

Enhancing Teacher-Student Relationship with Buddhist Four Acts of Doing Favors (Sangaha-vatthu)

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างครูกับนักเรียน ผลกระทบเชิงบวกของความสัมพันธ์ และคุณลักษณะของครูในการสร้างความสัมพันธ์เชิงบวกกับนักเรียน รวมทั้งสังคหวัตถุ 4 ประการในพระพุทธศาสนาเพื่อช่วยสร้างความสัมพันธ์ที่ดีของครูและนักเรียน ประกอบด้วย 1. การให้ เช่น ให้ความรู้หรือคำแนะนำ (ทาน) ช่วยสร้างความรู้สึกเชิงบวกและความเชื่อใจให้กับนักเรียน 2. ปิยาจาช่วยเสริมสร้างการสื่อสารที่มีประสิทธิภาพทั้งวัจนะและอวจนาภาษาซึ่งนำหลักการของเจ้าสุภาษิตมาปรับใช้ ประกอบด้วยคำพูดที่เหมาะสมแก่กาล เป็นความจริง อ่อนหวาน เป็นประโยชน์ และกล่าวด้วยเมตตาและความปรารถนาดี 3. อัตถจริยาเป็นการประพฤติเพื่อมุ่งประโยชน์ 3 ประการคือ ประโยชน์ตน (อัตตัตถะ) ในที่นี้คือครู ประโยชน์ผู้อื่น (ปรัตถะ) - นักเรียน และ ประโยชน์ทั้งสองฝ่าย (อุภัยตถะ) - ครู นักเรียนและสังคม 4. การประพฤติตนเสมอต้นเสมอปลายและปฏิบัติต่อผู้อื่นอย่างเท่าเทียม (สมานตตตตา) ช่วยสร้างความมั่นใจของนักเรียนที่มีต่อครู ทำให้นักเรียนกล้าเปิดใจพูดคุยซึ่งจะช่วยสร้างความสัมพันธ์ที่ดีระหว่างครูและนักเรียนได้มากขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: ความสัมพันธ์ของครูและนักเรียน, แนวคิดในพุทธศาสนา, คุณลักษณะของครู, สังคหวัตถุ

Abstract

This academic article aims to study the teacher-student relationship, its negative and positive impacts, and the teacher's characteristics in fostering a positive relationship with students. The Buddhist concept of Four Acts of Doing Favors (Sangaha-vatthu) is also studied as a practical strategy to enhance the teacher-student relationship. Each factor of Sangaha-vatthu

is analyzed, and some practical ways of applying Sangaha-vatthu to foster a positive relationship between teacher and students are presented. The acts of giving or showing generosity (dāna) such as imparting knowledge and providing some guidance develop students' positive feelings and trust. Offering kind and convincing speech (piyavācā) promotes effective communication with students. To deliver verbal and non-verbal speech, the Buddhist principle of well-spoken speech (subhāsitā Vācā) is also considered. The speech is well-spoken when it is truthful, affectionate, beneficial, delivered at a proper time, and is from the good-will of the speaker. The third is useful conduct (atthacariyā) which aims for the benefits of three kinds: for one's own benefits – the teacher (attattha), for others' benefits – the students (parattha), and for both parties (ubhayattha) – teachers, students, and the community. Finally, maintaining equal treatment and consistency in behaviors (samānattatā) cultivates students' confidence in their teachers which also helps them to be more open, to disclose themselves, and this enhances the relationship between teachers and students.

Keywords: Teacher-Student Relationship, Buddhist Concepts, Teachers' Characteristics, Sangaha-vatthu

Introduction

The relationship between teachers and students is crucial as it profoundly influences academic achievement, social and emotional development, and overall well-being. It provides an essential foundation for effective classroom management which is a key to students' high achievement. Thus, this relationship should not be "left to chance or dictated by the personalities of those involved." (Marzano, 2003, p. 9) Several approaches from Western concepts have been explored to enhance this positive relationship. For the Eastern concepts, the principles of Guru-Shishya Parampara and the Confucian five virtues of a person are studied; however, this article focuses on Buddhism which offers a diverse range of valuable insights that

can be applied to various contexts. An integration of Buddhist concepts to enhance teacher-student relationships would be beneficial for a teacher who aims for the overall achievement of students.

