

The Role of Buddhist Monastic Education in Moral Formation and Social Responsibility among Cambodian Youth: A Philosophical and Social Analysis

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Abstract

This article investigates the educational conditions under which Buddhist monastic institutions can support moral formation and social responsibility among Cambodian youth. It combines philosophical readings of selected Theravāda texts with an interpretive review of published research on Cambodian education, religious authority, and institutional inclusion. The textual analysis examines reflection on harmful conduct in the Ambalaṭṭhika-Rāhulovāda Sutta, intention in the Nibbedhika Sutta, reciprocal educational responsibilities in the Sigālovāda Sutta and Mahāvagga, and the social significance of restraint in the Abhisanda Sutta. The social analysis considers Cambodian educational debates, a UNICEF study of monastic schools, and a recent single-site study of novice education. The article distinguishes access to schooling, participation in religious practices, and demonstrated moral development. It argues that monastic education offers opportunities for ethical formation when disciplined routines are accompanied by reasoned inquiry, credible teacher conduct, care for learners, and opportunities to acknowledge and correct harm. Published evidence also directs attention to teacher preparation, material resources, curricular coordination, and unequal participation. The resulting framework connects reflective judgment, responsible action, reciprocal care, and institutional accountability without treating ordination or doctrinal knowledge as proof of moral maturity. The article proposes educational applications and research questions rather than reporting original fieldwork or establishing causal effects. Its contribution is a contextual philosophical account of the conditions that would make claims about morally formative monastic education more defensible.

Keywords: monastic education; moral formation; social responsibility; cambodian youth; theravāda buddhism; institutional accountability

Introduction

Buddhist monastic education brings together questions about the formation of character, the transmission of religious knowledge, and the social organisation of learning. For Cambodian young people connected with pagoda institutions, education may involve formal subjects, relations with teachers, communal responsibilities, and religious practice. These activities

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create a setting in which moral ideas can be learned and enacted. However, the existence of such a setting does not establish that every participant develops sound judgment or consistently acts responsibly. This article examines the conditions under which monastic education can support moral development and the evidence needed to evaluate that possibility.

The Cambodian context requires attention to the relationship between religious education and wider educational institutions. Tan (2008) notes inconsistencies between the traditional understanding of education and practices backed by government policy and external aid. Her analysis also argues for the involvement of communities and religious institutions in civic and moral education. The problem is therefore more complex than choosing between religious instruction and modern schooling. It concerns how educational purposes, relationships, and responsibilities can be coordinated without assuming that any institutional identity guarantees educational quality.

The principal research question is: under what philosophical and social conditions can Buddhist monastic education contribute to morally responsible agency among Cambodian youth? Three related questions guide the discussion. What understanding of moral development can be reconstructed from selected Theravāda texts? How do published Cambodian studies clarify the opportunities and constraints of monastic education? What educational practices and institutional safeguards follow from bringing these perspectives into conversation? These questions concern the justification of educational claims rather than the measurement of a national intervention.

Here, moral formation refers to the cultivation of ethical dispositions and capacities, while moral development concerns their growth over time. Social responsibility involves responsiveness to people affected by one's actions and to shared institutional obligations. The relevant capacities include recognising ethically significant features of situations, giving reasons for decisions, regulating harmful intentions, responding to other people, and revising conduct when harm becomes apparent. These are working philosophical definitions, not a validated psychological scale or a claim that young people pass through uniform stages. They allow the article to distinguish ethical growth from the memorisation of doctrine, public deference, or successful examination performance.

The category of youth is used descriptively for adolescent and young adult learners, without imposing a single age range on studies that examine different populations. Evidence about younger children is included where it illuminates the institutions through which adolescents may later learn; it is not treated as evidence about all Cambodian youth. The discussion also distinguishes ordained novices and young monks from lay learners connected with monastic institutions. Their religious obligations and educational circumstances cannot be assumed to be identical. In particular, lay precept education does not substitute for the disciplinary commitments of ordained learners.

The central argument is that morally formative education depends on the interaction of reflective judgment, responsible conduct, reciprocal care, and institutional accountability. Religious rituals can provide learning opportunities but their educational effectiveness depends on the understanding of the causes and how they are dealt with by learners. The essay starts

with a review of the relevant literature and a description of the process of its interpretation. It then develops the textual and social analysis, proposes educational applications, and identifies limitations and future research. Its contribution is a framework for evaluating monastic education without collapsing canonical ideals, institutional membership, and demonstrated outcomes into one category.

