

THAI SPIRITUALITY

I

The Inscription

According to the most important Thai inscription of 1292, the Thai must have been devout Buddhists of the Theravada tradition, at least since they revolted successfully from the Khmer Empire of Angkor and set themselves up as an independent state at Sukhothai around 1250. Indeed it was through Theravada inspiration regarding the righteous ruler who should behave as a father to his people (*Dhammarājā*) as opposed to the authoritarian God-King (*Devarājā*) concept of Brahministic Cambodia, that the Thai were converted to this new sect.

The inscription⁽¹⁾ says:

“The people of this city of Sukhothai like to observe the precepts and bestow alms. King Rama Kamhaeng, the ruler of this city of Sukhothai, as well as the princes and princesses, the young men and women of rank, and all of the noblefolk without exception, both male and female, all have faith in the religion of the Buddha.....”

“West of this city of Sukhothai is the Forest Monastery (*Araññika*), built by King Rama Kamhaeng as a gift to the Supreme Patriarch (*Sangharāja*), the sage who has studied the Three Baskets of the Buddhist canon from beginning to end, who is wiser than any other monk in the Kingdom.....”

“East of this city.....there are temple buildings and monks.....”

South of this city.....there are monks’ lodgings (*Kuti*) with temple buildings and resident monks.....”

“King Rama Kamhaeng.....commanded his craftsman to carve a slab of stone and place it in the midst of the sugar palm trees. On the day of the new moon, the eighth day of the waxing moon, the day of the full moon and the eighth day of the waning moon, one of the monks.....goes up and sits on the stone slab to preach the Dharma to the throng of lay people who observe the precepts. When it is not the day for preaching the Dharma, King Rama Kamhaeng, lord of the Kingdom of Sri Sajjanalai and Sukhothai, goes up, sits on the stone slab, and lets the officials, lords and princes discuss affairs of state with him.....”

“King Rama Kamhaeng was sovereign over all the Thai. He was the teacher who taught all the Thai to understand merit and the Dharma rightly. Among men who live in the lands of the Thai, there is no one to equal him in knowledge and wisdom, in bravery and courage, in strength and energy.”

From the above quotation, one can see the strong Buddhist influence on the ruler and the ruled, who were near to each other socially, ethically and spiritually. The King was of course the leader, but he was also the teacher in righteousness. Spiritually, the monkhood (the Sangha) was even higher than the King. One could assume that when the monk sat on the stone slab, the sovereign would be on the floor, with his subjects, listening to the sermon, as is still the custom nowadays.

That Buddhism in Siam was of the Theravadin, Sri Lanka type monks played a major role in preaching and setting an example of ethical behaviour, rather than casting magic spells as in the case of the Mahayana monks and Brahmins of Angkor.

Secondly, the Supreme Patriarch, or the most learned monk, well versed in the Pali canon, came from Nagara Sridhamaraja, in the South of Siam, an important sea port for trade with Sri Lanka. Hence the Supreme Patriarch could have been a Sri Lankan or a Thai reordained in that country.

Thirdly, the Sinhalese custom of dividing the Sangha into Town Dwellers (*Gāṃavāsi*) and Forest Dweller (*Araññavāsi*) was replicated in Sukhothai. There were temple buildings and monks in all the four quarters of the city, but the most important was the Forest Monastery, where the spiritual head of the realm resided.

The inscription went on to say that :

“At the close of the rainy season, they presented robes to the monks (Kathina ceremonies).....Everyone goes to the Forest Monastery.....When they are ready to return to the city, they walk together, forming a line all the way from the Forest Monastery to the parade ground. They repeatedly do homage together, accompanied by music.....whoever wants to make merry, does so; whoever wants to laugh, does so ; whoever wants to sing, does so.

“.... In this city of Sukhothai has four very big gates, and as the people always crowd together to come in and watch the King lighting candles and setting off fireworks, the city is filled to the bursting point.”

