



Thai Buddhism and Online Social Media

พระพุทธศาสนาแบบไทยกับสื่อสังคมออนไลน์

Somboon Watana

College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Thailand

Yaoping Liu

Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Thailand

Email: somboon.wat@mahidol.ac.th

Abstract

The 21st-century world is an online social media age. Online social media brings enormous benefits but can also bring negative consequences if misused. Thailand is the same as other countries in this regard. Buddhism is the main religion in Thailand. Accordingly, Buddhism contains the Buddha's teaching that can be interpreted and applied for well-being of mankind. The paper will discuss the Buddha's teaching for applying to solve online social media misusing and consequently will take examples of online social media using of Thai Buddhist monks to be a model of applying Thai Buddhism in using online social media in order to be well-being in the present age. Thai Buddhist monks have started applying the Buddha's teaching, especially *Trisikkhā*, which is also known as *Majimāpatipadā* (the Middle Path), in using online social media in order not to be the victim and slave of online social media. Consequently, we could call this phenomenon the application of Thai Buddhism in online social media, which is potentially useful to not only Buddhist monks but to secular Thai Buddhists as well if it has been applied appropriately for the sake of well-being.

Keywords: Online Social Media, Thai Buddhism, the Buddha's teaching



บทคัดย่อ

法令ศตวรรษที่ 21 เป็นยุคแห่งสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ซึ่งได้สร้างประโยชน์ให้มนุษย์อย่างมหาศาลแต่ก็สร้างโทษให้อย่างมหันต์ เช่น กันหากใช้ในทางที่ผิด ปรากฏการณ์เช่นนี้เกิดขึ้นทั่วโลก ประเทศไทยก็ต้องอยู่ในสถานการณ์เช่นนั้น ประเทศไทยมีประชากรโดยส่วนมากนับถือพระพุทธศาสนาเป็นหลัก และพระพุทธศาสนา มีคำสั่งสอนที่สามารถนำไปประยุกต์ใช้เพื่อความผาสุกของมนุษย์ได้ บทความนี้จึงมีความประสงค์อภิปรายพุทธธรรมเพื่อประยุกต์ใช้ในการแก้ไขปัญหาการใช้สื่อสังคมออนไลน์ในทางที่ผิด โดยจะยกกรณีตัวอย่างของการใช้สื่อสังคมออนไลน์ของประเทศไทยเป็นตัวอย่างในการประยุกต์พุทธธรรมในการใช้สื่อสังคมออนไลน์เพื่อความผาสุก ประเทศไทยได้ใช้หลักพุทธธรรมไตรสิกขาซึ่งเป็นหลักแห่งทางสายกลางในการใช้สื่อสังคมออนไลน์แบบไม่เป็นเหี้ยมและหาสของสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ ซึ่งเรียกการใช้สื่อสังคมออนไลน์โดยประยุกต์พุทธธรรมนี้ว่าเป็นปรากฏการณ์การของพระพุทธศาสนาแบบไทยกับการใช้สื่อสังคมออนไลน์ ที่จะเป็นตัวอย่างให้กับไม่ใช่แต่เพียงประเทศไทยเท่านั้นแต่ยังจะสามารถประยุกต์ใช้กับสังคมแบบชาวอาสาด้วยหากตั้งใจปฏิบัติจริงจังเพื่อความผาสุกอย่างยั่งยืน

คำสำคัญ: สื่อสังคมออนไลน์, พระพุทธศาสนาแบบไทย, พุทธธรรม



Introduction

In the age of online social media, people can communicate with each other rapidly and widely by using Internet networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Line, Webpage and so on. Online social media networks provide users with knowledge, understanding, and feelings of belonging, and create various business channels. It can be said that world society is stepping into the age of globalization, a time of borderless communication being driven by online social media. The reason that online social media is well accepted and widely used is that it can create a huge amount of income for certain users. The Economist has identified Alphabet as a giant company in this world that is the parent company of Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Microsof. These companies collectively produce the highest value in business. In the first trimester of 2017, the net profits of these companies were greater than US \$25 trillion, or around 875,000 million Thai Baht. Amazon is the company which occupies more than a half of e-commerce business in the United State of America, whereas Google and Facebook gain substantial profits from advertisement through their own online social media (The Economist, 2017).

