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Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand

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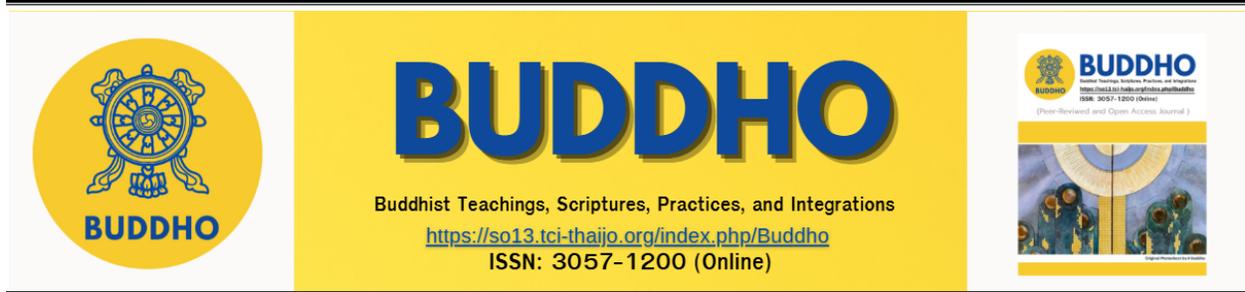
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Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand

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Abstract

Humanistic Buddhism is a modern interpretation of traditional Buddhist teachings that emphasizes engagement with contemporary society, ethical living, and social responsibility. In Thailand, Humanistic Buddhism has played a significant role in shaping social values, education, and community development. This paper explores the development, principles, and impact of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand, focusing on its role in promoting social welfare, ethical leadership, and harmonious living. The study examines key Thai Buddhist leaders and institutions that have contributed to the dissemination of Humanistic Buddhist ideals, such as Wat Phra Dhammakaya and the work of the late Phra Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. Additionally, this research highlights the challenges and criticisms of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand, particularly regarding its adaptation to modernity and its interaction with political and economic structures. The findings underscore the relevance of Humanistic Buddhism as a transformative force in Thai society, fostering moral integrity and social cohesion while addressing contemporary issues such as poverty, education, and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Humanistic Buddhism; Thailand; Buddhist Ethics; Social Engagement; Modern Buddhism

Introduction

Buddhism has been a central element of Thai culture and identity for centuries, shaping the nation's spiritual, moral, and social fabric. Among the various interpretations and movements within Thai Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism (Engaged Buddhism) has gained prominence as a progressive and socially relevant approach to Buddhist practice. Originating from the broader Mahayana and Theravāda traditions, Humanistic Buddhism seeks to integrate Buddhist principles with everyday life, emphasizing social responsibility, education, and ethical conduct (Cheng, 2004). In Thailand, this movement has been significantly influenced by figures such as Phra

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who advocated for a reinterpretation of Buddhist teachings to address contemporary social and environmental concerns (Jackson, 2013).

The rise of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand can be traced to both indigenous and global influences. The teachings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and the socially engaged initiatives of institutions like Wat Phra Dhammakaya reflect the adaptability of Buddhism to modern challenges (Swearer, 2010). Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand has been instrumental in promoting community development, ethical governance, and environmental sustainability, making it a vital component of the country's socio-religious landscape.

Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand faces challenges, including debates over its alignment with political structures, accusations of commercialism, and its relationship with traditional monastic practices (McDaniel, 2011). These issues raise important questions about the role of religion in a rapidly changing society. This paper examines the historical development, key figures, and contemporary impact of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of its role in shaping modern Thai society.

Objective

This article critically examines the development of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand, focusing on its moral, environmental, economic, and psychological contributions.

Historical Development of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand

Humanistic Buddhism, a modern interpretation of Buddhist teachings emphasizing engagement with social issues and everyday life, has gained prominence in Thailand. Influenced by both traditional Theravāda Buddhism and the Mahāyāna-based Humanistic Buddhism movement, it seeks to integrate Buddhist principles into contemporary social, economic, and political contexts. This literature review explores key themes in Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand, including its historical development, social applications, and contemporary challenges.

The roots of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand can be traced to traditional Theravāda Buddhist teachings, which emphasize moral discipline, meditation, and wisdom (Harvey, 2013). However, modern interpretations have been influenced by Mahāyāna thinkers such as Taixu and Yin Shun, who promoted Buddhism's relevance to daily life (Chandler, 2018). In Thailand, prominent figures such as Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa have advocated for a socially engaged Buddhism that addresses issues such as poverty, education, and environmental sustainability (Swearer, 2010).