As this inscription points out, for the Thais, there must always be an enjoyable part to the spiritual dimension. Hence *Sanuk* – enjoyment – is a keyword in Thai culture. In addition, however, fear and ignorance also prevailed, especially

for those who were unenlightened lay people. In the same inscription we read :

“There are mountain streams and there is Brah Krabun. The divine sprite of that mountain is more powerful than any other sprite in this Kingdom. Whatever lord may rule this Kingdom of Sukhothai, if he makes obeisance to him properly, with the right offerings, this kingdom will thrive, but if obeisance is not made properly or the offerings are not right, the sprite of the hill will no longer protect it and the Kingdom will be lost.”

It is clear, therefore, that in those days, animistic beliefs, inherited from or mingled with Khmer culture, were prevalent. The word *Brah Kurbun* is more Khmer than Thai.

Although the inscription did not mention Mahayana Buddhism and Brahminism, their influence must have been there in varying degrees. For example, the King's name was connected directly with the hero of *Ramayana*, and his chief concubine was said to be the daughter of a court Brahmin.

II

The Three Worlds

Round about 1345 in the *Sermon on the Three Worlds*⁽²⁾ written by Rama Kamhaeng's grandson, Phya Lithai, one can see a combination of Theravada and Mahayana traditions, with many Brahministic elements in between.

The Three Worlds is a royal text. In a way, it is an expression of the orthodox Theravada school—a sermon that seeks to make the spiritual dimension of Buddhism more accessible to the laity.

Although it was written by a layman, Phya Lithai was the first Thai King who became a monk temporarily during the latter part of his reign (C. 1361)—thus setting the tradition for most Thai males to follow this royal example by joining the monastic order for a short period in their life time. In the introduction to *The Three Worlds*, it is explicitly stated that the royal author composed the text in order to edify his mother concerning the Buddha's teaching, and “to advance the cause of the Dhamma”. Moreover, this purpose is clearly reflected in the fact that Phya Lithai chose to use a kind of cosmological format—not unlike the Brahministic concept—in order to include material that could be effective in communicating the profundities of the doctrine to those who possessed only a minimum of Buddhist sophistication and learning. Besides, the sermon is also the first Thai political manifesto to capture

the people's belief and imagination that to be born as a King was due to his great merit in previous lives. Hence his subjects were to be loyal to him while he exercised his royal duties righteously.

Because of the prestige of its author, its claim to orthodox authority in the Theravada tradition, and its strong popular appeal to former Mahayana and Brahministic worldviews, the Sermon had a broad social and cultural as well as a politically useful impact in his own time and in the subsequent history and life of the Thai people.

In the last phases of the Sukhothai period, that is through the third quarter of the fourteenth century, in the Ayudhaya period (from about 1357 to 1767) and in the more recent Thonburi and Bangkok periods, *The Three Worlds* has asserted a powerful influence on the religious consciousness of the Thai, on their literary and artistic development, and on their social, political and ethical attitudes—at least until the first half of the nineteenth century.

Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that *The Three Worlds* was the most important and fascinating text that had been composed in the Thai language before the present generation.

Because of the turbulence of Thai political history, the textual history of *The Three Worlds* is impossible to trace in any great detail. During the Ayudhaya period, the sermon enjoyed considerable prestige and popularity, and there is every reason to assume that a number of copies were preserved in great libraries in the old capital. However in 1767 the city was captured, sacked and burned to the ground by the Burmese. In the process the libraries and their manuscripts were decimated.

Once the Thai were able to repulse the Burmese armies and establish a new Thai Kingdom with its capital at Thonburi and then at Bangkok, attempts were made to reconstitute *The Three Worlds* tradition. Under the aegis of King Rama I (1782-1809) a version of the sermon was reconstructed on the basis of old traditions. Later the same King sponsored the compilation of a more comprehensive text. Even during the reign of the King of Thonburi (1767 - 82) new illustrated manuscripts were prepared by local artists who were supported by the court. Besides most mural temples in royal monasteries up to the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV—1851-1868) were pictorial presentations from *The Three Worlds*, especially the wall behind the main Buddha image in the sacred buildings (*Vihāra* or *Uposathāgāra*—Consecrated Assembly Hall).