Applying this situation to Internet users of Thailand, in the year 2016, the Thai Ministry of Digital Economy and Society, part of the Electronic Transactions Development Agency (ETDA), surveyed the behavior of 16,661 Internet users in Thailand during March to June 2016. The population surveyed can be classified as four generations: Generation Z, Generation Y, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. The results of the survey indicated that Generations Z and Y prefer to use the Internet for YouTube the most, whereas, Generation X and Boomers prefer to use Line the most. Each generation uses smart phones the most, but Generation Z has shown the most familiarity with this technology because they grew up with it. It is found that they use the Internet 40.2 hours per week or 5.7 hours per day, and many use it 16.01 to 20.00 hours outside the classroom for entertainment (primarily YouTube and online television). These people spend much of their free time with online social media, and so, not surprisingly, the best way to communicate with each other is through online channels (Apsorn Sathientip et al, 2017). These data suggest that online social media plays a dominant role in the daily life of people in each of the four generations surveyed. So, we may reasonably surmise that online social media is an integral part of human life in the 21st century.

In addition, in research on the behavior of Thai Internet users during the year 2016, Digital Advertising Association (Thailand) or DAAT and Marketing Oops.com found that there are 38 million Internet users in this country, which can be calculated as 56 percent of the whole Thai populations of 68.1 million. Within this number, social network users amount to 41 million, which can be calculated as 60 percent of the population. Social media networks that Thai people use the most are Facebook at 92.1 percent, followed by Line at 85.1 percent, and Google at 67 percent respectively (Artit Luangla, 2016). Later, in the year 2017, there were found to be more than 45 million Internet users (2017), 124.8 million mobile subscribers



(2018), Line Users of more than 44 million, and Facebook users of more than 52 million. From market promotion in recent years, E-commerce entrepreneurs obtained net sales of 1.44 billion baht, with a number of product orders reaching 1.7 million items within three days. The most popular products were consumer goods for children, electric appliances, smartphones, cosmetics, skincare (Electronic Transactions Development Agency or ETDA, 2019). The data show that the number of Thai internet users in the year 2017 increased to 7 million users from the year 2016 which were 38 million internet users. Whereas Internet users enjoyed online social media such as Facebook, Line, etc., most products increased under the name of E-commerce.

It can be seen that online social media has become crucial for businesses to generate income of the business. However, in the growth of communication, knowledge, technology, and economy through online social media, many problems have also arisen, such as cyberbullying which is new but more increases in Thai Society. (Chulanee Thianthai, 2020, online) and various forms of crime. So online social media brings a mixed picture and state of suffering for those who use it as a victim or a slave of it.

Since, at the present in Thailand there are very few academic works about online social media (Chulanee Thianthai, 2020, online). Therefore, this paper will discuss the academic papers concerning about using online social media and its negative effect and how to solve the problems, then the author will present the idea of interpretation and application of the Buddha's teaching as Thai Buddhism for using online social media in order to be well-being in the online social media age.

Some Academic Papers on Problems of Online Social Media Use in Thailand

There are various researches in Thailand which study about problems and ways to solve the problem caused by online social media use as follows:

Chulanee Thianthai (2020, online) dedicated for 5 years to conduct the research "Effect of Online Social Media on Thai Social and Cultural Changes from an Anthropologist's Perspective". She concluded the result that age is one of the key factors that make people to use online social media in the different behaviors. Elderly society group that is over 61 years old is using online social media a lot. Since, it is a period of time that has time and needs to socialize in order to find activities to relieve loneliness, therefore people in this group focus on using online social media to create networks of old friends and family following stories and discussing with each other, and for entertainment. However, online social media is still new for the people of this age. Therefore, encountered problems are sharing non-truthful things because of compassion and need to help. These are always occurs, because most aging people have a sympathy for philanthropy and less experience in using online social media than other ages. Therefore they are easily tricked. Therefore, we should give importance to the aging society in the internet literacy, which is to educate people about the use of the



internet correctly. In addition, cyberbullying in Thai society (Cyber / Internet Bullying) occurred in Western society for a long time. When starting this research, it was found that in Thai society there is still very little. But nowadays there are more and more. Therefore, if we learn from Western society and prevent cyberbullying according to our cultural mechanisms. We should know how to learn and prevent. This problem will occur less.

Apsorn Sathientip et al. (2017) conducted a research project on juveniles entitled “A study of social media violence and recognition of teenagers.” Participants are teenagers aged between 14-16 years old. There are four groups of participants; each group consists of 8 to 11 people. The results showed that each participant perceived that social media violence has a great impact on the mental health of teenagers. The reason for perpetrating social media violence is a lack of pride and dignity, while some also want other people to pay attention to them. Teenagers should learn to better manage situations on online social media and thereby avoid behavior that leads to online violence. This means averting the posting, sending or sharing of messages of violence. Parents and teachers should become good models for teenagers and transfer knowledge and skill to teenagers so they can cope with the problems they are experiencing.