Thailand's Buddhist history dates back to the 3rd century BCE when Emperor Ashoka's emissaries introduced Theravāda Buddhism. Over centuries, Thai Buddhism evolved through monastic reforms, royal patronage, and engagement with local traditions. The 20th and 21st centuries witnessed the emergence of Humanistic Buddhism, influenced by both traditional doctrines and global Buddhist movements.

1. **Moral Development** Moral development in Thai Buddhism has historically been promoted through monastic education and lay morality. The Vinaya (monastic code) establishes ethical precepts that monks adhere to, influencing Thai society. Humanistic Buddhism extends this by advocating socially engaged Buddhism, emphasizing ethical leadership, anti-corruption initiatives, and moral education in schools (Swearer, 2010). Organizations like the Dhammakaya Movement and Santi Asoke exemplify ethical cultivation, albeit with differing doctrinal interpretations.

2. **Environmental Humanistic Buddhism** in Thailand has played a pivotal role in environmental conservation. Buddhist monks have led tree ordination ceremonies, symbolically protecting forests (Darlington, 2012). Initiatives such as the Green Buddhist Movement integrate Buddhist ethics with sustainability, advocating for reduced consumption and eco-friendly practices. These actions align with the Buddhist principle of interconnectedness (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), demonstrating that environmental harm affects all sentient beings.

3. **Poverty Development** Buddhism in Thailand has been instrumental in addressing economic disparities through charitable activities, social enterprises, and community development projects. Temples function as welfare centers, providing food, education, and healthcare to impoverished communities. The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, influenced by Buddhist principles and endorsed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej, promotes economic self-reliance and ethical business practices (Puntasen, 2007). Such efforts embody the Buddhist virtue of *dāna* (generosity) and illustrate Humanistic Buddhism's impact on poverty alleviation.

4. **Mental Development** Mental well-being is central to Buddhist practice, with mindfulness (*sati*) and meditation (*bhāvanā*) forming the foundation of psychological resilience. The spread of Vipassanā meditation in Thailand has contributed to mental health initiatives, offering therapeutic benefits for stress, anxiety, and depression (Gethin, 1998). Humanistic Buddhism extends these practices to lay communities, incorporating mindfulness-based interventions in schools and workplaces. Additionally, Buddhist psychology has influenced cognitive behavioral therapies, merging ancient wisdom with modern psychological frameworks (Harvey, 2013).

Critical analysis and challenges, While Humanistic Buddhism has significantly contributed to Thai society, it faces challenges. The commercialization of Buddhist teachings, political entanglements, and doctrinal disputes occasionally undermine its ethical integrity. Furthermore, environmental activism by Buddhist monks sometimes conflicts with governmental and corporate interests, limiting its impact. Despite these obstacles, the integration of Humanistic Buddhism with contemporary societal needs demonstrates its adaptability and relevance.

The historical development of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. Through moral cultivation, environmental activism, poverty reduction, and mental well-being initiatives, Humanistic Buddhism continues to shape Thai society. Future research should explore its role in addressing contemporary issues such as digital ethics and global sustainability.

Social Engagement and Application

Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand has been instrumental in fostering social welfare, education, and community development. Monastic organizations and lay Buddhist groups actively engage in humanitarian projects, including healthcare, environmental conservation, and rural development (Somboon, 2020). Notably, the Dhammakaya movement has integrated modern technology and media to disseminate Buddhist teachings while engaging in philanthropic activities (Taylor, 2017). Furthermore, Humanistic Buddhism has played a role in interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution, particularly in the southern regions of Thailand where religious tensions exist (McCargo, 2011). The practice of Engaged Buddhism, inspired by global movements, has encouraged Thai Buddhists to participate in peacebuilding and social justice initiatives (King, 2019).

Social engagement refers to the degree of involvement and participation of individuals in societal activities, contributing to community development and social cohesion (Putnam, 2000). In contemporary society, social engagement has evolved with the rise of digital technologies, influencing how people interact, communicate, and contribute to social causes. This paper critically analyzes the significance, challenges, and applications of social engagement, drawing from theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence.

