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Buddhism and Thai Educational System: Historical Perspectives

Somchai Srinok

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Ayutthaya, Thailand

Niwes Wongsuwan

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Ayutthaya, Thailand

Saiyroong Buppapan

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Ayutthaya, Thailand

Phra Widesbrommakun

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Ayutthaya, Thailand

Vitthaya Thongdee

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khon Kaen Campus, Khon Kaen, Thailand

Niraj Ruangsang

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khon Kaen Campus, Khon Kaen, Thailand

Abstract--In Thailand, Buddhism has played an important role in terms cultivating morality and ethics for people in the society. Later, it has become an important part of the educational system of the country. This paper has its aims to clarify some backgrounds of Buddhist studies in Thai educational system from the early period to the present day. First, it discusses (1) some of the Buddha's principles of teaching first, and thereafter (2) importance of Buddhist studies in Thai society, (3) management of Buddhist Studies, and (4) History of Buddhist Studies in Thailand and (5) Buddhist Studies Curriculum will be discussed. The conclusion of this study reveals that training morality and ethics to youth is the key factor making Buddhist studies exist in the educational system of Thailand.

Keywords--Buddhism, principle, social teaching.

Introduction

In the past, the Buddha teachings were introduced to the society through his everyday activities (Ruangsang, 2017). Somehow, it is called 'Socially Engaged Buddhism', a persistent reflection on social action, manifested in compassion, grassroots empowerment, non-justice and nonviolence (King, 2009; Anālayo, 2021; Ferraro, 2021; Barzaghi & Coote, 2020; Kriaučiunaite, 2017; Queen, 2013). It is said that the Buddha delivered sermons during giving alms activity to the donors in the morning, for laymen and laywomen in the afternoon, for his disciples in the evening, for gods at midnight and he was always looking for all sentient beings who might be able to attain levels of enlightenment near dawn. The teaching methods of the Buddha are varied; as mentioned in the Pāli text, his teaching styles included Akāṃsa-lakkhaṇa (One-Side Insistency), Bhajja-lakkhaṇa (Clear Separation of Issues), Paṭipucchā-lakkhaṇa (Returning the Questions), Tḥāpana-lakkhaṇa (Not Answering the Questions) and Upamā-lakkhaṇa (Analogy). Today, his teachings have been used to develop the society in a variety of aspects. For instance, mindfulness has been used to support psychological research and clinical practices (Shonin et al., 2015), and many studies have confirmed effectiveness of the teachings. This paper has its aims to clarify a role of Buddhist studies in Thai educational system from the early period to the present day. This is beneficial to those who find references on historical background of Buddhist Studies in Thailand. In so doing, it discusses (1) some of the Buddha's principles of teaching first, and thereafter (2) importance of Buddhist studies in Thai society, (3) management of Buddhist Studies, and (4) History of Buddhist Studies in Thailand and (5) Buddhist Studies Curriculum will be clarified (Sreshthaputra et al., 2004; Kumar, 2002).

Buddha's principles of teaching

In Buddhism, there are many principles of teaching, which can be concluded as follows: (A) Teaching according to sense of people-Phra Buddhakosajarn, Indian philosopher in Lanka, who wrote the Visuddhimagga Scripture has classified the Buddha's Principles of teaching into 6 categories according to mental characteristics of senses of the learners: 1) lust, 2) anger, 3) ignorance, 4) nervousness, 5) faith and 6) wisdom as he has analyzed the audiences' based on the degree of defilements and merit before delivering his teaching (Buddhaghosa, 2020). (B) Teaching according to listeners' wisdom-Sometimes, the Buddha did not teach immediately and waited for the right time based on audience's readiness and advantage he has considered. (C) Teaching according to listeners' background- the Buddha considered audiences' social and economic background first before preaching as this benefited his instructional efficiency (Education Ministry, 2010).

Importance of Buddhist studies in Thai society

The importance of Buddhist studies in Thai society can be summarized as follows: (1) Buddhism is ethical for opposing problems and developing region. (2) Buddhism is ethical as connection with Thai fundamental culture even those people were at distance from Dhamma principles. (3) Buddhists have right to continuously study and implant morality by a process with rules of truth as basic

practices. (4) Thai society has unity as all most Thai people are Buddhist. Although they have some differences in mind and wisdom development, their faith on teaching principles is all most the same. (5) In Thai society, there is no reason not to teach Buddhist ethics because of such unity. (6) Buddhist studies for unity has been used to develop Thais; if Thai people do not know Buddhism, it means there is an educational issue in the educational system. (7) Education used to develop Thai society and must be confronted with truth and Buddhism is very important for developing Thai society in terms of cultural and environmental perspectives shaped by standard, identity and ethics. (8) Buddhist studies is used to preserve cultural and moral advantages of Thai society and so on (Piker, 1973; McCargo, 2004).

