
Senile Body, but Cheerful Soul: Adapting Dharma in the Lives of the Bangkok Elderly

老いた身体に元気な心——バンコクのお年よりは仏陀の教えを日常に

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Abstract:

This research article aims to highlight how Thai elderly adapt various kinds of dharma disciplines to lift up their spiritual well-being and cope with changes that globalization brought into their lives living in Bangkok, the largest metropolitan area in Thailand. Over sixty elderly Thais, both male and female, aged 60-86 years old, who came from lower-middle to upper class socioeconomic statuses, and live in central Bangkok participated in this research. The data was gathered through intensive 14 months of fieldwork using life histories and in-depth interview research techniques. Results have strongly reflected that practicing dharma disciplines can be utilized to solve life problems that most urban people commonly face in today's lifestyle and are beneficial to individuals and to society as a whole. Moreover, the Thai elderly are skilled and capable of converting complex Buddhist teachings into simple and practical forms for their decedents. If only the people in Thai urban society can see the importance of the Thai elderly and allow themselves to learn from these valuable lessons, living a fulfilling and sufficient lives in the hectic urban areas is not hard to achieve.

Keywords: Thai elderly people, adapting dharma, aging, spiritual well-being, urban lifestyle

Globalization has rapidly enabled dissemination and acceptance of Western cultural values. This change has directly affected all Thais in general. The beliefs of globalization have diminished the role of the Thai elderly as the focus on materialism has caused Thai society, especially urban society, to overlook the importance of the Thai elderly. In becoming one of the marginal groups, everyone tends to group the Thai elderly together and overlook their different lifestyles and self-expression. In truth, the lifestyles, beliefs, values and personal views of the Thai elderly in each group are very different. This difference has never been discussed and acknowledged. As a result of this, sadly, the younger generation tends to overlook the importance of the elderly in the development of Thai society.

The Thai elderly should be recognized as a major part of the society and be respected by the young. In the past, Thai culture has regarded the elderly as the pillar for their descendents as they are a source of knowledge and wisdom in many ways. They are also skillful and have important roles as knowledgeable people because they have experienced life as well as being givers without expecting anything in return other than seeing their family being happy. They are good at disseminating and conveying as they have a deep understanding that they can teach to others. The elderly have also been good role models for their descendents. A good example of this is how the elderly could act as a source of knowledge in effectively adapting Buddhist teachings in urban lifestyles. This also conforms to the King's royal initiative of efficiency living.

The researcher wishes to reflect the voices and views of the elderly in Metropolitan Bangkok with focus on the thoughts and experience in adapting dharma in urban lifestyles. The voices are of over 60 Buddhist elderly persons, both male and female, living in urban society in the heart of Bangkok. Overall, the characteristics of the sample group of the elderly who participated in this study are aged 60 – 86 years, consisting of 31 males and 34 females, with education from junior high school or vocational school to mater's degrees from abroad. To reflect the reality of the elderly living in the urban area, the researcher selected participants from various social and economic statuses in equal numbers ranging from upper-class owner of commercial building and hundreds of acres of land for lease to pensioners who must earn additional income to support themselves and their families. Furthermore, 57 of the participants live with their descendents as extended families and 8 participants live in retirement homes. The researcher gathered data from life history interviews as well as in-depth interviews during 14 months of fieldwork. The researcher hopes that readers will use the simple thoughts in this study in their everyday lives and enlighten their minds to overcome the obstacles and pressures of urban life in the globalization era.

The subject matter will be conveyed through the telling of the elderly which reflect the different dimensions of the lifestyles of the elderly in the urban areas when compared to those of the elderly in rural areas. The paper will illustrate the simple dharma disciplines and the Buddhist activities that the urban elderly practice to achieve efficiency living and peaceful lives. The elderly in this study actually practice these disciplines and activities in their everyday lives which positively affects their minds and bodies. Not only does the study reflect the practice of dharma disciplines in everyday lives of the elderly, but also effective integration of the dharma disciplines. The integration of dharma disciplines and the idea of encouraging awareness of being a good member of society, a good citizen of our country, compensating the goodness of country and King

and creating harmony in developing Thai society. If we look more closely, we will see that the wisdom of the elderly have shown us a way to develop Thailand into a serene and peaceful country and lay the foundation for a sustaining quality of life for the younger generation.

Theoretical Framework

This study was inspired by Cowgill and Holmes's book, *Aging and Modernization*, especially their cross-cultural research findings that show that originally, the elderly were respected and praised as persons with knowledge, experience, who played major roles in religious activities and were political leaders. Later on, when industry and capitalism became more prominent in society, the greatest impact that followed was that the status of the elderly in that particular society diminished as can be seen in the histories of various countries such as the United States of America, Norway, as well as developing countries.

