The Connection between Buddhist Philosophy and Social Work in Thai Society

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Abstract

Buddhism plays a significant role in Thai society, and the majority of Thai people have believed in Buddhism for a long time. Monks, who serve as priests in Buddhism, assume the role of spiritual leaders. The Buddhist proverb, "Atta hi attano nātho," which translates to "Oneself is one's own refuge", is closely aligned with the fundamental philosophy of social work "helping people to help themselves." While Buddhism focuses on holistic development, it gives importance to the equality of all human beings, whether it is a group of children, women, youth, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, or the underprivileged. This concept is encompassed in the four Saṅgahavatthus: Dāna, Piyavācā, Atthacariyā, and Samānattatā. The core principle involves aiding people through the teachings of Buddhism, enabling them to integrate these teachings into their lifestyles and attain the goals that constitute life's purpose, known as the three Attha: Diṭṭhadhammikattha represents the good to be attained in this present life, SFamparāyikattha pertains to the good to be achieved in the life to come, and Paramattha signifies the ultimate or highest good. This concept serves as a form of relief aimed at producing outcomes that fulfill life's necessities and aspirations, thus addressing life's challenges. Therefore, this Buddhist concept can support an individual to live happily and peacefully in Thai society.

Keywords: Buddhism; Social Welfare; Buddhist Social Welfare; Buddhist Philosophy; Thai Society

Introduction

Thailand, a country with a rich history, boasts invaluable institutions that consist of three primary pillars: the national institution, the religious institution, and the monarchy. Particularly, within religious institutions, a majority of Thai people has believed in Buddhism for an extensive period. Monks have played a significant role throughout various ages in the lives of Thai individuals. The Buddhist doctrine is connected and consistent with the fundamental philosophy of social work: "helping people to help themselves". This concept is related to the principles of Buddhism, as exemplified by the teachings of the Buddha in phrases like "Atta hi attano nātho," which translates to "Oneself is one's own refuge", and the timeless Buddhist saying "He is his own refuge. He needs no other refuge because he has

diligently trained himself; he will find refuge even in the midst of difficulties." The fundamental objective of social work is to prevent problems before they arise, to resolve them (when they cannot be prevented), and to nurture individuals, groups, and communities, fostering their potential to make meaningful contributions to society.

The Role of Buddhism in Thai society

Religion comprises a set of human beliefs and holds a significant place within society as an important social institution. Furthermore, it plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' conduct within the community. Each religion offers teachings that aid in the cultivation of the mind to exercise control over one's actions, speech, and thoughts, promoting goodness and preventing harm to others. Regarding Buddhism, Wichit Rawiwong (1984) states that it is an atheistic religion and stands as one of the three major world religions. Buddhism traces its origins back to the enlightenment of the Buddha, which occurred on the full moon day of the Vesak month, during the sixth lunar month, beneath the Sri Mahā Bodhi tree in Uruwela Senanikom Subdistrict, Magadha state (Bihar), India. This event took place forty-five years before the beginning of the Buddhist Era, and the location is now recognized as Bodh Gaya. Buddhism emphasizes the principle of self-reliance, encouraging individuals to undertake personal development to become self-sufficient rather than depending on others. As the Buddha taught: "He is his own refuge. He needs no other refuge because he has diligently trained himself; he will find refuge even in the midst of difficulties." The Buddha also advocated for a considerate approach to helping others, emphasizing the importance of not weakening them through assistance. True assistance should not foster a habit of relying solely on external aid.

Currently, Buddhism has endured for over 2,600 years, highlighting its significant role in Thai society. Monks, who hold the position of priests in Buddhism, serve as spiritual leaders, guiding people on the path to living a virtuous life. They also engage in social contributions, following the example of the Buddha's conduct (Buddha-cariyā). This practice of Dhamma and discipline requires monks to maintain close ties with society and participate in activities that bring benefit to the people. As a result, historical evidence indicates that monks have consistently fulfilled this societal role since ancient times. They have consistently contributed to the advancement of society by enhancing the mental well-being and overall quality of life for villagers, a role that resonates with their monastic commitment.