1. **Theoretical Perspectives on Social Engagement** Several theoretical frameworks provide insight into social engagement. Robert Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital emphasizes the value of social networks in fostering trust and cooperation. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explains how group memberships influence engagement behaviors, while participatory democracy theory (Pateman, 1970) highlights the role of civic participation in democratic governance. Social engagement can be categorized into direct engagement (e.g., volunteering, activism) and digital engagement (e.g., social media advocacy, online petitions). The transition to digital engagement has expanded opportunities for participation, but it has also introduced challenges such as misinformation and slacktivism (Morozov, 2011).

2. **Significance of Social Engagement** Social engagement plays a crucial role in community development and individual well-being. Empirical studies suggest that engaged individuals experience higher levels of social cohesion and psychological well-being (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). In political contexts, social engagement enhances democratic participation, fostering informed citizenship and collective decision-making (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Moreover, corporate social engagement, through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, contributes to sustainable development and ethical business practices (Carroll & Shabana, 2010).

3. **Challenges in Social Engagement** Despite its benefits, social engagement faces several challenges. Digital divide issues hinder equitable participation, particularly among marginalized communities (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). The prevalence of echo chambers and misinformation on social media platforms can distort public discourse, leading to polarization (Sunstein, 2017). Additionally, the commodification of engagement, where corporate interests exploit activism for marketing purposes, raises ethical concerns (Zizek, 2009).

4. **Applications of Social Engagement** Social engagement is essential for democratic governance. Grassroots movements, protests, and voting campaigns illustrate its impact on

political processes. The Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter movement exemplify how digital platforms mobilize global engagement (Tufekci, 2017).

5. Community and Organizational Engagement Non-profit organizations leverage social engagement to drive community programs, fundraising, and policy advocacy (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Businesses incorporate social engagement through CSR strategies, aligning with stakeholders' expectations and enhancing brand reputation (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

6. Educational and Technological Engagement Social engagement in education fosters collaborative learning and civic responsibility (Dewey, 1916). Digital platforms, such as MOOCs and social learning networks, expand access to education, promoting lifelong learning (Selwyn, 2016). Social engagement remains a critical component of societal development, influencing democratic participation, community cohesion, and corporate responsibility. While digital advancements have broadened engagement opportunities, challenges such as misinformation and the digital divide persist. Future research should explore sustainable engagement strategies that balance technological innovation with ethical considerations.

Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions

The modern world is facing a multitude of challenges that span across economic, social, technological, and environmental domains. As societies grapple with rapid globalization, climate change, and advancements in artificial intelligence, the future directions for sustainable development remain a subject of intense debate. This paper critically analyzes key contemporary challenges and proposes potential pathways for addressing them. Despite its contributions, Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand faces several challenges. The commercialization of Buddhist institutions, political influences on monastic leadership, and declining monastic ordination rates pose significant concerns (Gabaude, 2016). Additionally, the rise of consumerism and globalization has impacted traditional Buddhist values and practices (Kitiarsa, 2012).

Moving forward, scholars argue that Humanistic Buddhism must adapt to contemporary realities while maintaining its core ethical principles (Ladwig & Shields, 2021). Digital Buddhism, online meditation communities, and Buddhist social enterprises are emerging as potential avenues for expanding the movement's influence (Borup, 2020).

1. Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability Climate change poses an existential threat to global ecosystems, economies, and human health. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and biodiversity loss have exacerbated global inequalities (IPCC, 2021). Despite international agreements such as the Paris Accord, many nations struggle to meet carbon reduction targets due to economic constraints and political resistance (United Nations, 2022). Sustainable energy transition and international cooperation are crucial in mitigating these risks.

2. Technological Disruptions and Ethical Concerns Technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, have reshaped industries and job markets. While automation enhances efficiency, it also displaces workers, exacerbating income inequality (Frey & Osborne, 2017). Furthermore, AI-driven surveillance and data privacy concerns have raised ethical dilemmas, necessitating robust regulations to balance innovation and human rights (Zuboff, 2019).

3. Geopolitical Instability and Economic Uncertainty Global geopolitical tensions, including trade wars, territorial conflicts, and economic sanctions, have disrupted international relations. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains and economic dependencies (World Bank, 2021). To foster stability, there is a need for strengthened diplomatic efforts, economic diversification, and resilient global governance structures.

4. Public Health Challenges and Pandemics The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the fragility of global healthcare systems. Inadequate preparedness, vaccine nationalism, and misinformation hindered effective response mechanisms (WHO, 2021). Future public health policies should emphasize equitable access to healthcare, stronger pandemic preparedness, and investment in biotechnological research.

