

# The Dynamics of Tradition and Change in Theravada Buddhism

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## Abstract

Theravada Buddhism, also known as Hinayana tradition, has been considered to be the core of Thai national identity, since the establishment of the Kingdom of Sukhodhaya in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Though the present constitution does not make it compulsory for every Thai to follow the Buddhist beliefs and practices, it requires every king, to be a Buddhist. For the majority of the Thai population, one cannot be a true Thai, without being a Buddhist. Since early times, the Thai *sangha*, the order of Buddhist monks, has been integrated into the state structure to provide legitimating for the monarch and/or political rulers. The institution of nation, sangha and kingship are considered as the basic triad of social solidarity and identity. They have been so intermingled in the course of history and are so deeply meaningful to the hearts of the people as to form the core of what may be called the civic Thai culture.<sup>1</sup>

## Philosophical aspects of Theravada Buddhism

The teaching of Theravada Buddhism center primarily on human existence consisting of life, suffering, death and the way out of it. The Buddhists' views on life, suffering and death are closely intermingled with the Buddhist laws of causality and mutation. These two laws are understood as natural laws universally operative in all physical and mental phenomenon. The law of cause and effect is thus expressed: "when this exists, that exists; when this arises, that arises; when this is not, that is not; when this ceases, that ceases."<sup>2</sup> This is interpreted to mean, all that is, is the results of antecedent courses. Each "event" or "happening" acts as the cause or the necessary condition for the arising of the following event, which then provokes or causes another event. Thus, as used in Buddhism, the relationship between cause and effect is only that of the earlier to the later phase of a single process. Therefore, in the context of this natural law, life consists of many psycho-physical factors.<sup>3</sup> It is a fabric of causes and effects: arising, existing and continuing by the concatenation of these factors mutually conditioning one another. This process is specifically referred to as the *kamma* process. We are both deeds and consequences of deeds. *Kamma* (or *karma* in Sanskrit) means volitional activity whether it is mental, verbal or physical. The concept is used to emphasize that life

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<sup>1</sup>See also Frank E. Reynolds, "Civic Religion and National community in Thailand", *Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. xxxvi No.2, 1977, pp. 267-82.

<sup>2</sup>*The Book of the Kindred Sayings*. Vol.II, trans. Rays Davids (London: Luzac and Co., Ltd., 1952), p.23.

<sup>3</sup>These factors are ignorance (*avijja*), volitions or kamma formations (*sanskaras*), consciousness (*vināna*), the six faculties-the five senses plus mind-(*ayatana*)-, contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedana*), craving (*tanha*), clinging (*upadana*), becoming (*bhava*), again-becoming (*jati*), decay (*jara*), disease (*phayadhi*), death (*morana*), grief (*domanassa*), lamentation (*parideva*), suffering (*dukkha*).

consists of interwoven activities of causes and effects, deeds and consequences of deeds. In this sense, the preceding cause transmits its potential force to and is received by the following effect. Life is made possible because each of these factors is both conditioning and conditioned with no beginning and no ending point; the process is an endless cycle. Death is considered an integral part of existence and is one phrase of this endless cycle and in no sense is death seen as terminating the cycle. This conditioned existence is called in the Buddhist texts *samsara* and represented in the Buddhist art by the Wheel of Life (*bhavacakra*).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this cause-and-effect nature of life, there is also an emphasis placed on its impermanence (*anicca*) and insubstantiality (*anatta*) through another law of mutation also referred to as the law of change. This law is expressed in the following formula: “all compound things are impermanent.”<sup>5</sup> By definition, a compound object cannot be static or stable. Thus everything physical or mental is by nature transitory and in a constant stage of change. Whatever rises must fall. This state of change must thereby result in decline and decay. In this sense existence is an unending cycle of growth and decay, integration and disintegration. That change is the very essence of existence that which is implied by the law of mutation and this is applied to the life process. In this process, the apparent unity of existence is divided into five aggregates, known as the *khandhas*. These five aggregates are material form (*rupa*), feeling (*vedana*), perception (*sañña*), disposition (*sankhara*) and consciousness (*vinñana*) and include three traits: arising, remaining and passing away.<sup>6</sup> Due to its ephemeral nature, life is like a dream, quite brief and fleeting. However, Buddhism encourages us to work with this fleeting nature of life. In fact Buddhism teaches that life, however brief, should be lived fruitfully, so that there are no regrets. By emphasizing that the present moment is of paramount importance, Buddhism defines this moment as both cause and effect. As an effect, the present is the product of the past, and as a cause, it is the building block of the future. It is the only moment of life that one could free oneself from the effects of the past, and at the same time, can project oneself into the future.

