

The Role of Buddha Dhamma in the BA KA Monastic Education in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper will explore the pivotal role of Buddha Dhamma in guiding and shaping moral education within the *Ba Ka Monastic Schools' curriculum*. In Myanmar, *Ba Ka* monastic education schools offer the best learning opportunities for needy young people, particularly orphans who cannot afford formal schooling. Myanmar's education system has relied heavily on monasteries since the early days of the Burmese King Anawrahta in the 11th century. This education system remains highly relevant and applicable in society, playing a vital role in the spiritual and ethical development of children and adults, particularly in rural areas and on the outskirts of towns. Nowadays, monastic schools have become more popular as *Ba Ka* schools, named after the short form of ***Bhonetawgyithin Pyannaye Kyaung*** (Monasteries) and ***Thilashinthin Pyannaye Kyaung*** (Nunneries). They are currently offering an official government syllabus comprising English, mathematics, Myanmar language, arts, science, and other subjects. Alongside traditional Buddhist school education in the Buddha's Dhamma, students are also taught the core principles of the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha Dhamma holds a significant place in Buddhism, with its key principles and practices of morality and ethics serving as the central point in the integration of the modern school syllabus. Focusing on the key concepts, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the basic precepts laypeople need to observe every day and the principles of *Samsara* (Karma, Death and Rebirth), *Ba Ka* Monastic Schools cultivate mindfulness, attention, and compassion; promote ethical behaviour and respect; and encourage holistic development among students for their mental and personal growth, better adaptability and social harmony. I believe that through sound knowledge, understanding, and practice of the Buddha Dhamma, *Ba Ka* Monastic Education can genuinely contribute to resolving conflicts, promoting peace education, and developing students to excel academically and become responsible citizens with strong moral values under the management and leadership of monks and nuns. In this article, I will also emphasize the significance and advantages of the Buddha Dhamma for all sentient beings.

Keywords: Buddhism, Monastic Schools, Education, Myanmar, Children

Introduction

To pay great tribute to the Buddha's teachings, I would like to open by quoting a verse that emphasizes the importance of wisdom:

*Byattaputtā Kimālaso, Abyatto bhāraharako,
Byattako pujito loke, Byattaputtā dine dine.[65]*

"Children, be wise; wherefore are ye idle? One without wisdom is the bearer of another's burden. A wise man is honored in the world; day by day be ye wise, O children." [66]

Fortunately, in ancient times, the Buddha's Dhamma was faithfully preserved and continues to be practiced today. In the modern world, many countries provide free education for children because they view them as future leaders who will contribute to building a better nation. Yet, we now understand that education alone is not enough to create a good society. Therefore, a person must also have strong moral values, empathy, compassion for others, and the wisdom to distinguish right from wrong.

Buddha Dhamma generally focuses on morality, mental concentration, and total awareness of one's body and mind. It is also concerned with the broad rules of social behavior and activity, as well as with the better integration of the diverse social norms prevalent during the period. Buddhists firmly believe that practicing the Buddha Dhamma protects individuals from dangers and prevents them from falling into the four woeful states (Apāya): hell (Niraya), the animal realm (Tiracchāna), hungry ghosts (Peta), and demons (Asura). [67] In the Dhammapada Pāḷi, the Buddha taught, "Practice the Dhamma properly and avoid improper practice. One who follows the right path lives happily in this life and in the next." In *Buddha and His Teachings*, Bhikkhu Nārada explains that "The Dhamma deals with truth and facts that can be confirmed and verified through personal experience, and it is not concerned with theories or speculation." In the Sutta Piṭaka, the Buddha stated, "The person who realizes the Dhamma sees the Buddha." [68]

Buddha's teachings are based on principles such as mindfulness, compassion, and ethical behavior, and are applicable in all societies to promote good education, foster individual growth, and improve society. Buddha Dhamma and society have had a strong connection for over 2,500 years, dating back to when the Buddha introduced a new and distinctive Buddhist educational system, grounded in the Buddha's crucial teachings. In ancient India, education was limited to the upper class. Therefore, the Buddha established free education for all in the monasteries, and it later spread and expanded throughout society. In ancient India and to this day, Buddhist education has consistently been a source of motivation for individuals and social development. Moreover, it was the most effective medium for carrying the Buddha's message. The Buddhist Education System was original and not based on any other existing model.

