Village of the Five Precepts Project: A Case Study of Naraiwittaya School and the Sustainability of Students’ Self-Development

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Introduction

The ‘Village of the Five Precepts’ project, in cooperation with Buddhist, private, and local administrative organizations as well as government agencies, educational institutions, and communities throughout Thailand, seeks to encourage Buddhist Thais to adopt the Five Precepts of Buddhism as guidelines for leading their daily life. These Five Precepts of Buddhism are basic ethical guidelines taught by the Buddha for lay practitioners. The Five Precepts urge people to refrain from: destroying life, taking what is not given to them, immoral sexual behavior, false speech, and consuming intoxicating drinks.

The Most Venerable Somdet Phra Maharatchamangkhalachan, Acting Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, launched the ‘Village of the Five Precepts’ project by assigning the Sangha administration in all provinces to work in coordination with the Office of National Buddhism (National News Bureau of Thailand, 2014). Under the project, trainings will be organized that seek to assist village member participants in leading their lives according to the Five Precepts. In order to adopt the Five Precepts participants will be encouraged to join various activities, on a voluntary basis. The project will then identify if adoption of the Buddhist principles by participants leads to improvements in their lives, in relation to behavior, mentality, social aspects, and economic well-being. The project commenced in 2014 and runs through 2017, it covers 7,255 subdistricts and 74,693 villages throughout Thailand. Individuals and communities that achieve the objectives of the project will be honored (National News Bureau of Thailand, 2014).

The rationale for the ‘Village of the Five Precepts’ project came about as a response to a dramatically changing world in which children are considered the most vulnerable in our society yet their needs for physically nourishment and suitable education are increasingly overlooked. The result of which is a generation of underdeveloped children who are not capable of taking on the future challenges of the world. In order to address these issues, adults must take on the responsibility of supporting our children to ensure they are prepared to be tomorrow’s leaders. Therefore, this project seeks to expand on this notion that early education, in this case on the Five Precepts of Buddhism, is a necessity in the full and successful development of future generations. The pilot phase of this project was undertaken with students in the Naraiwittaya School as expanded upon in the proceeding section.

Overview of Naraiwittaya School

The Naraiwittaya School is a private institution which has served children and their parents in the Chaibadan and other districts, as well as nearby provinces, for more than 50 years. The school provides primary education and was founded by a family in the Chaibadan community concerned by a lack of educational opportunities for local children. The school was set up in 1961 with an inaugural enrollment of seven students. Currently there are 1,312 students registered for class levels ranging from Prathom 1st (first grade) to Prathom 6th (sixth grade). Seventy teachers and 12 support professionals advocate for their students. The family-owned school has 70 percent of its costs...
subsidized by the government. The other 30 percent of costs are covered by students’ school tuition fees.

The Naraiwittaya School vision is to promote students in becoming world citizens while maintaining awareness and understanding of their Thai characteristics. Naraiwittaya School has been long-established within the community as a Buddhist school with approximately 99 percent of students, teachers, and personnel identifying as Buddhist. Buddhist practices and principles are part of the teachers’ lesson plans and the school’s activities. The institutionalization of a Buddhist education plan seeks to produce students who are recognized as good members of a Buddhist society. It was with this in mind that the Naraiwittaya School was contacted by the Buddhist Office of Lopburi Province to be the primary school program in the pilot phase of the ‘Village of the Five Precepts’ project. Naraiwittaya School subsequently joined this longitudinal project (2014-2017) with the belief that early education of the Five Precepts of Buddhism instills a robust awareness of what it means and requires to be a good person according to this religious doctrine. In this study, triangulation methods between the observations, semi-structured interviews and documentations were used to ensure that findings came from more than one source as extended upon in the flowing section.

A Case Study: Interviewing, Documentation, and Observation

The subjects of this study are the head teachers at Naraiwittaya School for each of the primary school levels from first through sixth grade. While the subjects serve as the heads of each level, they also work as classroom teachers. The school administrators determined that the head teachers for each level were the best subjects for the study due to their ability to give both perspectives as classroom teachers and administrators of their levels. Furthermore, their long-term experience teaching students at Naraiwittaya School was deemed a necessity in identifying and comparing students’ development before and after adopting this project within the school. The six subjects were all women between the ages of 42 and 58-years-old with an average of 29 years teaching at Naraiwittaya School. For each grade there are six classes made up of 35-40 students, approximately 210 total students per grade, with one classroom teacher in charge. From the researcher observations, most students arrived at school before 7:40 a.m., in time for their required participation in the school assembly at 8.00 am. Students typically left school after 3:30 p.m. Cultivating the students’ moral developments such as integrity, compassion, generosity, responsibility, and gratefulness to others are the goals of students’ self-development as explained in the following section.