Literature Review

Historical scholarship provides an essential qualification to claims that Cambodian Buddhist education represents an unchanged tradition. Hansen's (2011) study examines Buddhist modernism in colonial Cambodia between 1860 and 1930. Its historical subject makes it useful for framing questions about religious education and modernity, but it cannot establish present classroom conditions. Regarding educational claims, it is important to distinguish between historical background and current evidence. A practice may have a historical religious pedigree, yet its organization, its resources, and its social aims can be the subject of research.

Studies on moral authority extend the institutional perspective. Kent and Chandler (2009) curated a collection on religion, power and the reconstruction of moral order in Cambodia. It situates questions of virtue within relationships involving religious representatives and wider social authority. This perspective helps formulate a question for educational analysis: what makes a teacher's authority ethically credible? Holding a recognised office provides a role and responsibilities; it does not by itself answer whether instruction is competent or whether learners receive fair treatment. This article develops that distinction as a normative question, without attributing a uniform pattern of conduct to Cambodian monks.

Institutional research provides more specific evidence. Lunsford et al. (2019), in a UNICEF-commissioned study based on research undertaken in 2018, describe Buddhist monastic schools that combine religious and general academic subjects. Their school visits identify shortages of teachers and learning materials, difficulties with mixed-age classes, and limited participation by girls at primary and secondary levels (pp. 21–26, 33–35). These observations concern the settings studied; they are not a current national census or a measurement of moral growth. They nevertheless identify educational conditions that philosophical accounts should take seriously.

Polla and Sophoeun (2026) use surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations to study Wat Prey Speu. They reported positive perceptions and associations related to school environment, teachers' duties, and moral growth. The reported relationships are relevant to questions about educational settings, but a single-site study cannot establish national effects. Moreover, perceptions of improvement and statistical associations do not independently demonstrate durable changes in conduct. This article uses the case to identify issues for interpretation rather than importing its strongest causal or policy claims.

Buddhist educational scholarship provides conceptual materials as well. In a study on sustainable school design in Thailand, the authors discussed moral conduct, mental training and the development of wisdom (Chansomsak & Vale, 2008). Their analysis supports the idea of considering educational practices and settings collectively but the national context of their study prevents direct application to Cambodia. Harvey (2000) points out the difference between

the Buddhist ethical goals and the behavior of people whose lives are determined by a number of forces. Nucci (2001) distinguishes moral considerations from social conventions, supplying a useful comparative question about whether learners understand harm and fairness or merely comply with expectations. These approaches are placed in dialogue here; they are not treated as interchangeable theories.

The research problem emerging from this selected literature is the need to connect normative accounts of ethical formation with evidence about educational relationships and institutional conditions. The proposed framework is an interpretive contribution to that problem. It does not claim that Cambodian scholarship has ignored morality or that an exhaustive literature search has established a wholly unstudied topic.

Methodology

This article uses philosophical textual analysis and an interpretive review of selected published sources. It contains no original interviews, questionnaires, participant observations, or statistical analysis. Sources were selected for their relevance to ethical learning, teacher–learner responsibilities, Cambodian educational institutions, and the distinction between religious ideals and social practice. The review is purposive rather than systematic; no claim of comprehensive coverage or reproducible database screening is made.

The primary textual corpus comprises Majjhima Nikāya 61 (MN 61), Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.63 (AN 6.63), Dīgha Nikāya 31 (DN 31), Aṅguttara Nikāya 8.39 (AN 8.39), and selected passages in Mahāvagga I concerning preceptors and their students. These texts are read in identified English translations, with canonical numbers providing stable locations. MN 61, AN 6.63, DN 31, and AN 8.39 belong to the Sutta Piṭaka; the Mahāvagga belongs to the Vinaya Piṭaka. Their functions and audiences are distinguished rather than treating all Buddhist advice as a monastic disciplinary rule. Bodhi's (1981) account of precept practice is used as a modern exposition, not as an additional canonical text.

The analysis proceeds by identifying the ethical issue in each passage, explaining the relationship between its instructions and its stated concerns, and considering educational applications. Applications to contemporary Cambodian classrooms are explicitly interpretive proposals. Ancient instructions are not represented as modern psychological findings, and the argument does not assume that Cambodian institutions already implement the proposed practices.

