

# THERAVADA BUDDHISM'S PHILOSOPHY: ETHICAL FOUNDATION OF KHMER COMMUNITY IN THE SOUTHERN VIETNAM

## FILOSOFIA DO BUDISMO THERAVADA: FUNDAMENTO ÉTICO DA COMUNIDADE KHMER NO SUL DO VIETNÃ

**HANH HUU LAM**

Vietnam Buddhist Sangha,  
Vietnam

[hanhlam.lhh@gmail.com](mailto:hanhlam.lhh@gmail.com)

**KHUE DINH PHAM**

Hanoi Architectural University,  
Vietnam

[khuepd@hau.edu.vn](mailto:khuepd@hau.edu.vn)

**Received:** 24 Nov 2024

**Accepted:** 10 Feb 2025

**Published:** 16 Mar 2025

**Corresponding author:**

[khuepd@hau.edu.vn](mailto:khuepd@hau.edu.vn)



**Abstract:** Theravada Buddhism has long been regarded as the ethnic religion of the Khmer community in the southern Vietnam. Its profound influence permeates their spiritual life, encompassing various aspects such as morality, customs and traditions, nurturing, and religious beliefs, and so on. Spiritual values have been arised and instilled each and every individual and community, and become an integral part of their daily lives, fulfilling the ever-increasing spiritual needs of the Khmer community in southern Vietnam. In fact, the ethical foundation of Theravada Buddhism consists in the precepts taught by the Buddha, guiding individuals towards virtuous conduct and away from wrongdoings. The foundation promotes goods of humanity as well, leading to tranquility and happiness for all beings. The Buddhist ethics are in intrinsic relationship with the ways of lives of the Khmer people, shaping their ideals, behaviors, and social interactions. In essence,

Theravada Buddhist ethics form the core of Khmer ethics.

**Keyword:** Theravada Buddhism. Ethics. Khmer of Southern Vietnam.

**Resumo:** O budismo Theravada há muito tempo é considerado a religião étnica da comunidade Khmer no sul do Vietnã. Sua profunda influência permeia sua vida espiritual, abrangendo vários aspectos, como moralidade, costumes e tradições, educação e crenças religiosas, e assim por diante. Os valores espirituais foram criados e instilados em cada indivíduo e comunidade e se tornaram parte integrante de suas vidas diárias, atendendo às necessidades espirituais cada vez maiores da comunidade Khmer no sul do Vietnã. De fato, o fundamento ético do budismo Theravada consiste nos preceitos ensinados por Buda, que orientam os indivíduos em direção à conduta virtuosa e afastam os erros. A base também promove os bens da humanidade, levando à tranquilidade e à felicidade de todos os seres. A ética budista tem uma relação intrínseca com o modo de vida do povo Khmer, moldando seus ideais, comportamentos e interações sociais. Em essência, a ética budista Theravada forma o núcleo da ética Khmer.

**Palavra-chave:** Budismo Theravada. Ética. Khmer do sul do Vietnã.

## 1. Introduction

Buddhism emerged in India around the 5th century BCE, founded by Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as the Buddha. Following the Buddha's passing, Buddhism underwent several councils and divided into two main branches: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada Buddhism, also known as the

“Doctrine of the Elders,” adheres to a more conservative approach, only allowing *Bhikkhu* Ordination, emphasizing individual enlightenment and studying veneration of the Buddha Shakyamuni. It is popular in Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam. Mahayana Buddhism, the “Greater Vehicle,” embraces a more expansive worldview, advocating for the liberation of all sentient beings and the worship of multiple Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. It flourished in northern regions, spreading to China, Japan, and Korea. “The terms ‘Theravada’ and ‘Mahayana’ primarily refer to the direction of Buddhist transmission, while ‘Hinayana’ and ‘Mahayana’ designate the doctrinal differences between the branches.” (Theodore, 2000, p. 90). This paper delves into Theravada Buddhism practiced by the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, examining both its doctrinal aspects and its role in their spiritual heritage. The Khmer community have meticulously preserved and passed down the teachings and precepts established by the Buddha from his enlightenment to his passing, ensuring their continuity across generations.

