

## The Prevention of Elder Abuse and the Essential Teachings of Buddhism

Koji YAMAGUCHI\*

In Japan the population has been rapidly aging. The number of people older than 65 years old reached 35.61 million in 2016. Among them, 16,423 have experienced abuse by caregivers, and this number has been increasing.

Cases involving abuse of the elderly invariably gives rise to the question: Why do caregivers commit abuse? Abuse tends not to be spontaneously occurring, but rather should be understood in terms of causes and effects.

This presentation tries to find clues to answering this question and help resolve the problem from the essential teachings of Buddhism. Buddhism, which seeks peace and happiness for people, teaches us from a scientific viewpoint how to understand and address social problems through the Four Noble Truths (the truth of suffering, the truth of the source of suffering desire, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the way to the cessation of suffering). Buddhism helps explain that it is inevitable for people to become old and suffer from dementia as well as other diseases and that things in life do not always go as one would like them to. Buddhism reasons that the caregiver's anger, the cause of abuse, comes from Attachment, and people must part with it. Buddhism also tells us that people must realize that their being is comprised of Dependent Co-Arising. These principles could be useful in the support of caregivers, especially those who have committed abuse.

Keywords: Elder Abuse, Prevention, Buddhism, Four Noble Truths, Attachment

### Introduction

When I heard that this international conference's topic was "Humanistic Buddhism and Contemporary Social Issues," what first came to mind was the Buddhist approach that gained my interest through the current research I'm conducting on elder abuse prevention. Buddhism was founded approximately 2,500 years ago by Gautama Buddha (hereinafter, "Buddha"). Since that time, the teachings of Buddhism have remained current through various scriptures. I am affiliated with Shukutoku University,

\* 淑徳大学大学院総合福祉研究科 総合福祉学部教授

which holds the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy as its institutional foundation. As such, the university provides regular opportunities to experience the teachings of Buddhism through a variety of events, which makes me feel close to those ideals. As social work is my field of specialization, I saw this conference as a good opportunity to report on and summarize the way in which I use the teachings of Buddhism from the standpoint of my elder abuse prevention study, which is titled “The Prevention of Elder Abuse and the Essential Teachings of Buddhism.”

Japan is experiencing a rapidly declining birth rate and a rising aging population. As of 2016, there were 34.61 million Japanese citizens aged 65 and above, with 16,423 of those citizens receiving abuse by caregivers (FY 2015). This number is gradually increasing. The issue of elder abuse in Japan has been perceived as a social issue since the mid-1990s, the study of which being influenced by American research (Yamaguchi 2009: 10). In 2006, the Elder Abuse Prevention and Caregiver Support Law (hereinafter, “the Elder Abuse Prevention Law”) was enacted, marking the Japanese government’s initiative to take this issue seriously.

I have been engaged in four major studies designed to prevent elderly abuse by caregivers. First, I constructed an empowerment approach, which utilizes the internal power of the elderly in order to preemptively prevent the abuse from occurring. Second, I engaged in prevention program development, which approaches families, local residents, and human service professionals in order to facilitate the empowerment of the elderly. However, avoiding involvement with caregivers who are abusing the elderly will not lead to the true resolution of this issue. Third, I summarized the work titled “Support Methodologies Using Cognitive Behavioral Theory Approach” for caregivers who are abusing the elderly. Finally, I focused on the relationship between the abuser and the victims of elder abuse. This was an attempt to categorize the reasons why the abuser resorted to elder abuse, and resulted in the formulation of the work titled “Types of Abusive Caregivers and Support Methodologies.”

Through these research processes, I became keenly aware of the ways in which the essential teaching of Buddhism has significance in elder abuse prevention research. By presenting several such instances of its significance, this paper will examine the Buddhist approach to resolving social issues by using elder abuse as an example.

As a side note, I am a teacher/researcher whose practice is based on social welfare studies, and am not a Buddhist monk. Therefore, I cannot say that I am fully versed in the usage and interpretation of Buddhist terms. It would be greatly appreciated if you could keep this point in mind.

