

Understanding the Ethical Dimensions of Flattery and Rebuke: Power Dynamics and Their Effects on Mental and Spiritual Development in Buddhist Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

The moral concerns of flattery and rebuke when applied from a Buddhist psychological perspective are the subject of this study, with particular reference to the consequences for the mental and spiritual growth of the individuals involved in power relations. Underpinning the present work are studies from the source texts of Buddhism and recent empirical literature; we explore the impact of praise and criticism for self-views, motivation, and intrapersonal relationship in hierarchical organisations. Flattery, our research shows, can cause egotism when practised and pursued, and hence prevents credible introspection and spiritual progress for sometimes it makes people happy. On the other hand, what we call 'skilful reproof' when accompanied by gentleness and truth can transform a man. But both encouragement and scolding depend on the difference in status between the encourager/scolder and the encouraged/scolded, and the degree of their mindfulness, emotional intelligence. It is to the development of this relatively new field of contemplative psychology that this work will contribute in following ways by examining the interdependent relationship between social approval, vigilance on self, and spiritual transformation. Thereby, one is protecting oneself by being least affected by both blessings and reproof that are fundamental to developing a harmonised psychological stability and spiritual growth.

Keywords: Flattery, Rebuke, Buddhist Psychology, Mental and Spiritual Growth, Power Relations, Spiritual Progress, Emotional Intelligence, Contemplative Psychology, Spiritual Transformation, Harmonized Psychological Stability

Ethical Conduct as a Component of Buddhist Path

Sīla, ethical conduct, is one of the three supports regarded as the basis for the Buddhist practice; it is closely connected with mental development, samādhi, and wisdom, paññā. Ethic is not just a civil response or a societal preservation but an important guide to salvation. The application of ethical principles in Buddhism is well illustrated in the Buddhas' words especially in the Noble Eightfold Path where in three

of the path, which includes Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood deals on morality of an individual.¹

Ethical behaviour is the basis for clarity of the mind and visions of the spirit. In some of the discourses the Buddha pointed out that by doing the unwholesome actions rooted in greed hate and ignorance one generates the unwholesome mental states which confuse the mind and harm the development of wisdom. On the other hand, people overcome the ignorance of immoral intentions and action as well as the notion of non harming and compassion result in freedom of mind and spiritual progress. The Buddha has pointed out that virtue in turn is a basis. It is still true that ethical discipline begins by purifying the mind to allow deeper concentration and, in the end, wisdom regarding the truth about existence.² Thus, it is clearly different from other religious systems of ethics, which offer rules and orders as the main means of regulating the behaviour of individuals.

Ethical Conduct for Liberation

These are Buddhist cardinal virtues or the five precepts (pañca-sīla) that are the basic moral standards of Buddhist practise to the laity. These are non-killing, non-stealing, non-illicit sexual undertakings, non-fabrication, and non-ingestion of alcohol. While lay people have to follow five precepts, monastics practise even more severe rules of conduct (Vinaya) and it is stressed that ethical purity is essential for making further steps on the Path to liberation.³ Ethical misconduct is assumed to prevent one from attaining higher states of meditation (Jhāna) and keeps the person back from cultivating the necessary wisdom to attain Nibbāna.

Beside, the personal activities, ethics has even more important role to ensure the proper discipline among the Brotherhood or the Buddhist 'flock' (sangha). The Buddha was asserting people behaviour contributes to the society peace and welfare of the society is pivotant on the people. Sins are flattering, lying, and rebuking with the intention negative to others' wellbeing breaks the societal fabric and stymies spiritual progression.⁴ When people conduct themselves rightly, they help create a symbiosis that is beneficial and helps people to gain awakening together.

Ethical Conduct: Towards the Building of Liberative Social Relations

Ethical behaviour also has a very deep psychological connotation in Buddhism. Righteous deeds are ascribed to the purity of the mind. As per the Abhidhamma – the Buddhist psychological, associated with or derived from unwholesome actions produce negative mental states which in turn cause suffering- for that person, and for others.⁵ Ethical conduct as a mental training diminishes the manifestations of desire and aversion which form Habits establishing the ground of mental balance and mindfulness.

These two mental states produced through effacing mental defilements pave way for advancement to the stage of meditation plus discovery of higher realities of life.⁶ Concisely speaking, ethics that reflect elementary methods of Buddhist practise are inalienable assets for mental cultivation, the maintenance of proper relationships within a community, and the ultimate achievement of enlightenment. Practise of the

¹ Bodhi, B. The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering.

² Harvey, P. An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues

³ Keown, D. Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction.

⁴ Gethin, R. The Foundations of Buddhism.

⁵ Nyanaponika, T. Abhidhamma Studies: Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time.

⁶ Gombrich, R. F. What the Buddha Thought.

cultivation of virtue thus prepares the field for attuning to deeper concentrations, developing insight and hence the transcendence of suffering.

