

Engaged Buddhism following the Public Welfare Works of Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn, Nongbuarawe District, Chaiyaphum Province

PhrakhuThammathorn Siriwat Siriwatthano, Assist.Prof, Dr.Thipphavit Saichart,
Assist.Prof.Dr.Sipmongkol Pongpha, Dr.Nakorn Chantharat¹

Abstract

The public welfare works of Phrakru Suwimonbhavanakun, the provost of Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn, Banhuanong, Nongbuarawe District, Chaiyaphum Province by building a dam have contributed to the public benefit in the following aspects: agriculture, promotion of sustainable society, tourism and leisure. As a result, the economy has been developed and stimulated through tourism that has increased the overall economy of the community. In transportation, agricultural products are more conveniently transported. The people have grown rotating economic crops throughout the year. Farmers have increased their incomes. They are not unemployed in the dry season. The people, thus, have a warm family institution living with happiness. Engaged Buddhism of Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn is, therefore, a social welfare in physical, emotional, social, health, intellect and life skills that benefit children, students, teachers, monks, novices, and as well as all villagers.

Keywords: Engaged Buddhism, The monks in Buddhism, Public Welfare Works

1. Introduction

Temples (Wat) are the center of Buddhists' spirit. Their roles are: founding the growth of society; promoting social solidarity and security; decreasing social problems; and promoting efficiency in social control. From past to present, temples and monks have their roles relating to people's living in society from birth to death. Monks are leaders not only in spiritual activities but also in various social aspects including social development, social welfare for those facing suffering and troublesomeness and even help solving problems occurring in society. (Phradhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), To study the development tool for developing, Press 9th, (Bangkok: Sahadhammika Thailand, 2000.) Temples and monks have influences on prosperity of Buddhism that help building a society commonly live in peace from local to national levels. Monks specifically have their roles in Buddhism propagation in various forms: admirable mode of self-practices, conversation, suggestion, consult on

¹ Graduate Center, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Ubonratchathani Campus.

grievances and preachment. These have been done through loving kindness towards all creatures. Dhamma has been preached not because of personal benefit of the preachers but for the audiences. The preachment is harmless for both the preachers and the audiences. (Aungkuttaranikaya, Panchakanipata, (Tipitaka in Thai version) book number 22/ Page 159/number 267.) Other than Dhamma preaching, there are other forms of admirable Buddhism propagation as public works or facilities that include lodging constructed by the people living in the temple. (Vinayapitaka Chulavakkhappali (Tipitaka in Thai version) book number 7/ Page 294/number 89-150.)

Thai people become far away from Temples while social problems have been increasing. (Praves wasi, S.NP., “Buddhist monk and social awareness”, the principle of temple management in globalization, (Bangkok: Rajapat’s council), Thailand. 2002.) However, in rural Thai society which is basically agricultural society and most of the people have low income depending on agricultural produce for their livings. Depending on natural factors especially rains, people sometimes feel insecure. Rural people are, thus, in chronic cycle of poverty. It is empirical that Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn, Banhuanong, Nongbuarawe District, Chaiyaphum Province led by Phrakru Suwimonbhavanakun of Luang Poh Chue Pantamutto as the abbot. He has been successful in introducing Buddhism in efficient social service that helps tackling poverty. Problems of people’s living are solved with loving-kindness. He, thus, tried to find solution for the poverty of the people by organizing the construction of a dam as a water reservoir for providing water for agriculture and also for consumption. This has helped improving the living of the people. He has, thus, been respected and admired by the Buddhists that he has truly made an engagement of Buddhism in society.

2. An Approach on Engaged Buddhism

Most academics accept the terminology of “engaged Buddhism” following Prof. Kenneth Kraft. The first academic using the term “engaged Buddhism” is Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, a monk in Vietnamese Zen Buddhism. (Kenneth Kraft, “Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism,” **Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence**, Edited by Kenneth Kraft (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 18.) “Engaged Buddhism” has its meaning covering concepts of Vietnamese monks in three aspects: awareness in daily life; social service; and social activism. (<http://www.gconnex.com/philosophy-religion/engaged-buddhism/>. [9 April 2017]) For the word “socially engaged Buddhism”, many academics in Buddhism have an analytical study the meaning that can be divided in to 2 aspects:

The first aspect mentions that “socially engaged Buddhism” is from French. The word “engage” and “l’engagement” are indeed the word used by Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh to cover 3 aspects of Vietnamese concepts as the following: 1) awareness in daily life;

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2) social service; and 3) social activism. (Donald Rothberg, “Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in North America” in **The Faces of Buddhism in America**, Edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1998), p. 273. and Charles S. Prebish and Damien Keown, **Introducing Buddhism** (London and New York: Rutledge Curzon, 2006), p. 209.)