## 1. Outline of elder abuse in Japan

The aforementioned Elder Abuse Prevention and Caregiver Support Law facilitates policies related to the prevention of elder abuse, and provides support to caregivers for the purpose of contributing to the protection of the rights and interests of the elderly. Thereafter, the abuse toward the elderly was categorized into five types of abuse. Those are physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, financial

abuse, and the neglect of nursing care. Ensuring the safety of the elderly is placed as the highest priority, with the municipalities held accountable in handling these issues. Furthermore, those who are involved in jobs related to the health, medical treatment, and welfare of the elderly are responsible for striving to detect abuse in the early stages, with all Japanese citizens being obligated to report instances of abuse.

According to the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare's "2015 Research Result on the Response Status Based on the Elder Abuse Prevention and Caregiver Support Law" (hereinafter, "National Survey"), there were 26,688 cases of consultations and reports concerning elder abuse by the caregiver. Of these cases, 15,976 were determined to have involved actual abuse, and the number of elder abuse victims had risen to 16,423. In the breakdown of those who consulted or reported, the most common were by care support specialists (29.6%), followed by the police (17.6%), family and relatives (10.3%), and the abuse victims themselves (7.9%). The abusing caregiver was most commonly the son of the victim (40.3%), followed by the husband (21.0%), and the daughter (16.5%).

In terms of types of abuse, physical abuse was the most common (66.6%), followed by psychological abuse (41.1%), abandonment of nursing care (20.8%), financial abuse (20.0%), and sexual abuse (0.4%). Female abuse victims made up 76.8% of the total, with the 80-84 age group being the most common at 24.1%. A total of 86.6% of victims lived with their abuser.

Aside of elder abuse cases in which the caregiver was the abuser, there were 1,640 cases of consultations and reports related to elder abuse by those working for nursing care institutions. In other words, the abuse was being done by human service professionals. Of these reports, 408 cases were determined to be abuse, with the number having increased in recent years. The number of elder abuse victims was 778, of which 80.6% of the abuse was conducted by care workers.

## 2. Viewing matters objectively

### (1) Factors that cause elder abuse by caregivers

In the aforementioned national survey result, the "causal factors of abuse" have been summarized in the following manner:

Table 1: Causal factors of abuse (multiple response)

Factors	Number of cases	Percentage (%)
Abuser's exhaustion/stress from providing nursing care	1,320	25.0
Abuser's disabilities/illnesses	1,217	23.1
Symptoms of dementia in the abuse victim	852	16.1
Financial difficulties at home (financial issues)	759	14.4
Relationship between the abuse victim and the abusers prior to the abuse occurring	666	12.6
(Behavior and statements based on) The personality and character of the abuser	550	10.4
Lack of the abuser's knowledge and information	511	9.7
Influence of the abuser's alcohol drinking	359	6.8
Unstable emotional state of the abuser	345	6.5
Psychological disorder (including suspicion of), higher brain dysfunction, intellectual disabilities, and the decrease in the cognitive ability of the abuse victim	210	4.0
(Behavior and statements based on) The personality and character of the abuse victim	187	3.5
Poor relationships with other family member of the caregiver (other than the abuser) in the household and other family issues	160	3.0
Other low physical autonomy of the abuse victim	127	2.4
The decline and the lack of the caregiving ability of the abuser	108	2.0
Other factors on the abuse victim's side	60	1.1
Lack of or decrease in the ability to understand the abuser	52	1.0
Lack of interest, understanding, and cooperation of the families (e.g., spouse) and relatives (other than the abuser)	42	0.8
Other factors on the abuser's side	39	0.7
Other factors related to the household	26	0.5
Financial interest within the household (e.g., properties, inheritance)	25	0.5
Isolation of the abuser and the absence of an assistance caregiver	23	0.4
Abuser's gambling addiction	20	0.4
Abuser's reluctance to use external services	18	0.3
Difficulties in the assistance of excretion care of the abuse victim	17	0.3
Management issues, including lack of or mismanagement of care services	6	0.1
Abuse victim's reluctance to use external services	4	0.1
Other issues related to care management and those related to the system	3	0.1
Opinions of those around the abuser that "family members should provide nursing care," and the stress and pressure of keeping up public appearance	1	0.0

