

THIS IS Life

Learning a better way

Formerly with the NESDB, Dr Witit Rachatatanun talks about how Buddhist education can solve many of the country's social problems

By: VANNIYA SRIANGURA

Published: 16/01/2009 at 12:00 AM

A former assistant secretary-general of the National Economics and Social Development Board (NESDB), Dr Witit Rachatatanun recently entered a new and important chapter of his life. He decided to devote his energy to the country's education system, believing that education, not the economy, is the real key to help rescue a society that is deteriorating.



“As a parent, you have to seriously consider morality as one of the most important elements in a child’s life curriculum,” says economist-turned-educationist Dr Witit Rachatatanun.

After 22 years as a civil servant building development strategies for the country, the academic with a Bachelor's in Economics from London School of Economics and a PhD in Education from Harvard University took the opportunity to retire early in 2004. Dr Witit then had the time and opportunity to practice dhamma, and to talk to the Venerable Phra Acharn Jayasaro. The former abbot of the International Forest Monastery gave him an understanding of the true cause of society's problems, and, for the first time in his life, a chance to understand himself.

Today, Dr Witit is a consultant for Thawsi, an elementary school following Buddhist educational principles which is run by his wife,

Bupaswat "Khru Onn" Rachatanun. He is also a member of the Ethical Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Subjects, Health Science Group of Chulalongkorn University, and a director of Panyaprateep school, a Buddhist-approach secondary school. A boarding school built on an 84-rai plot of land in the verdant setting of Pak Chong in Nakhon Ratchasima, Panyaprateep school is scheduled to open in May, with the first batch of 20-25 students at Year 7.

With over two decades working with the NESDB, what do you think is Thailand's biggest problem? What is holding the country back from full development?

People not understanding themselves and not realising what they need - that is the main problem at the individual level. People aren't sure what a good life should be, what happiness is and how they can achieve it. They believe they have to only consume and indulge their senses in order to be happy.

On a national scale, when it comes to developing the country, the focus is always on whether or not people have enough income, whether we provide enough social services like schools and hospitals, whether we have improved the quality of our products and, at the highest level, whether people have spare money so they can enjoy life.

These aren't wrong but unfortunately it seems that the economy is always the most important thing - more important than the real quality of people's lives.

So, a good economy is not the answer for a good society?

Recently I was listening to Phra Acharn Jayasaro, and he said that we tend to look at human beings as a resource to serve the economy. We are concerned that a person has a job and is efficient - efficient in the way of being skilful and materially productive.

Because we take the economy as our objective, the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has been one of the nation's highest goals and we'll do anything at any cost to reach that goal. So, along the way, we don't really care whether we destroy things or lives, we just say it's OK when

we reach our target and have lots of money we can use to fix the problems. Building rehabilitation centres for young drug addicts, for instance. But the curative way is never a good option for the society.

Aren't there countries that have a growing economy and also a good quality of life that we can follow?

Actually, there are hardly any. Even a "peaceful" country like Finland, which seems to have a very good quality of life, has serious hidden problems. Finland has the highest GDP as well as a high literacy rate, but it also has a very high murder rate. Lately there have been two school massacres there, too.

The Buddhist-approach boarding school, Panyaprateep, in Nakhon Ratchasima.



This is not to mention the two economically powerful countries like Japan, where the suicide rate is very high, and the United States, where there are many social conflicts.

Does that mean that the GDP is a misleading index?

Let me put it this way: if there's a terrible number of road accidents or burglaries in the country each year, would our GDP rate increase? Of course it would. Cars would have to be repaired, people would have to go to hospital and more security guards would be needed. Disasters definitely help create more jobs and boost the GDP rate.

In the West, the number of people suffering from stress has increased tremendously and doctors have had to prescribe billions of dollars worth of anti-depressants and sleeping pills each year. Definitely, the GDP has increased but at the cost of people's lives.

So, which one should we wish for - a high GDP with a low quality of life, or an inactive economy but a peaceful life?

In what way should the country be developed? How can we fix the problems at this stage?

I think we should look to the deepest roots of society - the education system. Nowadays the focus is always on the academic side - how to achieve academic success. That way, though, we will never catch up with the fast-changing society. As soon as we graduate from school, some academic skills and the knowledge that we learned may have already become outdated.

Buddhist education is a way to solve the problem because we don't teach children a body of knowledge, but how to learn and how to enjoy learning. Above all, we teach them the ability to develop life skills and how to be a good person.

Children can never be good by themselves without being taught or trained. As a parent, you should never assume that they will develop these things by themselves or that grandparents will teach them during their leisure time. You have to seriously consider morality as one of the most important elements in a child's life curriculum - and that's what we do in Buddhist education.

What inspired you to become involved in Buddhist education?

I felt that I owed so much to my country as I graduated with my degrees through government scholarships. Even though I've been a civil servant for over 20 years, I still regard myself as having this debt which needs to be repaid.

As I realised that my time was getting shorter every day, I took the early retirement believing that I might be able to give more to our society which seemed to be spiralling downwards.

From meeting Phra Acharn Jayasaro and practising dhamma, I've come to realise that social problems are a result of the failure of our education - a system that is solely geared towards academic success and material gain.

And in order to improve education, we have to build better schools. Not just any school but schools that offer correct education.

Tell us about the Panyaprateep school.

Panyaprateep school is a non-profit boarding school that aims to nurture the whole child - physically, spiritually and academically - following Buddhist principles of sila (ethical conduct), samadhi (steadiness of mind) and panya (insight wisdom). We don't just offer academic education, we provide a good, balanced lifestyle between nature and the material world.

At our school children, from Year 7 to Year 12, are encouraged to understand nature and to react with their surroundings, because that's the first step in getting to know themselves

Why is understanding oneself so important?

If you don't understand yourself, you'll never realise your potential and your value. Most children today focus on materialism and believe they have to depend on something else all the time. Many of them are under the wrong influences.

You can't give true value to yourself if your education is limited to classroom. Many teachers in mainstream education believe that the children must be taught by teachers and learn from textbooks. But this way they will never know that they can learn from almost anything around them, such as their families and the natural surroundings.

Does this kind of education risk compromising academic excellence?

Not at all. We are as serious about academic content as ordinary good schools, but we have a different approach.

What I'm trying to say is that not every child is born with great ability to compete academically, but all of them can be academically excellent. But if you look for academic virtue from the start, you are just ruining the children.

Many parents might think that they are happy with the way their children are raised and believe that their lives are already good. Why should they be interested in Buddhist education?

It depends on how you define the term 'good.' If by 'good' you mean giving in to the search for personal happiness, I don't think it's truly good.

'Good' in Buddhism means that you do good deeds for yourself and others at the same time. It is not true goodness if you think "OK, I should make myself happy first and then do something good for the community" - that way you just nurture your selfishness.

We forget to teach our children to always do something good for society, nature, the country and the world. Mainstream education often teaches children how to survive and live their own lives. Western education makes us think that humans can master the world and control nature because we are clever. But it isn't that way in reality.

Who is the Panyaprateep school for?

For people who realise that there are problems in mainstream education and want to find a good solution; parents who are affected by the current education system and perhaps suffering from raising their children.

However, we aren't just looking for students, we are also seeking other methods of support. We are glad to welcome those who have faith in what we're doing and would be willing to help by joining our team, because building a school is not easy, and it cannot be accomplished by just one group of people. It needs the cooperation and commitment of a community.

For more information on Panyaprateep school, contact 02-713-0260/1 or 087-042-4111 or

visit <http://www.panyaprateep.com>.