The Buddha created and taught it with complete devotion, drawing on his own experience, deep knowledge, and great compassion for all living beings.[69] The Buddhist Education System aims to enlighten students and help them develop strong moral qualities and ethical principles so that they may ultimately attain wisdom. In other words, it offers all-round personality development, including physical, mental, ethical, and intellectual growth. Moreover, this system not only provides the Dhamma for students' knowledge and wisdom but also offers food and shelter to those in need, without any discrimination, regardless of religion, race, wealth, or other differences. Therefore, I would like to quote one verse from the Dhammapada that states:

Jighacchā paramā rogā, sankhāra parama dukhā.

Etam ñatvā yathābhūtaṃ, nibbānaṃ parama sudham.[70]

Hunger is the greatest ailment; khandhas are the greatest ill. The wise, knowing them as they really are, realize Nibbāna, the most incredible bliss.[71]

In the Buddha's teachings, it is not solely focused on providing food and shelter, but on sharing the Buddha's Dhamma. However, people cannot be taught to practice the Dhamma unless their basic daily needs are first fulfilled. If people struggle to meet their basic needs, it isn't easy to concentrate on, understand, and focus on the Dhamma. By addressing these needs and solving the issues first, it becomes possible to teach the Dhamma effectively. Therefore, the Buddha emphasized people's needs first. Then he prepares them to learn about liberation from the cycle of birth and death, the central concept of Buddhism.[72] Moreover, the Buddha advised taking care of individuals when they have a mental illness because He is also the greatest and best doctor in mental health care.

Furthermore, the Buddha is the foremost and best leader in social work. He helps people find their way and get back on the right path when they are going astray for various reasons, including personal, professional, or business-related issues, and are feeling depressed. Therefore, I trust that being deeply rooted in the great compassion of the Buddha, which the Buddha's Teachings and the Buddhist monastic education system embody, will bring peace and harmony to people in Myanmar and all over the world.

The Background of Monastic Education and the Appearance of Modern BAKA Monastic Schools in Myanmar

Nowadays, education is considered a precious treasure. Without education, knowledge cannot be transferred or shared among individuals. Everyone should have the same learning opportunities, but this is always impossible, mainly for those who are poor. Therefore, the Buddha established a

Buddhist education system in ancient India, which later spread to Southeast Asia, including Myanmar. Thus, Myanmar education can be said to have derived from the Buddhist Monastic Education.

Myanmar is the leading Theravada Buddhist country in Southeast Asia. Notably, it is well known worldwide because the Fifth and Sixth Great Buddhist Councils were hosted in Myanmar. In ancient times, Buddhism and Myanmar were inextricably linked; they were the same. Therefore, Buddhism plays a crucial role in guiding the political, economic, social, and educational activities of the Myanmar people like a bright star. The Buddhist way of life has undoubtedly shaped Myanmar's literature, language, culture, and traditions. As a result, it is very rare to find a town or village without a monastery or pagoda, because monasteries are not only places for monks but also for teaching and learning Buddhist scriptures. Swe Swe Mon explained in "*Theory and Practice of Buddhist Monastic Schools in Myanmar*" that Buddhist monastic education originated in the Pyu era but gained popularity during the **Bagan, Pinya, Nyaung Yan, Ava, and Kuang Baung** Dynasties.[73]

During the time of the ancient Burmese kings, Monastic education was the only form of education available to the people; there was no other. Therefore, from the capital city to the small villages, only the monks could give education to all. However, when Myanmar came under British colonial rule, various types of schools emerged and became mixed.[74] At that time, the old monastic education system was no longer popular, as it was considered inadequate for supporting a career. It was considered a form of religious education that taught people basic literacy, enabling them to write and read Buddhist scriptures, and was used primarily in their daily lives. Despite these challenges and pressures, traditional monastic education played a crucial role nationwide, producing many talented and brilliant Myanmar people, including Myanmar's independence leader, General Aung San.[75] Still, when the British government introduced the new education system, monastic education became outdated. Fortunately, it did not wholly disappear from Burmese education until the Second World War. It remained a place for the Department of Buddha Dhamma.[76] After gaining independence, Myanmar was restored to its people and state. Our national language, religion, literature, art, and culture were reclaimed from the losses experienced during the colonial period. Then, monasteries and monastic education schools flourished again like the rising, shining sun.[77]

