

The practise of making merits in Myanmar - is there a generation gap? A case study in Yangon, Mandalay and Shan State

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study is to explore the attitude and approaches of the older and the younger generation towards “earning merits” in Myanmar. This was achieved through the evaluation of answers given in a questionnaire that has been handed out in April 2018. In addition the author joined events as a participant observer. The results show that a generation gap can be suspected only to a small extend. This manifests in a difference of attitude, in the way of practical application of *puñña/kusala* and also in the quantitative aspects. It is generally believed that the young generation has less time and possibility to perform merits. However in the younger generation about 40% said that there is no difference between the younger and the older generation in the way of in making merits. Those that see a difference in practise often hold the opinion that young persons have to struggle for their life, job and education. Also many think that older persons and younger persons have differences in attitude, knowledge, experience or wisdom. The young generation focuses more on *dāna* and *sīla*, in particular helping others, whereas the older generation has also in view that meditation is an option and aims to achieve a better rebirth. Some here mention the attainment of *Nibbāna* as their goal. It can be concluded that traditional values are still valued in the young generation but there are differences in practical application compared with the older generation.

Introduction

The paper presented earlier this year at the University of Mandalay “Making Merits (Puñña) in Modern Myanmar Society - Will It Stand the Test of Time?” has given the theoretical background. It has been criticised by some that it has not given enough clues for a concrete answer. That’s why I decided to conduct a follow-up with a questionnaire. The number of variables in the questionnaire originally included a research about the differences of attitude between the town and the countryside population, but was reduced to the generation topic only in order to achieve a strong focus. Thus this is a qualitative follow-up. Of 80 questionnaires 62 questionnaires were given back after been filled out at home. Confidentially was granted. 37 persons were categorised as young generation below 30 years of age; 25 persons were categorised as older generation above 30 years of age. Their households were located either in a big town (Yangon/Mandalay) or in the countryside within Shan State. Of the 62 questionnaires 53 had been answered in Myanmar language and with Myanmar font and had to be translated since the author has no knowledge of the Myanmar script. Nine were answered in English language. 58 were lay persons, four were Saṅgha members. My hypothesis was, that in modern Myanmar there is less interest in “making merits” because the recent opening of the country. I assumed that the confrontation with “western” influences has a negative effect on the traditional values of the young generation.

Results and Discussions

“Describe in your own words what “making merits” means to you.”

Answers from all respondents were given in 60% of the questionnaires.

Young generation

“Helping others; giving *Mettā*; it is the way to get a peaceful life; giving *dāna*, when one does *kusala* one will be rich; with no *kusala* one will be poor; merits can clean the mind; to finish the *akusala*, to go to a better existence; doing good things and having good behaviour; it is the quality of being good; doing some good things with good effects; it will have good effects; I feel peace; to spread love; to practise *dāna* and *sīla* and have wisdom in one day; doing good deeds to everyone; happiness is the key word by making merits; doing good without expectation in return; making the mind calm and escape from *saṃsāra* and arrive at *Nibbāna*; sharing ones *kusala*; doing good things and escape from the bad things; if I do good deeds I will get good *vipāka*; it is like feeding the mind; doing actions that are not wrong and give good results; making the surroundings pleasant.”

Older generation

“Because of *kamma* and *kamma* result we do merits; giving *Mettā* and giving *dāna* for my own profit and for the profit of others; merit will return to us for our fortune; to get the good next life, to finish the *akusala*; giving up and abandoning everything with *karuna*; finish the *akusala* and go to a good existence ; to clear and beautify the mind; to do good for myself and others; to escape from the lower world, to have a happy next existence, to make the mind happy; it means giving away; to make the *akusala* disappear and to go to a good existence; to achieve calmness of mind, not to be attached, to do it immediately; to make no fault; to reach *Nibbāna*; to attain *Nibbāna*.”

Discussion

Doing good and helping, the practice of *dāna* and the expectation that merits will have a good effect (*vipāka*) were mentioned frequently by the younger generation. The hope that merits will make one escape from *saṃsāra* and the aim to attain *Nibbāna* were mentioned only two times. To go to the good next existence, to clear and calm the mind and make it happy and to attain *Nibbāna* were mentioned more frequently with the older generation. So it seems that in the younger generation the practical application of doing good deeds to others is dominant, being aware however that it will have good effects for oneself later. With the older generation there is the association with a better next existence, a good mind set and the hope to attain *Nibbāna*.

“In what way do you practise “making merits?”