Along with the frailty and insecurity of life, it is believed that at the center of existence there is a void. This void is the result of the insubstantial nature of life. The aggregates, although forming recognizable and perceivable object, do not produce a substance: all of them are insubstantial, a part of the endless movement of life. Even consciousness, considered the most important of the five aggregates, is in state of constant flux. It has no stable quality and thus cannot remain constant for even a single second. In the thinking process as thoughts enter and exit, there is no substantial ego. The

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<sup>4</sup>The term *samsara* refers to the round of life and death in which the whole range of sentient beings, from the tiniest insect to man, is believed to exist. Only the human being, however, has the potential to terminate this endless cycle. For discussion of the Wheel of Life, see **The three Jewels** by Sangharakshita (London : Ryder & Company. 1967), pp.68-82.

<sup>5</sup>**Buddhism in Translations** (N.Y.: Atheneum, 1968), p.150.

<sup>6</sup>These five aggregates are sometimes given in a three-fold scheme: (i) physical (*rupa*): (ii) sense-perception and reaction (*vedana, sañña and sankhara*): (iii) consciousness (*vinñana*). In this case the three groups are called *rupa, cetasika* (conditioning factors of consciousness) and *citta* (state of consciousness). The five aggregates are also arranged in two groups: (i) *rupa* and (ii) *nama* (the other four aggregates)

apparent sameness seen in life is actually the continuity of preceding causes and subsequent effects. An analogy would be a process of filming in which projections are made of a series of running movement by many people to give the appearance of the action of one running person. The unity arises from continuity. It is the spectator who perceives this series as a single person. In the same way, there is no identity in the process of change. What exists is the rapid change and unbroken line of causes and effects. This gives rise to the concept of a substantial. Self in the same way that one ray of light is produced by a succession of flames.

Despite this plain fact of experience, people still believe in ego-consciousness, clinging to the fallacy that there is a permanent, abiding substance or Soul in and behind consciousness. Life for them is therefore a reality and an illusion. The five aggregates are real, but the enduring ego is illusion. The term “self” is a name for the linkage of all five aggregates, just as the term “human being” refers to an aggregate of body and mind. For Buddhism, this term “self” is the societal invention for the purpose of communication. Therefore, the “self” is an idea, not real. Devoid of a substantial ego, life is like a bubble with the center being a void. This non-egocentric view of life is a belief and an explanation of human existence unique to Buddhism. It encourages us to look at life objectively and to refrain from viewing it in terms of self-centeredness. By negating the self in life, Buddhism tries to eliminate the vanity, caused by self-absorption.

It may be concluded then that in Buddhist perspective life is characterized by three important traits: conditionality (cause and effect), impermanence, and insubstantiality. There is one additional trait which must be mentioned. That is suffering (*dukkha*)<sup>7</sup>. Suffering is used in Buddhism in a broader concept to include not only pain, grief, misery or unsatisfaction, which would normally be seen by most people as suffering, as opposed to happiness, but also to refer a unique phenomenon of the universe. In general, there are impermanence and imperfection of life which both cause suffering. Some elements of suffering such as grief, pain misery are inherent in the experience of living and cannot be avoided. Should a person be fortunate enough to avoid most forms of suffering there is a question that death as the final form of suffering is inevitable. And one’s own death or the death of one whom is deeply loved causes suffering. Due to this reality of death, Buddhism concludes that human existence is insecure, fragile and filled with suffering.

