

# HIGHER BUDDHIST EDUCATION IN VIETNAM : CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS\*



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to review all quality aspects of Buddhist Higher Education in Vietnam. Required by applied research, the author had to care about what has been available and considered what need to be improved upon. In this way, this paper looked at some of the shortcomings that occurred in the past, some of which extended to the present then came up with the proposed solutions. If properly done, Higher Buddhist Education in Vietnam can meet the International Standards, fulfil its roles and more importantly can transcend the purely academic field by firstly bringing students to really understand Buddhism then leading them to the personal liberation by practicing the Buddha's teaching throughout their whole life.

**Key words:** Buddhist Education, Higher Buddhist Education, Challenges in Higher Buddhist Education, Vietnam.

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## INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by thanking the venerable organizers for inviting me to present to you on the subject of Buddhist Higher Education in Vietnam.

“Education simply means a process of teaching, training and learning, especially in schools or colleges, to improve knowledge and develop skills.”<sup>1</sup> Higher education is provided by college or university where subjects are studied at an advanced level. This education always plays an important role for the maintenance and development in both quantity and quality of any religious organizations.

However, discussing Higher Education is not only about Colleges or Universities which are strictly academic but also about the broader aspects such as Organization, Management, Quality and Result.

Quality in Higher Education is a multidimensional concept, which includes all the related functions and activities that form the academic life in a university system. Therefore, any frameworks for the assessment of quality should take into account the quality of students, lecturers, infrastructure, teaching methods, curricula, assessments and learning sources.”<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of Higher Buddhist Education in Vietnam also aims to improve the knowledge of the Buddha teaching, to develop skills of practice and propagation and to bring Buddhist learners to wisdom (*paññā*) in mind. Wisdom is not equivalent of knowledge but without right knowledge, wisdom cannot be achieved by practitioners. Buddhist Education must focus both in knowledge and wisdom, both theory and practice accordingly.

Currently, Higher Buddhist Education in Vietnam is facing a variety of challenges- the technological and economic quality of its facilities, equipment and teaching resources remain sadly inadequate...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Muhammad Hamid Ulah, Dr. Muhammad Ajmal, Dr. Fazalur Rahman, “Analysis of Quality Indicators of Higher Education in Pakistan”.

<sup>3</sup>Venerable Dr. Thich Minh Thanh, “Vietnam Buddhist Education System in Light of Its Heritage and Recent Development,” in **Buddhist Education: Continuity and Progress**, p. 99.

More importantly, the statistics from General Investigation of Vietnam Population declared in 2010 that the Buddhist followers<sup>4</sup> were only 6.8 million people accounting for 7.92% of population.<sup>5</sup> However, according to a report in 1997 from Washington University the Buddhist followers were 7.6 million people accounting for 10% of population.<sup>6</sup>

The above-said figures pointed out the instability of Buddhist followers in Vietnam.

This reminds me of the Buddha teaching on the conditions for the stability of a religion in *Saddhammasammosasutta*: “the followers of the religion become well versed in its teachings, achieve its highest fruits, able to give a grounded exposition of the teachings and capable of refuting opposing religious views”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Buddha also considered the quality of teaching as a crucial factor which constitutes the longevity of the Dhamma.

In these current conditions, I believe the Higher Buddhist Education in Vietnam needs to be examined. This is also the main reason for this paper.

There were about hundred articles writing on Buddhist education published on the Buddhist website (<http://www.daophatngaynay.com/vn/giao-duc/>). Several works composed by some local authors such as “The Buddhist Education” by Dr. Ly Kim Hoa, and “The Buddhist Education in the Modern Time” by various authors, “Buddhist Education in Vietnam History and Situation” by Nguyen Dai Dong, “Teaching and Training methods in Vietnam Buddhist Universities” by Venerable Thich Nguyen Dat, “The Importance of Buddhist Education” by Le Thi Thanh Tam... However, they all discuss Buddhist Education in general, viewing Buddhist Education from different aspects separately such as Histories, Philosophies, Ethics, Training, Meaning, Subjects, Methods, Educational forms, and Purposes. There has been no specialized examination on the Higher Buddhist Education.

