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(IJEPC)**www.ijepe.com**PLANTING THE GOOD SEEDS OF DHAMMA:
AN INITIAL STUDY ON SUNDAY DHAMMA SCHOOL (SDS) IN
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This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

Buddhist education has an important role in nurturing the young talents of the Buddhist community. The Dhamma school or Dhamma class is an important platform for laypeople to learn the Buddha's teachings towards the path of enlightenment. The Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School was selected as a case study to demonstrate the contribution of the amma class to individuals and the community. Based on the Four Convictions: "The Young to Learn; The Strong and Healthy to Serve; The Aged and Sick to be Cared for; and The Departed to Find Spiritual Destination," Than Hsiang's educational initiatives aim to nurture positive character traits in children and teenagers, foster harmonious parent-child relationships, and cultivate a sense of goodness. This paper will take an initial study of the running of the Sunday Dhamma School in Than Hsiang Temple, to explore the operation of a Sunday Dhamma School in a local Chinese Buddhist organisation in Malaysia through its objectives, curriculum, implementation, activities and members. The quality of dhamma classes relies on three important elements, namely the practitioners, the contents, and the targets. This paper employs a case-study approach, drawing on participatory observations and interviews with leaders, committee members, staff, teachers, and volunteers on their experience with the dhamma classes. The study underscores the Dhamma class's significant effort in planting good seeds among the Buddhist community, ensuring the preservation and growth of Buddhism in the region.

Keywords:

Sunday Dhamma School, Buddhist Organisation, Than Hsiang Temple, The Ten Good Deeds, Fuzhi Shishanfa

Introduction

As a multi-racial nation, Buddhism is the second largest religion with 18.7% of Malaysia's population (Census, 2020). Buddhist education is fundamental to the development and prospects of Buddhism. Buddhist education has a key role in nurturing the young talents of the Buddhist community, not only through theoretical doctrines but also through the practice of Buddha's teaching to cultivate inner wisdom towards the path of enlightenment.

The concept of the Dhamma classes or Dhamma school in Buddhist organisations originated from the American Venerable Sumaṅgalo (1903-1963), who introduced the Sunday Dhamma Class at Penang Buddhist Association (PBA) in Penang on 29 December 1957, the same year that the nation achieved independence from colonial rule. At that time, the Sunday Dhamma Class received an overwhelming response from the community, which attracted more than two hundred children. In the following year, another Dhamma class for youth was established (Khoo 2001). With the enthusiastic response, the concept of the Dhamma Sunday Class began spreading to other places. Under these circumstances, many Buddhist associations started to set up Dhamma Classes.

From the teachings of the Buddha, the perfection of knowledge can be attained by the mind. Therefore, children are encouraged to participate in Dhamma classes and to practice Dhamma in their daily routine with good manners and moral values. In general, the main objective of Dhamma Classes is to impart the Buddha's teaching to the younger generation. The knowledge obtained from Dhamma Classes is to lead the young Buddhists to a good life.

This paper will explore the running of the Sunday Dhamma School in Than Hsiang Temple, including the objectives, curriculum, implementation, activities, and members, to further study how the Ten Good Deeds (Fuzhi Shishanfa) is implemented. The important elements in the Dhamma school will be identified to ensure the quality and effective running of the Dhamma class. The contribution of the Dhamma school will be explored as well.

Literature Review

Before independence, most of the Chinese schools were minban xuexiao - schools started and funded by local Chinese communities. The Chinese schools equipped the younger generation with basic literacy and numeracy skills, provided some essential general knowledge, inculcated traditional moral values, and sustained political and cultural links with the ancestral homeland (Tan, 2002). As an immigrant community, the Chinese community had to mobilise their resources to set up mother-tongue schools to educate its young. Some Chinese schools have deep roots in Buddhist organisations that depend on them for funding, leadership, operation, etc. The cost of land, construction of buildings, facilities and equipment was usually collected from donations from the Chinese community (Tang, 2004).

The first Buddhist Institution in Peninsular Malaya was initiated by Venerable Fanglian (1900-1937) in 1935. The Phor Tay schools are composed of four institutions, which are Phor Tay Kindergarten, Phor Tay Primary School, Phor Tay National Type Secondary School and Phor Tay Private High School. Its origin was the Phor Tay Free School, which was founded in 1940 by the Phor Tay Institution. In 1946, the free school was replaced by the Phor Tay Primary School, which also contained a preschool class. In the year of 1952, the Phor Tay High School was formed to enable primary school graduates to continue their education in a Buddhist secondary school. After the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957, Phor Tay

Primary School accepted the offer from the new Malayan government to convert into a national-type school and split into the Phor Tay National Type Primary School and the Bodhi Kindergarten, which remained as a private organisation. In 1962, Phor Tay High School accepted the same offer and divided into the Phor Tay National Type Secondary School and the Bodhi Private High School (Lee, 2015).

