

EDUCATION CRITIQUE



Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

A 'Message from Suan Mokkh'

Education Critique



by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Messages from Suan Mokkh Series – No. 1

Education Critique

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Translated from the Thai by Santikaro Upasaka

ศึกษาวิจารณ์

This article was prepared in 1988 by Ajahn Buddhadāsa as part of a series of six pamphlets to be distributed at a major exhibition on his life and work organized by Ajahn Runjuan Indarakamhaeng and other students at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. Subsequently, all six pamphlets were first published in 1990 by Vuddhidhamma Fund as *Messages of Truth from Suan Mokkh*.

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Anumodanā

To all Dhamma comrades, those helping to spread Dhamma:

Break out the funds to spread Dhamma to let faithful trust flow,
Broadcast majestic Dhamma to radiate long living joy.
Release unexcelled Dhamma to tap the spring of virtue,
Let safely peaceful delight flow like a cool mountain stream.
Dhamma leaves of many years sprouting anew, reaching out,
To unfold and bloom in the Dhamma centers of all towns.
To spread lustrous Dhamma and in hearts glorified plant it,
Before long, weeds of sorrow, pain, and affliction will flee.
As virtue revives and resounds throughout Thai society,
All hearts feel certain love toward those born, aging, and dying.
Congratulations and blessings to all Dhamma comrades,
You who share Dhamma to widen the people's prosperous joy.
Heartiest appreciation from Buddhādāsa Indapaṇṇo,
Buddhist Science ever shines beams of Bodhi long lasting.
In grateful service, fruits of merit and wholesome successes,
Are all devoted in honor to Lord Father Buddha.
Thus may the Thai people be renowned for their virtue,
May perfect success through Buddhist science awaken their hearts.
May the King and his family live long in triumphant strength,
May joy long endure throughout this our world upon earth.

Buddha dāsa

*Mokkhabalārāma
Chaiya, 2 November 2530 (1987)
Translated by Santikaro Bhikkhu
3 February 2531 (1988)*

Foreword

This pamphlet was written for educated Bangkokians, including the many educators involved in the original exhibition at Thailand's oldest university, which was vivacious and well attended.

Some of the points raised in this article will sit uneasy with modern readers, especially in the West. After all, Ajahn Buddhādāsa is criticizing many modern developments and ideals that we identify with — democracy, reason, mass education, human rights, gender equality, and so on. This editor is not in full agreement with every perspective he gives. Nonetheless, I find them worth listening to, if only because they challenge assumptions that we hold dearly.

Some readers may wish to dismiss him; you are free to do so. He did not expect or demand to be heeded. If, however, readers who are serious students of Buddhism, religion, or spirituality, might do well to suspend judgment and try to look at our modern situation in ways that may seem old fashioned or reactionary. You may find that Tan Ajahn was more “ahead of his time” than we are, probably because he is more firmly grounded in his own reality than we are.

Santikaro

Education Critique¹

*An article written on 29 March 2531 (1988)
at Suan Mokkhabalārāma, Chaiya*

Education guides each person's life, such that it is the same as the creator of the world. Yet, human beings are the very ones who arrange education for themselves or collaborate in leading themselves in what seems to follow the Buddhist principle of self-reliance. Here we find a most important issue that must be thoroughly considered and critiqued: In what direction are we leading ourselves?

What first strikes our attention is that we find only **the kind of education that promotes cleverness**, but hardly ever encounter anything that might control such cleverness. People are very clever in terms of their intelligence, vocations, technology, and whatever else helps them acquire the wealth and power that are necessary ingredients for the success desired by their defilements and facilitated by self-centered freedom. These result in minds following a lower course as they pursue their economic, political, social, and cooperative ventures/activities.

¹ More than any other article in this collection, this chapter focuses on the Thai situation and is somewhat constrained by the time period leading up to when this was dictated. This has posed difficulties for a translator who is aware that most readers will be in the West more than a decade after Tan Ajahn made these points. I have chosen to translate the text pretty much as he dictated it and have added notes to provide context. The Afterword will elaborate ...

They cause both hot and cold wars throughout every corner of the world. Ecological devastation, the loss of natural resources, the destruction of public benefits, and even corruption are rampant everywhere. There are all sorts of things that should never have occurred in the first place, such as narcotics and strange new diseases. The number of prisons, police stations, courthouses, mental hospitals, and psychiatric wards never decreases; on the contrary, they are increasing much more rapidly than population growth. Material progress has grown excessive such as we see in the current problems of the world, and which causes either people exploiting each other or their struggling to avoiding and correct such exploitation.