Published Cambodian research is then compared with the reconstructed educational conditions. Historical studies provide context; institutional reports describe selected settings; and recent case research offers bounded observations. These sources are not pooled as though they measured the same population or outcome. The results below therefore consist of philosophical distinctions and a contextual explanatory framework. They do not demonstrate that monastic education causes moral development or that young people educated in monasteries are morally superior to other learners.

Results of the Philosophical and Social Analysis

Reflection and the Recognition of Harm

MN 61 uses a mirror comparison to introduce reflection on bodily, verbal, and mental activity. Actions are examined before, during, and after performance for harm to oneself, others, or both. Harmful bodily and verbal actions are to be disclosed to a teacher or knowledgeable companion, followed by future restraint (T̥hānissaro Bhikkhu, 2006, MN 61). The sequence connects deliberation with continuing assessment and correction.

The passage gives the learner an active responsibility to examine conduct, while retaining a role for guidance. This article interprets that relationship as a resource for developing judgment. In contemporary teaching, the challenge is to create circumstances in which immediate satisfaction, peer pressure, and embarrassment do not prevent an accurate account of an action.

For educational practice, this article proposes discussion of ordinary dilemmas involving shared property, exclusion, or misleading information. These are hypothetical teaching examples, not observations of Cambodian classrooms. Learners could explain who might be harmed, what information is missing, and how a response could be revised. An answer would be assessed through its reasons as well as its conclusion. Such exercises would give teachers evidence of understanding that recitation alone cannot provide, while allowing learners to encounter disagreement without treating every different answer as misconduct.

Intention and Responsible Agency

AN 6.63 identifies intention as central to kamma and connects intentional action with bodily, verbal, and mental activity (T̥hānissaro Bhikkhu, 1997b, AN 6.63). This textual claim locates an important dimension of ethical responsibility in how a person directs action. It does not supply an exemption whenever someone later reports having meant well. Educational analysis must distinguish the intention with which an act is performed, the care taken in deciding what to do, and the effects that require a response.

Consider a hypothetical learner who repeats an allegation because friends insist that it is true. The learner may intend to protect a group, yet still need to ask whether the information is reliable and whether repeating it unfairly exposes someone to harm. Attention to intention should make deliberation more careful, rather than convert an appealing motive into sufficient justification. This application is a contemporary philosophical extension of the concern with agency; it is not a claim that the discourse discusses digital communication or defines modern negligence.

Habits also require interpretation. Repeated attendance, careful speech, and the performance of communal duties can provide occasions for practising responsibility. They can also be carried out solely to avoid punishment or obtain approval. The same observable routine may therefore express different levels of understanding and commitment. Moral development becomes more defensible as an educational claim when learners can explain a practice, adapt it to an unfamiliar situation, and remain responsive to others when direct supervision is absent. These are proposed criteria for inquiry, not outcomes established by the present article.

Educational Authority and Reciprocal Care

The Mahāvagga's treatment of preceptors and students places educational dependence within reciprocal responsibilities. The student is required to attend to the preceptor, while the preceptor must support instruction, help obtain necessary requisites, and care for an ill student. The familial comparison frames the relationship through reciprocal regard, although the relationship remains hierarchical (Horner, 2014, Mahāvagga I.25–26). DN 31 similarly pairs a student's attentiveness and respect with a teacher's responsibility to provide understanding, instruction, and protection (Kelly et al., 2005, DN 31, §29). Both passages make duties of teaching visible alongside duties of learning.

The resulting philosophical distinction is between positional authority and justified educational authority. A recognised position establishes who is expected to teach; competence, care, and fair conduct supply reasons for learners to rely on that teaching. Respect has educational value when it supports serious attention and mutual responsibility. It becomes problematic when it is interpreted as requiring silence about confusion, humiliation, or mistreatment. The present argument therefore treats opportunities to ask questions and seek assistance as features of credible education, not as evidence that traditional relationships have no value.

The reciprocity identified in the texts does not amount to a complete modern safeguarding policy. This article nevertheless proposes that institutions translate the responsibility of care into clear procedures for addressing learner concerns. An explanation, an accessible complaint channel, and review by someone other than the person complained about can protect both fair teaching and accurate judgment. A teacher should also be able to acknowledge an instructional error. Such accountability would make ethical instruction visible in institutional conduct rather than leaving it entirely within lessons addressed to students.