Differing with above mentioned articles and works, this paper only focused on Buddhist Higher Education, tried to identify the key issues and provided the proposed solutions for its improvement. The research methods used were Observational, Statistic, Analytical and Synthetic methods.

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<sup>4</sup>Buddhist followers are the persons who believe, practice and keep the Buddha teaching in voluntary manner according to Charter of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (Chapter 10, article 60)

<sup>5</sup>Vietnam Buddhist University news.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Denney, **Statistics on religion in Vietnam 1997**, by Government Committee for Religious Affairs, Washington University.

<sup>7</sup>Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha** (AN 160.10), II. 148/149 p. 526.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE CONTROL BY THE GOVERNMENT

Firstly, Higher Buddhist Education is a part of Vietnam Tertiary Education. The Vietnamese university system so far has been heavily influenced by the Soviet academic system, in which universities were primarily teaching institutions, while research was carried out by research institutes. The Vietnamese government is attempting to promote university research tasks. Unfortunately, these efforts have met with little success.

The problems Vietnam faces in higher education today are in part a consequence of the country's tragic history.

The French government that ruled Vietnam from the latter half of the nineteenth century until 1945 invested very little in tertiary education. Therefore, we missed the wave of innovation in higher education crossing much of Asia during the early 20th century.<sup>8</sup>

So, after open door policy in 1991, in order to integrate with world economics, our Government implemented the Renovation Project in education. As a result of this reform, Vietnam's higher education has experienced significant development, expansion of enrollments, and training objectives.

However, Vietnam's higher education still falls short of fulfilling the needs of current modern age. Universities have lacked of reality, Training quality and Efficiency have been poor. Teaching and learning methods have been out-of-date, and resources have been very limited. These shortcomings require further strengthening of the higher education reforms.

As a part of Higher Education of Vietnam, the Tertiary Buddhist Education could not avoid these issues. So, the Buddhist Educational renovation must be also considered.

Secondly, how the Local Government control Education?

Since 1990, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has overseen all aspects of Vietnamese education, including the regulation of new institutions, the creation of textbooks and curricula, decisions on admissions, and the issuing of certificates and

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<sup>8</sup>Thomas J. Valley, Ben Wikinson, **Vietnamese Higher Education-Crisis and Response**.

diplomas. Some specialist colleges are under the purview of other ministries, but the vast majority is governed by MOET.<sup>9</sup>

The curriculum of religious schools and training center must be submitted in advance to the local authorities and need to obtain approval from them. At every level, the authorities are empowered to reject requests for religious activities simply by providing a written statement to justify their decision. The quantity of Buddhist students at any levels must be reported and approved by the Vietnam government also.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Vietnamese Government has paid particular attention to all religions, the tight control on Religious Education from the government will strongly impact the quality and the Expansion of Higher Buddhist Education.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF HIGHER BUDDHIST EDUCATION

With a historical view, Higher Buddhist Education is linked closely with the Buddhist revival movement in Vietnam.

With an effort to reform and strengthen Buddhism which had lost ground to the spread of Christianity under French rule, a Buddhist revival movement emerged in the 1920s. The objectives of this movement occurred in the North, The Central and the South of Vietnam were closed to three contents: religious organizations of Buddhism, training of monks and nuns, and promulgation of Buddha Dharma.

In the Buddhist revival movement, the educational of Vietnamese Buddhism not only trained Buddhist monks and nuns in summer retreat (Vassa), but also established Buddhist Schools to teach according to a new system and method from primary to high Buddhist school, in which the Buddhist sutras were mainly taught.

