

Buddhism and Education in Thai Society

By Assist. Prof. Dr. Phrakru Arunsutalangkarn.

MCU.Nakhonsithammarat Campus.

The Role of Buddhism and Thai Society

Historically speaking, Buddhism has made a deep impact upon Thai society in many respects. From as early as the Sukhothai period (1238 – 1378), it has 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 monasteries have been, and even at present, continue to be, centers of the Thai villagers' life and a place where many activities are carried out all the year round. The monks residing in the village monastery have been the spiritual leaders of the people and have elicited worship and respect from the laymen in general.

Throughout the Thai countryside, at almost every village, a monastery forms the centre of activities. The people regard the monastery as belonging to them all; it is felt to be the common property of the supportive villagers. The monastery is, therefore, a unifying centre which functions as an integrating and binding part of Thai society as a whole.

The general role of a Buddhist monastery through the centuries may be summarized as follows:

1. It has been an educational centre for the villagers, children, particularly the boys who have been 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 has been a welfare institution where a poor boy or a poor man can find a livelihood and obtain education.
3. It has served as a public health centre for the surrounding community.
4. It has provided casual travelers with food and shelter.
5. It has functioned as a public club in which the villagers spend time for relaxation and for obtaining new knowledge and experience.

6. It has been a recreational center, where various festive fairs and entertainment, are staged all the year round.

7. It has functioned as a legal “court” in which the residents or the monks act as conciliators between conflicting parties and as advisors for those who are suffering from community or family problems.

8. It has been a cultural centre where artifacts and various invaluable cultural products have been preserved. It functions like a museum.

9. It has been a godown for different kinds of articles, which may be borrowed and used by the villagers for their occasional festivals and feasts.

10. It has been a meeting–place for the villagers who may be summoned by the village headman for certain official information. In this case, it has served as an administrative centre. (In time of war it may have been used for military purposes.)

11. It has been a place from where political campaigns have been launched especially at times of general election.

12. It also has been a place for performing religious ceremonies and services, which are concerned with man’s passage through life in its different stages.

These roles of Buddhism in Thai society are well known to us all and they still continue in rural areas. In towns, certain roles are disappearing as a result of the impact of new technology and modernization.

However, before modernization in the towns, the above sketched roles were present everywhere. The Buddhist monastery has actively performed especially the role of providing education for the public for a long period of time. When the government took over this role in the early twentieth century, the monastery slowly lost its grip over education in general.

It has been generally recognized that, in the past, monks were the only teachers available to the masses. They taught both sacred and secular subjects. From documental records, it is clear that “before the change in the educational system which transferred the responsibility for education to the government in the reign of King Rama V (Chulalongkorn),

those who were granted high ranks and titles were mostly products of monastery education.”¹

During the long reign of King Rama V (1868 – 1910), there was a great deal of social and political change. The kingdom encountered western expansionism and modernism. As a consequence, it was deemed necessary to improve the country in various aspects, and that this should be carried out speedily so as to catch up with the strong current of the western-inspired mood of political and social progress. The king took as his pivotal responsibility the task of improving the country as a whole for the sake of national security. Accordingly, though unprepared, new programmes were set up, and executed, in accordance with their priority.

In the field of education, there were great changes. Roughly speaking, the educational system of the time was divided into two levels: a primary educational level for the masses and a higher educational level to improve the future Thai administrative cadet’s qualifications for stimulating national development. The primary educational level was at first assigned as a responsibility to the Buddhist monastic organization (Sangha) with a view to utilizing an existing institution so as to attain mass literacy and improve morality at the same time. This assignment was in conformity with conventional practices and it contributed to religious and political developments in Thailand. As for higher education, in order to modernize the country in various fields, the best qualifications and specialization has to be acquired by the future Thai leaders and administrators. This could only be done with the help of western technology and knowledge. The Sangha was not in a position to provide the necessary technical know-how to speed up national political and economic development. The king therefore sent his children, other members of the royal family, noble’s children and scholarship-holders abroad for higher education.

