

ROLE OF THAI BUDDHIST MONKS AND EDUCATION IN THAI SOCIETY

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Historically speaking, Buddhism has made a deep impact upon Thai society in many respects. Thais, both men and women, accepted Buddhism as a way of life, which was interwoven in their lives from birth to death. Buddhist temples have been, and even at present, continuing to be centers of the Thai villagers' life and a place where many activities are carried out all the year round. The Buddhist monks residing in the village temples have been the spiritual leaders of the people in respect of the way of life, norms, and education. Also, Buddhist monks have elicited worship and respect from the laymen in general. This research has the objective to study and understand the educational role of Thai Buddhist monks.

Methodology: This documentary research was conducted by investigating and collecting data from the Pāli Canon and commentaries, books, documents, articles, and research reports included academic achievements from Buddhist scholars that related to the research topic. All the data were then analyzed to present the results of the research.

Main Results: The study indicated that Buddhism became a subject of study in Thailand for a long time. Thai education in the past began with temples as educational areas. The Buddhist monks were the instructors for the offspring of the villagers, and villagers enrolled their offspring to be disciples of the Buddhist monks in the temples to receive education. The Buddhist monks conducted education on the doctrines from the Pāli Canon, the Pali language, the Thai Language, and elemental subjects. Later, education management evolved from performing within the temples. In some areas, the Buddhist monks in the local donated some land from the temples to build a school that conducted education for students within the national curriculum. In addition, some temples had built schools for the education of Buddhist monks. These schools administered education on Dhamma, the Pali language, and secular subjects related to the national curriculum of ordinary students. Later, Thai Buddhist monks became knowledgeable and played the role of instructors for local schools. In addition, the Buddhist monks also sponsored scholarships for both secular and priests. Until now, Buddhist monks persisted in dedicating and involving in Thai education. The study of the Pāli Canon had become a supported subject. The center of education comprised temples, schools, and universities. There were also prominent Thai Buddhist monks, reformers, and thinkers in Buddhist

education preserved in modern times. These eminent Buddhist monks comprised Vajirañāṇavarorasa (1860 - 1921), Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu (1906 - 1993), and Prayudh Payutto (In the present, Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (1939 - present)).

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This research is based on applied Buddhism in the nature of social Buddhism that discusses the role of Buddhist monks in Thai society in terms of the educational role that Buddhist monks play as leaders, instructors and supporters of education for Thai society.

Conclusions: The research results indicated that Buddhist monks played a role in Thai society for a long time since temples had become the centers for learning the way of life and academics. Despite the constant change of the present day, Buddhist monks still played a crucial role in education. The eminent Buddhist monks kept making achievements to support and spread education on Buddhism among Thai society and international communities.

Keywords: Buddhist Monks, Education, Thai Society

Introduction

In the early days of Thai history, education was primarily provided by the religious and royal institutions. Buddhist monks gave basic education to boys in classes set up within the compound of the temples, Sathienkoset observed that "Thai boys would be sent to be educated at their local temples where the Buddhist monks acted as teachers and the abbots as head - masters, while children of the royal household and from families of the nobility were educated in order to serve in the court and govern in the provinces." (Phraya Anuman Rajadhon, 1957)

During the reign of king Rama V (Chulalongkorn, 1868 - 1910), there was increased recognition of the need for educated people to staff the growing bureaucracy. As a result, the Thai education system was modernized and made more accessible to the general public. This began with the 1898 Education Proclamation, which was strongly influenced by the British system and in which two educational parts were stipulated: the academic and the vocational (The National Library, 1980); (Kosajyawat, 2005).

Historically speaking, Buddhism had made a deep impact upon Thai society in many respects. From as early as the Sukhothai period (1238 - 1378), it had played an important role. Thais, both men and women, accepted Buddhism as a way of life, which was interwoven in their lives from birth to death. Buddhist temples have been, and even at present, continue to be, centers of the Thai villagers' life and a place where many activities were carried out all the year round. The Buddhist monks who resided in the village temples were the spiritual leaders of the people and had elicited worship and respect from the laymen in general (Nivat, 1965); (Faculty of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2007).

Throughout the Thai countryside, at almost every village, temples formed the center of activities. The people regarded the temples as belonging to them all; they were felt to be the common property of the supportive villagers. The temples were, therefore, the unifying center

which functioned as an integrating and binding part of Thai society as a whole (Luang Vichit Vathakam, 1975); (Phrasrisittivites & Phramahamit Thitapanyo, 2020).

