Idealism and Pragmatism: A Dilemma in the Current Monastic Education Systems of Burma and Thailand

Presented at the conference on "Revisiting Buddhism and the spirit cult in Burma [and Thailand]" at Stanford University, USA by Venerable Khammai Dhammasami, Oxford University, UK, 22-23 May 2004

1. The Problem

I begin with a gloomy observation on monastic education by Phra Prayud Payutto (1939- ) of Thailand whom Tambiah calls "a brilliant scholar-monk" [1]. Payutto said in 1984: "The present state of education is similar to a sky which has some spots of sunshine, but is in fact full of cloud. The sky is clear. When monks themselves see the dull and overcast sky they may feel disheartened and tired and might as well fall asleep".[2]

Here Payutto refers, I believe, to various educational problems facing the Sangha. There are, for instance, the Sangha’s gradual loss of cultural leadership; the inability of the majority of monks to relate the teaching to problems[3]; uncoordinated syllabuses for various monastic examinations; a shortage of teachers; the decline of Pali study[4]; and students being over-examined[5].
Based on Payutto's observation, which applies also to Burma[6], I shall suggest that these problems are primarily caused by the Sangha's inability to find a consensus on the objectives of monastic education. To that end, I shall discuss an argument on defining the aim of monastic education has been debated between idealists and pragmatists.

2. The Background

As we all know, until governments in both countries took over the responsibility of educating their people in the 1890s by introducing western secular education[7], the Sangha was the educator of society as a whole.[8] Although the emphasis in monastic education has always been on morality, the Sangha, until the 1890s, defined the objective of its education as a service to the Buddha's religion, buddhasasana, as well as to society at large. In other words, it was not only to educate those who wished to free themselves from suffering but also those who had worldly motives. [9] The Order did well by producing different types of curriculum, which took account of the needs of both the Order and society.[10]

When the government took over the educational responsibility from the Sangha in the 1890s, this development, at least in theory, relieved the Sangha of the need to provide education for lay society; so the Sangha could now fully dedicate itself to studying the teaching of the Buddha. However, in practice, the government could not alone provide education for people throughout the country.[11] So, people, particularly in rural areas, where the majority live[12], continue to send their children, mostly boys, to the monastery for education. Indeed, recognising its inability to extend universal education to all parts of the country, the government, from the outset, requested the Sangha to prescribe some western secular subjects in their curriculum to help implement the government's education policy.[13] However, for the last one hundred years the Sangha has not shown great interest in helping the government.[14] In my opinion, this is because the Sangha has not resolved within its ranks the problems related to the objectives of monastic education.

3. The Debate between the Conservatives and the Reformists

Conservative members of the Sangha hold an idealist position: monastic education should be only about the study of the Buddha's teaching known as Dhamma and Vinaya, teaching and discipline; the goal is to help individual members of the Order advance on their spiritual path and to produce competent administrators for the ecclesiastic hierarchy. Monks should not therefore study secular subjects. This is for two major reasons: first, appropriate for monks to study secular subjects because they could be considered "animal science", tiracchAnavijjA. Second, if the monks become competent in secular subjects, they would be inclined to leave the monkhood, thus depriving the Order of educated members.

The reformers, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic view in the debate. I shall report the views of two leading intellectual monks of our time: Ashin JanakAbhivaMsa (1890-1977) of Burma, who set up the most famous teaching monastery in Burma today; and Prayud Payutto of Thailand.
On the issue of designating secular subjects "animal science", JanakAbhivaMsa reasoned that without some mathematical skill one could not study some parts of the *TipiTaka*, for instance, the *SaNkhyAvAra*, the "chapter on numbers" in the *PaTThAna*, the last book of the *Abhidhamma*.\[15\] If secular subjects were not taught, people would not bring their children to monastery schools but to the Christian convents where they could study these subjects. If those educated at convent schools became leaders of the country, they would have little contact with or respect for the *Sangha*.\[16\] He said that "arts and science subjects that are not prohibited by the *Vinaya* should be taught (to lay people) by monks, free of charge. So the monks should make efforts (to study) that they can teach."[17]

What prompted the rejection of secular subjects by the idealists, focusing mainly on English a mathematics, appears to have been made on a doctrinal basis. In reality, however, "animal science" refers only subjects designed to harm people, regardless of the language in which they are taught.\[18\] It is doubtful if the debate over "animal science" was ever conducted in the light of the canonical scriptures. The main objection seems to have been the study of the English language,\[19\] although mathematics has usually been mentioned in the same breath. Before the British colonisation of the whole of Burma in 1885, a debate of such a kind on the study of languages, European or Indian, was unknown in either country.\[20\]

