

# Teaching and Learning of Pali as Traditional System of Phrapariyatidhamma in Thailand

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## **Abstract**

The following chapter presents the situation and role of the Pāli language in Thailand. Most Buddhists, who believe in Buddhism in Thailand, use Pāli, the language in which the Buddha had preached to pray. Monks and novices always use Pāli for preaching the teaching of the Buddha to the Thai people.

Furthermore, in Thailand Pāli is being taught to Buddhist monks as well as to common people from the level of the primary school to the university. But the curriculum of the Pāli studies for the Buddhist monks is different from that of the common people. For the Buddhist monks, the Pali studies are divided into two systems; one system is approved by the Ministry of Education but conducted by the Sangha. This system has a curriculum of education similar to that of the current educational system of the Thai people. The other system which is organized by the Sangha is only for the Buddhist monks.

But at here has been discussed only system which is organized by the Sangha which is called the Traditional system of Phrapariyatidhamma.

**Keywords:** learning; teaching; traditional system

## **Introduction**

While describing the teaching and learning of Pali in Thailand Sangtaksin Yupon (1998: 46-50) mentions that the Ecclesiastical Education in Thailand developed for the first time in the Sukhothai (Sukhodaya) period and functioned till Ratanakosin period, prior to the twentieth century. It was the study of the Pāli Tripiṭaka, the most fundamental teaching of

the Theravada tradition of Buddhism. The textbooks were written in the Pāli language and recorded in Khom (Cambodian/Khmer) characters written on Palm-leaves. There were three classes, namely, Parien-Tri (Third class), Parien-To (Second class) and Parien-Ek (First class). In 1816, King Rama II changed the three grade-Parien system into the nine grade-Parien system, which is the origin of the modern system. Apart from the Tripitaka, its commentaries were also added to the curriculum. This was called the Study of Phrapariyatidhamma or the Study of Pāli.

Thailand's ecclesiastical education in the twentieth century, beginning with the last phase of the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910) till King Rama IX (i.e. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, 1964-present) is an extremely important and most interesting phase in the history of Thai education.

Having succeeded to the throne, King Rama V understood that the provision of education was a vital factor in the development of the country. He provided full support to the educational administration, both secular and ecclesiastical. It was found that two types of ecclesiastical education were arranged. They were the former Phrapariyatidhamma study, and the study of general character conducted at Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya and Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya which were both at the college level. The former was the study of Pāli which was like that of previous time. But the programme of study and the examination procedure were improved. However, the oral examination of the Pāli course was carried on till the end of King Rama V's reign. The latter was the new system called Mahamakut System. It was later systematized. The curriculum, teaching and examination system were organized on new lines under the leadership of Ven. Vajirañāvarorasa who was the most important leader in the management of ecclesiastical education. He introduced the western system of written examination. The Mahamakut system was first used at Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya established in 1893, and later at Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya which was initially established in 1889 and was officially founded in 1896. Again, the Tripitaka, formerly a set of Palm-leaf books in Khom characters, was revised and printed in the form of normal books using Thai characters. In addition, the by-product of educational improvement was the issue of the Ecclesiastical Act of 1902 which effectively supported ecclesiastical educational activities. Regretfully, when the Sangha took the responsibility of the management of urban education of the country, the administration of Mahamakut system was to decline. But students themselves were not interested in the Phrapariyatidhamma study.

Eventually, in October 1902, the Mahamakut examination was cancelled by the order of the Sangha which was very powerful at that time. Although the new Mahamakut system of ecclesiastical education suffered from certain obstacles till it was cancelled, it shows that the beginning point of the new system of ecclesiastical education emerged at the time.