In these countries, the elderly tend to feel that they have little value to their family and society as a whole. Their status and roles have been limited. The major factors leading to the changes are the change in the family dynamic, retirement measures, materialism and the influence of the media in reflecting the undesirable old age (Cowgill and Holmes, 1972). Another study conducted by Palmore stated that in Japanese society there is an exception to explaining the roles of the elderly and that this theory cannot be used. Even though the Japanese society is an industrialized one, the elderly are still highly regarded as the Japanese culture respects and praises elders and believes in showing gratitude. Nevertheless, recent studies like Izuhara in 2000 and Hattori, Matsuda, Yoneda in 2002 found that the status of the elderly in current day Japan has decreased which is a result of modern society. These studies have given a general view that are consistent with other researchers who studied the social change which negatively effect the elderly in Thailand as well (Sithitrai and Sawaengdee, 1990; Kamnuansilpa et al., 1980; Choowattanapakorn, 1999).

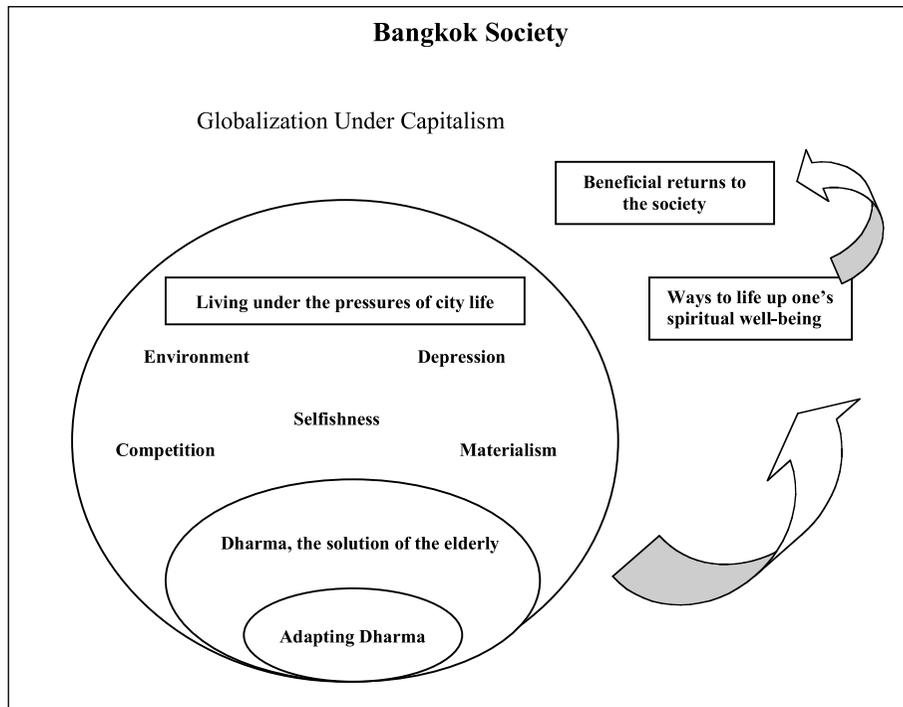
Nevertheless, researchers abroad continue to have special interest in studies on the elderly. These studies aim to show society the value of the elderly to reinforce their status in society. The research shows that the elderly have special skills when compared to the other age groups as they have accumulated skills, experiences, intellect and perspectives in problem solving that are extremely beneficial and valuable to society. This is especially true about adapting their intellect and wit in solving problems in our lives (Butler, 1985; Pargament, et al., 1998; Meisenhelder, et al., 2002; Fiori, et al., 2004).

It is generally accepted that the elderly have a major role in living with religion. The relationship between religion and the elderly can be found in every society, both traditional and modern societies (Gallup and Bezilla, 1990). Researches abroad have found that adults will attend church more frequently when they reach old age and will take the religious teachings to heart. The religious teachings not only positively affect their mental health and lead to calm and peacefulness, but they also create a feeling of usefulness, as well as attachment to society. Furthermore, the teachings have a positive effect on their physical health such as lowering stress, lessening mental instability, and lowering risks of high blood pressure and heart disease, when compared to the elderly who do not regularly attend church or have attachments to religious beliefs (Levin and Vanderpool, 1989; Ellison, 1991; Gesler, Arcury, and Koenig, 2000; Kaplan, Munroe-Blum, and

Blazer, 1994). The study conducted by Preecha Upayothin (1998) found that religion has helped the elderly in adapting by practicing religious ceremonies, going to temple and listening to dharma preaching. This not only helps enlighten their souls, but it is also similar to working as they help with chores in the temple and help the community. Additionally, it gives them an opportunity to get together with their friends of different ages. Making merit and performing good deeds is one channel of happiness for the elderly, giving them peace of mind.