Through illustrations and text, *The Three Worlds* represented a long history of visionary and cosmological literature within Thai spirituality. It presents, in an

especially vivid and concise form, the religious universe within which Thai Buddhists have traditionally lived. Moreover, Phya Lithai quite self-consciously and consistently correlates the cosmological vision he presents to his readers with the more psychologically oriented analysis of consciousness and material factors that are constitutive of Theravada doctrinal orthodoxy, and with definite Theravada conceptions of human social order and hierarchy. He incorporates into his cosmological vision a whole series of mythical and legendary accounts, including many that refer to important Buddhist deities.

Moreover, our royal author describes the various cosmic realms and beings in a form and sequence carefully designed to evoke a positive moral and religious response. On the one hand, he always keeps the Buddhist emphasis on the negative effects of human sinfulness and the positive results of man's meritorious activities very close to the center of his attention. On the other hand, he structures his sermon in such a way that the Thai readers are fully confronted with the impermanence that is believed to characterize all worldly, *Samsaric* existence, and with the ultimate Theravada ideal of life on the Noble Eightfold Path and the realization of Final release or Nirvana. He summarises the essential teachings of Buddhism in brief final chapters, while the various cosmological motifs are pervasive, including many elements of mythology difficult to accept by the more orthodox segments of the Theravada community. For instance, the main bulk of the book deals with various hellish beings and heavenly realms, and the cosmography of the earthly world, centered around Mt. Sumeru, and the various subsidiary aspects of the sacred geography. Later, through court interpreters, especially during the Ayudhaya period, the sacred cosmology was directly linked with the Thai King, his palace as well as his capital city, through numerous Brahministic rituals and Buddhist sacred places like *Viharas* and *Stupas* as if the king were the great god Siva or the Buddha - to - be (Bodhisatva).

III

Encounter with the West

For the Thais, the coming of Western power, its scientific ideas and ideologies created a situation in which the traditional cosmological orientation became problematic for many thoughtful Buddhists.

Not only the cosmological imagery and symbolism, but also the ritual and communal patterns that correlated with them, became the subject of scepticism and

were often attacked as archaic and even antithetical to the pristine teaching of the Buddha.

In the nineteenth century particularly, Prince Mongkut, (b. 1804 - 1868), before ascending the throne as Rama IV in 1851, was a monk for 26 years.⁽³⁾ He studied Buddhism critically and practised Buddhist meditation seriously. He was also exposed to various traditional folklore and beliefs, as well as being interested in western academic subjects like mathematics and astronomy. He was the first oriental monarch to have command of the English language. While a monk he had many dialogues with Christian missionaries, who tried to prove to him the superiority of Western civilization, with Christianity as the core of that civilization.

To prove to his own satisfaction the superiority of Thai spirituality and culture, Mongkut needed to go beyond Lithai's *Three Worlds*. The sermon was only a treatise based mostly on the Commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*) and Sub-commentaries (*Tikā*). Mongkut studied them as secondary sources, while giving more importance to the *Tipitaka* itself. Thus, he could separate the forest from the trees. He realized what was the essential and pure teaching of the Buddha, and what was mythological and popular Buddhism, mixed with magical beliefs and Brahministic rites. This led him to reform the Sangha with the foundation of the new Dhammayutika Order, which claims to be in strict adherence to the Dhamma (Teaching) and Vinaya (Disciplines) laid down by the Buddha and the practice as carried on through the unbroken lineage of the Elders, since time immemorial.

Through his meditation on mindfulness, his austere practices (*Dhutāṅga*) as prescribed in the Pali Canon, and his journeys to many parts of the kingdom mixing with his people in various walks of life, collecting alms from them and giving them spiritual advice, he gained much experience and insight not available to the nobility and princely families.

