Buddhism and the Middle Class’ Dhammic Practice in Thailand*

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The middle class’ dhammic practice in Thailand is an outcome of various motives and methods. Those who practice the dharma assert their compliance with the Tripitaka. The Thai middle class tend to practice the dharma in a school hermitage rather than in their daily lives. Their dhammic practice does not necessarily mean the Dhammic Training of Sila, Samadhi, and Panna (Morality, Mentality and Wisdom). Their practice is only a rest in a place for an escapist who needs a break in his/her life. Thus, it becomes an endless activity to be done occasionally throughout one’s life. It is noted that most of the middle-class dhammic followers are women with low income and academic handicap as well as those who are required to attend the dhammic practice program as a part of their jobs. These phenomena signify a religious flaw which calls for a Buddhist innovation so that the dhammic practice can render most benefits to all practitioners and provide them with successful results.

The term “middle class” used in Thailand today is different from that in the West. “Middle class” in the West was originally synonymous with the term “bourgeoisie” meaning the free residents of European towns during the Middle Ages (approximately C.E. 1000-C.E. 1500). The first use of the word “bourgeoisie” was to mean those who lived in medieval towns of France and occupied a social position between the peasants and the landowning nobility. The meaning was soon extended to be “the middle class” of other nations who were merchants, trades people, artisans, bankers and entrepreneurs.

At the end of the Middle Ages, the feudal society was transformed into early capitalist society of Europe in which the bourgeoisie were the leaders of social change. By the 17th century, the bourgeoisie or the middle class supported principles of natural rights and constitutional government against the theories of divine right and the privilege of the rulers. It should be noted that the bourgeoisie were leaders of the 17th century English revolution and the American and French revolutions of the late 18th century.

In 19th century, the Industrial Revolution led by the bourgeoisie brought about the development of mechanical power, the factory system and the growth of urban centers. The bourgeoisie then became the bourgeoisie class and expanded greatly. The original bourgeoisie (the capitalists) are then different distinctively from the petty bourgeoisie (the shopkeepers, the technical workers and the clerical workers). The capitalists became the owners and managers of industries and associated themselves with the upper classes.

During the time of Karl Marx (C.E. 1818-1883), the theory of the class struggle had been developed. Marx considered the bourgeoisie, or the capitalists who were employers, the class which held back the advancement of the proletariat or working class. At present, the term “bourgeoisie” is rarely used except by economic historians. It is generally interchangeable with the term “middle class” which is composed of professionals, white-collar workers, farmers and the like, all far removed from the capitalist class of Marxist theory.

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In Thailand, the definition of the middle class is rather obscure. Nevertheless, the middle class has existed in Thailand since the Period of Ayutthaya (C.E. 1350-C.E. 1767) and was understood as a class between the upper class (the noblemen) and the lower class (the commoners).

The concept of the middle class in Thailand has no connection with that of the capitalists in Marxism. It has gradually been developed within the Thai history.

In the Bangkok Period (or the Ratanakosin Period, C.E. 1782-the present), Thailand welcomes foreign visitors from afar. A considerable number of Chinese came to live permanently in Thailand and became Thai citizens. After the abolition of Slavery in Thailand in C.E. 1905, the free Thais and the Thais with Chinese blood have formed a new social class, the middle class. They are merchants, civil servants, professors, teachers, white-collar workers, soldiers, policemen and so on. One outstanding characteristic of the middle class is their freedom. They love to be freelancers and enjoy freedom of thought. The middle class are different from the upper class and the lower as to their free spirit. The upper class tend to attach themselves to Thai culture and tradition. The lower class are subject to social oppression and financial constraint. Only the middle class can work to upgrade themselves and to provide the society with innovated ideas and creativity.

Though it is difficult to specify the characteristic of the middle class, we can roughly understand that the middle class love materialistic lives, social respect and freedom to lead their own lives. Their materialistic attitudes are expressed even in their religious context. For example, they believe that their well-being in this life is the outcome of their previously meritorious deeds; thus, they try to do good materially, such as donating some money to the poor and so on, in order to sustain their good lives at present and to have more gain in the future.