The second Chinese Primary school developed by the Buddhist Association is Siang Lin, founded by Venerable Seet Kim Beng in 1951. Kee has made a study on Seet Kim Beng and the establishment of Siang Lin Chinese Primary School in Malacca for his M.A. dissertation (2017). The dissertation focuses on exploring the life and contributions of Venerable Seet Kim Beng to the establishment of Siang Lin Primary School. It provides a comprehensive background of Siang Lin Primary School in Malacca, offering insights into the educational practices and initiatives associated with the school.

In Guan's (2021) study, the development of Buddhist education in Malaysia is explored, with a specific emphasis on three key aspects of education: monastic, believer and public education. The research sheds light on the historical evolution of Chinese Buddhist education in Malaysia, tracing its origins to the arrival of Chinese Buddhist monks who initiated teachings in the country. The study further highlights the notable progress made in Chinese Buddhist education over more than 50 years, particularly in terms of sangha members, Buddhists and social education. Throughout this developmental journey, distinct characteristics and evolutionary patterns have emerged within the realm of Chinese Buddhist education in Malaysia (Guan, 2021).

Besides the schools established by the Buddhist community, the Buddhist education system in Malaysia can be categorised into two main types: formal education and non-formal education (Goh, 2007:255). Formal education is primarily intended for monastic members, and it involves the study of *sīla* (moral conduct), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom) for a considerable period. The content of education may be comprehensive or belong to a certain school of cultivation, and it typically emphasises both theoretical and practical elements. Non-formal education, on the other hand, is provided for lay Buddhists who cannot fully concentrate on cultivation due to secular commitments. Lay Buddhists typically make use of their free time to learn Buddha's teachings. Thus, Dhamma classes are an important platform for anyone who wishes to understand the teachings of the Buddha (Goh, 2007:255).

In Malaysia, the non-formal education offered to laypeople by Buddhist organisations in Malaysia primarily focuses on moral cultivation and ethical conduct. Buddhist educational initiatives are widespread, often through temple-based projects and community-led activities. The Sunday Dhamma School provides a structured and comprehensive curriculum for children to learn about Buddhist teachings, practices, and values. It not only helps to preserve Buddhist traditions and culture but also instils moral values and ethics in young students. Few studies have highlighted significant benefits when Buddhist ethics are integrated into educational systems, including enhanced moral development, improved student behaviour, and better mental well-being (Nithiyanandam, 2004; Khakhlary, 2019; Le, 2022; Dong, 2023 & Nguyen, 2024).

The efforts to establish the Dhamma School were initiated by Venerable Sumaṅgalo (1903-1963), who was an American monk who ordained in Laos in 1957. He was active in the spread of Buddhism in Singapore and Malaya, up till his passing in 1963. He initiated the first Sunday Dhamma Class at the Penang Buddhist Association (PBA) and wrote Buddhist Sunday School Lessons. His contribution to Buddhism in Malaysia and Singapore is significant and far-reaching. Piyasilo (1992) examines the concept of charisma in Buddhism and the role of Sumaṅgalo's charismatic leadership in the establishment and success of the Sunday Dhamma School. Sumaṅgalo's vision and efforts to establish the Sunday Dhamma School have been crucially important in spreading the teaching of Buddha among the young generation of Buddhists.

Few studies have been done to explore the Sunday Dhamma School among Buddhist organisations. Teoh has conducted a case study on the development and ecology of Dhamma classes established by Buddhist associations in small towns in Malaysia (2010). He focuses on the development process, problems faced, solutions, and prospects of Dhamma classes, with samples taken from two Buddhist associations in Malaysia, the Jimah Buddhist Association and the Sitiawan Buddhist Association. The study helps to identify the main problems faced by Dhamma classes, including a lack of qualified teachers, insufficient funding, and low attendance rates. By identifying these problems and providing solutions, the study can help to improve the operation of Dhamma classes. This, in turn, can lead to a more effective propagation of Buddhism and provide important insights into the development of Buddhist education in small towns.

In an initial investigation on creative teaching in the Dhamma class, Chen et.al (2023) conducted phone interviews with leaders, Dhamma class teachers and fresh graduates from various Buddhist organizations, and they have identified the key principles and conditions to design teaching methods for three target groups, college students, primary school students, and fresh graduates respectively. Based on these principles and conditions, the authors introduce ten creative teaching methods, which involve engaging, experiential, and interactive teaching strategies to enhance learning experiences in Buddhist classes. This ensures the Dhamma class lessons are both meaningful and practical in daily life. The insights from Chen et al.'s research provide a valuable foundation for further exploration into effective teaching strategies within SDS settings.

Although more than 50 years have passed since the establishment of the first Sunday Dhamma class, the progress and effectiveness of Dhamma classes in Buddhist organisations across the country remain uncertain due to a lack of literature and data. Therefore, ongoing research and efforts to improve the quality and accessibility of Dhamma education can further contribute to the preservation and growth of Buddhism in the region. This paper will take a closer look at the Sunday Dhamma School in Than Hsiang Temple. The findings are useful to understand the operation of the Sunday Dhamma School. Buddhist education for future generations of Malaysians is significant, and efforts to achieve this goal are worth pursuing.

