

# CONTRIBUTIONS OF BUDDHISM TO IMPROVING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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by Hoang Minh Phu\*

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## ABSTRACT

Buddha's teachings have meaningful contributions to society. This article introduces a scientific research on contributions of Buddhism to improving interpersonal relationships, particularly the relationship of youths with their parents, their teachers, their friends and with the people who have hurt them. The first part of this article introduces on basic concepts related to interpersonal relationships, and the methods using in this research. The second part describes result of the research. From findings of this research, it indicates that Buddhist youths have deeper level of understanding and belief in Buddhism than non-Buddhist youths; Buddhist youths can be better in developing and maintaining their interpersonal relationships than non-Buddhist youths; there are significant differences between Buddhist and non-Buddhist youths in their relationships with their parents, their teachers, their friends and with those who have hurt them.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For all of us, personal relationships contribute the most important issue in our lives. We spend our lives dealing with others. When people spend time together, they construct relationships, and the nature of their relationships constrains the possibilities for future

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\*Lecturer, Institute of Education and Management, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

interaction. All of our activities take place within the relationships we form throughout our lives. It is not easy for us to live without others. We are interdependent in our lives. We cannot exist alone in this world. It would seem that human beings have a need to belong, to connect, to be embedded in a rich network of relationships.

According to Buddhist philosophy, life is a process of giving and receiving. Sentient beings are reborn to work out their karma, to receive help from others and at the same time to fulfill their part in helping others. Therefore, life is a process of giving and receiving physically, spiritually and emotionally.

Interpersonal relationships have a paramount importance in our lives so that we have to establish, develop and maintain them, especially positive interpersonal relationships. The better relationships we establish, the happier we are and vice versa.

According to Hewstone and Geoffrey (1996), the term relationship refers to an enduring association between two people, refers to what goes on between two individuals. The special features of relationship are as follows:

- Relationships exist within a temporal framework, including a past history and an imagined future. Past events may influence current behaviour by fostering expectations and a context within which present experiences are evaluated. Similarly, expectations, goals, and fantasies about the future often affect partners' behaviour towards each other. Generally, the closer two partners are, and the greater their commitment to the relationship, the stronger such influence will be.

- Relationships typically, but not always, involve mutual influence. That is, each partner affects the other in ongoing and often complex intertwined, chain of causal influence. The nature of this pattern is viewed as the key to understanding special properties of relationships. Mutual influence is complex, and may not be evident in a single interactive episode.

- Relationships have enduring prototypical characteristics about which partners develop relationship awareness, such as a set of understandings about the nature of the relationship, and what each

partner can expect from the other. These beliefs may be conscious and consensual, or they may be implicit and idiosyncratic.

- Personal relationships are usually embedded within wider social networks. Partners must therefore balance the needs of one relationship with other relationships. Also, people often participate in social networks as members of a relationship. Dyadic relationships may also affect the manner and degree to which partners socialize with other network members.

- Relationships vary in the degree to which they are unidimensional or multifaceted. Some relationships are limited to one domain of activity, whereas, others are more diverse. Generally speaking, the more multifaceted the relationship is, the more difficult it is to characterize the relationship from single observations or with unidimensional principles.

Because interpersonal relationships have important role in our life, so the Buddha taught many teachings related to this issue. In the scope of this research paper, the author focuses on the teachings of the Buddha on four interpersonal relationships as follows:

- *Relationship of children with parents:*

Lord Buddha said that: *“Parents are two Buddhas in the family”*. In Filial Piety Sutra the Buddha stated ten types of kindness bestowed by the mother on the child: *“The first is the kindness of providing protection and care while the child is in the womb, the second is the kindness of bearing suffering during the birth, the third is the kindness of forgetting all pain once the child has been born, the fourth is the kindness of eating bitter herself and saving the sweet for her child, the fifth is the kindness of moving the child to a dry place and lying in the wet herself, the sixth is the kindness of suckling the child at her breast and nourishing and bringing up the child, the seventh is the kindness of washing away the unclean, the eighth is the kindness of always thinking of the child when it has traveled far, the ninth is the kindness of deep care and devotion, the tenth is the kindness of ultimate pity and sympathy”* (Buddha).

It is able to say that merit of our parents’ kindness is boundless and limitless. Even if a mother lives for a hundred years, she will

constantly worry about her eighty-year-old child. Because of this the children have to repay their parents' kindness and favors, have to respect them and take care of them, have to have filial affection. How difficult it is to repay our parents' kindness!

