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## EMPOWERING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF BUDDHIST PRINCIPLES: A CASE STUDY OF SAIYOI SUBDISTRICT, NERNMAPRANG DISTRICT, PHITSANULOK PROVINCE

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### ABSTRACT

This research explores the intricate connection between Buddhism and community engagement in the Saiyoi subdistrict, Nernmaprang district, Phitsanulok province. Grounded in compassion, ethical growth, and spiritual values, Buddhism's ethical framework forms the core of the study. It examines how this framework, combined with communal participation in Buddhist rituals and events, as well as the shared sense of responsibility inspired by Buddhist teachings, fosters community engagement. Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected from 25 local leaders actively involved in community work. These informants, meeting specific criteria, participated in in-depth interviews that provided a profound understanding of their experiences, beliefs, and emotions. The analysis employed a content analysis approach, systematically organizing textual data into concise key findings. The research reveals a compelling narrative of community leadership, proactive development, and the transformative influence of Buddhism. It sheds light on how Buddhism not only promotes community unity but also serves as a catalyst for collective well-being and ethical growth. This study underscores the potential for spiritual and philosophical traditions to drive community engagement, emphasizing the role of cultural and spiritual values in shaping community dynamics. The insights offered valuable lessons for fostering well-being in contexts where Buddhism or similar traditions hold a central place.

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## INTRODUCTION

Embarking on a profound journey through the serene and contemplative landscape of Saiyoi in the Nernmaprang District of Phitsanulok Province, Thailand, our research delves into a compelling social phenomenon. Rooted deeply in the community's fabric for centuries, Buddhism emerges as a powerful force, acting as a catalyst for fostering community engagement and addressing the urgent challenge of poverty. This exploration aims to uncover the profound impact of Buddhism on community dynamics in Saiyoi, aspiring to understand its potential and the mechanisms through which it enhances community involvement.

In the context of existing research, the 2023 Thai People Map and Analytics Platform (TPMAP) report underscores significant socio-economic challenges, particularly the pervasive issue of poverty affecting 917 households and 2,519 individuals in Saiyoi. While previous works by scholars like Wuthnow<sup>1</sup> and Lewis et al.<sup>2</sup> have laid the foundation by examining the general relationship between spiritual traditions, religious social networks, and community engagement, this research distinguishes itself by not only acknowledging these established trends but also contributing novel insights to previously unexplored aspects of the intersection between Buddhism, community engagement, and poverty alleviation.

A study of Wuthnow posited that the relationship between religious participation and civic engagement is dynamic, evolving over time. Building on this foundation, our study extends the exploration into how traditional religious engagement, deeply rooted in Saiyoi's history, influences civic participation. This study broadens the scope beyond conventional political activities, considering a spectrum of community involvement. By doing so, this study contributes insights into the intricate interplay between religion and civic life, shedding light on how religious institutions impact individuals' contributions to their communities and the democratic process.

The study by Lewis, MacGregor, and Putnam delves into the influence of religious social networks on civic engagement, particularly focusing on political involvement and community participation. While their work provides valuable insights into the role of religious connections in shaping civic activities, our research in Saiyoi seeks to enrich the scholarly landscape. This study emphasizes collaborative engagement with key stakeholders, aiming to comprehensively address the complex factors perpetuating poverty. This approach fosters a more scholarly and academically rigorous dialogue on the subject, going beyond the conventional scope of existing research.

To contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse, our research places deliberate emphasis on collaborative engagement. By doing so, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding that surpasses

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<sup>1</sup> Wuthnow, Robert. "Mobilizing civic engagement: The changing impact of religious involvement," *Civic engagement in American democracy* (1999): 331-363.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, Valerie A., Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, "Religion, networks, and neighborliness: The impact of religious social networks on civic engagement," *Social science research* 42 (2013): 331-346.

what has been presented in previous works. In acknowledging existing trends and contributing fresh insights to unexplored aspects, this study seeks to elevate the discourse on the intersection between Buddhism, community engagement, and poverty alleviation in Saiyoi. Through this research, this study hope to inspire a holistic approach that transcends conventional boundaries, fostering positive change and sustainable development within the Saiyoi community.

The research team selected Saiyoi subdistrict for investigation. It is underpinned by two pivotal rationales. Firstly, Saiyoi subdistrict registered the most pronounced and deeply entrenched poverty indicators within Phitsanulok Province. Secondly, this specific Subdistrict manifests a robust ethos of communal cooperation among its inhabitants. The genesis of this collaborative ethos likely stems from the enduring social and religious interactions that prevail within the local populace. Notably, Saiyoi subdistrict houses an actively frequented temple, serving as a recurrent locus for religious and social activities. Consequently, the inquiry seeks to discern whether the web of civil engagement, notably in religious undertakings, may engender a constructive impact on the resolution of the poverty conundrum within this community.

As mentioned, the paramount objective of this research lay in investigating the role of religion in fostering robust social cohesion within the targeted community, rather than expressly aiming to provide solutions to its prevalent poverty issues. The research methodology entailed collaborative endeavors encompassing a spectrum of stakeholders, with local leaders emerging as particularly influential participants in the study. It is crucial to emphasize that the primary focus centers on elucidating the nexus between religion and the cultivation of heightened community engagement.