Future Directions

1. Sustainable Development Goals and Green Innovation Achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires a collective shift towards green innovation. Investments in renewable energy, carbon capture technologies, and sustainable urban planning can help mitigate environmental degradation while fostering economic growth (UNEP, 2021).

2. Ethical AI and Inclusive Digital Transformation To counter the ethical challenges of AI, policymakers must establish transparent guidelines that promote inclusivity and fairness in technological applications (Bostrom, 2014). Digital literacy programs and AI ethics frameworks should be integrated into global education systems to prepare future generations for technological shifts.

3. Strengthening Multilateralism and Global Cooperation Reinforcing international cooperation through institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and World Health Organization is imperative for addressing transnational challenges. Economic and diplomatic collaborations can mitigate conflicts and promote sustainable development (Guterres, 2021).

4. Resilient Healthcare Systems and Global Health Equity Post-pandemic recovery must focus on creating resilient healthcare infrastructures. Universal healthcare policies, increased research funding, and global disease surveillance systems are necessary to prevent future health crises (CDC, 2022).

Addressing contemporary challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving technological advancements, ethical governance, and international collaboration. Future strategies must prioritize sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience to ensure a more equitable and prosperous world.

Conclusion

Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand represents an evolving and dynamic approach to Buddhist practice, seeking to harmonize spiritual traditions with modern social concerns. Rooted in traditional Theravāda teachings yet influenced by Mahāyāna perspectives, it has significantly contributed to moral development, environmental conservation, poverty alleviation, and mental well-being. The movement has played a crucial role in addressing social issues through monastic reforms, community initiatives, and ethical leadership. Despite challenges such as commercialization, political entanglements, and doctrinal conflicts, Humanistic Buddhism continues to demonstrate adaptability and relevance in contemporary society. Looking ahead, the integration of digital platforms, global collaborations, and innovative social engagement strategies will likely shape its trajectory, ensuring its continued impact on Thai society.

Suggestions

1. **Strengthening Ethical Leadership:** Encouraging monastic and lay leaders to uphold ethical integrity and transparency can help mitigate issues related to commercialization and political interference.
2. **Enhancing Digital Engagement:** Leveraging online platforms for Buddhist teachings, meditation, and social activism can expand the reach of Humanistic Buddhism and engage younger generations.
3. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Partnering with educational institutions, policymakers, and environmental organizations can amplify efforts in sustainability, mental health, and poverty reduction.
4. **Promoting Interfaith Dialogue:** Strengthening interreligious cooperation can foster peacebuilding, especially in regions experiencing religious tensions.
5. **Addressing Contemporary Issues:** Future research should explore Humanistic Buddhism's role in tackling digital ethics, climate change, and social justice in an increasingly interconnected world.

Body of Knowledge

1. Historical Development in Thailand

- **Traditional Theravāda Influence:** Thailand's dominant Buddhist tradition is Theravāda, which emphasizes monastic discipline, meditation, and scriptural study.
- **Introduction of Humanistic Buddhism:** The concept entered Thailand through interactions with Chinese Mahayana groups and influential Buddhist leaders promoting social and engaged Buddhism.
- **Prominent Figures:** Buddhist monks like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa incorporated humanistic elements into Thai Buddhism, promoting social justice, ethics, and environmentalism.

2. Core Principles and Practices

- Applying Buddhist Teachings to Daily Life: Focus on compassion, generosity, and ethical behavior beyond monastic settings.
- Social Engagement: Addressing social issues such as poverty, education, and environmental sustainability.
- Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue: Encouraging harmony between different religious traditions in Thailand.
- Dhamma in Society: Using Buddhist wisdom to solve modern societal problems, aligning with King Rama IX's philosophy of sufficiency economy.

3. Key Institutions and Movements

- Wat Phra Dhammakaya: A Thai Buddhist movement emphasizing meditation, merit-making, and social engagement.
- Santi Asoke Movement: A reformist Buddhist group promoting self-sufficiency, simple living, and social activism.
- International Humanistic Buddhist Organizations in Thailand: Such as Fo Guang Shan, which integrates Mahayana perspectives with Thai traditions.

4. Influence on Thai Society

- Education: Buddhist universities and schools integrating Humanistic Buddhist values.
- Politics and Governance: Some Thai leaders promote Buddhist ethics in governance.
- Social Activism: Buddhist monks and laypeople involved in environmental protection, human rights, and rural development projects.

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