Again in Filial Piety Sutra, the Buddha taught: *"If you wish to repay your parents' kindness, write out this sutra on their behalf. Recite this sutra on their behalf. Repent of transgressions and offenses on their behalf. For the sake of your parents, make offerings to the Triple Gem. For the sake of your parents, precept of pure eating. For the sake of your parents, practice giving and cultivate blessings. If you are able to do these things, you are being a filial child. If you do not do these things, you are a person destined for the hells"* (Buddha).

Our parents have sacrificed all their best to us so that we, as children, have to be filial. The unfilial guilt is the heaviest guilt of human beings. If we don't repay our parents' greatest kindness, don't respect them and behave towards them as strangers, we are not worthy to be a person. Being a person, the first personality one has to cultivate is to be a dutiful child.

*- Relationship of student with teacher*

Teachers play a crucial role in our lives. Teacher is the person who gives us knowledge and experiences, helps us to understand surrounding things, to conceive of real life, to know how to deal with problems facing in our lives, and how to prepare for our future plans.

Awaking to the important role of the teacher in one's life, the Buddha taught the ways that youths should minister to their teachers. In Sigālaka Sutra (advice to lay people) the Buddha said that: *"There are five ways in which youths should minister to their teachers: by rising to greet them, by waiting on them, by being attentive, by serving them, and by mastering the skills they taught"* (Buddha, 1995, p. 467).

With these words the Buddha advised youths should pay respect to the teachers, obey their teachings and often think of repaying the teachers' favors. However, one of meaningful ways of repaying is mastering the teachers' teachings, trying to be a good person and

try to apply learned knowledge into works as well as into daily life in order to support society.

*- Relationship of youths with friends*

Friendship is a distinctively personal relationship that is grounded in a concern on the part of each friend for the welfare of the other, for the other's sake, and that involves some degree of intimacy. In Sigāḷaka Sutra, the Buddha taught that: *"There are five ways in which one should minister to his friends and companions: by generosity, and benevolence, by kindly words, by treating them as one treat oneself, by looking after their welfare, by being as good as one's word"* (Buddha, 1995, pp. 467-468).

To maintain and develop a nice companion people have to respect and benefit their friends as well as to tell true words and to share happiness and sorrow with friends.

*- Relationship of youths with those who have hurt them*

Commonly, when someone hurt us we easily get angry or hated them, and don't want to be friendly with them anymore. And sometimes we want to retaliate against them. These attitudes harm ourselves before they might affect others as in Dhammapada Buddha said: *"Whatever harm an enemy may do to an enemy, or a hater to a hater, an ill-directed mind inflicts on oneself a greater harm"* (Buddha, 1985, p. 22).

According to the Buddha, if we adopt aggressive and violent methods to solve our problems, we cannot find the real solution to overcome them. Therefore, if we act in violent manner, we can never find lasting peace. This is why the Buddha once said in Dhammapada: *"Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal"* (Buddha, 1985, p. 18). To get rid of our hatred and anger and, sometimes, our thought of revenge, we need practice compassion, loving-kindness, patience, and forgiveness. These qualities are interdependent and support each other. When we cultivate loving-kindness compassion, patience, and forgiveness are also increased in our mind and, likewise, when we practice compassion the other qualities are also grown up in my mind. Once we have these qualities in our mind,

anger and hatred and revenge thoughts will be decreased and we can tolerate those who have hurt us easier.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Participants

A sample of 90 young people in Ho Chi Minh city participated in this study. The sample was composed of 45 Buddhist youths and 45 non-Buddhist youths. Among them there were 45 males and 45 females. They were in the age range of 22 to 34 years. Particularly, to access Buddhist youths, we visited some pagodas in Ho Chi Minh city and met Buddhist youths after praying period of the pagodas and invited them to participate in this study. About Non-Buddhist youths, we invited graduate and post-graduate students in some universities in Ho Chi Minh to participate in our research.

### 2.2. Measure

To collect data for this study, we use relational orientation questionnaire. A questionnaire consisting of 23 multiple-choice items was prepared. Each item has 4 alternatives. The constitution of this measure was based on Buddhist thoughts as well as pattern of behavior normally exhibited in interpersonal relationships. The content of questionnaire focused on five issues: Belief in and understanding of Buddhism, Relationship of youths with parents, Relationship of youths with teachers, Relationship of youths with friends, and Relationship of youths with those who have hurt them.