Problem Statement

Sunday Dhamma Schools (SDS) play a significant role in shaping the moral development of young Buddhists. However, despite their widespread presence across many Buddhist communities, there is a notable gap in research examining what makes these programs running smoothly and effectively. Key elements such as teaching learning quality, curriculum design,

and student engagement strategies vary widely between institutions, often resulting in inconsistent educational outcomes.

The lack of comprehensive study limits the ability of Buddhist organisations to replicate successful models or improve existing ones. As a case study, the Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School offers valuable insights into the implementation of SDS. By investigating how this particular school operates—focusing on aspects like curriculum content, and methods of engaging students, supporting members, this research seeks to identify critical element for the running of the Sunday Dhamma School.

These components is crucial for enhancing the overall effectiveness of SDS programs. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the long-term sustainability of Buddhist education by offering a reference framework that can help other organisations better nurture future generations in the Dhamma.

Research Objectives

Today, Sunday Dhamma Schools are an integral part of Buddhist education in many countries and are seen as an effective way of imparting Buddhist teachings to young people. Through Dhamma schools, children can also learn practical ways to apply these teachings to their daily lives and in their interactions with others. The concept of Sunday Dhamma Schools, introduced by Venerable Sumaṅgalo, has thus had a vital impact on Buddhist education in Malaysia and beyond.

This paper will explore the running of the Sunday Dhamma School in Than Hsiang Temple to identify essential elements of a Dhamma class in planting the good seeds of Dhamma. The findings can be a good reference and comparison for other Buddhist organisations. This is vital as Sunday Dhamma schools provide a valuable platform for the promotion of Buddhist teaching by instilling values of compassion, kindness, and social responsibility in young learners.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore the essential elements of a Sunday Dhamma School (SDS) in Than Hsiang Temple. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study as it allows a more comprehensive understanding of the SDS. A case study can be described as an in-depth investigation of an individual, a group of individuals, or a specific unit, to draw broader conclusions across multiple units. In a case study, the primary focus is directed towards a particular unit. The case study method is not primarily intended for the analysis of individual cases but serves as an effective means to define and explore cases and to gain a deeper understanding of a given context (Glynis, 2005).

In this paper, Than Hsiang Temple has been selected as a case study for the operation of the Sunday Dhamma School for a few reasons. First, Than Hsiang Temple is a home-grown Buddhist organisation established by Wei Wu, a local Chinese Buddhist born in Penang, Malaysia. The study can focus on the condition of a local Buddhist organisation in Malaysia. Second, with the convictions as the guidance, all the activities are targeted to promote Buddhist education, cultivation and social welfare. The educational activities in Than Hsiang can be categorised into a few smaller units, such as Than Hsiang Kindergarten, Sunday Dhamma School, Than Hsiang Youth Group, Phor Tay Schools, Kalyana Mitra Home, and the

International Buddhist College. Than Hsiang Temple exemplifies how Buddhist organisations establish Dhamma classes according to the needs of the Buddhist community.

Data used for this paper comes from multiple sources, such as existing historical literature, newspapers, periodicals, reports, handbooks, guidelines and relevant documents. These data are reviewed to provide a better understanding of the development and operation of the dhamma class in Than Hsiang Temple.

Based on the field study conducted in Than Hsiang Temple, twenty-three participants were interviewed, consisting of the committee, management team, staff, volunteer teachers and volunteer parents. Semi-structured and open-ended questions are used to collect information about their experiences with the dhamma classes. An in-depth interview was conducted with the founder, Venerable Wei Wu, to gain a deeper understanding of his ideas and philosophy in promoting Buddhist activities. Participatory observation is useful to collect information and to know the operation of the Sunday Dhamma School. Some information was collected from the website and various social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, YouTube, etc., that are related to the Sunday Dhamma School.

Research Design

In “Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction”, Ralph W. Tyler (1949) presents a framework for curriculum and instructional design centred around four fundamental questions. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain? What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes? How can these educational experiences be effectively organised? How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? These questions have profoundly influenced educational theory and practice since the book’s initial publication. This foundational text continues to serve as a critical resource for educators and curriculum developers.

Huang (1991) argues that curriculum design can be summarised into key elements such as purpose (goals), content (knowledge), activities (experiences), media, resources, teaching strategies, and evaluation tools. Huang & Yang (2004) further distilled the curriculum into four essential components: objectives and goals, selection, organisation, and evaluation. Building on these perspectives, Teoh (2010) adopts a simplified six-component model of curriculum design tailored to the Dhamma class in Buddhist organisations. These components are objectives, structure, content, implementation, evaluation, and management. Based on similar conditions, this paper will explore the objectives, curriculum, curriculum, implementation, activities, and members to identify the important elements of the Dhamma Class.

Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School

The Than Hsiang Temple is situated in the middle of the high-technology industrial park at Bayan Lepas. It is primarily a religious organisation based on the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha’s teachings. The Than Hsiang Foundation, under the leadership of Venerable Wei Wu has made various efforts on Buddhist education in society which guided by the conviction, “For the young to learn, the strong and healthy to serve, the sick and aged to be cared for and the departed to find the spiritual destination.”. With the convictions especially on “The Young to Learn” as the guiding principles, Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School (SDS) is one important unit that provides Buddhist education to kids, teenagers, and their parents.

The Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School was established in 1986 by the Bayan Baru Buddhist Association. At that time, the school attracted fifty students divided into six classes. Following the relocation of the Bayan Baru Buddhist Association to Than Hsiang Temple in 1992, the number of students increased to more than two hundred, with a growing number of volunteer teachers and parents joining the program. The objectives, curriculum, implementation, activities and members will be explored in detail.

The Objectives of Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School

SDS in Than Hsiang Temple was set up in 1986 to cultivate the orthodox and right faith of Buddha Dhamma. The purpose of the SDS is to inculcate wisdom, compassion, and gratefulness in society. It aims to cultivate the right faith and understanding of the Buddha Dhamma in the students, nurture wholesome character among children and teenagers and foster better parent-child relationships. The minimum age for entrance into Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School is seven years old or Standard 1.¹

There are four objectives of the Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School². First, cultivating students' correct beliefs and understanding of Buddhism. Second, promoting the development of a healthy personality in children and adolescents. Third, enhancing parent-child relationships. Fourth, allowing teachers and volunteers to utilise their expertise and achieve personal growth through service.

Than Hsiang SDS aims to provide a holistic approach to Buddhist education, not only imparting Buddha's teaching to the children but also emphasising the spiritual development, family relationships, and personal growth of the teachers and volunteers.

The Curriculum of Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School (SDS)

The Buddhist studies curriculum currently used in Sunday Dharma classes in Malaysia is diverse. There is no standard textbook at the beginning, so teachers will prepare the materials in loose-leaf format and distribute them to the children. By the end of the year, they will compile the materials together.

Teacher Lee recalled that,

"We will photocopy the text, exercise, and drawings from a few reference books; there will be a different topic every week, and after that, we will collect back the papers and compile them together. After that, YBAM published a set of textbooks, we started using them, and it is more systematic with the teacher's guidelines."³

In 2012, YBAM introduced a 6-year Buddhist textbook and teacher's guide for primary school students. By early 2015, the foundational Buddhist youth textbook titled "Always Follow Buddha to Study" was finally completed. Starting in 2017, THSDS adopted the Buddhist textbooks comprehensively for primary and secondary schools, which were compiled by the YBAM. The contents cover the life of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, and the enlightenment of the Buddha to deepen the children's understanding of

¹ Source: From SDS Handbook provided by the SDS leader.

² Source: From SDS Handbook provided by the SDS leader.

³ Source: Retrieved from the interview.

Buddhism. The most important thing is to lead the children towards the Buddhist way of life and to have the right understanding of Buddhism.

The SDS conducts a half-hour chanting session, consisting of Heart Sutra chanting, recitation of Amitabha's name, circumambulation and followed by a short meditation. There are group recreation activities such as Buddhist hymns singing, hand gestures, song and dance, drawing, crafts, movie sharing and parent-child interactive activities.

Apart from the basic requirement for a Buddhist to take refuge under the Triple Gem, namely Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha and observe the Five Precepts (pañcasīla). The Than Hsiang Temple introduces the Ten Good Deeds, which emphasise doing good while keeping away from evil. The teaching of the Ten Good Deeds was brought into Malaysia by Venerable Hui Tian (1927-2014) in 2004, from Taiwan during his visit to Than Hsiang Temple. He first introduced the triple refuge for teenagers, which is as follows:

"I take refuge in Buddha: Be filial piety to my parents

I take refuge in Dhamma: Study hard and diligently

I take refuge in the Sangha to avoid bad companions"

Venerable Hui Tian then introduced the original version of Ten Good Deeds to the Than Hsiang Youth Group. The teaching in Buddhism originally emphasised "To do the good, to stop the evil," so the positive way to deliver the Ten virtuous deeds is to correspond with the spirit of goodness in Buddha's teaching. Venerable Wei Wu agreed with the teachings and started implementing them in the Sunday Dhamma School. The Ten Good Deeds implemented in the Sunday Dhamma School are

1. Be filial piety to parents
2. Honour teachers and elders
3. Have faith in a religion
4. Study diligently
5. Be friends with the virtuous
6. Love and respect life
7. Be grateful. and contented
8. Speak politely and lovingly
9. Love others as you love yourself
10. Spend time wisely

All SDS students will participate in the Transmission of the Ten Good Deeds in a yearly ceremony administered by a Sangha member. In Venerable Wei Wu's view, the Ten Good Deeds is a modern educational concept that can be practised in daily life, which is beneficial to the students. The emphasis is especially placed on the traditional virtues of filial piety and respecting teachers. Teachers and parents also play a significant role in encouraging students to implement the Ten Good Deeds in their homes and schools.