Grounded in the worldview and methodology of dialectical materialism, and of historical materialism, the author employs a combination of research methods, including analysis and synthesis, comparison and contrast, textual analysis, logical inference, and historical analysis, to elucidate the ethical contents and values of Theravada Buddhism, and to discuss their influence on the ethics of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam.

## 2. Literature Review

With a long history of formation and development, Theravada Buddhism has established itself as a significant religion (Keyes, 1977), characterized by its: intellectual freedom, practicality, coexistence, toleration, national identity, populism, and inclusivity without losing the essence of enlightenment and liberation of traditional Buddhism (Thich, 2020, p. 84). Regarding the role of Theravada Buddhism, Phan argues that Khmer Theravada

Buddhism has made positive efforts in accompanying the nation through activities that teach followers and monks to practice according to the Buddha's teachings of "compassion, love, and renunciation," helping those who are less fortunate (Phan, 2014). Furthermore, in political life, Theravada Buddhism has actively propagated and mobilized followers and monks to strictly comply with the Party's and State's policies, contributing to the defeat of the enemy's plots against the nation's revolution and effectively implementing the slogan "Dhamma, Nation, and Socialism" (Huynh, 2015). Through these activities, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has made positive contributions to building a prosperous nation, ensuring social peace, and improving people's lives (Phan, 2014). Agreeing with this view, Pham also argues that the Khmer Theravada Buddhist sect has made significant contributions to the protection and development of the country. Not only has it accompanied the nation, but Khmer Theravada Buddhism has also made positive contributions to diversifying and enriching Vietnamese Buddhist culture (Pham, 2016). Similarly, Nguyen further affirms that Khmer Theravada Buddhism plays a spiritual role in maintaining and connecting the Khmer community, giving this ethnic group a unique identity within the Vietnamese community (Nguyen, 2005). For the Khmer people, pagodas are not only religious establishments but also political, cultural, and social centers, playing a role in connecting the community. Existing within this community, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has both maintained its religious characteristics and has a national character with Khmer folk cultural features, distinguishing it from other Buddhist sects (Nguyen, 2005, p. 121). In another study, Vuong et al. argue that Khmer Theravada Buddhism influences all aspects of Khmer people's spiritual lives, from culture and consciousness to rituals, customs, and practices (Vuong et al., 2017, p. 271). According to Hoang, the Theravada Buddhist sect is the inevitable choice for Khmer residents in the Mekong Delta. From the time it was introduced to Vietnam, Theravada Buddhism has been closely associated with a specific community of people, the Khmer people in the Southern. Wherever there are Khmer people living in the Southern, there is Theravada Buddhism. The Khmer people in the Southern region are the ones who brought Theravada Buddhism from the ancient Chenla kingdom to the Southwest region (i.e. Mekong Delta), thus, the issues of ethnicity and religion in this land are always intertwined and inseparable (Hoang, 2019). Do further emphasizes that Khmer culture is essentially of Khmer Theravada Buddhist culture (Do, 2003). We may find a similar perspective in the research of Truong Thi Thanh. She argues that Khmer Theravada Buddhism is a traditional religion with a distinct transmission within the Khmer ethnic

community in the Mekong Delta, followed by most Khmer people (Truong, 2016). Studies in Asian Theravada Buddhism have also provided a multi-faceted view that Theravada Buddhism actually play a significant role (Frasch, 2014, p. 347). Continuing this line of thought, this article will focus on clarifying the influence of Theravada Buddhist philosophy on the moral life of the Khmer people in the Mekong delta of Vietnam.

### 3. Ethical Values of Theravada Buddhism

*At the heart of Buddhism* lies the doctrine of suffering and liberation, eloquently presented by the Buddha in his first sermon to five companions at the Sarnath's Deer Park, commonly known as the Four Noble Truths. "In terms of religion, the most fundamental doctrine of Buddhism in general and Theravada Buddhism in particular is the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha (*Cattāri Ariyasaccāni*)" (Truong, 2017, p. 44). "The Four Noble Truths are four sublime, certain, and self-evident truths. Because in Pali, 'Sacca' means 'real or true', and in Sanskrit, 'Satya' means self-evident truth, not to be debated" (Doan, 1999, p. 254).