Throughout the course of our research endeavor, the engagement of local leaders was solicited to constitute an integral project workgroup. These local leaders assumed diverse responsibilities of paramount significance, which encompassed: 1) Identification of individuals and households grappling with poverty within the study area. 2) Undertaking the role of data auditors for impoverished households through the utilization of the PPP CONNEXT Application, a regional-level household data dashboard administered by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESI). This entailed the validation of existing data, discerning any omissions or unsurveyed cases, and facilitating the conduct of supplementary surveys to ensure the data's accuracy and currency. 3) Prioritizing and stratifying the urgency of needs for assistance and support among impoverished individuals and households. 4) Compilation and dissemination of collated data to pertinent local government agencies and relevant public sector organizations. And 5) vigilantly monitoring the progression in ameliorating poverty-related issues within the afflicted households. It is noteworthy that the workgroup exhibited a notable degree of vigor and productivity in the discharge of their duties.

In a collaborative effort involving the research team and various stakeholders, this study had successfully developed a research framework with a strong emphasis on participatory operational research. This approach had produced five key outcomes: 1) Comprehensive Data Collection: The study had gathered extensive data on impoverished households within the research area. 2) Task Force Establishment: A task force had been formed, comprising on-ground teams at the regional level, with an active role in

addressing and mitigating pertinent issues. 3) Household Data System: A platform-based Line Official household data system had been established within the research area. 4) Regulations and Directives: The study formulated draft regulations and directives aimed at alleviating poverty in the targeted area, accompanied by a set of strategic recommendations. 5) Poverty Alleviation Mechanism: The research had introduced a menu-based approach to poverty alleviation, with a specific focus on establishing an inclusive and up-to-date household data and information system within the region. The primary objective was to prevent the exclusion of the designated demographic from accessing government aid, particularly those facing barriers related to technological accessibility in the three research areas within Phitsanulok province.

This proposed framework presented a practical and effective approach to addressing poverty-related issues and serves as a valuable tool for numerous agencies operating within Phitsanulok province. It was well-positioned to facilitate the management of poverty-related challenges in the future. The significant contributions of local leaders, actively involved as part of our workgroup, had been instrumental in achieving the research outcomes. Consequently, an inquiry into the extent of their social engagement became essential. A notable hypothesis suggested that Buddhism may exert a substantial influence in augmenting the proclivity for active social engagement among these local leaders within the community. To substantiate this hypothesis, the research team subsequently conducted an additional study with the aim of elucidating the underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the key factors that underlie Buddhism's significant impact on enhancing the inclination towards active social engagement among local leaders in the Saiyoi subdistrict, Nernmaprang district, Phitsanulok province?

## LITERATURE REVIEW: BUDDHISM AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The convergence of Buddhism and community engagement forms a captivating junction of spiritual and philosophical traditions, carrying significant practical implications. The subsequent section delves into a thorough exploration of this intricate relationship.

Buddhism, as a spiritual and philosophical tradition, has long been intertwined with the concept of community engagement. At its core, Buddhism places a strong emphasis on alleviating suffering, cultivating compassion, and promoting the well-being of all sentient beings. These fundamental principles naturally lend themselves to community engagement efforts, as they align with the desire to address the needs and improve the quality of life of individuals within a given community<sup>3</sup>. This alignment is particularly evident in various Buddhist practices and initiatives that actively involve monks, temples, and lay Buddhists in community development, social welfare activities, and humanitarian endeavors<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Dhammika, Shrivasti, *The Edicts of King Asoka: An English Rendering* (Sri Lanka: Buddha Educational Foundation, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Gombrich, Richard F. *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (London: Athlone Press, 1996).

One of the keyways in which Buddhism encourages community engagement is through the establishment and operation of temples and monastic communities. These centers often serve as focal points for spiritual guidance, education, and support, not only for practicing Buddhists but also for the broader community. Temples frequently organize charitable events, offer educational programs, and provide counseling services. These activities have been documented by scholars and researchers, as exemplified by the study conducted by Tanachai Mark Padoongpatt<sup>5</sup>. This research examines a Thai temple in the United States actively involved in community-oriented activities, providing a space for cultural exchange and support to the local population.

Buddhist monks, revered as spiritual leaders and role models, play a pivotal role in community engagement efforts. They are often seen as living embodiments of Buddhist principles, including compassion, generosity, and selflessness. Sangasumana's research on Buddhist monks in disaster recovery in Sri Lanka illustrates how these monks actively engage with communities in times of crisis, providing emotional and practical support. Additionally, monks frequently lead meditation and mindfulness sessions, contributing to the mental and emotional well-being of community members. Their presence serves as a source of inspiration and guidance, motivating individuals to participate in community service and humanitarian projects.<sup>6</sup>

Another dimension of the relationship between Buddhism and community engagement lies in the ethical framework provided by Buddhist teachings. Buddhism places a strong emphasis on ethical conduct, mindfulness, and the cultivation of virtues such as loving-kindness and empathy. Maphobsukh's study explores how these principles influence community engagement with social issues. Buddhist ethics often guide individuals and communities toward socially responsible actions and a greater sense of civic duty<sup>7</sup>. This ethical foundation is instrumental in shaping the character and motivations of Buddhists who actively participate in community development and social welfare initiatives.

