations.)

‘ရှားပင်အိုလေအနှစ်ပြည့်လေ’

The more the tree of acacia catechu gets older, the more extensive the Duramen of it becomes. (The older the person, the wiser his brain.)

‘ငါးပိဖုတ်ပင်ဆရာမပြုနည်းမကျ’

Even to roast the fish-paste, it will not be perfectly done without an instruction. (Teacher or guide is indispensable in all cases of learning.)

‘မေးဖန်များစကားရ’

The more one asks, the more one will learn. (This is an instructive motto in the legend of Tagaung.)

‘အတုမြင်အတက်သင်’

If one sees something really impressive, one will easily imitate and learn to do one’s own.

‘လူအကြောင်း ပေါင်းမှသိ၊ ရွှေအကြောင်း ဖယောင်းသက်သေ’

The quality of gold can be proved by the wax. (A kind of prepared wax is used to test the gold powder.)

‘ခြေသလုံးမြင်ရုံနဲ့ တောသားမှန်းသိ’

One can be recognized as a jungle-folk by noticing his shake. (The quality of a man can be discerned from his outward appearance.)

‘ရာသီမသိပန်းနှင့်ညှိ’

If a season cannot be clearly defined, one can distinguish it by the flowers blooming during that particular period. (Decide the month by its usual blossoms.)

‘လူရိုးသချိုင်းမှာရှိ’

The honest person is only in the graveyard. (In Myanmar the word for “honest person” is a pun having the alternate meaning of “unfortunate baby”).

‘လမ်းမသိခွေးနောက်လိုက်’

If the way is uncertain, follow the dog. (Sometimes even the dog may lead.)

‘ရေဖူးနှင့်ဖိနပ်မပါခွေခါမှသိဒါနနဲ့သီလမပါသေခါမှသိ’

Without a water pitcher and shoes one will suffer in summer. Without any religious observance and charity one shall suffer at the death-door.

By studying the above proverbs, one can know new knowledge and new ideas to distinguish situations and conditions in doing an act.

CONCLUSION

In Myanmar, philosophical thought is based on Theravāda Buddhist culture. According to Buddha, knowledge (*Pannā*) means wisdom or reasoning power in seeing things and general knowledge. There are three kinds of knowledge which are knowledge gained by learning, (*Sutamaya Pannā*), knowledge gained by reasoning and thinking (*Citamaya Pannā*), and knowledge gained through meditation and repeated Contemplation, (*Bhavanamaya Pannā*).

The literal meaning of the phrase *sutamaya* is “heard wisdom” which learned from others by reading books or listening to sermons or lecturers. The above some Myanmar proverbs of testimony knowledge and perceptual knowledge are concerned with *sutamaya* wisdom. In this way, this is another person’s wisdom which one decides to adopt as one’s own. Whether it is accepted out of blind faith, out of craving or out of fear, received wisdom is not one’s own wisdom and not one’s own experience. It is borrowed wisdom. The second type of wisdom is concerned with reason or conceptual knowledge of some proverbs. After reading or learning a certain teaching, one considers it and examines whether it is really rational, beneficial and practical. And if it is satisfying at the intellectual level, one accepts it as true. If this is not still one’s own insight, it is only an intellectualization of the wisdom on being heard. The unique contribution of the Buddha to the world was a way to realize truth personally and thus to develop experiential wisdom, *bhavanamaya pannā*. The Buddha Himself attained that experience through the practice of meditation. Therefore, the practice of meditation is what He primarily taught. His words second His experiences into practice in order to reach the goal that he had attained, the experience of truth. For these reasons, experimental and testimonial knowledge indicates *bhavanamaya pannā* for a good life. Moreover, the teaching of the Buddha in ‘*Kālāma Sutta*’, what the *Kālāma Sutta* declares is that reason alone could not provide full knowledge nor mere experience will supply complete knowledge. Concentrated combination of reason and experience is required to possess harmonious knowledge. In this way, one will try to lead a good life.

In Western philosophy, Socrates said that “virtue is knowledge”, “the unexamined life is not worth living” and “Know Thyself” means “to know” and only if one knows one can live in a life that is virtuous. One comes to know the right kind of life to live.

There are many Myanmar proverbs extolling the benefits of knowledge. By studying the above characteristics of Myanmar proverbs, it can be concluded that there must be a basis guiding us to the Myanmar way of thinking. Moreover, one can distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, only with proper knowledge or wisdom depending on situations and conditions in doing an act. So everyone understands more clearly some Myanmar proverbs in Myanmar culture and thus improve peace and harmony of social relationship. So each individual must try to acquire knowledge and understanding in order to lead a good life.

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