In 1833, on his travels to Sukhothai, in the north by boat and on foot, Mongkut discovered Rama Kamhaeng's stone inscription of 1292 together with the stone slab, on which the King and the monks of those days used to sit in turn, to awaken the people to the path of righteousness. The significance of both stones had been lost, perhaps since the 1420's when Sukhothai had ceased to be the capital city. The local inhabitants regarded them as sacred shrines with magical powers!⁽⁴⁾

Mongkut had both stones brought to Bangkok, despite local warnings that he would be cursed by the spirits enshrined in the two objects of worship.

Mongkut then deciphered the inscription and gave a copy with the English

equivalents of certain words in his own hands to Sir John Bowring when the latter represented Queen Victoria as Envoy Extraordinary and concluded the first successful treaty with the Kingdom of Siam in 1855. The King obviously regarded the inscription as a *Magna Carta* of the Thai nation. He followed many examples set out by Rama Kamhaeng in the Thirteenth century. On Mongkut's own coronation in 1851, he used the stone slab as the throne, and declared himself to reign righteously, as all succeeding Thai Kings have now followed this royal precedence.

For Mongkut, to be a Thai Buddhist and survive Western imperialism, was (1) to go back to the original teaching of the Buddha, beyond *The Three Worlds*, and (2) to reinterpret Rama Kamhaeng's message in the light of Theravada Buddhism, depicting the King as a just and moral ruler (*Dhammarāja*) not a divine king (*Devarāja*) which Ayudhayan monarchs had inherited from the Brahministic Khmers after Thai conquests of Angkor around 1367 and in 1432. Mongkut said the Thai King had the right to rule as long as he was righteous, and if the people did not want him on the throne they had the right to remove him. Indeed, he himself succeeded his half brother, Rama III, by the "popular assent" of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal of the realm, rather than by being appointed by the late

Regarding foreign powers, Mongkut believed the Thais must be able to blend with the winds of change and to compromise, in order to save their independence and traditional way of life. Thus, the essence of Buddhist spiritual heritage would be preserved while they should also learn Western sciences and technologies as their ancestors had done with knowledge gained from India and China. Whenever the Thai regarded "inferior" knowledge as more superior to the lofty teaching of the Buddha, it would be to their peril. Indeed, this was proved convincingly to them at the destruction of Ayudhaya in 1767.

As *Brah Krabun* had been the main sprite of the city state of Sukhothai, Mongkut created *Brah Sayamdevādhirāja* as the national deity of the kingdom of Siam. Although he reformed the Holy Orders and used much rationality to interpret Theravada Buddhism, he also inherited Li Thai's *Three Worlds*, as a state ideology which his grandson, Rama VI (r. 1910 - 1925), mixed with the British concept of God, King and Country and made it the spirit of nationalism, in the name of three sacred institutions: the nation, the religion and the monarchy. This tradition still prevails today.

IV

The impact of Mongkut

When Mongkut left the monkhood to become Rama IV in 1851, the new Dhammayutika Order prospered with royal patronage. This led to the reform of the majority of the Sangha, the Mahānikāya. Monks of both sects who were scholars, meditation masters, and contributed meaningfully to the welfare of the society, received royal encouragement. Bad monks were defrocked.

The Theravada tradition inherited from Sri Lanka through Sukhothai of dividing the monkhood into two categories was maintained. (1) Town Dwellers (*Gāmvāsī*) concentrated on *Ganthadhura* — the task of learning the scriptures. (2) Forest Dwellers (*Araññavāsī*), concentrated on *Vipassanādhura* — the task of meditation practice.

The former task was later developed especially by two of Mongkut's sons. Prince Patriarch Vajirañāṇavarorasa (1892 - 1921) introduced Dhamma studies nationwide for monks of both sects, as well as for lay men and women. They did not need to master the Pali language, but should have enough knowledge to understand the essential teaching of Buddhism in the Thai language to be able to survive spiritually, socially and culturally as proud Buddhists in the modern world. The Prince Patriarch also reorganized Pali teachings for monks and introduced written, regular examinations in Western fashion, instead of the old oral examinations which were held irregularly.