As Thai society underwent a transition towards a more modern framework driven by the advancements of Western science, there emerged a shift in Thai lifestyles and values. Traditional practices were altered, and new material developments and institutions gained prominence, overshadowing the once-central role of temples and monks within the Thai community. Notably, the monks' historical role in education, which they had long been responsible for, transformed. These factors prompted monks to initiate various movements

aimed at revitalizing their societal role. One such initiative involved establishing advanced educational institutions within the Sangha, becoming sources of modern academic knowledge. This was complemented by continued scripture study, enabling monks to adapt to the evolving demands of a progressive society. Consequently, they could engage in activities that spread Buddhism and perform religious deeds aligned with traditional principles. Simultaneously, this movement aligned with governmental goals, as the government sought the Sangha's assistance in fostering national development for the country's growth and security. As a result, monks became active participants in executing government policies related to national administration. While these shifts had a direct impact on urban communities, rural areas in Thai society experienced relatively limited transformation. The modern patterns of change had not deeply penetrated these remote regions. Rural monks maintained close connections with villagers, earning their respect and continuing to play influential leadership roles in various social activities (Hoa, 2003). The rapport between rural monks and villagers remained steadfast and unaltered, in contrast to the urban shifts taking place.

The most ven. Brahmapundit (Prayoon Dhammacitto) (2019) highlighted the intersection of religion and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), noting that Buddhism emphasizes comprehensive development by placing equal importance on all individuals-women, children, youth, the impoverished, the disabled, and the elderly. They all should share in the benefits of development under the guiding principle of "Leaving no one behind." This principle aligns with the Bodhisattva ideology of Mahayana Buddhism, where a Bodhisattva, even upon achieving enlightenment, chooses not to enter Nirvana immediately. Instead, they continue to teach all beings until no one remains to be taught, only then do they enter Nirvana as the final individual. Sustainable development shifts its focus from individual human advancement to the overall development of the entire human being. This shift resonates with Buddhist teachings, recognizing that humans form the foundation of development, as encapsulated in the saying, "National development begins with its people. Developing people begins with their hearts. To develop anything, start with ourselves." Buddhism terms call this development "Bhāvanā," signifying that human growth is holistic, with no compartmentalization of different aspects. Human beings must progress in all four dimensions, as follows:

1) Kāya-bhāvanā means physical development within the realms of society, economy, living conditions, and the environment.

2) Sīla-bhāvanā means moral development, encompassing the advancement of sociocultural norms, customs, and peaceful coexistence. Its purpose is to align behavior with disciplined conduct that avoids causing harm to others.

3) Citta-bhāvanā means mental development for overall well-being. It involves training the mind to attain strength and stability through virtuous living and working, even in the face of various challenges and obstacles.

4) Paññā-bhāvanā means intellectual development, aiming to acquire knowledge and understanding of ever-changing circumstances.

Therefore, in Buddhism, development does not prioritize a single aspect to the detriment of others. Instead, these four fundamental elements hold equal importance and must be interconnected. Failing to maintain this balance can lead to an imbalanced form of development. In Buddhism, development follows the concept of Majjhimā Patipadā, the middle path. This path harmonizes both physical and mental development into a cohesive whole, recognizing human beings as the cornerstone of progress.

Concepts of Buddhist Social Work

The Buddhist approach to social work involves implementing social work practices based on the concepts and principles outlined in Buddhist teachings. Buddhadhamma, as a foundation for social work, guides leading a fulfilling human life, navigating a path that aligns with the three goals of life, known as the three Attha: Ditthadhammikatha represents the current benefit, Samparāyikattha is the benefit in future, and Paramattha signifies the highest benefit. Phra Maha Seri Putthrakkhito (2009) asserts that this approach to social work is harmonious with the concepts and principles of social work as guided by Buddhist principles, as outlined below:

1) In terms of perspective, the three Attha represent methodologies in social work aimed at resolving life's challenges:

1.1) Diṭṭhadhammikattha: This method involves aiding individuals in obtaining the four essential bodily requisites sufficiently. It focuses on individual relief.

1.2) Samparāyikattha: This approach aims to foster societal harmony, contributing to peace within the community. It constitutes a collective response and targets the resolution of social issues.

1.3) Paramattha: This method focuses on cultivating a stable and tranquil state of mind for individuals. It involves addressing mental well-being and serves as a comprehensive solution to various challenges.

The social work methods aligned with the three principles of Attha are as follows:

Needs of Life	Problems of Life	Social Work Methods
1. Biological aspect	Personal problems	Diṭṭhadhammikattha
2. Social aspect	Social problems	Samparāyikattha
3. Mental aspect	Mental problems	Paramattha

2) In principle, the three Attha concepts are harmonious with the core principles of Buddhist social work. These three Attha serve as rational methods for promoting well-being

and addressing challenges based on their underlying causes. They represent approaches to offer relief across economic, societal, and mental dimensions, aiming to restore balance. Furthermore, these three Attha represent relief methods that require individual initiative and action. They encompass a gradual and measured approach, adapting to the specific context of the situation. Addressing challenges across all three dimensions underscores a holistic problem-solving strategy, ultimately contributing to the greater benefit and well-being of society as a whole.