Saṅgha leaders were aware of the need to build a monastic organization that conformed to modern society. Clergymen and women need to be trained and educated to serve people in this new environment. In order to serve Buddhist revival as well as the long-term development of Buddhism, Buddhist schools paid attention to teaching monks

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<sup>9</sup>Decree 43/2000/ND-CP, dated August 30, 2000, detailing and guiding the implementation of a number of articles of the education law and Decision 52/2002/QĐ-BGDDT, promulgating the regulation on management of education at all levels.

<sup>10</sup>Decree 92/2012/ND-CP, Directives and measures for implementing the Ordinance on beliefs and religion.

and nuns many secular occupations. Many monks and nuns were appointed to study in foreign countries.

Right after the Buddhist crisis in 1963, the Unified Buddhist Council was established and the Van Hanh University was founded. This was the first Buddhist University in Vietnam. It had an extensive system of social and educational services for both monastic and lay people. Monastic education also consolidated into one system. “Duoc Su Academy was also established to train nun students of college level before 1975”.<sup>11</sup>

After 1975, Vietnamese Buddhist Council tried to revive the tertiary education system. High colleges of Buddhist studies inherited from Van Hanh University became the Vietnam Buddhist Universities of today.

Currently, there are four Buddhist universities: in Hanoi, Hue, Ho Chi Minh City and the Theravāda Buddhist University in CanTho for Khmer monks. The Vietnam Buddhist Research Institute founded in 1984 is a separate unit from the university system and belongs to The Buddhist Saṅgha Council.

The training level of Vietnam Buddhist Universities has been limited in Bachelor, Master and Specialized colleges. “The education programs have been mixed between canonical texts and the social science subjects as well.”<sup>12</sup> The purpose is to improve the secular knowledge for Saṅgha members, let them easily make a practical contribution to the country’s socio-economic development.

## HOW BUDDHIST IS TAUGHT

In Education, the key points are the training method by lecturers and studying attitude from students both inside and outside the class. Currently in the world, three forms of modern Education are applied - Lecturer centered; Learner-centered and Interactive teaching method.

Lecturer centered method is the traditional form in which the lecturer keeps the central role. Learner-centered method is the method that shifts the role of the instructor from teacher to student. The Interactive teaching method encourages interest in the learning

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<sup>11</sup> Bhikkhuni Nhu Duc, *A Brief History of The Vietnam Mahāyāna Bhikkhuni Saṅgha*, p.245

<sup>12</sup> Mai Tho Truyen, *Buddhism in Vietnam*, pp. 68-69.

process; provides high motivation, strength, knowledge, team spirit and freedom of expression; and most importantly, contributes to the complex competences of future specialists.<sup>13</sup>

The lecturer would be considered as the information giver or the advisor and students need to process the given information by their own view.

The main strategy of modern higher education focuses on the student's independent activity. Universities and colleges expect students to work on their own, outside of lecturers, tutorials, and seminars. Most independent study is spent to research the subject, reading and thinking critically about the material, making notes, preparing for seminars, planning, and writing assignments for assessment. By this view, learner-centered and the Interactive teaching method are more suitable than lecturer-centered one.

Unfortunately, due to the impact of traditional methods for such a long time, most of the students in Vietnam still consider lecturer method as the best teaching method. "Reasons included; teacher provides all knowledge related to topic and it is time saving method".<sup>14</sup> And by this method, students like to receive the benefit of the teacher knowledge rather than just go over the information in the textbook.

Much emphasis by Buddhist Universities in Vietnam still placed on memorizing facts and oral culture. Emphasis is placed on what the instructor does but very little is placed on asking students what they actually learn.

The traditional method has been widely used which places students in a passive rather than an active role, and will encourage one-way communication. As a result, the lecturers try an effort to be aware of student understanding without any feedback. The common explanation for the passiveness is the cultural features of the Confucian heritage culture which is claimed to shape students' learning style in Vietnam.