The Implementation of Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School

From the first batch of fifty students in 1986 the number of students increased to about two hundred in 1992 due to the relocation; about 146 students in 2010 and 50 volunteer teachers and parents; 127 students in 2012, comprising both Primary Level (7-12 years old) and Secondary Level (13-17 years old). The Primary Level had six Chinese classes and one English class, while the Secondary Level had two classes. Forty-eight volunteers, including teachers

and parents, were involved in the administration of THSD.⁴ However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions on the Movement Control Order, which suspended physical classes. The number of students increased to one hundred and forty-five in both levels in 2020 and 2021, and the number of loving families was thirty-eight. In 2023, the THSDS resumed physical classes, and the number of students increased to more than one hundred thirty, with one hundred and seven students at the primary level and twenty-five at the secondary level.

SDS make effective use of the space at Than Hsiang temple for certain activities, such as morning service at the 5th-floor Multipurpose Hall and learning classes at the 1st-floor Than Hsiang Kindergarten. The flow of the SDS of the learning and teaching is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Schedule Of Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School 2023

| Time | Flow |
|---------------------|---|
| 8:00 am - 8:45 am | Preparation of the venues |
| 8:45 am - 8:55 am | Daily aspiration of the Than Hsiang staff and volunteers. |
| 9:00 am - 9:30 am | Students gather at the 5 th -floor Multipurpose Hall. |
| 9:30 am - 10:00 am | Morning Service: A. Triple Gem Song B. Pay homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha C. Than Hsiang SDS Song D. Heart Sutra chanting, recitation of Amitabha's name, circumambulation and followed by a short meditation and The Ten Vows of Samanta-Bhadra E. Three Refuge and Transfer of Merits |
| 10:00 am - 10:10 am | Move to the respective classroom on the 1 st floor. |
| 10:10 am - 11:10 am | <u>Dhamma Classes</u> (Low level, High level, Secondary level) <u>The pre-class process</u> : (Led by representatives of each class group. A. Pay homage to the Shakyamuni Buddha three times B. Pay respect to the loving parents and teachers C. Say, Good morning, teacher! Good morning, loving dad and mom! Amitabha! D. Before the class: Recitation of Buddha's name three times |
| 11:10 am - 11:15 am | Closing A. Transference of Merits B. Recitation of the Ten Good Deeds C. Words of Gratitude (led by representatives of each group) D. Advise |
| 11:15 am | Reminder & tidy up |

Source: Guideline of Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School 2023 (pg 5)

⁴ Source: Retrieved from the interview with the leader of SDS.

Sis Sow, the leader with more than 20 years of volunteer feels a strong sense of belonging in Than Hsiang. She said that,

“The Daily Aspiration is added to cultivate the religious sentiment of staff and volunteers. Firstly, the staff and volunteers pay homage to Shakyamuni Buddha and pay respect to the Triple Gem and monastics. We appreciate the opportunity to offer service to the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and all sentient beings. Then we make the aspiration to practise Buddhism in daily life, to practise loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity and to abandon idle talk and disruptive speech. After that, we dedicate the merits accrued to the awakening of all beings, may all karmic hindrances be eradicated, and all beings attain supreme enlightenment.”⁵

One Loving Mum, Madam Heng commented that,

“I felt particularly warm when participating in SDS. My heart feels much more at ease now compared to those online classes. There are a variety of interesting and attractive activities in SDS. The children can learn the dhamma, and the parents can continue to be volunteers. The SDS is a great learning platform for children and parents”.⁶

Venerable Wei Wu stresses that one should start learning Buddhism from an early age and practice the teachings in daily life. He always emphasises cause and effect. “If you focus on the cause, the right one, you will get a good result”.

The Activities of Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School

Besides using the textbooks as the main resource to gain knowledge in Dhamma, extra-curricular activities such as handicraft work, singing, learning through the Buddhist percussion, outings, Gratitude Day, Graduation Day, Buddhist camps and religious cultivation activities like a half-day retreat, taking refuge ceremony, the transmission of the Ten Good Deeds are also conducted by the SDS. There are various activities every year. The annual events are the first day of class, which is Orientation Day to welcome all the new students and the last day of the class, which is the Graduation Ceremony and Award Presentation Ceremony.

In Than Hsiang, the festival celebrations will be incorporated with Buddhist teaching and practice. Some other religious practices included “Easy Access to Buddhist Classes”, singing and hymns, half-day retreats, SDS Fun Day, Half-Day Tour and so on. The SDS will also organise some learning camps with themes like “Appreciation and Gratitude” to instil positive values and practices in the primary and secondary students during the holidays. These activity-based camps received overwhelming responses with more than two hundred participants.