Management for Buddhist studies

Teaching Buddhism that it is not about the content students have learned only but the important thing is how the learners think, how they believe, and how they act. The importance is on developing a thinking process. Right thought leads to the right behavior. Dhamwongpol (2016), mentions teaching and learning Buddhism in two domains:

- Teaching Principles -1.1) the essence of teaching must be appropriate for the age of the students and taught appropriately; 1.2) teaching must provide reasons indicating benefits of practice and demerits of non-practice; 1.3) consistent practice is required by teachers as a good example and a leader in morality and ethics.
- Teaching Methods - teaching must define behavioral objectives for learners in advance. Teachers should specify what students are asked to do, determine the criteria to be judged and use the correct assessment method. Behavioral purpose writing must specify the desired final behavioral condition and criteria for judging. Teachers must consider the content first and then choose an appropriate teaching method or even choose methods in one subject as appropriate for the learners.

Jantarakantee (1999), said that teaching Buddhism requires a combination of various methods, such as problem solving, research, report, discussion, debates, interviews, observations, shared experiences, writing of ideas, role-playing, simulation of case studies from news, events and situations, including the use of supporting media such as puppets, fairy tales, music, games for lectures and explanations. She also proposes guidelines on how to teach Buddhism in order to get good results as follows: (1) teachers should choose a teaching method suitable for the subject taught, should not use the same lecture method in every subject. Sometimes it is better to use a logical method of reasoning, or creating a shocking point or inferences and metaphors. (2) There should be a news story or an example story to clearly show what needs to be taught. (3) Teachers must be role models as it is good in giving children confidence and want to follow the teacher's teaching, if there are other examples for the children to follow, they must be clear and unambiguous. (4) Teachers should engage children to participate in teaching and learning to experience in thinking and solving problems. (5) They should use teaching materials and (6) emphasize on individual teaching and training based

on differences of students on readiness and intelligence ([Marlatt, 2002](#); [Thathong, 2012](#)).

History of Buddhist studies in Thailand

Buddhism has played an importance role in very historical periods of Thailand: Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Rattanakosin. Sukhothai Period: education has been organized since Sukhothai era (1781-1921 B.E.) in the form of a traditional study which continued to up to Rattanakosin era, the beginning of the reign of King Chulalongkorn. In Sukhothai, the state and temple were united as the educational center of the community organizing various activities. Many subjects were taught such as Pāli, Thai language and basic common subjects. There were two school bureaus - one was a temple which was a school for the children of noblemen and general people. There were monks who specialized in Pāli language as a teacher, at that time, Pāli language was taught as the basis subject. One who knew Dhamma and Vinaya (disciplines) was considered a philosopher. Another one was Royal Graduate Office which only taught the royalties and children of government officials ([Kozan & Richardson, 2014](#); [Law et al., 2019](#)).

Ayutthaya Period (1893 – 2310 B.E.): education has changed from the Sukhothai period. The characteristics of education in the Ayutthaya period were in contact with the community only. In general, education was arranged in the temples. The people took their children to the temples to study. The monks were willing to accept them as disciples for serving. Disciples were religiously trained, learned to read and write Thai and Pāli as appropriate to prepare for ordination. To ordain a man who has reached the age of 20 years as a monk has been a tradition for a long time. It is understood that that this culture is a continuation from the land of King Boromakot because he was very strict in religious education. In his time, any child of a government official who will dedicate himself to government service If he had not yet been ordained before, he would not be appointed as a government official ([Ruangsana et al., 2021](#); [Marasri et al., 2021](#)). This tradition also resulted in all temples being schools and all monks being teachers to train and teach their students according to their abilities. However, the word school at that time was different from schools at this time, that is, there were no buildings as a place to especially study. The monks taught their disciples at his cloister at his convenience and satisfaction. One monk had few disciples because he had to take care of his disciples. Europeans who came to Thailand in different periods have told stories about Thai education in his books. For example, Simon de La Loubère, one of the ambassadors in France's 2nd ambassador of King Louis XIV who came to create royal friendship in the reign of King Narai the Great, said in the book of the Kingdom of Siam that "The monk teaches the youth, as I have already told. And he explained the instructions to the people as it is written in the book of Pāli." ([de La Loubère, 1700](#)).

Early Rattanakosin Period: The study has been ongoing like in Ayutthaya period. The temples were used as the place to educate citizens suitable to the needs of the community. Temples and houses took the burden of educating children. As for the state or the royal court, it controlled and provided reasonable patronage. The book of Sir John Bowring 'The Kingdom and People of Siam' Governor of Hong Kong which Queen Victoria Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain

appointed as an ambassador for royal friendship in 1855 during the reign of King Mongkut mentions two cases related to education at this time that ‘The education started with shaving his tuft, then the boy was sent to the temple to learn to read and write religious teachings with monks’; ‘The monk was assigned to provide education. The school was very close to the temple (Kane, 2020; Sethabouppha & Kane, 2005). It was a common thing to teach the teachings and perform Buddhist rituals as it was a very important part of the education system. Male citizens were able to read and write but seeking higher knowledge in a particular field was limited. Among the nobles, they were interested in learning mechanics. They know a lot about using navigation tools and philosophy. Tuition fees as usual in general schools in Bangkok were collected from each boy \$8, or 35 shillings a year, and another \$15 for housing, clothing, stationery, etc. Some wealthy Chinese people hired private teachers \$8 a month. A classroom can be rented for two months for two and a half dollar or less. Women's education was abandoned. In Siam, few women were able to read or write. However, a woman told the script and turns the pages of the play very fluently (Browning, 1857)’.

