

A DEVELOPMENT OF THE NON-FORMAL EDUCATION MODEL FOR ORGANIZING SELF-RELIANCE BASED ON ASOKE'S CONCEPT

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Introduction

The so-called "Asoke people" is a group of Buddhist Practitioners in Thailand who follow the orthodox path of Buddha's teaching laid for them by a Buddhist monk called Samana Bodhiraksa.

The name "Asoke" or in Sanskrit "Ashoka" , means "*being free from all sufferings*". It goes well with the term "Buddha" which means "being enlightened, awakened, and happy."

The term "Asoke" is appropriately used by this group of people to identify themselves for several reasons:-

Firstly, Samana Bodhiraksa, as Mr. Rak Rakpongse a young Thai Television program organizer, first used "**Asoke**" as his pseudonym in writing articles about morality.

Secondly, Samana Bodhiraksa was ordained as a monk at Asokaram (**Asoke** + Aram) Monastery near Bangkok.

Thirdly, after his ordination, Samana Bodhiraksa delivered his lectures on Buddhism in an open ground under Asoke trees called "Lan **Asoke** (Asoke Ground)" within Mahadhat Monastery in Bangkok.

And lastly, his first Buddhist Centre set up in Nakorn Pathom, a town adjacent to Bangkok, was named "Dan **Asoke**" (Land of Asoke).

His explicit, lively, and straightforward style of teaching has made the Asoke's Buddhist way of life well adapted to the modern globalized world and at the same time the practitioners remain strick fast to the old principles. Their technique of developing their lives is called "rabop khatkiao"* (Apinya, 1993 : 77) The purpose of the betterment is to make the practitioners well equipped with nine following qualities** (Sunai, 1988 : 11-12) :-

1. Subharo - Leading a very simple life.
2. Suposa - Being easily cultivated.
3. Appiccha - Being satisfied with little.
4. Santusthi - Being contented with bare necessities.

* human nature polishing process

** These nine qualities called "vanna" in Siam Tripitaka, Pali edition, vol.1-2. Buddha praised those with nine "vanna" in every sikkhapada. (disciplinary rule)

5. Sallekha - Ridding oneself of defilements.
6. Dhuta - Being strict to Buddhist precepts.
7. Pasadhika - Being composed in all bearings.
8. Apacaya - Refraining from accumulating worldly properties.
9. Viriyambha - Being diligent.

Their success could be seen from their progressive way of living. Several of them were awarded with prizes from the government and private sectors of international, national, and local levels including the Magsaysay Award of the Philippines and the National Ablest Woman Award of Thailand. (Sudfangfan Group, 1995 : 112-115)

Their success in individual development resulted into the forming of their ideological communities with the purpose of upgrading incessantly their way of life, individual as well as communal. Thus, the process they exploited has become a strand twisted in the same rope as that of their education. (Sunai, 1988 : 29) Moreover, the Asoke people had set up Sammasikkhalaya Wangjivit (Academy of Life and Learning = ALL) in order to activate non-formal education for community members. Sammasikkhalaya Wangjivit was therefore a systematic development of the Asoke community's non-formal education.

Sammasikkhalaya Wangjivit was first founded in 1997 (B.E.2540) in Rajadhani Asoke, a group's centre in Ubonratchathani. Its aims are as follow :-

1. Being self-reliant and self-developed.
2. Leading a righteous life-style with environmental conservation.
3. Leading a righteous life-style with social services.
4. Being good members of the state and mankind.

(Sammasikkhalaya Wangjivit Project, 1996)

The Asoke's perseverance in building up a good self-reliant community has demonstrated a way out for Thai society during its various crises of today. Non-formal education is undoubtedly their main tool. A development of its model is therefore an important and interesting issue to study.

Consequently, this research aims at studying the organization of the Asoke communities' non-formal education for self-reliance in order to propose a developed model. It was conducted in three phases. The first phase deals with social environments within Asoke communities as a platform upon which one could understand their concept of organizing their education in that manner. The second phase was to scrutinize into their organization of non-formal education. The third phase would be to develop a suitable model of education based on Asoke's concept. Research data and information were accumulated

from documents, participant observations, in-depth interviews as well as group discussions in five Asoke communities with Wangjivit campuses scattered in the northeast and in the central plain (Rajadhani Asoke, Sisa Asoke, Pathom Asoke, Santi Asoke, and Sali Asoke). Resource persons are community leaders, administrative committees, educational administrators, facilitators, and selected community members.

Asoke Community

Prior to the community setup, the Asoke people had Buddhasthana (Buddhist Centres) as their spiritual development activity pivot. At the same time, the community members' living quarter was built nextdoor to each centre. Up to today there are altogether five communities :-

1. Pathom Asoke in Nakorn Pathom
2. Sisa Asoke in Sisaket.
3. Sali Asoke in Nakorn Sawan.
4. Sima Asoke in Nakorn Ratchasima.
5. Santi Asoke in Bangkok.