“Buddhist monks and novices were rapidly further trained in religious studies in order to preserve the religious doctrines, and their educational system was thoroughly overhauled.”² Many improvements in the Sangha’s education resulted. The centre of

¹ The National Library, Pariemratchakon Thisi (Education in Rama IV) Sophanaphiphathanakon, Bangkok, 1980, p .57.

² Ministry of Education, History of ministry of Education, Khuruaspha, Bangkok, 1982, p. 149.

religious studies was transferred in 1889 from the Emerald Buddha temple to Wat Mahathat, and was named Mahathatvidyalaya. Later the name was changed into Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, Thailand. Subsequently, in 1893, the King founded another Sangha University named Mahamakutrajavidyalaya. The objectives of establishing these two Buddhist universities were: (1) to provide the monks and novices with a new study method to preserve religious doctrines; (2) to be a centre of Buddhist propaganda both in the form of preaching and by way of publications; and (3) to enable the graduate monks to start schools for teaching basic Thai language, arithmetic and morality to children in rural and urban areas.

In the field of religious studies. King Rama V from the beginning had his half-brother the Supreme Patriarch, Prince Wachirayanwarorot, as an important figure in helping to work out various plans and projects for the Sangha's education. The improvement of education may be looked upon as a cooperative and joint effort between the Sangha and the government. The provision of education in this new period aimed at the improvement of the Sangha's religious studies, combined with secular studies so that the monks could catch up with modern education and could there by better teach the Dhamma to the modern educated layman.

However, near the end of the reign of King Rama, V, this joint co-operation ceased. There was a separation of education between the Sangha organization and the government both at the lower and higher levels. At a higher level, the government had already established an institution, which could provide a graduate with specialized courses for the purpose of training capable personnel for national development. This higher institution was the school for civil servants, which offered such courses as political science, law, medical science, technology, commerce and education. Later, in 1916, it was upgraded to a university and named Chulalongkorn University, the first of its kind in Thailand.

“As for primary teaching of the masses, formerly in the hands of the Sangha, the government took the responsibility for this away from the monks. This action was undertaken for various reasons, chief among them the king's decision to completely

remove the education of the masses from the Sangha.”³ However, in some measure, there remained a relationship between the Sangha organization and the educational system. In certain places, the monks were qualified to remain directors of the educational institutes for the masses. In other places monks were able to persuade the pious lay folk to donate their property and money for constructing school buildings. The government machinery from them or responsible for mass education was the Ministry of Education; and the personnel taking over the teaching load in place of the monks were those who had received a western type of education.

The Role of Monastery and Thai Education.

Although the government has assumed direct responsibility for education from the Sangha and has made efforts to distribute equal education to the people all over the country, it has not been able to implement its programme as rapidly as anticipated, especially in remote areas. In certain regions, state education cannot easily reach the masses. In some other places, it has reached only a marginal section of society; and then is confined to only primary learning. Those who want to pursue higher education have to go to towns, cities, or the capital. But the poor, unable to afford the expense of higher education, has to stay in their native places, even though some have scholarly aptitude and want to continue higher studies.

When people have no way to get their children a higher education provided by the state, they turn to the monastery as the only recourse left. The monastery is the Centre of community life and it is the last hope of the poor to have their children educated. “Poor villagers usually send their children to be temple boys or else get them ordained as novices and monks to study religious subjects. If these boys succeed well in studies provided by the village monastery up to the highest level of education available therein, they may move to the temples in provincial towns or the capital, for still higher

³ Phar Deveddi (Prayudh Payutto), *BotbatKhong Phrasong Nai Sangkhom Thai Patchuban (The Role of the Sangha in Thai Society)*, Withayanukun, Bangkok, 1993, p.27.

education.”⁴ Following this road, a great number of monks and novices have been able to leave their native rural monasteries for better-endowed urban areas by staying in various big city monasteries, especially in Bangkok. Has they remained in the remote poverty-stricken rural areas where the state is not able to provide sufficient education for all the people, they would have remained ignorant and unable to catch up with modern knowledge, thus inevitably denying themselves the chance of further progress in life.

