

Critical Thinking: The Burmese Traditional Culture of Education

Thein Lwin (28 May 2010)

Abstract

Buddhist monastery schools are the second largest education institutions in Burma. A senior monk has suggested that critical thinking strategies are the method of the Buddha's teaching. The presentation will explore the practice of critical thinking teaching strategies in Burmese schools, and in refugee and migrant schools on the Thai-Burma border from 2002 to 2010. It will also report on the response of teachers who promote critical thinking in their classrooms, including what they understand by the term 'critical thinking'. The presentation will discuss the relationship between 'critical thinking' and the Buddhist tradition in Burma. It will also explore the impact of 'critical thinking' in Burmese society.

1. Introduction

When I was studying at the University of Newcastle, UK (1996-2000), I found that the Burmese education system prevented students from learning how to think. I wrote about this in a paper I presented at a conference in Oslo. After my presentation, Maureen Aung-Thwin of the Open Society Institute (OSI) introduced me to the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) program funded by the Soros Foundation and co-organized by the International Reading Association. In 2001, OSI sponsored me to attend an RWCT conference in Romania. I arrived at the Bucharest Airport but was not allowed entry because of my refugee status. I was sent back. Soon after, OSI and IRA sent international volunteers to give RWCT training to Burmese refugee teachers in Thailand. I was able to learn RWCT strategies and became an RWCT trainer.

I could not go back to Burma under the military regime because of my participation in the democratic movement. I therefore work on the education of Burmese refugees and migrants living along the Thai-Burma border.

In the following, I will present some background to education in Burma and the education of refugees and migrants in Thailand. I shall also report on the RWCT project for Burmese teachers, active learning and critical thinking in RWCT, the response of teachers to RWCT, and the relationship between critical thinking and Buddhist tradition, followed by a conclusion.

2. Background of Education in Burma

Burma has been governed by a military regime since 1962. Burmese people received a traditional Buddhist education in the past. Under British colonial rule, the school system and curricula were changed to suit the British administration. After independence in 1948, it was changed from colonial education to national education. In 1962, after a military coup, it was changed again from national education to so-called socialist education. In 1988, there was a nationwide democratic uprising and Burma was struggling for democracy. However, the military rule continues and education is deteriorating in every area such as children's access to education, curriculum, teaching and students' progress.

Children in rural areas as well as children of poor families in the cities have little chance to attend school because of lack of schools and economic deprivation. The dropout rate from school is very high. According to a recent study (Thein Lwin, 2003)¹, almost 40 per cent of children never attend school and almost three-quarters fail to complete primary education. There is a different reckoning on the adult literacy rate between the regime and other sources. The regime claim the literacy rate is 80 per cent while other estimates put it at less than 60 per cent. The regime argues that children learn reading and writing at Buddhist monasteries although they do not attend public school. It is true to some extent that the regime allows Buddhist monasteries to open primary schools. Children learn reading, writing and Buddhism.

2.1 Public Schools

Today's public schools are extremely poor in terms of equity, quality and efficiency. Schools do not treat students equally. Students who are the children of government officials and who pay bribes to teachers are privileged. Many teachers enter the classroom without proper training. The curriculum is textbook based and is just concerned with memorizing facts in science, history, geography and so on. Teachers use an authoritative role in teaching. It seems that the regime uses education as a political tool by preventing children from learning how to think. Young people are expected to be disciplined in and out of school under the military regime. The notion of discipline invokes ideas of loyalty and the image of obedient citizens.

2.2 Monastic Education

Thanks to Buddhist monks, children who never enrolled in secular schools can still learn the three R's in monasteries. These children learn literacy, numeracy, sciences, history and geography as well as Buddhism. From the political, social and religious points of view, however, monastic schools should be reconsidered. Monastic schools are officially allowed by the regime under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It is likely that monastic schools are supported by Buddhist communities and the regime does not need to use its budget. However, other religious communities - such as Christian and Muslim - are not allowed to open schools officially. It is not a fair policy. Even in the eyes of a Buddhist, schools should be supported by the government and monasteries should be the place for Buddhism. It is difficult for the children of other religious communities to send their children to Buddhist monastic schools.

2.3 Private Schools

Recently, the military regime announced that private schools could be registered to operate. Since children do not receive quality education in the public schools, many parents want to send their children to private schools with western teachers and qualified local teachers. School fees are high and only the ruling class and rich people can send their children to such schools. There are huge discrepancies between the children of different social classes in pursuing their education. The private schools mostly focus on the mastery of English language. Parents want their

¹ Education in Burma (1945-2000). The paper can be viewed at: www.thinkingclassroom.org

children to speak good English - hoping that they will send their children to the English speaking countries to work or to continue their studies.