As pointed out by Somin Saloemphon (2003: 136) at present for Buddhist monks and novices in Thailand there is still the traditional system of education (i.e., that is the Phrapariyatidhamma study) consisting of the Dhamma studies and Pāli studies at the temple. Thus, Pāli studies in Thailand have two systems: In one system the Pali studies have nine levels of study at the temple for the Buddhists monks. The Sangha of Thailand organizes the curriculum of Pāli for this system. It is called the traditional system of Phrapariyatidhamma. In the other system the Pāli studies belong to the stream of foreign languages at the school, college and university levels for both Buddhists monks and common people. There is the Ministry of Education in Thailand organizing the curriculum of Pāli for this system. These two types of Pāli studies are introduced below.

### **The Traditional System of Phrapariyatidhamma**

According to Somin Saloemphon (2003: 128-136), the Pali Study in the Phrapariyatidhamma traditional system as is said in Thailand, is the study of the Buddha's teachings as contained in the Tipiṭaka and its commentaries. As mentioned before (see sec. 2.6) the study of Pāli was carried out since the Sukhothai period; it was eventually improved and divided into nine grades during the reign of King Rama II of the Chakri dynasty. Now, the educational administration is in the hand of Somdej Phramaha Rajamanglacaraya (Chuang Narapuñño) of the Paknam Monastery. He is the chief monk of the Pāli Course with three vice-chiefs, a secretary and assistant secretaries being his staff-workers.

The Phrapariyatidhamma traditional system is meant for the monks only. No other subjects other than Pali are taught in this system. Obviously, the course is difficult and heavy. It has already been mentioned that the Pāli Course in this system was divided into nine grades during the King Rama II's period, starting from the third grade to the ninth grade. The total number of classes was seven. The first grade and second grade were included in the third grade. Now, it is also divided into nine grades, starting from the first-second grade onwards. There are eight classes in total. Again, the above-mentioned nine grades have been categorized into three levels similar to those of olden days. These are:

Level one – Parien-Tri: The person who has passed the third grade is called Parien-Tri. He obtains the title ‘Phramaha’.

Level two – Parien –To: The person who has passed the fourth or the fifth or the sixth grade is called Parien-To.

Level three – Parien – Ek: The person who has passed the seventh or the eighth or the ninth grade is called Parien-Ek.

### **The Curriculum of the Pali Course in the Phrapariyatidhamma Traditional System**

The curriculum of the first and second grade up to the fifth grade covers the Sutta ahakatha, the sixth up to the seventh grade the Vinaya-atthakatha and the eighth and the ninth grade lie on the Abhidhamma-dika and Abhidhamma-pakarana. The brief curriculum of each grade is as follows:

#### **I. The First-Second Grade (Prayog 1-2)**

In the first and second grade the two subjects used for study are Pāli Grammar and Pāli-Thai Translation. They are presented in detail as follows:

##### **Pāli Grammar:**

The textbooks used in this grade are the different volumes of the elementary Pāli Grammar, i.e., Volume I containing Samaññābhidhan-Sandhi (Designation of vowel and consonant-Euphonic-combination), Volume II containing Nama-Avyayasabda (Noun and Affix), Volume III containing Samāsa-Tadhita (Compound and Secondary derivatives) and Volume IV containing Ākhyata-Kitaka (Verb and Primary-Derivatives). All of these were compiled by the late Supreme Patriarch, Prince Vajirañāavarorasa. The subjects aim mainly at memorization rather than the understanding for students.

##### **Pāli-Thai Translation:**

The textbooks used for this purpose are Commentary of Dhammapadaatthakatha, Volumes I to IV which contain the history of the Buddha, his teaching and his disciples, composed by Phra Buddhaghosacaraya.

#### **II. The Third Grade (Prayog 3)**

There are four subjects scheduled for the third grade. They are Pāli Grammar, Pāi Syntax, Pāli-Thai Translation and Official Letter Writing. The details of all these subjects are pointed out below:

##### **Pāli Grammar:**

The Pāli grammatical texts used in this grade are the same as in the previous grade but students have to study by memorizing and criticizing, for the subject is based on analytical reasoning.