The above theories and research studies encouraged the researcher to bring forth these ideas in order to show the reality, the opinions and the spiritual well-being of the elderly. The researcher wishes for the younger generation to value the elderly in Thai society. In addition, the younger generation should adapt the intellect, wit and experiences of the Thai elderly in their lives. They can also learn how to lead happy, fulfilling, sufficient lives without extravagance or bad behavior. This can all be found in the views and details of this paper. The researcher is certain that everyone agrees that the elderly should be valued always and that it is beneficial to learn from them.

Conceptual Framework



Objective of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To study the diversity of the lives of the elderly
2. To study the dharma disciplines that the urban elderly follow and how they adapt the dharma disciplines, as well as the Buddhist activities that the urban elderly participate in their everyday lives
3. To analyze the benefits of adapting dharma disciplines by the urban elderly

Results of the Study

A Different Perspective on the Lives of the Thai Elderly in the City

“Sometimes the elderly in the city will not admit that they are old because they are part of a social clique. There are many distractions. They are accustomed to finding gratification whether it is going out with friends or traveling. When it comes to going to the temple, they will say that the commute is difficult but when it comes to traveling, they are game. But the elderly in the rural areas are living with nature. No need to think too much. The temples are close by, if there’s nothing to do, they can just walk over to the temple and chat with the monks, study dharma and pay homage to the Buddha. Nothing to allure them to commit sins. The elderly in the city sometimes go out at night and sing karaoke. They think that as they have grown old, they should find as much happiness as possible. But I think it is a fake happiness. In the country, when there’s nothing to do, they go to bed after dark. But in the city, once it’s dark, when they’re bored they will go out, get something to eat, sing karaoke.”

(Male veteran, age 64 years)

“The elderly in the rural areas don’t have to do anything much. They don’t have to think too much. They go about their lives as normal. They don’t travel much and they don’t go out for entertainment. Their lives are peaceful, smooth, modest, and sufficient. But some of the elderly in the urban areas must go to the shopping centers. Most of them still long for fun and are spendthrifts although some do live humbly though.”

(Male veteran, age 71 years)

“It is very different. People in the rural areas live longer because of the environment. The air is pollution free and they eat healthy food like vegetables and fish. People in Bangkok are the opposite. They live in crowded areas, compete for air to breathe. When we drive out there, we can see exhaust fumes every where. There’s none of that in the country. The elderly there (in the country) rise early to walk and perspire. Perspiration is good for you. They eat lots of rice and vegetables. Our food consists of pork, streaky pork, duck, food that is fatty which makes us fat. You don’t see many fat elderly in the rural areas. They hardly ever get sick. And you know what else they have? Nature. They work up a sweat. People who perspire a lot tend to not get sick. City people sleep in air-conditioned rooms. Air-conditioners absorb bad air and circulate it.”

(Male, dharma practitioner, 62 years)

Other than the different way of life of the elderly in the urban and rural areas, the difference in mind and habits is also something that the elderly can see.

“If our minds think that the country is better, they are more pure. This is definitely true. From my experience, they have nothing to hide. When they speak or give advice, there’s nothing concealed or if there is, it’s less than the people in the city. Pure means that there is no consideration of benefits. It is hard to guess the minds of the people in the city. You have to be aware that they might take advantage of you. You live with

paranoia because competition is normal in the lives of city people like us.”

(Male, former businessman, 68 years)

However, when reaching senility, whether they live in the city or in the country, people will turn to Buddhism as an anchor for their souls. The interviews have shown that the environment and problems caused by living in the city encourage the elderly to employ dharma disciplines to rid their souls of sadness that arise from the many problems that the city throws at you. Almost all of the elderly in this study have stated that they were able to overcome the obstacles in their lives because they practice the teachings of Buddhism in their everyday lives to lessen the stress and bad thoughts from their minds. Therefore, when problems arise in life, Buddhism is extremely important for this group of elderly people.

Dharma Disciplines that the Urban Elderly Use for a Peaceful Life by Living Sufficiently

Throughout our lives, there is a time when our life is full of obstacles and problems, which results in our simple lives becoming more complex. This is normal in the human life. Learning from the experiences of the elderly is ideal for dealing with the problems that we face in our lives. This section illustrates how to adapt simple dharma disciplines from Buddhism in everyday urban life.

Trilak Enables Understanding of the Truth About Life

The elderly in this study have shared how they solve their problems with the dharma principle of *trilak*. The elderly often teach us that of *anijchung* (impermanence), *tookkung* (cause of sadness) and *anutta* (no-self) are important. They teach us that *anijchung*, or impermanence, is that things are always changing, never staying in one form. *Tookkung*, or cause of sadness, is a result of these changes as people tend to think that a part of their lives or something in their lives is theirs and should not change. But in reality everything is *anijchung*, should not be considered as self (*utta*), which means that by nature everything will change as factors arise. Therefore, an understanding *anutta* will lead one to come to term with how there is no self in the world and the concept of self is not eternal.