*Dukkha* is the truth about the nature of suffering. Life around us is full of sufferings (Life is suffering). Suffering is a perpetual state in human beings, due to unfulfilled desires; due to birth, old age, sickness and death. *Samudaya* is the truth about the root of suffering. People suffer because of *craving* and *ignorance*, motivated by *greed – hatred – delusion*. Desire expressed through actions is called *Karma* (influencing force). Bad karma causes people to receive its results (negative consequences) and become trapped in a recycling of reincarnation that they cannot escape (cause and effect of reincarnation). *Nirodha* (renouncing sufferings or cessation) is the truth about the striving to end suffering. Suffering will be ended when the cause is removed. The end of suffering is called *Nirvana* (extinguishing the fire of sorrow). Nirvana is the ideal world of enlightenment and liberation. When you can end suffering and reach Nirvana, you are as a Buddha. *Magga* (the Middle Way) is the truth that shows the path (measure) to end suffering. That is to practice good conducts (Precepts), keeping mind in focus (Concentration) and enlightenment (Wisdom). These three disciplines are consist of the Noble Eightfold Path's concept (eight elements). "Later, Buddhism's cultivation methods were also enriched, especially when Buddhism was divided into different sects. But the cultivation method is the same: Eightfold path, five precepts, six paths (or six lower world)" (Doan, 1999, p. 264).

Similar to the fundamental teachings of Buddhism in general, the content of Theravada Buddhism is embodied in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. These principles are further elucidated through concepts such as impermanence (*anicca*), egolessness (*anatta*), non-creationism (*rupa-kalapa*), the twelve links of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*), the law of cause and effect (*kamma*), and karma itself, and so on.

*Distinctive characteristics of Theravada Buddhist Philosophy.* Theravada Buddhism is distinguished by its non-theistic nature, setting it apart from many religions that revere a supreme deity. Unlike these faiths, Theravada Buddhism does not ascribe to the existence of a divine creator. Before becoming Buddha, He (Sidharta) was a person of flesh and blood, not the lord who enlightened all things. He appeared in real life and became Buddha through his path of enlightenment and helped sentient beings realize the nature of the world. Theravada Buddhist cosmology recognizes the existence of 28 planes of existence, each inhabited by celestial beings. To attain the ultimate state of Nibbana, transcending the suffering and anxieties of worldly existence, as well as escaping from the karma and reincarnation, individuals must engage in spiritual practices and virtuous actions in the present life.

Theravada Buddhism exhibits adaptability. In its introducing into Southern Vietnam, Theravada Buddhism has been “warmly welcomed due to the compatibility between its ethical teachings and the local people's way of life and customs.” (Vo, 2015, p. 458). Similar to other religions that entered Vietnam and adapted to the local culture, Theravada Buddhism has created its unique form of buddhism, integrating ethnic groups’s identities in the region into its practices. In Southern Vietnam, specifically among the Khmer people, Theravada Buddhism blended with the traditional Ba La Mon’s beliefs (Brahmanism) and local cultural values. In particular, traditional Khmer culture “has regulated Buddhist cultural and ethical values, creating unique characteristics of Theravada Buddhist ethics in Southern Vietnam. Over time, these indigenous values, traditions, and customs have been integrated into this Buddhist’s practices. Simultaneously, Buddhist values have enriched and refined the customs, ethics, and doctrines of the people in Southern Vietnam.” (Vo, 2015, p. 472).

Theravada Buddhism is of an engaging way of life. “Engagement means taking care of worldly life's affairs, not going into seclusion” (Institute of Linguistics 1995, p. 691). Buddhism emerged in an Indian society where the rigid system of castes brought immense suffering, as “the tears shed were more numerous than the ocean.” Buddhism aimed to fill

the void in people's spiritual lives. To achieve this, Buddhism encourages individuals to cultivate their minds to attain enlightenment and liberation, guiding them to transcend the earthly realm of joy, sorrow, happiness, and suffering. Like anywhere in the world, when people are unable to explain natural phenomena and feel powerless in the face of reality, they turn to spirituality for solace, with an ultimately aim to spiritual emancipation.