Kunya Phanichsiri and Banjaporn Tuntasood (2016) conducted a project entitled “Social media addiction and attention deficit and hyperactivity symptoms in high school students in Bangkok,” which entailed collecting data from guardians and students of secondary schools in the Bangkok area from January to March 2016. This study comprised 601 participants. The research results showed that the prevalence of online social media usage in Bangkok’s senior secondary schools is 17.6 percent. The results also showed that attention deficit disorder is related to online social media, in which the absence of attention deficit disorder helps to reduce online social media addiction, but there is no statistically significant difference. This study revealed some factors that could help to reduce online social media addiction, and could be used to control teenagers’ use of such media.

The research results of Jittaphan Kwamkanung and Marid Kawechinda (2016, as cited in Apsorn Sathientip et al. 2017) showed that most of teenagers who are bullied have felt mental more than behavioral effects; that is, they feel angry, stressful, sad, frustrated, fearful and ashamed. The research results also revealed that 10 percent of teenagers have been bullied through online social media, and this effect is long lasting. Group consultations to build mental stability have helped to confront problems and reduce students’ stress and depression (Jittaphan Kwamkanung and Marid Kawechinda, 2016).

A report from the National Reform Steering Assembly (2015) entitled “The results of study and recommendations on social media reform” also showed various effects from social media use. Online social media users have to face known and unknown problems. These problems can be classified as follows: 1) Limited legal monitoring of social media or social networks; there is no appropriate law, rule or regulation to protect teenagers; 2) Lack



of updated knowledge on media and the population of teenage social media users; 3) Lack of ethics among entrepreneurs due to high competition that focuses on popularity; 4) Lack of awareness, knowledge, and a way to creatively use online social media to reach consumers; 5) Lack of knowledge about the potential role of educational institutions in changing social media usage; 6) Lack of a single agency that can control and follow up problems; 7) The rapid change in technology, and the fact that most technology is imported from abroad, requiring monitors of social media use to update their knowledge. Therefore, unscrupulous individuals may use social media technology as an instrument to take advantage of others.

From the above-mentioned researches as taken for examples, there are many types of violence arisen from online social media use, violence has a great impact on mental health. The attention deficit disorder of students, for example, is related to online social media using. The online social media users received mental effects; they feel angry, stressful, sad, frustrated, fearful and shameful. All these effects arise from online social media use without appropriate law, recognition standard improvement, knowledge of appropriate using of the online social media, main agency to control and follow up problems and body of knowledge that can challenge to the rapid changes of online social media technologies. As noted, then, all these effects arise from online social media use without appropriate laws and other means for monitoring and treating the situation.

The Application of the Buddha's teaching as Thai Buddhism to solve the Problems of Online Social Media Use.

According to Buddhism, each human being has innate merit and demerit based on internal and external factors. Buddhism is the same as other religions in the sense that it instructs people to follow a moral path in life. Thai style Buddhism uses various types of social media to disseminate Dharma, while also instructing people not to overindulge in social media, and to adhere to good ethics. Accordingly, this article will present the results of research on application of Thai Buddhism in online social media.

3.1. The Benefits of using online social media of the monks in Thai style Buddhism.

Online social media was created for communication and business. In fact, online social media has no merit or demerit in itself, but its moral value depends on the individuals who use it. In Thailand, where there were 40,580 monasteries in 2019 and 358,167 monks and novices in 2016 (Office of National Buddhism, 2017), online social media is relatively unrestricted; many temples in fact use various kinds of social media, such as websites, particularly Facebook and YouTube, to advertise their history, vision, mission, and performance, enabling monasteries to rapidly disseminate news and information to the public.

Phra Wuttichai Vajiramedhi is an example of a monk who uses online social media to propagate the Buddha's teachings. He has become well known and widely accepted



while still not even 40 years old. He has thus been able to communicate and disseminate Buddhist teachings and make people understand them easily. He has said that we are stepping into the fourth industrial revolution, in which the Internet has become very important to our lives. It has a broad impact on our ways of thinking, lifestyle, economy, society, and politics (Phra Maha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi, 2018). Research on Phra Maha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi's ways of using online social media shows how Buddhist monks can utilize social media for religious purposes.

Artit Luangla (2016) presented research entitled "The use of Facebook among monks", He found that monks who use Facebook can be classified as follows: 1) Some monks use Facebook for the public interest; they disseminate Buddhism through Facebook. They understand how to use Facebook and apply one-way communication. They use Facebook not for their own purposes, but for Buddhism as a whole. 2) Some monks use Facebook for personal purposes or for recreation. This group of monks uses Facebook with two-way communication. However, they must be well disciplined and be careful in communicating with people.