Moreover, the students have to make a clear understanding of the part of speech in grammar because it is useful to study the Pāli Syntax.

#### **Pāli Syntax:**

The textbook of Pāli Syntax is called the Vākyasambandha in Thai. It describes the usage of linking-words in each sentence. Each linking-word is named in accordance with its rules. The texts used for the purpose of examination are the Commentary of Dhammapadahakatha, Volume V to VIII. It helps students greatly to understand the usage of Pāli in depth.

#### **Pāli-Thai Translation:**

The textbooks used are the Commentary of Dhammapadahakatha, Volume V to VIII like the subject of Pāli Syntax. All of these textbooks contain the history of the Buddha's teaching and his disciples.

#### **Official Letter Writing:**

This subject is called Būrababhāga (Formal Letter) in Thai. It refers to the formal writing of Thai letters used for official purposes. The textbooks used in this subject are dependent on the teacher but the teacher must teach the form of a formal letter to the students.

### **III. The Fourth Grade (Prayog 4)**

In this grade, there are only two subjects for learning. They are Pāli-Thai translation and Thai-Pāli translation. The details of both subjects are given below:

#### **Pāli-Thai Translation:**

The curriculum includes the Buddhist text called the Maṅgalatthadīpanī, volume I compiled by Phra Sirimanggalacaraya (Thai Bhikkhu) of North Thailand. It is an extensive commentary on the Maṅgala Sutta, the small discourse from the Khuddhakapaṭṭha. Students learn to translate this Pali text into Thai.

#### **Thai-Pāli Translation:**

The textbook used for this purpose is the Dhammapadaaṭṭhakathā, volume I. This is the first step for students who study the process of translating Thai into Pāli. Students, here, learn to translate this text in Thai into Pali.

### **IV. The Fifth Grade (Prayog 5)**

The fifth grade contains two subjects for studying; they are Pāli-Thai translation and Thai-Pāli translation. This grade helps the students to understand the process of translating both Thai texts into Pāli and Pāli texts into Thai properly. The details of the textbooks are explained as follows:

**Pāli-Thai Translation:**

The textbook used is the Maṅgalatthadapana, volume II, compiled by Phra Sirimanggalacaraya (Thai Bhikkhu). It is an extensive commentary on the Maṅgala Sutta. In this connection it can be mentioned that the volume I of the same text is used for Pali to Thai translation in fourth grade.

**Thai-Pāli Translation:**

The textbook used in this grade is the Dhammapadaaṭṭhakathā, volume II to IV. This is the second step of learning translating Thai to Pali for the students. The volume I of the same text is used for Thai-Pali translation in the fourth grade.

**V. The Sixth Grade (Prayog 6)**

The sixth grade has the same subject as in the fifth grade; they are different only in case of the textbook used for learning and teaching, which it is presented as follows:

**Pāli-Thai Translation:**

The textbook used in this grade is called the Samantapāsādikā, volume III to V. The textbooks contain the details of the rules of Buddhist monks for maintaining discipline.

**Thai-Pāli Translation:**

The textbook used for Thai-Pāli translation is the Dhammapadaatthakathā, volume V to VIII. The question-papers designed on the basis of these texts are more detailed and complicated in form than those of the previous grade.

**VI. The Seventh Grade (Prayog 7)**

The subjects for the seventh grade are the same as those of the pervious grade. But they are different only regarding the textbooks used for learning and teaching. The details of the subjects are mentioned as follows:

**Pāli-Thai Translation:**

The textbook used in this grade is Samantapasādikā, volume I to II which say about the rules of Buddhist monks.

**Thai- Pāli Translation:**

This course includes the translation of Thai into Pāli by using the textbook named the Maṅgalatthadapana, volume I which is the Pāli-Thai translated textbook of the fourth grade.