(Note) Aggregated the 5,276 case examples that were in the survey responses

(Source: "2015 Research Result on the Response Status Based on the Elder Abuse Prevention and Caregiver Support Law" <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/04-Houdouhappyou-12304500-Roukenkyoku-Ninchishougyakutaiboushitaisakusuishinshit su/0000155730.pdf> 2017.10.22)

From the national survey, the indicated causal factors of elder abuse are the caregiver's exhaustion and burdens from nursing care, stress and alcohol dependence, psychological illnesses, past history of family relationships, dementia symptoms of the elderly, and financial motivations. On the structural understanding of these factors, we have determined the following:

- ① Factors on the side of the elderly: personalities and characters, symptoms of dementia, low physical autonomy, and difficulties in excretions
- ② Factors on the abuser's side: personalities and characters, exhaustion from nursing care, stress, illnesses and disorders (e.g., physical, intellectual, and psychological), addiction (e.g., on alcohol or gambling), lack of knowledge and information on nursing care, and domestic violence
- ③ Human relationship factors: Past family/couple's relationship, and the rejection of relationships
- ④ Sociocultural factors: Reluctance to use relevant services, mindset that it is a given for family members to provide nursing care, and the indifference of neighbors
- ⑤ Financial factors: Financial difficulties and financial interests

It is evident here that various causal factors of abuse are active. However, the individuals that chose the method of abuse and instinctively adopted it before ultimately performing the abuse are the caregivers themselves. Regardless of the reasons or external factors involved, it is necessary to maintain a perspective that questions why caregivers abuse, and to focus on finding the answer. The phenomenon of abuse does not occur naturally. Rather, it is a causal relationship. That is, a cause existed that resulted in the abuse. In other words, abuse occurs because an abuser takes an abusive action. As such, it is clear that if the abuser did not take any abusive action, the abuse would not have occurred. Abuse against the elderly also occurs because the caregiver takes abusive action. Why, then, do caregivers abuse? This is a natural question to ask, but the answers are not easily found.

## (2) The Buddhist Principle of the Four Noble Truths

The original teaching that Buddha preached was compiled in the scripture known as *Dhammapada* (Tomomatsu, 1985: 129-130). This scripture is said to have been compiled by the disciples relatively soon after the passing of Buddha. This paper will mainly refer to this scripture.

The *Dhammapada* verses 190 and 191 describe the truth of the world, which is known as the Four Noble Truths. These verses provide an important viewpoint when analyzing social issues. The *Four Noble Truths* preach that living is suffering ("truth of suffering"), that suffering is caused by desires ("the truth of the source of suffering desires"), that one must liberate oneself of such attachment to desires ("truth of the cessation of suffering"), and, in order to do so, one practice ends the suffering ("the truth of the way to the cessation of suffering"). This means that suffering is something unavoidable in the lives of people, and that all things are causes of suffering. However, by directing one's attention to the causes of suffering and practicing to eliminate such causes, the feelings of suffering will end.

In Buddhism, it is taught that there are eight types of universal suffering. These consist of the

*Four Sufferings*, which are known as birth, old age, illness, and death, and the additional sufferings of parting from those one loves, having to meet those one hates, not being able to have what one desires, and clinging to the five aggregates, which are the sufferings of the mind and body. Buddhism claims that there are causes to such sufferings, and that those causes are related to the state of one's mind. For example, let's say that a grown son or daughter who is looking after their parents wishes to gain the assets of those parents. In order to do this, a form of abuse may occur in which the son or the daughter makes the assets their own without telling the parents, then uses those assets for their own gain. Even though this scenario involves a parent-child relationship, the child is an adult, the savings belong to the parents, and the use of the savings would require consent. The reason the child steals from their parents is the attachment to properties that exist within the child's mind. In other words, the child desires to make the assets their own. In order to extinguish this form of abuse, Buddhism teaches the child to lead a proper life, which is known as the *Eightfold Noble Path*.