In this article, the Buddhist concept of the Four Acts of Doing Favors (Sangaha-vatthu) will be studied and discussed their meanings, benefits, and how to apply this concept to enhance teacher-student relationships.

The Importance of a Teacher-Student Relationship and Its Effects

Wubbels et al. (2014) described the teacher-student relationship as an interpersonal meaning based on interactions that the teacher and students have with each other, and these interactions bring relationship. The concept is further explained that it is not only the interactions but the perceptions of the teacher and students on one another, and their interactions that contribute to the relationship. (Brinkworth et al., 2018) Thus, the teacher-student relationship according to Pianta (1999) is a composite of their beliefs and expectations about self, others, and the relationship, behavioral exchanges that contribute to experience and beliefs, individual characteristics such as temperament, and some experiences like prior attachment.

The teacher-student relationship is one of the fundamental cornerstones in effective academic learning and teaching. Students' academic and behavioral performance can be highly characterized by teachers' support which can either improve or deteriorate students' academic outcomes. (Agyekum, 2019) Apart from the ability to impart knowledge, the use of educational technologies, and the effective curriculum, it cannot be denied that the strong bond of the teacher-student relationship especially the positive one helps create a better educational environment and academic success.

There exists a variety of outcomes stemming from a positive teacher-student relationship. Positive interactions between a teacher and students create a peaceful environment and also help students adjust their behaviors to achieve their educational goals. (Agyekum, 2019) In

addition, a positive relationship fosters students' self-esteem, self-efficacy, academic performance, extracurricular activity involvement, and subjective well-being. (Bai et al., 2022)

Nevertheless, negative relationships between a teacher and students probably arise which promote "significant problems that can affect the student to the highest level." (Agyekum, 2019, p. 121) The results are various, ranging from a hindrance in academic progress, low self-esteem, disengagement in class and activities, less class attendance, and emotional distress which could negatively affect the students' physical and emotional health.

As a positive teacher-student relationship brings profound impacts on academic success, personal growth, and overall well-being, it is necessary - from a teacher's perspective, to focus on the characteristics that a teacher should establish in order to have this desirable relationship.

Elements of A Positive Teacher-Student Relationship

The elements of a positive teacher-student relationship in this article are focused solely on the characteristics of a teacher and how a teacher can establish constructive interactions with the students. Various Western scholars have pointed out several key characteristics of an effective teacher that construct a positive teacher-student relationship. A teacher's personality characteristics and emotional states are associated with the quality of a teacher-student relationship. (Wubbels et al., 2015) As emotional aspects play an important role in determining the quality of a teacher-student relationship, the teacher's empathy for each student's needs and concerns, and closeness to their students are essential. It is necessary for teachers to have a deeper understanding of students' needs and potential, warmth, closeness, and engagement with students. It also implies the teachers' ability to understand each student's emotional state and how to appropriately respond to it. In addition, the teacher's willingness to support and share emotions with students to help them achieve their academic goals contributes to the building up of constructive relationships. (Pastore & Luder, 2021)

In order to have a positive relationship with students, a teacher should try to establish these characteristics: empathy, respect, warmth, and genuineness. (Raczynski & Horne, 2015) With empathy, a teacher can understand students' emotions and the causes of their emotions and behaviors. A teacher also needs to know students' abilities and characteristics, and then show respect to the students that the teacher believes in their abilities. Warmth can be shown in how a teacher cares about the students and how much attempt the teacher makes to build a positive relationship with students. All of these need to be done with genuineness that is all actions and words are wholeheartedly delivered with care and from the teacher's genuine willingness. While communicating with students, a teacher should try to establish relationships with leadership skills, and helpful, friendly, and understanding behaviors. Non-verbal behavior as visual contact like scanning the whole class should be appropriately applied along with verbal behavior to prolong the communication. (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2012)