Education today still cannot get rid of the animal instincts in human beings; even more, such instincts are unwittingly promoted. Lacking the capacity to solve our problems non-violently, we use force like beasts that lack any opportunity to use their brains. We are thus in a state of blocking our own path to peace and spiritual advancement, leaving us with only material and physical progress. Consequently, the world is full of economic animals, political animals, and social animals, without any civilized animals or noble beings. Human intelligence has fallen slave to materialism, which naturally leads to competition and conflict, and eventually to war. Wars break out unnecessarily without consideration for morality or the shared religious values that both warring parties claim to uphold.

These simple facts make inhabitants of the modern world incomparably more harmful and dangerous than their so-called “primitive” ancestors. The “savages” of the prehistoric past would have thousands of reasons to tease and ridicule their “civilized” descendents of today. The more progress we make, the more deranged and lacking in peace we are. So we are faced with permanent crisis. The more electricity we use, the more darkened our minds become; the more ice we consume, the more hot-hearted we are. The more convenient our communication technologies, the more we must suffer crime and accidents.

We have only the kind of education that promotes selfishness without our being aware of it. This is because such education is organized by those who are selfish. This, in turn, results from education that merely promotes intelligence without any restraints upon that intelligence, as mentioned above. It is organized so one-sidedly as to forget restraints on selfishness. In this respect, we can say that **selfishness is the actual organizer of modern education**. The more organized it is, the more selfish it becomes, until people split into factions to compete with one another for domination of the world. Selfishness has made democracy into a dangerous system that provides unequalled freedom to act selfishly in pursuit of personal gain. As an obvious example, selfish people vote for selfish representatives, who, in turn, constitute a selfish parliament. Such a parliament can only set up a government consisting of selfish persons. You can imagine for yourselves what will follow.

Selfishness is a threat to the existing democratic system, making it infirm and unsteady, causing it to deteriorate or even collapse before we know it. Selfishness overwhelms democracy with conflicts, such as opposition parties that blindly oppose everything as a result of their selfishness. Actually, democracy is not an appropriate system for selfish people; it is only for those who are suitably educated enough to be unselfish. Giving democracy to a society in which people are not adequately educated is tantamount to offering them a knife to slit their own throats. Some speakers maintain that providing democracy to people will make them progress, but there is nobody among the selfish who can bring about such a result, except by managing the kind of education that can control selfishness-causing intelligence and brings about genuine intelligence, that is, unselfish intelligence.

In short, education that has no control over cleverness is a threat to democracy. Another way to put it is that it makes democracy dangerous without even knowing so. What a pity that democracy cannot flourish in the present world because education is ineffective in eliminating selfishness.

At present, we have the same education for boys and girls.

This is unnatural and is risky for the development of humanity. To speak metaphorically, we are populating the world with neuters, that is, there are neither women nor men, neither fathers nor mothers. Consider the human body that God or Nature created. In particular, women have the duties of pregnancy and child-birth, while men have responsibility for taking care of their families. Together, they function as a cooperative. The result has been species survival and further human evolution, which is quite satisfactorily when viewed over the long-term. So long as neither partner is deficient in their duties, humanity progresses without troubles, especially the problem of men and women competing for the same jobs and duties. Such unnatural competition and conflict between the sexes ought never to happen.

Women have the duty of raising the best possible children so that they can be good world citizens. Men take responsibility to provide for everything that the family needs, without women having to work outside their homes. If women have other work, they should do it at home together with raising the children, seeing the latter as the most honorable work, that is, **raising good human beings**. Nowadays, children grow up without direction in life and readiness to be complete human beings because they are brought up by servants or by those with insufficient knowledge and true love for them. Children thus grow up like machines, lacking good moral and cultural foundations. Women should receive the best possible education in order for them to be the best possible mothers. They should not be made to feel slighted that the work of child-rearing is without honor and status, because of blind faith in a simplistic and shortsighted version of human rightism that has no clue why human beings were born.²

² The ideal family described here is very similar to the one in which Ajahn Buddhadasa was raised. His mother was a strong woman by no means dominated by her husband; she and he each took care of different aspects of the family home and economy. One might argue that the situation would be different for peasant farmers, not to

