Cambodian Buddhist Education
(Challenges and Opportunities)
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Introduction

Cambodia is a small Theravada Buddhist country in Southeast Asia. It is also known as the temple capital of Asia. It is full of surprises, and is a place that Buddhism has been well observed for ages. According to Cambodian history, Buddhism arrived Cambodia in the 3rd century B.C, while King Ashoka sent missionaries, Sona Thera and Uttara Thera to the land of Suwannaphumi, which has sometimes been identified as the mainland Southeast Asian region of Mon (now a state in Myanmar, the state of Mon) and Khmer (now Cambodia) people. Again, in Funan period about 1st to 5th century A.D., the first organized Khmer polity, the Khmer people embraced not only the diverse Brahmanic and Buddhist religions but also the social customs and mores of India.

In Cambodia, Buddhism is a religion of nation or state. An estimated 93 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist. The Theravada Buddhist tradition is widespread and strong in all provinces, with an estimated 4,392 pagodas throughout the country. The vast majority of ethnic Khmer Cambodians are Buddhist, and there is a close association between Buddhism, Khmer cultural traditions, and daily life. Adherence to Buddhism generally is considered intrinsic to the country's ethnic and cultural identity. The Mahayana school of Buddhism claims more than 34,000 followers and has 105 temples throughout the country.

Buddhist Educational Systems

Cambodia is a Theravada Buddhist country where we see there are two kinds of Educational Systems – the Public Schools of State and Buddhist Monastic School. When we talk about the Buddhist Education, people surely know we talk about monastic schools or schools in the monasteries where the novices, monks and some lay students studying the Teachings of Lord Buddha. Temples or monasteries (Wats in Khmer) are the symbolic educational centers for the poor children from the poor families. The monastery was not only the moral-religious center of a village community, but served important educational, cultural, and social functions as well. Until recent times, monasteries were the main centers of learning with schools and libraries where the Khmer culture and language was preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. They also served as culturally-and environmentally-sensitive foci for people-centered development that included, indeed featured, social safety nets for the poor, destitute, and needy. The Buddhist Temples in Cambodia play important roles for the human resources. Therefore, we see the Buddhist Schools in Cambodia are classified into two, namely, Dhamma-Vinaya School and Pali School.

- The System of Dhamma-Vinaya School:

There are also three levels of Dhamma-Vinaya School in which the courses are continuously provided for three years in the monasteries throughout the countries. According to the statistics 2012-2013 of Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs, there are 7,390 students who studied in Dhamma-vinaya schools and 659 teachers of Dhamma-Vinaya. Actually, in
the past time, Dhamma-Vinaya Schools were so popular in Cambodia. Buddhist monks and novices had to attend Dhamma-Vinaya school when they got ordination in Buddhasasana. Dhamma and Vinaya are critically taught to all students, especially, novices and monks from various places.

Dhamma, here in the Dhamma-Vinaya School, is focused on the numeral terms of Buddha’s teachings. All students have to memorize the numeral terms of Dhamma, for example, Sabbe Sattā Āhāraṇṭhitikā – all beings are maintained by nutriment is well explained. After memorizing, students have been allowed to talk or explain this term to the class. This is the way to develop speaking skill of Dhamma. And Vinaya means ‘discipline, rule, morality, or virtue’, which is a mode of mind and volition manifested in speech or bodily action. It is the foundation of the whole Buddhist practice, and therewith the first of the three kinds of training (sikkhā) that form the threefold division of the Noble Eightfold Path, i.e. morality, concentration and wisdom. Other interesting subjects which have been provided in Dhamma-Vinaya school are the Life of Buddha and the Sayings of the Buddha. The novices, monks and students have been gradually taught the history of Gotama Buddha in which it is started from the time Sumedha Bodhisatva met the Buddha Dipankara up to the end of His life (Parinibbana). And the Sayings of the Buddha are also taught to students because it is very necessary to understand what the Buddha taught. Here, the Sayings are focused on the verses or stanzas of the Buddha and Arahats. These four essential subjects have been widely provided in Dhamma –Vinaya School; and at the end of each academic year, students have to sit for certificate examination which is held for whole country.