2.4 Higher Education

The regime has opened many new universities in different regions and proudly announces the number of graduates each year. However, it is just quantity rather than quality. Even so, in terms of quantity, many young people do not finish their primary or secondary education, and only a small percentage of young people can join university courses. In terms of quality, it is nothing. Students do not get ownership of their learning. University courses are again textbook based and are seriously lacking in resources.

Students can not choose the subjects they want to study. Subjects taken depend on 10th standard (final year of high school) exam marks. Entry to medical, engineering, computer science and foreign relationship subjects require higher marks. It makes students, parents and teachers exam oriented rather than concerned with students' real learning. There is much corruption in order to get higher marks in examinations and entry to popular subjects at university. The quality of education is very low at all levels. Graduates are not properly trained to gain the skills required to do a job. Many graduates are unemployed. On the other hand, the military have set up their own universities for the students in the military circle. It is thought that these students are well trained and have opportunity to further their studies abroad whilst ordinary students receive a poor education.

3. Education of Refugees and Migrants in Thailand

There are about 140,000 refugees living in nine refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border recognized by UNHCR. The refugees are mostly from Karen and Karenni states where there was frequent fighting between regime troops and ethnic armed groups. There are over two million illegal immigrants living throughout Thailand outside the camps. The migrant population comes from different parts of Burma and enters Thailand illegally to look for work. There are also thousands of Burmese migrants living in neighbouring, Malaysia, Bangladesh and India. About 20 per cent of the refugee and migrant population are of school age children and are in need of education.

3.1 Refugee Schools

About 30,000 students attend schools in refugee camps - from primary to secondary levels. There are over 1,000 teachers. At the beginning of a school year, the number of students is higher because young people inside Burma cross the border and come into refugee camps seeking the opportunity to get an education. The education department of the Karenni ethnic armed opposition group (KNPP) controls schools in two Karenni refugee camps, and the education department of the Karen ethnic armed opposition group (KNU) controls schools in seven Karen refugee camps with the support of NGOs. Curricula were drawn-up based on political and nationalist ideas. Teachers are recruited from the refugee population and they are not well qualified. Where native English speakers go to the camps and teach English, students' level of English is relatively higher than that of students inside Burma. However, the overall level of education does not show much improvement. One

good thing is that almost all children in camps attend school. Because education is free in camps and parents get food rations, children do not need to work - or there is no place to work anyway.

3.2 Migrant Schools

Many Burmese migrants came into Thailand with their families and some are married in Thailand and produce children. These children need to attend school. Since the parents are working illegally in Thailand and children do not understand Thai, they cannot attend Thai schools. In theory, every school age child can go to a Thai school but, in practice, children are denied schooling because they are not Thai. Some Burmese communities in Thailand have created their own classrooms and teach children Burmese, Karen, English, Thai and Mathematics. Some parents want their children to attend schools where they are taught in Burmese or Karen to preserve their own language and culture. In the Mae Sot area alone (near the Burma border), there are about 60 schools attended by 10,000 students. Except for two well-funded secondary schools, many of them are one-classroom schools. There are some schools in Mahachai area (near Bangkok), Ranong and Phuket Island. A few hundred children there get education in the migrant schools. These are children who are living near schools and their parents want to give them the opportunity to learn. There are many other children living at a distance from schools, with parents who move from place to place for their jobs, with parents who need their older children to earn money or to look after small children. Consequently, they have little opportunity to learn.

Furthermore, the migrant workers themselves need education and training. Their old skills and disrupted education in Burma do not fit in with the Thai economy. They need to learn more to improve their skills.

4. RWCT Project for Burmese Teachers

My colleagues and I set up a teacher training center based in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand since 2001 supported financially by Prospect Burma, UK and the Open Society Institute, USA, and academically by the School of Education, University of Newcastle, UK. Through community leaders, teachers and educators, we learned that the need for education of the younger generation in the Burma border regions was enormous: many children had no school; shortage of teachers; insufficient training; curriculum disputes, etc. Unable to provide for all of their needs, we decided to contribute our knowledge and skills by organizing teacher training and education seminars, and offering professional advice on curriculum development.