## **VII. The Eighth Grade (Prayog 8)**

There are three subjects in the eighth grade; they are Pāli-Thai translation, Thai-Pāli translation and Pāli poetry as explained below:

### **Pāli-Thai Translation:**

The textbook used for learning and teaching of Pāli-Thai translation is called the Visuddhimagga compiled by Phra Buddhaghosacaraya. The matter of this textbook contains the method of practicing the meditation and morality; otherwise, it contains the details of religious precepts of Buddhist monks.

### **Thai-Pāli Translation:**

The textbook used for this purpose is the Samantapasādikā, volume I which is in the curriculum of the seventh grade related to the Pāli-Thai translation.

### **Pāli Poetry:**

The subject is concerned with the writing of Pāli poetry. The textbook is dependent on the teacher and the teacher must teach the students the method of writing poetry in Pāli. At the time of examination students are asked to compose a Pāli Poetry on a given topic.

## **VIII. The Ninth Grade (Prayog 9)**

This is the last grade i.e. the ninth grade of the curriculum of the Pali course belonging to the Phrapariyatidhamma traditional system. There are three subjects in this grade. They are Pāli-Thai translation, Thai-Pāli translation and Pāli Composition. The details of all these subjects are stated as follows:

### **Pāli-Thai Translation:**

The textbook used is the Abhidhammatthavibhāṇa, compiled by Phra Anuruddhacaraya in a simple way for students. It is almost a new commentary on Abhidhamma Piṭṭaka related to the philosophical treatment of the Buddha's teachings.

### **Thai-Pāli Translation:**

Visuddhimagga, The Pāli-Thai translated book of the eighth grade is used here as the text book for Thai-Pali translation.

### **Pāli Composition:**

In this course students are taught to write Pāli essays on the topics given and the textbooks used for teaching and learning depend on the teacher who is teaching.

## **Assessment and Evaluation**

The process of Assessment and Evaluation in this system is called Royal Pāli Examination, because in ancient time, the Thai Kings used to carry on the activities involving

Pāli Studies by themselves. Though in later time, their Majesty the king assigned these activities to the government officials, but still these activities are supported by the king.

When the time of examination comes, the administrators of the Royal Pāli Department in Bangkok headed by the Chief of the Royal Pāli Department fix the date and place of the examination and then prepare the question-papers. After that, some senior monks are assigned by the administrators in Bangkok to take those question-papers to organize the examination in various places as fixed earlier.

The process of assessment and evaluation is very strict. The examinees have to gain at least 88 marks (out of 100 marks) to pass the subject of translation from Pāli into Thai and vice versa, and at least 75 marks (out of 100 marks) to pass the subject of Pāli Grammar. In evaluation, the evaluation-score is "H" (called *Hai* in Thai). In each subject, the full score is 3Hs, and the examinees have to gain at least 2 Hs (of 3Hs) for every subject to pass each grade. This is a tough examination. Even though the examination in Pali studies belonging to the Phrapariyatidhamma traditional system conducted by the Thai Sangha is generally regarded as very heavy and difficult as a large number of monks and novices fail in the examination every year, we should not consider it as a waste of time or useless. Anyway, this is the tradition of screening-process by the Thai Sangha. The time of examination is usually in February of every year. The examination is held for one time every year.

## Conclusion

There is a close relationship between Buddhism and the Thai nation. Nearly 95 per cent of the Thai people believe in Buddhism. They use Pāli for praying. Moreover, Buddhist monks usually use Pāli to preach Buddhism to the Thai people. Pāli is the language in which the Buddha's doctrines are recorded. So it is very important for the Buddhist people in Thailand to understand Pāli.

It is noteworthy that in Pāli descriptions of the psycho-ethical account of Dhammas, a list of various branches of consciousness, mental processes, and causal relation are available. Some Pāli books describe life and activities of Buddha and other contemporary teachers. Thus, the study of Pāli is important for the Thai monks and Thai people who want to know the various aspects of religion, culture and political history of ancient India, especially the doctrines of the Buddha.

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