Phramaha Thanit Sirivatthano (2015) studied the research topic, "The model and process of Buddha-Dhamma communication through Buddhist monks' use of social media in Thailand". The research results showed that the behavior of Buddhist monks in communicating the Buddha's teachings to people consist of posting pictures, uploading videos, and they consider these to be fulfilling religious activities. It is now the accepted modern approach to preach on the the Buddha's teachings and answer questions about the monks' teachings through online social media. The Buddha's teachings disseminated to people should be modified for the time, place, and desired popular benefits. But there should some means for evaluating the format of propagating Buddhist teachings through online social media.

Thaniporn Jullasak (2012) conducted the research topic, "The dissemination of Dhamma through the online social media of Phra Maha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi," and found that there are more than 800,000 Facebook fan pages following Phra Maha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi's page (www.facebook.com/v.vajiramedhi). His Facebook page is ranked number four based on a number of people pressing like. The purpose of this Facebook is to disseminate the Buddha's Dharma by adhering to the following three principles: 1) Getting closer, changing the image of religion from mysterious, and encouraging scholars to provide a range of viewpoints. The language that this monk uses is very simple and easy to understand. Moreover, the Facebook fan page of Phramaha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi fully uses multimedia, which can be extended to other platforms. In this Facebook page there are 10 text menus, 8 image menus, 6 video link download menus, 5 sound menus. These menus are mixed together in order to solicit the interest of targeted groups of people; the contents on the Facebook fan



pages consist of messages mostly about Buddhist principles and teachings (Thaniporn Jullasak, 2012).

From the aforementioned research, monks are encouraged to use online social media for the sake of propagating Buddhist teaching, whereas if they use online social media for fun and for commerce and so on, their superiors will criticize them because of the view among some online users that it is not the business of monks to use online social media like ordinary people. How should a monk use online social media? The case of Phramaha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi is an answer. Monks should not be prohibited from using online social media. But they should use it in accordance with Buddhist teaching and discipline. Monks must be mindful of using online social media as they are in the highest state of morality conservators.

3.2. A Thai Application of Buddha's Teachings in Online Social Media.

Thai style Buddhism is experiencing a new challenge from secularization; this process has changed society from using religion as the center of economy, politics, education, family, and art towards the secular world instead (Artit Luangla, 2016). In the Buddhist perspective, problems caused by using online social media cannot be solved by simply avoiding the internet, but by careful and useful suggestions. This is because online social media can provide a lot of benefits to people if they use it in creative ways. Moreover, online social media is in line with globalization, which may be seen as not only beneficial but also inevitable.

However, the trend of using online social media for the purposes of business and entertainment have caused many other problems such as violence, absence from school, suicide and narcotic addiction. To solve these problems, Buddhism instructs people to be more aware of how they consume social media, and to avoid using social media to create greed, anger, and delusion. Buddhism teaches people to avoid the twin extremisms of hedonism and self-mortification and instructs people to follow the Eightfold Path, which consists of right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Buddhism also teaches people to avoid the Three Cravings: craving for sensual pleasure, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. When these cravings are aroused through online social media, consumers will thereby become attached, which can create dualities of happiness and suffering, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, based on internal and external factor.

Phra Paisal Wisalo pointed out that Facebook is a kind of social media that is always changing. We cannot imagine what imagine what sort of social media could replace Facebook in the future. In the beginning of Buddhism, there was no such form of media. When people became monks they adapt their ways of using social media to fulfill religious activities. Phra Paisal Wisalo has also suggested that monks use online social media with carefulness and awareness (Artit Luangla, 2016). This idea reflects the important principle in Buddhism that



everything in the world is impermanent, changing all the time based on factors and causes. We need to consume messages in social media with the right wisdom and understanding.

Phramaha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi points out that he does not use Facebook for personal purposes, and he does not have enough time to use Facebook frivolously. He uses Facebook for disseminating Buddhist teachings only. What he presents is true and correct without complaining, cursing, defaming and blaming any other persons, and it does not involve politics. He consciously avoids paying attention to rumors circulated on online social media but does pay attention to the mainstream media and takes the news into consideration. He feels that since our life is not long, we should dedicate our time to studying, reading, and doing something for the benefit of other people. We need to be careful in using online social media, and we should not use it to defame and libel others (Phra Maha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi, in his lecture, “Knowing how to use Buddha’s teachings beyond technology,” at Ruan Ariya Bangkok on September 25, 2017). Phramaha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi has also commended the use of social media among monks so that they should have the common sense to know what is appropriate or inappropriate. They should seek the knowledge to develop themselves in order to propagate the Buddha’s teachings. Monks should use online social media for the purpose of disseminating Dharma; they should not use it for the purpose of entertainment, joy, and pleasure.