The very transitory nature of life is a cause of suffering because even happiness is seen to be temporary. While experiencing happiness which by definition is the absence

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<sup>7</sup>Suffering constitutes an essential part of Buddhism. All its teaching is primarily focused on this unpleasant fact of experience. “This I do teach,” declared the Buddha, “suffering and the cessation of suffering” (**The Book of the Kindred Sayings**, Vol.III, trans. F.L. Woodward. London: Luzac and Col, Ltd. 1954, p.157). This preoccupation with suffering has made many outside observers frequently regard Buddhism as a pessimistic religion. Such misunderstanding arises from their looking at suffering apart from the context of the Four Noble Truths (i.e. the fact of suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the Eight-fold Noble Path which leads to the cessation of suffering). The Buddhist approach to suffering emphasizes a sense of realism and certainly discourages any attempt to brood over suffering and be agonized by it. It would be more appropriate to describe Buddhism not as “pessimistic” but as “realistic” for it begins with the fact of our daily experience. However, the Buddha’s teaching went far beyond this simple observation of the facts of life. The Buddha penetrated the causes of suffering and showed the way to end it.

of pain one has expectations of the continuation of the state of joy. But these expectations can never be met.

Certainly, this is no rosy-spectacled view of life. Yet Buddhism does not absurdly deny the presence of happiness (*sukkhā*) in human existence. In the Buddhist texts, one finds a list of various kinds of pleasures including sensual pleasure and the joy of family life that one is able to enjoy comparable to the list of the common experience of suffering.<sup>8</sup> However, Buddhism does not want us to accept happiness uncritically. Subject to the law of mutation our feelings and attitudes are liable to change. Similarly, these objects of pleasures (such as a new motor-car, a glass of beer, a girl friend) cannot last long for they contain within themselves the potential for change and decay. Having undergone through those stages, they tend not to give us happiness in their new forms. One should always remember that life contains a number of undeniable unpleasant experiences, which nobody could ever pretend are enjoyable, such as old age, disease, death, being separated from what we like and associated with what we dislike. All these make up the painful side of existence which humanity tends to ignore.

Buddhism accepts the fact that like happiness suffering is subject to change. But at the same time Buddhism points out that there is no balance of happiness and suffering. The painful side of experience usually outweighs happiness. However, pessimistic as it may seem, Buddhism tries to address the reality of suffering, without any pretense or deception, so as to focus on this painful side of life. At the same time, it tries to probe beneath the fact of suffering in search of its causes and a way to end its suffering. The Buddha's insight in its concentrated form, is found in the Four Noble Truths (*ariyasacca*). They are the truth of suffering (*dukkha*), the cause of suffering (*samudhaya*), the method to end suffering (*nirodh*), and the Noble Eight-fold Path (*magga*) that leads to the cessation of suffering.

In order to cease suffering, one should not project suffering on to others. Nor should one become a masochist or a martyr and enjoy suffering. Nor should one find attachment or substitute whether there is in the world of art or other pleasure-giving areas like sex, drug and liquor. Substitutes are to be avoided because they feed ego-gratification (*tanha*). In Buddhist thought fulfilling ego's desires is itself a cause of suffering. The nature of ego-desire is such that it is unsatisfiable. The flame of this desire usually sprouts out again as soon as it is put out.

As mentioned earlier, lacking a permanent ego at the center of our being and transitory in our nature, we long to find and to cling to something substantial in the ceaseless flow of change. We therefore project reality into an illusory ego for the purpose of gratification. Possession is used as a means of ego-gratification to fill this void. The use of people as objects to be manipulated for our needs is another way in which we attempt to solidify ourselves. But it is like building a house on sand. There is nothing substantial there. The grains fall apart and dissolve, and the house crumbles into dust. We still feel inadequate or unsatisfied, no matter what we get, because our ego-desires (*tanha*) are by nature insatiable.

It is seen in Buddhism that much of the miseries in life is caused by self-centeredness and the constant desire to satisfy one's own needs. These ego-desires are the

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<sup>8</sup>Lama Angarika Govinda, **The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy**. (London: Ryder & Co., 1966). p.63.

original root of all evil including greed, lust, hatred, lying, deceit, and crime. It is the delusion of the permanence of the ego that begets all forms of these ego-desires. Because ego-desires are the cause of most human suffering, it is the elimination of the ego that is necessary to end our unhappiness. And because the ego has no reality of its own it is possible for us to abolish it through our efforts. This is not seen as an easy process.

Buddhism discourages ego-focus because it wants us to realize our non-personal potentialities. Besides, self-concentration does not allow the pursuit of truth and righteousness. The value of life does not depend on quantity but quality. Any life lived solely for the self is a life not worth living as there is no room for the highest goal of attaining *nibbana*, the liberation from the endless life cycle, *samsara* existence. It is this ultimate goal that makes life worth living. Thus to be absorbed and engrossed in the temporal and impermanent part of life matters little.