Owing to the smaller number of monks compared with the community members in the last five years, the situation reversed, new communities arose first followed by the Buddhasthanas. These new centres are

1. Bhupha fanam in Chiangmai.
2. Rajadhani Asoke in Ubon Ratchathani.
3. Taksin Asoke in Trang.
4. Hinpha fanam in Chaiyabhum.

Asoke communities at the moment have created their community network in order to promote social, economic, and political co-operation. Every year they would assemble in their traditional meetings in their five main centres. The meetings are as follow :-

1. New Year Celebration and "Ariya Fair", 30 December – 5 January, at Rajadhani Asoke. In their "Ariya Fair" all goods sold are cheaper than the cost of production. This fair manifests well "Punnism" ideology of social services.
2. Buddhahisek, in February at Sali Asoke. During their seven day meeting, serious discourses on Buddhist disciplines are taught to the members by Samana Bodhiraksa and senior monks.
3. Plukse, in April at Sisa Asoke. All activities during seven days here are similar to Buddhahisek.

4. Buddha's Relics Worshipping Day and Asoke Remembrance Day, 9-10 June at Santi-Asoke to commemorate the day the relics of the Buddha are placed highly on the top of a Pagoda in Santi Asoke, and at the same time to commemorate the Asoke Court Case in 1989.
5. Mahapavarana, about five days in the beginning of November at Pathom Asoke. Samanas from all Buddhasthanas would gather today to give advise to one another in correcting and developing their Dharma practice. Moreover they discuss about circumstances or problems occurred in Buddhasthanas and make policy decisions.

Asoke community members comprise of four categories : the ordained, the aspirants, the temple residents, and the community residents.

Except for the community residents who still earn their living from their outside jobs, all of them devote their time working for the community without pay. The reason for such a rare phenomenon lies in their social values : working hard, being economical, being trustworthy, and being devoted to mankind.

In controlling their behavior, the members abide by Buddhist precepts according to their status. Rules and regulations of the community are also used. Precept and rule breakers must face trial either in the meeting of Samanas or community committee members as the case may be.

Because the Asoke ideology places high individual behavior, cultivating their thought, speech, and action is consequently considered their most important commitment. Once the competence of their mind and behavior have been elevated, their work will become more creative and beneficial, not only for themselves, but for their community and society as a whole. In order to fulfill their intention in creating self-reliant community, the Asoke members, with the community's assent, set up a number of work-bases to produce products for their communities first, and then expand to help the outsiders by selling goods of reliable quality at low price.

Nowadays, many organizations visit Asoke communities regularly in order to study their interesting way of life. Last but not least, the communities are requested to organize several training programmes, including a special course on "Saccadham jivit (Truth of Life)" for the Farmers' Potentiality Development and Quality of Life Promotion Project in response to the present Government's policy of debt suspension.

Non-Formal Education in the Community

Concerning the education of Asoke members, it commenced in a form of non-formal education. Samana Bodhiraksa directed them to apply the Buddha's teaching to everyday life in the modern society and at the same time to observe strictly the doctrine. He laid down the development of a man in eradicating all his defilements as the real aim of education until he gains the state of Nirvana or Lokuttara. Nirvana literally means being above all worldly desires. This aim runs alongside "lokanukampa" being efficient in working for the world, and "lokavidhu" being knowledgeable enough to catch up and give services to mankind.

To them the essence of the education is the Buddhist principle of Noble Eightfold Path [Marga Eight] together with other Dharma teachings suitable for each learner in each circumstance. However, all principles are inter-related like small streams branching out from a big river of Marga Eight leading to the same destination i.e. lokuttara.

Concerning their aims towards "lokanukampa" and "lokavidhu", many forms of learning are introduced including 'knowledge exchange' among members, special lectures from outside experts, and participating in vocational and academic trainings in other educational resources.

While Buddhist principles are taught as theory during the morning prayers, daily routines are considered the practical part. The practical session concerns at all time the mindfulness in all actions, speech, and thinking. To efficiently work in the work-bases, and to orderly administer their offices are the best method of promoting their capability. They learn from their doing how to find the way out together in solving the problems.

Should any defilements occur to anyone, various techniques must be used to lessen the degrees of the impetus to the point of disappearance. In the case of mental or working problems, apart from advices privately given by monks and Sikkhamats, various meetings of the community including those of monks, Sikkhamats, work-bases, and community organizations can always be of great help. The problems would be raised in order to find common solutions. The best application of theory into practice which have been proved successful is that monks and Sikkhamats joining community members in working diligently and devotedly.

It is considered a duty of every community member to self-assess his and her own development in spirit, efficiency in working, and advancement in knowledge seeking. To Asoke people self-evaluation is more for improvement rather than punishment. It is important to note that there had been cases of members leaving the community after adjudging their behavior improper, but came back to join the circle again later.

After twenty years of organizing the non-formal education in this way, their "Sammāsikkhalaya Wangjivit (Academy of Life and Learning)" was established with further aims to extend their holistic knowledge in response to globalization.

