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## **Theory and Practice of Buddhist Monastic Schools in Myanmar**

### **Abstract**

To effectuate three pillars of the ASEAN Economic Community, the improvement of human resource is crucial as human power can achieve everything. In building up this improvement for the good of many otherwise capable and useful citizens, education is the essential key which opens the door to a better and well-disciplined community. From this, it cannot be denied that everyone needs education. Making education free and accessible for everyone based on compassion is the theme of all Buddhist Monastic Schools. They provide not only free education together with ethical improvement but also food and shelter at no cost especially for children from needy families and orphans. These benefits are not available in government schools and private schools, therefore, Buddhist Monastic schools stand as great a expectation of poor and indigent families. Hence, this work has endeavored to highlight the theory and practice of Buddhist monastic schools in Myanmar as one of the Buddhist contributions to society. It takes three steps to elaborate this topic: the first is an elaboration on the phases of Buddhist Monastic schools, the second is the theory and practice in Buddhist

Monastic Schools in Myanmar and the third is their effectiveness and advantages to contemporary society.

**Keywords:** improvement of human resources, education system, theory and practice, Buddhist Monastic Schools, ethical improvement, well-disciplined community.

## Introduction

*“Byatta putra kimalaso, Abyatto bhārahārako;  
Byattako pūjito loke, Byatta putra dine dine.”<sup>1</sup>*

“Children, be wise; wherefore are ye idle? One without wisdom is the bearer of another’s burden. A wise man is honored in the world; day by day be ye wise, O children.”<sup>2</sup>

The attitude regarding learning and studying in ancient Myanmar was identical with the above verse from *Lokanīti*. The mind is like an empty vessel at the time of a human’s birth, it keeps developing as the human grows with knowledge and experiences learnt from life. Parents are eager for their children to learn and study to building up their ability to improve their social level otherwise to fill the empty vessel of the mind with knowledge. Learning is a never ending process which starts with the birth of mankind and it will go as long as mankind exists. It does not indicate to particular things, subject or place, in the same way, there is no time, limit or age for it. Yet learning for employment and for survival of life has an exact limit of education. In this contemporary world, education for employment is a basic principle which is followed everywhere. Everyone understands that a person with degree gets better chance for a job than without. A person with higher degree will get better salary than a normal one. At this juncture, schools become vested ground where everyone can gain education.

The importance about the purpose of education goes beyond. It is the only real instrument which will keep updating those on a regular basis and it helps to visit to the next label within life-style. The uneducated person in youth is as unbecoming in a group as cranes among swans. Likewise, a country with many uneducated citizens will be inglorious amidst the neighboring countries. Without it, there is no avail however the Government tries to develop a country.

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<sup>1</sup> Lokanīti, Verse – 17.

<sup>2</sup> James Gray, *Ancient proverbs and maxims from Burmese sources; or, the Nīti Literature of Burma*, (1886).

Depending on the imbibed education system and education policy, the amelioration of human resources differs from country to country as well as the growth and development of a country relies on it.

## **1. Present day education in Myanmar**

Prior to the imposition of military rule, Myanmar had one of the better education systems in Southeast Asia. Now its education system must undergo a prolonged process of recovery that will present challenges.<sup>3</sup> The current education system has not met the needs of people and it is running with many problems so that both government and its citizens must find a way to solve it but they are not on the right path yet. Why is it taking so long to develop methods to create a new path for education? Is government not willing to change or are our citizens at fault?

The Buddha says “*Manopubbangamā dhammā*”,<sup>4</sup> in the *Dhammapada* which means every action in this world is mind-made and depending only on the mind. Generally, selfishness (Atta) is overwhelming in all living beings so that whenever they have to do something in life, they think first about their profits. If they see some advantages and profits for them, their faltering mind becomes enthusiastic to grab it. So, the mostly greedy mind is the forerunner for every action. Likewise during the period of transforming education, the education law failed but private schools promptly appeared from which government can gain taxes. For every child eleven years basic education is needed and starting from grade- 1 to grade – 11.