Since life is so worthwhile, the first precept in Buddhism prohibits the taking of life. Within this precept all killing for whatever reason is not allowed. But there is room for taking life for just cause. A story in the Jataka tales concerns the *bodhisatta*, the future Buddha, killing a bandit in order to save five hundred merchants.<sup>9</sup> The exception also includes self-defense and suicide in some circumstances. Self-defense is acceptable only when all alternatives have been exhausted. The precept upholds the sanctity of life of all human beings regardless of the conditions of their lives. As a rule suicide is prohibited. If one destroys his life in such a way, the great object of one's existence is lost. It is difficult to be born as a human being. In Buddhism, only human beings can liberate themselves from *samsara* existence. Thus even when one is suffering from a painful and incurable disease, or when one's life is unsatisfactory, one should bear quietly and patiently while simultaneously tries to rid oneself of the pain and suffering in all possible ways. Suicide in this circumstance is not allowed. Yet in some cases, according to Buddhist scriptures, taking one's own life is sometimes allowed for noble ends. The giving of one's own life to save the lives of the others as a bodhisatta gave himself to a hungry lioness to save herself from eating her own cubs is one example of this exception.<sup>10</sup> Another example is the committing of suicide to escape incurable illness that is an obstacle to attain Nibbana. Aside from these rare cases, killing cannot be justified. Killing of enemies and terrorists and even mercy killing (euthanasia) are not morally acceptable. To the growing debate on the justification of killing Buddhism reminds that as society grows more complex, and as methods of causing death increase day by day life taking is becoming as easy as the means and thus strict observation of the first precept is necessary. Though there may be some grey areas where ethical questions are not

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<sup>9</sup>Bodhisattava is a term that refers to the one who is a Buddha-to-be. It is believed that prior to becoming a Buddha, Gotama the Buddha was bodhisattava in 550 previous lives practicing all kinds of perfection (e.g. Perfection of Wisdom, Perfection of Compassion, Perfection of Vigor). The stories of the Buddha's previous lives are collected in Jatakas Stories.

<sup>10</sup>From a story in the Jatakas Stories, this event has been used by Mahayana Buddhism to justify suicide. The Buddha was said to give approval to suicide of a monk named Godhika who, after attaining the state of spiritual release through meditation six times in succession and then falling away from it, committed suicide the seventh time he attained it, in order not to fall way from it again (**Semuvutta-Nikaya I**, p.120). On 11 June 1963, a Vietnamese monk, Thic Quang-Duc, burned himself to death to oppose the Diem regime. Whether his suicide was morally justified or not has been an open question since his death.

satisfactorily answered, it is worth to remember during such talk of justified killing that real human lives, not labels, not statistics, are at stake. Killing is killing whether it is done for mercy or not. It is better to call a spade. If we kill someone, we must be frank to, admit it and regard it as something unwholesome.

The precept against the taking of life is not limited to human life but includes animal's life as well as irrespective of size. Animal's life is valued because animals share with human beings many of the same quality of suffering, pain, pleasure and conception. Other living beings which do not share human quality such as plants are not included in the precept. Buddhists are urged to have compassion and to consider it as their duty to care for the well-being of all animals and at the same time are against the killing of animals as a sport or for luxury or for ritual sacrifice. Those who develop the habit of being cruel to animals are quite capable of ill treating people as well when the opportunity occurs. When a cruel though gradually develops into an obsession, it may well lead to sadism.

In fact, there is no rule or injunction in the teaching of Buddhism that a Buddhist should live wholly or even principally on vegetables. Whether or not meat is eaten is purely an individual concern, but those who consume fertilized eggs, however, break the first precept. The most noteworthy result of the strict observance of the precept is the spirit of tolerance or characteristic of Buddhism. It is the religion which has never sought to extend itself by the sword or by might. The Buddhist hold his religion to be the truth, but he lets others hold their belief also. The twelfth edict of King Asoka reveals to us this Buddhist spirit of tolerance.