The general roles of a Buddhist temple through the centuries might have been summarized as followed:

1. It was an educational center for the villagers, children, particularly the boys who were sent by their parents to be "temple boys" (Dek Wat), not only for moral training but also for learning a variety of other skills.
2. It was a welfare institution where a poor boy or a poor man could have found a livelihood and obtain education.
3. It served as a public health center for the surrounding community.
4. It provided causal travelers with food and shelter.
5. It functioned as a public club in which the villagers spend time for relaxation and for obtaining new knowledge and experience.
6. It was a recreational center, where various festive fairs and entertainment, were staged all the year round.
7. It had functioned as a legal 'court in which the residents or the Buddhist monks acted as conciliators between conflicted parties and as advisors for those who were suffered from community or family problems.
8. It was a cultural center where artifacts and various invaluable cultural products have been preserved. It functions like a museum.
9. It was a go - down for different kinds of articles, which might have been borrowed and used by the villagers for their occasional festivals and feasts.
10. It was a meeting - place for the villagers who might have been summoned by the village headman for certain official information. In this case, it had served as an administrative center. (In time of war, it might have been used for military purposes.)
11. It was a place from where political campaigns were launched especially at times of general election.
12. It also was a place for performing religious ceremonies and services, which were concerned with man's passage through life in its different stages.

These roles of Buddhism in Thai society were well known and still continued in rural areas. In towns, certain roles were disappeared as a result of the impact of new technology and modernization.

However, it should be noted that even though the state had removed education from the Buddhist temples, the latter had not yet lost its entire diminishing further role in education. At the beginning of the separation, people who could not benefit from the state provision of education, particularly rural villagers, kept turning to the Buddhist temples for education, or at least for the basic learning of how to write and read. Subsequently, down to the present time, large numbers of people who could not receive the state-provided education at a level higher than the compulsory level of education, looked upon the Buddhist church as the source of acquiring further knowledge. In this respect, there were two methods of acquiring knowledge from the Buddhist temples.

The first method was enrolment to stay in the temples as "temple boy", known in Thai as Sit Wat or Dek Wat. The temple boys were not monks or novices: they were lay persons who, out of poverty, depended on the temples, or an individual Buddhist monk's support for education during his compulsory schooling age. After completing their secular studies, he might have left the temples and engaged in an occupation that suitable to his knowledge and capacity. This condition was prevalent in all regions over the country at the present time. Thus, the temples continued to be closely involved with the education of a large number of people.

The second method was ordination, through which the individual gained access to the study of secular subjects along with religious principles. The state had to extend certain permit Buddhist monks to study subjects which were generally conducted in the state - owned and other secular schools, and it had agreed to confer certificates on those who passed ecclesiastical exams. In the former times, the government recognized religious and Pali studies as equivalent to a high level of secular education, and thus accepted to work in the government offices for those learned ex - Buddhist monks who returned to the family life. But now only a few government offices still followed this practice (Phra Debvedi (P. A. Payutto), 1995).

In conclusion, we might have said that the Buddhist Sangha had made a great study contribution to the cause of national education. It appeared that those who received education from the religious institutions were mostly from rural villages where their families had low social and economic status. Thus, poor peasants who could not send their children to state - run schools let alone to university for higher study, would look upon the village temples as the only available educational avenue for their children. The temples could be said to be the stepping stone for poor village boys to climb up into a higher position in society. It also had helped bridge the vast gap between the rich and the poor, and it had helped the poor village boys to have a chance to better his life through education. And finally, the Buddhist Sangha had helped alleviate the problem of inequality in education opportunity faced by Thai society as a whole. Thus, one could safely maintain that Buddhism played very important roles in Thai education.

Objective

To study and understand the educational role of Thai Buddhist monks.

Methodology

This research documentary research was conducted through the following methods and processes:

1. Studying and collecting primary data from various sources, from the Pāli Canon and commentaries that related to research topics.
2. Studying secondary data from books, documents, articles, and research reports, such as academic achievements from Buddhist scholars, which included electronic data.
3. Analyzing, categorizing, and concluding all collected data.
4. Concluding and presenting the research results.

Results and Discussion

The role played by Buddhist Sangha in promoting Buddhism and Buddhist education could not be underestimated. In Thailand, Buddhist Sangha was not an institution of elites having members coming from nobility. The majority of Buddhist monks basically came from rural areas. There was a custom that every male must spend some period of his life as a member of Buddhist order. Hence, every boy had to become novice for some period of time. As a novice he was to learn how to read Buddhist texts and how to write which was necessary for duplicating texts. They also had to memorize chants used in rituals. Many of the males thus had to spend time coming from few months to several years as novices, which resulted into a high level of literacy. French people who visited Thailand during the 17th century were much impressed by the higher degree of literacy in Thailand as compared to that in France. Among that society, it was necessary for a man to become a monk at any time in his life. Even the temporary monkhood was held sufficient for men to develop moral sense which might have been remained with him throughout his life. Such moral training was highly valued among Thai people. Some people who entered the Buddhist Sangha's monkhood never sentenced to ordinary life as they wanted to become more knowledgeable about Buddhist Dharma and devote themselves to such practices that would lead to Nibbana or salvation. But the fact was that the man who sought to realize the teachings of Buddha by rejecting the world order was likely to be the most sought after by the people in the society (Phra Debvedi (P. A. Payutto), 1995).