For every new intake, SDS will organise an opening ceremony. Sis Chan, the leader of SDS, shared with me a post on FB from an Aixin mama,

“In 2023, the Opening was held jointly with the New Year celebration in the auditorium on the fifth floor. The day before the celebration, we set up game booths and hung lanterns to create a festive atmosphere. On the day of the celebration, the little bodhisattvas and their parents arrived wearing red clothing, and after the morning prayers, Venerable Zhenxin, the advisor of

⁵ Source: Retrieved from the interview.

⁶ Source: Retrieved from the interview.

the SDS, gave a teaching encouraging students to join the SDS, learn and grow together on the path of Buddhism, and make good aspirations.”⁷

Besides, the Chinese New Year celebration is organised by a Love Family that includes various traditional cultural activities such as sketching, paper-cutting, calligraphy, and lantern riddles. The children and their parents participated actively in these activities and enjoyed the dragon dance performance.

Students at SDS celebrate Buddhist festivals such as Buddha’s Day to commemorate the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of Shakyamuni Buddha. Usually, the Bathing of the Buddha ceremony will be held, followed by chanting and Dhamma teaching.

Teacher Chan further explained that the participation of students and parents on the Buddha Day,

“The students will fold their palms and bow to the Buddha statue, then pick up and fill the ladle with water, and carefully pour water over a statue of the little Buddha. It is rather to cleanse the Buddha of a ceremony, the emphasis is on purifying the heart, to cleanse the inner dirt of greed, hatred and ignorance. All the students and parents will be invited to attend the ceremony.”⁸

During the Ullambana Festival, as mentioned in the Ullambana Sutra, the Buddha taught Mahāmaudgalyāyana to save his mother from suffering in the lower realm of the Hungry Ghosts realm. This Ullambana Festival will be celebrated with the chanting of the Amitabha Sutra continuously for six evenings. On the seventh day, the Filial Piety Dhamma Assembly with a lamp lighting ceremony will be held in Than Hsiang Temple.

Teacher Chan explained more about the purpose of the participation in the Filial Piety Dhamma Assembly and the Lamp Lighting.

“The purpose of having a Filial Piety Dhamma Assembly is to develop gratitude towards parents, ancestors, and all sentient beings, who could have been parents in the past uncountable lifetimes, and to transfer merits to the departed ancestors, relatives, and all sentient beings in all the Buddhist realms. The students will understand the meaning of participating in the Dhamma assembly better. Besides, the Lamp Lighting is a symbol of knowledge and dispelling of darkness. Darkness usually represents ignorance, and light is a metaphor for knowledge. Therefore, the students will be instilled that lighting a lamp symbolises the destruction, through knowledge, of all negative forces: wickedness, anger, greed, fear, and all kinds of suffering.”⁹

Birthday Thanksgiving is another important activity to enhance students' religious sentiments and cultivate students' virtues of filial piety and gratitude. Birthday is regarded as a mother’s Suffering Day; the birthday is a matter of life and death. It’s a day to be deeply grateful for parents’ giving birth and upbringing.

Sis. Chan, who attended the birthday celebration, felt touched after the participation. She shared that,

⁷ Translated by the author from Than Hsiang Facebook.

⁸ Source: Retrieved from the interview.

⁹ Source: Retrieved from the interview.

“The process of the Birthday celebration begins with offering incense sticks, following the chanting of praise to the Medicine Buddha, the medicine mantra, and Buddha light illumination. Then there are Dhamma teachings on Mother’s Suffering Day and the playing of a song of “Tearful Gratitude.” After playing a song of “Tearful Gratitude”, followed by a few Buddhist birthday songs and the cutting of cakes. The last part is the moments of gratitude, where children will offer roses to their parents. The ceremony is simple yet meaningful. I am deeply touched by the song.”¹⁰

From the activities described above, the Plan-Check-Do-Action model is well applied to every activity. The strong bonding of loving families can be observed during the activities as well. All the teachers and volunteers show strong teamwork in the preparation, during the activity and after the activity. Most of the interviewees show appreciation towards the efforts of every member. The uniqueness of SDS, they think, is that the activities and the festival celebrations will integrate and blend in with Buddhist values. The Buddha’s teaching can be applied in daily life and activities in the Than Hsiang SDS.

The Members of Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School

All the activities of SDS are carried out by the loving members of the Than Hsiang family. Aixin Jiazuo (Loving Family) is a group of volunteers formed of Aixin Laoshi (Loving Teachers), Aixin Papa & Mama (Loving parents), Aixin Jiejie & Gege (Loving sisters and brothers), who conduct Buddhist classes and organise various activities for the Sunday Dhamma Class. The Loving Family leads the organisation dedicatedly, not only to help oneself but also others through Bodhisattva practices.

