

Methods used in conflict resolution among sinhala buddhist university students in a leading university in Sri Lanka

Abstract

University students often need to maintain a fine balance between academic and social life especially while they face conflict situations. As such the general objective of this study was to assess the attitudes and find out the extent the Sinhala Buddhist university students utilize Buddhist concepts, beliefs of gods and astrology in conflict resolution and in minor mental distresses. The specific objectives were to investigate how far a student utilizes Buddhist principles to resolve conflicts, to understand how the beliefs of gods influence conflict resolution and mental distresses and to understand the role played by astrological beliefs in conflict resolution. A descriptive cross sectional survey was conducted on 426 students using a self-administered questionnaire to assess their views and practices on utilization of Buddhist principles, beliefs on gods and astrology in problematic occasions in their university life. Continuous variables were analyzed and the categorical variables were also analyzed using frequencies and percentages. The possible variations in the practices were compared using the Chi-square tests. Some important conclusions are as follows: most of the students admitted that they resort to Buddhist principles to resolve conflicts. A small minority stated that though they are born-Buddhists they prefer teachings of other religions in times of crisis. Most students wished to maintain five precepts. Though the concepts of "Atalodahama" (eight worldly truths) and that "the hatred is never overcome by the hatred" were widely known, the application of the same principles was minimal in real-life situations. Belief of the gods and horoscopes were relatively higher among the study population.

Keywords: anger, Buddhism, conflict resolution, five precepts, forgiveness

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Methodology

A descriptive cross sectional survey was conducted among 426 university students by means of a self-administered questionnaire to assess their views and practices on utilization of Buddhist principles in problematic occasions during their university life. Continuous variables were analyzed using mean, median, mode and standard deviation. Categorical variables were analyzed using frequencies and percentages. The possible variations in the practices with principles were compared using the Chi-square tests. A representative sample was collected from the final year Sinhala, Buddhist university students. Out of the four faculties of this university, a random sample was selected. Written informed consent was obtained individually. Confidentiality was maintained at all times.

Discussion

University students are a cohort of youngsters who had successfully completed their school education. After qualifying through highly competitive examinations, Sri Lankan students enter the state universities for their higher education. Scoring well in examinations does not make a person successful as there are many other challenges that a student should face skillfully. Conflicts among university students are the rule rather than the exception in Sri Lankan universities similar to many other universities in the world. Conflicts should be resolved and the method of conflict resolution varies from

one person to another. Conflicts could be internal or external as well as trivial to lethal. So the tactics that are followed at troubled times are warranted to be analyzed as it may reveal certain deductions that could be further utilized deeply in conflict resolution. The university students too had been molded according to the theories of observational learning and social conditioning.¹ Conflict resolution is addressed extensively in Buddhist philosophy, similar to other religions as well. Though religion is only one out of many resources that could be resorted to, in conflict resolution, it surely plays an important role in framing one's mind set. Cultural beliefs of gods and astrology may also influence one's response to a conflict. When Buddhist students are concerned it is expected to have their mind-set framed by basic Buddhist principles such as eight worldly truths, five precepts, forgiveness, tolerance, loving-kindness, belief in 'karma', rebirth and value of living a simple life with minimal attachments. As such, it is a worthwhile attempt to try to find out how these religious teachings affect or influence them in their real-life situations to respond to stressors and conflicts in a healthy manner.² In addition, beliefs of gods, astrology and other metaphysical concepts too are widely engraved in the minds of Sri Lankans along with the Buddhist concepts making it extremely difficult to refine the Buddhist concepts alone.³

This study was helpful to analyze how the university students have made use of Buddhism, concept of gods and astrology for conflict resolution. The belief of gods and horoscopes crept into the

Sinhala Buddhist culture a variety of influences over a period of time as mentioned above.³ To study about the governing concepts of a given society the mindsets of the people should be quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed using scientific and reliable parameters.⁴ In this research, interestingly, it was revealed that 3.1 percent of the students were in the opinion that though they were born as Buddhists, they like to resort to the teachings of some other religions in conflict resolution and in difficult life-situations. Almost 94 percent mentioned that they want to maintain the five precepts and the rest mentioned that they see no point in doing so. One most striking deduction was nearly 47 percent of the students had chosen to be neutral in case of conflicts. About twelve and a half percent of the students mentioned that they resorted to a negative approach when faced with conflicts while 28.9 percent of students claimed that they face the conflicts positively and courageously. Eleven and a half percent (11.5) students mentioned that they used to resort to some other acts to overcome the situation such as telling it to another faithful person such as parent or a friend etc. The concept of 'Atalodahama'⁵ was utilized only by 11.3 percent of the students. Forgiving was only accepted by 30 percent. It was worth to note that 5.6 percent of the students (24 in number) had justified fighting and physical assaults among students as an effective response when faced with conflicts. Eighty nine percent of students had been to Sunday schools. Almost ninety percent of students believed Buddhist principles were helpful to resolve conflicts as the first place but 2 percent thought it as the second choice.

The belief of gods and horoscopes were prevalent among 1.4 percent and 7 percent individuals respectively as a method of conflict resolution. Almost five percent mentioned that though they believe in Buddhism, in case of conflicts they followed different techniques such as self-determination and will power. The concepts of eight worldly truths and "hatred never ceases through hatred" were their strong beliefs but they agreed that they do not practice them in worldly conflicts faced in real life. In general students had believed the help and assistance offered by of Buddhism, belief of gods and astrology in 90.1 percent, 89.44 percent and 80.51 percent respectively. This showed that the vast majority resort to religion, concept of gods and astrology when faced with real-life conflicts. As per the specific first objective, it explains that the Buddhist principles were in demand when a conflict is to be resolved. But when it is deeply analyzed, with some other Buddhist concepts such as how often they are forgiving and etc, the contrary was the truth. Belief of Gods was similarly accommodated as the Buddhist concepts. Belief of horoscopes as

observed in the third objective also showed a significant percentage as a reliable tool for conflict resolution. Finally it was rather clear that this type of research invariably entertain many limitations as some times students tend to mark controversial answers in a given circumstances making it difficult to ascertain the real practices or attitudes.⁶ Another limitation that encountered was the absence of similar researches published to the best of authors' knowledge and it made further interpretation difficult.

Conclusion

Most students had agreed upon the importance of Buddhist concepts though only a minority had actually resorted to them in conflict resolution and stressful life situations. This emphasizes the existence of a hiatus between the knowledge and application of Buddhist concepts in managing life events and further emphasizes the need for correctional measures to be taken since early childhood by parents, teachers and religious dignitaries to inculcate the practical religious approaches in the mindset of the developing child.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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