The second aspect, on the other hand, mentions that the 4 Chinese alphabets used by Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh to communicate the meaning of “engaged Buddhism” include “Yu”, “Sue”, “Faw”, and “Jiew”. The alphabet “Yu” means “enter”, “Sue” means “the world”, “Faw” means “Buddha” or “Monk” or “Buddhism”, “Jiew” means “teachings”. The combination of these words can be substantially interpreted as “Worldly Buddhism”. (“Engaged Buddhism” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engaged_Buddhism [2 December 2017].) Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh explained the term “engaged Buddhism” as “Buddhism existing in daily life and every moment”. (Thich Nhat Hanh, “Definition of Engaged Buddhism” Original is “A kind of Buddhism that is present in daily life and moment”) He mentions that when general public acknowledge the word “engaged Buddhism”, they usually refer to: fighting for social justice; struggling for human rights; or demonstration etc. However, these meanings are not the basic components of “engaged Buddhism”. Engaged Buddhism is a part of Dhamma practice. In reality, “the basic components are to practice Dhamma in every moment of daily living”. It is the attentive mind on what is happening “here and now” in the scope of body, mind and the physical environment. In other words, “engaged Buddhism” is the response towards physiological formation, mental formation and physical formation. This explanation seems to focus on “awareness” rather than social service or social activism. In addition, it may also be understood that this “awareness” is a crucial indicator of “engaged Buddhism”

By its content, the concept of “awareness existing in daily living” of Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh is the principle of Satipatthana or right mindfulness. However, when Satipatthana in 4 regards is practiced, there must be other Dhamma accompanying mindfulness as mentioned in Mahasatipatthanasutra including “effort, Sampajanna (consciousness) and mindfulness” (Atapi Sampajano Satima) (Theekhanikaya Mahavakkha (Tipitaka in Thai version) book number 10/ Page 373/number 301-2.)

According that the true awareness as “the mentality” or “the quality of mind” is the internal abstract with the right effort as a crucial push, this eventually leads to constructive physical and verbal behavior as external concrete appearance. Since the right effort (Sammavayama) has its crucial character in unlimitedly making merit without discouragement that means if it follows such principle with the true awareness, there must be mental condition in making merit. This eventually leads to the real action in social service or social activism resulting from the true awareness.

In conclusion, awareness is the necessary or indispensable condition but it is not a sufficient condition for “engaged Buddhism”. In addition, according to Queen, “engaged Buddhism” is an unprecedented paradigm of Buddhism. (Christopher S. Queen, “Introduction: A New Buddhism,” **Engaged Buddhism in the West**, Christopher S. Queen (ed.) (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 1.) Engaged Buddhism must have its difference from other approaches in Buddhism. If the three concepts of engaged Buddhism are reconsidered, “socially engaged Buddhism” is, thus, mainly on “social activism” rather than the other two concepts.

As Satipatthana is regarded as the crucial principle commonly practiced by all sectors of Buddhism, “Social service” is, however, not an explicit indicator. That is because not all forms of social service are considered as “engaged Buddhism”. It is neither controlled nor supported by state, capitalists and other power structures. (Christopher S. Queen, “Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism,” in **Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia**, p. 19.) Most social services organized by government policy, therefore, cannot be categorized as “engaged Buddhism”. Such social services are more passive than active without people’s enthusiastic participation in solving problems. It is compulsory through orders rather than voluntary. It is, thus, not energetic and active in implementation. Such concepts are not the identical indicators of engaged Buddhism. The real and crucial concept of “engaged Buddhism” is, for example, social activism. The writer of this article considers that this conclusion matches other academics and practitioners upholding engaged Buddhism. For example, Sallie B. King defined the word “engaged Buddhism” as “a contemporary form of Buddhism in social and political activism” (Sallie B. King, “An Engaged Buddhist Response to John Rawls’s the Law of Peoples” **Journal of Religious Ethics** 34.4: 637–661. Original is “the contemporary form of socially and politically activist Buddhism”) In addition, Douglas M. Padgett directly specified that “engaged Buddhism” is a form of Buddhist social activism. The practitioner as Vishvapani, a member of Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), mentioned that “engaged Buddhism” is a form of Buddhism assimilation between the values of internal mental reflection and the values of the explicit social activism. This concept has been propagated widely in society and bringing Buddha Dhamma principles as a tool in concretely servicing society. It is a new model of Buddhism reformation by upholding Dhamma practice in every moment of mind and simultaneously implementing dedicated social service and social activism for the better change. This is in accordance with the teaching of Venerable Buddhadasa mentioning that working is Dhamma practice that changes the attitude of Buddhists. Dhamma practice is not solitary without activities but it is the time for simultaneously practicing mind and benefiting society. “Engaged Buddhism” includes not only servicing society but simultaneously practicing Dhamma. Both practitioners and society are, thus, the beneficiaries of engaged Buddhism.

3. Roles of Engaged Buddhism of Phrakru Suwimonbhavanakun

3.1 Infrastructure Construction and Mission in Society

Engaged Buddhism of Phrakru Suwimonbhavanakun, the provost of Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn, Banhuanong, Nongbuarawe District, Chaiyaphum Province, in 1980, while the venerable was practicing Dhamma at the temple, the people of Nongbuarawe District were suffering from shortage of water for consumption and utilization. He, thus, tried to develop water resources. Then he found that Lam Chiang Ta was a water source flowing through the area down to the Chi River so a water reservoir should be available for the benefit of the people in Nongbuarawe District and nearby communities. He led monks, followers and villagers cooperatively built an earth dam with little budget from donors and government. This has helped the people in three districts of Ban Khwao, Nongbuarawe and Muang Chayaphum having water for agriculture; increasing their income in agriculture and fishing; providing water supply among the three districts. The dam site was also a leisure place for the general public. Not only the earth dam but also roads and water barriers for keeping water in dry season were constructed. In addition to his religious roles for his community and society at large, roles in development that benefited the people was also concrete especially public welfare works. He was the leader in both the Dhamma practice and development.