From the content and characteristics of Theravada Buddhism, it can be seen that *Theravada Buddhism contains many humanistic ethical values* such as “the concepts of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, renunciation”, “sow good causes reap kind effects”; “earn merit from the meritorious deeds”, etc. Buddhism arised in the context of Brahman domination of Indian society along with an extremely harsh caste discrimination system. Buddhism has called for equality, and they spoken out against such discrimination. Therefore, Buddhist ethics is seen as a declaration of human rights, as the voice of a group of people against the injustice of Indian society at that time. In this line, Theravada Buddhism affirms that people can eliminate suffering, take control of their lives, through their own will and efforts. Rather than “slaves of karma”, humans are the masters of their own doings. These ehtical values are suitable with Vietnamese culture and people in general, and Southern Khmer people in particular. Since then, Theravada Buddhist ethical values have become a popular way of thinking and have an important position in the lives of Southern Khmer people. According to Venerable Thich Minh Chau, “Buddhist ethics is a way of life that brings happiness to people and it appreciates human values; a decent, pure, healthy lifestyle, eliminating unwholesome dharmas, achieving good dharmas; a way of life that is accompanied by blessing, not accompanied by suffering, liberates all hindrances and desires; a lifestyle in which wisdom plays a key role, life in harmony with nature and people; a selfless, altruistic lifestyle” (Thich, 2022, p. 4).

The teachings of the Buddha do not contain revolutionary philosophical content or groundbreaking scientific values, like mathematics or biology, and others. Rather, they discusses the present and future lives of human beings, suggesting the way for liberation from life's suffering. Buddhism’s humanity and prominence, is in its focusing on humans, placing human beings at the center of the universe. Buddhism’s good cause is on how to support humans in achieving happiness in the real world. The ultimate goal of liberation (nirvana) is at the heart of the teachings. It holds both ethical and religious significance. As the Buddha claimed, “Just as the great ocean has one taste, the taste of salt, so also this teaching and discipline has one taste, the taste of liberation.” (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha,

1996, 563). On the other hand, Buddhism prioritizes individual practice over theoretical understanding, focusing on enlightenment through meditation rather than doctrine-based learning. As such, teachings are regarded as a means to an end, aimed at fostering reasoning and, ultimately, human happiness. Therefore, Buddhism does not treat teachings as the primary goal but as a measure for reaching the underlying principle, “Everything is for human happiness.”

The ethics of Theravada Buddhism are also expressed through the ideas of filial piety and openness. Buddhism attaches great importance to family relationships, especially the relationship between parents and children. Parents nurture children, and children have the responsibility and duty to take care of their parents. The Buddha taught:

“In five ways, young householder, a child should minister to his parents as the East:

- (i) Having supported me I shall support them,
- (ii) I shall do their duties,
- (iii) I shall keep the family tradition,
- (iv) I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance,
- (v) furthermore I shall offer alms in honour of my departed relatives.

In five ways, young householder, the parents thus ministered to as the East by their children, show their compassion:

- (i) they restrain them from evil,
- (ii) they encourage them to do good,
- (iii) they train them for a profession,
- (iv) they arrange a suitable marriage,
- (v) at the proper time they hand over their inheritance to them.

In these five ways do children minister to their parents as the East and the parents show their compassion to their children. Thus is the East covered by them and made safe and secure.” (Thich, 2023, p. 541-542).

Theravada Buddhism also encompasses the value of developing goodness (direction of goodness). This goodness direction of Buddhism is adequately reflected in the path to cessation of suffering: Precepts - Concentration - Wisdom. First of all, Buddhism calls on people to be calm and alert, eliminating from their lives ambitions, desires, and vile instincts, because they always push people to sin and evil. The second part of the path is “Concentration”, which means not being distracted, peacefully cultivating spirituality, not having evil thoughts arise, ending afflictions, and being tranquility. Concentration’s dharma helps people return to themselves, renouncing evil thoughts, distractions, and worldly constraints, being focused on mindfulness to reach a state of clarity and fulfilment. The third path is “Wisdom”, which is “the virtue of being insightful and intellectual, understanding things and reasons, break off delusion and confusion, and having determination in destroying

all self-doubts.” (Tran, 1996, p.12).