According to the Master’s Thesis of Ms. Pratibha Pabhasrawong, most of the middle class who came to join the dhammic practice at Wat Pah Nanachat (the International Forest Hermitage) did not expect to attain Nirvana as their Buddhist goal. They only wanted to stay in a place where they could find peace of mind, good surroundings and foreign monks with whom they could have a dhammic talk.

It should be noted that only few members of the middle class practice “the dharma” in order to liberate themselves from suffering. Most of them do it traditionally and materially, i.e., expecting a wealthy life in return. Their practice does not relate to the Buddhist “dhammic practice” because its goal is not the emancipation from suffering.

The meaning of the dhammic practice can be considered as follows:

1. The dhammic practice is all beings’ duty. This “doing duty” is doing according to the Law of Nature. All beings have to follow the Law of Nature in order to survive. Similarly, human beings can survive if they follow the Law of Nature, i.e., they practice the dharma in order to be able to cope with their suffering. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (B.E.

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2449/1906-B.E. 2536/1993), an eminent Buddhist monk who was honored by the UNESCO last year as one of the World’s Great Personalities, explained that dhammic practice could be done at all times in our daily lives, e.g., working in the field, trading and so on. Whenever we worked or lived with our sense of duty, “duty for duty’s sake,” we practiced the dharma. We needed not go to the temple in order to fulfill our dhammic practice.4

According to Buddhadasa, our dhammic practice can be fulfilled through our right thought which is the origin of our sense of duty. If we realize the value of our own duty, we will do it willingly and happily. For example, if we are medical doctors, we should realize that our duty is to save our patients and not to seek wealth and fortune through our profession. A medical doctor can fulfill his/her dhammic practice through his/her devotion for the sake of his/her patients. The dhammic practice can thus be done for the best of other beings in a society. It is not a personal activity performed in an isolated place.

2. The dhammic practice is the Buddhist practice according to the Threefold Training (Ti-Sikkha) which is composed of morality (Sīla), mental discipline (Samadhi) and wisdom (Panna). The normative Buddhists believe that the dhammic practice should proceed from the training of morality to the training of mental discipline and finally to that of wisdom. The fulfillment of wisdom is the enlightenment leading to the end of suffering.

The dhammic practice of laypeople in the time of the Buddha was primarily based on faith, e.g., faith in the Buddha, faith in good manners of the Buddha’s monk disciples and faith in the Buddha-dharma. The Buddhist faith motivated them to listen to the teachings and to practice the dharma. It is noticeable that the teachings of the Buddha and his monk disciples for laypeople at that time were not aimed at the insight development (vipassana-kammathana) which was a high level of meditation leading to the end of suffering. The teachings, however, merely focused on principal dharma leading to the enlightenment such as the Progressive Sermon5 the Fourfold Noble Truth (ariyasacca) and the Three Characteristics (ti-lakkhana). According to the Buddhist Scriptures (Tipitaka), there were no laypeople, in the time of the Buddha, who attained the Arahatship (the final stage of holiness). Those who were asserted in the Tipitaka to be the Arahan (the Buddhist saint, the enlightened one) were the ordained. Especially, the sutta (sutra, one of the three Buddhist scriptures) concerning the higher meditative practice or the insight development (vipassana-kammathana) aiming at self-detachment and final liberation (nibbana), e.g., Maha satipathana sutta, Anapanassati sutta, Cula-sunnata-sutta and Mahā- sunnata-sutta, were preached by the Buddha to the ordained disciples, both male and female. The teachings for laypeople are suitable for their complicated daily lives so that they can solve their worldly problems and feel relieved. On the contrary, the

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5 The Progressive Sermon (Anupubbikatha) is the sermon for gradual understanding of The Paths Toward Nirvana/Nibbana. It is composed of dana-katha (talk on charity), sīla-katha (talk on morality), saṅga-katha (talk on heavenly pleasure), kamad’ ina-katha (talk on bad effects of sensual pleasure)
teaching for the ordained are suitable for their peacefully religious lives aiming at the Buddhist ideal, the end of suffering.