The investigation results in 2009 of Pedagogy University, HCMC showed that 75% of students after graduation still lack self-reliant skills to pursue a career".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Thich Nguyen Dat, *Phuong Phap Giang Day va Hoc Tap tai cac Hoc Vien Phat Giao Vietnam*

<sup>14</sup>Dr. Shahida Sajjad, "Effective Teaching Method at Higher Education Level".

<sup>15</sup>Tran Thi Tuyet, "The causes of Passiveness in Learning of Vietnamese Students". **Journal of Education Research**, vol. 29, no. 2 (2013), pp. 72-84.

The traditional method, I believe, is only suitable for the primary education level.

Additionally, memorizing facts has been used in the Examination method by Buddhist Universities. This easily leads to negative actions from students during the exam process such as cheating or copying exam papers from each other.

So, it would be better if the exams use more open questions which require the comprehensive understanding and synthetic skills by students rather than questions required a lot of memorizing. Education should never be limited to memorization. The Interactive Teaching Method should gradually take the place of Traditional method in Vietnam Buddhist Universities.

## THE SOURCES OF TRAINING

The sources used by Buddhist Universities for training mainly are the translated Pāli canons, Chinese Mahāyāna scriptures and the textbooks prepared by the Professors of Universities and Buddhist scholars.

Most of the Pāli canons and Chinese Mahāyāna scriptures have been translated by the past most venerable Dr. Thich Minh Chau, Most Venerable Thich Thien Sieu, Dr. Le Manh That, Tue Sy, Dr. Thich Nhat Tu, Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist Monks and scholars in Vietnam.

However, the study of Early Monastic Buddhism conducted by Dr. Nalinaksha Dutt indicated that:

The Pāli Piṭakas undoubtedly passed through several redactions with accretions and omissions till the texts reached the form in which we have them now. The artificial and stereotyped of each *sutta* takes away the original freshness of the sayings and distinctly reveals the clipping and shaping hands of the redactors of a time far away from the time of the Teacher.<sup>16</sup>

In the work “Studies in the Origins of Buddhism” by prof. Govind Chandra Pande, a lot of controversial information relating to the Early Buddhism could be found.

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<sup>16</sup>Nalinaksha Dutt, “Early Monastic Buddhism,” vol.1, preface.



He mentioned that Mrs. Rhys David has raised the all-important question: what was the original message of Buddhism? After her work, the facts of interpolation, elaboration and expurgation in the suttas can hardly be ignored. It means there is a necessity of a re-study of the problems of Buddhist origins.<sup>17</sup>

Bikkhu Sujato and Bhahmali listed 33 odd points in Pāli canons<sup>18</sup> Matthew Kosuta also found the contradiction in Theravada Buddhism with its pacifist ethic<sup>19</sup>...

Mentioning these points, I do not mean to make the Pāli canons less worthy for studying, but my idea is there may have some things in the canons that need to be reviewed again. The Buddha also declared this point in Kalama sutta “not to accept the words of any teacher including himself but to find things out for ourselves, relying on our own experience”.<sup>20</sup>

It also means that the study of Buddhist religious tradition has not been taken in any kind of critical spirit, but has been simply a matter of learning in order to benefit from it and pass it on to future generations.

By this view, students of higher Buddhist studies should be encouraged to raise an independent opinion, to test the logic of arguments, to demand empirical evidence and to find whether the evidence is sufficient to support the given conclusions or not. Critical thinking skill needs to be applied widely in Higher Buddhist study. Students should be able to differentiate the right from wrong when they get the Buddha teachings. “Teaching has been produced over two thousand five hundred years, mistakes and misprints are presumably understandable.”<sup>21</sup>

The research of Prof. Irvin J. Lehmann showed that there was a significant improvement in critical thinking ability from freshman to senior years in higher education.<sup>22</sup> This factor needs to be exploited for the favor of students in higher level.

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<sup>17</sup>G.C. Pande, **Studies in the Origins of Buddhism**, preface & p.23

<sup>18</sup>Bhikkhu Sujato, Bhahmali, **The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts**, pp. 86-89.