In the post-independence period, many monks in monastic education schools actively took the initiative to support and foster educational development in the new era. In 1948, Prime Minister U Nu provided grants to monasteries to encourage them to establish primary schools,[78] which were later expanded into middle or high schools. Moreover, from a secular perspective and in consideration of contemporary needs and national priorities, the monastic community agreed to follow the government's educational policy guidelines and, consequently, to integrate the new curriculum into the existing one. Some senior and dedicated monks successfully implemented the Ba Ka education system in certain monasteries, and it was later extended to nunneries as well. Therefore, in Myanmar, Ba Ka

schools are called Phonetawgyithin Pyannaye Kyaung (Monastic School) and Thilashinthin Pyannaye Kyaung (Nunnery School), which are established and managed by monks and nuns, respectively. These schools offer the best educational opportunities for needy children who cannot afford formal schooling, especially orphans. I learned from many articles that mention that there are three main reasons for opening Ba Ka schools, all of which provide essential benefits to children and local communities. First, they support low-income families who cannot afford the additional expenses of government schools. Second, they serve students in remote or secluded areas where government schools may not be available. Third, they provide education, shelter, and a supportive family environment for orphans who have no other means of receiving these essential needs.

The Significance and Benefits of Buddha Dhamma Through Its Daily Rituals and Practices in BA KA Monastic Education

The primary objective of the Ba Ka monastic education method is to learn and apply the Buddha Dhamma, encouraging students to develop a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the principles of karma and rebirth. In addition, the system teaches students to observe the five precepts, support their parents, respect both elders and peers, show kindness and responsibility toward younger individuals, and apply the fundamental teachings of the Buddha Dhamma in their daily lives. It can also help develop students' crucial life skills, such as emotional management, stress management, mindfulness, ethical behavior, harmony, kindness, peaceful living, and becoming good citizens. Therefore, the Buddha Dhamma plays a great role in Ba Ka monastic education schools, which have recently incorporated new curricula, including science, computers, mathematics, and other subjects taught in state schools.

At *Ba Ka* Monastic Education Schools, students have begun their day with the Buddha Dhamma every morning. Before their classes start, all students and teachers sit in their classrooms and recite the prayer, 'Okāsa Okāsa Okāsa.' The Formula for Asking Permission to Pay Homage begins with a respectful request: "O Venerable Sir, may I pay obeisance three times?" This recitation expresses the intention to be freed from all offenses committed through physical, verbal, and mental misconduct. The practitioner then pays homage to the Three Gems, which are called the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṃgha once, twice, and thrice, with palms respectfully joined at the forehead. Through this act of merit, one aspires to remain free from the four Apāyas, the three Kappas, the eight Atthakkhanas, the five Veras, the four Vipattis, and the five Byasanas, and further wishes to attain Magga, Phala, and Nibbāna in the final existence.[79] After completing this homage, students proceed to keep the Five Precepts in Pāli.

The Five Precepts, known as *Pañca Sīla*, form the foundational moral discipline for lay Buddhists. They are: taking the life of all living beings (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*), refraining from taking what is not given (*adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*), abstaining from sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*), abstaining from false speech (*musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*), and abstaining from intoxicants (*surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*). These precepts regulate bodily and verbal conduct and contribute to essential qualities in life, including longevity, prosperity, mindfulness, and a fortunate rebirth, accompanied by a high level of intelligence. Because the principles of morality and social harmony are embedded in these precepts, they are not only benefit for Buddhists but also for everyone who wishes to cultivate self-discipline and lead a peaceful life within their family or society.[80] For this reason, Ba Ka Monastic Schools place great importance on reciting the Five Precepts daily, because students are continually reminded to practice them throughout the day.

Following the Five Precepts, students recite the Nine Qualities of the Buddha, the Six Qualities of the Dhamma, and the Eightfold Path, which encompasses the Nine Qualities of the Sangha. The Buddha's qualities describe Him as the Worthy One (*Arahā*), the Fully Self-Enlightened One (*Sammā-sambuddho*), the Perfected One in Knowledge and Conduct (*Vijjā-caraṇa-sampanno*), the Well-Gone One (*Sugato*), the Knower of the Worlds (*Lokavidū*), the Peerless Trainer of Persons (*Anuttaro Purisa-damma-sārathī*), the Teacher of Celestial and Human Beings (*Satthā Deva-manussānaṃ*), the Enlightened One (*Buddho*), and the Blessed One (*Bhagavā*). The Dhamma is praised as being well-expounded by the Buddha (*Svākkhāto*), realizable by oneself (*Sandiṭṭhiko*), effective without delay (*Akālika*), inviting all to “come and see” (*Ehipassiko*), capable of being applied inwardly (*Opaneyyiko*), and realizable individually by the wise (*Paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*). The Sangha is honored as those who practice the good path (*Suppaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*), the straight path (*Usuppaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*), the path leading to Nibbāna (*Ñāyappaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*), and the appropriate conduct (*Sāmicippaṭipanno bhagavato āvakasaṅgho*), represented by the four pairs and eight kinds of noble individuals.[81] Moreover, the Sangha is worthy of gifts (*Āhuneyyo – Āhuna*), hospitality (*Pāhuneyyo - Pāhuna*), offerings (*Dakkhiṇeyyo - Dakkhina*), and reverential salutation (*Añjalikaraṇīyo - Añjalikaraṇa*) and is regarded as an unsurpassed field of merit for the world (*Anuttaraṃ puññakkhettaṃ lokassa*). Reciting these special qualities of Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṃgha aims to inspire students to cultivate these virtues within themselves, while developing deep respect and reverence for the Triple Gems. Furthermore, reflecting on these noble qualities helps students generate faith, joy, and inner confidence, peace, enabling them to overcome fear and distress as though they were in the Triple Gems themselves. Even though they do not achieve higher insight in this life, such reflections ensure a favorable rebirth in the next.