Study Findings

Eight months after adopting the Five Precepts into lesson plans for all subject strands and school activities, between May 2014 and December 2014, students of Naraiwittaya School show an outstanding outcome in their development. This determination is based on interviews and documentation with all subjects as well as school observations. Through these different methods the researcher also identified various themes which they categorized into four dimensions: Promoting Five Precepts through the School Activities, Promoting Five Precepts through the Lesson Plans and Class Teachings, Students’ Self-Development Outcomes, and Teachers’ Suggestions. The four dimensions of the pilot project initiatives and study findings are expanded upon in the following sections.

Promoting Five Precepts through the School Activities

In promoting the Five Precepts of Buddhism various activities were initiated during the 2014 academic year. These activities included:
1. Participating in the morning school assembly, every Monday through Friday, by singing Thai national anthem, praying, brief meditation, being compassionate, and paying respect to the parents and teachers.

2. Dressing appropriately in white top uniform, five precepts keeping, and giving of offerings to the nine invited monks on the Buddhist holy day four times a month.

3. Participating in Praying Assembly on Fridays from 2:00-3:00 p.m.


5. Participating in Ethics and Moral Development Activity to become good laypeople within a month of June 2014.

6. Participation in Dharma teaching by the invited monk in a topic of ‘gratefulness to the parents’ on July 2, 2014.

7. Give offering candles to the temples in the community during the Buddhist Lent on July 7-9, 2014.

8. Participating in National Mother’s Day Activity to help develop students’ gratefulness to their mothers on August 12, 2014.

9. Participating in National Father’s Day Activity to help develop students’ gratefulness to their fathers on December 5, 2014.

10. Give offering to the Buddhist Pilgrims on December 17, 2014.


12. Participation in cleaning of school activity during which students help pick up trash, empty trash cans, and contribute to the overall cleanliness of the school grounds Mondays through Fridays from 12:30-1:00 p.m.

13. After school praying activity of each class on Mondays through Fridays.


**Promoting Five Precepts through the Lesson Plans and Class Teachings**

In the current technological age, children tend to prefer playing video games over playing outside. Consequently, teachers need to find fun and meaningful educational tools that help children learn about building relationships with other human beings, other loving beings, and the environment in order to be a positive member of society (Seibert, Sullivan, Simonis, and Nemitz, 2013). To foster this type of learning Naraiwittaya School offers a holistic and hands-on approach to teaching which reaches out to students of all ages and aims to strengthen their relationship with the environment.

Beyond encouraging meaningful participation by students with the activities associated with the Five Precepts, the teachers explained that they also simplified the meaning of each precept to make it easy to understand for students. They did so by describing each of the precepts as follows: 1) To abstain from intentionally harming living beings; 2) To abstain from taking what is not given; 3) To abstain from sexual misconduct; 4) To abstain from lying and unkind speech; 5) To abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs. The teachers substituted the new thoughts to refine the students’ behaviors to be: 1) Loving-kindness; 2) Generosity; 3) Stillness and Contentment; 4) Truthful Speech; 5) Mindfulness or Awareness (Clear Vision, n.d.).

When teaching each precept, the first rule for example, to abstain from intentionally harming living beings is not possible to fully practice in most realistic contexts. The teachers explained to the students that when we grow food, or protect our families, we may kill or injure animals, so that we may live in health. They also noted that whether we harm the animals, or someone else does it for us, we are equally responsible. Moreover, Danuse Murty (2012) explains in her work that teaching the
first precept can encourage students’ critical thinking by asking questions such as: how do you like being treated by others?; how do you think we should treat other people and animals?; how can living by the Five Precepts make your school, your country, and the whole world a safer and nicer place?; what would this world be like without any wars, crime, theft, lying and harsh speech, and illegal drugs?

When growing the students ‘Loving-Kindness’ in their minds, the teachers reviewed the Buddha’s life story. Some of the techniques enlisted by the teachers included asking students to demonstrate how the Buddha showed loving-kindness and compassion towards animals and people (Clear Vision, n.d.). Furthermore, teachers had students describe various situations, where the Buddha showed loving-kindness towards people. It is then understood by students that the loving-kindness is an absolute basis for the whole spiritual training, and also for all the other pure states of mind (Murty, 2012). Through the teachers’ lessons on loving or caring about a person or an animal, the students were meant to innately feel compassion towards her or him. Students were taught that everyone is born with natural kindness towards ourselves, and those who love them, parents, siblings, children and grandchildren, and also with the knowledge that all people like to be loved. The teachers tried to cultivate the idea of living by the Five Precepts, including being kind to everyone in our daily life, even in the face of difficult interpersonal situations (Seibert, Sullivan, Simonis, and Nemitz, 2013).

In classes, the teachers introduced the use of moral songs, ethical stories, and dharma talks as well as creative activities such as drawing, which the researcher observed to polish the students’ minds. By engaging students with these learning tools at the beginning of each lesson plan the teachers drew their attention to the Five Precepts before teaching each subject. In some cases the teachers inserted a current issue, such as the use of illegal drugs, into their teachings and offered the students methods by which to engage the Five Precepts, in this instance to avoid drug addiction and why they must not utilize illicit drugs according to Buddhism.