Buddhist teachings outline the path as a perspective of viewing all things objectively and scientifically. That is, through a relationship of cause and result. This perspective is believed to be useful when analyzing the developmental mechanisms of elder abuse.

### 3. Attachment generates anger

#### (1) Belief as the cause of elder abuse

When analyzing cases of elder abuse, it becomes evident that although various factors impact the occurrence of abuse, anger is the reason the caregiver ultimately chooses to take abusive action.

Here are some example cases:

Case 1): A physical abuse case in which a daughter (58 years old) provided nursing care for her mother with dementia (83 years old)

The mother with dementia experienced hallucinations and delusions, and could not understand what her daughter was saying. At times, she accused her daughter of stealing her wallet (in reality, she had just misplaced it). As a result, she would leave the house alone and be unable to get return. Therefore, the daughter tired of providing daily nursing care, and became irritated. The mother was meticulous and strict in her younger years, which was an image the daughter held onto strongly. She was therefore unable to accept her mother's declining state. As the mother became senile, the daughter shouted at her and, at times, hit her.

Case 2): The case of the son (55 years old) who exploited his father financially (85 years old)

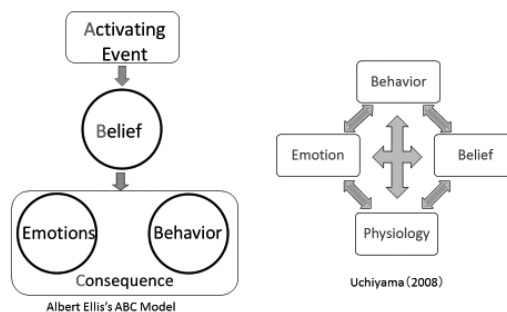
The father and the son lived together by themselves. The son was able to work, but did not. Instead, he demanded money, and relied on his father's savings. If the father refused to accede to the son's demands, and did not act in the way the son desired, the son would threaten the father with physical

violence. The son would intimidate his father in order to extort money. The father was afraid of getting hit, and was unable to seek help because his son was the only family member on which he could rely. This case came to light when people in the neighborhood became worried and notified the authorities.

Through the analysis of these cases, it becomes clear that the emotion of anger erupted within the caregivers because they desired to make their parents behave in a certain way, or resulted from annoyance over the way in which the parents disobeyed. The anger then led to violence. The reason the caregiver resorted to abuse in this series of events can be explained using cognitive behavioral theory (Albert Ellis' ABC Model) (Shimizu 2010: 51).

Everyone has a rationale behind their thoughts. When exploring why caregivers resort to abuse, attempting to understand the thought patterns of the caregiver will provide an entry point for intervention. This model states that abuse toward the elderly occurs due to unhealthy and irrational beliefs. Given that, disputing such beliefs and changing them into healthy and rational beliefs by communicating with the abuser will aid in modifying the distortion in their beliefs. Beliefs are thoughts that one can control. To be specific, violence and abuse are "learned." Therefore, it is important to have the abuser realize where and how they learned such behavior, and understand that such behaviors are not right. The abuser can then strengthen their desire to change, and will transform their actions. This model is based on shaping such possibilities. In other words, it is necessary to change the unconscious circumstance in which caregivers choose abusive behaviors into a conscious one. For this purpose, assistance is given so that the caregiver can reform to adopt more flexible thinking through individual counseling and group activities. This model states that as a result, the caregiver who was initially being abusive out of anger caused by the belief that things don't go their way will see changes in their emotions and behaviors by adopting beliefs that enable them to accept the words and behaviors of the elderly.

### Rational Cognitive Behavioral Theory



This type of cognitive behavioral theory is used in a relapse-prevention program for perpetrators of domestic violence (hereinafter, "DV"), but it could also be used for aiding caregivers who abuse the elderly.

In addition to the factors of "belief," "emotions," and "behaviors," the factor of "physiology" has

been point out. These four human functions interact with one another (Uchiyama, 2008: 13). Applying this to elder abuse means that influencing one of the four functions of the abusing caregivers will cause the functions to impact one another. This can reduce improve the relationship between the abuser and their victim. For example, in regard to the abusive caregiver's latent anger, the following measures can be taken. One, the caregiver can take a deep breath to alter their physiology to a calmer state. Two, they can leave the site of caregiving, and maintain some distance until the desire to engage in abusive behavior has passed. They can also consciously think of other healthy and rational thoughts to influence their beliefs.