### **1.1 Basic Education**

There are 2,351 Basic Education High Schools, 3,121 Basic Education Middle Schools, 6,553 Basic Education Post-Primary Schools and 28,967 Basic Education Primary Schools, totaling 40,992 basic education schools. There are altogether 273,516 teachers, teaching 8,200,595 students at basic education schools. There are also 21 private schools in formal basic education.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it is estimated that over one million children in Myanmar are still out of school, less than 70% of primary school age children complete a full course of primary education at the

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Hayden and Richard Martin, *Recovery of the Education system in Myanmar*. pg – 47.

<sup>4</sup> All mental phenomena have mind as their forerunner in the sense that mind is the most dominant, and it is the cause of the other three mental phenomena feeling (*vedanā*), Perception (*saññā*) and Mental Formations or Mental Concomitants (*saṅkhāra*)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.myanmar-education.edu.mm/dhel/education-system-in-myanmar/education-structure>

correct age, and out of every 100 children entering primary school, only about 20 go on to finish lower secondary school. Issues of low quality of education are also serious. In this respect, basic education has much to offer, for it plays an important role in the personal and social development of the young, who represent the future.

Basic education in Myanmar currently consists of five years of primary education, four years of lower secondary education and two years of upper secondary education. In effect, a child receives 11 years of schooling (grade 1 to 11) before entering tertiary education. Kindergarten or grade 1 is taken to be part of the primary education cycle making it a de facto 'standard one'. A Myanmar child starts his or her schooling at five years of age and takes his or her matriculation examination at 16 years of age.

## **1.2 Need of education for poor**

Pre- school education is also available, but the pre-school sector is not effectively integrated with the rest of the education system and only about one-fifth of all eligible children attends a pre-school, with children in rural areas being the least likely to participate. Data collected in 2009-10 by UNICEF, in collaboration with several ministries, show, for example, that whereas 76% of children aged 10 to 15 years from urban areas were enrolled in school, the comparable figure for children in the same age group from rural areas was only 52%. The data also show that, whereas over 85.5% of children aged 10 to 15 years from the richest quintile of households were enrolled in school, the comparable figure for children in the same age group from the poorest quintile of households was only 28.2%.<sup>6</sup>

“For a poor family like us, the government-run schools are out of our reach. We have no choice but to take our children to monastic schools where they can receive a free education, free books, free school registration and free donations. So the monastery schools really help families like ours who face economic hardship,” said one of the parents. There are many reasons why poor children are not able to get basic education. But these reasons are mainly because of insufficient provision of education by government and the economic situation of our country. No provision of school and teachers in rural areas make children miss out on education and education becomes further and further away from them. To help support the family, parents want their children to work not go to school. They think school is a waste of time. The education of

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<sup>6</sup> UNICEF, 2011, p-106

children relies on the attitude of the parents. When parents struggle to feed the family, it is no surprise they do not think to spend more money and let their children go to school.

In such circumstances, the Buddhist monastic schools provide supplementary education for needy children and orphans, filling a significant gap in the education system. They provide free lodging and free learning to the pupils regardless of their birth, rank, social status, race and gender. “We established a monastic school because we were worried that if the children didn’t get an education, they would become street kids or irresponsible adults. We think we should give them a chance to study,” said Sayadaw U Vilarsa, a founding monk of the Pyinnya Shwe Taung Post Primary Monastic School in Southern Zaiganai, Pegu. It is a really interesting history how Buddhist monastic education from the Pyu<sup>7</sup> dynasty has transformed time and again up to the present time.

## 2. Phases of Buddhist Monastic schools

It has a The Buddhist monastic school system in Myanmar is an old education system with a very long history. Myanmar literacy education is originated in Buddhist monasteries. High literacy rate in Myanmar is creditable to the widespread monastic education. Monasteries are well supported by the state and the public. Monks, teachers impart secular and religious knowledge to the pupils. The secular knowledge comprises literacy, numeracy, grammar, literature, history, astrology, alchemy, etc. and religious knowledge includes scriptures, *Tipiṭaka*,<sup>8</sup> Buddhist literature, philosophy, meditation, etc.