King Chulalongkorn, Rama V (r. 1868 - 1910) established two institutes of higher education for monks, one for each sect. The reformed sect institute was named after his father, while the other was named after himself. Both later became Universities for the Sangha, which introduced Western academic subjects like social sciences and the humanities, although law and western medicine are still not allowed.

For dealing with the younger generation and for addressing foreign missionaries, one of Mongkut's followers, who became his Foreign Minister and later well known as a historian, Chao Phya Dipakaravamsa (1812 - 1870), wrote a book in Thai (*Kijjanukit*). This was the first modern account against *The Three Worlds*. It claimed to be authentically Buddhist, and a more scientific view than that prescribed in the Bible. *Kijjanukit* was translated by the then British Consul in Bangkok as "The Modern Buddhist".

In his Preface, the translator had this to say :⁽⁵⁾

“The *Modern Buddhist* assumes religion to be the science of man, and not the revelation of God. He does not think that the comprehension of the Deity, or the firm persuasion of the exact nature of heaven, is of so much consequence as that just idea of one’s own self which he believes he finds in Buddhism purged of superstitions.

“He is a deeply religious man, but his ideas of religion differ so much from English ideas, that it is difficult to state them without giving offence.

“Strange to us are his teachings on the subjects of God and eternity ; yet throughout his work there is a spiritual tone which shows, that with him, as with us, religion is the link which connects man with the Infinite, and is that which gives a law of conduct depending on a basis more extensive than the mere immediate present.....

“True it is the “Modern Buddhist” does not go so far as to assert this, but declares that Buddha, the wise one, has already taught the nature of a virtuous life. Nevertheless he does not attempt to set up the wisdom of Buddha as a bar to further progress in the way of wisdom. He has a firm faith that whatever truths science may reveal, none will be found opposed to the vital points of Buddhism. He freely criticises his sacred books by such small lights of science as he possessed. He states his opinion that Buddha, although he knew everything, was careful not to teach that which the people of his age were not ripe to understand, and therefore refrained from many topics he might have referred to, had he lived in a more advanced age.....

“The missionaries again and again feel hopeful that the day of conversion is at hand, yet are ever doomed to disappointment. I cannot but think that the money and energy expended on their work is in great measure lost, and that the labour of many of them would be better employed in their own country. It is a pity to see good men, who might be of use in their own country, doomed to a life of disappointment in an unhealthy and enervating climate. It is a pity to see good Buddhists turned into bad Christians ; and I am afraid that the Protestant missionaries could not produce one good Siamese Christian for each ten thousand pounds that has been devoted to their work. They may have a few sincere and intelligent Chinese and Burmese converts, but Siamese converts, if any, are very rare.

“I hope this will not be misunderstood to be an attack on the missionary body. They have not succeeded as missionaries, but they have done, and still do, much good in the country as physicians, teachers, and pioneers.....”

Although in 1851 Mongkut left the celibacy of the monkhood to embrace the polygamous life of an oriental monarch, he practised mindfulness all through his life. He tried to be as just and kind to his subjects as he could. On his deathbed, he reminded himself and members of the monkhood :

Although suffering in my body,
My mind does not suffer.
Thus do I train myself
Practising the Buddha's Teaching.⁽³⁾

In the Sangha he set up a strong *Araññavāsī* tradition, concentrating on the task of deep meditation practice. The Dhammayutika Order of the Northeast, in particular, carries on this spiritual heritage until today, especially through charismatic meditation masters like the Venerable Phra Acariya Mun (1871 - 1949). His biography by his direct disciple, Ven. Phra Acariya Mahā Boowa, has already been translated into English.⁽⁶⁾ The author of this book is still alive and is regarded as the doyen of the living masters. Although Ven. Phra Acariya Cha, another living master, does not belong to the Reformed Sect, he was a close disciple of the late Ven. Phra Acariya Mun and has spread his lifestyle, his method of meditation practice and his strict adherence to the Buddha's Disciplines to the majority of monks in the Mahānikāya Order. Not only Thai but foreign monks have also been attracted by the Ven. Phra Acariya Cha's teaching. They have carried his message and set up monastic orders in the U.K., U.S.A., Sri Lanka, New Zealand and Australia.