As to the claim that the study of secular subjects encouraged monks to leave the monkhood, JanakAbhivaMsa argued that the reason for monks leaving the Order was "the lack of a good foundation in monastic discipline", not the study of English or any other secular subject: if a monk had been well trained in the *Vinaya* and lived under his teacher, he would not leave the monkhood. He pointed out that the first six generations leading sayadaws from the *Shwegyin-nikAya*, famous for its strict following of the *Vinaya*, had studied English; many of them were also well versed in Sanskrit and Hindi.\[21\]

Payutto has also argued that taking away the opportunity for monks to study secular subjects was a guarantee of their not leaving the Order; because, among the educated monks who had left the overwhelming majority were trained in a purely religious curriculum and had no knowledge of secular subjects. It could be disadvantageous to a monk to leave the Order highly educated in religious scriptures and yet totally ignorant of any secular subject. He would be lost, unable to integrate into a secular life. This, Payutto continued, would degrade monastic education, and thus the Order, in the eyes of society.

There was no way, Payutto says, that the Order could prevent its members from leaving if individual members chose to do so. The *Sangha* is an organisation of volunteers, which upholds the freedom of individuals to join or to leave. Instead of wasting effort in trying to prevent the unpreventable, the Order should concentrate on ways to provide education that would benefit both those who decide to stay in the Order and those who wish to leave. If
the Order could help move its former members up the social ladder\[22\], not only would that help individual members, it would also bring esteem to monastic education from those who were in contact with those individuals. Not only would these individuals become better citizens, but the Order could count on them to spread through the society in which they lived the knowledge of the *dhamma* and *vinaya* they had acquired as monks.

Payutto holds that the Sangha had a responsibility towards individual students and the state. He says that individual students wish educated and turn to the Order for help. The quest for good education through the Order by certain sections of society is a good opportunity for the Order to instil Buddhist values in those students a propagate the *dhamma*. The Sangha also has a responsibility to assist the state in producing good citizens, because the Sangha as an institution could not exist by itself without the support of the state. Like JanakAbhivaMsa, Payutto believes that participating in the nation's education programmes would help the Sangha regain cultural leadership in society.\[23\]

4. Conclusion

In both Burma and Thailand the debate is far from over. While both the idealists and the pragmatists agree that the principal aim of the monastic education systems should be to train monks in the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, the two sides cannot agree whether or not steps should be taken to help fulfil some education needs of the society by bringing in some secular subjects in monastic schools.

Today, in Burma, the curricula for the various monastic examinations focus exclusively, also narrowly from the very beginning on the study of Pali and the *TipiTaka*. No English, mathematics, geography, philosophy nor history are included because they are considered secular subjects.\[24\] As a result, even educated monks find it difficult to relate the *dhamma* to lay people's lives.

In Thailand, too, the main curricula, such as the *nak tham* and the Pali *parian*, have remained exclusively religious. Although, since 1970 there has been a new curriculum, called *sai saman suksa* (lit. general way of education)\[25\], which combines the religious and the secular, it does seem this curriculum has been forced on the leadership and has not been a well thought through policy. This curriculum has too many subjects at each level means student monks do not have sufficient time to learn properly either Pa Buddhism or secular subjects.\[26\] In addition, this curriculum has been designed neither to replace nor to complement the traditional religious curricula, such as the *nak tham* and the *parian* curricula. It has thus the potential to distract, which I think it has done, the young monks from the *nak tham* and *parian* curricula. Indeed, its separate existence from the two highly regarded religious curricula, the *nak tham* and the *parian*, suggests that the idealists and the pragmatist have yet to work out the objectives of monastic education.

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In Burma, the founder of one of the leading teaching monasteries, Ashin JanakAbhivaMsa (1890-1977), said in 1971: "Nowadays monks and novices do not benefit spiritually from their study as much as they used to [because] the entire monastic scholarship is fixated only on formal examinations. The student's exclusive focus on the syllabuses for formal examinations takes place not only at the beginning of their monastic study, but also from halfway until the end of it." Ashin JanakAbhivaMsa, nan net khin ovida mya [Records of Morning Speeches], [delivered in 1971], Dhamma byuha sarsaung, [a monthly Buddhist magazine], 1994, pp. 23-24.

In its 1981 report on the Pariyatti Education Scheme (Pariyatti pyinnyayay simankein), the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee, the highest ecclesiastical body in Burma, wrote: "Moreover, due to the current examination systems, although it is not possible to say that the efforts and intelligence of the monks and novices, who are the sons of the people, are fruitless, it is, however, clear that, despite their invested effort and intelligence, the end-result is a minus, not a plus." Niang gnan daw thangha mahanayaka aphive paryayti simankein (The State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee's Pariyatti Education Scheme) (Third Draft), Ministry of Religious Affairs, Jun 1981, p. 7.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, when most of Southeast Asia had been conquered or was under threat by Britain and France, the government decided to take over the responsibility for providing education for its own citizens. With colonialism came the advance of western education. Among different education programmes initiated in Burma and Thailand the most significant in relation to monastic education was the introduction by the British colonial government in Burma and King Chulalongkorn in Siam of primary education based on western secular instruction.

