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Buddhist Training For Children and Youths

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ABSTRACT

The Buddha's advice to parents is clear – support our children to become generous, compassionate, virtuous, responsible, skilled and self-sufficient beings. We do not need to teach Buddhism to our children, we only need to give them the basic skills they need to find true happiness. We, as parents, are the ones who can provide our children with what they need to understand Buddhist philosophy. The single most important thing we can do for our children is help them to understand that every action has consequences. They can understand that each moment presents us with an opportunity, and it is up to us, as individuals, to choose how we will think, speak, or act. Each of these actions will determine our happiness, not only in the moment but in the future. This is the basic teaching of karma, or cause and effect. The most important factor for Buddhist training to children and

youths is imitation to parents and other factors which will be discussed in this paper together with the two main courses for youth training available in Myanmar nowadays.

Introduction

Buddhism in Myanmar is predominantly of the Theravada tradition, practised by 89% of the country's population. It is the most religious Buddhist country in terms of the proportion of monks in the population and proportion of income spent on religion. Adherents are most likely found among the dominant Bamar people, Shan, Rakhine, Mon, Karen, and Chinese who are well integrated into Myanmar society. Monks, collectively known as the sangha, are venerated members of Myanmar society.

Youth Population In Myanmar

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|---------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Age structure: | 0-14 years: | 26.4% | (male 7,498,179/female 7,209,588) |
| 15-24 years: | 18.3% | (male 5,163,399/female 5,037,117) | |
| 25-54 years: | 43.1% | (male 11,930,777/female 12,073,741) | |
| 55-64 years: | 7% | (male 1,836,463/female 2,059,482) | |
| 65 years and over: | 5.3% (male 1,277,919/female 1,659,588) (2014 est.) | | |

So, the population of children(0-14) and youths (15-24) are 44.7% of Total population in Myanmar.

The Buddha’s advice to parents is clear – support our children and youths to become generous, compassionate, virtuous, responsible, skilled and self-sufficient beings. We don’t need to teach Buddhism to our children and youths , we only need to give them the basic skills they need to find true happiness. . We should provide our childldren and youths with what they need to understand Buddhist philosophy.

The single most important thing we can do for our children and youths is to help them to understand that every action has consequences. They can understand that each moment presents us with an opportunity, and it is up to us, as individuals, to choose how we will think, speak, or act. Each of these actions will determine our happiness, not only in the moment but in the future. This is the basic teaching of kamma, or cause and effect.

The life of youth is very important to be a good buddhist other than a traditional Buddhist. The followings are the main factors that play to be a good Buddhist for youth or other ways, important factors for Buddhism training to youths.

1.Imitation and Externals

The educational program depends very much on the age of the youths. The good example of the parents is the most important part of any education and if the parents live in accordance with the Dhamma this will be the surest and best guide to the children, whatever their age. Children develop the faculty of observation to a high degree and imitation is an important factor for them. We should not neglect this fact. Everything depends on how much the parents themselves succeed in realising the Dhamma in their everyday life, in making Buddhism a living thing, and not just something to talk about.

Together with imitation, externals play an important role during childhood. No Buddhist household should therefore be without a Buddha-rūpa (image), or at least a picture of the Enlightened One. It is a good idea to let each child have a small Buddha image of its own and they can offer flowers, incense and light regularly . But it is vital that we see to it that the child does not come to worship the image itself, but that it pays devotion to the Buddha as the greatest teacher of mankind. Although we must not develop any system of rites, we must not neglect the fact that a simple ceremony such as this brings Buddhism closer to the hearts of children. For adult Buddhists, rites are more a fetter than a help, in so far as they are apt to make us think that we have achieved something merely by the performing of them. The philosophical aspects of Buddhism, although essential for adults, are generally too deep for children to grasp. But as externals help our children towards the Buddhist way of life we may make use of some simple ceremony. Children love the spectacular, and the regular offering of flowers, incense and lights, helps to develop such good habits as veneration and respect.

2.Telling the Budhha Stories and History

From time to time the parents can read one of the Buddha stories from the Jātakas, the tales of rebirth. There is no reason why these beautiful tales should be neglected so long as the moral of the story be stressed and the amoralities carefully explained away. These stories will introduce them into the way of thinking and the concepts of kamma and rebirth and they will find a natural place in their minds. And since an understanding of kamma and rebirth requires a minimum of intellectual reasoning, the ideas can be taught even to children. In fact the whole teaching of the Buddha could be taught to children if only we could present it in the right way. To abstain from teaching our children Buddhism is a great mistake, and it is incongruous that some Buddhists put much stress on wrong facts, while neglecting to give their own children a Buddhist upbringing.