Phrakru Suwimonbhavanakun, the provost of Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn, said that he acted as a welfare practitioner because he had been invited by monks and Buddhists to be the abbot of the temple. The missions of engaged Buddhism at Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn were as the followings

(<http://www.komchadluek.net/detail/20090219/2651/.html>. [๒๖ กันยายน ๒๕๖๐].

1. Mission on children: He was the spiritual leader advising villagers to realize the importance of education in developing national human resource and fulfilling the necessary quality especially among children and youth. He was, thus, the giver, the builder, the developer and the promoter of society. (Interview teacher Prachit Srithar. Head of Child Development Center, Huanong Village Nongbuarawe Sub-District, Nongbuarawe District, Chaiyaphum Province, Thailand. Date 20 September 2016.)

2. Mission on teachers: His concept was to build awareness of the teachers to be like parents of children. They should focus on dedication. He participated in school activities and provided spiritual support among teachers. He taught the teachers to love their teachings as self-loving focusing on the ultimate goal of school development including life-long learning, further education, learning English and ASEAN languages, abstention from allurements that led to ruin, and right behavior as a good model of a quality society (Interview Mr.Prasit Kaewhom. Home adults of Huanong Village , Huanong Village Nongbuarawe Sub-District, Nongbuarawe District, Chaiyaphum Province, Thailand. Date 20 September 2016.)

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3. Mission on temples: He focused on 5 principles including: studying, touching the effect, propagating and correction. The activities included: promoting monks and novices to further study in both worldly and Dhamma aspects; cleaning and rehabilitating the temple infrastructure; organizing the landscape of the temple for welcoming laymen and being a good place for Dhamma practice, initiating activities for benefiting the public. (Interview Phrakru Suwimonbhavana. Abbot of Khaotangor-udomsomphorn, Huanong Village Nongbuarawea Sub-District, Nongbuarawea District, Chaiyaphum Province, Thailand. Date 20 September 2016.)

4. Mission on the people: He promoted and supported villagers to be economical and practice insight meditation that helped decreasing selfishness, increasing unity and mutual care and compromising social and personal benefit. The villagers respected the venerable and accepted his guidance to practice. They were, thus, economical and simple in all festivals without entertainments or alcoholic drinks. He opened a warm opportunity for villagers to lead their lives in society happily, honestly and sustainably. He also inculcated the necessary quality among children to be: knowledgeable, virtuous, patient, diligent, economical, honest, grateful, well-disciplined and being away from allurements that led to ruin. (Interview Mr.Set Wongphim. Former house manager of Huanong Village , Huanong Village Nongbuarawea Sub-District, Nongbuarawea District, Chaiyaphum Province, Thailand. Date 20 September 2016.)

3.2 Model of Engaged Buddhism of Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn

Engaged Buddhism of Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn includes 3 models:

1) In Dhamma practice: Insight meditation was taken place throughout the year. He advised, consulted, provided a warm and trustful advice, chaired and prayed for the funerals, and helped relieving from suffering from losing the one whom one loved.

2) In intellectual aspect: He educated and provided knowledge in various fields including: wisdom in Dhamma; insight meditation; interest of youth and parents in Dhamma; intellectual development process; and local wisdom.

3) In holistic health aspect: training people in taking care of physical health by applying Dhamma principle in: selecting food for health; promoting organic farming especially vegetable growing; promoting skills, characteristics, social manners; adapting oneself in social, technological and environmental changes; enhancing quality of life through Dhamma for self-reliance and for helping others.

4. Conclusion

Models of engaged Buddhism of Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn include social welfare in physical, mental, social, health, intellectual and life skills that benefit children, students, monks, novices and all villagers. The model focuses on helping children International Conference "ASIAN Values in the Process of Integration and Development", University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh, VN ,25 October 2019

to help themselves and stimulating adults to be a good example of children such as festivals without alcoholic drinks and campaigns on abstention from allurements that leads to ruin. This has made Wat Khao Ta-ngoh Udomsomporn be acceptable in moral aspect. From past to present, novices and children under the patronage of the temple have appropriate behavior, discipline, strictly observe the law that helps minimizing severe crimes. In addition, desirable characteristics exist among the people such as modesty, social manner, gratefulness, moral shame, moral dread, generosity and loving kindness. In building Dhamma descendants, monks and novices have been supported in continuing their studies in higher education in worldly and Pali courses. Many of them returned to teach the younger generations. Engaged Buddhism of the temple began from social welfare that affects the behavior of novices and children with outstanding performance in education, morality and religious descendants that inherit Buddhism in the long future.

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