<sup>19</sup>“The Buddha and the Four-Limbed Army,” **The Military in the Pali Canon**.

<sup>20</sup>Bikkhu Bodhi, *op.cit.*, (AN 3.65), p. 280.

<sup>21</sup>Thich Thanh Tu, “Open the Door To Self- Emancipation,” p. 48.

<sup>22</sup>Irvin J. Lehmann, “Changes in Critical Thinking, Attitudes and Values from Freshman to Senior Years,” **Journal of Educational Psychology**, vol. 54, no. 6 (December 1963), p. 305.

Additionally, Buddhist universities do not have the unified curricula and textbooks for whole higher educational system. The biggest challenge to this issue is that curriculum authors always want students to follow the same path that they themselves have already experienced. Most curriculum authors have not been able to go beyond their perceptions.

<sup>23</sup> This issue needs to be improved by our Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha.

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE ABILITY

Higher Education has in no way diminished the need to learn foreign languages. Original sources to be read in original language are well appreciated in many countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam ... There, the study of Theravada Buddhism normally involves Pāli language, and the study of Mahāyāna involves Chinese language. Besides, to study Buddhism at an academic standard also requires fluent English skills.

In Vietnam, English is still a second language, and hardly anyone studies Pāli and Chinese because students think they must be difficult. Of course, no one expects Buddhist primary learners in Vietnam to learn Chinese and Pāli. However, it is much better for students of higher level education to be able to read the Buddha's words in Pāli language, and read Mahāyāna sutta in Chinese language or Sanskrit. Students should be able to penetrate the original texts.

Currently, the candidates are required to get only primary level of English or Chinese before joining Buddhist University. The expectation of these students to master the related foreign languages for Buddhist researches within 4 years is impossible.

Therefore, it would be much better if, before enrolling in Buddhist universities, students achieve at least intermediate level of foreign language proficiency (English, Chinese or Pāli). The Common European frame work of reference (CEFR) for languages can be used as guideline to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan D London, **Education in Vietnam, Development History, Challenges and solution.**

<sup>24</sup> CEFR, [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)

## LEARNING BY PRACTICE

There are three stages in any course of Buddhist Education: learning (*pariyatti*), practicing (*paṭipatti*), and realization (*paṭivedha*). Thus learning is only the first step and cannot stand alone. Understand the Buddha's teaching is important but how to apply it in life is more crucial. Being knowledgeable of all sutras but not applying them towards enlightenment is not better than a book case. The Buddha emphasized not to focus merely on speculation because it could not bring us to the Truth. Buddhist teaching is meant to awaken our true self, not merely to add to our storehouse of knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

Like other scientific branches, Buddhism needs to be proven and experimented. Lacking of practice or verification, we can only be a parrot to narrate the Buddha teaching or be the document keepers in Buddhism. In addition, responding to changing environments, higher education needs to develop more contextual strategies. "Buddhist Education is a mean to direct and guide the heart toward Purification. It is also the greatest practical force for social reformation."<sup>26</sup> Practical efficiency has a very important place in Buddhist education.

However, the curriculum of Buddhist studies in Universities seems to lean toward the doctrinal studies, and not focus much on practical side. Only few hours of meditation (one credit equivalence) out of 132 total credits are found in Buddhist studies of B.A curriculum.<sup>27</sup> No practical skills training have been found in the curriculum, currently.

Learning by practice strategy implies the presence of links between theoretical knowledge and practical skills acquisition in order to improve the student professional competence both academically and practically. It is a new educational and has been successively employed in many universities across the globe strategy to be applied recent years."<sup>28</sup>

I am totally convinced that this strategy should be applied in the higher Buddhist Universities by enriching the personality development process with meditation, showing them the techniques to apply the Buddha teaching in daily life.

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<sup>25</sup>Thich Nhat Hanh, **The Heart of Buddha's Teaching**, p.17.

<sup>26</sup>Tran Ngoc Ninh, **The Buddha and Social Reform**, p.10.