### 2.1 Bagan Dynasty

When *Theravāda* Buddhism in written form on palm leaves was introduced to Bagan by *Mahāthera* Shin Araham and King Anawratha in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, *Buddha Sāsana* spread throughout the kingdom and monastic education flourished in the entire domain. Monks are teachers who impart knowledge, preach dhamma and propagate *Buddha Sāsana*. The schools provided important education needs throughout Myanmar's history and they were the only source

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<sup>7</sup> Pyu is a kind of Tibet-Myanmar tribe lived at the border of Yunnan at the beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> Century. At the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, they migrated to the Ayarwaddy river basin of Myanmar. Their cultural and civilization was at the peak during 3<sup>rd</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup>Vinaya Piṭaka, Suttanta Piṭaka and Abhidhamma Piṭaka

of education for lives ranging from royal princes to unskilled workers. Since it was introduced to Myanmar, Buddhism has exerted a profound influence on Myanmar's daily life.

The Buddhist monastic schools have helped to give Burma a rate of literacy considerably above those of other East Asian countries in the early 1900s. In 1931, 56% of males over the age of five and 16.5% of females were literate — approximately four times as high as those reported for India at the same time. In the Bagan dynasty (1044-1287 ME), monastic education had two parts; *Tipitaka* learning in *Pāli* and other secular knowledge comprises literacy, numeracy, grammar, literature, history, astrology, alchemy, etc., in Sanskrit. The aim of monastic education on that age is to value the Triple Gems, to propagate the three kinds of *Sāsana*,<sup>9</sup> to attain *Nibbāna* and to be able to read and write in *Pāli* and Sanskrit scriptures. Pedagogy is emphasized on memorizing by heart.

## 2.2 Pinya to Nyanung Yan Dynasty

From the Pinya dynasty up to Nyaung Yan dynasty<sup>10</sup> (1287- 1752 ME), the aim of Monastic schools had changed. To value not only the Triple Gems but also parents and teachers, to well restrain in bodily, verbally and mentally, to have strong morality and to be fluent in other mundane subjects such as mathematics, history, law, etc. In the Ava dynasty which was known as the golden era for Myanmar literacy, the pedagogy of monastic schools is changed by Venerable *Mahārathasāra* and that pedagogy is regarded as the best instructions for learners until now. According to it, a student must follow the eight rules in studying.

- (1) *Suneyya* (listening carefully)
- (2) *Cinneyya* (thinking)
- (3) *Puccheyya* (questioning)
- (4) *Bhāseyya* (discussing)
- (5) *Visāyeyya* (analyzing)
- (6) *Likeyya* (taking note)
- (7) *Sikkheyya* (practicing)
- (8) *Dhāreyya* (learning by heart)

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<sup>9</sup> Pariyatti (learning and teaching the Dhamma), Paṭipatti (practicing the Dhamma) and Paṭivedha (liberation)

<sup>10</sup> Pinya dynasty, Sagaing dynasty, Taunggyu dynasty, Ava dynasty and Nyaung Yang dynasty

At that long period, depending on the political situations, the economic, the education and the social of country was rise and fall.

### **2.3 Kaung Baung Dynasty and British Colonial Time**

At the time of Kaung Baung dynasty, the political situation was complex and there were wars with British Empire. The curriculum of monastic schools added western knowledge and King Mintone send young people to study in aboard. It is the first step to acquire of learning from western country. During 1824 – 1885 ME, it was the colonial age governed by British Empire. It is the starting of western education and appearing of different schools such as European schools,<sup>11</sup> Western schools,<sup>12</sup> Vernacular schools and Monastic schools. Monastic education has its origins in Pyu era but became popular in Bagan dynasty and for centuries played a major role in nurturing children with secular knowledge for living through the teaching of Buddhist literature. Even at the time of colonial occupation, the authorities permitted monastic education because they saw it as imparting moral values in students. After that, monastic schools become fade amongst the secular educations for a particular time being.

### **2.4 Present -day Buddhist Monastic Schools or Ba Ka schools**

Herein, the Buddhist monastic schools mean “Ba Ka” schools. The term “Ba Ka” is abbreviated form of Phonetawgyithin Pyinnyaryay Kyaung and Thilashinthin Pyinnyaryay Kyaung in Myanmar. Monastic schools are administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ Department of Promotion and Propagation of Sasana. They are founded by monks and nuns and provides totally free education for everyone. This contribution of the *Samgha* to the contemporary society is recognized as socio-religious services of Buddhist monks and nuns. Even though government provides free education starting from 2015-2016 academic year, Ba Ka schools will still be vital and essential for poor and needy families because of three reasons:

1. Low-income families cannot afford additional cost in government schools;
2. In remote areas, there may not be government schools; and
3. For orphans, Ba Ka Schools give parental care and love.