In a classroom, the communication between a teacher and students occurs all the time. Effective communication of a teacher helps maintain students' attention to listen. When students are encouraged to share their ideas and opinions, they will feel that their teacher is flexible even though there are rules set by the teacher. Apart from in-class communication, a teacher should express his/ her high expectations to students and try to effectively convey to them the reasons why these expectations are set forth. A teacher also has to make an effort to express care and concern for the well-being of students. (Freiberg, 2015)

States and Keyworth (2018) suggested that a teacher can foster a positive relationship with students by trying to create a positive classroom climate, treat students with respect, have high expectations for all students, cultivate and maintain the skills of clear communication, avoid biases, motivate students, and show empathy to students. Wanders et al. (2020) mentioned that students are expected to be more motivated to interact, discuss, and participate in class when they perceive their teacher as caring, attentive, fair, and understanding.

To achieve a constructive relationship with students, a teacher has to plan it well from the very beginning and try to approach it thoughtfully, intentionally, and appropriately. It is essential for a teacher to know students well as real persons, try to adjust the teaching methods to serve their needs and interests, and allow them to express themselves freely in a safe and encouraging environment. (Pranjić, 2021)

Apart from Western ideas, some Eastern concepts related to the teacher-student relationship should also be considered. In India, there is a concept of Guru-Shishya Parampara which refers to a teacher-disciple tradition. A guru (teacher) who is seen as a guide and a mentor has an important responsibility to a shishya (student) in providing education, guidance, support, and equal treatment to all students regardless of their different backgrounds. Education was based on students' interests and abilities, and the knowledge was imparted through effective communication of dialogue, debate, and discussion. (Behl & Pattiaratchi, 2023) Thus, a teacher needs to have effective communication skills, leadership skills, compassion, and fairness.

In Confucianism, there are five virtues for a person to have ethical behaviors and social relationships. These five virtues comprise benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020) A teacher who wants to create a better relationship with students may practice these five virtues and internalize them into behaviors. The first virtue is benevolence which refers to caring for others. This includes having compassion, showing concern for the well-being of others, and having unselfishness. The second is righteousness which refers to fairness and integrity. A person has to have public responsibility that is to behave in accordance with moral principles and to be uncorrupted even in the face of temptation. Ritual propriety is the third virtue which emphasizes proper ritual etiquette and willingness to do one's roles. Having this virtue, a teacher can become a role model to the students and maintain positive interactions with them. Next is wisdom in evaluating people and situations. A teacher who practices this virtue will strive to learn, understand, and make moral judgments.

The last virtue is trustworthiness. Keeping promises, acting with integrity, and having sincerity induces trust which is a foundation to establish a positive relationship with others.

It can be summarized that the characteristics and personalities of a teacher play a crucial role in determining a positive or negative relationship with students. Some effective qualities that a teacher should have are empathy, respect, warmth, and genuineness in order to truly understand the students. In addition, it is necessary for a teacher to have decent skills in leadership and communication. With leadership skills, a teacher can motivate and encourage the students to believe in themselves and their abilities, set their goals, and try to achieve them. Verbal and non-verbal communication skills are also essential. A teacher should be able to select what to say, when and how to communicate and to listen. A teacher who can communicate effectively with students can build trust and strong bonds with the students.

The Buddhist Four Acts of Doing Favors (Sangaha-vatthu)

To build constructive relationships with students, a teacher must try to cultivate those effective characteristics and qualities as Western and Eastern approaches provided. In addition to the cultivation of these qualities, some Buddhist concepts can be employed to enhance a positive teacher-student relationship. The concept of Four Acts of Doing Favors or Sangaha-vatthu is the one to be studied and discussed its benefits and how a teacher can apply this concept to establish a constructive relationship with students.

In Sangaha Sutta (AN 4.32), the Buddha taught his Bhikkhu disciples that

“There are these four grounds for the bonds of fellowship. Which four? Generosity, kind words, beneficial help, consistency. These are the four grounds for the bonds of fellowship.”

The four acts or four grounds mentioned in the Sutta consist of generosity, kind words, beneficial help, and consistency. These four acts are described as the bases that could help

create bonds or a good relationship among people who are in interactions. This concept can be further explained as follows.