When people of both sexes have the same duties, the world lacks both men and women, as well as fathers and mothers in the true sense of these words. That is, all are neutered and shut their eyes to their own particular duties. So let's have institutions, culture, and education that develop femininity and masculinity fully, with men having the highest male capabilities and women having the highest female capabilities. Together, they cooperate in unity to carry out the duties of humanity in the truest sense of the word, that is, human beings are the animal with hearts and minds above and beyond all problems and the creation of new problems, which are the same as digging holes in which to bury ourselves.³

In modern times, **we have a kind of education that has separated itself from religion**, for religion is considered an impediment to material progress. In this age of materialism, education is no longer integrated with religion. Westerners initiated this dissociation; we Thais followed suit⁴ through lacking sufficient knowledge of ourselves and what is called “*sāsana*” (religion). It is now generally accepted that whoever wants to study a religion can learn it on their own. This, however, is very difficult and hasn't a strong enough foundation. Therefore, young people lack a firm orientation for their spiritual needs and emotional security, while lacking connection with their cultural heritage, which must have religion at its core. Otherwise, we end up with another form of culture that can never suffice as spiritual

mention people living in the modern economy. In the latter case, some inequalities can be blamed on the structure of the economy, as much as on gender roles in the home. Further, one might observe that Siam never had the strict segregation of women often found in India, as well as Victorian England. Feminists might note that he shares their criticism of “women's work” being demeaned in the modern economy.

³ This notion of human beings and their duty is based on Ajahn Buddhādāsa's understanding of Dhamma being the Law of Nature (*idappaccayatā*) and that all things, including living and sentient beings, are subject to this Law, consequently having duties in accordance with this Law as it applies in each specific situation.

⁴ Literally, “followed their behinds.”

refuge. We ought to draw religion back into harmony with education in such a way that each is integral to the other. This will be a safer arrangement.⁵

For the most part, we now have instant education that is imposed upon students from outside under the influence of primarily material external factors. Buddhism, however, offers an education that reflects inner truths. This is because the mind is central and primary. One observes oneself through one's own inner faculties; having observed oneself, one sees oneself and then knows oneself in line with one's own reality.⁶ One knows what problems one has and what causes and conditions influence them. This leads to the kind of self-understanding that allows one to deal with oneself correctly and thoroughly.

Furthermore, we force students to learn too much about the outside world. We make children study and memorize information from around the whole world, while they don't even know the meaning of parents, the graciousness and blessings of parents,⁷ and filial obligations towards parents. The problem is serious to the extent that graduates with long tails of degrees cannot describe parental blessings. They don't even want to know about it. Children ought to begin their educations by learning about themselves, their families,

⁵ Unlike many modern thinkers, Ajahn Buddhadasa finds no necessary contradiction or conflict between scientific education and religion, especially when the latter is Buddhism and both are founded on natural principles.

⁶ Note that Tan Ajahn did not fall for the fallacy of the subjective-objective duality.

⁷ This should not be taken as a blind worshipping of parents. One reason that children don't know the meaning of "parents" beyond the basically biological is that many parents have not fulfilled their roles, some going so far as to abuse their children. Tan Ajahn isn't just looking at the micro level; he also discusses the macro social level.

and their own countries no less than external matters.⁸ They should start to know about the mind and its defilements when they are still young, for such internal knowledge constitutes the foundation for subsequent external knowledge and enables them to meet with outside problems adequately.

Education at present is mostly concerned with theoretical knowledge and classroom lectures; thus, it lacks the kind of training and practice that brings about sufficient psychological and spiritual change. There is no attempt to nurture children so that they become good sons and daughters of their parents, good students of their teachers, good friends to their friends, and eventually good citizens of their societies and good disciples of their respective religions.⁹ So, we find that students who have worked hard to graduate secondary school and then go on to “higher education” have had to endure barbaric freshmen initiation rites at the hands of more senior students. This has caused at least one death. What a vivid example of the kind of education we have today!¹⁰

We must make actual practice the essence of education, just as in Buddhism. where the practice of *sīla* (precepts), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom) is the core education. Only with practice as the heart of education will there be effective psychological and spiritual transformation, which is in turn expressed physically and verbally. Regrettably, we have the kind of education that emphasizes copying into notebooks rather than nurturing real growth within students. It is thus no surprise that we fail to create good children of parents, good pupils of teachers, and good friends towards friends. So, it is impossible to have the good

⁸ Westerners may not realize how the effects of colonialism have led to education systems in countries like Thailand that spend an inordinate amount of time on the West.