In addition to the Jātakas already mentioned, we should tell our children about the life of the people during the time of the Buddha, their social structure, the historical background of early Buddhism, the history of Buddhism in general, and how the “Wheel of the Dhamma” rolled over the whole of India and beyond.

3.Explaining the Dhamma

The children’s mind will gradually grow into the spirit of Dhamma, while developing an understanding of the basic doctrines of Buddhism. The parents can then read some easy or digestible Suttas to the children, e. g., those concerning the basic five sīlas and what a lay-Buddhist ought to do and ought not to do, more particularly the discourses of the Aṅguttara, the “layman’s Nikāya.” This is all within the grasp of children. In addition, some easy stanzas from the Dhammapada may be read:

“All tremble at punishments, all fear death.

Comparing others with oneself,

One should neither injure nor kill” (Dhp 129)

“Not to do any evil,

to cultivate the good,

to purify one’s mind

this is the Teaching of the Buddhas.” (Dhp 183)

Buddhism is not as complicated as some of us are apt to think, and furthermore we are right to presume that a child of Buddhist parents had kammic tendencies which caused it to be born as a child of such parents, and so there is every reason why it should be given a Buddhist education.

4.Language

If oral teachings were given in the language with which people are most familiar, the language in which they are educated, then they could understand the meaning better. Colloquial language communicates much better to lay people than does classical language. For scholars and serious practitioners, knowledge of Pali, and Sanskrit but for the general public and young people who are used to television colloquial language and everyday examples are more suitable. If the teachers use many Pali words, the children will not understand, lost interest and fear for listening. They will avoid going to learning or reading books because they cannot understand the language well.

5.Clear and logical Explanation

It is essential that Buddhist principles be clearly and logically explained. They want to understand the logical proof for some events such as rebirth and to know about hells and deva planes.

Young people are often queried by their classmates and colleagues about Buddhist theory and practice. If the youths do not receive a good Buddhist education so that they know what is Buddhist practice and what is not, if they do not understand the purpose and meaning of chanting and rituals, if they do not understand well exactly what the Triple Gem is and how taking refuge benefits oneself, then they become full of doubts and may eventually abandon Buddhism for another religion. Or, they may become tempted to criticize and denigrate other religions in an effort to defend their own. Both of these unfortunate reactions could be avoided by directly dealing with these issues through education. If Buddhism is explained clearly and logically, youths will naturally see its validity and worthiness, and they will be able to answer questions posed to them.

In the past, Buddhist philosophical education was reserved for the monks and nuns, with the role of the laity being to have faith and make offerings to the monastic community. However, with the rise in the literacy rate and standard of education, the laity wants to and is more capable of taking responsibility for the practice and spread of Buddhism. People have more time and ability to study the Dhamma in a weekly series of teachings, to engage in a daily meditation and chanting practice at their homes, and to attend week-end retreats. They can teach Sunday School classes for children and prepare educational materials about Buddhism. It would be suitable for modern Buddhist education to reflect this increasing capability and changing role of the lay devotees.

6. Relationship to modern lifestyle and problems

Buddha's doctrine becomes extremely clear in the minds of the youth when it is explained explicitly in relationship to modern lifestyle and problems. In this way the profound meaning of the Buddha's teachings is directly made relevant to current situations, and the youth easily see the value of practicing the Dhamma. Teachers can explain how to live according to ethical values in corporate business, how to practise patience in international politics, and how to develop detachment in discotheques. They can answer questions such as: how can one be compassionate towards people who try to take advantage of us? How can Dhamma practice improve relationships with our family and colleagues? What is the value of becoming a monk or nun in the present days ? Should Buddhists become more involved in projects to benefit society, such as operating schools, clinics, drug counseling centers and old age homes? How can meditation prevent stress?

One way to make the teachings relevant to contemporary society is by using stories and examples of current situations during teaching sessions. Another is by having discussion groups where youths share their experiences and consider how to solve daily life difficulties by employing Dhamma methods.