For the decline of Pali in Thailand, See also Tambiah, World Conqueror and World Renouncer, p. 200; Donald Swearer, "Centre and Periphery: Buddhism and Politics in Modern Thailand" Buddhism and Politics in twentieth-century asia, ed. Ian Harris., London, 1999, p. 203.

Payutto has pointed out that books on Buddhism are popular among the people but those books have been written by la\ scholars, not monks.

In Burma, one of the findings of the 1941 Pali University Enquiry Committee, which interviewed teachers at more than hundred and ten leading sarthintaik, "teaching monasteries", was that the top teaching monasteries did not take the study of the Pali language seriously and that the Abhidhamma scholars could not understand simple Pali prose without the assistance dictionary. Pali-tetgatho sonzanyi kawmiti-I asiyinganza 1941 (Report of the Pali University Enquiry Committee, 1941), Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon, 1946, p. 11; the decline of Pali standard among students was also reported in the report on monastic education by the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee in 1981. Niang gnan daw thangha mahanayaka aphive paryayti simankein (The State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee's Pariyatti Education Scheme) (Third Draft), Ministry of Religious Affairs, Jun 1981, p. 6.

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studying, and then left. This temporary ordination became a part of Burmese as well as Thai Buddhist culture.


[10] The first type of curriculum essentially included lessons on secular subjects known at the time. Such a curriculum was designed and modified by individual abbots to suit the needs of their students, but never adopted nationally, despite similarities in curriculum between monasteries. There was another type of curriculum for those who stayed in the monastery longer, ordained monks. This second category of curriculum, which, since the seventeenth century, came to be known as the *pathakampany* examination curriculum in Burma and the *parian* in Siam, focused entirely on the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, and it was presumed that those who studied these curricula were committed to serious spiritual practice and would one day become leading members of the Order themselves. See also David Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform*, Yale University Press, 1969, p. 4; Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, MD Gunasena, Colombo, 1956, p. 161.

[11] Even as late as the 1970s in both Burma and Thailand the government education programmes still failed to offer equal opportunity in education to people, particularly those in rural areas, where the majority lived. For many people, education within their reach existed only in their village monasteries or in a town nearby. Indeed, recognising its inability to extend universal education to all parts of the country, the government, from the very beginning, requested the monasteries to adopt a secular curriculum to help implement the government's universal education policy. In Burma the request was made by the British colonial authorities who ruled the country until 1948 as well as the government of independent Burma. However, in Burma that request was accepted only by a minority of monastic schools, less than 20% of over 20,000. See also David Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform*, Yale University Press, 1969, p. 4; Tambiah mentions that 85.37% of 35,550,105 total population of Thailand in 1970 live in rural areas. S. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, pp. 270-273. The north-eastern region where the availability of secular education is behind the other regions is described by Tambiah as "the powerhouse of the country's sangha".

[12] From time to time, the government of Burma would request the Sangha to help educate the children. See *Phon-dawgyi kyaung pyinnya thinkyayei mawgoon* (Records of Monastic Education), Ministry of Welfare, Rangoon, 1959, pp. 53-56.

[13] British colonial government in Burma reported in 1939-1940 that for the past seventy years it had been able to convince the majority of monastic schools to adopt a secular curriculum. However, in Burma that request was accepted only by a minority of monastic schools, less than 20% of over 20,000. Report on Public Instruction in Burma, 1893-94, Superintendent, Government printing, Rangoon, pp.9-10. The reason why the majority of monastic schools refused the request was because the conservative members of the Order, who had occupied important administrative positions, were against particular developments: the monasteries teaching secular subjects; and the prospect of lay teachers teaching students.

[14] Indeed, in 1891 the *Sangharaja* or the head of the Burmese *Sangha*, issued a "circular" prohibiting to that effect, warning the monasteries of the pain of excommunication if any of them defied his order. Report on Public Instruction in Burma, 1891-1892, Resolution, pp.9-10. But the government has continued to make such requests from time to time. In Thailand, too, in 1898, in the introduction of primary education to the provinces King Chulalongkorn made sure that the Sangha was involved from the outset. Prince-Patriarch Vajirayan, then the deputy leader of the Dhammayuttika-nikaya, and twelve other learned monks, were entrusted with the task of organising the "religion and education of the Buddhist population" and made the Mahamakut Sangha College the headquarters of national education in Siam. Almost all schools were situated in monasteries and monks were the teachers. However, despite the fact that they had successfully carried out the introduction of the primary education programme, Prince-Patriarch Vajirayan and the other monks soon withdrew from involvement educational affairs of the nation. However, just as in Burma, even half a century after the introduction of primary education and, after the kingdom had embraced constitutional monarchy, the Thai government continued to attempt to enlist the help of the Sangha in providing general education to the people by setting up, in 1940, special schools, rong rien wisaman, in some monasteries. *Prawat karn suksa khong khana song*, p. 142.


