

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT: THE PRACTICAL BUDDHISM IN KENGTUNG

Petcharat Lovichakorntikul^{[a]*}

^[a] lecturer at Stamford International University, Bangkok, Thailand,

* Author for correspondence; e-mail: petcharat.lovichakorntikul@stamford.edu

Abstract

People around the world are all looking for happiness. Where can we find the happiness and how can we reach it? It is not easy to define the word of “happiness” and to make this meaning to be acceptable for all people since different people have different ideas of happiness. The most important part is how to measure the level of happiness that is still questionable at this present as well. We, however, can notice that most of people from developed countries who have good education fully with high technology equipment and easily connected with the whole world at the tip of their fingers coming to the oriental countries and searching for something that are missing from their lives. Some of them are fascinated with the natural beauty, and touched by generous hearts of eastern people. Moreover, they have settled down in the land of tranquility and have a peaceful life in the continent of Asia. Kengtung is one of the charismatic places for heritage tourism and ecotourism. People who travel to Kengtung can explore the lifestyle of local people including their faith, beliefs, cultures, and happiness in their everyday life related to Buddhism. They really adore and pay high respect to Buddhism and Buddhist monks. Once we go there, we can touch the true peacefulness surrounded by Kengtung people. Hence, Kengtung is the region that individual is able to practice Buddhism and attain the inner happiness in order to cultivate their personality towards a religious or spiritual desired for the better quality of life.

Keywords: Buddhism, happiness, Kengtung, peace, spiritual development

Introduction

On the spiritual development, some people might focus on the development of personality towards a religious or spiritual desired for the better personality, whereas it could be questionable how human beings are able to develop their spiritual skills. To answer to this inquiry, a person

must be accepting of the phenomena and must continually look for spiritual influence in one's life in the form of coincidences, instincts, and other unusual phenomena. In this way individual will increase his or her awareness of spiritual influence in one's life and notice more and more the activity of his or her spiritual skills (Anonymous, 2017). According to Almaas (2012), the process of spiritual development, which is the maturation of the human being, can be divided into two complementary facets. One is the self-realization of Being in its various aspects and manifestations, and the other is the integration this self-realization in the everyday life of a human person. In this academic paper, the researcher will be focusing on the spiritual development in terms of how local people in Kengtung follow and practice Buddhism on their daily basis.

Kengtung: The Peaceful City in Myanmar

Myanmar is the second largest country of Southeast Asia. It was divided into states and districts. Each states is different in terms of art and culture. Kengtung has a unique culture, especially people who live in Kengtung. In addition, Kengtung is one of the safest cities in Shan State. Although people comprise various races and religions, they are living together in harmony. Majority of people are Tai Khun. They are gentle and peaceful. Tai Khun people have settled down in Kengtung for a very long time. People in Kengtung have been living on self-sufficient basis for centuries. Each household grow rice and vegetables, raise some poultry, and barely has to pay any expenses. It is still a generous and sharing society until this present (Singboorana, 2016).

Kengtung is located in the Shan States in Myanmar (Burma). It is the largest, most mountainous, most easterly, and culturally the farthest from the Burmese, of all the Shan States. It is quite difficult to reach Kengtung from within Myanmar because of its geography; on the other hand, it is close to China and Thailand instead. Due to the diversity in the area, including Chinese and Thai influences, Kengtung has multiple spellings – including Kyaing Tong, Chiang Tung, Cheingtung and Kengtong. About 63% of the area lies in the basin of the Mekong River and 37% in the Salween drainage area (Agency, 2017) (Wikipedia, 2017).

Infrastructure and public transportation from the government are the basic need for local people in general. Anyway, Kengtung people have

learned to struggle and to survive on their own feet, for example they use the natural hydro power to produce the electricity for their household usage and pounding the paddy for their daily life consumption (Thaworn, 2009). To face with the blackout every day or several times a day is their ordinary situation.