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<sup>11</sup> European schools are only for western’s children.

<sup>12</sup> Western schools are founded by Churches with the aim to do missionary.

They teach modern subjects as teaching in the government schools. Total number of these schools is 1,431 in 2010-2011 academic years. According to 2010-2011 academic year record, there are totally 215,202 students studying in monastic schools in different places. There are 12,075 novice students; 4,377 nun students; 104,062 boy students and 94,688 girl students in different states and divisions.<sup>13</sup> Thousands of monks and nuns are working in free education services for the people.

For 2013-2014 academic years, the government supports Kyats (Myanmar currency) three billions (it is equal to 3,000,000 US \$ in current exchange rate) for paying salary for the teachers. Most teachers either monastic members or lay teachers are actually volunteering without any payments. In some schools, they get 38,000 to 50,000 (38 to 50 US \$) per month. The department of religious affairs under which Ba Ka Schools are running states that in 2013-2014 academic years, there are totally 1,579 Ba Ka Schools consisting of 1,136 primary level schools, 329 secondary level schools, 112 middle level schools and 2 high schools.

### **3. Theory and Practice of Buddhist Monastic schools**

In Buddhist literatures, children play an important role for the realization of the truth, preservation and propagation of Buddhist teachings. It can be found that there are many children enter to *Samgha* order and many of them realize the truth. Besides, the Buddha also gives special attention to children and he recognizes children as social units for better world and peaceful society. Teaching to children, therefore become a part of Buddha's life.

Venerable *Chekinda* mentioned, unless we train the children with moral, ethical and educational values, there may not be well-developed society in the future. Yes, it is absolutely true. Monastic schools teach modern subjects prescribed in the government schools as mentioned above. Moreover, they teach and train to the children according to the Buddhist way of life.

Apart from modern subjects prescribed in the government schools, Buddhist monastic school teach fundamental Buddhist teachings such as the chronicle of the *Buddha*, *Maṅgala Sutta*, *Siṅgālovāda Sutta*, *Sīla*, *Lokaṇīti*, *Abhidhamma*, and meditation techniques etc. These fundamental Buddhist teachings aim and focus on personal development in cultivating moral, educational and behavioral management. The Buddha delivered all moral virtues into thirty-eight

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<sup>13</sup> 2010-2011 Academic year, Ministry of Religious Affairs.



rules<sup>14</sup> in *Maṅgala Sutta*. If these *Maṅgalas* are practiced, one can become a good human being for his country, for his family and also for his life.

There are two kinds of *Sīla* (Morality) in the Buddhism; they are *Caritta Sīla* and *Varitta Sīla*. The Buddha preached the *Sīṅgālovāda Sutta* with the intension to show up the *Caritta Sīla* for lay people. *Caritta Sīla* means abiding by the rules of conduct and performing one's duties and responsibilities. In *Sīṅgālovāda Sutta*, the *Buddha* described the rules of conduct or duties for sons and daughters, for parents, for pupils, for teachers, for husbands and wives, for friends, etc.

Furthermore, there are many rules concerned with respecting of old aged people and acting polite manners. For example, one should respect one's parents, teachers, elders and monks. One should bend one's body forward when one passes in front of them. One should not eat first before they start to eat, etc. This *Sīla* can bring harmony between human beings and can maintain the good in social community. Regarding with *Varitta Sīla*, five precepts<sup>15</sup> are instructed to practice and apply in daily life. This *Sīla* is not concern with social life but only for purification of your mind. It prevents one from doing immoral actions and unwholesome things.

*“Sīlapaññāncapana Bhikkhave Lokasmiṃ Aggamakkhāyati”*<sup>16</sup>

O monks! Morality and wisdom are called the best in the world.