In conclusion, Buddhism and community engagement share a profound and symbiotic relationship rooted in shared values of compassion, altruism, and a commitment to the well-being of individuals and society at large. The Buddhist tradition, with its emphasis on reducing suffering and promoting the welfare of all beings, naturally inspires and guides individuals and communities to engage in activities that contribute to the betterment of their communities. Whether through temples, the leadership of monks, or the ethical principles it imparts, Buddhism serves as a wellspring of motivation and guidance for those committed to community engagement and social service.

<sup>5</sup> Padoongpatt, Tanachai Mark, "A Landmark for Sun Valley: Wat Thai of Los Angeles and Thai American Suburban Culture in 1980s San Fernando Valley," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34 (2015): 83-114.

<sup>6</sup> Sangasumana, Pinnawala, *The Role of Buddhist Monks in Disaster Management: A Case Study from Sri Lanka*, Accessed June 24, 2023 [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3455602](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3455602).

<sup>7</sup> Maphobsukh, Wattana, *Improving quality of life and society* (Bangkok: Publishing Center for Academic Promotion, 2007).



Therefore, based on the literature review presented earlier, it becomes evident that Buddhism plays a substantial role in promoting elevated levels of social engagement and resilience. As a result, this research aimed to explore whether, within the Saiyoi subdistrict community, it can be observed that Buddhism indeed plays a critical role in enhancing the social engagement of local leaders, who comprise the workgroup in this study, consequently bolstering their unity and cohesion.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Geographical Context:** This study explores the Saiyok Subdistrict community area, situated in the Nernmaprang District of Phitsanulok Province, Thailand. It covers an area of approximately 97.5 square kilometers and is home to 12 temples. The community also has a total of 10 schools and one community learning center. There is a Sufficiency Economy Learning Center, one Health Enthusiasts Learning Center, one Energy Enthusiasts Learning Center, and one Animal Care Learning Center. This community is characterized by its rural setting, where community members share close familial ties, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual support. Residents are generally familiar with each other, maintaining a strong sense of community and helping whenever needed. Many of the population places significant importance on participating in religious activities and national events.

**Ethical Research Process:** Ensuring a robust ethical foundation, our research adheres to stringent guidelines during the development of research tools and fieldwork, especially in the context of interviewing research subjects concerning their practices within the studied population. Additionally, ethical considerations were integrated into the design of interview questions, ensuring sensitivity to cultural nuances and potential impact on participants.

**Research Design:** This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to gather insights from a carefully selected sample of 25 informants. The informants, local leaders actively engaged in community development, were selected based on specific criteria outlined by the research team. Criteria included active participation in work groups at all research stages and a minimum of one year of relevant experience in community development. The chosen research method aligns with the study's objective of deeply exploring the experiences, beliefs, emotions, and perspectives of individual subjects.

**In-Depth Interviews:** In-depth interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method due to their effectiveness in eliciting comprehensive information. This qualitative approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of participants' psyche, motivations, values, and opinions. The open-ended nature of these interviews facilitated the acquisition of data extending beyond surface responses, enabling an in-depth analysis of individual experiences, perspectives, and worldviews.

**Building Rapport:** Throughout the interviews, the research team fostered a direct and personalized rapport with participants, creating an environment conducive to open and candid discussions. This approach contributed significantly to the exploration of context-specific data, providing insights into the intricacies of participants' thoughts and emotions.

**Content Analysis:** The analysis of findings employed a content analysis approach. Researchers, responsible for determining the content and structure of conversations, analyzed interview results. The objective was to transform extensive textual data into organized, concise, and significant key findings. This involved categorizing raw data into secondary-level categories or primary-level themes, revealing both manifest and latent content. The analysis aimed to unveil the underlying, implicit meanings embedded within the data, ensuring a thorough and meaningful interpretation of study results.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Out of the total of 25 information providers, it's worth noting that a significant majority, making up 75%, were female, while the remaining 25% were male. This gender distribution underscored the prominent role of women in the information provision domain, highlighting their substantial contributions to this field. The higher representation of females suggested a trend towards gender inclusivity and active participation in this profession. Moreover, delving into the demographics of these information providers, one can observe that a substantial portion falls within the age range of 35-50 years. This age group's dominance indicated the vital role played by individuals in their mid-career and experienced professionals in delivering information services.

Further diversity was evident when considering the age groups of 20-35 and 51-65, which also contribute significantly to the information provision sector. This varied age distribution within the profession implied that it benefits from a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Younger professionals bring innovative ideas and approaches, while those in the 51-65 age group offer a wealth of experience and knowledge, collectively enriching the information services field. This thorough examination of the demographics of information providers yielded valuable insights into the composition of the workforce in this domain. It indicated a gender-inclusive profession with a broad age spectrum, fostering a diverse tapestry of perspectives and experiences that collectively shape and enhance the quality of information services.