Restraint and Social Responsibility

AN 8.39 describes abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxicants as gifts that offer other beings freedom from danger, hostility, and oppression (Tānissaro Bhikkhu, 1997a, AN 8.39). The social significance of restraint is therefore not exhausted by an individual's observance of a rule. Other people have an interest in being able to live without exposure to the corresponding harms. Bodhi (1981) presents precepts as training commitments and relates restraint to the cultivation of positive moral qualities. His exposition helps distinguish a practice of learning from the assumption that undertaking a precept proves completed moral formation.

In the proposed educational framework, responsibility involves both restraining harmful conduct and attending to conditions that affect others. A learner may avoid taking another person's possessions yet still need to understand fair access to shared materials. Likewise, honesty involves recognising the reliance that classmates and teachers place on information. These examples develop the article's social interpretation; they do not imply that every modern issue can be resolved by assigning it to one precept. The distinction between lay commitments and ordained discipline also remains necessary when activities involve participants with different religious statuses.

Community engagement can offer opportunities to connect moral understanding with practice. A voluntary learning activity might involve supporting a community library or helping younger learners with reading. Its educational quality would depend on what participants learn about responsibility and how recipients experience the assistance. Participation alone would be an inadequate measure. The same activity could support care, become an occasion for status display, or place burdens on learners. Asking affected people about its usefulness would therefore form part of the proposed assessment.

Institutional Opportunities and Unequal Participation

The Cambodian sources make clear why the institution must remain an object of analysis. The UNICEF study describes monastic schooling as an educational setting with religious and academic content, while identifying constraints affecting instruction and participation (Lunsford et al., 2019). Its account of access and resources allows questions about moral learning to be connected with the practical organisation of education. Having a moral curriculum cannot compensate by itself for a lack of instructional support or for circumstances in which learners cannot ask for help.

The article distinguishes educational opportunity, ethical capacity, and demonstrated conduct. Opportunity concerns access to instruction and supportive relationships. Capacity concerns the learner's developing ability to understand, deliberate, and respond. Conduct concerns what the person does in a relevant situation. Evidence at one level does not automatically establish another. Enrolment demonstrates access; a reasoned response to a dilemma may indicate understanding; repeated responsible action would require further evidence. This distinction provides a way to interpret the favourable perceptions reported at Wat Prey Speu without treating them as proof of durable moral transformation (Polla & Sophoeun, 2026).

Unequal participation also affects the scope of the title's reference to Cambodian youth. A study centred on novice monks cannot represent young women, non-ordained learners, or young people with other religious commitments. Religious identity may matter greatly within monastic education, while opportunities for ethical learning beyond ordination should remain open to separate investigation. The framework therefore treats inclusion as a question about who can participate, whose experiences inform educational decisions, and what barriers require a response. It does not make an unsupported claim about nationwide changes in access.

Discussion

A Contextual Framework for Moral Development

The combined analysis supports a framework in which reflection, action, care, and accountability reinforce one another. Reflection identifies reasons for conduct; practice tests whether those reasons guide decisions; reciprocal care concerns the relationships within which learning occurs; and accountability allows mistakes and harmful arrangements to be addressed. None of these components can adequately replace the others. Strong explanations accompanied by humiliating instruction undermine the teaching relationship. Well-organised routines without opportunities for judgment offer limited evidence of developing agency. Concern for learners without a means of correcting institutional failures can remain ineffective.

This paradigm understands educational continuity not as homogeneity. A Cambodian monastic school may preserve religious learning while changing the methods through which students examine questions or teachers receive professional support. Conversely, introducing contemporary subjects does not automatically improve ethical education. The relevant question is how each arrangement supports learners' understanding and responsibility. Tan's (2008) account of competing educational perspectives helps frame this problem, but the present article does not infer that one curricular arrangement will solve it in every institution.

The distinction between moral concerns and conventions requires particular care. Nucci's (2001) approach directs attention to whether a judgment concerns harm and fairness or rests primarily on an established expectation. This comparison is useful when assessing what an educational practice teaches. However, it should not be used to dismiss all religious observances as ethically empty conventions. Practices can carry several meanings simultaneously. Their moral significance must be argued in relation to their purposes, consequences, and treatment of participants, while respecting that monastic education also has specifically religious aims.

