

Note : A Buddhist Perspective on an Alternative Approach for Upholding the Dignity of Children in the Midst of Globalization*

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Attention to dignity of children is most needed where it is most difficult to guarantee. This paper aims to present a Buddhist perspective on an alternative approach for upholding the dignity of children in the midst of globalization. It is partly based on “Educational Management and Propagation of Buddhist Teachings of Temples in Bangkok and Patoomtani Province, (2002)” and “Directory of Organizations Working on Child Rights and Protection in Thailand, (2003).”

Globalization and the Dignity of Children.

It is very obvious right now that anxiety about globalization exists in advanced and developing countries. At its most basic, there seems to be nothing alarming about globalization. The term is widely used, reflecting scientific and technological progresses that have made possible all efficiency and effectiveness. However, it has been realized that globalization works both ways; that is globalization has generated both positive and negative impacts. Living conditions have improved significantly in virtually all countries. Yet, the strongest gains have been made by the advanced countries and only some of the developing countries. Everybody can now enjoy all kinds of pleasure and extreme wealth.

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Children are not an exception under the influence of globalization. They may be able to reach their maximum potential physically, intellectually, and spiritually. Most children may have a happy childhood. But what about some? Obviously, we can say that globalization makes ways for children to go everywhere. As a matter of fact, we can also say that the more streets, the more street children. While children are affected by globalization, will they fully gain their dignity and be able to live without being exploited or abused?

To a certain extent, Thai society nowadays shows more vigilance for, and awareness of, the need to protect child rights and welfare, which results in clearer and more concrete procedures for helping children who are abused, or whose other rights are violated.

Child Protection Act of Thailand 2003 gives emphasis to every category of children, which includes those who are normal, at risk, abused, in need of special care, delinquent, and criminal. Besides, organizations working with children, no matter whether they belong to public, private, or civic sectors, are now in a large number all over the country.

A Group of ‘Normal Children’

Here in this paper, let's focus on a group of children who are categorized as ‘normal children’. They are normal because they are the majority group of children who live in big cities or towns. And a large number of them are in average families. They go to school from Monday to Friday. And on Saturdays and Sundays, most of them have extra tutorial classes; they are cramming for entrance examinations at all levels of education, starting from kindergarten to university. Actually, normal children have normally been in classrooms for seven days a week.

Apart from studying, some of them may have music or swimming classes. Some of them may chat on computer, or play computer games. Certainly, their lives are very well equipped with all kinds of necessities and even more. Things like mobile phones, digital cameras, computer notebooks, etc, are so common to them.

By analogy, ‘instant streets’ have already been built for ‘normal children’ to go. Their parents, relatives, brothers and sisters, together with friends and teachers are people who are looking forward to seeing them get along the streets to the golden goals of their lives.

‘Normal children’ have to pass all that are expected by those people around them. They are to study in well-known schools, get good grades, and be able to enter top-ten universities. The goals of their lives may perfectly fit to expectations. However, should this step of the lives of the normal children be considered as good lives?

Kalyanamittata

As human beings, children have dignity because they have the ‘Buddha Nature’, the potential to free their mind from defilement--to be spiritually developed, in other words. Therefore, as Kalyanamittata, adults are not supposed only to avoid impeding, but also to promote the children’s actualization of the potential.

According to Buddhist Teachings, *Kalyanamittata* is the first component of the Auroras of a good life, or the dawn of education. *Kalyanamittata* means having good friends. *Kalyanamitta* are persons or social environment which encourages one to learn and develop communication and relations with people through goodwill, to have faith to follow good examples, and to know how to utilize external resources for seeking knowledge and virtue for one’s life development, problem solving and constructive action. Therefore, parents are regarded as *Kalyanamitta* in the family, as well as good teachers at school. The temple community and the monks are also *Kalyanamitta*.

Buddhist Virtuous Community

Buddhist temple used to be the center of everyday Thais’ lives, including education. However, modernization has shifted its locus to the periphery. Now under the state’s supervision, formal education is facing severe criticisms for its failure to develop children as humans, and its promotion of superficial and consumerist attitudes among students, both of which contribute to

social problems such as student prostitution, and formation of teen gangs for criminal purposes like kidnapping and raping, and robbery, and motorbicycle racing on public roads at night.

Fully aware of the religion's significant role in human development, many monks have initiated a movement to re-introduce religious doctrines and practices into the Thais' ways of life with the main focus on the moral and spiritual development for children. The attempt is made with the hope that children will gain more respect in their dignity. These monks offer training programs that support such idea in different aspects and levels. That is, some programs focus on the aspect of Sila (moral conduct), some on Samadhi (concentration), and some on Panna (Wisdom).

For example, Wat Raja-Orasaram organizes a Samadhi-Training Program for high school students. This program is run by a group of Buddhist assemblies consisting of monks, school-teachers and parents. The Buddha- Putra Training Program is a program dealing with practicing properly according to ten courses of wholesome action (Kusala - Kamma). This program is held at Wat Panyanantaram in Patoomtani province. Moreover, a Buddhist Sunday School at Wat Anongharam which is the oldest center of its kind is one of the many places where children can train themselves following the Buddha's teaching. This school is partially supported by a group of Anongharam Assemblies.

Despite the new Education Act (1999)'s indication of religious institution's educational role, concrete mechanisms and supports are yet to come. Therefore, those monks have to struggle with limited resources available to them. An effective strategy that many have adopted to overcome this scarcity so far is to create a 'virtuous community'. The 'virtuous community' is here coined to designate a group of people who share a common social bond and behave like community members, but do not belong to the same specific geographical setting. It is similar to a network except that it is not formally organized and does not have many well-organized groups. Participants usually comprise members of the three groups: temple, family, and school. The abbot of the temple is the leader; children or students the beneficiary; parents and teachers the benefactors.

A general pattern of the emergence of such community has a monk with vision and leadership at the center. Usually, he is an abbot because the Thai laws of ecclesiastical affairs bestow this position with an authority of temple management. When his plan to run a program of child development is successfully communicated to laity, contributions come in financial, material, and labor forms, including technical knowledge and technology until the plan are realized. In the first phase, these laity are limited to those close to the abbot. However, the number of supporters later spirals. For example, many parents of those children who participate in the program later become benefactors; or those who hear about the program's success may offer helps. These supporters may not frequent the temple, but each time a program is to start, they gather, often in alternate, to contribute in various forms.

Because innovative ideas are not easily accepted, the formation of such community is vital. For example, in case of Wat Panyanantaram temple, people from surrounding communities still expect the temple to take care of religious ceremonies like funerals, and festivals with various kinds of entertainment. However, the abbot aims at revolting the temple's roles and so does not conform with these expectations. He, for instance, refuses to allow the use of the temple's area to hold a festival because he does not want the religion to take part in promoting people's mistaking the causes of suffering for happiness. He also wants to use the temple's area mainly for educational, not ritual, purposes. Therefore, it is not hard to see that, without rituals and festivals, supports can not be drawn from the surrounding communities.

Conclusion

If the midst of globalization is neither good nor bad, why do not we end up with the building of virtuous communities as an alternative approach? Virtuous communities are not about reinventing something, but they have already been built voluntarily and effectively through the Buddhist Teachings on *Kalyanamittata* which means the state of being good friends and good circumstances. *Kalyanamitta*, the first component of the auroras of a good life, or the dawn of education, can guarantee children's good lives in future.

Thus, having *Good lives* can lead children to self-actualization, knowing themselves, and they can act accordingly to the dignity they own.

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