Answers from the young generation and the older generation were given in 100% of the questionnaires

Young generation

Offering food/robes/money to the <i>Saṅgha</i> =	11
Offering food/water/light/flowers/smell to the Buddha/to the Pagoda =	10
Paying respect to the Buddha =	7
Helping others =	7
Cleaning =	6
Sharing what I have/my merits/ my <i>Mettā</i> =	6
Giving <i>dāna</i> =	5
Keeping <i>sīla</i> =	4
Doing meditation =	3

Having good cetanā to all 3; Keeping in mind *Buddha*, *Dhamma*, *Saṅgha*, parents and teachers 3; Feeding animals 3; Doing prayer 3; Chanting 2; Clean the mind 2; Pay respect to our religion 2; Not to do bad things 1; Learning *Dhamma* 1; Becoming a *Saṅgha* member 1; Giving labour *dāna* 1; Giving blood donation 1; Listening to the parents 1; Counting beats 1; Speak nicely 1; Good behaviour 1; Support the elderly 1; Try to attain *Nibbāna* 1.

Older generation

Offering food/water/light/flowers/smell to the Buddha/to the Pagoda =	12
Giving <i>dāna</i> =	9
Doing meditation =	8
Offering food/robes/money to the <i>Saṅgha</i> =	7
Keeping <i>sīla</i> =	5
Chanting =	5
Cleaning =	4

Paying respect to the Buddha 3; Counting beats 3; Feeding animals 3; Sharing what I have/my merits/ my *Mettā*; Helping the poor 2; Support the elderly 2; Clean the mind 2; Renovation of the street, the Pagoda 2; Take care of the mother 1.

Discussion

Offering food/robes/money to the *Saṅgha* and offering food/water/light/flowers/smell to the Buddha/to the Pagoda were central in both generations as a daily practise. Paying respect to the Buddha was an expression mostly used by the young generation. Giving *dāna* and doing meditation was emphasised more in the older generation as actual practice.

“Is it important to you? Why?”

Answers from the young generation and the older generation were given in 100% of the questionnaires

Young generation

100% of young generation said it is important for them.

<i>For my good saṃsāra, next existence =</i>	16
<i>Good results for me, vipāka =</i>	10
Get away from the bad things =	4
To attain <i>Nibbāna</i> =	4
Make me feel good, happy, pleasant =	4

Help the people 3; I can share my *kusala* 2; My wishes will be fulfilled 2; Because of *kamma*; I will get beautiful environment; To be peaceful; Because I am Buddhist; It is a good deed; I will get respect.

Older generation

100% of older generation said it is important for them.

<i>For my saṃsāra, next existence =</i>	9
<i>To attain Nibbāna =</i>	5
<i>Make me feel good, happy, pleasant, calm =</i>	5
Good results for me, <i>vipāka</i> =	3
It is a good deed =	3

Having no fault 2; It is good, when I die 2; Get away from the bad things; Everybody should do it 1; It is good for others 1; I want to do one good deed every day 1; Having less lobha, dosa, and moha 1.

Discussion

Young generation and older generation alike emphasized the good effect on the cycle of rebirth, to get a good next existence. The young generation was thinking more about good resultant effects for themselves in general; the older generation had higher percentage concerning the goal of *Nibbāna*.

“Is it important for others (or for the society)? How? ”

Answers from the young generation and the older generation were given in 100% of the questionnaires

Young generation

100% of young generation said it is important for the society.

<i>It is good for the community =</i>	7
<i>It is good for me and others =</i>	7
<i>It is beneficial and peaceful for all =</i>	6
<i>It is good =</i>	5
<i>Supporting the poor is good =</i>	5
<i>I will be peaceful =</i>	4

I am able to share 3; Everybody will get a good mind 2; It generates protective forces; I will get respect 1; Surrounding will be pleasant 2; Other also want to follow that example 2; Buddhist or not, it is good 1; To create the peaceful world 1; Next life will be better 1; There are practical results 1; I believe in *kamma* 1.

Older generation

100% of older generation said it is important for the society.

One questionnaire: no answer.

<i>It is good for me and others =</i>	6
<i>I will be peaceful =</i>	4
<i>It is good for the community =</i>	3

I am able to share 3; It is good for me and others 2; It is good 2; With *Mettā* it is beneficial and peaceful for all 2; Supporting the poor is good 2; It is good for the dead person 2; The *sāsana* will exist long 1; Giving *dāna* to the nuns is good 1; The next life will be good 1; Lobla, dosa and moha will be less 1; It is social work 1.

Discussion

All persons of both generations had the opinion that “making merits” is important for others and for the society too. The young generation explicitly mentions the “community” more than the older generation. But both generations highlighted that peacefulness will be achieved within oneself and also others will achieve that peacefulness.

“Do you share your merits? With whom? ”

Answers from the young generation and the older generation were given in 100% of the questionnaires.

Young generation

100% of young generation said it is important for them.

<i>To all beings =</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>To the beings in the lower planes, they can say Sadhu =</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>To parents, brother, sister, family, teachers =</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>To beings in the 31 planes =</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>To the passed away persons =</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>To the Devas and Brahmas =</i>	<i>6</i>

To all human beings 5; To the persons who cannot see 2; To those that have helped me 1; to old persons 1; to the 10 directions 1; to those that I love 1.

Older generation

100% of older generation said it is important for them.