Phramaha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi also pointed out that online social media is comparable to money in our pocket. Money is not good or bad and has no merit or demerit in itself; it depends on the person who spends that money. Money can be spent doing either good things or bad things. We need to apply ethics in using online social media, and use it for the benefit of ourselves and other people (Phra Maha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi, in his lecture “knowing to use Buddha’s teachings beyond technology, at Ruan Ariya Bangkok on September 25, 2017). The ideas of Phra Maha Wuttichai Vajiramedhi reflect the fact that he follows Buddhist teachings. His aim of using online social media is to create and increase knowledge, understanding, and practice to the people according to Buddhist principles of morality, meditation, and wisdom. He has commented that online social media is similar to the sharp knife. Unethical persons can use it to others’ detriment, whereas ethical persons can use it for the benefit of themselves and the others.

Discussion on Thai Buddhism in Use of Online Social Media

Online social media has been used to enhance communication among people around the world at a rapid rate and lead society to globalization. It also arouses consumerism. In the midst of online social media, if Thai Buddhism refuses the use of online social media, it will be very difficult to propagate the Buddha’s teachings to improve morality and ethics in society. If society uses online social media without consideration for ethics it will become lost in the online social media world. If monks in Thai Buddhism neglect addressing changes in a society



driven by online social media, they will become irrelevant and have no ability to cope with these challenges. What monks should do is to choose appropriate social media that is relevant to their status so as to disseminate Buddhism. Therefore, we should update our knowledge of social media and thus encourage further research on ways for monks to appropriately use Buddhism in online social media. Furthermore, we can synthesize the various previous studies presented in this article to arrive some recommendations.

Online social media is well accepted by a lot of people and it is a system that leads to creating a business circle and a huge amount of income. Hence people's way of life cannot be separated from online social media. Online social media can provide merit or demerit based on users' own background knowledge, morality, and ethics. Following the way how to use online social media of the above mentioned Thai Buddhist monks, their way and idea of online social media use can be traced back to the Buddha's teaching of *Majjimāpāṭipadā* (The Middle Path). With this in mind, in Buddhism one can apply the *Majjimāpāṭipadā* or the Threefold Training (*Trisikkhā*: *Pāli*): i.e, 1) training in higher morality (*Silasikkhā*), 2) training in higher mentality (*Smadhi*) and 3) training in higher wisdom (*Paññāsikkhā*). These points should be taken into account for living in the midst of online social media. Doing that improves morality, meditation, and the wisdom. In living in the age of online social media, there should be an improvement of knowledge, wisdom, consideration, and discretion in consuming social media, which is otherwise overwhelming society. People should be careful to choose useful information with good intentions for themselves and other people. Ethically minded people should accept online social media and receive news and information with care. They should screen news and accept only the real news; this is to be called "living with wisdom according to Thai Buddhism". Basically, meditation practice should be applied to build social immunity in the age of online social media, including all ages, from children to the elderly. We need to build systems that support the practice of meditation in order to become more mindful people, not be the victims of online social media and finally in order to be well-being in daily life in the age of online social media. In addition, if we use online social media as a tool for communication, as a master, not as a slave of it, for having well-being in daily life, the online social media will be like a divine blessing and gift (S. H. Hosseini, 2008) that can be used for promoting and cultivating religious morality for human well-being, then it should be used as a powerful religious media by religious people for the sake of human in spiritual dimension.

Conclusion

Online social media is not good or bad in itself. But it depends on how we can apply. Monks who used online social media for propagating Buddhist teaching are following the monk's duty for the sake of well-being of Buddhists, should be taken as a model of using online social media in order to be well-being in the present age. This can be described as the knowledge of how to live well-being in an online social media age in moderation



(Majimāpatipadā) between absolute rejection and unquestioning acceptance with the help of *Sīla* (morality), *Samādhi* (mindfulness) and *Paññā* (wisdom) as well. Using online social media without morality, mindfulness, and wisdom will be a victim of it, whereas rejecting online social media would be out of date. Both will not lead to be well-being. This is the new challenge for Thai Buddhism in the 21st century: to study and integrate the Buddha's teachings for within online social media, and to cultivate this in social media for Thai Buddhists both monks and layman for the sake of well-being in the online social media age in the 21st century era.



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