Brief Introduction to Flattery and Rebuke as Psychological and Ethical Phenomena

Flattery and rebuke means that Buddhism provides ethical and psychological importance to simple words used in daily interactions. It worth mentioning that both are, in many ways, related to the notion of right speech (Sammāvācā) in the Noble Eightfold Path, and an important focus is made on the ethical aspect of the speech as a way to develop mental, and therefore, spiritual conduct.⁷ Both flattery and rebuke are also used according to power dynamic of individuals within interpersonal relationships, with emphasis on teacher-student, spiritual and social relationship.

Flattery from a Psychological Perspective

Whereas, in the context of the given conflict, flattery refers to overstating your words simply to gain the other parties favour usually for a selfish end. According to Buddhism psychological process, flattery is described as one kind of deceptive speech and it enhances the customers' egoisms, partaking in the creation of more delusions. In particular it builds upon the instinct of approval seeking in people and attaches the value towards self- centred perceptions.⁸

Thus when a person develops affection for appreciation, this causes blot on his/her mental understanding and provokes mental-agitation due to craving or taṇhā. This disturbance prevents one from being mindful (sati) and to concentrate (samādhi), which are features of spiritual practise.⁹ According to Buddhist ethics flattery is an akusala (unwholesome) action particularly when one lays it on to someone with the intention of winning his or her favor or sympathy or to twist the facts.

This kind of speech leads to moral destruction since people build their perception and countenance on what indeed is temporary, materialistic affirms. Moreover, it is an intimacy that can be destructive to the organisation of shared living because flattery creates jealousy, rivalry, division within a spiritual community (Sangha).¹⁰ It is clear that the Buddha did not like flattery because it is harbours unwarranted pride and conceit and both are detrimental to spiritual progress and result in negative kamma or karma.

Rebuke as an Ethical Phenomenon

Rebuke or scolding, negatively and severely spoken to, are other multifaceted concepts, from the perspective of both psychological and ethics. Thus the criticism, which is both useful in helping others find their way towards embracing Dhamma may on the other hand be ethically defamatory when issued out of anger, frustration, or arrogance. In Buddhist practise there is a lot of emphasis of the thought behind the spoken word. When rebuke is driven by malice in dealing with people or wish to exercise authority over them it becomes Duccarita or misconduct.¹¹

Self-esteem is hurt by such speech, which forms spiritual bruises and prevents the spiritual growth of the recipient. Psychologically punitive reprimand is likely to obscure the message because it can elicit feelings of fear, resentment, or confusion in the recipient, if attended with no element of compassion or wisdom.

⁷ Bodhi, B. The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering

⁸ Keown, D. The Nature of Buddhist Ethics

⁹ Nyanaponika, T. Abhidhamma Studies: Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time

¹⁰ Gethin, R. The Foundations of Buddhism

¹¹ Harvey, P. An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues

Similar to flattery, rebuke can also promote certain mental states by means of the emotions that include anger and sadness. In the case of the giver and the receiver deliberate rebuke is detrimental to the development of the state that fosters mental calmness and equanimity (upekkhā).¹²

The Buddha's teachings also mention the right thought (sammā-saṅkappa) when criticising anything. When the criticism provided is one anchored in love, and not pride or prejudice, then it is a quality to be embraced on the paths of individual and spiritual development. But when rebuke is used as a method of domination, it erases the principles of ethical behaviour, and prevents the giver and receiver from moving forward on the path.¹³

The principles of flattery and rebuke

The principles of flattery and rebuke in the Buddhist framework can be analysed under the principle of Right Speech, which is among the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right Speech, as explained in many Buddhist scriptures, is much more complex than simple telling the truth. It underlines the problems of relevant, non-malingplent speech with clarity, in place of falsehoods; spoken on time for the right benefit, without ill will. Lying or being over nice if practiced at the wrong time and wrong place then it is overstepping the boundaries of Right Speech. The Abhaya Sutta of the Pali Canon forbids speaking in an "untrue, incorrect and unbeneficial" manner of words.¹⁴

Compliment giving tends to fit in this bracket because compliment giving is an aspect of flattery, and where flattery is involved, the compliments may well be insincere, thus making it false speech. This, however, the Buddha discouraged not only because of untruthfulness, but because of pride-inducing as well as delusory propensity it fosters, which are antient to enlightenment.¹⁵ Likewise, if rebuke is offered improperly or out of ill will it is also a violation of Right Speech. In the Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta it simply states not to indulge in abusive language but learn to speak gently 'how one would like to be spoken to. Severe scolding can be broadly described as vacī-duccarita-which is a description of verbal misconduct that involves not only a negative impact on the counter part but also the cultivation of ill intentions in the undertaker.¹⁶

Which means that ethical factors of flattery and rebuke do not only lie in everyday interpersonal relationships but also hold dire consequences for spiritual communities. The monastic community, or Sangha in Buddhism, requires proper usage of words in order to promote order and growth for all its members. Desai characterizes numerous rules governing the speech in the Vinaya Pitaka, which deals with monastic discipline and its significance to the collective spiritual procedure of the community monks.¹⁷ Psychologically, sweet talking or even frowning at the individual is not good to the health of the individual or even to his or her spiritual nature. Praise and blame can fortify one in attachment to the praise and blame, which are among the eight worldly concerns, aṭṭhalokadhammā as taught by the Buddha as an impediment to spiritual progress.