The roles and responsibilities are stated clearly in the guidelines and will be updated. The Director is responsible for convening and presiding over the administrative meetings of Buddhist classes, supervising the routine activities of Sunday Dhamma School, monitoring the progress of the activities of the teams, being the general coordinator of the Dhamma Class and the Than Hsiang Foundation, and handling the regular administrative affairs of the Dhamma classes. The Director is assisted by the deputy to ensure that the teachers of the SDS are sufficient and that the teaching is carried out smoothly. The Event Director is responsible for leading the activity accordingly. A secretary is responsible for meeting minutes, the enrollment of SDS and the registration of new students, and reporting on all the activities of the SDS. The Finance supervises the financial management of the Buddhist class, collects administration fees and makes monthly financial reports to the Than Hsiang Foundation. There are other committee members, such as Process Information and Data Centre, Audiovisual & Photography, Birthday Celebration and Charity, Printing, Booklet editing, Buddha tables and offerings, and Art Designer, to support the running of the SDS.¹¹

The coordinator will invite parents to attend parent-child Buddhist classes and parenting skills classes. Interaction between the parents and students is vital to building close relationships. Parents showed engaging support to the activities such as visits to old folk’s homes, offerings to the Sangha or almsgiving, seminars for parents, as well as family days.

¹⁰ Source: Retrieved from the interview.

¹¹ Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School Administration Guideline, 2023

Most of the interviewees appreciated the opportunity to gain experience from each other in SDS. They always use encouraging words, such as “Limitless Appreciation (Wuxian ganen), it’s great to have you (youni zhenhao)” during the conversation with each other. For the newcomers, they will also have a senior to guide them. However, a volunteer voiced out that, “Volunteers are the backbone of activities, but we should avoid overburdening them. Providing proper support and ensuring their contributions are recognised will sustain their enthusiasm and energy.” It is always good to take care of each other and have a good balance between family commitments and a volunteer role in the temple.

The Importance Elements of the Dhamma School

The teachings of Buddhism, which form the basis of Dhamma classes, are centred around the cultivation of virtues such as kindness, compassion, generosity, and mindfulness. Teoh (2010) has pointed out three crucial elements of the Dhamma classes: the person in charge, the content and the target.

Firstly, the person in charge of organising Dhamma classes must emphasise both knowledge and practice. Indeed, in Yinshun’s article “Buddhism and Education”, he expounded on the complementarity of “knowledge” and “practice”. The Buddhist path is to know about Buddhism before guiding the practice, as well as to practice the true meaning of knowledge. One can move forward by seeing clearly what is in front. One can practice by knowing the truth, and only by practising can one learn the truth. The more one knows, the more he/she will do; the more one does, the more he/she knows (Yinshun 1992:32-32). Participation in the Buddhist classes is a real examination of the understanding and practice of the Dhamma of the teachers and volunteers. Those who have merely an understanding of the dhamma may not have the patience and methods to teach others. Some may be able to teach but lack the knowledge and enthusiasm to spread the teachings. In Buddhist organisations, many practitioners have no choice but to give up teaching halfway (Teoh, 2010).

Second, is the content of the Dhamma classes. The Dhamma classes infuse more understanding of the Buddha’s teachings, which may involve the history of early Buddhism, doctrines, ethics, rituals, etc. There is a variety of curricula used by different dhamma classes among the Buddhist organisations in Malaysia. The most popular textbooks are *Chinese Primary School Buddhist Textbooks*, edited by Venerable Seet Kim Beng, *Hui Xue*, published by Fo Guang Cultural and Educational Centre and *Buddhist Textbooks* compiled by the Young Buddhist Association Malaysia (YBAM). However, the most suitable curriculum for systematic compilation and alignment with the national education system is the Buddhist Studies Textbook by the YBAM (Teoh, 2017). The primary reason is that the YBAM’s materials are developed from the Outline and Explanatory Notes for the Primary School Buddhist Studies Curriculum and include a complete six-year series of Buddhist Studies Textbooks, Teacher's Guides for Buddhist Studies Textbooks, and supplementary CDS. It is the most systematic and comprehensive textbook.

Thirdly, it is the target of the Dhamma classes. Children and youths are the future leaders of society. The future of Buddhism relies on the future generation. The young Buddhists should not rush to gain personal liberation but should equip themselves with compassion, wisdom, aspiration, and right action. The target of the Dhamma classes is the future successor of the light of Dhamma.

It can be understood that the process of establishing Dhamma classes is indeed filled with difficulties. With the support from the loving family, Than Hsiang Temple introduces the Ten Good Deeds, which emphasise doing good while keeping away from evil. The activities are full of fun and well-planned by the practitioners. Various methods the music, singing, dancing, games, sports, and festivals, are used to attract students.

However, there was concern about the management of the SDS in Than Hsiang Temple from a volunteer,

“There seems to be a gap in succession planning. While the senior members are experienced, it is crucial to bring in more energetic and younger individuals to inject fresh perspectives and ensure continuity. Most activities depend on volunteers, some will feel exhausted with activities one after one, the organisation shall provide proper support and training to volunteers to ensure they have the proper knowledge and skills to conduct the class and activity so that they will have better confidence and be willing to put in efforts.”

Therefore, the Dhamma classes should be seen as a collaborative effort among teachers, volunteers, parents, and the community to nurture the next generation of Buddhists and contribute to the betterment of society. The future of Buddhism relies on ensuring accessible and effective Dhamma education, which requires concerted efforts and a comprehensive approach from Buddhist organisations for the betterment of the community and society.