Moreover, the *Ba Ka* schools train children in Mindful Meditation because mindfulness enhances their concentration, reduces stress, improves overall well-being, and fosters responsibility, self-discipline, and a helpful, collaborative learning environment. By following good meditation practices, they can focus better on their studies and put more effort into their education. Finally, they also share their merits and send loving kindness to the world. Loving kindness also helps students reduce stress and enhance their emotional well-being. Furthermore, they can promote self-love and avoid danger, harm, and enmity. As a result, they can make friends easily and feel very happy learning both inside and outside the classroom. Next, at the *Ba Ka* Schools, students gather to sing the national anthem, listen to the *Ovāda* (Briefing) from the head monk or nun, and begin learning other school subjects from their class teachers. After school, some students from the neighborhood return home, while residents live at the monastery or nunnery. Near the end of school, the class teachers always encourage and remind them to help their parents and pay respect to the elders and monks on their way home.

The daily rituals of *Ba Ka* Schools cultivate and encourage students to believe in and practice Buddha Dhamma through the three main components of *Sīla* (Morality), *Samādhi* (Meditation), and *Paññā* (Wisdom). Practicing these three helps children develop correct values from an early stage, and therefore supports them in becoming better leaders. Moreover, they are the principal summary of the Buddha's Dhamma, and it is taught to be applied in everyday life. By practicing it continuously, individuals can eventually attain the state of an Arahant, the highest level of human development, becoming spiritually complete and free from the cycle of *Samsara* (death and rebirth). Furthermore, *Ba Ka* schools provide valuable lessons in peaceful learning by teaching students critical thinking and moral values that help them solve conflicts and problems with empathy, responsibility, and nonviolence.

Conclusion

The Buddha taught that education is a person's best friend, for an educated individual is respected everywhere, and education surpasses both beauty and youth. In this regard, the Buddha Dhamma in the *Ba Ka* School curriculum ensures that students receive a well-rounded education that supports personal growth, moral development, and social awareness. Moreover, the Buddhist education system enables students to attain wisdom and develop a well-rounded personality, encompassing physical, mental, moral, and intellectual growth, as well as mindfulness meditation practice. In Myanmar, *Ba Ka* Buddhist monastic schools are significantly filling the gap for people with low incomes to develop their minds and contribute to the betterment of individuals and society. The teachings of the Buddha's Dhamma in *Ba Ka* Monastic Schools thus hold great potential for personal and societal transformation, guiding future generations toward a more ethical and peaceful world. Fortunately, including myself, a product of monastic education, and a few monks and nuns from Myanmar who have the best opportunities to study at foreign universities today, are pursuing higher education and

gaining new, in-depth knowledge. We are all very grateful and committed to keeping *Ba Ka* education sustainable and developing in the years to come, alongside the advancement of the digital world today.

Finally, referring to one of the verses that the Buddha taught in Dhammapada, "*Dhammo have rakkhati dhammacāriṃ*", which means the Dhamma indeed protects the one who practices the Dhamma. So, I sincerely wish and hope every child can get a chance to receive a school education and wisdom. Moreover, they can practice the Buddha Dhamma and apply it in their daily lives. A good child is the best adult or leader for society. Therefore, I would like to conclude my article with a few precious Dhamma lines from the Ovada Patimokkha (Briefing) of the Buddha, which He cited at one special gathering that took place only once in the Buddha Sasana, focusing on the three main principles:

“Avoid Doing Evils, Cultivate The Good, Purify The Mind”

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