The Way of Life and Belief in Kengtung

According to Singboorana (2016), population of Kengtung comprises various races, so it is no surprise to see Tai Khun, Tai Yai, Burmese, Akhe, and Palaung gathering in the community. Kengtung is a small township with neither industrial factory nor department store. Most of the manufactured products are from agricultural trade. Imported products are from neighboring countries like Thailand and China. One good thing that tourists feel very impressed about Kengtung is about shopping in Kengtung and paying at the equal amount of local people. Although Kengtung is diverse in terms of ethnicity, but they all live together cohesively. Moreover, Kengtung is also diverse in terms of religion, but they never have any conflicts even though they had different cultures and beliefs. Accordingly, in the past, Kengtung was a prosperous principal town. Foreign people came to do their business and settled down there.

Singboorana (2016) also mentioned that Padaeng Muslim Community is the biggest Muslim Community in Kengtung, consists of approximately 250 Muslim households. It is the location of Kengtung Mosque which is about 130 years old according to its local history. Furthermore, there are tremendous of Christians in Kengtung, and most of them are tribal people. In the rural area, there are Christian churches scattered in tribal villages. Whereas most of Buddhist Tai Khun and Tai Yai live in a simple Buddhist way without any competition.

Modern entertainments have influences only on young generation and do not cause any negative effects. Simple recreational activities that ordinary people choose are talking, walking, and exercising around Naung Tung (the large pond located at the center of Kengtung). As a result, visitors feel the simplicity in Kengtung's lifestyle. Generally, Kengtung people have a simple life. They are self-sufficient and barely indebted because there is no installment system. If they want to buy expensive goods, they have to save money and pay by cash only. Rice is Kengtung's important economic crop. Farmers grow rice at least twice a year because of its abun-

dance in natural resources. They plant vegetables for their household consumption and for sale at “Kad” which means market (Singboorana, 2016).

The Challenges in Kengtung

It is true that only if we have a mobile phone, we will be able to access to the social media in the globalization era very easily. What is happening is that we have to face with a challenge to preserve unique culture, traditional arts, and a strong bondage in religion of local people in Kengtung among the current flow of Western culture. In the past, Kengtung was a prosperous capital of this region. Recently, everything has changed due to the political situation. Only the people’s faith in Buddhism is remaining in Kengtung.

Fortunately, there are monastery institutions that push their efforts to preserve their traditional arts and culture. According to having more than 300 temples in Kengtung, each temple has its own typical style that is deferent from others. Wat (means “temple”) Inbuppharam where is known as “Wat In” by Kengtung people is one of the oldest temples of Tai Khun. Moreover, it is the center of restoration and preservation of Tai Khun culture initiated by Kruba Kampira, the abbot of Wat In (Singboorana, 2016).

Buddhism in Kengtung

Buddhism is composed of three elements which are the Lord Buddha, Dharma (the Lord Buddha’s teachings), and Sangha (Buddhist monks). At this present, there are merely two components: Dharma and Sangha. It is completely proved that Buddhism in Myanmar is very resilient and stable due to their strong belief and practices in Buddhism.

Nowadays, Kengtung is renowned for the city of hundreds of Buddhist temples. However, there is no clear evidence when Buddhism first came into Kengtung but the historians had estimated that people in Kengtung have strongly believed in Buddhism for thousands of years. The primary stage of Buddhism prosperity in Kengtung was during the time when it was ruled by Sawbwa (the royal family) because every Sawbwa had to support and prolong the Buddhism. In the past, Sawbwa of Kengtung had to study Dharma and ordained at Wat Ho Khong Monastery where is located at the center of Kengtung. Wat Ho Khong Monastery is an old temple

and becomes the center of Buddhist people in Kengtung in terms of the bondage between their heart and faithfulness (Singboorana, 2016).

There are around 100 Tai Khun temples in Kengtung where they have different architectures from Burmese temples whereas their architectures have the similar style and pattern as the Lanna decoration in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Additionally, they use the same Pali language in praying and chanting as in Thailand does. Due to the elongated history, Kengtung people had a close relationship with Chiang Mai people as well.

Singboorana (2016) also suggested one of the attractive places for tourists to pay homage to is Mahamyatmuni temple, also known by the local people as “Phra Jao Luang Temple” where Luang Sakeng Buddha image is enshrined inside. This temple was built during the Sao Kawng Kiao Intaleng’s period. In Myanmar, there are many replicas of Mahamyatmuni Buddha but the one at Kengtung is the most beautiful one. In addition, Wat Phra That Zom Kham is about 1,200 years old that is the oldest temple in Kengtung. Inside the golden pagoda, Buddha’s hair relic was enshrined and it is greatly respectable for Kengtung people.