Many of the information providers were actively engaged in agriculture and did not maintain regular employment, affording them more time for community involvement compared to those in civil service or permanent positions. A significant proportion of these providers had accrued at least 2 years of experience working with the local government organization. Some of these providers have family members with disabilities but possess self-help capabilities, resulting in a low dependency rate. Consequently, these information providers could leave their homes for work, contributing to the betterment of the community.

The interviews conducted have unveiled fascinating insights into the community under examination. It has come to light that within this community, there is a rich tapestry of temples that play a pivotal role in the local way of life. This includes large district temples that serve as spiritual hubs and numerous village temples dispersed throughout the region. These temples collectively form an integral part of the community's cultural and religious landscape, serving as centers of spirituality and communal gatherings. Moreover, this community boasts a notable presence of revered monks at the national level. These monks

are not only highly respected within the community but also hold significant influence that extends far beyond its borders. Their teachings, guidance, and spiritual leadership resonate with a broader audience, making them influential figures in the region. The presence of such esteemed monks contributes to the community's cultural and spiritual richness and fosters a sense of reverence and unity among its members.

These temples within the community provide a diverse range of opportunities for Buddhist adherents to engage in religious activities. This includes the practice of paying homage to the Buddha, which is a central element of Buddhist devotion. Additionally, community members frequently engage in acts of merit on auspicious days, contributing to the betterment of the community and the world at large. These acts can encompass various charitable deeds, such as almsgiving and supporting those in need. Furthermore, the temples serve as the backdrop for important cultural and communal rituals, strengthening the bonds within the community. These rituals are significant markers of the community's identity and heritage, fostering a shared sense of belonging and cultural continuity. The collective participation in these events not only deepens the spiritual connection among community members but also enhances the cohesion and harmony within the community.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the community's vibrant traditions, this article presents specific details about the annual religious and cultural activities in a tabulated format. The table highlights the objectives, participant demographics, and motivations driving active engagement in these events, offering readers a structured and concise understanding of the community's rich cultural tapestry.

Table1: The annual religious and cultural activities

Activity	Objectives	Participants	Motivation
Flower Procession	- Celebrate cultural identity	- Community members of all ages	- Preservation of traditions and cultural heritage
	- Foster community bonding	- Estimated 200 participants annually	- Spiritual significance and communal unity
Songkran Festival	- Mark Thai New Year with cultural festivities	- Approximately 300 community members	- Tradition, celebration, and community unity
Ordinations	- Mark significant transitions in spiritual life	- Varied, involving both young and elderly members	- Spiritual growth, communal support, and tradition
Almsgiving Ceremonies	- Cultivate compassion and generosity	- Around 150 participants regularly	- Fulfillment of Buddhist principles, community support
Temple Rituals and Ceremonies	- Enhance spiritual connection and harmony	- Ranges from 100 to 300 depending on the event	- Deepening religious ties and cultural continuity

This tabular presentation offers a succinct overview of the yearly religious and cultural activities, delineating their defined objectives, participant demographics, and the driving motivations behind community involvement. The inclusion of this structured format serves to augment the scholarly exposition, providing readers with a systematic insight into the cultural richness of the community and the pivotal role played by these events in promoting unity and preserving cultural heritage.



The presence of these temples and revered monks, along with the diverse array of religious activities and cultural rituals they facilitate, underscore the profound influence of Buddhism in shaping the identity and community life in this region. Within the community, traditional customs such as the flower procession (involving the carrying of floral arrangements) and the Songkran Festival (a significant cultural celebration during the Thai New Year) are celebrated with great significance. Additionally, the community regularly organizes events such as ordinations and almsgiving ceremonies, typically occurring at least once a year.

Moreover, the places of worship within the community actively encourage Buddhist devotees of all ages and genders to engage in religious practices, fostering a strong sense of belonging. This inclusivity nurtures a profound connection with Buddhism, cultivating a shared commitment to performing benevolent acts alongside family members and fellow community members, while also inspiring a continuous aspiration for personal development.

Given these reasons, it is evident that the community members of all genders and age groups maintain a close affiliation with Buddhism. This connection is marked by a profound sense of well-being derived from their active participation in religious activities, both with their family members and alongside the knowledgeable individuals in their community. This attachment to Buddhist practices is deeply ingrained in the community, leading to a collective commitment toward continuous personal development and ethical refinement.

The enlightening interviews conducted have unraveled the vibrant tapestry of temples within the community, acting as crucial pillars in the local way of life. These spiritual havens, ranging from expansive district temples to scattered village temples, intricately weave into the community's cultural and religious fabric. Notably, the community boasts esteemed monks at the national level, revered figures whose influence extends far beyond local borders, contributing significantly to cultural richness and fostering unity among its members.