Implications for Teaching and Institutional Practice

The first proposed implication concerns explanation. Moral instruction should give learners opportunities to articulate why conduct matters, including reasons that refer to other people's interests. Teachers could combine textual study with age-appropriate discussion of situations involving shared resources, truthful reporting, or disagreement. Questions should be designed to reveal reasoning rather than require a single approved slogan. Their use would need local adaptation and evaluation; this article does not claim that such methods have already been shown effective in Cambodian monastic schools.

The second implication concerns the relation between discipline and correction. Institutions can maintain clear expectations while distinguishing a mistake, a deliberate harmful act, and a concern reported in good faith. Responses should allow accurate accounts, proportionate correction, and support for those affected. Acknowledgement should not depend on compulsory public exposure of a learner's private experiences. Protective procedures are proposed here as contemporary educational responsibilities. They should be developed with appropriate expertise and learner participation, rather than being presented as a direct transcription of ancient monastic instructions.

The third implication concerns teachers and resources. Institutions should identify the competencies needed for religious instruction, general subjects, and work with learners of different ages. Religious knowledge and an educational role are valuable, but neither establishes preparation for every teaching task. Support might include collaborative lesson planning, access to suitable materials, and discussion of difficult classroom situations. Partnerships with educational bodies should be assessed through their contribution to learning and care. Cooperation should also preserve learners' ability to pursue general education and participate without being required to misrepresent their religious commitments.

The fourth implication concerns community activities. Learners should understand the purpose of an activity and the responsibilities they undertake. Teachers have to think about how much

work it is, how easy the task is, and how the people they are trying to help feel about it. One could look back and consider what was useful, what caused issues and what should be changed. This shifts community interaction from being a supposed sign of virtue to a possibility for ethical investigation. Any assessment would need to recognise the difference between voluntary participation and activity shaped by dependence on teachers or institutional support.

Implications for Social Research

Research should examine the relationship between stated values and educational experience. Interviews can explore how learners understand responsibility, but assurances of good character should be compared with other evidence. Classroom observations, carefully designed dilemmas, and accounts from teachers and community participants may clarify different aspects of learning. Confidential methods are especially necessary where young people may feel pressure to praise respected adults. Evidence about change would require repeated assessment and attention to explanations other than schooling, including prior experience and family circumstances.

Future studies should specify the population, educational setting, religious status, and meaning of the outcome under examination. A study of resident novices should not be labelled a study of Cambodian youth generally. Comparison across institutions and the inclusion of lay learners could improve understanding of variation, while studies addressing barriers to participation would broaden the social perspective. Research involving minors would require appropriate consent, assent, ethical review, and protective arrangements. These are proposed requirements for future empirical work; no such research was conducted for this article.

Limitations

The argument is limited by its selected corpus and reliance on English-language translations and publications. It does not analyse Khmer classroom discourse or reconstruct the full history of Cambodian monastic education. The historical sources, the institutional report, and the recent case study address different periods and populations. Their comparison offers contextual questions rather than a representative account of conditions in 2026. Textual interpretation also cannot establish whether particular institutions follow canonical instructions.

The proposed definition of moral development and the suggested educational practices have not been validated through fieldwork. The framework may require substantial revision in light of learners' experiences, institutional differences, and Cambodian educational priorities. It does not assess the comparative effectiveness of monastic and public schooling, rank religious traditions, or estimate social outcomes. The inclusion of evidence concerning younger children is relevant to educational institutions but narrows what can be concluded about adolescents and young adults. These limitations are part of the argument's scope rather than grounds for claiming that normative analysis is unnecessary.

Conclusion

Buddhist monastic education can be understood as a possible setting for moral development when its educational relationships and practices support reflective judgment, responsible action, reciprocal care, and accountability. Selected Theravāda passages supply ethical

resources for examining intentions, reviewing harmful conduct, recognising teachers' responsibilities, and understanding the social significance of restraint. Their relevance lies in the standards and questions they make available; canonical ideals do not establish contemporary educational achievement.

Published Cambodian research places these questions within institutions that have particular curricular, material, and social conditions. The article's principal contribution is the distinction between access to moral education, developing ethical capacity, and demonstrated responsible conduct. That distinction clarifies why ordination, recitation, participation, and favourable perceptions require further interpretation. Teaching practices and future research should therefore examine learners' reasons, experiences of care, and opportunities to correct harm. A defensible account of morally formative education must attend to what young people learn and how institutions themselves act.

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