Nowadays, phenomenal material progress a lot in the world but not in spiritual well-being. Therefore, everyone need today is a code of ethics and morality which will guide them to the way of peaceful and purification of their mind. In Buddhism, the Buddha teaches us-

*“Sabbapāpassa Akaranam*

*Kusalassa Upasampadā*

*Sacittapariyodāpanam.”*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> non-association with fools, association with wise, honoring those worthy of honor, residence in an appropriate place, having merits in the past, keeping oneself in the right course, vast knowledge, skill in art and handicraft, good learning in moral discipline, having well-spoken word, attention to one's parents, support of one's spouse and children, performance of un-conflicting, doing charity, practice of Dhamma, supporting of relatives, performance of blameless actions, avoidance of evil thought, avoidance of evil speech, avoidance of intoxicants, non-negligence of meritorious deeds, having respectfulness, having humbleness, having contentment, knowing gratitude, timely listening to the Dhamma, being tolerance, obedience, meeting of noble persons or monks, timely discussion of the Dhamma, self –restraint, leading a noble life, having insight into the four noble truths, realization of Nibbana, having mind unshaken by weal and woe, absence of worry, absence of defilements and having peace of mind.

<sup>15</sup> Abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and from using drinks and drugs.

<sup>16</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya*. Vol. I. p. 116-117.

<sup>17</sup> *Dhammapada*, Verse No. 138.

“To refrain from all evil,  
To do what is good,  
To purify the mind”

In this verse, “To purify the mind” is a need of nowadays people. The only way to purify one’s mind is observing *Sīla* (morality). We don’t need to find the way how to purify the mind, just only walk along on the way which was already laid down and lighted up by the Lord Buddha. Morality can control one words and actions. It can make us good ladies and good gentleman in the worldly wise sense. At this juncture, Buddhist monastic schools pay attention in the morality or ethical practices of students.

Attempts to replace a culture of rote learning with a child-centred style of teaching have been more successful in monastic than state schools. Many monastic schools are also employing new teaching approaches, particularly the child-centered approach (CCA) to learning, where students are encouraged to more actively participate in lessons, with little emphasis placed on rote memorization.

#### **4. Effectiveness and benefits of Buddhist Monastic Schools**

Basically, the *Samgha* organization totally relies on laity for its worldly needs: food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Nevertheless, Buddhism and its fellow *Samgha* never forget to save and uplift human society and environment as they are interdependent and interrelated. Thus, modern education based on the teachings of the Buddha provided by Buddhist monastic schools is likewise a pond with clear and cold water for a thirsty person as well as a great Buddhist contribution to the society.

As the effectiveness and benefits earning through Buddhist monastic schools, there were lack of crime and rule of law and justice prevail in the whole country and the nation reached the highest stage of peaceful society. Almost all Buddhist leaders and devout Buddhists believe that unless Buddhist teachings reach to the public, there may not be peaceful society because Buddha’s teachings are based on human rights, mutual understanding and civic ethics society. Moreover, the improvement of human resource through education service both mentally and physically is the biggest contribution from Buddhist monastic schools for the better future of our country.

## Conclusion

*“Natthi vijiāsamammittaṃ,  
Naca kammasamaṃ balaṃ.”<sup>18</sup>*

Friendship is not equal in value of knowledge;  
no power equal to moral merit!

It is our responsibility and obligation to make the trembling planet stable and serene. It is important to exclude ourselves from groups who are trying to make this world unstable and dangerous. We should collectively gather to extinguish the burning flame of desire and to exclude ourselves from groups who make this planet burn. Education alone helps and supports man to perform so. “Education means in Buddhism, bringing knowledge and skills to a person, enabling him to translate such knowledge and skills to appropriate situations in life- finally, developing discipline, insight and wisdom.”<sup>19</sup>

Hence, making both modern and Buddhist education free and accessible for everyone based on compassion, providing food and shelter at no cost with loving-kindness are incomparable contributions of Buddhist monks and nuns in Society Myanmar. It leads to the improvements of human resources which are the fundamental need for a country as well as to the peaceful society. Due to this fact, the theory and practices of Buddhist Monastic schools will never fade away amongst modern schools in the contemporary world.

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<sup>18</sup> Lokanīti, Verse – 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ratnapala, Nandasena, *Buddhist Sociology*, Delhi, Sri Satguru Publication, 1993, p. 177.

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