

## CHAPTER TWO

### TEACHERS IN THAI SOCIETY



#### 2.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The teacher's role in Thai society is determined by the cultural, religious and economic structures present in the society. Social beliefs and perceptions regarding the role of the teacher change as the value systems of the society change, and as future generations face different challenges, their value systems will continue to evolve as well. It should be noted, however, that these beliefs and perceptions change at a slower pace than any structural changes. The traditional values tend to remain even though the framework which organizes these values has already matured into another form. That being the case, it should not be surprising that teachers in the modern context continue to draw on values from traditional roots.

Traditionally, the Sangha, or Buddhist order of monks has led the way for educational pursuits in Thailand. After the death of the Buddha, all Buddhist thought and philosophy was transferred by word of mouth. When those teachings were finally put into writing, a certain rhythmic cadence was retained which indicated the use of chants and rote memory in the learning of the scriptures. Some of the older texts used a didactic form which emphasized debating skills and intellectual awareness. As doctrinal disputes were often settled by public debate, the Sangha

encouraged the development of different philosophical expression and inter-school argumentation. Since there was little competition from other religions in the area, the Sangha was free to develop a multi-faceted ministry. While the monks performed various religious and agricultural rituals, one of their most important functions was the education of the common people. (Terwiel, 1989:97-98)

Although the teaching of Pali was considered to be a major goal of the monks who taught in the monasteries, their institutions soon became the center of culture as well as education. Advanced courses in art, law, medicine and mathematics were offered in addition to studies in basic literary skills. The educational offerings of some monasteries of this period were comparable to that of university-level instruction. (National Development Education Center, 1982:11)

The common practice was for parents to send their sons to monastery schools for training in a profession as well as for scholarship. During that time, the boys would stay in the monastery as apprentices to the monks who taught them. These temple-boys were expected to accompany their teachers after school hours, and provide manpower for whatever services might be needed. The relationship between teacher and student in this context approached that of father and son, and the term *luuk sitr* (student-son) came into use, referring to anyone receiving instruction from a teacher. (Prapod, Personal interview, 15 February 1994) After the brighter students absorbed all the knowledge available from the local



teachers, it was not uncommon for them to move to other communities where they were able to continue their study with different instructors.

During the Sukhothai period, an additional institution became responsible for education, as the palace joined the monastery in providing opportunities for learning. While entrance into the Royal Scholar Institute was restricted to the Royal Family and children of important officials, the monastery schools were open to everyone. As the value of education became more obvious, additional tutoring opportunities began to appear as monks retiring from the Sangha continued to instruct village children in a less formal setting.

Most of the transfer of knowledge, however, was being provided by Buddhist monks in temple monasteries, resulting in the identity of the teacher becoming closely inter-woven with that of the monk. The term “teacher” (*acharn*) as used in modern society, formerly referred to the monk who was respected as the spiritual guide of the people. As more non-monks began entering the educational system, they were granted the same high level of respect which was given to the men who taught while wearing saffron-colored robes. The duties of the teacher were determined by specific Buddhist principles which encouraged further blending of identity between the teacher and the monk. In volume 11 of the Tripitaka, the teacher was identified as being one who would give good advice and educate well his student by providing him with all knowledge and protecting him from all danger. The teacher came to be identified as

*kalayanamittr* which means “good friend”. (National Development Education Center, 1982:11)

The educational endeavors of monks and teachers were traditionally offered without the anticipation of anything in return, as it was considered to be part of their social responsibility. The obvious long-term benefit to the teacher was his being recognized by society as a scholar or morally superior person. This respect was sufficient reward due to the low economic demands placed on individuals at the time, although in the short-term, teachers' life styles were forced to remain unpretentious. In summary, prior to the establishment of modern educational methods, Thai teachers were seen to have the qualities and characteristics of monks both in terms of obligation and compensation.

As the significance of the teacher's position in society was increasingly recognized, a more formal and structured educational institution developed.