The opposite side of Wat Phra That Zom Kham, there is a magnificent standing image of Buddha known as “Yat Thaw Mu” in Wat Zom Sak. This Buddha statue has a right hand pointing towards Kengtung, as a blessing for people and the city to be prosperous while the left hand holding his robe, as an important symbol that Buddhism will be always within this city. Additionally, it is believed that anyone who takes a picture of Yat Thaw Mu’s finger pointing at individual’s head it will bring a good fortune to one’s life. We could assume that people in Kengtung are highly faithful in Buddhism. No matter where we go to villages or communities, we will see temples everywhere.

The faith in Buddhism of Kengtung people is not limited to establishing religious places, building temples, or maintaining temples, but they also prolong Buddhism in their daily life’s practice (Singboorana, 2016).

Practical Buddhism in Kengtung Lifestyle

Mostly, Myanmar Buddhists go to the temple almost every day. Some of them regularly go to temples several times in one day (Singboorana, 2016). For example, on the Buddhist holy day, they get up very

early like at 3:00 a.m. and go to do the “Face Wash” of the Buddha statue. Afterwards, they offer breakfast to the monk in the morning and they go to talk with the Buddhist monks in the afternoon as well as they go to practice the silence meditation at the main shrine in the evening with their family members including young children and grandparents. It is like their typical practice in everyday life. Every tourists will normally see this picture at every temple in Kengtung.

Furthermore, Kengtung people are quite similar to elderly Thai Buddhists in the countryside in terms of they usually go to the temple on Buddhist holy days and the special occasion of Buddhist festivals especially during the Songkran Water Festival (the Burmese, Thai, Laos, and Cambodian New Year) and the end of Buddhist lent (the end of raining season). Formally, the Buddhist holy days (the wax and the wane of the moon) are the official holidays in Myanmar. Hence, they have two days off for their holidays in every month no matter what day it will fall on such as if the Buddhist holy (the full moon day) falls on Monday, then on that Monday, it is an official holiday except the small business or the service industry are still open. Most of them go to the temple to make merit.

In the old days, Thai people used to practice in this way like the Kengtung people are doing at this present. However, this practical way of Thai Buddhist people was changed and it is quite rarely to find it except in the rural or remote area of Thailand. On the other hand, everyone can see this performing in Kengtung commonly because they practice Dharma seriously and effectively use the Dharma in their daily lives.

Why Buddhism is very Strong in Kengtung?

Kengtung people value Buddhism and practice Buddhism in their everyday life and finally it became their norm, tradition, culture, and way of life. In the past, there were not enough schools, as a result Kengtung people have sent their children to receive the formal education at temples by being a Buddhist novice. It is also the parents’ ultimate dream that to have their children in a monkhood and to take part in maintaining the Buddhism in their country (Singboorana, 2016).

As stated by Singboorana (2016), after the political situation had been resolved, many temples were transformed to the monastery institutions. Education in Myanmar became more systematic and scripture

schools were officially established. The reason why Buddhism in Kengtung is dramatically strong because it has a strong Buddhist society in Kengtung. Everyone including the old and young generation often go to the temple to make merit as well as young boys are usually ordained to be novices.

Every morning at the temple, Buddhists come together to offer foods to hundreds of monks and novices who are studying at the temple. After the breakfast, all novices have to get together and clean up the temple. Everyone has a duty to complete the chores and this way is also the method to implant good habits to young people to get used to cleanliness and taking care of their responsibilities. After that, they can attend the regular classroom.

On the word of Singboorana (2016), people of Kengtung, including Tai Yai and Tai Khun, have a common belief that they prefer their sons to be under the Buddhist umbrella by being ordained for at least one time. Therefore, when the boy turns to ten years of age, he will be ordained as a novice because it is believed that the merit of being a novice will send his father to go to the heaven. And if the boy still stays in a monkhood until he becomes a monk (at the age of 20), the merit will send his mother to the heaven. On the contrary, Thai people have a different thinking on this issue. Thai Buddhists believe that the merit of being ordained from their son(s) as a novice or as a monk will take both parents to the heaven eventually.