The ordination of Buddhist monks is very meaningful to both the religious institutions and the state. Not only will religious principles be rightly preserved and transmitted through a proper channel to the next generation, but also the state will gain a more capable and spiritually advanced population when these monks and novices have disrobed and returned to lay life. Ordination has been a traditional practice in Thailand since ancient times. If a Buddhist wants to experience a period of peaceful and quiet existence, he may enter the monastic order. As a member of the Sangha, he will study Buddhism and propagate the Buddhist Dhamma to the people if he acquires sufficient knowledge and remains in the order for some time. But when he feels disinclined to continue in the monkhood, he may return to his family life and resume an ordinary existence. Both robing and disrobing are conventional in Thai society.

For those who can benefit by the state’s provision of education either owing to their economic wealth or their capacity to gain access to the state education system by other means, the monastery is not the obvious place to look for an education. When they finish their studies in institutions provided by the state, such people may be employed in a government office or engage in their own private business; really do not have a chance to become novices or monks, thereby unintentionally secluding themselves from the monastery. Nevertheless, the relationship between these laymen and the monastery may deepen from time to time depending upon such factors as parental encouragement and suggestions from other relatives who cling to traditional ceremonies. They may be encouraged to become monks, to listen to a religious sermon and to practice meditation on convenient occasions. The ordination is the most auspicious traditional practice ever

⁴ Palani Thitiwatana, *Kankluanthi Khong Song (Sangha’s Movement)*, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 1977, p.115.

observed in Thai society. The layman who has never been a monk before may, on short leave from government service or in spare time from his own business, join a monastic order to get religious training and moral exercise for a period of time, the length of which may range from seven days to three months or more. Thus, we have seen that the purpose of ordination of these adults is quite different from that of the formerly mentioned deprived section of the population. From the statistics of the Department of Religious Affairs Report, Ministry of Education, it is found that “each year in different monasteries in Bangkok about 90 percent of the resident monks and novices hail from the provinces.”⁵ This figure is obviously collected after the Lenten season is over. Thus it can be said that the Bangkok monasteries are in a way rural communities amid the metropolitan environment.

We find that the government has taken the responsibility for providing secular education for all people; it has largely neglected the Sangha’s educational system. Practically speaking, we still find that the Buddhist monastery continues to give at least some education to the masses both at the primary and at the secondary level. A great number of youngsters who, for economic reasons, cannot get further studies provided by the state after completing compulsory schooling, have turned to the monastery for further education. Thus, these youngsters view the monastery not only as a religious institution but also as an educational institution. Here are in fact many children who look to the monastery for further studies. And most of the monks and novices (about 70 – 80%) are at the age of learning. According to the Department of Religious Affairs statistics in 1999, “There were 477, 259 university and high-school students receiving education supported by the state, and there were 231, 730 monks and novice students attending religious and Pāli courses provided by the Sangha organization. Out of this number, 40,000 were ordained for only a brief period before going back to worldly, life, and the rest of them (141, 730) were at schooling age. Out of these 141, 730 monks and novices, about 100,000 were novices, the remainder were monks.”⁶

⁵ Department of Religious Affairs Report, Ministry of Education, Bangkok, 1999, p. 23.

⁶ Ibid. P. 36.

From the above evidence, we may say that of those youngsters who seek further education, three-fourths were studying in the government-sponsored schools, and one-fourth in the Sangha schools. Government after government has been neglecting this one-fourth without taking serious steps to help them, even though these people are Thai citizens who should have the same rights to education as other Thais do. This section of the Thai population has not had the opportunity to receive education from the state because of their economic condition. They have turned to the monastery for study because of their desire to get higher knowledge. When they disrobe, they will be in a position to get employment in a government office or in any private enterprise through the knowledge they have received from the religious institution. They have been sometimes wrongly accused of living off the wider society. As a matter of fact, these monks and novices have been denied access to state-sponsored education. Such being the case, the state and the Sangha organization should work together to solve the problem of inequality in education instead of working in opposing directions as is happening at present.

The Problem of Inequality in Education and the Buddhist Institution

Injustice with respect to the chances of obtaining an education is a problem facing the state's educational system.