The course covers the foundations of education including learning theories, curriculum rationale, philosophy of education, and history of education in Burma. We facilitate Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) workshops. Lesson planning and classroom management across the ability range are also included. Students also have opportunity to improve their study skills, IT skills and English proficiency. In the first few years, we recruited students from refugee camps who had completed secondary education and wished to become teachers. However, it became increasingly difficult for Burmese refugees to travel from their camps to Chiang Mai year by year, and we had to change the training model. We then recruited senior teachers with recognized leadership skills and evident dedication to

educational work. We provided them with a foundation course, RWCT training and a train-the-trainers workshop. Following training, they became trainers and re-trained other teachers at their own schools and near-by schools. Also, in collaboration with the NGOs working on education in refugee camps, we trained senior teachers and teacher-trainers from camps, and they organized second generation training in nine refugee camps.

Since 2005, we have also recruited senior teachers from inside Burma using the train-the-trainers model. Course graduates organize second generation training inside Burma. We also provide local RWCT workshops in Kachin State, northern Burma, Mon State southern Burma and to migrant school teachers in Mae Sot, Phuket/Kho Lak and Mahachai. From the Chiang Mai training alone, **250 teachers** have completed training; from the second generation training about **2,250 teachers** completed the training (850 in refugee camps and 1400 inside Burma); from the local RWCT workshops **500 teachers** completed the training (150 in Kachin, 120 in Mon, 200 in Mae Sot; 20 in Phuket and 15 in Mahachai). **In total, about 3,000 teachers received training** in our program and **90,000 students** have been given opportunity to practice active participation and critical thinking learning strategies.

5. RWCT: Active Learning and Critical Thinking

The Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) project is based on the idea that democratic practices in schools play an important role in the transition towards peaceful and thoughtful societies. Active in 30 countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and more recently Latin America and South/East Asia, RWCT introduces research-based instructional methods to teachers and teacher educators. These methods are designed to help students think reflectively, take ownership for their personal learning, understand the logic of arguments, listen attentively, debate confidently, and become independent lifelong learners. The program can be used in all grades and subjects with existing curricula.

RWCT for Burmese teachers (RWCT Northern Thailand Project) was initiated as a part of the international RWCT program funded by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and International Reading Association (IRA) in 2002. In the first year of RWCT workshops, international volunteers Jeannie Steele, Kurt Meredith, Karin Dahl and Terry McEachern came to Thailand to introduce RWCT methods. In the second year, the first generation participants organized workshops in three refugee camps. In 2004, IRA and OSI stopped their funding and we could not organize more workshops in camps. However, I was invited by Karen Education Project (KEP) supported by ZOA, a Dutch NGO, to provide training to its local trainers. I provided RWCT strategies and train-the-trainers workshops to them. In 2005 and 2006, the KEP trainers provided RWCT workshops in seven refugee camps. According to a report, 700+ teachers have received RWCT training with the KEP project. The Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers (TTBT) which is directed by me continues RWCT workshops – and other in-service teacher training - supported by Prospect Burma, UK and individual donors until today.

RWCT is now disseminated not only in refugee camps but also inside Burma. In 2005, 15 teachers from Mandalay and Rangoon attended the RWCT training and education foundation courses in Chiang Mai, Thailand. In 2006, another 22 teachers who had some years of teaching experiences and leadership skills attended the

training in Chiang Mai. Back in Burma, they now re-train other teachers. About 1400 teachers inside Burma have completed RWCT workshops and are now using these strategies in their schools.

RWCT strategies are useful tools for classroom level educational change in Burmese schools. It changes the teacher's role in the classroom. A teacher becomes a thoughtful facilitator of students' learning rather than playing an authoritative role. The classroom is also changed to become a student learning community where students participate actively, think critically and gain ownership of their learning. Critical thinking involves a complex thought process which begins with information and ends in decision making. The critical thinking teaching strategies offer 'democratic experiences and practices' within the classrooms. It is intended not only for the personal development of individual students but also for the development of a better society.

6. Teachers' Response to RWCT

At the beginning of the RWCT project, 'active learning' is interpreted differently among teachers. Through classroom observation it was found that some teachers encouraged students to sing, dance, and play almost all the time during the lessons. This made for too much noise and students in other classrooms could not focus on their learning. Some teachers spent too much time on the 'evocation stage' and students had little time to realize the meaning of their new knowledge. RWCT suggests a three-part framework in each lesson. These are evocation, realization of meaning and reflection. In the evocation part, students are encouraged to express their prior knowledge and experiences in relation to the new knowledge to be learned. It is based on the idea that "learning is the process of assimilating new information to the knowledge of the world we already have" (Piaget). In the 'realization of meaning' part, it encourages enquiry based learning. Students investigate information whether it is reliable or biased, analyze it in-depth and synthesize with information from other sources to understand the new knowledge widely. Then they evaluate the new knowledge. In this part 'cooperative learning' is encouraged based on the idea that "full cognitive development requires social interaction" (Vygotsky). At the end of the lessons, students are encouraged to reflect the new knowledge they have learned.