<i>To the beings in the 31 planes =</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>To the beings in the lower planes, they can say Sadhu =</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>To the passed away persons =</i>	<i>4</i>

To the passed away persons 1; To all human beings 1; To friends 1; To those who can know and hear 1; To the 10 directions 2; to all beings 1; To parents, brother, sister, family and teachers 1.

Discussion

Sharing merits is important to all persons that gave back the questionnaire. The younger generation preferred the term “Sharing merits to all beings”, the older generation the term “Sharing merits to the beings in the 31 planes.” They are equally concerned about beings in the lower beings. There they can say *Sadhu*, when they hear the sharing of merits and thereby improve their situation.

“Do you think that the younger or the older generation practices “making merits” differently or more often? Why?”

Answers from the young generation and the older generation were given in 100% of the questionnaires.

Young generation

There is no difference = 11

It depends on ones intelligence and cleverness
Everybody must make merits
It depends only on ones understanding
It depends on ones mind
It depends only on the attitude
It depends on the person only
Only because of the mind there can be a difference

There is a difference = 26

Older persons can make merits more often, have more time =	15
Older persons and young persons have different attitude knowledge, experience or wisdom =	5
Young persons have to struggle for their life, job and education, no time for meditation =	4
Young persons use their time for happy things =	2

Because of age; Young persons are mostly not so serious; Older persons have more money; Older persons can concentrate on religious activity; Younger persons do merits as volunteer; Older persons donate money; The individual belief is different according to age; With older age one can concentrate more on making merits; There is a difference concerning religious matters; Older persons cannot do whatever they like because of old age; Older persons can do more meditation; Youngsters can help in the Pagoda; Youngsters think that they will live long; Youngsters want to spend time with their friends; Older persons can abandon lobha, dosa and moha; Older persons do kusala for next life with a plan but younger persons do it randomly; Youngsters have limited effort; Older persons know the taste of *kusala* so they do *kusala* to attain *Nibbāna*; Younger persons do it for the next life; Older persons know more ways of doing kusala; Young persons have more lobha, dosa and moha; Young persons can use their labour force; Older persons can work for the *sāsana*; younger persons can do only what somebody tells them.

Do you think that the younger or the older generation practices “making merits” differently or more often? Why?

Answers from the young generation and the older generation were given in 100% of the questionnaires.

Older generation

There is no difference = 5

Everybody is intelligent
Everybody can do in the free time
The way of making merit is the same
There is no difference in the amount of merits.

There is a difference = 20

Young persons have less time, older person has more time + can make merits more often = 20
Older persons and young pers. have different attitude, knowledge, experience or wisdom = 8
Young persons have to struggle for their life, job and education = 7
Youngsters have less faith, interest = 3
Older persons can do more meditation = 3

The religious learning is different ; Young persons do through advice, older persons on their own decision; Older persons can give more *dāna*; Older persons can go to Pagoda and monastery more often; There is a difference in attitude: older persons have a habit; younger persons can do merits only in their free time; Older persons can do *kusala* individually and younger persons in the *prahita* association; Youngsters have not much understanding in *Dhamma*; Youngsters use their time for happy things; The wish that is uttered may be different (e.g. *Nibbāna* versus to get a good exam); Youngsters can help in the Pagoda; It depends on the opportunity; The mind is different.

Discussion

In the younger generation about 40% said that there is no difference between the younger and the older generation in the way of in making merits, however mostly they admitted that the older generation can do merits more because they have more time. With the older generation only 25% hold the opinion that there is no difference between the generations. But also with this group there was agreement that the time at disposal for doing merits for the older persons is more, so they can do more merits. The difference in practise boils down to the opinion that young persons mainly have to struggle for their life, job and education. Also many think that older persons and younger persons have different attitude, knowledge, experience or wisdom.

My participant observation

I have been able to participate in various events in Yangon, Mandalay and in villages in Shan state. These included: meditation courses; taking the five or eight precepts from Sayadaws, *Saṅgha* members or lay teachers; offering food, robes and money to the *Saṅgha* or Pagoda Trustees; paying respect to the Buddha, Dhamma and the *Saṅgha*; chanting the *Patthanā*, the *Iti pi so* and the *Paṭicca-Samuppāda*; offering food and money to lay persons and becoming a member of the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* myself. My observation has been that members of the older generation in these religious activities were greater in number compared to members of the younger generation, especially in meditation camps. With the practise of *dāna* and the taking up of the moral precepts the quantitative difference was not so obvious. Both generations expressed the same high religious faith in these activities, at least what could be observed from the outside.

Conclusion

The results show that a generation gap can be suspected only to a small extent. I had assumed that the confrontation with “western” influences has a negative effect on the traditional values of the young generation. This could not be fully confirmed. Those that see a difference in practise often hold the opinion that young persons have to struggle for their life, job and education. It can be concluded that traditional values are still valued in the young generation but there are differences in practical application compared with the older generation.

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