According to the National Educational Commission "equality in the chance of getting education means an equal chance given to all sections of the people to receive education freely at any level they are equipped for, especially at the higher levels. The chance of education should be distributed in proper and balanced portions to all groups of the population. The number of students at different levels should not be in vastly imbalanced proportions."⁷

Equality in education is the official government policy and the government has apparently made every effort to implement this policy. The problem of injustice in the opportunity for education still prevails in Thai society.

⁷ The Nation's Educational Committee, Rayngankanwichai Ruang Rabopudom SuksaKhong Thai (Thai Post – graduate System Report), Samnak Nai Yok Ratmontri, Bangkok, 1987, p.41.

Dr. Dippanond Ketudhat Minister of education, has pointed out that, “there are five causes of the failure of the government policy to give equal chances in education: (1) The existing limitations. Those who have the chance to pursue their studies at a level higher than the compulsory level of education are for the most part from well-to-do families and reside in urban areas. This is because of the fact that high schools and most wealthy people are situated in towns. (2) There is wide variation in educational quality. The factual reality is that there is a great difference in the educational quality of schools in rural and those in urban areas and between provincial schools in general and those of Bangkok. The schools in urban areas receive a better support in budget and accessories for education than do the schools in rural areas; and the schools in Bangkok receive a better support than do the schools in the provinces. Such being the case, it is inevitable that there is a difference in educational quality. (3) The entrance examination for higher studies has caused injustice vis-à-vis disadvantaged students. The conducting of only an internal academic examination as a method of measuring results puts the students from well-to-do families in a more advantageous position because in addition to better family support and experience, these students receive education from well-equipped schools with better teaching accessories and better qualified teaching staff. (4) Investment in each level of education is not in an equal proportion. Considering education from the points of view both of the receivers and of the giver education (the state), we find that the amount of investment spent by the state and the student’s parents at a compulsory level of education is very nearly the same. But at secondary and university levels, the expenditure by the parents on their children’s education is proportionally less than that borne by the state. The latter has to spend an increasing amount of money for higher levels of education. Furthermore, the state spends a larger amount of money on university-level education than on the secondary-school level education. Thus it can be said that though the education at the higher levels provides for only a minority of people and is more beneficial to the individual student than to society as a whole, yet the state has to bear heavy expenses and at a higher rate than the amount spent on the compulsory level which the majority of the people are receiving. This state of affairs can be said to cause injustice in education one, which appears to be increasing in extent. (5) Permits given to

private organizations to take responsibility for the compulsory level of education have caused a further move away from equality in education. A Private school is permitted to collect fees only at a fixed rate. This, however, has resulted in the collection of voluntary charges or extra fees in addition to those fixed by government. Many private schools do not pay teachers salaries in conformity with their qualifications. In certain places, teachers with lower qualifications are employed. In a school where high voluntary charges are collected, there is no chance for poor children to enter. Only the children of the better-off can attend. However, anybody whether poor or rich, should have an equal chance to get education at this compulsory level. Because the fees are collected at such a high rate, the right to get equal education is indirectly limited. There seems to be an inequality in the chance of education for the children even at the very lowest level of schooling.”⁸

From various reasons as stated above, the full benefits of the educational system as practiced in present Thai society can be said to be available only to students from well-to-do families, but not to those from impoverished families even though such students may be bright and intellectually gifted. A large number of less fortunate children drop out of school each year owing to economic reasons. This condition has resulted in a pyramid-shaped graph of those in the system of education, in which there are a relatively small number of students at high school and university level.

Actually the government is well aware of this inequality in the chance of education: but it cannot completely solve this problem. In certain respects, the government has made an effort to get rid of the problem by setting up programmes such as the adult learning programme, twilight courses, and short – term occupational training. However, these forms of education have intrinsic inequalities; for, at the least, they perpetuate and even create inequalities between urbanites and the rural people. The above re-schooling system of education is generally needed in rural areas. As a matter of fact, the rural people should have had better chances in education than the urbanites, for they form the majority of the national population and have in every way long been in a less fortunate position than the urbanities.