In addition, Theravada Buddhism also contains the value of practicing ideal personality. Buddhism advises people to live together in equality, tolerance, honesty, humility, and chastity. We must have a heart of joy and equanimity such as sharing joy with success, forgiving and accepting mistakes of others. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to deal with suffering for a liberation, demonstrating the noble humanistic spirit of “to people and for people”, believing in people, sharing and sympathizing with people's suffering, and to seek effective ways for facilitating people in escaping from suffering. For individuals, the practicing requirements are: keeping precepts, being quiet in mind, doing good deeds, cultivating wisdom, living with few desires - contentment. In social relationships, Buddhism's “social responsibility” is expressed in two moral principles: “six harmonies” and “four graces”. According to Buddhism, human nature is diverse, both good and bad, so people must be constantly aware and alert in each and every thought, word and behavior, even if it is small, it must be good and wholesome. It is essential that we should stay away from evil actions originating from three roots: greed, hatred, and delusion. Buddhism advises people to strive to do good deeds, restrain evils, to avoid taking any action that is harmful to themselves, or harmful to others, or harmful to both, or disturbed by others, to which acts if being accepted and done will bring about suffering. Such actions is unwholesome, and we must abandon them.

#### **4. The influence of Theravada Buddhism on ethical values of Khmer People in Southern Vietnam**

Khmer people mainly live in the Southern provinces of Vietnam such as Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Kien Giang... They are an ethnic minority community in Vietnam, with cultural characteristics associated with Theravada Buddhism. The cultural and spiritual life of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam is very rich, but almost all activities in life such as religious activities, customs and moral awareness of the Khmer people are deeply marked by Theravada Buddhism's philosophy. For the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, Buddha has an extremely important position in their lives, so all activities of the people, from the elderly to children, are associated with pagodas. Everyone visits the pagoda in the town, and in the family, he (the Bhodi) is worshiped in the most solemn place. Thus, Theravada



Buddhism not only affects the moral standards of the Southern Khmer community in general, but also affects family ethics and the shaping of individuals' personality here.

*Firstly, of the influence of Theravada Buddhism on the community relationship's norms among Khmer people.* In their life, Khmer Theravada Buddhism plays a leading role in all fields and in all activities of the community. It is noticeable that this influence is embodied in Khmer people from the birth to the death, being closely connected to the spirit of Khmer Theravada Buddhism.

Khmer Theravada Buddhism grounded its ethical values of the community upon practicing and virtue of compassion. The practice of human morality conform to the principles of Buddha is carried out through the Noble Eightfold Path, that aim to enter Nirvana. All ethics in its teachings is oriented towards liberation as the basis, only then can morality be truly explained, which is the Buddha's attitude and concept of morality. The issue of practicing morality according to the perspective of Theravada Buddhism Dhamma is expressed in many aspects of human life, such as:

“abandoning the killing of living beings, becomes one who abstains from killing living beings; with rod and weapon laid aside, gentle and kindly, he abides compassionate to all living beings” (Vietnam Tripitaka, 1992, p. 122), “... one who abstains from taking what is not given; he does not take as a thief another's chattels and property in the village”; or “... abandoning false speech, becomes one who abstains from false speech” (Vietnam Tripitaka, 1992, p. 122);

Or,

“... Abandoning malicious speech, he becomes one who abstains from malicious speech: as one who is neither a repeater elsewhere of what is heard here for the purpose of causing division from these, nor a repeater to these of what is heard elsewhere for the purpose of causing division from those, who is thus a reuniter of the divided, a promoter of friendships, enjoying concord, rejoicing in concord, delighting in concord, he becomes a speaker of words that promote concord” (Vietnam Tripitaka, 1992, p. 122-123).

Also, it should be as,

“... Abandoning harsh speech, he becomes one who abstains from harsh speech: he becomes a speaker of such words as are innocent, pleasing to the ear and lovable, as go to the heart, are civil, desired of many and dear to many... as one who tells that which is seasonable, that which is factual, that which is good, that which is the Dhamma, that which is the Discipline, he speaks in season speech worth recording, which is reasoned, definite and

connected with good.” (Vietnam Tripitaka, 1992, p.123).