<sup>27</sup>From the author's Statement of Marks (B.A in Buddhist studies at Vietnam Buddhist University).

<sup>28</sup>The alternate way of learning by practice – A Buddhist approach to new education.

## FACILITIES AND FUNDING

The Buddhist Universities in Vietnam are facing with several issues with facilities. Classrooms, Libraries are not well equipped. Computers, Hostel, Multimedia and Research facilities are not available for students.

Good facilities appear to be an important precondition for student studying. Therefore, the improvement of facilities should be made. Using modern management methods and technology, especially information technology and media; a national database center for training and scientific research should be established, as well as an e-library system in Buddhist universities.

The construction of the new modern Vietnam Buddhist Institute on a site of 23.8 hectares in Ho Chi Minh City was in the first phase of completion and it is hard to predict for the entirely completion due to a funding issue. Only 83 billion VND (# 3.8 million dollars) out of 2,000 VND billion (# 93 million dollars) - just 4% capital requirements has been obtained, so far.<sup>29</sup>

This funding issue has been considered as historical lesson, appeared very early at the beginning of the establishment of our Buddhist educational system in early decade of 1930s. At that time, only a few of the Vietnamese Buddhist temples and organizations had their own steady sources of income from rice fields and business enterprises. The rest mainly rely only in donations. The donation which fluctuates depending on the own free will of sponsors, cannot be relied on.

In the short term, Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha needs to attract the funding for Higher Education by increasing tuition fee. Subsidy system must be stopped in Buddhist Education system.<sup>30</sup>

Currently, tuition fee in Buddhist Universities is much lower than the non-Buddhist ones.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> <http://phatgiao.org.vn/van-de-quan-tam/201501/dien-mao-moi-cua-Hoc-vien-PGVN-tai-Tp-HCM-co-so-Le-Minh-Xuan-17059/>

<sup>30</sup> News of Buddhist University of Vietnam ([www.vbu.edu.vn/vbunews/](http://www.vbu.edu.vn/vbunews/))

<sup>31</sup> Vietnam Buddhist University news (<http://www.vbu.edu.vn/vbunews/vbunews-detail/NP-37/Sinh-vien-noi-cua-Phat.html>)

The fee has the important role. It will be used to reinvest in the universities to continuously improve the facilities. Fee is associated with teaching and learning quality. The below table shows the unreasonableness of annual tuition fee of the Buddhist universities in Vietnam:

USD

<b>University</b> <b>Groups</b> <b>Tuition fee</b> <b>2014</b>	<b>National</b> <b>Universities</b>	<b>Private</b> <b>Universities</b>	<b>International</b> <b>Universities</b>	<b>Local</b> <b>Buddhist Uni-</b> <b>versities</b>
B.A. level	\$ 400	\$ 1,000	\$ 4,000	\$ 150

*Source:* The Author collected from various University Websites in VN

In the long term, Vietnam Buddhist Sangha council needs to have the stable income by doing its own business. There is much debate on this topic by Buddhist scholars because the monastic way of life idealized by Buddhism is economically very minimalist.<sup>32</sup>

Because of the limitation of this paper, the study of Buddhist Economics would be suggested for further research.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper can be summarized as the unsuitable educational management system, non-unity curriculum and textbooks, “rote” teaching, learning and testing styles, the limitation of foreign language ability, the lack of practice, and lack of funding leading to poor study conditions. Therefore, significant renovation is necessary to improve our Buddhist Higher Education. If properly done, Higher Buddhist Education in Vietnam can meet international standards, fulfill its mission and more importantly can transcend the purely academic field. After all, the aim of Buddhist Education at higher level is to teach human beings to achieve personal liberation by practicing the Buddha’s teaching in whole life. Firstly, however, this Education must bring students to satisfy themselves and really understand Buddhism.

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<sup>32</sup>Phadet Dattajeevo, **Buddhist Economics**.

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