In early days a learned monk who could read the scriptures and certain important commentaries in Pali was recognized with the help of a special title. Generally, such titles were given by the public but many times even the kings also conferred such titles to the learned Buddhist monks or those who were related with temples supported by the kings. This, gave an opportunity for the king to recognize the importance of Buddhist Sangha in promoting religious and moral education in the society but also it helped them to have control and authority over the Buddhist Sangha.

In Thailand, the tension between popular and royal recognition of learned Buddhist monks continued until the late 19th century when the religious reforms gave the royal government the sole right to confer clerical ranks.

Kings and lords also appointed Buddhist monks of the major temples within their jurisdiction. But these Buddhist monks came from elite families and not from rural families as in case of other Buddhist monks. Although kings tried to include all the members of the Buddhist Sangha in their societies in hierarchical order headed by the Buddhist monks appointed by the kings, these hierarchies had no social significance as Catholic hierarchy enjoyed it in Europe. Thus, Buddhism could be popularized and easily spread without much reference to higher authorities of the Buddhist Sangha. It was only at the end of the 19th century when social reforms were implemented that an effective hierarchy of Buddhist Sangha that covered all the Buddhist monks in the country could be created (Batson, 1991).

In early days the kings were not able to assert their authority over all of the Buddhist monks within their domain indicated that Buddhism was the religion, which had deeper roots in the rural societies and it was not the religion only of the elites.

According to Keyes, "While the Buddhism of Siam (Thailand) was fundamentally similar to that of other Thai states and indeed to that found among the dominant peoples of Burma and Cambodia as well, some differences became relevant when Siam (Thailand) incorporated outlying territories into its domain. The orthographic system employed for religious texts by Siamese Buddhist monks in the inner Muang of Ayutthaya was a Khmer one that the Siamese called Khom. In the realm of Lanna, in what is today northern Thailand, a different script based on Mon and called Yuan was employed. In the Lao areas of Lan Chang and also in some outer Muang of Ayutthaya the dharmic script (Tua Tham) used for religious purposes was essentially the same one used in Lanna. The difference between the religious literatures of Ayutthaya on one hand and those of the Lao areas and of Lanna on the other hand tended to inhibit religious communication." (Batson, 1991)

Even within the inner part of Ayutthaya religious differences were existing as Mon and Khmer continued to follow their own traditions. Muslim people who became subjected to the king of Siam (Thailand) either lived in semi - autonomous domains under their own lords or in separate enclaves within Siam (Thailand) proper. Since 17th century, small Christian communities in Ayutthaya were concentrated in stranger quarters within the capital city. The tribal people were controlled by their own chiefs as they stayed far away in the forests. Although there were people with different value system, most of them took the king as a source of sacred power and these differences did not become the basis of internal conflict (Ministry of Education, 1976).

In the field of education, the role of Thai Buddhist monks, was clear. Thus, the three eminent Buddhist reformers and thinkers who were all Buddhist monks played an important role in education.

The study began with Wachirayanwarorot (1860 - 1921) who lived during the reign of Rama V, and Rama VI of the current Chakri dynasty. He in late life became a supreme patriarch, and played an important role in bringing about the change in Buddhist Sangha education, especially the examination system which was changed from the oral tradition to the written system. He had written some Buddhist texts which were still in use today.

The second Buddhist monk was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906 - 1993) whose radical approach in reinterpreting Buddhism had caused both positive and negative changes in Thai society, especially from the elite. However, it was undeniable that he was an influential figure in the Thai Buddhist world. The temples, Suanmokkhaphalaram was well - known to Buddhists, both Thais and foreigners. While Thai Buddhists were having dilemma regarding their religion, many had found Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism relevant to and consistent with the present - day society. His ideas and approach covered various issues, Zen Buddhism, environment, education, democracy etc. Therefore, it was not possible to explore all his ideas in a limited space. Some

scholars had said that his teachings were widely scattered. However, he was still regarded as an important Buddhist thinker in contemporary society.