## (2) To eliminate attachment and earthly desires

Since ancient times, Buddhism has been preaching the distancing of oneself from attachments. Since anger is behind attachment, attachment occurs because of anger. For example, irritation that "things don't go my way" or "I want that person to obey me" comes from a strong attachment of "wanting others to behave the way I want them to," and the dissatisfaction of "not being acknowledged" is perceived to come from the strong attachment of wanting to be acknowledged.

In *Dhammapada*, there are many verses on attachment. For example, verse 186 involves the attachment of financial desire, and verses 334 to 359 are about attachment related to lust and craving. In particular, verse 347 says, "Those who are lust-infatuated fall back into the swirling current (of samsara) like a spider on its self-spun web. This, too, the wise cut off. Without any longing, they abandon all suffering and renounce the world." (Tomomatsu, 1985: 222). This means that those who are bound by desires due to attachments will be bound to the currents of desires, just as spiders can only walk on top of the strands they have spun. It preaches that the wise detach themselves from such desires, which liberates them from all sorts of suffering and prevents the formation of any attachments.

Many earthly desires exist within a person's mind. Even among such desires, Buddha has provided many lessons on attachments. The preaching has lasted for 2,500 years, and is still sufficiently relevant and worthy of attention in today's society.

Then why do attachments occur? Buddhism teaches that nothing remains unchanged ("all things are impermanent") and that attachment occurs from a worldly view that is centered on oneself. The idea that "all things are impermanent" is stated in verse 277 of *Dhammapada*, and verse 279 touches on "without a self". Many things in the world are subject to change. Buddhism teaches us that understanding this and liberating ourselves from self-centered thinking is the way to relinquish oneself from attachments.

Cases 1) and 2) from above can be interpreted as instances in which anger originated from the strong attachment of the children to make their parents behave in a desired way. This served as the cause for triggering abuse. The aspect of Buddhism on changing oneself internally instead of blaming others (changing how one thinks about things = maintaining inner peace by relinquishing detachment) can be understood as having the same approach as changing one's belief in cognitive behavioral theory.

According to the *Four Noble Truths*, this series of thinking signifies the relinquishment of such attachments (truth of the cessation of suffering), and the practice of eliminating such sufferings (truth of



the way to the cessation of suffering) for that purpose. Specific methods for relinquishing attachments have also been preached in the *Eightfold Noble Path*, but possible measures include performing meditation, reciting sutras, and listening to the teaching and sermons of a monk.

#### 4. People and their environment

##### (1) The relationship between the elderly and the caregivers

It is said that people cannot live by themselves, but live within their relationships with others. The examination of households in which there is elder abuse reveals that the problem has occurred as a result of each party of a relationship (e.g. parents and child, husbands and wives, or brothers and sisters) impacting one another from the past to the present. Therefore, information on both the elderly and the caregiver needs to be collected in order to engage in elder abuse prevention. As well, the history of the abusive relationship should be traced. In order to do this, assessments play an important role in which various pieces of information are collected, such as the physical, mental, and financial situations of each party, relationship spanning from the past to the present, characteristics of how they think, living environment, and social relationships.

For example, there was a case in which a son who was raised in a strict environment by his father resultingly became unable to establish a sense of self. He became an adult without having the sufficient experience to develop or state his own opinions. When the father became old and started to require nursing care, the power relationship between the parent and the child reversed. The son abused the father in order to control his behavior. The person who is currently doing the abuse is the son, and such actions cannot be ignored. However, one can also not ignore the way in which the father interacted with the son during his childhood, nor the way in which the child-rearing impacted the son. Support for the son needs to be given by focusing on this aspect.