Another question may be also raised about the first precept. At present, it seems that man cannot live in health and comfort without taking life in one way or another. Apart from killing animals for food, we have to kill vermin and pests, so that we can raise crops for food. In cases of certain illnesses, we have to use antibiotics to kill the organisms that cause the disease. This problem can be addressed by putting it in a more general context of Buddhist ethics. In this ethics, there is a scale of values accorded to the moral culpability involved in the taking of life. The kammic results of killing human beings and animals vary in proportion to their physical and mental development. Patricide, matricide and the killing of innocent people and people of considerable mental development (e.g. holy men) are therefore particularly productive of evil results to the killer. In the case of the doctor who treats the patient with antibiotics or other bacteria-destroying drugs, his sole purpose is to cure the patient-to alleviate suffering as much as he can. Although the treatment results in the death of the bacteria, it is not done primarily with that intention with the repugnance that usually accompanies all acts of killing, but rather for the welfare of a higher organism such as man. Buddhist ethics is an ethics of intention in which the criterion of right and wrong is based on the intention (*cetana*) of the doer. All actions that are rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, that spring from selfishness and therefore foster the harmful delusion of selfhood, which are unwholesome (*akusala*). Conversely, all actions that are based on disinterestedness and wisdom (*vijja*) are wholesome (*kusala*). Considered from this standpoint, the doctor's act should not be culpable.

Concerning death, as mentioned earlier, Buddhism views death as an essential part of the human predicament. It is one of the conditioned and conditioning factors of the

cycle of causes and effects (*samsara*) in which human beings exist. It is also shown that death is one of the central causes contributing to the suffering of human existence.

Buddhism defines death in terms of the concepts of impermanence (*anicca*) and insubstantiality (*anatta*). The standard definition of death in Buddhist texts describes death as “the falling away, the passing away, the separation, the disappearance, the mortality or dying, the action of time, the breaking up of the aggregates, the laying down of the body.”<sup>11</sup>In this definition death is seen as the dissolution of the five aggregates, the factors constituting the individual. As the manifestation of the impermanence of life, death is not a one-time event but occurs at every moment of life. Since the aggregates are in a state of constant flux, birth (seen as arising) and death (seen as passing away) are always present in juxtaposition to each other. These momentary life and death are one phase of the cycle. From another perspective death is nothing but the arising of the new state in place of the preceding one. This may be explained by means of a house-gate analogy. To one who is outside the house, the gate is an entrance, whereas to the one inside the house, the same gate is an exit. But the state in the cause-and-effect process is called birth, whereas its following state is viewed as death, although both of them belong to the same single process.

Hence in its analysis of the nature of existence, Buddhism also places an emphasis on the reality of death. It is through an understanding of death that we gain an understanding of life. The Buddhists thus see the attempt made by people to find the meaning of life as an attempt to define the meaning of death. A man who defines death as merely one event in the unbroken cause-and-effect continuum should be able to rid himself of anxiety and then could live life to the fullest conquering the vicissitudes of life. But this is impossible without the full realization that life and death are two inseparable aspects of one entity.

Buddhism agrees with the generally negative view that death is the fearful and disastrous culmination of an existence already marred by sorrow and suffering. This tragedy of death is magnified by the certainty of rebirth (again-arising) and the repetition of suffering and death (passing away) in *samsara* existence. That we are locked in the wheel of life and death is an indication of the fundamental emptiness of existence. The continuity and duration of life and death for each individual are incalculable, as the collection of the bones of one person’s repeated rebirth could be amassed. They would form a mountain of skeletons. This imprisonment in the round of existence, however, is neither arbitrary nor mandated by a tremendous power. It is rather the result of one’s own deeds (*kamma*), good or bad. Through one’s deeds, each person weaves his own web of fate. It is therefore this power within each individual person to either remain in the endless cycle or to escape from it. For in this cycle he is both the cause and effect, the entire act or deed on the one hand, and on the other hand the consequence of the act. As an effect of his past deeds, he is the product of the past but as a cause he is a field of possibilities: he possesses his own ability to gradually free himself from the past and to become whatever he wants to be.

Buddhism places death at heart of human predicament while also recognizing it as the primary solution to this predicament. This religion has maintained that one cannot find liberation from the human predicament by denying death but only by confronting it.

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<sup>11</sup>Henry clark Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*, p.206.