The elderly tend to abide by *trilak* and see discontent and obstacles as normal events that occur in our lives and are not permanent. Therefore, the elderly are not discontent. They are able to rid their lives of depression and are able to face the real world problems head on as illustrated by a former school teacher (male):

“In our lives, from the past to the present, we encounter luck and failure. For example, problems in our jobs, sometimes things don’t always go smoothly, sometimes there are obstacles. When we do good, people don’t see it. Or people mess with us. For example, the boss may not see that what we are doing is right or wrong, which results in problems. So then we think of the teachings of Buddha that says that we should not persist, that is *utta*. *Utta* is self. Its makes us look at ourselves and see that if we hold firm, we will be troubled. *Anutta* is uncertainty. We must see if this is tangible. The situation will end and go away. Therefore, if we think about it too much, we will not

find the answer. *Utta* makes us see that if we hold firm to everything we do or everything others do, we will not be at peace. *Anutta* makes us realize that nothing is certain and that things continuously change. Like trees that are alive, people also grow and die at the pinnacle. So if we do not hold firm to our problems, we will see that nothing is certain. When we do not persist, we will see things with wider eyes.”

(Male, former teacher with the Ministry of Education, 60 years)

Eight Earthly Dharma Explains Human Nature

Sometimes, when we understand the world and nature it helps us to figure out ways to overcome the obstacles. Therefore, understanding human nature helps us to be prepared in advance for changes that might occur which is a way of overcoming problems. Many elderly choose the Eight Earthly Dharma and agree with the opinion of one elderly man as follows:

“The reason we are suffering these days is because we do not know the Eight Earthly Dharma. The Eight Earthly Dharma is dharma of the world. There’s happiness. When there’s happiness, there’s suffering, right? They are a pair because when you want happiness, you don’t want suffering. We have fortune but one day we will lose it. Most people don’t realize that things come in 4 pairs. These are fortune, honor, praise and happiness and each of them come with their own partners, loss of fortune, loss of honor, gossip and suffering. Today they praise us, one day they will gossip about us. You can see that it will happen for sure. When you have honor, you will lose it. When you reach the top, you must come down. Like retirees. Life has its ups and downs, ups and downs, obstacles. This is what humans on earth must learn. When you have fortune, you will lose it. When you have honor, you will lose it. When you have praise, you will have gossip. When you have happiness, you will have suffering. Be prepared for it!”

(Male, dharma practitioner, 62 years)

Karma Comes with Being Born Human

Buddhists will always speak of karma. Most people will speak of unwanted karma, called bad karma. Some of the elderly will think of the problems in their lives as resulting from bad karma, which every human will come across by nature. Therefore, we cannot avoid the problems that arise but we can overcome them through understanding of the problems. This includes taking it easy and thinking that it is natural for us to be faced with obstacles.

“Solving problems is our karma, our destiny. I trust my friend too much because we have known each other for a long time. He has once taken advantage of me. It is about money. But he must really need it. If it weren’t necessary, he probably wouldn’t have done it. But then again, once it’s lost, it’s lost. I have to make peace with it. He probably really needed the money, that’s why he did it. If I think like this, I will be at peace.”

(Male with sufficient life, 68 years)

“We should not think too much when we are faced with serious problems. Let it go. Think of it as normal. When we are faced with obstacles and we overcome them, then we should forget about it. Let it pass.”

(Male, solemn individual, 68 years)

From many conversations with the urban elderly, we can see that they view the obstacles that occur in their lives as part of human lives that must pay for their karma in every life. It is human nature. However, the choices we have in solving our problems and the choices we have in our actions will come back to us, like a cycle. Therefore, if we choose to act on good karma, find ways to overcome the obstacles and choose the right way, it will result in good things for us. The Four Noble Truths can help us in overcoming suffering and in solving our problems.

The Four Noble Truths Help Us to See the Solutions to Our Problems

“When we are born, we have problems from birth and all through our lives. It is as they say that we are born with karma. You can see when babies are born, they all hold fists, none of them open their palms. The important thing in solving problems is do we have the strength to fight. Obstacles are like tests. They make us stronger. Like me, I’ve been faced with situations where there did not seem to be a way out but I had the moral support to fight so I was able to get out. If we have never been faced with problems and live a contented life, we will be idle and we won’t grow. Like a tree, when it is small, we put it in a planter. When it grows, its roots will expand, filling up the planter. If we continue using the planter, it has no way to go, it won’t grow and it will stay small. But if we put it in a bigger planter, add more soil, it will be able to grow. Another important thing, other than moral support, is we must have dharma as well. Use dharma to determine the cause of the problem and find ways to solve them by following the Four Noble Truths. The four truths are suffering, cause of suffering, overcoming suffering and path to accomplish this. These truths are known as the Four Noble Truths*1. I was once bankrupt. Instead of thinking of suicide, borrowing money and deceiving others when I knew that I could never pay them back, I chose not to do so. I chose to start over, start saving money and start a new life with what I had. It took some time, but I am proud that I chose the right path.”