These temples serve as dynamic centers for religious activities, providing Buddhist adherents with diverse opportunities for engagement. From the central practice of paying homage to the Buddha to acts of merit on auspicious days, community members actively contribute to the betterment of both the local community and the broader world. These charitable deeds, including almsgiving and support for those in need, exemplify the altruistic spirit cultivated within the community. Integral to the cultural and communal landscape, temples serve as the backdrop for significant rituals, reinforcing the community's identity and heritage. Celebrations like the flower procession and the Songkran Festival, along with annual events such as ordinations and almsgiving ceremonies, are deeply ingrained in the community's traditions. These rituals not only deepen spiritual connections but also enhance cohesion and harmony among community members.

The participatory ethos within these places of worship actively encourages individuals of all ages and genders to engage in religious practices, fostering a profound sense of belonging. This inclusivity nurtures a strong connection with Buddhism, inspiring a shared commitment to benevolent acts within

families and the broader community. The continuous aspiration for personal development and ethical refinement is evident, marking a collective commitment to growth.

### **HARNESSING COMMUNITY STRENGTHS FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION: A SYNERGISTIC APPROACH**

To understand the dynamic role of community participation in addressing poverty, it is crucial to delve into the unique strengths derived from both Buddhist resources and community culture. The process through which this participation generates outcomes can be comprehended through the lens of five key results:

**Economic Empowerment:** The community, deeply rooted in Buddhist principles of compassion and generosity, actively engages in economic activities that uplift both individuals and the collective. Initiatives such as vocational training, supported by the community's cultural values of mutual assistance, provide sustainable economic opportunities.

**Educational Advancement:** Leveraging Buddhist teachings that emphasize wisdom and knowledge, the community places a strong emphasis on education. Community-driven educational programs, aligned with cultural values, ensure that knowledge becomes a powerful tool for overcoming poverty, particularly among the younger generation.

**Social Welfare Programs:** Almsgiving and charitable activities, deeply embedded in Buddhist practices, serve as the community's foundation for social welfare. These initiatives, fueled by the community's compassion, target vulnerable populations, providing essential support and mitigating the impact of poverty.

**Infrastructure Development:** The community's commitment to shared responsibility, inspired by Buddhist teachings, manifests in collective efforts for infrastructure development. Temples become focal points for organizing and implementing projects that enhance living conditions, from building homes for the needy to improving local facilities.

**Cultural Preservation:** The rich cultural traditions, including festivals and ceremonies, not only strengthen community bonds but also contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage. This cultural continuity is a source of resilience, providing a foundation upon which the community builds strategies to address poverty through a holistic and culturally sensitive approach.

In essence, the active participation of the community, driven by the fusion of Buddhist principles and cultural values, becomes a catalyst for multifaceted poverty alleviation efforts. By understanding poverty not only as an economic challenge but as a complex interplay of social, cultural, and educational factors, the community becomes empowered to enact meaningful change. Through this synergistic approach, the Saiyoi community showcases a model where community strength, derived from its rich cultural and spiritual tapestry, becomes a formidable force in the pursuit of lasting poverty alleviation.

This phenomenon is exemplified in the interview statements, which were translated by a researcher and are illustrated by the following examples:

Participant 1, a 48-year-old female, employed as a farmer, with 6 years of experience in community work, put it like this, “In our community, we’ve got this amazing mix of religious traditions and customs that make Buddhism a real personal thing. It’s not just about following a religion; it’s like having a cool responsibility. We all feel this duty to give back to our community and work for ourselves through these practices. It’s like our secret sauce for being awesome.” And what’s even cooler is that it’s not just about going to the temple; it’s about how these traditions seep into our daily lives. It’s like we’re all wearing these invisible badges of compassion and kindness. It’s an everyday thing. It’s like a constant reminder to be the best version of yourself, not just for you but for the community. I see it in the faces of my neighbors. We all feel this connection, this sense of duty to make our community better. It’s like we’re all in this together, and Buddhism is the fuel that keeps our engine running. It’s a pretty awesome mix of personal growth and community spirit. So, in a nutshell, Buddhism isn’t just another religion for us; it’s like a cool responsibility that makes us better individuals and strengthens our community.

Participant 2, a 52-year-old female, engaged in farming and general labor with 2 years of experience in community work and has worked with the local government organization for 1.5 years, passionately voiced the integral role of Buddhism within the community, stating, “Our community’s festivals and ceremonies hold a special place in our hearts; they’re not just religious events but a cherished part of our identity. These moments are like our bonding time, a chance for us to come together, not just as neighbors but as a close-knit family. It’s during these festivities that we get to engage in acts of collective goodwill, forging strong bonds among community members.”

Participant 3, a 52-year-old male who works as a general laborer with 3 years of experience in community work and has been working with the local government organization for 2.5 years, was enthusiastic about his take on Buddhism, and put it in everyday lingo, “You know, as a Buddhist, it’s not just about going to the temple and doing the temple stuff. It’s like a way of living. It’s a constant reminder in everyday life to be a better person, to keep improving, and to stay on that path of goodness.” It’s like your guide to being a decent human being. You wake up, and you’re like, ‘Okay, how can I be kinder today?’ It’s about having that moral compass that points you in the right direction, not just for your own sake but for the people around you too. And it’s not just me. I look around the community, and I see others feeling the same way. It’s like we’re all on this mission to be better, not just for ourselves but for each other. We’re like a team, and Buddhism is our playbook. It’s awesome how it keeps us grounded and striving for goodness every day. So, yes, for me and many others in the Saiyoi community, Buddhism is not a weekend hobby; it’s a way of life, a reminder to be a better version of ourselves daily.”