V

Other living traditions

Apart from the above lineage of meditation masters, there are a number of other practices which claim to be older than the reform of King Mongkut, but they tend to be mixed with superstitions and supernatural beliefs which are not denied by Theravada Buddhism. In other words the spirit of *The Three Worlds* still mingles on.

In the north, for example, there was Kru Ba Srivijaya (1873 - 1937) who refused to acknowledge the spiritual and temporal authorities of Bangkok. He was regarded as a holy man, with deep spiritual insight, who led the multitudes to rebuild many important Buddhist monuments which were then in ruins. Under his leadership the people built a road up Doi Suthep mountain to the most holy Buddhist shrine in Chiangmai without government assistance. He ordained monks ignoring the requirements laid down by the first Ecclesiastical Act of 1902. Later,

however, the central government made a compromise with him.

There are still a few meditation masters who claim to be direct disciples of the Kru Ba. They are all known as healers of the sick through the use of traditional herbs, or as religious psychiatrists using holy water or various spiritual mediums to help their patients. They were also known as astrologers, but none have been restorers of important national monuments, nor are any of them known as social reformers or scholars. None of these monks has again rebelled against the government. In fact, the royal court, the military and civilians, as well as business community regard meditation masters, of all schools and lineages, as their great supporters – spiritually, socially, politically and economically.⁽⁷⁾

The only sect which has openly rebelled against the present established Sangha and criticized the practices and teachings of all the leading Elders calls itself Santiasoka, with its headquarters in Bangkok. The founder, Phra Bodhiraksha (b. 1934) was ordained in both the Dhammayutika and Mahānikāya orders, but was dissatisfied with both of them. His new sect dated from 1975 when he gave ordination disregarding the Ecclesiastical Law of 1962. He has also attracted some lay followers by being puritanical and fundamental, refusing to take meat (which is not normally the case in Theravada tradition), soft drinks, tea or coffee and not taking part in all kinds of ceremonies. He also claims to be enlightened spiritually—combining scholarship with meditation, stressing social reform rather than upholding the *status quo*. Yet, he lacks deep insight into Buddhist studies. He has not mastered the Pali language nor the social realities of Thai society. One wonders whether Santiasoka will really become a movement of any significance in the future, despite the fact that it has attracted support from some important people. This has led the Government and the Supreme Council of the Sangha to ignore its challenge rather than to challenge it legally.

Another movement, contemporary to Santiasoka, bases its authority on the Ven. Luang Poh Sod (1884 - 1959), abbot of a small temple in Thonburi, who claimed to have rediscovered a Dhammakāya lost to the Sangha for hundreds of years, presumably since the Thai were converted to Sinhala Buddhism. This meditation technique, akin to some Vajrayāna or Tibetan practices, has become popular especially among Japanese Buddhists of Shingon sect, who came to practise at his temple. In 1957, the first batch of British monks were also ordained by him. One is still in the northeast where he has been reordained in the Dhammayutika order and is a close disciple of the Ven. Acariya Maha Boowa.

Of Luang Poh Sod's Thai followers, the most well known or notorious is Kittivuddho Bhikkhu, (b. 1936) who once said that to kill a communist is to preserve the nation, the religion and the monarchy and is not sinful. He works closely with the military and embraces the materiality of the modern world. Many Buddhists doubt whether peace and nonviolence are still of importance any more to this monk and his admirers.