3) In the context of the assistance process, the three Attha represent foundational teachings and social work methodologies that serve as initial steps. These steps can subsequently lead to the implementation of other teachings, systematically promoting welfare aligned with the principles of the three Atthas. For instance, welfare under Diṭṭhadhammikattha can be systematically supported through practices such as Utthānasampadā, which then leads to the exploration of concepts such as the Four Noble Truths, and so forth.

Therefore, the three Attha embody a Buddhist approach to social work. This approach aims to address the requisites of life and resolve life's challenges through the following means:

1) Solving personal problems: Personal issues often stem from biological needs, necessitating individuals to fulfill at least four essential requisites to support themselves and their families adequately. Addressing these individual challenges involves instilling in each person the foundational virtues termed "Diṭṭhadhammikattha" or the four virtues conducive to temporal well-being. These virtues encompass Uṭṭhānasampadā (diligence in the acquisition of wealth), Ārakkhasampadā (achievement of protection and security), Kalyāṇamittatā (association with good people), and Samajīvitā (practicing economical living). Furthermore, the solution entails incorporating the "four paths of success" or "Iddhipāpa": Chanda (finding contentment and satisfaction in one's work), Viriya (applying diligent effort to one's tasks), Citta (cultivating focused concentration while working), and Vimaṁsā (employing continuous investigation and reflection).

2) Solving social issues: Social issues often involve disruptions in interpersonal relationships within the community. These problems ripple through society, driven by conflicts arising from disputes over wealth, status, recognition, and more. These challenges stem from the values, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals tainted by their inherent impurities. Consequently, resolving social issues necessitates rectifying the collective behavior within society. This entails cultivating a fundamental virtue known as "Samparāyikattha," representing benefits to be realized in the future. This virtue comprises four fundamental aspects: Saddhā-sampadā (cultivating correct faith, including an understanding of the principles of good and evil actions), Sīla-sampadā (fostering moral conduct and respect for social norms and rules), Cāga-sampadā (nurturing a spirit of generosity and mutual assistance.) and Paññā-sampadā (developing wisdom to comprehend situations and grasp the truth of life).

3) Solving mental problems: Tackling mental issues is intricate and profound, as it involves the complexities of human desires. If the mind becomes ensnared by impurities, its impact reverberates through society. Buddhism recognizes the mind's central role in human experience, and addressing this challenge involves following the "Eightfold Noble Path." This path comprises the following factors: Sammādiṭṭhi (Right View), Sammāsaṅkappa (Right Thought), Sammāvācā (Right Speech), Sammākammanta (Righ Action), Sammā-ājīva (Right Livelihood), Sammāvāyāma (Right Effort), Sammāsati (Right Mindfulness), and Sammāsamādhi (Right Concentration).

The Connection between Buddhist Philosophy and Social Work

Buddhist philosophy is intricately linked with social work, particularly in aiding marginalized individuals within society and actively contributing to societal progress. This connection is encapsulated by the concept of the four Saṅgahavatthus, which comprise:

1) Dāna: Embodying the act of giving, sacrificing, and sharing for the betterment of others. This practice cultivates selflessness (charity).

2) Piyavācā: Entailing kind and sincere speech that avoids rudeness or aggression. Words are chosen thoughtfully for their beneficial, appropriate, and timely impact (eloquent speech).

3) Atthacariyā: Encompassing mutual assistance and service to one another (rendering services).

4) Samānattatā: Reflecting consistent impartial conduct. This involves being steadfast companions through both prosperity and adversity, not exploiting one another, collaboratively addressing issues for mutual well-being, eschewing arrogance, and forming meaningful relationships. In times of trouble, true friends stand by each other, offering support and ensuring unity.

The alignment of Buddhist principles with the philosophy of social work is evident through the concept of "helping them to help themselves," which aims to enhance individuals' quality of life by empowering them to improve their circumstances. Buddhism's core principle of assisting people harmonizes well with the notion of "Life steaming, Learning is Life," as articulated by Phra Adhikan Paisal Visalo (Wongvorawisit) (2023) on the Institute of Holistic Learning's website. This philosophy underscores various avenues of learning in life—intellectual understanding, practical experience, and heartfelt engagement. It emphasizes that not only is learning a goal in itself, but it also serves as a tool for meaningful living. From a Buddhist perspective, life is dedicated to personal development, and learning is integral to this growth, unleashing inherent potential. This cultivated potential subsequently translates into actions that contribute to the well-being of individuals and society at large. This noble endeavor aligns with the highest aspiration in Buddhism—the attainment of cessation of suffering, a state only attainable through deep insight into the truths of existence. This wisdom represents the ultimate form of profound learning regarding the essence of life.