- The System of Pali School:

In 1933 a secondary school system for novice monks was created within the Buddhist religious system. Many monastic schools had so-called Pali schools that provided three years of elementary education from which the students could compete for entrance into the Buddhist high schools. Graduates of these, students could sit for the entrance examination to the Buddhist University in Phnom Penh. The curriculum of the Buddhist schools consisted of the study of Pali, of Buddhist doctrine, and of Khmer, along with mathematics, Cambodian history and geography, science, hygiene, civics, and agriculture. Buddhist instruction was under the authority of the Ministry of Religion. There are three years for Buddhist Elementary School Level, three years for secondary school level, three years for high school level and four years for University level. Furthermore, for the first year of Buddhist elementary school, Pali Grammar, the life of Buddha, Mathematics and Khmer literature had been well taught. And the second and the third year, the translation of the Dhammapada stories and its Atthakatha had been provided. There are eight volumes of Dhammapada stories in Cambodian Roman-Pali. For Buddhist secondary schools, the translation of four volumes of mangalatthadipani and other subjects had been focused. And in three years of Buddhist high school, students needed to learn the translation of three volumes of Visuddhimagga. According to the statistics of Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs (2012-2013), there are 775 Buddhist Primary schools, 26,462 students and 1817 teachers; 35 junior high schools, 4817 students, and 614 teachers; 17 senior high schools, 1685 students and 377 teachers; and there are five Buddhist universities throughout country.

In 1962, nearly 600 Buddhist primary schools, with an enrollment of more than 10,000 novices and with 800 monks as instructors, existed. The Preah Suramarit Buddhist High School—a four-year institution in Phnom Penh founded in 1955—included courses in Pali, in Sanskrit, and in Khmer, as well as in many modern disciplines. In 1962 the student body numbered 680. The school’s graduates could continue their studies in the Preah
Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University created in 1959. The university offered three cycles of instruction; the doctoral degree was awarded after successful completion of the third cycle. In 1962 there were 107 students enrolled in the Buddhist University. By the 1969-70 academic years, more than 27,000 students were attending Buddhist religious elementary schools, 1,328 students were at Buddhist High Schools, and 176 students were enrolled at the Buddhist University. 

The Problems in Buddhist Monastic Schools

Buddhist monastic schools are not run by the government, but the temples are. The temples play important roles to open and support the school. And the temples are sponsored by the various generous people. The temples must be responsible to teachers’ fee, food and accommodation. Some temples could run schools for only one year or two years and then schools were closed. The Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs and the government have never pay attention to develop the Buddhist monastic schools for better future of our monks. All Buddhist monks and novices in Cambodia were from the farmer families. They came to temples because they wanted to learn and to change their lives. Unfortunately, after ordination some of them could not learn anything, but learning chanting paritta. 80% percent of temples or monasteries in Cambodia did not have schools for novices and monks. The chief or the abbots of the temple do not pay attention on education; they focus on construction, building and other things.

According to the research done by Khmer-Buddhist Educational Assistant Project (KEAP), it was true that the quality and standards of the Cambodian Sangha, however, have remained low given the loss of an entire generation of learned monks. In the 1990s, only some 20 percent of monks, the bulk of whom are under 25 years of age, received some formal training, mainly from lay teachers whose qualifications tended to be rudimentary. The first secondary school for monks re-opened in 1993, followed in 1997 by a preparatory class of the re-opened Preah Sihanouk Raj Buddhist University. But very few monk graduates of the high schools (there are now several) and the university choose for a variety of reasons to remain in the Sangha. Most disrobe to move into fields such as computers, accounting, and English as preparation for jobs in lay life. Few have chosen the monastic path of teaching the Dhamma and Vinaya to monk students and laypeople as preparation for leadership roles in the Sangha. The low numbers and quality of education for monks and, as a consequence, the generally poor discipline of the monks in Cambodia today remain one of the great sociocultural problems of the country and its recovery as a moral community. The weakness of the Sangha and lack of resources at the Ministry of Religious Affairs have prevented these institutions from introducing meaningful education reform in a country where local masters at the temples and national levels are simply no longer there.

Challenges and Opportunities

Buddhist monastic schools were not recognized worldwide. Some Cambodian people do not know what our monks, novices and kids in the temple are doing or learning. They just knew that the Buddhist monks in the temple learned chanting paritta. This is because our Buddhist monastic schools were not spread or it was not explained to the people throughout the country. Buddhist monks who have learned the teachings of Lord Buddha in Dhamma-Vinaya and Pali schools, however, have to learn other general knowledge or subjects if they want to challenge in any work fields with other students. The Dhamma-Vinaya and Pali
students faced many problems when they changed their status and applied for a job. The work fields, companies, factories and other departments do not need such fields of study.