Sangaha-vatthu is four bases of sympathy, acts of doing favors, principles of service, virtues making for group integration and leadership consisting of

1. *Dāna* or giving, generosity, or charity. This is to give, sacrifice, or share with others one's own things and also knowledge and advice.
2. *Piyavācā* or kindly and convincing speech. One should deliver polite, amicable, non-divisive, respectful, useful, and reasonable speech.
3. *Atthacariyā* or useful conduct, rendering services, life of service, and doing good. To perform useful conduct is to try to help others, to volunteer, and to promote morality to other people.
4. *Samānattatā* or even and equal treatment, equality consisting in impartiality, participation and behaving oneself properly in all circumstances. One should participate with others, help them solve problems, and behave consistently, impartially, and equally with others in all situations. Also, one needs to behave properly according to his status, persons, environments, and virtues. (Payutto, 2003)

These Four Acts of Doing Favors (Sangaha-vatthu) can be applied to live with other people peacefully and harmoniously. In Dutiyahatthaka Sutta, the Buddha had a conversation with a householder named Hatthaka that

“Hatthaka, you have a large congregation. How do you bring together such a large congregation?”

“Sir, I bring together such a large congregation by using the four ways of being inclusive as taught by the Buddha. When I know that a person can be included by a gift, I include them by giving a gift. When I know

that a person can be included by kindly words, I include them by kindly words. When I know that a person can be included by taking care of them, I include them by caring for them. When I know that a person can be included by equality, I include them by treating them equally.” (AN 8.24)

Hatthaka, who was a wealthy man with many followers, brought the principles of Sangaha-vatthu into use to effectively treat his followers for inclusiveness. Material things, kindly words, care, and equality were given at a certain time to the right person who needed them. Thus, it can be concluded that not only did Hatthaka apply the concept of Sangaha-vatthu, but he also used his wise consideration for when and to whom he would deliver these acts. Moreover, this Sutta shows that Sangaha-vatthu could have been applied in daily life for the harmony of living with other people from the Buddha’s time until the present and to the future as the Buddha concluded in the Sutta that “This is the right way to bring together a large congregation. Whether in the past, future, or present, all those who have brought together a large congregation have done so by using these four ways of being inclusive.” (AN 8.24)

The benefits of Sangaha-vatthu are also mentioned in Sigalovada Sutta when the Buddha preached Sigala, a householder, about the six directions and he concluded his teaching with Sangaha-vatthu as follows.

“These four winning ways make the world go round,
As the linchpin in a moving car.
If these in the world exist not,
Neither mother nor father will receive,
Respect and honor from their children.

Since these four winning ways

The wise appraise in every way,
To eminence they attain,

And praise they rightly gain." (DN 31)

Hence, these Four Acts of Doing Favors are the virtues that help unite people. With these virtues, people will support and encourage one another. They are the virtues that should not be abandoned. Those who have practiced these four acts of doing favors would gain respect, honor, praise, and recognition from others.

Utilizing The Principles of Sangaha-vatthu to Enhance a Teacher-Student Relationship

To enrich the positive characteristics of a teacher suggested in the earlier section, the application of the Buddhist Four Acts of Doing Favors or Sangaha-vatthu could be supportive and assist the establishment of the meaningful connections between teachers and students. Each of the four principles of Sangaha-vatthu could be employed to implement the satisfactory characteristics of a teacher as follows.

1. Dāna or giving, generosity, or charity.

In Buddhism, there are three kinds of giving (dāna): material things (āmisa dāna), knowledge and guidance (dhamma dāna), forgiveness and the gift of non-fear (abhya dāna). The first kind is giving material things or āmisa dāna. This refers to the giving of the four necessities in life, i.e., food, clothes, shelter, and medicine. It also includes other material things and money to help the receiver to be happy, especially for those who require them. The second, dhamma dāna, is to help or assist others in their spiritual development. It can be knowledge, guidance which is in a form of teaching, conducting classes, writing books, or other ways to disseminate knowledge. The last kind of giving is abhya dāna which is an action to dispel one's fear of danger, to save life, to give refuge, to heal and comfort, and to forgive a person for their mistakes. (Thou, 2022)

Imparting the knowledge is a clear example of how a teacher can apply dhamma dāna or the giving of knowledge. However, it is not just about teaching according to the lessons in the curriculum. A teacher with a generous mind would try to find teaching strategies to help make

the lessons understandable, interesting, and responsive to the needs of the students. Apart from the lessons in the curriculum, other knowledge and related information should be delivered to the students. With the sincere act of an attempt to transfer beneficial knowledge and information and a concern for students' needs and abilities, the students could possibly feel the good intentions and care of the teacher which gradually develops positive feelings and trust in the teacher.