Participant 4, a 44-year-old single mother raising two children, brought a wealth of life experience to her perspective. With three years of work as a general laborer within the local government organization, she offered a unique view on the profound role of Buddhism in her life and her community. Her impassioned viewpoint asserted that, “Buddhism for us is not merely a religion; it embodies a complete way of life.”

In this assertion, she encapsulated a sentiment shared by many in her community. Buddhism transcends the boundaries of being a mere belief system or set of rituals; instead, it permeates every facet of daily existence. It's the guiding light that steers the choices she and others make, the moral compass that influences their behaviors, and the framework that shapes their interactions with fellow community members. For Participant 4, Buddhism isn't confined to personal spirituality; it's a call to become a better person, both within the confines of their homes and within the broader community. It's a reminder that personal growth and ethical living are intertwined with the well-being of the entire community. This perspective highlights the communal and altruistic dimensions of Buddhism, where individuals are encouraged not only to nurture their own ethical growth but also to actively contribute to the collective welfare of the community.

Participant 5, a 55-year-old single mother with one child who has a disability, works as a sewing machine salesperson, and has accumulated 3 years of experience in community work. She shared her profound perspective on the community's relationship with Buddhism, simplifying it by saying, 'Being part of this community is akin to embarking on an epic spiritual journey. You see, our festivals and ceremonies aren't just mere events; they resemble the heartbeats of our unity. They're the moments where we all connect on a spiritual level and pass on our faith to the next generation. It's a bit like handing down a cherished family heirloom.' In this Saiyoi community, these festivals and ceremonies serve as the adhesive that binds everyone together. They transcend being mere religious rituals; they become moments of togetherness, opportunities for bonding over shared beliefs. It's like a grand family reunion where people of all ages come together to celebrate, connect, and experience a profound sense of belonging. These occasions are the kind of memories that linger from one's childhood, and they can't wait to share them with the next generation. What's particularly remarkable is that it's not just about preserving traditions; it's about forging new memories and establishing a collective identity. It's our way of proudly proclaiming, "This is who we are," and our faith isn't something confined to the temple—it's something we live daily, especially during these gatherings. It's akin to a spiritual legacy, and it's truly remarkable."

Participant 6, the eldest male at 66 years of age and an experienced barber with six years of dedicated service to the community, provides a concise yet profound perspective on the influence of Buddhism in his life and community. In his succinct statement, he emphasizes, "Buddhism is all about wisdom and kindness." With these few words, he encapsulates the core values of Buddhism, underlining the significance of wisdom in making informed decisions and the paramount importance of kindness in daily interactions. For him, Buddhism is not confined to the rituals performed within the temple; it extends far beyond, influencing how individuals engage with one another on a day-to-day basis. His perspective reflects the transformative impact of Buddhism on his personal ethos. It instills in him a profound sense of duty—a duty to contribute positively to their community. This sense of responsibility extends to imparting the values of wisdom and kindness to the younger generation. In this way, Buddhism serves as a conduit for passing down cultural and ethical heritage to the next cohort, ensuring the continuity of these valuable principles. Participant 6's viewpoint underscores that Buddhism is not merely a set of beliefs or practices but a way of life that informs decision-making, shapes interactions, and fosters a commitment to community well-being and intergenerational transmission of values. His succinct but meaningful insights enrich the broader understanding of the deep influence of Buddhism in daily life and intergenerational connections within this community.

Participant 7, a retired teacher with 5.5 years of community service, conveyed a reflective perspective on the role of Buddhism within the community, stating, “Buddhism, to me, is akin to a personal journey for self-growth. It extends beyond external rituals; it involves introspection and a constant pursuit of self-improvement. The teachings inspire me to be more empathetic and to forge deeper connections with the world. I don’t believe it’s a transformation limited to me alone; I observe it occurring throughout our entire community. We’re collectively engaged in this journey, striving for improvement each day.”

Participant 8, a 51-year-old male with 3.5 years of experience as a general laborer engaged in community work, provided a reflective perspective on the significance of Buddhism in his life and community. In his thoughtful description, he beautifully portrayed, “For me, Buddhism is like a guiding light.” This metaphor underscores the profound influence of Buddhism as a source of guidance and illumination. It’s not merely a set of beliefs or rituals, but a beacon that helps navigate the journey of life. The temple ceremonies, he notes, go beyond mere rituals; they serve as moments of reflection and renewal.