Therefore, recently to challenges the requirements of the modern world, our Buddhist monks, novices and kids have been advised to study other important subjects such English, Computer, Economic, Management, Politic and Law, etc... However, this is not accepted by all. Some Cambodian people still criticised the Buddhist monks who studied English and other subjects beside Buddhist studies (Pali, Dhamma-Vinaya, etc...). The Buddhist monks tried to overcome such negative thoughts of the people to get higher education of various fields for their better lives. Actually, in the past time, Buddhist monks traditionally were called upon to perform a number of functions in Cambodian life. The monk traditionally occupied a unique position in the transmission of Khmer culture and values. By his way of life, he provided a living model of the most meritorious behavior a Buddhist could follow. He also provided the laity with many opportunities for gaining merit. For centuries monks were the only literate people residing in rural communities; they acted as teachers to temple servants, to novices, and to newly ordained monks. Until the 1970s, most literate Cambodian males gained literacy solely through the instruction of the Sangha. Cambodian people keep Buddhism as righteous way of life which can lead them to peace and happiness in their own families and society. The Sangha and Temples have played important roles in Cambodian society as follows:

- Monks work as teachers, Spiritual teacher,
- Monks work as doctors when people get sick,
- Monks work as lawyers when people get troubles,
- Monasteries plays as Hospitals for people,
- Monasteries plays as Schools for training, etc.,

These are the most important things to show us how strong the influence of Buddhism on Cambodian life. And this is also to show how Buddhist monks assist the society for better life of all people in their community. The language, way of life, literature and culture of Cambodia cannot be separated from Buddhism. This is to show us how much Buddhism takes care of our Humanities.

Nowadays the Buddhist monks in Cambodia have started to engage the social welfare for the benefits of the many, for the peace and happiness of the world and also for the development of the human resources. We found many monks have run Non-Profit Organization and Association to support the poor for better life of all people in the community. In addition, the monastic education gives brilliant and bright life to the poor monks, novices and kids who came to stay and learn the teachings of Lord Buddha and general knowledge. Since 2004 Buddhist monks who finished high school degree were allowed to sit for examination as teachers of state. And they could also apply for any job as their wishes which match to their degree. Meanwhile the society opens wide gate for monks to join many social and religious works, the primary monastic education or school decreased day by day; and the number of monks or students also decreased. The Dhamma-Vinaya schools disappeared from the monasteries. The modern society gives a lot of chance to the monastic learners, but it will be a big challenge if the monastic schools are going down in numbers.

The Hope of Change

The monasteries are not only places where the Buddhist monks live and practise the teachings of the Buddha, but they are also places where people come and learn the Buddhist doctrines for daily practices. Actually, the monasteries play so important roles to the society
both in the past and in the present. Monasteries are like the hospitals where people come and get cured the physical and mental diseases. Monasteries are also schools where people come and learn several skills of living. Monasteries are the courts of Cambodian people too. People get resolved the problems while they get in the monasteries.

We want the new role of Cambodian Buddhist monasteries to be back as in the past time. Buddhist Education in Cambodia is depending on the chief monks of the temples or monasteries and laypeople. If they all pay attention to develop human resources, absolutely they can do it. The monasteries should be developed as Buddhist centers for monks, novices and kids to come and learn the Buddha-Dhamma and general knowledge. Furthermore, if the monastic schools have been opened, but the teachers were not supported by the temple, it is also impossible. In my opinion, I want all monasteries in Cambodia to be Buddhist centers for training Buddhist monks, novices, kids and laypeople physically and mentally.

Conclusion

The Cambodian Buddhist Education in the present moment as well as in the past period of time, are enrolled for the whole country for the welfare of the many, for peace and happiness of the world and also for the development of human resource in Cambodia. There are Buddhist elementary schools, high schools and universities have been opened. Especially, the two Buddhist educational systems, Dhamma-Vinaya and Pali Schools play important roles in Cambodian Society. Students are suggested to choose any system as their wishes. Recently the Buddhist Education in Cambodia is not so interesting to Buddhist monks and students, but this gave the brilliant and bright life to them. Buddhist monks in the modern world enjoy their lives with material things, so to study in Buddhist monastic schools is not so important to them at all. However, the Buddhist Education gave much value to their lives.

So, as Cambodian way of life and Buddhism are inseparable, Buddhist Education must be well developed and spread throughout the country for better life of all people.

End Notes:

1. B.A (Buddhist Study), ITBMU, Myanmar; M.A (Buddhist study), Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
3. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, Chapter III, Article 43.