It is conduct in accordance with the Dhamma, righteous conduct. Practicing righteous conduct in life from the perspective of Khmer Theravada Buddhism is also expressed as,

“...I avoided running errands and messages; buying and selling; falsifying weights, metals, or measures; bribery, fraud, cheating, and duplicity; mutilation, murder, abduction, banditry, plunder, and violence.” (Vietnam Tripitaka, 1992, p. 124).

“...someone with a confident heart undertakes the training rules to refrain from killing living creatures, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and alcoholic drinks that cause negligence” (Vietnam Tripitaka, 1992, p. 260)

Khmer people in Southern Vietnam believe that practicing morality is implementing the Eightfold Path. And according to Buddhism, rules, and *cause and effect* are also the basis for understanding the *effectiveness* of ethics. Ethics exists not only in the present but also in the past, future, and even in the reincarnation of every human being. Therefore, we must speak good things and follow to the Five Main Precepts and the Eight Precepts.

Stemming from the fundamental Buddhist principle of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), Theravada Buddhism asserts the determining of mind in shaping our world. Specifically, it posits that the absence of mind renders objects nonexistent, and conversely, objects arise from the presence of mind. Without mind, objects become imperceptible, and even the very nature of objects is contingent upon mind. Accordingly, this emphasis on mind as the primary creative force extends to the notion of forming the world. Theravada Buddhism maintains that the world we perceive is largely a product of our own consciousness, not dictated by supernatural forces beyond our mind. Instead, it is through the interplay of causes and effects, or karma, that our experiences unfold over time. Each present moment is a consequence of preceding actions, which in turn stem from earlier causes, forming an intricate web of interconnected events. This profound perspective of reality has deeply influenced the worldview of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. They embrace the concept of reincarnation, believing that one's current life circumstances are shaped by past actions and that virtuous conduct in this life will lead to a more favorable existence in the next. This belief stems from the recognition of life as a cycle of suffering (“*dukkha*”), a reality that can be transcended by relinquishing attachment and craving (“*tanha*” and “*upadana*”). Consequently, a strong emphasis on spiritual cultivation is prevalent among the Khmer people of Southern Vietnam. They believe that the purpose of

life is not merely to become a Buddha, but to strive for personal transformation and enlightenment. This dedication to spiritual growth manifests in their daily lives, where they seek to align their thoughts, words, and actions with Buddhist principles. The Theravada Buddhist perspective on human existence extends beyond individual reflection to encompass the broader social sphere. Human interactions and societal structures are also viewed as stepping stones on the path to spiritual awakening and liberation (Nguyen et al., 2024). This worldview has fostered a sense of ‘contentment and acceptance’ among the Khmer people, leading to a less confrontational approach to societal issues and challenges in the time of materialistic and market-driven society.

Theravada Buddhist ethics encompass the realm of actions, thoughts and intentions, permeate every aspect of human existence, whether mere physical appearance or invisible ideas. These principles, as taught by the Buddha, include refraining from killing living creatures, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, speaking false speech, or malicious speech, or harsh speech, and engaging in double-dealing or gossip... These ethical guidelines manifest in daily life, guiding individuals' actions and interactions through the framework of the five aggregates (*pancakkhandha*): form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and discernment. The embodiment of ethics and ethical practices extends beyond the individual to encompass interpersonal relationships and societal interactions. The Buddha's teachings emphasize the importance of cultivating ethical conduct not only for present well-being, but also for shaping one's future rebirths. Theravada Buddhist ethics serve as a moral compass, not only influencing the ethical standards of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam but also shaping family dynamics and fostering harmonious relationships within the household.

*Secondly, of the influence of Theravada Buddhism on the family ethics in Khmer households.* Despite centuries of living together with other ethnic groups in Southern Vietnam, the Khmer people have tenaciously preserved their unique cultural identity. Family serves as a cornerstone of their cultural heritage, playing a pivotal role in upholding and nurturing cherished traditions (Pham et al., 2025). Family dynamics revolve around core relationships, including those between husbands and wives, parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, and siblings (Do, 2022). Within Khmer households, the husband traditionally assumes the head of family role, primarily in the aspects of agricultural production and external interactions. However, in most other aspects of family life, both husband and wife

share equal responsibilities and decision-making power.