Therefore, Buddhism does not condone a melancholia reaction to the death of those dear to us. What is necessary when death occurs is that we understand its meaning and to cope with it in a realistic and intelligent manner.

The teaching of *nibbana* as the practically attainable goal of man's struggle to escape from life, suffering and death prevents Buddhism from being "religion of despair". The meaning of *nibbana* as employed in Theravada Buddhism corresponds to the state of a flame that has been blown out. It is on the one side the total extinction of the three fires of greed (*lobba*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*); and on the other side it is the perfection of all human excellences. When all delusions about the permanence of the self and other beings are put away together with greed and hatred, the heart is filled with universal love and benevolence for all beings. Since greed, hatred and delusion are the bonds that tie each person to the endless cycle of life (*samsara*), *nibbana* is also viewed in its final attainment after death as the quenching of the liberation from *samsara* existence. In Theravada, Buddhist perspective *nibbana* is not self annihilation nor a hereafter as many people think. It is the purity of the mind unbound from greed, hatred and delusion. It can be attained here and now in *samsara* existence. The Buddha himself attained *nibbana* at the age of thirty-five, and he, in the state of *nibbana* i.e. the full extinction of defilements, spent the remaining forty-five years of his life in active preaching and doing good. The same is true of arahants, nibbanic enlightened disciples, who, with the total absence of greed, hatred and delusion, lived and worked for others until death. *Nibbana* therefore, cannot be the annihilation of all activities.<sup>12</sup> It becomes so only after the death of the nibbanic person like the Buddha and the arahant. The nibbanic, person is a living process of freedom and an embodiment of all perfect virtues, and after death there will be no more rebirth for him, like a fire that is taken up no more oil, and that burns towards extinction, and after the extinction it can never be lighted again.

In Theravada Buddhist formulation of the way to *nibbana*, three stages are recognized: morality (*sila*), concentration of mind (*samadhi*) and liberating knowledge (*panña*). The practice of morality consists of the observance of all moral precepts with purity of intention and feeling of fear, shame and remorse at the smallest violation of any of them. The Buddhist precepts are perceived as a means to develop moral character and practice through the control of mind, sense-organs and bodily conduct. There are five precepts incumbent on all Buddhist lay people, eight on those who are more severe, ten on novices and two hundred and twenty-seven on monks. The five precepts which forbid to kill, steal, commit adultery, lie and take intoxicating beverages are moral precepts, whereas the eight and ten are more religious vows, and the rest are rules and regulations for monks to follow. The Buddha was aware of the burdens borne by a layman with a wife and children, hence he did not expect from him the same ethical conduct as he did from the monks. But he emphatically stressed that the layman should strive hard to observe at least the five precepts, the minimum moral obligation of the ordinary person, to ensure peace and harmony in society. The observance of the three additional precepts (abstaining from sex, taking meals after the noon time, wearing bodily ornaments, using perfumes or ointment, dancing, singing, playing music, or seeing shows, and from using

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<sup>12</sup>The full extinction of defilement (i.e. greed, hatred and delusion) is called *sa-upadisesanibban* (*nibbana* with the remaining body-mind groups or *khandhas* that compose human beings) while the dissolution of the *khandhas* is *anupadisesanibbana*.

large high bed or seat) make the layman more religious. Though the Buddhist moral precepts are expressed in the negative form of abstinence from evil actions, they also involve a positive aspect. Killing is bad, and therefore abstinence from it and compassion are good; stealing is a vice, and therefore abstinence from it and generosity are virtues; lying is bad, and therefore abstinence from it and truthfulness are virtuous, and so forth. Buddhism not only teaches avoidance of evil or demeritorious acts it also teaches the performance of good or virtuous actions together with such avoidance.

Buddhism does not teach that man is by nature evil. In its perspective the evil in man is not inborn, and its moral precepts do not refer to any external source of authority. The various moral precepts are not commandments given by the Buddha, though they were taught by him. The Buddha was a teacher and not a law-giver. The moral precepts are the ways pointed out to us what was right and what was wrong and the consequences. It is left to the individual to make necessary effort to translate into action the precepts he has undertaken voluntarily. Though these precepts are neither rewards nor punishments in a future world, yet the law of *kamma*, stressing the interweave of actions and their consequences, is operating powerfully as a cosmic force that determines the appropriate sanction for one's action. Good actions produce good *kamma* with rewarding consequences, and vice versa. Everyone has to reap the result of his own sowing. Even the undetected criminal does not escape the effects of his deeds.

