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Issā and Macchhariya in the Pāli Canon and Commentarial Literature: A Comparative Textual Study

KANDDALA

Samrat Ashok Subharti School of Buddhist Studies, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University

ABSTRACT :

Issā (envy) and Macchhariya (stinginess) are key unwholesome mental phenomena in Theravāda Buddhist philosophy, distinct yet related to selfishness and conflict. Issā relates to resentment towards another's success, while Macchhariya involves possessiveness and reluctance to share. This article explores their conceptual foundations and ethical implications via a comparative analysis of the Pāli Canon and commentarial literature, including the Dhammasaṅgaṇī and Aṭṭhasālinī. The findings indicate that canonical texts frame these phenomena within ethical and soteriological contexts, while commentaries offer systematic insights into their characteristics. Additionally, the article links these concepts to Buddhist practices of generosity and mindfulness, suggesting that this comparative study enhances understanding of Theravāda Buddhist psychology and ethics, paving the way for future research on their relevance today.

Keywords: Issā; Macchhariya; Pāli Canon; Theravāda Buddhism; Abhidhamma; Comparative Textual Analysis.

1. Introduction

The philosophy of Theravāda Buddhism is based on the human experience in three interrelated aspects: mental processes, ethical conduct, and liberation from suffering. Within this framework, unwholesome mental phenomena are not simply bad feelings, but conditioned states that affect intentions, actions and relationships. Of these, Issā and Macchhariya are important as they reveal two related but distinguishable forms of self-centeredness.

Issā is generally translated as envy or jealousy and in the Abhidhamma analysis means resentment at another person's success or prosperity. Macchhariya is commonly rendered as stinginess, avarice or possessiveness and it means an unwillingness to share or let others gain from one's possessions and advantages. But though both impede friendly intercourse, their direct aim is different. Issā is the concern with the well-being of another person; macchhariya is the concern with the holding on to or hiding of one's own good fortune.¹

This distinction is particularly important when the concepts are considered in the various layers of Theravāda literature. In the Pāli Canon there are doctrinal contexts in which envy and stinginess and related unwholesome tendencies are linked to suffering and obstacles to spiritual development. The Abhidhamma is a systematic analysis of mental phenomena, and the commentarial tradition elaborates upon their characteristics, functions, manifestations and conditions of arising.

Although there is a conceptual relation between the two terms, Issā and Macchhariya are not synonyms. In comparing them, one must consider the textual context, doctrinal classification and the interpretative contribution of later exegetical works. The article therefore examines their presentation in the Pāli Canon and commentarial literature, highlighting both continuity and development in Theravāda Buddhist thought.

The main argument is that canonical and commentarial sources describe Issā and Macchhariya as distinct but related unwholesome mental tendencies. Their comparative analysis demonstrates the Theravāda Buddhist understanding of the relationship between mental states, ethical conduct and the cultivation of liberation.

2. Research Methodology

The method of this study is qualitative textual analysis and comparative doctrinal interpretation. Its main sources are selected passages from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, the Vibhaṅga and the commentarial work known as the Aṭṭhasālinī. The Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha is said to

¹ Nyanatiloka, Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines, 4th rev. ed., ed. Nyanaponika (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980), s.v. "Issā" and "Macchhariya."

be a later systematic account of Abhidhamma categories.

The analysis is presented in three stages. First the relevant canonical passages are examined to ascertain the doctrinal contexts in which Issā and Macchhariya occur. Second, we investigate explanations in commentaries to understand their defining characteristics and functions. Third, the findings are compared for conceptual continuity, differences of emphasis, and implications for Buddhist ethical psychology. It is a textual rather than an empirical study. It does not purport to identify how common envy or stinginess is among modern populations, or to show the clinical efficacy of Buddhist practices. Modern psychological implications are discussed only when they appear reasonably to follow from the textual analysis.

3. Issā in the Pāli Canon and Abhidhamma Tradition

Issā is an unwholesome mental phenomenon, a feeling of resentment towards another person's success, prosperity or good fortune. Its defining concern is not simply the awareness of another person having something desirable. It's a poor mental response to that person's good situation, not a denial of their good fortune.

The difference is morally significant. Acknowledging someone else's success doesn't have to be an act of envy. Issā is born when another person's success becomes a source of dissatisfaction or resentment. So, the idea is about the quality of the mental response and not just the external circumstances.