The Contribution of the Dhamma School

The focus on planting good seeds and fostering positive influences is an important approach, as even small efforts can have a ripple effect and contribute to a more loving and peaceful society. The efforts of Than Hsiang Temple to impart the Buddha’s teaching through the Sunday Dhamma School are noteworthy.

Mr. Lim, who has been a volunteer for more than eight years and sent his three kids to SDS, stated that,

“In today’s society, we are often busy with work, eagerly looking forward to a weekly day off to relax and recharge. Everyone has different methods, some choose to sleep in, others spend time shopping or watching movies, while some take the opportunity to gain experience. The Than Hsiang Sunday Dhamma School provides parents and children with a space for learning dhamma. My kids can learn dhamma, it offers something different in the school, while my wife and I serve as Aixin Papa and Aixin Mama, it is a unique opportunity for my family to spend time meaningfully.”

SDS provides a learning platform for its members to have a proper understanding of Buddha’s teachings. By emphasising filial piety, taking refuge in the Triple Gem, observing the Five Precepts and Ten Good Deeds, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Six Perfections, SDS instils strong moral values among its members.

Madam Gan, a volunteer teacher with more than ten years of experience, mentioned,

“Not only providing a place for learning, but SDS also encourage students to practice the Ten Good Deeds (Fuzhi shishanfa), particularly emphasising “filial piety toward parents” and “respect for teachers and elders.” SDS aims to nurture children into becoming grateful, kind, and responsible individuals who are good children at home, excellent students at school, and responsible citizens of the country, ultimately faithful Buddhists to the triple gem.”

SDS builds a foundation for spiritual development. The emphasis on inner satisfaction over materialistic pursuits and the promotion of a better quality of spiritual life is important to develop the right faith, cultivate virtue, concentration, and wisdom, and respect the Triple Gem out of genuine confidence in Buddhism. This will foster a stronger sense of faith and commitment among participants.

Besides fostering a deep understanding and application of Buddha's teaching, SDS promotes the bonding among members. The Dhamma class also creates an engaging environment for members to learn, share, share experiences, and practice together, strengthening the faith in the Dhamma. It also encourages intergenerational learning, where elders share wisdom while youth bring fresh perspectives. By organising various activities and camps that involve both parents and children, the organisation promotes gratitude, nurturing a sense of responsibility towards parents, the country, the triple gem, and all sentient beings.

SDS serves as a platform to nurture future Buddhist leaders. SDS encourages youth to actively engage in various activities. The Dhamma teachers and leaders will always guide the proper way to ensure the continuity of Buddhist teachings and practices. The young ones will be exposed to Buddhist scriptures, meditation techniques, and rituals, ensuring these practices are passed down authentically.

Overall, SDS can provide individuals with the opportunity to learn and apply Buddhist teachings, promote moral values, strengthen family relationships, and foster a sense of social responsibility. A Dhamma class serves not only as a spiritual hub for the Buddhist community but also as a transformative force in society, nurturing future leaders with wisdom, compassion, and ethical integrity.

Conclusion

The establishment and work of the Sunday Dhamma School, led by Sumaṅgalo, have had a profound impact on the development and propagation of Buddhism in Malaysia. These schools serve as crucial platforms for attracting youth to Buddhist associations and passing on the teachings to the younger generation.

The Than Hsiang SDS aims to nurture positive character traits in children and teenagers, foster harmonious parent-child relationships, and cultivate a sense of goodness. With dedicated support from the loving family and caring community at Than Hsiang Temple, the school promotes the practice of the Ten Good Deeds and engages students through enjoyable activities such as music, singing, dancing, games, sports, and festivals.

In conclusion, the spreading of these good seeds through initiatives like the Sunday Dhamma School plays a vital role in cultivating moral values, promoting strong family relationships, and fostering a loving and peaceful society. With continued dedication and effective implementation, Buddhist education can continue to make positive strides in Malaysia.

This research adds value to the field of Buddhist education in both theoretical and practical aspects. From a theoretical perspective, it broadens the understanding of Sunday Dhamma Schools (SDS) by highlighting crucial factors such as leadership, curriculum design, and student engagement, which are essential for an effective learning environment. By building on

prior studies, including those exploring creative teaching methods, this paper provides a structured approach to improving SDS programs and enhancing student participation.

On a practical level, the study offers meaningful insights into the functioning of the SDS at Than Hsiang Temple, serving as a useful reference for other Buddhist organisations looking to refine their educational initiatives. The findings emphasise the profound influence of Dhamma classes on personal development by instilling ethical values, encouraging mindfulness, and fostering self-growth. At the community level, these classes play a role in strengthening Buddhist identity and promoting a sense of social responsibility. By enhancing the effectiveness of Buddhist education, this research supports the long-term sustainability of SDS, ensuring that future generations develop into compassionate and socially conscious individuals.

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