⁹ Tan Ajahn’s phrasing here is meant to emphasize healthy and meaningful relationships depending on respective roles, e.g., student vis-à-vis teacher.

¹⁰ The hazing of freshmen is commonplace in most tertiary institutions in Thailand and frequently gets out of hand.

citizens of society and good disciples of religion who are the true security of the Thai nation and the fortress that protects Buddhism.¹¹

This education should not be expanded; instead, it should be improved.¹² The kind of education that provides people with cleverness without any means to control the use of that cleverness will promote nothing but selfishness. It will never decrease the number of prisons, police stations, courthouses, mental hospitals, and psychiatric wards. Don't bother expanding this kind of education or we will just have to expand the prisons and all. Instead, upgrade and improve the schools until we get the opposite results, which are truly satisfying: elevate people's mind till they deserve the title "*manusaya*" (human, one with an uplifted mind). Then, they will not cause any problems for themselves or society. The kind of expansion that increases quantity while decreasing quality cannot be called "expansion" at all; it is more like contraction and decay. Nowadays, everyone is pleased with the word "expansion," while overlooking how harmful results are hidden within the expanding.¹³



¹¹ Here, Tan Ajahn is speaking to the oft repeated themes of the 70s and 80s concerning nation building, national security, children being the future of the nation, etc. He also echoes the conservatives claim that communism will destroy Buddhism; however, he scoffed at that, for poorly educated Buddhists are what destroy Buddhism, whether nowadays or in India 1500 years ago.

¹² In the 70s and 80s the focus of the Thai government was to expand the school system. A series of World Bank funded projects eventually created a national system of Teachers' Colleges and secondary schools in every province, then every district. In terms of quantity, it may be deemed successful. In terms of quality, there is great disappointment. From Tan Ajahn's moral and spiritual perspective, the whole business has largely been a failure.

¹³ These shouldn't be called "side effects," as they are a direct result of the way education in Thailand and elsewhere has been envisioned and managed.

ศึกษาวิจารณ์.

- ① การศึกษาคือสิ่งนำชีวิตสร้างโลก : โลกไปตามการศึกษา
ตามมนุษย์เอง ก็เป็นผู้ให้การศึกษาแก่ตนเอง รวมหัวกันจึงตนเอง.
มันเขารู้นที่ว่า ตนเองเป็นผู้พึ่งแก่ตนเอง จึงควรวิจารณ์อย่างยิ่ง.
- ② การศึกษาที่ให้แก่ความฉลาด : ไม่มีการควบคุมความฉลาด
ทำให้จิตใจเกินค่า
ทางวัตถุจะเจริญจนเป็นมัญหา หรือเพื่อเกินไป. มัญหาที่กำลังมีอยู่.
- ③ การศึกษาที่ไม่กำจัดชีวิตชาวเขาอย่างสัตว์ : แถบจะส่งเวรมไปเสียอีก
มีแต่ความกลัวหนาวทาง ภาย-วัตถุ, ไม่มีทางวิญญาน
ที่มีแต่สัตว์เศรษฐกิจ - การเมือง - สังคม, ไม่มีสัตว์อารยะ.
- ④ การศึกษาที่ส่งเสริมความเห็นแก่ตัว : สอนการกำจัดความเห็นแก่ตัว.
ความเห็นแก่ตัว เป็นผู้จัดการศึกษา จนถึงกับรวมพวกแย่งกันครอง-
ทำประชาธิปไตย ให้เป็นภัย โดยไม่รู้ลึก. -โลก.
และเห็นข้อแห่งประหลิดใจ
- ⑤ การศึกษาที่เป็นอย่างเดียวกันทั้งชายและหญิง : เป็นกะเทย ไม่มีพ่อแม่.
มีแต่แย่งงานกันทำ จนลูกหลานเลวลงๆ
แล้วก็หลงไปว่าส่งเสริมสิทธิมนุษยชน อย่างเลิศ
- ⑥ การศึกษาที่แยกห่างจากศาสนา : เพราะมุ่งแต่ประโยชน์ทางวัตถุ
ไม่มีการพันเกี่ยวกันกับศาสนา จึงไม่มีสิ่งยึดเหนี่ยวจิตใจ
ไม่อาจสัมพันธ์กับวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งเป็นสิ่งที่ต้องมีศาสนาเป็นแกน.
- ⑦ การศึกษาที่มีแต่การชักเข้าไปจากภายนอก : ภายใต้อิทธิพลของสิ่งภายนอก
ไม่เป็นการสทอนออกมาจากของจริง ในภายใน.
การดูตัวเอง เห็นตัวเอง รู้จักตัวเอง ทำ/มีอะไรที่เหมาะสมแก่ตัวเอ

“Education Critique” Notes typed by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.
Ref. Archives document of the Buddhadasa Indapañño Archives
BIA 3.1/20 (1/2) Box 6. page 139.