⁸ Dr. Sippanond Ketudhat, *Kanpatirup Kansuksa (Educational Reform)*, Thaiwathanaphanit, Bangkok, 1980, pp. 53 – 55.

One might suggest that the problem of inequality in the chance of education may be solved by increasing school building programmes, by extending educational institutes to rural regions and by revising the existing education system; but such procedures cannot be carried out successfully owing to the limitations of the budget, of manpower and material. Therefore, the problem of inequality in the opportunity for education, a problem accumulated over a long period of time, still prevails as a great weakness in the state educational service system.

Buddhist Institutions and Injustice in Opportunity for Education

As we have stated above, Buddhist institution, especially the monasteries, have played a major role in mass education ever since Sukhothai times. Even in the present Ratanakosin period the role of the monastery in this regard has been important. Even though the educational system was adapted in line with the Western system of education in the later part of King Rama V's reign, the role of the Buddhist monastery in education continued. But this role decreased when the educational system was formally taken away from monasteries. The present educational role of the monastery is generally seen only as providing of support and facilities, notably with regard to making available space for school buildings. The monks no longer function as full-fledged teachers as in the early period; and their supportive role in education is now even diminishing further.

However, it should be noted that even though the state has removed education from the Buddhist monastery, the latter has not yet lost its entire 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 monastery 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 cannot receive the state-provided education at a level higher than the compulsory level of education, look upon the Buddhist church as the source of acquiring further knowledge. In this respect, there are two methods of acquiring knowledge from the Buddhist monastery.

The first method is enrolment to stay in the temple as "temple boy", known in Thai as Sit Wat or Dek Wat. The temple boy is not a monk or a novice: he is a lay person

who, out of poverty, depends on the monastery's, or an individual monks, support for education during his compulsory schooling age, after completing his secular studies he may leave the monastery and engage in an occupation suitable to his knowledge and capacity. This condition is prevalent in all regions over the country at the present time. Thus, the monastery continues to be closely involved with the education of a large number of people.

The second method is ordination, through which the individual gains access to the study of secular subjects along with religious principles. The state has to a certain extent permitted monks to study subjects which are generally conducted in the state-owned and other secular schools, and it has agreed to confer certificates on those who pass ecclesiastical exams. In the former times, the government recognized religious and Pāli studies as equivalent to a high level of secular education, and thus accepted for work in the government offices those learned ex-monks who returned to the family life. But now only a few government offices still follow this practice.

From what has been written above, we may say that since the state has not been able to provide equal opportunity for education to all people ever since its takeover of education from the monastery, the monastery has been a place of last resort for those who are less fortunate in obtaining an education. This can be seen in rural villages where an increasing number of boys become monks and novices in order to get education; and many of them, after completing the highest level of education available in their local monasteries, have migrated to the city monasteries, especially the Bangkok ones, for further studies. In Bangkok alone, it is reported that most monks and novices hail from rural areas; they are from the disadvantaged section of the population who have a limited chance for obtaining higher education. In this regard Phra Debvedi (Phayudh Payutto), a well known Thai Buddhist scholar, has remarked: "In the region (particularly in the central region), where the state has extended education to almost every section of social life, the number of novices who want to continue their education in the temple is also decreasing in the socially and economically advanced regions. On the other hand, the number of novices

who want to get higher education is comparatively high in the socially and economically less-developed regions where state-sponsored education does not reach”⁹

Conclusions.

In conclusion, we may say that the Sangha has made a great contribution to the cause of national education. From the study findings cited above, it appears 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 monastery as the only available educational avenue for their children. The monastery can be said to be the stepping stone for a poor village boy to climb up into a higher position in society, It also has helped bridge the vast gap between the rich and the poor, and it has helped the poor village boy to have a chance to better his life through education. And finally, the Buddhist Sangha has helped in alleviating the problem of inequality in education opportunity faced by Thai society as a whole. Thus, one can safely maintain that Buddhism plays a very important role in Thai education.

⁹ Phra Debvedi (Prayudh Payutto), *Pratchaya Kansuksa Thai (Thai Educational Philosophy)*, Khledthai, Bangkok, 1995, p. 188.

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