There is no coercion or compulsion in Buddhism. The practice of *sila* is self-imposed obligation. Belief in future rewards and punishments may influence man's conduct, but it cannot be a real moral force. The ordinary Buddhist may use the doctrine of *kamma* to serve as the all important motive force for the moral life, and practice the moral precepts as a means to accumulate merit through good *kamma*. But the main stay of morality, as perceived in Buddhism, is the realization of the selflessness of all beings and the consequent equality of all beings with one another. It is this realization that forms the spring of compassion and benevolence, which are the basis of all good deeds.

The primary goal of Buddhist concentration (*samadhi*) is the attainment of enlightenment and *nibbana*. By placing the goal of life in the attainment of *nibbana* through enlightenment, Theravada Buddhism does not make the cultivation of intellectual power of greater importance than the practice of morality (*sila*). The practice of morality is emphasized as the primary condition that must be fulfilled before the mind can fit to be a receptacle of truth. Morality is a means to attain enlightenment, but it alone does not constitute enlightenment. Without a perfect understanding of the real nature of the self and other things, no one can attain *nibbana*, however moral he may be. To lead the higher life, enlightened understanding is absolutely necessary, but it cannot be obtained except by the practice of morality such as benevolence and forbearance. In this way morality and knowledge are intertwined-like heat and light in a flame-so much that they cannot be separated from one another. No one can even be said to be truly moral, if he does not possess the necessary insight and knowledge. The abstract understanding of the *anatta* (the substratelessness of things) cannot destroy the illusion which makes one believe in the reality of ego, unless the practice of charity teaches him to sacrifice his goods, his body, and even his life. But true altruism, genuine benevolence, and sincere charity imply also liberality of intelligence and enlightened understanding. The achievement of enlightenment necessarily presupposes the presence of compassion, devotion, and morality. In short, it may be said that while morality forms the basis of the higher life

knowledge completes it. Mere change in external life and conduct cannot yield much benefit unless coupled with a thorough cleansing of the mind from all defilements. This subjective purification is to be affected by liberating knowledge that annihilates all thought of an attachment to self. Only those who have achieved such knowledge can be said to be able to internalize morality in their every thought, word and deed, i.e., perfectly fulfilling the moral precepts.

In Theravada Buddhism liberating knowledge can be achieved only through the practice of Samadhi or meditation. To this way end, different techniques are introduced as a means for the development of the mind from mere concentration and ignorance to insight meditation (*vipassana-kammathan*) and transformation and the real nature of the self and all other things in the universe. This knowledge has the liberating power because it can purify the mind from greed, lust, and delusion, the germs of defilement. The liberating power of knowledge is greatly emphasized in Buddhism. If knowledge cannot deliver a man from the power which leads to destruction, what benefit can all his learning be? Through knowledge all mental and physical phenomena, within and outside, are apprehended in terms of substratelessness (*anatta*), impermanence (*anicca*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). The self or the “I” is thus cognized as the “not-I”, a transient phenomenon. As a result it loses its importance automatically and naturally. In such apprehension the “I” is also dissolved, like the light going out simply for want of fuel. And this lack of fuel is brought about solely through the transition from ignorance to knowledge. Ignorance acts on the “I” as an identical and unchanging being; knowledge acts on the “I” as “not-I”, subject to decline and decay. The former creates greed and delusion in all forms, whereas the latter leads to the ceasing of these passions and finally to *nibbana*.