The Buddha's guidance on marital relationships has profoundly impacted the Khmer family structure, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and mutual respect among couples. This emphasis on shared values strengthens the bond between husband and wife while elevating the role of women within the family. Khmer couples in Southern Vietnam are known for their dedication to each other and their shared commitment to building strong and resilient families, contributing to a cohesive and resilient society. Theravada Buddhism advocates for the establishment of harmonious and fulfilling family life. The norms and expectations governing family life and individual conduct within Khmer's communities of Phums and Socs are outlined in the "Sutra to Sujata". The Buddha instructs individuals to leave fourteen bad things behind, categorized into four groups<sup>1</sup>:

- eradicating the four vices in conduct: Refraining from killing living creatures, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying.
- committing no evil action in four ways: Transcending desire, anger, ignorance, and fear.
- pursuing not the six channels for dissipating wealth: Refraining from (a) indulgence in intoxicants which cause infatuation and heedlessness; (b) sauntering in streets at unseemly hours; (c) frequenting theatrical shows; (d) indulgence in gambling which causes heedlessness; (e) association with evil companions; (f) the habit of idleness.

These fourteen bad things represent the characteristics of an individual lacking virtue. Conversely, avoiding from these harmful deeds and cultivating good qualities is the path to becoming a virtuous and ethical person.

The ethical principles of Theravada Buddhism significantly influence the daily lives of Khmer individuals in Southern Vietnam, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships, as exemplified in the "Sujata Sutra":

The Buddha instructs husbands and wives to not only love and be faithful to each other but also to respect and honor their soulmates. He states,

"Sujata, a husband also respects his wife in five ways. What are the five?  
1. He treats her with respect, 2. he's dignified and not indecent, 3. he provides her with clothing and food when it's needed, 4. he provides her with ornaments according to the occasion, and 5. he entrusts the affairs of

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<sup>1</sup> Sct. 41 Sāleyyaka sutta, in Majjhima. Retrieve from <https://thuvienhoasen.org/a824/41-kinh-saleyyaka-saleyyaka-sutta> 15, March, 2024.

the household to her.”<sup>2</sup>

In modern Khmer society, women are no longer confined to domestic roles but actively participate in various spheres of social life, holding significant positions within families. Therefore, it is essential for husbands to show care and consideration for their wives.

In the relationship between parents and their children, Theravada Buddhism believes that parents have five responsibilities towards their children and children have five responsibilities towards their parents. In short, to their parents, children should follow these,

“ In five ways, young householder, a child should minister to his parents as the East:

- (i) Having supported me I shall support them,
- (ii) I shall do their duties,
- (iii) I shall keep the family tradition,
- (iv) I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance,
- (v) furthermore I shall offer alms in honour of my departed relatives.<sup>3</sup>

In return, to their children parents should do these things,

“In five ways, young householder, the parents thus ministered to as the East by their children, show their compassion:

- (i) they restrain them from evil,
- (ii) they encourage them to do good,
- (iii) they train them for a profession,
- (iv) they arrange a suitable marriage,
- (v) at the proper time they hand over their inheritance to them.

In these five ways do children minister to their parents as the East and the parents show their compassion to their children. Thus is the East covered by them and made safe and secure.” (Vietnam Tripitaka, 2001, p.541-542).

Within Khmer communities of phums and socs, families share a deep sense of responsibility and obligation to support one another in times of need, covering both economic assistance and emotional solidarity. This ethos of mutual care extends to all members of the community, regardless of class, social status, or familial ties. The prevailing atmosphere within Khmer communities is one of harmony and peaceful coexistence, with conflicts rarely occurring. When disputes do arise between families, they are often met with strong disapproval from the community. This harmonious social fabric stems from the deep-rooted empathy shared among members of the community, further nurtured by the tenets

<sup>2</sup> Siṅgālovāda-suttam (Siṅgāla) , Dīghanikāya. Retrieve from <https://suttacentral.net/da16/en/patton?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false> , 15, March, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Sigālovāda sutta, sct. 31, in Dīgha Nikāya, tr. By Thich Minh Chau, Retrieve from <https://thuvienhoasen.org/a241/31-kinh-giao-tho-thi-ca-la-viet-sigalovada-sutta> 15, March, 2024)

of Theravada Buddhism. Again, the Buddhist teachings emphasize the virtues of generosity, performing good deeds, living a pure and upright life, and refraining from wrongdoing, and so on. These principles foster a sense of compassion and understanding that permeates all aspects of interpersonal relationships within Khmer communities.