(Male, Chinese descent, 64 years)

Most of the problems that the elderly talked about were a result of the actions of others surrounding them, such as relatives, friends or their boss including strangers. The dharma discipline that the elderly tend to follow in order to rid themselves of suffering from the actions of people is the Four Brahma Vihara*2 which are 1) *Metta*, caring, the desire for others to be happy; 2) *Karuna*, compassion, the desire for others to overcome suffering; 3) *Mudita*, sympathetic joy, being happy for others and 4) *Upekkha*, grace. The Four Brahma Vihara is the dharma discipline that enables people to live nobly and purely.

The Four Brahma Vihara Used for Living with Others

“We must have the Four Brahma Vihara in the allocation and management of

family affairs or socializing with others. The Four Brahma Vihara are *metta* (caring), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkha* (grace). If we are caring and compassionate to others, we will live peacefully. Do you agree? We must show sympathetic joy towards others. Grace is acceptance even when we meet someone who doesn't like us. Some people don't like each other from previous lives, we don't know. Is it the same with you? When you met your friend, you felt very close to her. But with some people, you don't like them even before you speak. In this case we must use grace. Whatever they say that makes us mad, we must be calm. If we fight back, we will become enemies forever. We must care for others when they are in need. We must care for the people who work for us. We must show them compassion, like giving them money to help out their parents back home. We express sympathetic joy when they can care for themselves, have additional income and a better life. We must show grace by not punishing them too harshly when they do wrong."

(Female, grocery store owner, 82 years)

A former professor has given an example of practicing *upekkha* or grace. When we have done good but the problems arise from a person who has done wrong, we must think of it as karma. Many elderly feel the same way. When the elderly believe that they have acted right, if our heart and soul are pure, grace will help to ease the problems because people who do wrong will receive the results of their actions.

"We live in a world filled with obstacles. We cannot make people do as we please. Conflict, cursing, criticism and slander. I've received all of them. We do good and they say that we are bad. We live our life and they bully us. They will be the ones who are nervous. Some will cause misunderstanding in our family. We can solve this by being still. We are innocent, with nothing to show. When they see that we are not affected and we do not use weapons or curse at them, those who hurt us have sinned and they will eventually go away. They want us to lose our reputation. They spread rumors. We can see that they are not accepted. One day they will go away because they can't stand it. But we can live on. I have seen a lot of this in my life."

(Male, professor of religion and religious philosophy, 67 years)

Show Compassion and Forgiveness to Fellow Humans and Other Living Things

"Compassion and forgiveness. Compassion and sympathy. Compassion and helping others. My father taught me this since I was a young boy. When we see someone in need, we must help them. My father is never vengeful, he always forgives. You will receive many things in return. My father would say dharma allotment. Allotment to our minds and bodies make us good people. It makes us exempt from doing wrong. When we stick to doing good, we will be at peace. The good things that we do for others, even though it may be just simple things (not be vengeful, forgive those who do us wrong), will bring happiness and peace back to us."

(Male, dharma practitioner, 62 years)

The elderly often tell stories of obstacles in their lives and they will stress that we must give time to consider and find solutions to every problem that arises. We have a part in providing moral support to ourselves so that we do not give up. Other dharma disciplines that can help us solve problems are patience and intellect.

Patience Helps Create Moral Support to Combat Obstacles

The elderly tend to practice the dharma discipline of patience*³. Patience is tolerance. It makes us strong. Patience is a virtue that helps us not to be discouraged. It encourages diligence and makes us view the obstacles as challenges that we must overcome. Therefore, the elderly practice patience to overcome the obstacles.

“When we are faced with a sticky situation, we tolerate and have patience to go on. We concentrate and fight back. When we meet with obstacles, we must be strong. We must not be discouraged. We will then lead peaceful, smooth lives and meet with success. We cannot make others treat us right. Sometimes people trick us, treat us badly. We must show tolerance and endure. We must concentrate and not show interest in the bad things around us.”

(Male, cheerful, 70 years)

Possess Intellect

“An important dharma discipline in Buddhism is intellect. Intellect and patience. The Buddha says we must live with intellect. We cannot have patience alone, we must also have intellect. Patience alone cannot help us to tolerate. We cannot endure if we do not use reasoning. When someone curses us, we must use intellect to judge that it does not hurt, not like if someone put a knife to us. If we act like we didn’t hear anything or if we don’t react, then it’s as if nothing happened. If we listen and fight back, instead of that person being punished, we will be the ones in jail suffering. Therefore, we must use intellect and not fight dirty with the bad. ‘Instead of losing a lot, we lose a little.’ If we can give in to them, that’s okay. If cursing us makes them happy, then let them, but we will be alright.”