The Dhammakāya School was formally established in 1970. It has attracted a number of young Thai with university education who have been ordained in the traditional Mahānikaya order, but stresses this special techniques of meditation. Hitherto Thai laymen were usually ordained only temporarily. Only poor peasants remained monks for a long period. The Dhammakāya School stresses lifelong ordination.

This new school claims to represent the only authentic teaching of the Buddha not revealed in the Scriptures, although it has not attacked the established Orders of the Sangha. It also works closely with the capitalist elements in the Thai society, and is closely linked with the royal palaces and the military. Buddhist clubs in most universities are now dominated by lay followers of this Dhammakāya school. It hopes to convert the whole Thai population and the world through its missionary zeal which sounds both unThai and unBuddhistic. None of their leading monks are critical scholars of any attainment, nor have they any message for social reform. They have, however, designed a new religious architecture and ceremonies based on older tradition, and have sent one monk to study Pali and Sanskrit at an English university.

VI

Buddhadasa and the future

During the Sukhothai period, we had Rama Kamhaeng and his grandson, Li Thai, as the major figures defining the philosophical and theological concepts of Thai spirituality. During the Bangkok period up to the end of the Absolute Regime in 1932, King Mongkut and his son, Prince Patriarch Vajirañānavarorasa, dominated Thai spirituality in like manner. These members of the Thai upper class focused on the inner dimension of Thai life, helping their people to use Buddhism as a guide to confront social realities meaningfully. Not only through their writings and lifestyles, but also in education, the arts, national ideology, cultural influence, spiritual direction through court ceremonies, temple rituals, and royal edicts, they preserved Thai identity with the Buddhist tradition and Siamese kingship at its core. Although popular Buddhism was mixed with animistic and Brahministic beliefs, it was

nevertheless Theravada, with the Pali canon, plus its commentaries and sub commentaries as the final authority. The king was the Lord of life and death, a *Dhammarājā* the supreme upholder of moral conduct and the welfare of his people. He was above the law of the land, the top of the hierarchical order of worldly existence, but he, too, had to follow the righteous law of nature as discovered by the Buddha.

In 1932, that established social and political order was challenged and broken down by the Western ideology of liberal democracy - liberty equality and fraternity. Although the new elites were mostly educated in Europe, they were rooted in Thai tradition. Hence constitutional monarchy, not republicanism, replaced the old regime.

It was fortunate also that in the same year a young Thai monk was dissatisfied with the division of the Sangha into meditational (*Vipassanā - dhura*) and textual learning (*Gantha - dhura*). He left Bangkok and returned to his native village in the South, at Chaiya, and founded Suan Mokha, the Garden of Liberation. This monk, the Ven. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (b. 1906) had the vision and scholarship of Mongkut, but he went far beyond the great king. Being a commoner who remained a practising monk, gave him more advantage spiritually. Not being interested in ceremonial detail and going beyond the literal message of the Pali Canon, he was able to grasp the essential teaching of the Buddha. He has not been concerned with founding a new sect or criticizing the established hierarchies. Indeed, Buddhadasa is the first Thai monk, who understood the Pali Tipiṭaka critically, and gave serious consideration to the Mahāyāna tradition as not inferior to the Theravada school. In addition, he has studied Christianity and Islam in the spirit of dialogue without any feeling of superiority or inferiority. He is much admired by Thai Christians and Muslims alike. However, some Thai and Sinhala Buddhists who regard the Pali texts, especially the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and Buddhaghosa's commentaries, as sacred, have attacked Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. Some have even called him a heretic! His comments on social reform and Dhammic socialism have also made him known among certain circles as a communist. Yet, his influence in the monkhood is tremendous. Both scholars and meditation masters look up to him as a very important *guru*, although he only claims to be a Good Friend (*kalyāṇamitta*). He has also inspired many among the young intellectuals in the lay community, who find his teaching scientific and convincing to deep spiritual insight enabling them to restructure their personal lives in order to reconstitute a just and peaceful society.