Monks engaged in public welfare work encounter several challenges that impede progress. Some of these challenges include the absence of effective management plans tailored to the tasks at hand, inadequate strategies for community engagement, operational discontinuity, insufficient financial support, limited collaboration with governmental and private entities, a lack of monk-led promotion and support, and divergent approaches leading to inconsistent efforts. These hurdles hinder the advancement of public welfare initiatives. To address these issues, monks should adopt a structured form of social work development that aligns with societal expectations. This approach encompasses both material and mental assistance, with the ultimate aim of fostering sustainable social integration. The goal is to enhance mental well-being, elevate the quality of life, develop human resources, and preserve natural resources and the environment. All of these efforts follow the development model rooted in the Buddhist paradigm, which seeks liberation from suffering and the attainment of maximum happiness for Thai society. Implementing public welfare work under Buddhist principles requires the adaptation and application of these principles in a suitable manner. The Trisikkhā principle, Brahmaviahāradhamma principle, and Saṅgahavatthudhamma principles, among others, must be appropriately employed within the comprehensive system. The central objective is to enable the Sangha to effectively practice and operate, with an emphasis on aiding individuals facing diverse challenges. Indeed, the findings of the research on the application of Buddhist principles in the public welfare works of the Sangha in Thung Khru District, Bangkok, strongly align with the core tenets of Buddhism. The Sangha in this context has effectively employed key Buddhist principles, namely the Four Saṅgahavatthu, the six Sāraṇīyadhamma, and the four Brahmaviahāra, as a means of aiding individuals, communities, and society as a whole.

Conclusion

Currently, Buddhism has endured for over 2,600 years, maintaining a significant presence in Thai society. It holds a pivotal role due to the enduring practice of Buddhism by the majority of Thai individuals across generations. The core foundation of social work according to Buddhist philosophy lies within Buddhadhamma. This philosophy represents both a method of social work and a set of teachings that guide individuals in leading a human life. It directs people towards achieving the goals of life, encapsulated in the three Attha. These three Attha serve as a guiding framework for social work, outlining effective approaches to address life's challenges:

1) Diṭṭhadhammikattha: This method involves aiding individuals in obtaining the four essential bodily requisites sufficiently. It focuses on individual relief.

2) Samparāyikattha: This approach aims to foster societal harmony, contributing to peace within the community. It constitutes a collective response and targets the resolution of social issues.

3) Paramattha: This method focuses on cultivating a stable and tranquil state of mind for individuals. It involves addressing mental well-being and serves as a comprehensive solution to various challenges.

In addition, Buddhist philosophy is linked to social work in helping the underprivileged in society and social development directly known as the four Saṅgahavatthu, which comprise:

1) Dāna: Embodying the act of giving, sacrificing, and sharing for the betterment of others. This practice cultivates selflessness (charity).

2) Piyavācā: Entailing kind and sincere speech that avoids rudeness or aggression. Words are chosen thoughtfully for their beneficial, appropriate, and timely impact (eloquent speech).

3) Atthacariyā: Encompassing mutual assistance and service to one another (rendering services).

4) Samānattatā: Reflecting consistent impartial conduct. This involves being steadfast companions through both prosperity and adversity, not exploiting one another, collaboratively addressing issues for mutual well-being, eschewing arrogance, and forming meaningful relationships. In times of trouble, true friends stand by each other, offering support and ensuring unity.

This concept finds harmony with the philosophy of social work, which emphasizes the principle of "helping them to help themselves." When extending assistance, it's essential not to diminish the self-sufficiency of those receiving aid. Similarly, the Buddha's approach to teaching exemplified this philosophy. He didn't bestow enlightenment upon individuals; instead, he offered guidance and advice, encouraging self-discovery and self-improvement. Central to Buddhist principles is the notion of self-reliance. Consequently, the term "social work" encapsulates principles that are readily applicable, beneficial, and effective. This is particularly true in times of societal crises, where social work plays a pivotal role in fostering peaceful coexistence, unity, and harmony among individuals. Importantly, the scope of social work extends beyond mere material assistance; it encompasses multifaceted approaches that address the broader aspects of human well-being and societal cohesion.

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