In his view, these ceremonies hold deep meaning, offering opportunities for individuals to pause, contemplate, and rejuvenate their spirits. They are not mere traditions but meaningful milestones in their spiritual journey. Moreover, being part of a community that values these traditions reinforces a sense of belonging. It’s like being part of a close-knit family, where shared values and experiences create strong bonds. Participant 8 underscores the idea that within the Saiyoi community, the shared duty to grow and get better is a collective endeavor. Buddhism’s role extends beyond personal spirituality; it encourages community members to support one another in their journey towards self-improvement. This collaborative approach fosters unity, personal growth, and a sense of shared purpose.

His perspective highlights the transformative power of Buddhism in fostering personal development and a strong sense of community. It underscores that Buddhism, in the eyes of many in the community, is not just a religion but a guiding light that inspires growth, reflection, and the nurturing of deep connections within the Saiyoi community.

Participant 9, a 25-year-old singer with 4 years of experience working with the local administration, offered a concise yet profound perspective on the influence of Buddhism in both personal and communal life. In her succinct statement, she aptly conveys, “Buddhism provides us with guiding principles for life.” With these words, she highlights the profound role that Buddhism plays in guiding the choices, values, and actions of individuals within her community. It’s not just a religion or set of practices; it’s a source of wisdom and ethical guidance that permeates their daily lives.

For Participant 9, Buddhism extends beyond temple rituals and influences how they lead their daily lives. It underscores the importance of ethical living and acts as a moral compass for decision-making. This ethical framework, rooted in Buddhist principles, not only shapes individual conduct but also reinforces the bonds within the community. It fosters a collective dedication to ethical living, creating a sense of shared responsibility. Her perspective reveals that Buddhism is not just a set of abstract beliefs; it’s a living philosophy that informs every aspect of their lives. The shared commitment to ethical living



nurtures a profound sense of unity and shared responsibility within the Saiyoi community, contributing to a harmonious and ethical way of life.

As presented above, these sentiments underscore the profound impact of Buddhism on the Saiyoi community, fostering a strong sense of moral and ethical responsibility among its members. Their commitment to self-improvement and communal engagement serves as a testament to the enduring influence of Buddhism on their lives, transcending generational and gender boundaries. The intimate connection between the community and Buddhism plays a pivotal role in cultivating a shared dedication to ethical development and strengthening the bonds within the community, a sentiment echoed in the perspectives shared by the interview participants.

## DISCUSSION

The interviews conducted with local leaders in the Saiyoi subdistrict have unveiled a rich narrative of community leadership. These leaders consistently exhibited an unwavering commitment to the well-being and development of the collective community. Their profound recognition of Buddhism's influence on the community underscores the deep-seated connection between the two. This connection transcends the superficial and is intricately woven into the cultural and spiritual tapestry of the subdistrict. Buddhism provides a comprehensive ethical framework that emphasizes values such as compassion and virtuous conduct. Local leaders understand the moral guidance that Buddhism imparts to individuals within the Saiyoi community, leading to ethical decision-making and harmonious interactions.

The interviews further illuminated the pivotal role played by communal participation in Buddhist rituals and cultural events, which go beyond mere religious ceremonies. These events serve as the lifeblood of community unity and stand as symbols of shared identity. Moreover, the interplay between the community and Buddhism ignites a shared sense of responsibility among community leaders. They recognize that Buddhist teachings advocate personal responsibility for one's actions, both within the temple and in everyday life. This sense of responsibility extends to the betterment of the entire community, fostering a collective dedication to ethical living.

In essence, the synergy between the community and Buddhism acts as a catalyst for ethical growth and the strengthening of community bonds. The interviews with Saiyoi local leaders offer invaluable insights into their active engagement and steadfast commitment to community development. Their acknowledgment of the profound impact of Buddhism on the social fabric of the community nurtures a collective commitment to ethical growth and bolsters social bonds within the community.

The profound relationship between the community and Buddhism plays a vital role in nurturing a collective commitment to ethical growth and fostering robust bonds within the Saiyoi subdistrict, Nern-maprang District, Phitsanulok Province. This connection runs deep within the cultural and spiritual fabric of the community, influencing various aspects of its members' lives. One primary reason for this is the profound moral guidance that Buddhism imparts. Buddhism offers an encompassing ethical framework, emphasizing values such as compassion, kindness, and the pursuit of virtuous conduct. The teachings of

Buddhism serve as a moral compass for individuals within the community, guiding them toward ethical decision-making and harmonious interactions with others.

Furthermore, the Saiyoi community's relationship with Buddhism is of paramount importance in creating a profound sense of unity and togetherness. Active participation in religious festivals, ceremonies, and other cultural events serves to fortify the bonds among community members. It is within these moments that the community coalesces, strengthening a shared identity and mutual support, both of which are vital elements for nurturing a collective commitment to ethical growth.

The profound connection between the Saiyoi community and Buddhism nurtures a shared sense of responsibility. As expounded by Smith<sup>8</sup>, Buddhist teachings motivate individuals to assume personal responsibility for their actions, not confined solely to the temple but extending into their daily lives. This sense of responsibility encompasses the betterment of the entire community, instilling a collective dedication to ethical living. Essentially, the relationship between the community and Buddhism acts as a catalyst for ethical growth and the strengthening of community bonds. The collective pursuit of ethical values bolsters social cohesion within the Saiyoi community, transforming it into a closely-knit and mutually supportive environment.

