

# **Buddhist Education in Thailand Today**

Ven. Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso

Since the advent of Buddhism in Thailand nearly 1,000 years ago. Buddhism had crucial roles in Thai society especially in moral education of the public. Through the influence of Buddhist teaching, Thai people, in general are compassionated, friendly and generous. According to the Thai tradition, primary education was established in temples. Buddhist monks played a major role as teachers, only young men served as temple boys and they were given instruction in reading, writing and simple arithmetic as well as in religion and morals. Many of them chose to be ordained as novices or monks to study Buddhist teachings and other subjects in the monasteries. Education, therefore, was limited only to young men, monks and novices. Female rarely had the chance for further education except those from well to do families. Only a few people could have higher education while the majority of Thai people lacked educational opportunity, as they were poor and lived far away from cities.

Even though Thai education has been improved respectively since the reign of King Rama V the government is able to provide all Thai children with compulsory primary education almost 100% (grade 1-6), and the number of illiterate people is decreasing. The government, however is unable to push all Thai children through the process of compulsory formal education from grade 7-12, as the existing schools are

not sufficient for the rapid increase of Thai population. Since it costs money to send children to study in secondary and high school level, poor families, therefore, are unable to send their children to good schools for higher education. Buddhist schools were established to give opportunities to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Traditional Sangha Education**

The Pali language has been studied by Thai monks since the Ayutthaya period. It was the King's mission to support Sangha education. Pali studies were a traditional system of Sangha education, there were three levels called in Thai as Parian Tree (primary) Parian Tho (intermediate) and Parian Ek (advanced level). The Pali examination was held within the Grand Palace in the presence of the King. Monks or novices, who were determined to take the exam would have to translate Pali into Thai in front of the committee. The result of exams would be announced that very day. The King always offered a set of three robes to Buddhist monks who passed the Pali exam.

Later on in Rattanakosin period, the Pali studies were divided into nine levels, from level 1-9, Buddhist monks and novices are required to study Pali grammar, translation of Pali into Thai, Thai into Pali and to compose the Pali verse. The overall syllabus covered the basic essence of the Vinaya Pitaka, Suttanta Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka. The oral exams were practiced for a long time, but in B.E. 2469, the Sangha had changed the oral exam to be an essay type exam, until now (B.E.2547) there have only ever been 1,051 monks and novices who have passed the highest level of Pali studies. Since Pali is very difficult to learn,

involving a great deal of memorization and recitation. As a result, the number of Pali students is decreasing as monks and novices are no longer interested in studying Pali. The state, however, does recognize level nine, the highest level of achievement, as equivalent to a Bachelor's degree.

It is obvious that only well-to-do families are able to send children to good schools, and most poor children are expected to stay with their parents and work for the rest of their lives. Many of them, after finishing primary school, come to work in factories in Bangkok and the suburbs and send money back to their parents.

Traveling to the villages in rural Thailand, it is common to see small girls and boys watching the cattle and working in fields. Similarly in Bangkok, the sight of youngsters selling newspapers, flowers, garlands etc. is an ordinary experience for visitors. Therefore, the only way young boys from poor backgrounds could study Pali was to be ordained as monks or novices and only then could they move on to higher education.

Besides Pali studies, the Sangha also provides Dhamma studies, there are three levels, instructed in Thai and intended as basic Buddhist education for monks and novices. There is also a Dhamma course provided for laity called Dhammasuksa, so that the lay Buddhists can learn the basic doctrine in Buddhism.

### **Modern Buddhist Education**

Through the vision of King Rama V, he realized that only the knowledge of the Buddhist scripture alone was not enough, Buddhist

monks needed to know modern academic too, therefore, two Buddhist universities were founded for the higher education for Buddhist monks. They are Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and Mahamakutrajavidyalaya University ministered by monks. Both of them are state universities, receiving financial support from the Thai government and both have Baccalaureate through Doctorate programs open to both ordained and lay people. Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University maintains 10 campuses throughout the kingdom and four Sangha Colleges, with 10 educational centers, as well as 3 affiliated institutes including those in South Korea and Taiwan. Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University provides Buddhist studies in post-graduate level in four fields: Buddhist studies, Philosophy, Pali, and Dhamma communication. In addition, we also have instituted an International Program majoring in Buddhist studies, taught in English. The majority of students, however, are monks and novices. There are four faculties; the faculty of Buddhism, the faculty of education, the faculty of humanities and the faculty of social science.

Apart from undergraduate and post-graduate level provided in two Buddhist Universities, many big monasteries also provide formal education from grade 7-12 for monks and novices. The young men will become novices or monks and are able to stay in the monastery for further education. Male children have a good chance to fulfill their education through ordination. The subjects they study are Thai, English, Mathematics, and Social studies and it is a free service, as monks and novices have the four necessities of life provided by lay Buddhists.

At Abhidhammachotika College, they provide Buddhist studies

focused on Abhidhamma, the course attracts lay Buddhists who are eager to learn the Buddhist doctrine, there are nine levels and it takes 7 years and a half to complete the entire course. The Council of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University recently recognizes the highest level of Abhidhamma studies as equivalent to a Bachelor's degree, so that, any student who completes this level can further study in post-graduate level at the graduate school.

Buddhist studies are becoming more popular with lay people, Buddhist courses are being taught both in undergraduate and post-graduate levels in other universities such as the religious studies college (Sanasuksa College), Mahidol University has a baccalaureate program majoring in religious studies, Dhammasat University and Chulalongkorn University also have post-graduate programs majoring in Buddhist studies and all of the programs are open to both ordained and lay people.