RWCT helps teachers and students to promote their teaching and learning skills rather than promoting subject knowledge. Since the level of education has become lower and lower under the military regime, teachers may need to improve their subject knowledge to help students' learning. Furthermore, the RWCT program can only work with schools in ceasefire regions run by Kachin and Mon ethnic armed groups, some monastery schools, some church schools, and few private schools. It does not work with schools run by the military regime. The majority of students attend government schools. In the current political situation, RWCT may not be applied in government schools. Although some non-governmental schools received RWCT, these schools cannot recruit qualified teachers. Schools in refugee camps need to recruit new teachers every year because many teachers go to a third country under a resettlement programme. Teachers at migrant schools are not stable because of their unstable life conditions and low salary. Teachers at schools in Kachin and Mon regions are more stable than other schools because of their political commitment. However, they need more training to provide quality education.

7. The Relationship between Critical Thinking and Buddhist Tradition

A Buddhist monk from Mandalay who had completed a higher degree at a Buddhist university attended the RWCT workshop in Chiang Mai in 2006. In 2007, 2008 and early 2009, seven Buddhist monks and a nun attended the workshop. Since the middle of 2009, Buddhist monks were not allowed to attend training in Thailand by the Burmese authority. However, many Buddhist monks teaching at Buddhist monastery schools joined the 60-hour RWCT training in Mandalay and some other cities. These monks unanimously agreed that critical thinking is a Buddhist philosophy. They explained 'Kalama Sutta' as an example. There was a question as to why Burmese schools practice rote learning teaching strategy although critical thinking is its tradition. Obviously, children's rote learning has dominated Burmese education. Rote learning has been a very strong influence in Burma since the Buddhist Scriptures were committed to memory. Monks simply learn the *Pitakas* (the three repositories of Buddhist Scriptures) by rote. Since there was no script at the time of Buddha, rote learning was used to perpetuate the Buddha's teaching in its original form.

Rote learning has its uses in that education also relies on remembering such things as timetables and verbs with irregular forms in English grammar. But rote learning without proof of understanding does not have a place in modern education. In the teaching of modern subjects such as science and social studies, however, Burmese pupils are still expected to absorb knowledge in a passive way despite the international trend - based on sound educational theory - that learners should be encouraged to participate in an active way. A key factor in this the huge rate at which human knowledge, and access to knowledge, has grown and the consequent need for people to be equipped to process it.

Kalama Sutta

You may well doubt, you may well be uncertain ...

Do not accept anything because it is the authoritative tradition, because it is often said, because of rumor or hearsay, because it is found in the scriptures, because it agrees with a theory of which one is already convinced, because of the reputation of an individual, or because a teacher said it is thus and thus ...

But experience it for yourself.

— The Lord Buddha

This Buddhist theory about the nature of knowledge is echoed in Socratic thinking, Vygotskian and constructivist theories of education, and dialectical philosophies. These ideas underpin the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking approach to teaching and learning. In this way the Buddha's critical thinking and enquiry based learning are being re-introduced into Burmese education by RWCT. It is appropriate because the world is rapidly changing and people of different social, cultural and political backgrounds can meet everywhere. Besides, media technology helps people to get information from different sources. It is essential for everybody to investigate and evaluate the information around them before they make a reflective judgment.

8. Conclusion

‘Active learning and critical thinking’ strategies can become well developed in Burma because it is the cultural context of Burmese society and the country is destined to form a democratic nation. However, the major disturbance is the military rule in Burma. The regime recently announced that an election will be held in 2010. However, the main political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi has decided not to participate in the election. The reasons are that the regime has failed to recognize the result of the 1990 election which the NLD won by a landslide majority, the constitution imposed by the regime in 2008 does not lead to a democracy, and the election law is unfair in that it takes advantage of the domination of the army and excludes many democratic activists.

Facing such challenges, it is the responsibility of educators to introduce ‘active learning and critical thinking’ teaching strategies into the Burmese education system and to encourage teachers to exercise the new strategies in their classrooms. Apart from the RWCT programme for teachers, my organization is introducing ‘critical thinking’ workshops for young people working at political organizations, civil societies, and community based organizations including human rights groups.

Although the result may not be seen clearly for a few years, the impact may be huge in the long run: the investment is a long-term one aimed at supporting systemic change. Since Burma needs active and thoughtful democratic citizens, ‘active learning and critical thinking’ will be helpful in meeting this goal.

End.