Furthermore, the teachers taught the students why they should go to the temples on the Buddhist Festivals, and other important Buddhist days, to make merit and give offering to the monks. The students were also taught about the core Buddhist festivals. Buddhist festivals (bucha) are celebrations held to commemorate important events in the Buddha’s life and the lives of his noble disciples. The three most important celebrations are, Makha Puja in March, Visakha Bucha (Vesak) in May, and Asalha Bucha in July. Teachers also encouraged students to join activities for fathers’ day and mothers’ day to demonstrate their gratefulness to their parents.

The ideas and skills associated with team building were also important and demonstrated through the installation of group work among the students. Through this teaching method students were meant to learn how to successfully interact with their peers. This included how to effectively approach, and communicate with, each other in order to learn and work as part of a collaborative group. They would gradually adjust their perceptions and understandings to meet at an optimal point of agreement. As noted by one head teacher, “living with people has to be practiced.” The project endeavored to demonstrate that young children must be trained in order to understand that life is about being interdependent and that living with others needs much empathy and caring. Beyond teaching students to be successful collaborators, the teachers sought to grow students’ moral developments such as integrity, compassion, generosity, responsibility, and gratefulness to others. The project functioned under the understanding that such characteristics are required for the students’ ability to follow a decent career path.

The teachers at Naraiwittaya School also taught about Karma through examples of the Buddha. The Buddha taught that good actions lead to happiness and Nirvana as
as well as freedom from suffering, and bad actions lead to more suffering, unhappiness
and away from Nirvana. The teachers had the students name and describe living cycle
such as breathing (in and out), describe the Law of Karma, and discuss the three karmas
(bodily actions, speech, and thinking).

**Students’ Self Development Outcomes**

The teachers presented that within eight months most of the students made
significant progress and the school met their goal for students’ self-development. The
teachers framed the outcomes broadly, and articulated that students became much more
aware of, and cared more for, others around them. Overall, the teachers found that
students became more well-behaved, harmonized within group settings, and respected
the rules of the classrooms. The teachers reported that the parents of the children also
indicated that they were more helpful at home.

The researcher identified the changes in the students’ self-development in three
distinct yet interconnected ways. First, for the students themselves they became more
disciplined in terms of wearing school uniforms properly, coming to school early to
attend the morning assembly, increased independence, awareness of benefits from
working hard, utilizing good manners, being more responsible and honest, engaging
leadership skills, and learning the Pāli terms of praying and knowing the meaning of
each. Second, for living with others, the students learned to be patient and punctual as
well as to speak politely, behave appropriately, reduce swearing and aggressive
behavior, have a softer character, help out with others, act appropriately to different
genders, increase sharing, be kind to other living beings, have more respect to others,
and not engage in bullying. Third, for the benefit of the nation, the students learned to
observe the rules and the norm of the society which benefits the happiness for citizen
of the whole nation.

**Teachers’ Suggestions**

Globalization has far reaching effects that impact everyone, including the
students in Naraiwittaya School. Students’ understanding and maturation do not yet
match with the western culture that floods in through social media and the internet.
Keeping of the Five Precepts can act as students’ protection system to reduce harm from
outside influences and teach them to be smart in their media consumption. Moreover,
in the future, the teachers recommend an interdisciplinary curriculum available between
school and temple. They believe this would help students to be more capable at the
practices of being moral Buddhists. The teachers also emphasized that this would
provide a clear connection between the two important places in the students’ lives.

Since Naraiwittaya School is located in a province that requires parents to move
to cities to find work, many students were left to live with their grandparents who were
less aware of global changes. Under the grandparents’ guardianship, students
encountered difficulties associating school teachings with their living environments.
Nonetheless, the keeping of the Five Precepts should be practiced to correspond both
with home and school life. While the students practice at the school, they should be
able to bring the Five Precepts keeping into their homes where parents and grandparents
can benefit along with the children. This will instill keeping of the Five Precepts from
eyarly development through their entire lifespan.

**Conclusion**

In sum, the Five Precepts play an important role to help the Naraiwittaya School
students’ self-development with an emphasis on their moral development. While the
student participants in the ‘Village of the Five Precepts’ project examined the
foundations of Buddhist morality, they were also able to explore their own moral beliefs and compare them with those entrenched in Buddhist teachings (Religions Along The Silk Roads, n.d.). Similar to western culture, students in this project, aged 7 to 12-years-old, were taught to follow a common set of moral virtues such as honesty, kindness, gratefulness, fairness, and responsibility (De Roche and Williams, 1998). The student participants were able to reflect on the experiences and internalize rules for good conduct that were a part of the project. For example, they learned that it is good to help others who are in trouble and it is wrong to take something that does not belong to you. This learning leads children to become considerably more independent and trustworthy (Weisner, 1996). As children get older, cognitive-developmental theorists point out that they benefit from increasing opportunities for moral discussion, in other words evaluating beliefs and practices on moral grounds (Berk, 2005). As the students keep progressing in their self-development, the Naraiwittaya School looks to keep engaging with this project in order to meet the highest point of students’ self-development.
References