*Thirdly, of the Influence of Theravada Buddhism on individual ethics among the Khmer People of Southern Vietnam.* Theravada Buddhism extends beyond mere religion, serving as a cornerstone of social morality for the Khmer people. Venerable Thich Thanh Tu once remarked, “Compassion is like a refreshing stream for people to bathe in when their minds are troubled and heated. Compassion is also like a cool and sweet Amata, saving those who are being burned by the fire of anger and delusion.” (Quy, 2012, p. 38). The Buddha clearly stated, “No one can make us pure or impure. Purity or impurity is our own doing. We ourselves make ourselves impure, and we ourselves make ourselves pure (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 2004, p. 187). Recognizing that “all share the same red blood and salty tears,” individuals should refrain from taking one another's lives for any reason. The Buddha cautioned, “One who murders created not only hatred, suffering, anxiety, fear, and insecurity in this present life but also extends these evils into future lives, preventing one from living in peace and happiness and leading to many misfortunes and little good fortune. Conversely, one who abstains from killing lives and practices releasing living beings will have a long and happy life, good health, longevity, joy, and rebirth in a good realm.” (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 2004, p. 210). Theravada Buddhist ethics play a crucial role in educating individuals to fulfill their personal responsibility for their actions, both good and bad. Whether one is pure or impure is solely a product of one's own choices. Thus, Theravada Buddhism has positively influenced the relationships among the Khmer people of Southern Vietnam, guiding their individual and social behavior.

Theravada Buddhism's emphasis on a virtuous life has profoundly impacted the Khmer people of Southern Vietnam, shaping their worldview and guiding their daily conduct (Do, 2023a). They strive to live ethically, adhering to principles of fairness and equality in all aspects of life. Their compassion extends beyond fellow humans to encompass all living beings, embodying the Buddhist tenet of non-violence. Theravada Buddhism asserts that all individuals are inherently equal, regardless of social status, occupation, or authority. This principle of equality serves as the foundation for justice and fairness within society (Do et al., 2022). Unlike other religions, Theravada Buddhism's conception of equality extends to both ideology and practice. Embedded within the ethical framework of Theravada Buddhism

is the notion of a reciprocal relationship between individual and societal justice and equality. This concept resonates deeply with the Khmer people, who recognize that individual freedom must be exercised within the boundaries of community norms and legal obligations (Do, 2023b).

The ethical principles of Theravada Buddhism play a pivotal role in shaping the character and moral values of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. These profound teachings, imbued with deep humanity, have permeated Khmer society, influencing every member of the community and guiding their individual actions towards virtue, kindness, and the avoidance of harm. The profound influence of compassion, a cornerstone of Theravada Buddhism, is evident in the inherent goodness of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam.

## **5. Conclusion**

Theravada Buddhism has profoundly shaped the lives of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, influencing both their material and spiritual well-being. Despite centuries of historical transformations, Theravada Buddhism remains the predominant religion, deeply embedded in their daily lives. The ethical principles of Theravada Buddhism have served as a guiding force, shaping the character and moral compass of the Khmer community. The teachings of Theravada Buddhism, emphasizing karmic consequences, selflessness, compassion for all beings, cultivating wholesome thoughts, upholding moral precepts, and filial piety, have become the golden compass for cultivating the Khmer people's values and guiding principles. These ethical tenets have instilled in the Khmer community a deep sense of humanity and morality, forming the foundation of their cultural identity. Within the broader context of the Vietnamese Buddhist Church, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has contributed significantly to preserving cultural identity, customs, moral values, and the character of the Vietnamese people; it practices strengthening patriotism and national unity, improving literacy rates and mobilizing people actively participating in services such as social welfare and environmental protection.

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