About the Author

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu was born in 1906, the son of a southern Thai mother and an ethnic Chinese father. He followed Thai custom by entering a local monastery in 1926, studied for a couple years in Bangkok, and then founded his own refuge for study and practice in 1932. Since then, he has had a profound influence on not only Thai Buddhism but other religions in Siam and Buddhism in the West. Among his more important accomplishments, he:

- Challenged the hegemony of later commentarial texts with the primacy of the Buddha's original discourses.
- Integrated serious Dhamma study, intellectual creativity, and rigorous practice.
- Explained Buddha-Dhamma with an emphasis on this life, including the possibility of experiencing Nibbāna ourselves.
- Softened the dichotomy between householder and monastic practice, stressing that the noble eightfold path is available to everyone.
- Offered doctrinal support for addressing social and environmental issues, helping to foster socially engaged Buddhism in Siam.
- Shaped his forest monastery as an innovative teaching environment and Garden of Liberation.

After a series of illnesses, including strokes, he died in 1993. He was cremated without the usual pomp and expense.

About the Translator

Santikaro went to Thailand with the Peace Corps in 1980, was ordained as a Theravada monk in 1985, trained at Suan Mokkh under Ajahn Buddhadasa, and became his primary English translator. Santikaro led meditation retreats at Suan Mokkh for many years, and was unofficial abbot of nearby Dawn Kiam. He is a founding member of Think Sangha, a community of socially engaged Buddhist thinker activists that has given special attention to the ethical and spiritual impact of consumerism and other modern developments.

Santikaro returned to the USA's Midwest in 2001 and retired from formal monastic life in 2004. He continues to teach in the Buddhist tradition with an emphasis on the early Pāli sources and the insights of Ajahn Buddhadasa. He and his wife Jo Marie are founders of Kevala Retreat, a modern American expression of Buddhist practice, study, and social responsibility in rural Wisconsin. There he continues to study, practice, translate the work of his teacher, teach, and imagine the future of Buddha-Dhamma in the West.

‘Messages from Suan Mokkh’ Series

- #01 *Education Critique*
- #02 *Nibbāna for Everyone*
- #03 *A Single Bowl of Sauce Solves All the World’s Problems*
- #04 *Kamma in Buddhism*
- #05 *Let’s All Be Buddhadāsas*
- #06 *Help, Kālāma Sutta! Help!*

Recommended Reading (Books)

- *Mindfulness With Breathing: A Manual for Serious Beginners*
- *Handbook for Mankind*
- *The First Ten Years of Suan Mokkh*
- *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*
- *Keys to Natural Truth*
- *Living in the Present without Past without Future*
- *Natural Cure for Spiritual Disease: A Guide into Buddhist Science*
- *Nibbāna for Everyone*
- *No Religion*
- *The Prison of Life*
- *Paticcasamuppāda: Practical Dependent Origination*
- *A Single Bowl of Sauce: Teachings beyond Good and Evil*
- *Void Mind*
- *Buddha-Dhamma for Inquiring Minds*

Online Resources

www.bia.or.th

www.suanmokkh.org

www.kevalaretreat.org

www.youtube.com/@buddhadasabhikkhu7829

www.soundcloud.com/buddhadasa

Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives

Established in 2010, the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives collect, maintain, and present the original works of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. Also known as Suan Mokkh Bangkok, it is an innovative place for fostering mutual understanding between traditions, studying and practicing Dhamma.



Kevala Retreat

Kevala Retreat is a Dhamma refuge in the USA's Midwest inspired by Suan Mokkh. Here, Santikaro and friends work to nurture a garden of liberation along the lines taught by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, where followers of the Buddha-Dhamma Way can explore Dhamma as Nature and in the Pāli suttas.



“Education guides each person’s life, such that it is the same as the creator of the world. Yet, human beings are the very ones who arrange education for themselves or collaborate in leading themselves in what seems to follow the Buddhist principle of self-reliance. Here we find a most important issue that must be thoroughly considered and critiqued: In what direction are we leading ourselves?”

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