Generally, most dhammic practice hermitages in Thailand do not differentiate training methods for monks from those for and nekkhammanisam 'sa-katha (talk on benefits of renouncing sensual pleasure) laypeople. While laypeople in the time of the Buddha, e.g., Anathapindika and Visakha, practised the dharma by means of donation to the poor and attained the first stage of holiness (sotapana) through listening to the Buddha’s teachings. Laypeople nowadays are trained, in a hermitage or in a temple, with the mindfulness on breathing (anapanasati) and the four foundations of mindfulness (satipatthana) which are higher methods of meditation taught by the Buddha only to the ordained (bhikkhu), bhikkhuni and a Buddhist novice. If we compare laypeople who practised the dharma in the Buddha’s time to the middle class who practised the dharma nowadays, we can notice some interesting factors in the two groups.

Firstly, the Masters of the dharma practitioners in the Buddha’s time and in our days do not share the same spirit and understanding of their training methods. In the time of the Buddha, the Buddha and his disciples paid close attention to each of the dhammic practitioners and select training methods suitable for each person. Thus, each practitioner took a different method suitable for his/her attitudes and capacity which yielded more possibility to achieve his/her dhammic goal. At present, on the contrary, the Masters of meditation train their followers in a group. They have neither time nor energy to pay enough attention to each individual and do not expect that all dhammic practitioners will finally attain the end of suffering.

Secondly, the dhammic practitioners nowadays have different incentives to practice the dharma from those in the Buddha’s time. Buddhist laypeople in those days practised the dharma because they had faith in the Buddha or in his monk disciples. The dhammic practice of the middle class today, however, is initiated by some external causes, e.g., persuasion by friends, rumor about the supernatural power of a meditation Master, and some personal problems in their daily lives. The practice is not initiated by their interest in the dharma which is the means of their enlightenment.

Thirdly, some dhammic practitioners today are under a project requirement. Many governmental offices, academic institutions and non-governmental organizations demand that their employees or their students should fulfill a course of dhammic practice in a selected temple/hermitage. Since their dhammic practice arises from neither their faith nor their willingness, it makes no progress over time. Consequently, we cannot differentiate the dhammic practitioners from others by their spiritual achievements.

Fourthly, the dhammic practice at the level of donation does not mean the same for the practitioners today and those in the Buddha’s time. Lay attendants in the time of the Buddha donated some money to the poor in order to train their mind to realize the value of giving and to prepare themselves for higher levels of dhammic practice, i.e., the practices of morality, meditation and wisdom. On the other hand, the practice of giving

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6 In Dāgh - nikaya of the Tipiṭāka, the Buddha’s teaching of Grounds for Accomplishing Merit (Punnakiriya - vatthu) presents different levels of merit - making as giving or donation, moral deeds, mental development, gentleness, service, sharing, sympathetic joy, acquiring knowledge (dharma), spreading knowledge (dharma), and securing the right view. Shortly speaking, the merit - making can be fulfilled through donation, moral deeds, mental development or meditation, and wisdom.
nowadays is not always aimed at the fulfillment of merit-making. It may be only a means for some physical/worldly gain, e.g., a rebirth in heaven or a wealthy life in the future.

Fifthly, the dhammic practice of the middle class today depends on the belief of the Master’s supernatural power. If the Master of the owner of the hermitage is popular in his so-called superhuman qualities, he will gain more disciples and devotees of dhammic practice in his place. On the contrary, the dhammic practitioners in the Buddha’s time were taught by the Buddha to pay more attention to the Teaching than to the Teacher. They were thus capable of attaining the final goal of their dhammic practice.

From B.E. 2545/2002 to B.E. 2546/2003, I had done a research in several temples and hermitages in all four parts of Thailand where 1,000 sets of questionnaire papers were distributed to dhammic practitioners.