Sammāsikkhalaya Wangjivit

Students of Sammāsikkhalaya Wangjivit are called "nisit" meaning inhabitants, as they have to stay in the community through out the period of their studies. Food, accomodation, tuition fee, and even clothing are supplied by community. In case of illness, treatment is ready for them free of charge no matter how serious the symptom is. For recreation they can watch video tape, theatre, and cinema together in the common room every evening. In other words, Wangjivit's nisit need not spend any money at all.

Wangjivit has set eighteen as a minimum age of their learners, and for the oldest limit they use the well-known proverb "No one is too old to learn".

No pre-requisite is considered as criteria in entering Wangjivit. Nevertheless an applicant must spend a year in the community. The outcome of that probational one-year stay, together with details in an application form, and an interview, must be approved by an entrance committee consisting of monks, Sikkhamats and gurus. So the procedure of Wangjivit's selection of their nisit can be said "quite tough".

Their educational philosophy manifests best in the slogan "Orthodox in Keeping Sila, Efficient in Working, Knowledgeable in Studying Subjects."

'Learning while working method' is still maintained in Wangjivit, As far as researching is concerned, they have to work harder through reading and experiments. Daily note-taking, assignments, reports, term papers, and eventually their theses must be submitted in order to fulfill the completion of their study.

The system of evaluation in Sammāsikkhalaya Wangjivit is not less tough. It comprises of four stages as follow:- self-evaluation, colleague's evaluation, community members' evaluation, and gurus (facilitators)' evaluation.

A minimum period of six years is required for a student to complete his study at Wangjivit. But anyone can remain a 'nisit' without time limit as long as he is trustworthy in keeping eight precepts. Such lengthy period of the study process gives a nisit enough time to change himself into a good person permanently.

Non-Formal Education Model for Self-Reliance

Based on Asoke's concept, the non-formal education model for self-reliance has eventually been developed by the researcher of this thesis. It is composed of five elements :-

principles, objectives, contents, activities, and evaluation. The composite can be abbreviated into one word "EREMITE" an old Anglo-Saxon term meaning 'HERMIT'.

E = Education (lifelong and continuing)

The main principle of the non-formal education for self-reliant community development is life-long learning to develop one's behavior, work, and knowledge. Because of natural differences in human learning ability, facilitators, well-cultivated with educational pursuit, are definitely needed.

R = Renunciation

Since the genuine educational objective of this model is to renounce all defilement, the real barriers of human effectiveness, the more successful one is in so-doing, the more useful would he become to society.

E = Eightfold Path

The emphasis of the Buddhist Principle of the Noble Eightfold Path is undoubtedly the way towards the goal. It consists of understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

MI = Mission

For this model, daily routines are the best educational activities. Through it, one can learn to change his way of life (Eightfold Path), and make it sustainably righteous. However, it would work well only if a learner tries his best to check and recheck continuously his behavior according to the Noble Eightfold Path.

Should at any moment an element of the composite principle in him went astray, he must be mindful to put it right immediately. This betterment of course needs long practice.

Apart from daily routines, following commitments should be added for the learners to activate :-

1. a diary keeping for self-revision self-improvement'.
2. group meetings of learners for advice-exchange.
3. community meetings for the teaching and learning process development
Community members who are not learners would at the same time be beneficial.
4. self-directed learning and knowledge sharing according to learners' diversified interests. This channel of knowledge as well as information should be extended to community members for the sake of the improvement of their skill in listening, reading, speaking, writing, and thinking.
5. advice-seeking with gurus in order to share and exchange experiences and ideas.
This two way betterment is needed for this model.

TE = Team Evaluation

Learners and facilitators would both benefit from team evaluation. The first would know their drawbacks while the latter would be able to use such drawbacks in adjusting the teaching process to suit each learner.

Evaluating each learner all round by concerning team would give the best adaptation of study process. The team mentioned consist of learners, community members, and all facilitators.

Although team evaluation is rather complicated and time consuming, the result is more justified than by using only examination papers or by guru's opinion.

The researcher deliberately used EREMITE with this model of non-formal education for self-reliance based on Asoke's concept. EREMITE is an old English term for the today "HERMIT". The explanation of the usage is that the products produced by this model are highly cultivated persons with nine qualities.

Educators may think that EREMITE model would work only with religious community as the Asoke. But, in fact, it is not so. EREMITE can be adapted to suit all kinds of people even those who do not intend to be educated in this way. However, it must be stressed that with those who have an intention to change themselves, the model will definitely be more fruitful.

In application, EREMITE would give best result if facilitators are well cultivated with will to cause sustainable change in the learners.

The length of time in managing the process, together with community participation, are also essential in making EREMITE highly effective.

It must be stated clearly at this point that this report is only initial finding. The researcher is confident that after having analyzed and synthesized a great number of the data left, the conclusion of the research must be much clearer. At the same time the proposed model will be developed up to the stage of easier utilization.

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