(Male, President of Buddhism Club, 69 years)

When asked about the path to a peaceful and satisfying life, the elderly advised that there is one simple secret and that is to adapt the dharma disciplines as well as the following beliefs in our everyday lives.

Abiding By the Eightfold Path for Spiritual and Physical Happiness

Many of the elderly agree that when practicing dharma disciplines, we should start with thoughts, speech as well as actions that coincide with the Eightfold Path. The elderly tend to give special importance to *the right view* which is acting correctly. *The right thought* means to have good thoughts, think right and speak right. If we act accordingly, we will lead happy, peaceful

lives for if we do not hurt others, no one will hurt us.

“We do good, we will think that we have done good. We speak right and we will be at peace. We do right, think right and speak right, we will be at peace. When we talk, we only want to say good things. We do not talk of the bad.”

(Female, talkative, 65 years)

“Think good, speak good, do good. They will make us happy. When we should not lie and deceive, when we speak frankly from our hearts, we will be very much at peace. When we speak frankly, trustworthy people will never die. We must think this way.”

(Female, kind-hearted, 77 years)

“Have you ever noticed that old people who do not look relaxed, who look unfriendly, when their faces are expressionless, they look like they are frowning? It is because they have had bad thoughts all their lives. They speak rudely and make faces so their faces and bodies are a result of their bad thoughts. Therefore, we must not forget that doing good and thinking good will effect our physical appearance, our actions and our minds. Remember that.”

(Female, well-intentioned, 79 years)

Live By the Doctrine of Moderate Practice or Machimapatipata

Another dharma discipline that the elderly live by is machimapatipata which translates to moderate practice. It refers to the practice to achieve nirvana, not too taut or too loose. Therefore, the elderly live sufficient lives, which mean to start with a peaceful mind that does not lean towards any particular way. This is achieved through consciousness as well as ensuring that bad thoughts do not appear. Life is sufficiency without carelessness. You will find success in whatever you set your mind to do.

Everything is moderate practice. We don't do too much, think too much or want too much, even with religion or others. Don't go too far. It is pleasing and will lead to success and prosperity.”

(Cheerful male, 72 years)

Maintaining the Five Precepts in Everyday Life

The dharma discipline that most elderly abide by is the Five Precepts. This is because it is the beginning commandments that laypersons can easily practice and is a suitable path to follow in life. The Five Precepts are 1) not to kill living being, including physically hurting people, 2) not to steal, including not to plot against others for their assets, 3) not to have sexual conduct, 4) not to lie, and 5) not to consume liquor or drugs. The elderly believe that the Five Precepts conform with our everyday lives the most. If we abide by the Five Precepts, our lives will be righteous. We will be at peace. They believe that if everyone abides by the Five Precepts, everyone will act in the

right convention. No one will do wrong. No one will cause harm to others. This leads to a peaceful society.

“In my opinion, I think that the teachings of the Buddha about precepts, concentration and intellect are powerful. I find them interesting and practice them everyday. Have you heard of the song that says that precepts, concentration, intellect are the means to tolerance. The dharma disciplines of precepts, concentration and intellect can be used in society, with us individuals. If everyone follows this practice, including society and country, such as abiding by the precepts, I don’t mean abiding by all 227 precepts as monks do, just the Five standard Precepts, it will be a framework for society. There will be no exploitation. Society can live together peacefully.”

(Male, navy veteran, 60 years)

Persist in Abiding By Morals

“We must be good people by following morals. We must not hurt or exploit others. Following morals is to not cheat people. Be honest and trustworthy. We should not be jealous of those who we think are better than us at work. We must look at ourselves before we decide on anything when we think that others are better than us.”

(Female, finishing school graduate, 68 years)

Be Cautious

“We must be cautious. Carelessness can lead to death. No matter what you are careless about. If you are careless with your money, you will lose it. You like to drive, right? If you drive recklessly, you may hit someone and kill him or her. Carelessness is very bad. The Buddha teaches us to always concentrate to avoid carelessness. Carelessness leads to all deaths. It leads to loss and grief. If you are careless with your money, buy everything in sight, you will become poor. If you are reckless, like danger, you will die. If you don’t take care of your home, it might burn down. Carelessness in everything can lead to death. I’ve lived my life cautiously so I’ve never had to face anything really bad.”

(Female, convenience store owner, 82 years)

Always Be Loyal and Grateful

The elderly also consider loyalty and gratitude to be a dharma discipline. Loyalty to the King and gratitude to our parents. Gratitude is the 25th favorable dharma that the Buddha defined as a quality and symbol of a good person. It is a practice of a good person or the ideal person. In Buddhist society, people who show gratitude are those worthy of love, honor, pride and praise from others because they have followed a favorable dharma practice. Therefore, loyalty and gratitude in the eyes of the elderly are one of the most important dharma disciplines that they have always followed, which is held as a good deed. The elderly also believe that if you follow this practice, the holy idols will bless you.