### 2.3. Procedure

This study was conducted from 08/2016 to 07/2017. To conduct this study the prepared relational orientation questionnaire was given to two groups of youths as mentioned earlier. Participants were instructed how to respond the questionnaire. The idea “there is no right or wrong answer in the items of questionnaire” was stressed to participants. Once participants clearly understood the way to respond, the prepared questionnaire was given.

Once the data collection was satisfactorily completed, the scoring of the tests was started. The raw data obtained was converted into a master chart and keeping in mind the hypotheses formulated,

statistical techniques to be adopted were decided.

After completion of statistical treatment, hypotheses were accordingly accepted or rejected, the study involves exploratory work and relationship between various variables was explored.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Beliefs and understanding of youths about Buddhism

The present study was conducted to explore influence of Buddhism on interpersonal relationships of youths. However, beliefs and understanding of an individual play an important role in one's attitudes and patterns of behavior, they influence the way people behaves towards the others. Therefore, firstly this study researches on beliefs and understanding of youths about Buddhism. From collected data, we found that there is a significant difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist youths on their beliefs and understanding of Buddhism ( $p = 0.000$ ;  $< 0.1$ ). Besides, according to the results, mean score of Buddhist youths on their beliefs and understanding ( $M = 19.15$ ) is higher than mean value of non-Buddhist youths ( $M = 14.88$ ). From these data, we can infer that Buddhist youths have deeper understanding and more reasonable beliefs in Buddhism than non-Buddhist youths. Particularly, they think that success and failure in our lives are impacted by the law of cause and effect, neither by chance nor fate; they think the differences among living beings are due to their karma, not due to the Creator; and they don't think that death ends up everything, instead, they think a person will reborn into somewhere depending on his karma. According to most of Buddhist youths, Gautama Buddha was a person and through cultivating seriously he became the Enlightened One, he was neither God nor a Creator who had power in blessing and visiting calamities on people, and they think Buddhism is an intellectual approach to reality, neither a pessimistic religion nor just a philosophy. There is no surprising with these findings. Being a Buddhist, naturally one studies teachings of the Buddha so that he has deeper understanding than those who are not Buddhists. As a result, with his understanding of the Buddha's teachings, he has deeper beliefs in Buddhism.

Regarding gender dimension, the result of ANOVA (Analysis of

Variance) does not exhibit the significant difference between male and female. However, from the result of mean value, when compare between male and female, mean score of female on their beliefs and understanding of Buddhism (M = 17.28) is higher than mean value of male (M = 16.75). Although this difference is not big enough to create significant difference in analysis of variance, it is more or less different in beliefs and understanding of Buddhism between male and female. Base on this, we can say that female has little deeper beliefs and understanding of Buddhism than male. This finding is appropriate with common assertion as well as the research findings of not few researchers that women are more religious than men. Walter and Davie (1998) stated that women are more religious than men on every measure of religiosity. Stark (2002) concluded that, it is so taken for granted that women are more religious than men that every competent quantitative study of religiousness routinely includes sex as a control variable. According to Sullins (2006), in the past decade new interest has developed in explaining this taken-for-granted gender difference. In the 1960s it seemed apparent that women’s higher religious devotion reflected both their freedom from the constraints of wage labor and their nurturing role in the family, that is, the different structural location of women than men in a gendered social division of labor. According to Luckmann (1967) men’s commitment to the workforce provides an alternative source of values and meaning that makes religion less necessary.

**Table 1:** Summary of two-way ANOVAs factorial design, religion x gender, in dimensions of relationship

Measures	Religion			Gender			Religion x Gender		
	MS	F	p	MS	F	p	MS	F	p
1. Beliefs and understanding of Buddhism	407.52	66.32	.000	4.32	.704	.404	3.58	.583	.447
2. Relationship with parents	12.85	2.761	.100	21.74	4.67	.033	2.73	.588	.445
3. Relationship with teachers	36.76	10.36	.002	6.54	1.84	.178	.727	205	.652



4. Relationship with friends	5.315	1.44	.232	.338	.092	.762	7.18	1.95	.165
5. Relationship with those who have hurt them	7.03	2.85	<b>.095</b>	.635	.258	.613	9.62	3.90	<b>.051</b>