Buddhadasa's contribution to our understanding of spiritual language is very

important. In reading religious texts, like *The Three Worlds* or the sacred writings of any great tradition, one must be able to distinguish between Dhammic or Truth language and worldly language. In this way one can go beyond that which would normally be regarded as myths, superstition, miracles or supernatural powers and deities. One should not merely accept these concepts or reject them outright. One should use one's wisdom to interpret them for one's spiritual growth, enlightenment and liberation.

An American scholar has this to say about him:

"Buddhadasa's vision of the good and just society coincides with his view of an original state of nature or an original human condition, one of mutual interdependence, harmony and balance. By its very nature this state of nature is selfless—individuals are not attached to self for its own sake. But with the loss of this state of innocence individuals are subject to the bondage of attachment (*upādāna*) and unquenchable thirst (*taṇhā*). Consequently, sentient beings need to find ways to return or restore this condition of mutual interdependence and harmony, love and respect. On the personal level the attainment or wisdom (*bodhi*) through the methods of awareness (*sati*), continuous attention (*Sampajañña*) and focussed concentration (*samādhi*) serve to break through the conditions of greed, ignorance and lust (*kilesa*); while on the social level those in positions of power promote economic and political policies which after meeting basic physical needs promote a balanced development in which matters of spirit (*citta*) assume their rightful dominance.

"Buddhadasa's notion of a truly human community is a universal vision shared by all religions. This socialist society is one governed by love (*mettā*). In the language of Buddhist millenarian expectations, it is the age of the Buddha Maitreya. But Buddhadasa's teachings regarding Buddhist Socialism cannot be consigned to an otherworldly messianism. His vision serves as a critique of Western political theories of capitalism and communism, and provides the basic principles for a political philosophy with the potential to guide not only Thailand in the coming years, but all societies struggling to create a just and equitable social, political and economic order." (8)

The quantity and quality of Buddhadasa's written work have excelled all living Theravada scholars. He has even been compared with Buddhaghosa of Sri Lanka and with Nagarjuna of India. It is premature to say whether such a comparison is valid, but his work has been studied critically by Thai and foreigners as expressing the crown of contemporary Thai spirituality and beyond.

Notes

- (1) See "Epigraphic and Historical Studies no. 9" by A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Bangkok, July 1971 (Vol. 59 part 2) pp. 179-228
- (2) See *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Buddhist Cosmology*, Translation with introduction and Notes by Frank E. Reynolds & Mari B. Reynolds, Asian Humanities Press, Berkeley, California 1982.
- (3) See, *His Majesty King Rama IV Mongkut*, published by Mahamakutarajavidyalaya, Bangkok 1968.
- (4) Some scholars have now accused that King Mongkut had faked the inscription and the stone slab!
- (5) See *The Wheel of the Law or Buddhism illustrated from Siamese Sources* by Henry Alabaster, (Trubner) London 1871. The author later joined royal Thai Government and established his family in Bangkok. His grandson, Sitthi Sawetasila, has become Thai Foreign Minister.
- (6) There are two English versions to this biography, one translated by Ruth Inge Heinze was published in the Asian Folklore & Social Life Monograph Series, Teipe; another by Siri Buddhasukh (Bangkok, Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya Press 1976).
- (7) See *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* by S.J. Tambiah, Cambridge University Press 1984.
- (8) See Buddhadasa's *Dhammic Socialism* edited by D.K. Swearer (Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development), Bangkok 1986.

Recommended reading:

Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World by Phra Rajavaramuni (P. Payutto) Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya, Bangkok 1985.

Monuments of the Buddha in Siam by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (translated by S. Sivaraksa and A.B. Griswold) The Siam Society, Bangkok 1973.

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Popular Buddhism in Siam and other Essays by Phya Anuman Rajadhon
(Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation) Bangkok 1986

Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society by S. Sivaraksa (Thienwan Press)
Bangkok 1986.

Siamese Resurgence by S. Sivaraksa (ACFOD) Bangkok 1985.