7.Multimedia

Buddhism can be explained by using a variety of media. Traditionally, education was done by the disciple listening to the teacher in a strict teaching situation, or by children mimicking their parents actions. But now videos, television, radio, comic books, weekly articles in the city newspaper, theater, and modern music are viable media for youths to learn about the Dhamma and to express what they have learned. If these media are used more, then young people will feel that Buddhism fits into their modern culture. It is very nice that dhamma school students sing Buddhist songs written in modern lyrics to the accompaniment of modern instruments. The songs create a wonderful atmosphere of faith in the Buddha and spiritual friendship among the devotees. Playing games and drawing pictures provide a way to use humor in teaching Buddhism, and comic books (for the youngsters) and videos easily catch their attention.

8.Explanations of Buddhist Theory and Practice

It is beneficial for explanations of Buddhist theory and practice to be made available in general. The purpose is not to be evangelical, but to avoid misconceptions arising in non-Buddhists' minds about Buddhism and to give interested youths an opportunity to learn about the Dhamma without getting involved in rituals and devotional practices. Here Buddhism is explained in a more academic way, without youths feeling obliged to call themselves Buddhists or adopt Buddhist practices. To this effect, public talks could be given in libraries and auditoriums, as well as courses on comparative religion or philosophy could be taught in universities and adult education courses.

9. Child Centered Approach Method

In Myanmar, now most of Sunday Dhamma Schools are using Child Centered Approach Method in Buddhism Training . Child-centered learning is an approach to education focusing on the needs of the students, rather than those of others involved in the educational process, such as teachers and administrators. Child-centered learning is focused on each student's needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles, placing the teacher as a facilitator of learning. At the early stage more emphasis should be given to the child's sensory and natural development.

The whole idea is that learning should be fun and engaging for the child, and is most likely to be that way if the child is in charge of the learning experience, rather than teacher.

10. Inter-religious Dialogue

Lastly, inter-religious dialogue is extremely valuable, especially in multi-religious societies. In our rapidly-shrinking world, people need to respect, and not antagonistically criticize, other religions. This can be achieved only by knowing about other belief systems and emphasizing the common, uniting points. It is important not only that religions be harmonious among themselves, but also that leaders of all religions present a united front in encouraging world peace and better living conditions. This would truly be an inspiring example of openness and tolerance for all peoples of the world.

Two Main Courses In Myanmar

Nowadays, in Myanmar, there are two main courses of Buddhism training to children and youths.

(1) Summer Short Course

In summer holidays, we give Buddhism training to the children as short course. It mostly lasts from one week to one month. In these courses, we teach basic Buddhism cultural training, course based on thirty eight Mingala (auspiciousness), combined with English Language and computer training. These courses are given by government sector as well as private sectors such as monasteries, religious laypersons, and religious organizations.

(2) Sunday Dhamma School

On every Sunday, we give Buddhism training to the children and the youths in Sunday Dhamma Schools. In Sunday dhamma schools, they can learn for 2 or 3 hours weekly, throughout the whole year.

They worship to Buddha images and monks, offer the Buddha images with flowers, incense and candles. The act of paying respect to the Buddha statue or picture, the children are learned with the mindfulness of Buddha's virtues for a few minutes. Sometimes, they donate to the monks. They learn dhamma lessons and classes are classified by their ages or school grades. These Sunday Dhamma Schools multiply within last three years in Myanmar. Most of these Sunday Dhamma Schools are founded by private sectors, some are founded by monks, some by religious laypersons and some by religious organizations. These Sunday Dhamma Schools are situated at monasteries, temples and dhamma halls.

In short, conventional Buddhism is at a critical juncture. The path to liberation and enlightenment that the Buddha described from his own experience is a timeless one. Compassion and wisdom, the essence of the doctrine, are always needed to make our lives meaningful and beneficial to others. However, if we neglect to express these principles in a form that is easily understood by the youths of today, then we are denying them access to the beauty of the teachings. Having huge temples and elaborate statues will not guarantee the continuation of the doctrine in the minds and actions of youths.

Performing rituals which few understand while neglecting to give advice suitable to youth's mentality and problems is not sufficient to ensure that youths actually benefit from the Dhamma. For youths to touch the real meaning of the Dhamma and to enrich their lives through Buddhism, education that is relative to their modern culture, lifestyle and language is necessary. To provide the Buddhism education is our responsibility and also joyful for us to be able to share and cherish the precious doctrine of the Buddha.