The Abhidhamma tradition offers a system for analysing this phenomenon. The first book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, classifies and examines the mental phenomena in their relation to their ethical character. Its systematic treatment is the doctrinal basis on which the commentarial tradition elaborates on mental factors.²

The Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha describes issā by its characteristic of envying another's success or prosperity. This explanation makes a distinction in orientation than macchhariya which is about one's own possessions or advantages. The distinction serves as an analytical principle, for the two mental factors can be grouped under the same wider category of unwholesome tendencies, but they differ in their immediate objects and functions.

Canonical materials also locate envy in a wider conversation about unhealthy mental states. The Aṅguttara Nikāya contains a more extensive numerical scheme in which Issā and similar tendencies are expressed in repetitive textual sequences. "The arrangements point to the significance of recognising these mental states as separate objects of ethical and contemplative enquiry.

In this light, Issā is relevant to Buddhist practice for the way it gets in the way of responding constructively to the welfare of another person. Mudita, or appreciative joy, provides a different focus: instead of feeling resentful of another person's happiness, the practitioner learns to notice and rejoice in it. The connection between the two is an important ethical implication of the doctrinal analysis but should not be taken as a claim that every canonical passage presents them explicitly as a direct pair.

4. Macchhariya in the Pāli Canon

Macchhariya is mainly stinginess, avarice or possessive unwillingness to give. While issā is about the success of another person, macchhariya is about one's own possession, benefit or advantage, and the unwillingness to share it with others.

One important canonical source is the Aṅguttara Nikāya, which enumerates five types of macchhariya, relating to a dwelling or residence, families, gains, recognition or reputation, and dhamma or teachings.³ These categories indicate that stinginess is not limited to material wealth. It can also be about social access, influence, status, and knowledge.

This classification is of importance for the understanding of Buddhist ethics. One may be generous in material things but unwilling to share reorganization or knowledge. Another may entertain guests but try to keep others from getting to powerful families or helpful connections. Thus, the canonical categories offer an analysis that goes beyond ordinary economic possession. Of relevance to the religious and educational communities is the discussion of stinginess in relation to dhamma. Knowledge can be withheld to preserve authority, superiority or exclusive advantage. Such conduct is inconsistent with the broader ethical significance of teaching, learning and support for spiritual development. The Aṅguttara Nikāya also contains a discourse directly about the abandonment of macchhariya. The textual emphasis suggests that stinginess is not just a personality trait, but a mental tendency that must be identified and overcome through Buddhist practice. But the doctrinal concept must be applied cautiously. Responsible protection of vital resources is not automatic Macchhariya. The ethical issue is possessive attachment and refusal to share where sharing is appropriate, not any instance of keeping property or maintaining reasonable boundaries.

² Dhammasaṅgaṇī, 1121–1122

³ Aṅguttara Nikāya 5.254, "Macchhariya" (Pañcamacchhariya), PTS edition, Aṅguttara Nikāya 3:272

5. Commentarial Interpretation of Issā and Macchhariya

The commentarial tradition offers a systematic interpretation of issā and macchhariya within Theravāda Buddhist psychology. The *Aṭṭhasālinī*, a commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, classifies mental phenomena by their characteristics, functions, manifestations and proximate causes. The *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* also classifies these factors under the wholesome mental concomitants (*kusala cetasikas*). Issā is envy of another's success or prosperity, while Macchhariya is possessiveness and unwillingness to share one's own advantages. Both are associated with unwholesome mental states, but their objects and functions are different. This distinction points to the analytical precision of the commentarial tradition in articulating Buddhist ethical psychology and mental processes.

5.1 The Role of the *Aṭṭhasālinī*

The *Aṭṭhasālinī* is a commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, attributed traditionally to Buddhaghosa. It elaborates on Abhidhamma terms and builds systematic interpretations of the mental phenomena identified in the canonical analysis.⁴ This is important in that it links the technical classifications to explanations of their qualities and expressions.

In the commentarial tradition, mental factors are analysed in terms of categories such as characteristic, function, manifestation and proximate cause. These categories help us to focus on the functioning of mental tendencies. Applied to issā and macchhariya, they help to explain why the two phenomena are not to be reduced to one general notion of selfishness.

Issā is characterised by envy of another's success or prosperity. In contrast, macchhariya is associated with the concealment of one's own advantages and unwillingness to share them. This is more than a difference in words. It distinguishes different orientations of the mind: resentment against the good fortune of another and possessiveness against one's own resources or benefits.