Apart from giving appropriate and adequate knowledge without expecting any benefits in return, a teacher can give the students time to talk about general topics, to ask about the lessons, or to consult about their problems. A specific time may be scheduled in advance, but it is better if a teacher can find some time for the students when they come up. Nevertheless, it is not only sparing some time for the students to meet as scheduled, but it is also being truly present with them during that time. Truly listening and paying attention to what they want to convey during that specific time would help a teacher know and understand the students better, and it also shows that the teacher cares and respects what the students bring up.

As for the giving of material things (*āmisa dāna*), a teacher does not need to buy things for the students, but the things to give may be in the form of rewards, gifts, applause, or compliments for some special occasions like when a student can reach the highest or satisfactory scores, the end of the semester, or the New Year's Eve. It can also be done in the form of positive reinforcement to motivate the students to pay attention, participate, and try to achieve their goals, for example, a game or a break after a long studying time, or doing activities of their interests after finishing assignments, etc.

To forgive the students is a form of *abhya dāna*. However, punishment is still important for wrongdoing. Forgiveness, especially to those who have done wrong for the first time or without intentions, should be shown after punishment to encourage the students that they still have chances to change and develop themselves. Another way to give *abhya dāna* to students is to help them out of fear, danger, or even the feeling of loneliness or awkwardness in class,

and to heal and comfort them. A teacher should try to find some ways to help them adapt to the situation or classroom environment, to console them with kind words, and to help adjust their feelings and attitudes. With forgiveness and how a teacher tries to help the students out of problems, the teacher will become the students' safe zone and the person they can rely on. This can facilitate the blossom of relationship since the moment in a relationship that people most cherish is when they feel loved, seen, and understood. (Craig, 1996)

2. Piyavācā or kindly and convincing speech.

In imparting the knowledge and handling the class, it is inevitable for a teacher to communicate. Applying the principles of Piyavācā surely promotes effective communication. To have a kind and convincing speech is not only about talking with polite and kind words, but also knowing when and what to talk about, and what should be refrained from talking. In this case, the Buddhis concept of well-spoken speech (Subhāsitā Vācā) could be brought into consideration. In Vācā Sutta, the Buddha explained that there are five factors for delivering a well-spoken speech.

“It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth.

It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially.

It is spoken with a mind of good-will.” (AN 5.198)

Hence, a teacher should consider when to say or announce something to the students and whether it is the proper time for them to know, for example, when and how to announce the test results, especially to those who fail. All information delivered to the students must be truthful, but sometimes all truths cannot be revealed at the same time. Frightening truths like severe sickness or losing the beloved ones should be carefully revealed at a proper time when the listeners or the students are ready to listen, otherwise, the truths will harm them. The speech should also be pleasant that it is constructed with polite, kind, and encouraging words, and the speech should be delivered for the benefits of the students such as to advise them or to help them accomplish their goals. All in all, before, during the time of, and after delivering a

speech, a teacher should observe his/ her minds that he/ she really has goodwill for the students. What content and what kind of speech to be delivered and how to convey are things that a teacher has to be carefully considered and adjusted to complement the situation.

3. *Atthacariyā* or useful conduct, rendering services, life of service, doing good.

In Pali, ‘*cariyā*’ means conduct and behavior, while ‘*attha*’ means welfare, gain, and wealth. (Buddhadatta Mahathera, 1968) In this article, ‘*attha*’ will be referred to as benefits resulting from a teacher’s conduct. There are three types of benefits in Buddhism:

1. One’s own benefits (*attattha*) are good health, work, family, social standing, being proud and satisfied with a worthwhile life, having a peaceful, stable, cheerful mind, and not being distressed by attachment.