Positive reinforcement, on the other hand, causes positive affect and is in contrast, harsh rebuke instils negative affect such as anger which is inadequate and is categorised as unwholesome mental states

¹² Salzberg, S. Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness

¹³ Thanissaro, B. Right Speech

¹⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi. The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya

¹⁵ Harvey, Peter. An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues

¹⁶ Gethin, Rupert. The Foundations of Buddhism

¹⁷ Prebish, Charles S. Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Sūtras of the Mahāsaṃghikas and Mūlasarvāstivādins

(akusala-citta) in Buddhist psychology.¹⁸ The Buddha designating pattern was not simple; he offered principles on how to maintain the challenges. In the case of Vaca Sutta he only offer advice to speak only the truth, that which is wholesome and that which will be pleasant to the ear. It therefore means that there is a middle way between dangerous praises and scorn. From this teaching there is reappearance of 'skillful speech', which is not only truthful but timely, gentle and spoken not out of spite but from compassion.¹⁹ Also, the Buddha has introduced the concept of mindfulness (sati) which provide practical ways of developing ethical speech. If we integrate time to reflect on what we want to say and how we want to say it, then we are able to avoid both the positive falsely presented compliments and the over bearing harsh scoldings.²⁰ This self-restraint in expressing oneself is not only correct from ethical point of view, but is useful and contributes to individual spiritual work and the right atmosphere in the society. Thus, one must agree that flattery and rebuke evident in Buddhist teachings have a rich ethical perspective. They go well beyond the mere concept of truthfulness in informing and include purpose and outcome for the speaker and the person to whom the information is given. The text teaches that through the direct study of Right Speech, the practitioner will be able to avoid pitfalls of flattery and rebuke that may come in its different forms, and help facilitate their personal spiritual development as well as the development of the society.

Conclusion

From Buddhist mental health perspective, this paper has analysed how flattery and rebuke influence positive and negative psychological changes at the psychological and spiritual level within the power relationships. Our analysis reveals several key insights:

1. Sīla is making moral precepts as being ethical conduct is a starting point of practice for cultivating the mind (samādhi) and insight (paññā). It is a social imperative, but at the same time, a practical guide to achieve spiritual freedom.
2. Although people do not consider it wrong, flattery is an action that has negative consequences for spiritual growth. To say the least it lifts the ego, distorts personality reflection, fosters illusions which alters attentiveness and focus. According to the Buddhism teachings when it comes to behaving ethically flattery in many cases is regarded as unwholesome (akusala) action if conducted with intent to deceive.
3. On the other hand, rebuke is only a variety of ethical phenomenon that can be considered rather ambiguous. When saying it in a wise and kind manner, it becomes a great source of learning to be spiritual. But when it is used with such motivation as anger or abusive power it produces psychological demoralization and be counterproductive to spiritual growth.
4. Compliments and scolding are very closely connected with the right speech (sammā-vācā) as the part of the Noble Eightfold Path. It is learned that ethical consequences of these asexuals are not merely contained within interpersonal relational contexts but involve the unity and sanctity of spiritual communities.
5. Flattering and rebuking people leaves a psychological scar. They affect individual perceptions of self and motivation and behavior in interpersonal relationships especially in the structured work

¹⁸ De Silva, Padmasiri. An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology

¹⁹ Bodhi, Bhikkhu. The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon

²⁰ Gunaratana, Bhante Henepola. Mindfulness in Plain English

environments. The extent of response may be predetermined by the relationship between the sender and the receiver, as well as their unselfconsciousness and empathy.

This research fits into the growing literature of contemplative psychology by exploring the coappearance of social affirmation, scrutiny, and spiritual change. It underlines the process of building a balanced organisational sound of optimism along with realism as the definite organisation psychological and spiritual harmony. Subsequent studies may examine the way to integrate this approach responsibly in relations between intimacy partners, friends and families or within the working environment. Also, the current research might shed light on how different societies and religious systems are dealing with the moral dilemmas concerning flattery and reprimand. Therefore, in this study it can be recommended that practitioners, leaders and-contact persons should be aware of potentially ethical and psychological impacts of their speech. By cultivating this awareness of what flattery and rebuke do, we are putting a good system in place to help to make people's interactions real, kind, and create a spiritually helpful environment that will help the people as they all seek to be wise and enlightened.

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