5.2 The *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*

Ācariya Anuruddha's *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* is a concise systematic presentation of the Abhidhamma doctrine. Especially useful for comparative analysis is its discussion of mental factors which places issā and macchhariya in an organised classification of unwholesome *cetasikas*. What makes Issā unique is the focus on the success and prosperity of others. Macchhariya is explained as the possessive disposition of the avaricious person, its emphasis is on the wish that an advantage should remain exclusively one's own. The commentarial explanation expresses this attitude in the phrase, "Let this not be for others, but only for me." This formulation is to be understood as an interpretative explanation of possessiveness, not as a canonical statement of the Buddha in so many words.

The systematic account also connects both factors to *dosa*-rooted unwholesome consciousness. They are thus classified within the wider ethical psychology of aversion and unwholesome intention. But their different functions remain significant: Issā refers to the welfare of another, Macchhariya to the unwillingness to share one's own advantage. Therefore, the *Aṭṭhasālinī* and the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* are complementary resources of explanation. The first is a commentary on the canonical Abhidhamma, the second a brief manual arranging doctrinal categories. They are more explicit and easier to study systematically to distinguish between issā and macchhariya.

6. Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading between canonical and commentarial sources yields three main findings.

The sources first establish a conceptual distinction between the two mental factors. Issā is oriented towards the good fortune of another person, while Macchhariya concerns an unwillingness to share one's own advantages possessively. This distinction keeps envy and stinginess from being equated incorrectly.

Second, the canonical and commentarial materials are weighed differently. Canonical passages provide ethical and practical contexts, like the listing of five sorts of Macchhariya and the need to discard miserliness. Commentarial works give systematic definitions and analytical categories of the mental factors. The difference is one of emphasis, not necessarily of doctrinal contradiction. Third, the commentarial tradition provides a conceptual vocabulary for investigating the operation of these mental tendencies. The analysis of characteristics, function, manifestation and proximate cause is to distinguish the immediate object of a mental factor from its wider ethical implications.

These findings show the value of comparative textual research. Instead of just looking up dictionary entries for translations, a researcher may analyse how concepts work in different textual genres. This is especially important for Pāli terms whose English equivalents may overlap in common usage.

⁴ Buddhaghosa, *Aṭṭhasālinī*, commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, ed. Edward Müller (London: Pali Text Society, 1897), discussion of issā and macchhariya.

7. Ethical and Practical Implications

The distinction between Issā and Macchhariya has ramifications for Buddhist ethics. If envy is a resentment at the success of another, the practice of appreciative joy is a relevant alternative. Muditā calls the practitioner to feel joy in the happiness of another, without feeling it as a loss for oneself. Where Macchhariya is an unwillingness to share, dāna, or generosity, is the ethical practice that corresponds. Generosity defies the impulse to regard resources, knowledge, and advantages as things that must remain entirely one's own. Such giving should be governed by wisdom and proper consideration of circumstances rather than by indiscriminate expenditure.

Mindfulness is also a part of the framework. In observing resentment, comparison and possessive impulses as they arise, practitioners can recognize their conditions and avoid translating them immediately into harmful speech or action.⁵ This process is supported by ethical discipline that imposes boundaries to deception, malicious speech, and exploitation.

These practices fit within the wider Buddhist emphasis on mental cultivation and ethical transformation. However, the current study does not show that they lead to specific clinical outcomes. Further empirical study would be required to substantiate claims about their efficacy in contemporary psychological treatment.

8. Conclusion

The Pāli Canon and commentarial literature have been compared in a study of issā and Macchhariya, showing two related but distinct unwholesome mental factors. Issā is when you resent another person's success or prosperity. Macchhariya is when you are possessive and unwilling to share your own advantages.

Important canonical contexts include the five classifications of macchhariya and the emphasis on abandoning stinginess in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. The Dhammasaṅgaṇī presents the systematic Abhidhamma foundation, and the Aṭṭhasālinī and Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha develop the conceptual characteristics and functions of these mental phenomena.

The comparison shows that it is best to study canonical and commentarial sources together. Canonical contexts provide practical and ethical relevance and later systematic explanations can make distinctions more transparent that are obscured in general translation. The practices that correspond to the tendencies identified in these texts are generosity, joy, mindfulness, and wisdom.

Further research might explore how these ideas have been received in different Theravāda traditions and their relevance to contemporary ethical and psychological discussions. Such research should retain the doctrinal meanings of the Pāli terms but should separate textual interpretation from empirically established psychological findings.

Ultimately, Issā and Macchhariya shed light on the connection between mental states and ethical conduct in Theravāda Buddhism. Their comparative analysis refines our understanding of Buddhist moral psychology and shows the continued scholarly value of studying the Pāli Canon alongside its commentarial tradition.

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⁵ Anuruddha, A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, chap. 2, discussion of macchhariya and its possessive orientation toward one's own advantages.