Nevertheless, novices graduated from the monastery institution mostly continue their studying in Buddhist university in Yangon or go to further study in Thailand. Once they turn to 20, they will attend an ordination ceremony in order to prolong Buddhism in Kengtung.

Sang Long ceremony known among Thai Khun people as a festival of the Crystal Sons to be ordained as a young Buddhist novice, starts from March until April of every year. It is still a beautiful tradition of Buddhist people in Kengtung. People who attend this ceremony will attain the great merit and also a famous festival. Whenever this ceremony is held, the villagers will come together to help the host. The atmosphere will be full of ecstasy of parents and the joy of people in the community. This event will be last long in Kengtung and will be preserved as their tradition (Singboorana, 2016).

The World-PEC Program in Kengtung

One of the virtue programs to promote the moral education and world peace through young students is the World-PEC (or the World Peace Ethics Contest) program which was organized by the World Peace Ethics Club. It has a good intention and pure objectives on cultivating ethics and morality to young generation who will be the future of our world regardless of their nationalities, races, religions, beliefs, faiths, age, gender, and education. As a result, they can use these moral principles as their guidelines in their daily life to continuously pursue success and happiness. Since we view Buddhism as a way of life and a universal philosophy for living, hence it can be integrated into any culture and religious practice (World Peace Ethics, 2016).

According to the old saying states that the mind of children are like a blank canvas. The way that parents, teachers, and adults around them “paint a masterpiece” in order to create good people to have a happy life and bright future is very important. Therefore, we need to begin teaching them how to differentiate the right things from the wrong ones and what is merit and sin as well as the polite manner and etiquette that are very necessary to live in this world. It would say that ethics, morality, mindset, and attitude are the basic principles which we need to cultivate to our children at an early age. Consequently, we will ensure these new generation will grow up to be good children in their own families, good students in their schools, and good citizens in their society and country. Eventually, they will be the global citizens who will bring prosperity, true happiness and peace for the whole world (Thanavuddho, 2013).

This program was first established in Kengtung in March 2016 and it was very successful because there were hundreds of teenagers who attended the program by participating in the World-PEC contest which had two parts to complete. The first one was the written examination to measure on their Dharma knowledge, principles, morality, and ethics. The second part was the group activities to measure on their manner, etiquette, and moral practice based on the Universal Goodness 5 (UG 5) which are composed of cleanliness, orderliness, politeness, timeliness, and mediation. This program encourage all participants to experience Dharma teaching, morality, mindfulness, concentration, and peaceful mind in the real practice. Lastly, all of them felt joyful, happy and connected to each other. They had more awareness on the Buddha’s teachings and valued more on

Buddhism in their region. Finally, they would like to preserve and prolong Buddhism as long as they can and will deliver to the next generation. It is just like the sunrise that drives away all the darkness and illuminates all living beings to see everything obviously. Dharma knowledge is like the inner wisdom to brighten individual's insight. As a result, everyone will be bright and the world will be bright eventually.

Feedback from Participants and Parents

From the researcher's interview and observation, most of participants who attended this program shared their perspectives and more understanding on practical Buddhism in their daily life. They could focus on their study and had more concentration and mindfulness in whatever they performed. Furthermore, they felt happy and highly adored to Buddhism.

While one of the parents whose daughter attended this program mentioned that, "I like this program and it helped my daughter became more responsible and kinder to other people. She learned the most important value of life. I strongly recommend this exercise to everyone." Whereas another one stated that, "We are glad to see this program is making an effort to implant ethical and moral values into the minds of young kids. We understand that this will help in the overall development of the children's personality. We, as parents, would like to extend our gratitude towards this effort to the organizer and all the management team, teachers as well as supporters."