### **Buddhist Sunday Schools**

The Buddhist Sunday School originated in Sri Lanka in B.E.2429 (1886). At the school, monks, novices and some lay people teach various fields of Buddhist knowledge and languages. From B.E.2496-2500 (1953-1957), Phra Bimonladham, the abbot of Wat Mahadhat and the late Second President of the Council of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, visited Sri Lanka and witnessed moral and cultural teaching in the Sunday School. He deeply appreciated the success of its work, having returned to Thailand, he decided to establish the first Buddhist Sunday School in Wat Mahadhat. It was

said that in those days, Wat Mahadhat was a center of education and discussion about Dhamma. Even too this day, there is a Dhamma discourse on every Buddhist Holy Day and Sunday. While the parents listened to the Dhamma discourse, their children played around the hall, therefore, the concept of Buddhist Sunday School arose, so that the children can benefit from Buddhist teachings and get closer to Buddhism. The Buddhist Sunday School was established for the first time at Wat Mahadhat in B.E.2501 (1958) with the following objectives:

1. To make young people and children familiar with Buddhism.
2. To inculcate moral discipline and cultural appreciation in young people and children.
3. To teach young people and children to lead their lives according to Buddhist principles.
4. To train young people and children to work for public welfare.

The Buddhist Sunday School are still going strong. Now, there are 1,340 branches of the Schools around the country and there are 228,159 students. At the Buddhist Sunday School of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, class levels are arranged according to student's grades as follows:

1. There are 4 elementary classes for primary school pupils of grades 1,2,3 and 4.
2. There are 3 intermediate classes for secondary school pupils of grades 1,2 and 3.
3. There are 3 advanced classes for high school students of grades 4,5 and 6.
4. There are 2 final classes for the college students.

To complete the entire course, it takes 12 years. Teachers are monks, novices and some lay people. They teach the Buddhist doctrine, Buddha's history, English, French, Thai dancing, Thai musical instrument and so on and work for the program on a voluntary basis. Buddhist Sunday Schools are much appreciated by all Buddhists and considerably helps improve public morality.

### **Buddhist Classes in Schools**

It is obvious that many social problems, e.g., drugs, sexual experimentation, juvenile delinquency, and outbursts of senseless violence etc., arise from a lack of moral training and moral cultivation, ethical training is no less crucial than academic proficiency. Being conscious of this fact, the Thai Sangha has persuaded the Ministry of Education to mandate the teaching of Buddhism to all students from grade 1-12.

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University undertook the task of producing the formal curriculum on Buddhism for all schools. Local school districts, however, were left to formulate their own curriculum. The overall syllabus is in the frame of the Triple Gem: Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Students should learn about the Buddha's life, his conducts in propagating the truths he discovered and declared whilst on the path of liberation. The students should know the Buddhist teaching (Dhamma), the truth discovered by the Buddha as the way of practice to achieve moral, happy peaceful lives and finally they should learn about Sangha or monks, they will learn about the model disciples in the Buddha's day and hopefully follow their virtues. Monks are

benefactors for all Buddhists in that through their inheritance, the Buddhist teachings have been handed down from generation to generation. Students should learn about the monk's life, so that they will appreciate the importance of monks and behave toward monks properly. To fulfill this objective, many monks are invited to teach Buddhism in school, it is worthy that the students will study Buddhism directly from a monk who is both the source of Buddhist studies and the heir of Buddhism.

It is also worthy to mention here that now the Ministry of Education approves the project of 'Schools in the Buddhist way' with the purpose to cultivate moral development together with physical, social and intellectual developments in a whole according to the teaching of threefold training vision: through training in morality, school students will be self-disciplined through the observance of the five precepts, through training in concentration, their mind will be calm and inculcated with compassion, friendliness, and love of peace and through training in wisdom, students will develop their understanding and intellect. Monasteries, villages and schools must collaborate in order to bring about integrity and sustainable development of children and society. Now, there are 12,000 'Schools in the Buddhist way' throughout the country. So it is urgent to train monks and lay teachers to be efficient Buddhist teachers for the growing number of such schools. Students in the School in Buddhist way must be trained both morally and academically. Their knowledge from both sides will guide them to live a good and moral life.



Buddhist studies are becoming more popular, we can see that in the monasteries, hospitals, universities, companies and some ministries, they are the places where informal Buddhist education is provided. This is great for Buddhists who are eager to learn about Buddhism. The most important thing is that they should put what they have learned into practice, and then they will really experience the benefits of being a Buddhist.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The foregoing talks enable us to see that religious knowledge is crucial as well as academic knowledge. Education is not a tool to prepare students to become productive citizens, but it is the principal tool of human growth, essential for transforming the unlettered child into a mature and responsible adult. I personally believe that both moral cultivation and academic training are equally important for students. To live a successful and a moral life, students need to have knowledge in Buddhist teaching and modern academics. Therefore, the government must equally support Buddhist and modern education. Through the proper moral and academic education, students will be good, virtuous and happy.

For Buddhist education to be widely effective, the Buddhist Universities, monasteries, the government and all private agencies need to cooperate in supporting educational projects in all schools. Monks and teachers must be trained to teach in schools when required. The ways of teaching must be modified to make the entire process of learning attractive and more interesting. Since the children of today are the adults of tomorrow if they have good moral values installed in them from the start, they will become the great citizens and human beings of the future.