“Chinese texts state that the two most important things are loyalty to those above, loyalty to the monarchy and gratitude towards parents. They are the first virtues, symbols of good people. Take a look, people are successful because they do not forget to show gratitude. If you have these, you don’t have to worry about not being prosperous.”

(Male, Chinese rich, 72 years)

Many of the elderly appreciate the King’s kindness. They choose to follow the words and ideas of His Majesty King Rama IX in their lives. One of the elderly that was interviewed talked about a song composed by His Majesty “The Supreme Dream.” He considers it a motto. He believes that we must aim to correct our wrongdoings instead of finding excuses. Everything requires effort to combat the obstacles in order to succeed. This song emphasizes setting aspirations to do good and be loyal to your country.

“I do my duties, take care of my responsibilities. I lead a normal, simple life. One day I heard a song composed by His Majesty the King and I’ve abided by it ever since. The song is “The Supreme Dream.”

Especially the verse that goes “*I will correct my wrongs, I will love my country till I die, I will die for my honor, I will do good without announcing it to the world.*”

Everyone has both a good side and a bad side. We know it. We will correct our wrongdoings and not just find excuses. Everyone is able to look at themselves and see if what they’ve done, whether they’ve done wrong, whether they’ve held anything back, whether they’ve cheated anyone. We always know what we have done. Only we know what sins we have committed, what good we have done, no one else.”

(Male, veteran air force officer, 71 years)

As can be seen, the reason why the elderly have adapted dharma disciplines into their lives is the need to correct the problems in their lives and to combat the obstacles they come across. Another reason is they need peace and cheerfulness in their lives. Lastly, it leads to a peaceful society. It can be noted that all the dharma disciplines that the elderly have talked about in this study all meet the three needs at the same time.

Buddhist Activities That the Thai Elderly Practice

In this study, many of the elderly suggest participating in religious activities to take care of the problems and to lead sufficient lives, such as praying, paying respect to the Buddha and meditation. The results of this study show that when the elderly participate in these activities, their minds are at peace. When they are at peace, they are better able to see the answer to their problems. Moreover, meditating can help the elderly to be at peace, be in one emotion, that is, it helps the mind to concentrate on one thing for a long period of time as one wishes. The elderly who have been regularly active in these activities or have just begun to do so, all say that the activities have helped them to be at peace, to have concentration, which leads to them being able to see a way out to their problems. They are able to lead their lives with peaceful minds as illustrated by the following interviews.

“Your mind becomes at peace when you praying and pay respect to the Buddha. When your mind is at peace, you will find enlightenment. You will see answers to your problems.”

(Male, avid reader, 68 years)

“We must solve our problems by ourselves. When we are suffering, we should meditate to find the cause and the effect of the problem. I’ve been able to solve all my problems using this technique.”

(Female, sociable member of society, 65 years)

“If we use the teachings of the Buddha, the temple will be in our hearts. Praying is a means to recall the goodness of the Buddha. It makes us stop and think. At the very least, we will have concentration when we pray. When we have concentration, it will lead to intellect, to good ideas. We will see what we have done and be able to judge if our actions were right or wrong so that we can improve ourselves in the future. Buddhism helps a lot because our lives are like a graph. There are ups and downs, right? So your life cannot be composed of ups, there must also be downs. Life is a mixture of success and failure depending on the circumstances. We use the Buddhist teachings to enlighten us when we are faced with obstacles. We will be able to see solutions to our problems. Buddhism has helped my life tremendously. There must be a time in our lives when we fail. The basic religious precept is concentration. It helps us to stop disorder and complex thoughts.

When we have concentration, stop thinking for a while, we will have intellect. You may wonder what intellect in this context is. Intellect is finding solutions to our problems. If we stop our fanciful thoughts, intellect will show us how to solve each problem.”

(Male, former professor, 60 years)

“I pray regularly and wake up in the morning to offer food to the monks. Sometimes when I can’t get up to cook the rice because my body is weak, I will give money instead to help out with the temple’s utility bills when I can. Then I pour ceremonial water for my ancestors. I take care of some household chores, then when it’s 8 o’clock and the national anthem sounds, I meditate and think of (1) wish that the soldiers who fought for us will have a better life in heaven and that those who are still alive are able to fight off the enemies; (2) wish that the King, the Queen and the Princes and Princesses have a long life; (3) wish that the King Mother’s spirit will rest in peace in heaven; (4) wish that the King will guide the Thai people to unity; (5) wish that our country will prosper side by side with Buddhism. After praying, my mind is at peace. Then I worship the Buddha image.”