[16] Ashin JanakabhivaMsa, *BhAtAthWhe*, pp. 123,137-8. He held responsible "for a drop in the number of students in monastery schools the attitude of some sayas (sayadaws) that arithmetic and English are not appropriate (for a monk) to learn". Ashin JanakabhivaMsa, *PAtimok BhAtAthAikA*, p. 439.


[18] For more on "animal science" see DN I. 9; V I.73.

[19] For more on "animal science" see DN I. 9; V I.73.
The impact of the second Anglo-Burmese war, 1852-1854 not only made the Sangha nationalist but also strengthened a perception among the Sangha that Buddhism was facing a threat from European colonialism. The sentiment felt by the Sangha against the British non-believers and occupiers was expressed by Seepanni Sayadaw (1817-1894), one of the most senior abbots in Mandalay, in his famous poem ygawmfrlwrf;csif; par taw mu tan chin (The Deposition of Our Lord). In that poem, the Seepanni Sayadaw, who was one of the leaders of the Fifth Buddhist Council, blamed corrupt ministers and officials for the fate that king, the kingdom and the Buddhist religion were now suffering. This nationalist sentiment of the Sangha may have influenced the interpretation of the English language as animal science.

With the help gained from the study of those languages, they had written books on Pali grammar useful to the understanding of the TipiTaka. Ashin JanakAbhivaMsa, BhAthAthwe, pp.85-8.


See Richard Gombrich & Gananath Obeysekere Buddhism Transformed, Princeton University Press, 1988. Bhikkhu Payutto has summarised this problem facing the education of the Sangha in Thailand. He said that if the government and the leaders of the Sangha failed to give appropriate support, the Sangha would not be able to lead the people in instilling Buddhist values into the nation. He cited examples of how the Sangha could not teach Buddhism and Pali at state universities because their qualifications were not recognised and argued that th higher institutions of the Sangha themselves faced many obstacles in producing qualified teachers. He pointed out how universities in non-Buddhist countries have produced competent Buddhist scholars and how Buddhist countries themselves could not do the same. This comparison came after Payutto visited in the late 1970s some American top universities, such as Harvard and Princeton University, who there has been a long tradition of Buddhist studies. Phra Thepwethi (Pryud Payutto), Thit thang karn suksa khong khana song, pp. 16-17, 21-24,

Nor are student-monks admitted to government schools to study those subjects because culturally it is not sensible for the novices and monks to sit in the same classroom as lay students. In brief, the Sangha does not participate in the nation's education. The monks do not even teach Buddhism at government schools.

This time, these schools were mainly to educate monks in secular subjects, because many of them would return to lay life after a few years in the Order. The ecclesiastical cabinet, created by the government through the amended Sangha Act of 1940, was the official organ through which these schools were set up. The introduction of special schools was popular with young monks. However, when the 1940 Sangha Act was replaced in 1961 and, therefore, the Sangha cabinet, which had some middle-aged monks as its members, no longer existed, the Mahatherasamakhom, "the Council of Elders", which had more senior monks as its members, moved to abolish the special schools for monks. prawat karn suksa khong song, p. 143.

The sai saman suksa curricula are the best example to demonstrate that students are required to study too many texts and subjects within a year. This reflects the high expectations the state and society have of the student. He is expected to be a good Pali scholar, a dhamma teacher, a good monk with thorough knowledge of the vinaya, an expert in rituals, a good administrator, a peace maker, a missionary monk, an artist and a health worker with all necessary general knowledge of science, geography, English mathematics and archaeology. A system that reflects only unrealistic expectations and not the interest of the students in the end produces only disenchanted students. The whole sai saman syllabus shows how the reformers have adopted a quick-fix solution to the lack of secular knowledge among the Sangha. All the subjects are compulsory. The sai saman system, as it stands today, neither helps the student achieve the aim of an ideal bhikkhu for the future of the Asana nor produces a knowledgeable person competent in both secular subjects and the Buddhist teaching as expected by pragmatists. However, were these subjects to be divided into compulsory and optional to reduce the burden for both the teacher and student, not only will that help reduce the burden on teacher and students but it will also give them more time to study each subject in greater depth than they can at the moment.