## 2.2 TEACHERS DURING MODERNIZATION

As Thai society began a process of modernization during the last half of the 19th century, the educational system began to undergo progressive changes as well. Western instructional methods were initiated during the reign of King Rama V and a new school was started at the Court in 1871. It was not until 1884, however, that a school was opened





for common people at Wat Mahannaparam, and the groundwork was laid for the establishment of a Ministry-level organization in 1887. Starting in 1898, Prince Wachirayanwarorot, who later became the Supreme Patriarch, began a vigorous effort to establish village schools with standardized syllabi and textbooks. This modern form of instruction, developed by the Ministry of Public Instruction in Bangkok, differed significantly from previous efforts which provided no systematic and little secular quality. Students around the country were introduced to standardized scripts and language in addition to western-style mathematics and science. (Wyatt, 1982:217)

Although most instruction continued to be accomplished in monastery compounds, there were now three types of teachers: government officials, monks and private tutors. Over time, the number of monks in the classroom decreased, and the private tutors became teachers in private schools. In spite of the reduced role of monks in the education system, teachers were still modeled after strict Buddhist principles, and the desire to be *kalayanamittr* remained their motto.

As the nation's school system continued to expand, it became necessary for the government to become increasingly involved with the organization. Curriculum goals, budget allocation and teacher training were some of the issues which attracted national control. The ensuing educational revisions resulted in significant cultural changes as well. The new director of teacher training was a foreigner who had little appreciation of Thai culture, and did not understand the background and social

perception surrounding the teacher. The resulting training system was thus influenced by values from abroad, and did not maintain the principles found in traditional society. The character of Thai teachers in turn, was significantly altered by the mores and social understandings of those in charge of the reorganization. The new curriculum provided by monks in the provinces was considered to be a lower, primary form of education, while the European styled schools in Bangkok provided education for the more highly qualified. This dual system proved to be quite unfair to those living outside of the city, as virtually no tax money was made available for them from the central budget. Provincial schools were thus forced to levy and collect their own education tax to help meet the expenses incurred by the monastery schools.

Following the revolution in 1932, significant changes continued to take place in the country's educational system. The dual-system of education was scrapped, and funds were made available for the training of teachers and building of secular schools outside of Bangkok. The curriculum was adjusted to provide the same training previously available only in the privileged schools of Bangkok. The Sangha's role in state schools was rapidly reduced and by 1965 only 25% of all instruction was done in temples. (Heinz, 1977:144) Once again, the teaching of *Dhamma* became the primary subject of the monastery teacher.

One of the most important transformations which took place at that time involved the perception of teaching as a profession. Instead of stressing charitable activities, teachers were enrolled as government



employees who received a monthly salary just like other civil servants. This opened the door for a period of turmoil, during which the economy continued its change from a subsistence economy to cash. Traditionalists in Thai society demanded that teachers maintain the role of *kalayanamittr* as previously held by Buddhist monks, while progressives looked to the western model for direction. The resulting tightrope which the teachers were forced to walk was delicate indeed, as they tried to follow the traditional expectations of society on one hand, and receive money and directives from the government on the other. The effect was the loss of a significant amount respect which was previously given to them by students and parents alike.

### 2.3 TEACHERS TODAY

During the government of Prime Minister Sarit, a new systematic plan for the economic and social development of Thailand was initiated. This plan stressed education as an important factor in the equation to promote growth, by producing qualified human resources. Western advisors were again introduced, and great strides were made in the training and preparation of teachers in the modern context. Although teachers were still highly respected, the economic realities of the time did not provide adequate support for the educators. The financial pressures forced many to turn to private business or after-school tutoring to make ends meet. In an attempt to increase their salary, some attempted advanced degrees or additional qualifications only to find that the rush to teach their

regular classes, attend graduate school and work after-hours was more than could be properly negotiated.

In traditional classrooms, teachers enjoyed plenty of time to establish close relationships with their students. Classes were small and students grew very close to their teachers. Following the new development plan however, classes and subjects were much more specialized and students were exposed to a larger number of teachers. There was insufficient time for much interaction between the two, so relationships and classroom discipline began to suffer. Prasert Ruangskul, secretary-general of the World Fellowship of Buddhists confided that he was shocked recently to hear of a case where a rebellious student even challenged his teacher to a fist-fight! Although such occurrences were unheard of back during his tenure as a teacher, they are unfortunately more and more the norm today.