(Female, former teacher, 76 years)

The elderly will participate in Buddhist activities on the religious days, such as make merit, light waving rite and make offerings to monks on Buddhist Lent, the end of Buddhist Lent, Wisakha Bucha Day and Makha Bucha Day. The elderly also get together as good Buddhists on

other occasions such as ceremony of presenting robes to monks at the end of Buddhist Lent and offering robes to monks at the temples. Furthermore, they will give to those less fortunate even though they are not connected to the monks or the temples. The elderly view the giving to those less fortunate as adapting the Buddhist disciplines in their everyday lives. The activity that the urban elderly tend to get together to do are building temples, schools and hospitals and giving scholarships to poor children.

The above are only some examples of the Buddhist activities that the elderly practice. There are many more that have not yet been discussed. Participation in these activities depends on convenience, liking and aptitude of the elderly, as well as circumstances and their lifestyles. The reason that the elderly participate in these activities is not only for peace of mind and relief of suffering, but also for others and society. For instance, making donations for those less fortunate, restoration of historic sites, and restoration of temples for the younger generation to study the history. Moreover, many of the elderly believe that the practice of the Buddhist teachings will have an effect on the younger generation, both directly and indirectly, and set a good example for their descendents to follow.

Conclusion

The information in this study, which was gathered from the Thai elderly Buddhists living in Bangkok, can be concluded as follows:

1) The lifestyles of the elderly are diverse in various ways. But the diversity shows us the valuable practices that the younger generation can follow in their everyday lives. For instance, the way of life, views on the surrounding environment, ways to solve problems in our lives, loving our country, our land and our King. Even though the elderly may differ in their thinking, but their souls are all cheerful and they are bold enough to express their opinions. It can be concluded from this study that the reason the elderly adapt dharma disciplines in their lives is not only for the benefit of themselves, but also to raise their spirits and make them happy. Moreover, each of the dharma disciplines that the elderly talked about reflect the lifestyle and relations between the various dharma disciplines which are inseparable between one's personal life and the society as a whole.

2) The study shows that the elderly accept the changes that occur, including globalization. They do not resist the changes that occur around them. They will accept only good things that happen to themselves and to society. They have advised how one should react to different situations by following the path of sufficiency. Not disturbing others, not being greedy, not complying with others, and not being conceited from fortune and honor.

3) The study also shows the great value of the Thai elderly as they have experienced life. They have the strategy to adapt dharma disciplines suitable to solving all kinds of problems. They also showed skills in conveying the Buddhist teachings to their descendents so that they can better understand dharma and practice it in the society that they live in, like urban life. The wisdom and skills are more beneficial to Thai society than material objects. These wisdoms and skills can lead Thai society to continuous peace.

4) Furthermore, the study has shown that Buddhist dharma disciplines despite originating a long time ago are still modern and can be suitably practiced at various times in our lives. Anyone

who practices these dharma disciplines will have intellect, be at peace, raise the quality of life, and create peace and sufficiency in themselves which will lead to sufficiency in society. The dharma disciplines are not only limited to the lives of the elderly in Bangkok, but can also be adapted in the lives of Bangkokians of all genders and ages, as well as those living in the rural areas. Thus, practicing dharma disciplines can be beneficial to individuals and society as a whole.

If only the people in Thai urban society will maintain and carry on Thai cultural values by respecting and recognizing the value of the Thai elderly, allowing oneself the opportunity to learn from the elderly life experiences, listening to their views and practicing their teachings, the development of intellect, body and mind, living sufficient lives and participating in the development of society are all possible.

Endnotes

- * 1 The Four Noble Truths comprise of 1) *Dhuka* i.e. birth, old age, sickness, death, sadness, anger, hatred, jealousy, wanting, worry, disappointment, losing loved ones and persistence all lead to suffering; 2) *Samutai* is the cause of suffering ; 3) *Nirodh* is overcoming suffering, understanding the reality of life leads to overcoming all sadness; and 4) *Marga* is the path to overcoming suffering, consisting of the Eightfold Path which helps us to live our lives with consciousness, which in turn leads to concentration and intellect to let go of all suffering and sadness resulting in peace and tranquility.
- * 2 1) *Metta* is the desire for others to be happy; 2) *Karuna* is the desire for others to overcome suffering; 3) *Mudita* is being happy for others, the desire for others to grow and succeed without being jealous; 4) *Upekkha* is grace, recognizing that those who do good will receive good things and those who do wrong will receive bad things as is the law of karma
- * 3 Patience is maintaining one's normal stance no matter what comes our way, whether it is desired or not i.e. 1) tolerance when others curse us, we must act like we didn't hear and show no interest, we must not let it negatively affect us; 2) do not lash out, we must control our anger; 3) do not cause suffering to others; and 4) always be cheerful

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