2. Other people’s benefits (*parattha*) are the benefits mentioned above that a person tries to help others to achieve and to develop their lives.

3. Benefits for both parties (*ubhayattha*) are the mutual benefits, happiness, and virtues of the community. (Payutto, 2017)

To bring these three benefits (*attha*) into practice for the useful conduct of a teacher (*atthacariyā*), the teacher may start by developing him/ herself with the knowledge of the subjects, handling the class, and understanding the students as individuals. Moreover, a teacher must have mental development to be able to control his/ her emotions and behaviors in different and challenging circumstances. This is what the teacher tries to do for his/ her own benefits (*atthattha*), nevertheless, these benefits will implement the teacher when trying to help students achieve their goals and develop their lives (*paratha*). In this case, a teacher may set the achievement goal for the course and for each student, if possible. Then, find effective strategies to help students reach this goal. During the path to accomplish the goal and when it is achieved, benefits will occur for both teacher and students as both of them are developing themselves academically, physically, and mentally as well as their relationship.

4. *Samānattatā* or even and equal treatment, equality consisting in impartiality, participation and behaving oneself properly in all circumstances. To create a positive relationship with students, a teacher needs to try to be acquainted with the students. Apart from the above-mentioned three factors of Sangaha-vatthu, the last factor is not the least crucial. A teacher needs to behave and do his/ her duties properly and consistently according to the role as a teacher who is the role model for the students. A teacher also has to treat all students equally without prejudice in all situations. The consistency in the teacher's behaviors would strengthen students' confidence in their teacher which helps them disclose themselves and their problems to the teacher. When the teacher knows and understands the students better, he/ she can help students solve their problems and this contributes to the constructive relationship between them.

Conclusion

A teacher-student relationship is essential in education which could influence both positive or negative academic growth and students' well-being. In nurturing a positive teacher-student relationship, the teacher's characteristics are crucial as they greatly impact the interactions with students. The Buddhist concept of the Four Acts of Doing Favors or Sangaha-vatthu offers a framework for a teacher to build a constructive relationship with students. The practice of Sangaha-vatthu can help the teachers cultivate a positive relationship with students and desirable teacher characteristics as some Western and Eastern approaches suggested such as compassion, genuineness, fairness, trust and respect from the students, communication skills, and leadership skills. The physical acts of giving resources, knowledge, and guidance (*dāna*) allow the teacher to demonstrate support to students and show them that the teacher can be their role model, facilitator, and advisor. The offering of kind words nourishes a constructive environment of affirmation and encouragement. The practice of delivering pleasant speeches (*piyavācā*) also develops a teacher's communication skills which are essential in understanding

each other. The useful conduct aiming for students' benefits (atthacariyā) nurtures students' physical, mental, and academic advancement. This kind of conduct manifests the teacher's genuineness and willingness for the students' development. Equal treatment and consistency in the teacher's behaviors (samānattatā) promote the teacher's leadership skills which can cultivate trust and confidence in the students' minds. Hence, following and applying these four acts helps a teacher create positive relationships and a flexible and intimate environment with the students.

Limitations and Suggestions

This academic article delves only into the overview of how Sangaha-vatthu can be applied to enhance a teacher-student relationship. However, an in-depth study and a continuous practice of applying Sangaha-vatthu have not been conducted. Moreover, this is from the teacher's perspective only and the practice is from the teacher's side. Also, the application of Sangaha-vatthu in this article is from the author's points of view and experiences as a teacher of graduate and undergraduate students which might be different from the opinions and practices of the teachers who teach kindergarten, primary, or high school students. For more valuable insights to foster positive interactions, in-depth studies on factors such as students' age, class size, subjects of study, timeframe, the roles of the students and their collaboration in applying this concept, and the integration of other Buddhist principles are needed. Exploring these various elements will enable more understanding of how Sangaha-vatthu and other Buddhist concepts can be effectively applied to diverse students and educational settings to promote a harmonious relationship between teachers and students.

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