The third Buddhist monk was Phra Prayudh Payatto (Present PhraPhrommakhunaphon) (1939 - present). He was the author of many books on Buddhism, the most important of which was Buddhadhamma. He was influential among the Thai intellectuals and scholars. His writings were said to be systematic and well - organized. His dominant approach was often seen in his work as the reconciliation between Buddhism and the swift - moving society. What he clearly expressed was that Buddhists should have appropriate Buddhist approach to life. As far as the environmental issue was concerned, he held the view that human being must not greedily and blindly destroy nature, because by doing so, human beings inevitably harmed and destroyed themselves. Technology should be used with care and caution to avoid the disaster which could occur if human beings blindly used it. Regarding education, his views were that the Thai Buddhist should not blindly follow and appreciate western education. Instead, they should be wisely selective in their approach.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

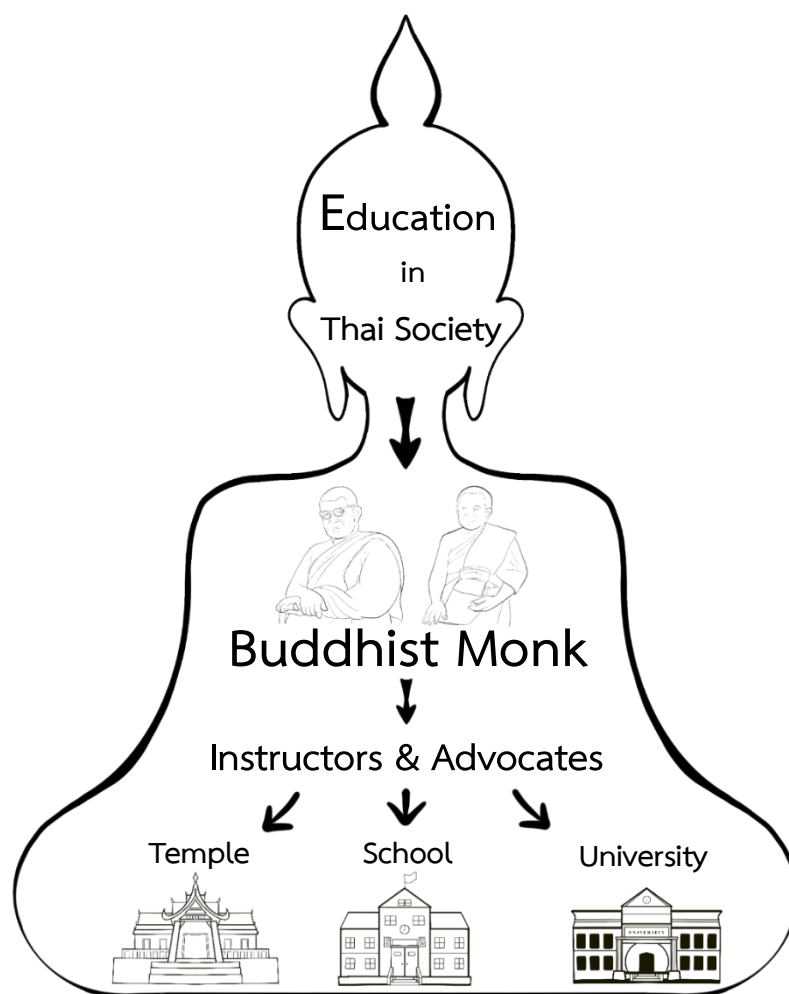


Figure 1 The Relation between Buddhist Monks and Education in Thai Society.

Figure 1 indicates the role of Buddhist monks in Thai society. Schools and universities have been the center of education until now. The Buddhist monks learn the principles and Buddha's teachings from the Pāli Canon to gain a deep understanding and then teach students and youths. In some regions, Buddhist monks donate some areas of the temples to be built as schools and provide scholarships to students in the school. In some communities, Buddhist monks play the role of instructors and advocates according to the context of each community in Thailand. In addition, some Buddhist monks prepare texts for dissemination to make society aware of the benefit of education with Buddhism and general education, which is known as secular and religious knowledge.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the study, Buddhism and education in Thai society indicated that Thailand had a long history of education on Buddhism. It began with temples as the centers of education. In the present day, schools, universities, and the Buddhist Sangha had a contributing role in the education of the Pāli Canon, Buddha's teaching, and Pali for people in Thai society. The role of Thai Buddhist Sangha and education had eminent Buddhist monks who were reformers and thinkers worked on the study of Buddhism to be conserved in the modern day. It could be said that, Buddhism and education in Thai society still existed in Thai society because of Thai Buddhist Sangha's contribution to education in Thai society.

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