Habit Development Process

According to Phrarajbhavanajarn (2014) demonstrated about the Lord Buddha's teaching on individual which pinpoints that everyone should stand on one's own feet, therefore each individual should practice the basic moral good deeds in order to stand on their own legs. The model below will summarize the process of habit development that will be helpful for anyone to cultivate ethics and morality into their mind. No matter what nationality they are or what religion they believe, this basic goodness will enhance the peaceful world for everyone and create a good working environment for each organization when they live and work together. Afterwards, it will be a positive impact on the world's atmosphere as a whole (Lovichakorntikul & Walsh, 2015).

The way to implant good habits and moral education to oneself is the process of self-development and spiritual development as well. Everyone needs more encouragement to follow the footsteps of the Lord Buddha. Anyone who follows the Lord Buddha's sermons and teachings beginning with the right view or the right understanding, eventually he or she will reach the stage of "enlightenment" or "inner wisdom" regardless of his or her nationalities, religions, ages, genders, and level of education (Phrabhavanaviriyakhun, 2002). Nonetheless, it is not too difficult to practice it. Figure 1 illustrates the procedure starting from the easiest method and from the first step to another then finally individual can do better and better and will reach the destination.

This model was implemented for the young generation in Kengtung during their practice and participation in the World-PEC contest which came up with the fruitful success.

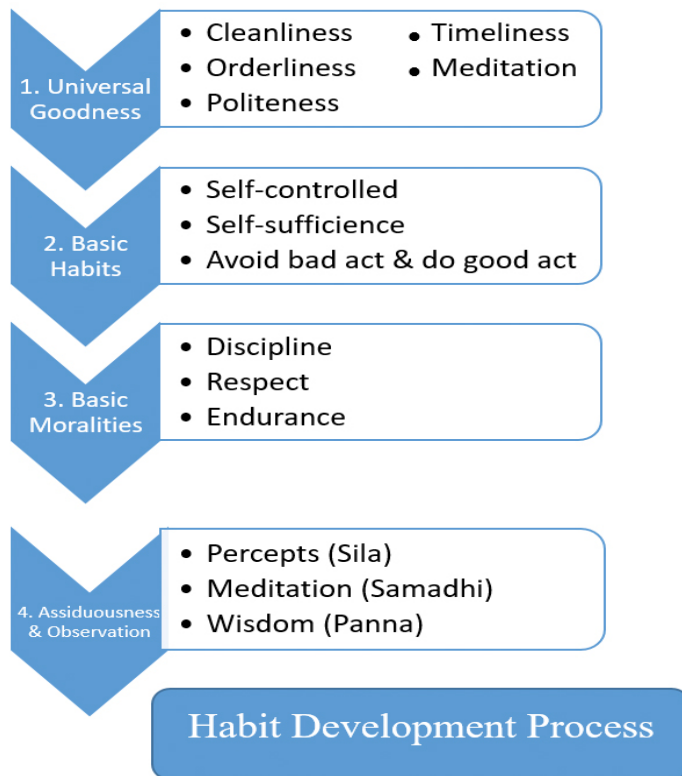


Figure 1 Habit Development Process; Source: Phrarajbhavanajarn (2014)

Conclusion

Kengtung is one of the destination places for tourists or anyone who would like to search for the peaceful place and generous people with kind hearts. Their walk of life is very normal, simple, easy, joyful, and humble. They live with nature and by nature, no matter how the world and technology are changing, at this moment; they still are the same as they have been since the old days. However, it is not guaranteed that their stereotype lifestyle will be exactly the same as in the previous time if they have received more influences from the outside world such as technology, social impact, economy change, and influx of tourists which we can see some examples from other places.

One thing that if the Kengtung people can preserve their norm, tradition, culture, faith, and belief in Buddhism and they still practice their routine life regularly, the researcher strongly believes that everyone who has an opportunity to visit Kengtung, he or she will be impressed and will be touched by friendly and nice Kengtung people. This is one of the happy places on earth where everyone can reach by oneself and experience on one's own. Lastly, the researcher would recommend to implementing the above model to new generation in Kengtung for their bright future and the sustainable development of Buddhism in that region. Moreover, this kind of development will increase not only spiritual enhancement but also the economic growth according to the surge number of tourists annually.

In summary, the researcher has intended that the benefits from this study will stimulate anyone whether or not he or she is Buddhist to be interested in enhancing the spiritual development and attaining the inner wisdom as well as happiness for their own purposes.

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