Buddhist studies curriculum

Since ancient times, the Buddhist Studies curriculum has been a compulsory subject everyone must study because the teachings in Buddhism are fundamental principles which most people use in their daily lives (Scotton, 1998; Tiberghien, 1994). From historical evidence, the school for teaching Buddhism in the past was a temple because of the stipulation ‘all Thai men must be ordained to study the Dhamma and various teachings in Buddhism as a basis for their further life’. Until 1902, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, King Rama V, the Ministry of Dhamma has scheduled to teach ethics for the first time in the curriculum in order to use it as a principle of teaching to cultivate behaviors of the youth in those days (Academic Department, 1995). In 1932, the country's governance was changed from an absolute monarchy system to a democratic system. People had more freedom. Therefore, the new curriculum has been updated. Ethics must also be improved by expanding into civic duty and moral subjects. The content of this course has been continuously updated as youths still had more moral and ethical problems. From the promulgation of the National Education Development Plan in 1936, the content of ethics in the lower and upper secondary school levels was provided with the aim to educate youths to behave as good citizens of the country. Therefore, the Ministry of Dhamma has added subjects on civic duties and morals to the curriculum (Amnaj Chanpean, 2009). Later, Buddhist Studies Curriculum has been improved according to the National Education Plan B.E. 2503 (1960) with the purpose to educate youths as a good citizen with morals, culture, disciplines, responsibility, good health, democratic mind, knowledge and career ability to create benefits to the nation as follows: (1) create ethical education to educate students to have morals and culture, conscience and moral dread, pay more attention on mutual benefits than that of one's self; (2) organize physical education so that students are healthy both physically and mentally as well as having the spirit of being an athlete; (3) arrange Buddhist education to train students to have academic knowledge and wisdom for life; (4) organize handicraft education to train students to have habits and diligence in the use of hands-on work as the foundation of a career (Prime Minister Department, 1999) (Hill & Capella, 2014; Kumar & Sumathi, 2017).

In the National Education Plan, B.E. 2503 (1960), moral subjects were taught in conjunction with civic duty subjects by the same teacher who linked the Dhamma doctrines as a citizen duty with good legal and moral rules. After Thailand has been using the 1960 Curriculum for a long time and it is found that most teachers still rely on the content of textbooks and information and were lacked of creativity in terms of life goals, feelings, values and ethics in various areas. Therefore, educational reforms have been initiated, which caused major changes such as changing the class system from 7: 3: 2 to 6: 3: 3 (elementary school: lower secondary school: upper secondary school). This led to the use of 3 new curriculums as follows: Primary School Curriculum 1978, Lower Secondary Curriculum 1978 and Upper Secondary Curriculum 1978.

In the Lower Secondary School Curriculum 1978, the term 'Buddhism' was directly used as the subject with content purely related to the history and principles of Buddhist teachings, cultivating morals and ethics to students in order to have desirable behaviors and to be a good role model for living in society. The content was later improved after its 10 objectives were investigated. It is clear that the content related to Buddhism emphasizes on the virtues of coexistences. The Basic Education Core Curriculum, B.E. 2551 (2008), since the Ministry of Education has announced the Basic Education Curriculum of B.E. 2544 (2001) as the country's core curriculum by setting the destination and learning standards as the goals and direction frameworks for developing the quality of learners to be good, intelligent people, have good quality of life and have the ability to compete in the global stage. At the same time, the curriculum development process has been adjusted to be in line with the initiation of the National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) and its amendments (No. 2), B.E. 2545 with the emphasis on having educational institutions to play a role and participate in curriculum development to comply with the condition and local needs (Prime Minister Department, 1999). The study on the basic education curriculum of the Ministry of Education indicates the basic education in Buddhism from the past to the present has been changed in order to cultivate morality and ethics for youths to be good adults in the future and to maintain Buddhism as the national religion (Suryasa, 2019; Sukarma, 2016).

Conclusion

Buddhist Studies curriculum has been a compulsory learning subject for Thais since the early period of Thailand. The Buddhist temples were used as the learning center with training morality and ethics to Thai youths. The basic education in Buddhism from the past to the present has been changed mainly to cultivate morality and ethics for youths as good adults and alternatively to maintain Buddhism as the national religion. Today, some of the Buddha's principles of teaching have been applied in the general educational system. Techniques related to teaching principles and methods are introduced to further develop Buddhist Studies. This clearly indicates the academic interest in the field of study.

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