Each time I encounter such a situation, I feel that people live within the relationship they have with others, and that they may receive positive or negative impact from such relationships. As a result, these relationships have produced the current state of the person in that context. Such relationships are not limited to a household, but can exist with friends, neighbors, and also within the local community. In these contexts, influence can also be exerted. In order to understand and provide support to these relationships, an examination of the relationship of the caregiver from micro-, meso-, and macro- perspectives is necessary.

##### (2) The sense of cause and effect within Buddhism

As mentioned in the *Four Noble Truths*, Buddha preached that a causal relationship is always active in everything. That is, there is a cause, and then a result. These causes can be referred to as *origins* and *causes*. The first and second verses of *Dhammapada* preach that all events occur due to actions of the mind, and that impure minds will result in corresponding results. On the other hand, pure minds will result

in pure results. Other verses also preach that there are causes to all human suffering.

The perception of this cause and effect is not simply limited to the issue of people's minds, earthly desires, and attachment. It can also be applied to say that the existence of oneself in the present was established by the rules of cause and effect. This means that a self does not exist from one's own ability, but exists as a result of one's parents and antecedent ancestors, and that a self has been supported by the involvement of multiple people. These events result in the self of "now." The awareness of this will create the feeling of desire to do something for others. This feeling can be expressed as "gratitude and service" in Mahayana Buddhism.

Concerning caregivers who have abused the elderly, when they realize anew that they are relied on by the elderly and that they were allowed to live because of the elderly, they will realize that the error in the abusive acts they took was a result of being swayed by their attachments. At this point, a change in thinking may be possible. In this way, people live in relationships of causes and effects.

## Conclusion

As I studied the ways that assistance given to the caregiver could prevent elder abuse, I started to picture the essential Buddhist teaching in conjunction with the support method. I began to think that strong attachments were perhaps the cause of the abuse. Therefore, I examined this issue by using that approach as its theme.

Buddhism is essentially a teaching that wishes for people and all other living beings to cherish life and happiness. Its teaching is still relevant in our everyday lives as a source of spiritual guidance for existing in an era rife with difficulty. Furthermore, we wish that Buddhism will continue to serve this purpose.

Although this examination used elder abuse as an example, social welfare is something that aims to achieve social human happiness. As such, abuse issues that are associated with the human rights of the elderly cannot be ignored. Similarly to Buddhism, social welfare aims to achieve human happiness and a respect for human dignity. What differs in Buddhism is that people solve and overcome their issues through their own abilities. However, social issues such as elder abuse contain problems that are difficult for abuse victims to solve solely through their own abilities. Considering that societies are composed of people who live together, encouraging the individual to relinquish the attachments they have within their earthly desires will in turn lead to the happiness of the overall society. Using this opportunity in which I compiled this document as a starting point, I would like to continue my research on the possible ways to utilize Buddhist teachings when resolving future social issues.

### [Appendix]

This paper is a modified version of the presentation given at the International Buddhist Conference held in Vietnam on December 8, 2017.

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## 高齢者虐待防止と仏教の基本的な教え

山口 光 治

急速な少子高齢化が進行する日本において、65歳以上の高齢者は3,461万人（2016年）に達し、その中で養護者によって虐待の被害を受けている高齢者が16,423人（2015年度）おり、微増傾向にある。

高齢者虐待問題に出会うたび、「養護者はなぜ虐待をしてしまうのか」という問いを考えずにはいられない。虐待という現象は、自然発生的に起こるものではなく、原因があって虐待という結果が起こるという因果関係でとらえられる。

本報告は、その疑問を解決する糸口を仏教の基本的な教えから捉えてみようと試みるものである。人々の平和と幸福を願う仏教は、社会問題を科学的にとらえる視点を、四諦（苦諦、集諦、滅諦、道諦）を通して伝えている。また、仏教では、人が老いていくことや認知症などで病んでくこと、思い通りにいかないことは避けられないこと、虐待の原因に挙げられる養護者の怒りは執着から起こり、それを棄てることを説いている。さらに、自分の存在はすべて縁起によって成り立っていることを自覚していくことなどは、虐待をしている養護者への支援に役立つものといえる。

キーワード：高齢者虐待，防止，仏教，四諦，執着