**Table 2:** Mean Scores on the measures of relationship as a function of the main effect of gender

Measures	Female		Male	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Beliefs and understanding of Buddhism	17.28	3.12	16.75	3.40
2. Relationship with parents	18.15	1.50	17.15	2.67
3. Relationship with teachers	16.28	1.94	16.8	1.99
4. Relationship with friends	17.35	2.04	17.22	1.80
5. Relationship with those who have hurt them	9.71	1.67	9.86	1.54

### 3.2. Youths' relationship with their parents

With dimension of relationship with their parents, results shown in Table 1 indicate that there is a significant difference between female and male in their relationship with their parents ( $p = 0.033$ ;  $< 0.1$ ). In addition, mean value of female in this dimension as shown in Table 2 ( $M = 18.15$ ) is higher than mean value of male ( $M = 17.15$ ). With respect to Buddhists and non-Buddhists, although there is no significant difference in the result of ANOVA, mean value of Buddhist youths ( $M = 18.04$ ) is bigger than mean value of non-Buddhist youths ( $M = 17.26$ ). This result indicates that Buddhist youths behave towards their parents quite better than non-Buddhist youths. Accordingly, the difference in quality of relationship with parents between Buddhist youths and non-Buddhists youths is not very much. This finding is reasonable.

In every cultural tradition, the affections between children and parents are often given prominence. This is a crucial standard in human personality and it is also a duty and a source of happiness to children. It is able to say that loving our mother and father is not a question of morality or virtue, it is happiness. Especially, in Viet Nam, filial piety is an extremely important value. Because of this point of view, most Vietnamese people are dutiful to their parents, no matter he is a religious person or not, and this is one of reason which can explain why the difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist youths in relationship with their teacher is not very much.

### 3.3. Youths' relationship with their teachers

In relationship with teachers, the result of ANOVA shown in Table 1 exhibits a significant difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist youths in relationship with their teachers ( $p = 0.002$ ;  $< 0.1$ ). Moreover, mean value of Buddhist youths in the relationship with their teachers ( $M = 17.17$ ) is higher than mean value of non-Buddhist youths ( $M = 15.91$ ). These results show that relationship of Buddhist youths with their teachers is better than non-Buddhist youths. Particularly, Buddhist youths more usually wait for their teacher when he/she comes to class late, while teacher is teaching an abstract topic, they often pay more attention to his teaching rather than doing their own works, if their teacher states something that contradicts to their understanding, Buddhist youths usually listen to him till he finishes and then express their thinking, if their old teacher fall into poor situation, most of Buddhist youths often visit him and help with all their best.

### 3.4. Youths' relationship with their friends

To relationship with friends, there is no significant difference in result of ANOVA between Buddhist and non-Buddhist youths, and between male and female, as well as there is no significant difference in interaction effect between religion and gender on this relationship. However, when we consider the mean values, we found out mean value of Buddhist youths ( $M = 17.53$ ) and of female ( $M = 17.35$ ) in their relationship with their friends are a little bit bigger than mean value of non-Buddhist youths ( $M = 17.04$ ) and of male ( $M = 17.22$ ). These results indicate there is not much difference

between Buddhist and non-Buddhist youths as well as between female and male in their relationship with their friends.

### 3.5. Youths' relationship with those who have hurt them

With respect to relationship with those have hurt them, according to the results shown in the Table 1, we see that there is the significant difference between Buddhist and non-Buddhist youths ( $p = .095$ ;  $< 0.1$ ); and there is significant interaction effect between religion and gender ( $p = .051$ ;  $< 0.1$ ). In addition, mean value of Buddhist youths ( $M = 10.06$ ) is larger than mean value of non-Buddhist youths ( $M = 9.51$ ) in their relationship with those who have hurt them. These data indicates relationship of Buddhist youths with those who have hurt them is better than non-Buddhist youths. In other words, Buddhist youths' attitudes and behaviors towards those who have hurt them are better than non-Buddhist youths. That is, Buddhist youths usually practice compassion and loving-kindness with those who hurt them, sympathize with those people and try to convert their relationship with those people to a more harmonious and friendly relationship.

Through these four aspects of youths' interpersonal relationships we can be confident to conclude that there are significant differences between Buddhist youths and non-Buddhist youths in their relationships with their parents, their teachers, their friends and with those who have hurt them.