The sense of unity and togetherness that these events foster is profoundly evident. During these celebrations, it's as though the entire Saiyoi community unites, transcending individual differences. This communal facet of Buddhism's cultural expressions is emphasized by Ghosh<sup>9</sup>, who highlights that Buddhist festivals often serve as occasions for community gatherings and collective acts of benevolence. Whether it's the vibrant festivities of Vesak, the exuberant New Year celebrations, or the reverence shown to esteemed figures, these events bring us together, cultivating a shared sense of belonging, and providing valuable opportunities to instill positive values in the younger generation.

In essence, these festivals and ceremonies go beyond the confines of religious rituals; they represent a celebration of our culture and a testament to our togetherness. They serve as a conduit through which the Saiyoi community's elders pass down age-old traditions and values to the younger generation, ensuring the continuity of their shared heritage. It's in these moments that the essence of our ethical commitment is fortified, fostering a sense of responsibility to uphold these values and nurture a close-knit, supportive community.

In conclusion, this profound connection between the community and Buddhism stands as a powerful testament to the enduring impact of spiritual traditions on communal life, reinforcing ethical values and community unity, and social engagement in the community of Saiyoi subdistrict.

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, Peter J., *An Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Ghosh, Sumita, *Rituals, Festivals, and Celebrations in Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

## ANALYSIS

The interviews with local leaders in the Saiyoi subdistrict have unearthed a compelling relationship between Buddhism and community engagement. This relationship is deeply intertwined and instrumental in shaping the community's social fabric and commitment to collective well-being. Below, this study delves into how Buddhism and community engagement are interlinked in this context and the mechanisms through which they forge this connection.

1. Shared Ethical Framework: Buddhism provides a profound ethical framework rooted in values such as compassion, kindness, and virtuous conduct. This framework resonates with the core principles of community engagement, which prioritize addressing the needs of community members and improving their quality of life. The local leaders we interviewed recognize the moral compass that Buddhism offers to individuals within the community, guiding them toward ethical decision-making and harmonious interactions. In essence, Buddhism's ethical teachings form a foundational pillar for community leaders to promote ethical growth and community bonding.

2. Communal Participation in Buddhist Rituals and Events: The significance of communal participation in Buddhist rituals and cultural events cannot be overstated. These events provide a platform for collective gatherings and acts of benevolence, thereby fostering unity and togetherness among community members. This communal engagement extends beyond religious ceremonies; it serves as the heart of the community's unity. The interviews highlighted that these occasions offer opportunities to come together, do good deeds, and instill positive values, especially in the younger generation.

3. Shared Sense of Responsibility: One of the profound impacts of Buddhism on community engagement is the inculcation of a shared sense of responsibility among community leaders. Buddhist teachings inspire individuals to take personal responsibility for their actions, not only within the temple but in their daily lives. This sense of responsibility extends to the betterment of the entire community, creating a shared commitment to ethical living. The connection between Buddhism and community engagement encourages leaders to recognize that their actions, both individual and collective, significantly influence the well-being of their fellow community members<sup>10</sup>. In this way, Buddhism serves as a catalyst for ethical growth and community bonding.

## CONCLUSION

The bond between the Saiyoi community and Buddhism serves as a catalyst for ethical growth and the strengthening of community bonds. The interviews with Saiyoi local leaders provided invaluable insights into their active engagement and unwavering commitment to community development. Their recognition of the profound influence of Buddhism on the social fabric of the community nurtures

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<sup>10</sup> Inthsara, Wichien, *Buddhist Ethics* (Bangkok: Thong Kwaw Printing House, 2005).

a collective commitment to ethical growth and bolsters social bonds within the community. This profound connection between the community and Buddhism plays a vital role in nurturing a collective commitment to ethical growth and fostering robust bonds within the Saiyoi subdistrict, Nernmaprang district, Phitsanulok province. It is a testament to the enduring impact of spiritual traditions on communal life, reinforcing ethical values and community unity.

## RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

This study proposes additional research to explore its recommendations as outlined below:

1. **Quantitative Assessment of Community Engagement:** Conduct a quantitative survey to measure and assess the levels of community engagement in the Saiyoi community. This can help in quantifying the impact of Buddhism on community involvement and provide statistical evidence for the observed qualitative findings.
2. **Longitudinal Study:** Consider conducting a longitudinal study to track changes in community engagement over time. This would allow for a more in-depth understanding of how the relationship between Buddhism and community engagement evolves and whether it remains sustainable in the long run.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** Compare the Saiyoi community's experience with that of other communities with different religious or cultural backgrounds. This can provide insights into how the influence of Buddhism on community engagement is unique or shared across various contexts.
4. **In-Depth Interviews with Community Members:** In addition to local leaders, conduct in-depth interviews with a broader sample of community members to gather diverse perspectives on the influence of Buddhism on community engagement. Understanding how different community members perceive this relationship can provide a more comprehensive view.

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