Ultimately, it appears almost impossible for many teachers to maintain their traditional position in society. Despite such a negative picture, there remains a grassroots component of deep respect for the Thai educator. In 1982, the National Development Education Center (Thailand) ranked the classroom teacher as being the occupation which received the highest rate of social recognition in the country, followed by doctors, farmers, soldiers, and policemen. (National Development Education Center, 1982:33)





## 2.4 TEACHER MOTIVATION

Having examined something of the historical background surrounding teachers in Thailand, it is also important to determine exactly what issues are considered by educators as being meaningful. In a UNICEF-funded study on the Development and Training of Teachers for Remote Rural Schools in Less Developed Countries, four factors were listed as being significant:

1. Social Factors are cultural elements which provide satisfaction and motivation from within a given context. In Thailand, the high level of respect given teachers by society has long been an important attraction for those entering the field of education. As modernization takes its toll on the teacher's perceived value, this factor will become less and less convincing.
2. Economic Factors include such issues as salary, housing and other benefits which invite teachers to fill classroom positions. When inflation and other changes in the economy force teachers to supplement their income, finances begin to play a much larger role as teachers re-evaluate their employment.
3. Professional Factors are motivations which come from issues peripheral to the classroom. Certain research projects, government grants and opportunities for advancement can be realized only by spending time as a teacher.

4. Personal Factors which attract teachers are considered to be intrinsic, matters of the heart. A love for the subject matter, a desire to be of assistance to the disadvantaged, or a zeal springing from a religious agenda might all be considered to be personal in nature.

Teachers who are found with motives from several of these general areas are normally considered to be more dedicated and better teachers. Of course personal abilities and attitudes also play an important part, but those with several reasons to teach are those who will more likely be dependable when working conditions deteriorate. On the other hand, teachers whose motivation stems from only one or two of the above mentioned factors, will likely be among the first to voice their feeling of job dissatisfaction and begin looking for other employment.

From a Thai perspective, educational institutions today are facing severe difficulties in finding adequate teachers for their classrooms. The Social and Economic factors have lost much of their appeal, and teachers are leaving their profession in large numbers. Khon Kaen University has been severely rocked by the resignation of more than 500 academics and officials in the past five years. In a recent editorial, the *Bangkok Post* said,

“..more than half of the 4,000 teaching jobs available at the country’s 18 state universities for the 1994 fiscal year are still vacant with little prospect of them ever being filled...In one respect at least, the large number of vacancies indicates that the teaching profession is not rewarding anymore, money-wise or career-wise...it comes as no surprise at all that state universities are experiencing a serious brain drain as their lecturers resign in droves to join private corporations.” (*Bangkok Post* August 25, 1994:4)



The issue at stake is the matter of motivation. If “the teaching profession is not rewarding anymore, money wise or career wise”, it will be increasingly difficult to recruit qualified educators. The *Bangkok Post* continues,

“In comparison with the other professionals such as judges, public prosecutors, engineers, architects, doctors and lawyers, the pay and fringe benefits provided to university lecturers are chicken feed despite the fact that their role and responsibility towards society are of equal or more importance.

To supplement their meager income, several university lecturers are doing private jobs in addition to their teaching roles. Others offer their expertise by acting as consultants to private corporations. And in the worst case, they simply quit the teaching jobs if they are desperate or feel it is worthless to spend any more time in universities.” (*Bangkok Post* August 25, 1994:4)

It is becoming obvious that there is something lacking for those who would be drawn into the field of education. The job opportunities are available, but there is insufficient appeal in the profession to attract enough qualified applicants. Many of the most capable people are being enticed to more lucrative or personally rewarding positions elsewhere. Formidable issues at hand discourage the most dedicated and intimidate those who might be interested in becoming teachers. Financial concerns, problems with discipline, increasing crime and drug abuse among teenagers all seem to work against educators.

In the midst of this period of upheaval however, there remain a significant number of men and women who continue to serve the children

of the nation as teachers. As the long-popular song by Wongjan Pairot explains, there are educators who serve as the vehicle which carries the children of Thailand across the fast-flowing river of ignorance before depositing them on the far bank with the education and tools necessary to survive as adults. (*Mae Pim Kong Chat*, Traditional Thai Song) These beleaguered teachers deserve an honest appraisal from the society which so desperately needs them.

For the purposes of this research, the question we are forced to consider is not, “Why are so many teachers leaving their profession” because we can identify several reasons for their departure. The question worthy of inquiry is “Why do so many talented people remain in the classroom?” We know all the reasons for leaving, but what keeps so many of them at their jobs? Why do they remain in the classroom year after year with what appears to be such limited remuneration? What do they see as their reward? What is their motivation? Given the fact that Thailand is a Buddhist country, it would hardly be surprising to find that part of the motivation felt by teachers today was somehow related to their religious up-bringing and value system. Perhaps part of the answer can be found in the concept of *witthayadana*, Alms of Knowledge.

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