Moreover, as results shown in Table 3, total mean value of Buddhist youths of five dimensions ( $M = 81.97$ ) in this study is greater than total mean value of non-Buddhist youths ( $M = 74.62$ ); total mean value of female of five dimensions ( $M = 78.8$ ) is higher than total mean value of non-Buddhist youths ( $M = 77.8$ ) too. Therefore, it is able to conclude that Buddhist youths could be better in developing and maintaining their interpersonal relationships than non-Buddhist youths. And female could be a little bit better in developing and maintaining their interpersonal relationships than male.

**Table 3:** Total Mean Scores on the Measures of Religion and Gender

Dimensions		Mean	SD
Religion	Buddhist (n=45)	81.97	5.30
	Non-Buddhist (n=45)	74.62	6.55
Gender	Female (n=45)	78.8	5.31
	Male (n=45)	77.8	6.55

From these findings we can infer that the teachings of the Buddha are really valuable and they can benefit those who practice his teachings. By practicing the Buddha’s teachings, he/she can become a better person, a useful and helpful person. Don’t need to wait until hereafter, people can have happier life by cultivate the teachings of Lord Buddha here and now, at the moment one practice Dharma in his daily life.

**4. CONCLUSION**

Buddha’s teachings are very practical, rational and offers a realistic view of life. Buddhism does not entice people into living in a fool’s paradise, and it does not frighten, agonize people with all kinds of imaginary fears and guilt-feelings as well. Buddhism produces the feeling of self-reliance by teaching that the whole destiny of humanity lies in their own hands, and that they themselves possess the faculty of developing their own energy and insight in order to reach the highest goal.

Moreover, Buddhism fosters spiritual progress by appealing to the thinking powers of human beings. It promotes in people the sense of tolerance by remaining free from religious and national narrowness and fanaticism. Buddhism has supplied fine and ethical basic attitudes among the people who adopted it in one form or another.

Buddhism tells us exactly and objectively what we are and what the world around us is, and shows us the way to fulfill freedom, peace, tranquility and happiness.

The capacity of the Buddha's teaching to enhance an individual's personal and general potential has been overshadowed by the contributions of Buddhism to philosophy, art and literature. But one aspect of Buddhism which has remained of paramount importance throughout its history is its clear rationalism. Reason, though often overruled to everyone's regret, is something that belongs to humanity, to civilize them, no matter how obscured it may be by the other facets of human nature such as emotions. Buddhism will continue to exhort man to be a rational being, ruled by the head, but giving due consideration to the heart as well.

Nowadays, Buddhism has contributed to disciplines of science, among them psychology is one of the disciplines which has the closest relevance to the teachings of the Buddha and it can be promoted by applying the Buddha's teachings into academic as well as in practice fields, especially psychotherapy.

In present study we found that Buddhism has considerable contributions to developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships of youths. Particularly, Buddhists youths could be better in maintaining and developing their relationship with their parents, with their teachers, with their friends and can reasonably deal with the persons who have hurt them than non-Buddhist youths. In other words, attitudes, behaviors and affections of Buddhist youths towards their parents, their teachers, their friends and the people who have hurt them are better than non-Buddhist youths.

Buddhism has such valuable contributions to contemporary society so that the teachings of the Buddha should be taught to everyone, especially young generation. To avoid the bias of religious discrimination and to overcome challenges in instructing the Buddha's teaching, educator and instructor should be skillful in this process, don't need to insist on religious rituals, otherwise, should tend to moral principles and methods of cultivating our mind, our personality which are taught by the Buddha.

In addition, we have to admit that this study is not a complete one. Although we strictly and carefully analyzed collected data, the results we presented above are relative. This matter resulted from by both objective and subjective causes. On the one hand, the

questionnaire we constructed may be not a perfect one so that it could not express the issues need to cover in this study and could not get necessary information which might be important for studying. On the other hand, there were participants did not perform the questionnaire seriously and honestly as they are, therefore their responses could not reflect accurately the issues mentioned in the questionnaire.

Hence, for further study of this topic, I would like to propose that we need to carry out more intensive studies of this issue in order to attract the attention of community to Buddhism, especially to moral principles and scientific methods in cultivating personality. Studies should be conducted both qualitative and quantitative tendencies, or combination of the two. Because with qualitative researches, researcher can consider the issues under many aspects so that he can discover significant things that quantitative researches cannot reach.

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