In Bangkok, the selected places for the distribution of questionnaire papers are Wat Pak Nam (Monastery/Temple at the Mount of the River), Wat Maha That (Temple of the Great Element) and Sathian Thamma Sathan (Sathian Dhammic Place). The dhammic practice at Wat Pak Nam uses the technique of concentration on a point inside the body in the center of the abdomen which is 2 inches above the navel. This point is said to be the place where consciousness has its seat and the words “Samma Araham” can be repeated mentally to aid initial development of concentration. In Wat Maha That, the meditation techniques are based on Four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipatthana) described in the Maha Satipatthana Sutta. Concentration is developed on the rise and fall of the abdomen, then awareness is directed to physical and mental sensations. Sathian Thamma Sathan may be quite a special place for female dhammic practitioners because the owner and the dhammic leader is a famous nun in Thai society today, the Nun Sansanee Sathiarasut. The nun is an engaged Buddhist and a dhammic practice leader. As to the dhammic practice or meditation, she uses the technique of mindfulness on breathing (anapanasati).

In Central Thailand, apart from Bangkok, the selected places are Wat Cholpratharn Rangsarit (temple under the Support of the Irrigation Bureau), Thammasathan Suan Buddha dharma (The Garden of Buddha – Dharma Hermitage), and Suan Kaew Meditation Center. Wat Cholpratharn – Rangsarit and Thammasathan Suan Buddha – dharma use the meditation technique of mindfulness on breathing. Suan Kaew Meditation Center, however, uses the same technique as Wat Pak Nam.

In Northern Thailand, only one meditation center is selected because of its convenience for the research procedure.

The selected place is Wat Ram Poeng (Monastery in Memory) which uses the meditation technique of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The selected meditation centers in the Northeastern part of Thailand are Wat Nong Pah Pong and Suan Weluwan (Bamboo Garden). Wat Nong Pah Pong uses the meditation techniques of Mindfulness on Breathing. Suan Weluwan, on the other hand uses the technique of Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

In Eastern Thailand, the questionnaire papers were distributed to the dhammic practitioners at Vivek – asrom Vipassana Meditation Centre where the dhammic practice was based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Finally, Suan Mokkhabalarama (Garden of the Power of Liberation) is the chosen place to represent the meditation center in Southern Thailand. This place is
internationally famous because it was once the hermitage of Buddhadasa – bhikkhu. The meditation technique used here is the Mindfulness on Breathing.

The outcome of the research shows that all of the dhammic practitioners are the middle class. Most of them are Bangkokians (51.40%). They participate in the dhammic practice both in Bangkok and in other meditation centers in all parts of the country. This phenomenon indicates that the Bangkokians have a good financial status and enough money to go off to some other places. Most of them are traders and freelancers. They have enough time to spend for themselves. It is interesting to know that most of the dhammic practitioners in all meditation centers are female (80%). They may have more time and feel more psychologically insecure than male. Most of them practice the dharma in a center at their convenience (63%). Thus, their dhammic practice cannot progress well. In addition, nobody wants to practise the dharma in order to attain nibbananirvana. They just want to escape from their boring lives at home and relax in a more peaceful place.

As long as the middle class do not take the dhammic practice seriously, their activities in meditation centers are still a waste of time. The dhammic practitioners should prepare themselves with some basic knowledge of the Buddhist teachings, e.g., the teachings of suffering and the cause of suffering, before going to join the meditation practice in a temple or in a hermitage. The owners of the meditation centers and the Masters of meditation should equip the dhammic practitioners with basic Buddhist teachings according to the Buddhist Scriptures in order to prepare them for a practical meditation. The Masters should be aware that practitioners should not be all expected to attain the highest goal of meditation as stated in the Buddhist Scriptures. They thus should set proper methods and procedure of training for their followers. Though a dhammic practitioner cannot attain the Buddhist highest goal, he/she can apply the dhammic expertise for his/her best and the society.
Bibliography