### **Forest monks, Town monks and Development monks**

The present Thai sangha comprises of two sects (*nikaya*), i.e. the older majority group, Mahanikaya, and the reform order, Dhammayuttikanikaya, founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by King Mongkut. Within these two groups there are monks who are labeled forest monks and village/town monks in accordance with the specific vocation, each is pursuing, i.e. (meditation) “practice” (*patipatti*) or “learning” (*pariyatti*). This traditional division was dated back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the Sukhodhaya period when the non-sectarian sangha consisted of monks who were forest dwellers (*arannavasi*) consecrated to meditation practice and those who were village/town dwellers (*gamavasi*) devoted to the vocation of books (*gantha-dhura*) or learning. Since the establishment of the sangha in the Sukhodhaya Kingdom the Thai laity has accepted “learning” and “practice” as the basis of the regular sangha’s life. Ideally, Thai monks should combine the two vocations together, but in practice such achievement is so rare. Buddhadasa of Wat Suan Moksa in the South is one of the very few monks who are both meditation master and forest scholars. Though every monk is required to practice meditation since the day of his ordination not many of them are willing to practice insight meditation (*vipassana-kammathana*) leading toward liberating knowledge (*panña*) and the resulting *nibbana*. Majority of Thai monks prefer “learning” and a less stricter mode of life to “practice” and austerities.

Most of the forest monks are affiliated with Dhammayuttikanikaya, known for its strictness of adherence to the monastic discipline prescribed in the pali canon. They

usually are wandering monks (*phra dhudong*) who go into deep forests in seclusion, some alone and some are accompanied by few selected companions, dwelling in caves, on mountains, under trees, meditating and practicing austerities, moving from place to place. Their austere practices consist of observance of 13 vows such as eating one meal a day in one uninterrupted session, mixing the food together in one bowl, wearing the triple-robe.<sup>13</sup> All these austere practices are not to be understood as a form of asceticism (e.g. fasts and penances) could advance people in their search for deliverance from misery. Only the Middle Path is the true means of attaining salvation. Buddhism therefore considers asceticism unhealthy not conducive to enlightenment, and urges a healthy simplification in living, discerning that the higher life must be rooted in simplicity and purity. In this view meditation and dhudong practice are means to cleanse the mind from passion and pride, lust and greed, or in other words, for all egoism.

These wandering monks usually dwell in the forests for years. Their supra-normal powers (*iddhi*), the by-product of the long and arduous meditation practice, and the moral virtues they possess enable the monks to survive in the wilderness with tranquility. Through loving-kindness (*metta*) which they extend to all beings everyday they could subdue wild and ferocious beasts such as poisonous snakes, tigers and elephants. Many of the forest monks are successful in their struggle for self-perfection and some are on the path to *nibbana* and some even become *arahant* (perfected saints). After such spiritual conquest, they emerge from the forests in possession of knowledge and loving-kindness criss-crossing the country, and some have founded forest heritages (*wat pa*), making themselves freely accessible to men and women to whom they teach meditation in order to help them to be on the Right Path. The enlightened forest monks are highly admired and respected by lay people for their supra-normal powers and moral perfection. They live and work, not for themselves, but for others. Apart from teaching meditation, these forest monks also serve as “field of merit” (*nabun*) in which lay people may cultivate merit. Since it is believed that “giving” to the enlightened and/or strict monks gains the highest merit, lay people tend to pursue the forest monks as their “field of merit”. Lay people also pursue them for the supra-normal powers which, they believe, could be used for curing, protection and prosperity. Some of these forest monks such as Luang Phoo Waen have transferred their psychic powers to amulets and charms and distribute them to their adherents.

The most revered forest monk is Luang Phoo Mun of Wat Pa Sutdhavas, Skolnakorn Province, who lived from 1870 to 1949 and is regarded by numerous pious Buddhists as modern arahant (perfected saint). He is a great meditator master and a great teacher who trained a number of illustrious disciples. His life and spiritual experience in the struggle for self-perfection are accounted in great detail by one of his disciples, Phra Acharn Maha Boowa, himself a meditation master and teacher at Wat Pa Ban Taat, Udonthani Province. Perhaps, the most important contribution of Luang Phoo Mun to Thai Buddhism is his dedication to the revival of the forest monk tradition in contemporary Thai society. His life is an example for those who want to pursue the vocation of “practice”. After his death his disciples and associates and their own disciples have been propagating this tradition around the country through the establishment of forest heritages and meditation centers (*samnak shanga*). Among his

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<sup>13</sup>For detailed account of the 13 dhudong practices, see **Visuddhimagga**.

illustrious disciples are Phra Acharn Fun of Wat Udomsomporn, Sakol Nakorn; Luang Phoo Khao of Wat Tham Klong Pein, Udondhani, Phra Acharn Chaa of Nong Paa Phong, Ubonrajdhani, Luang Phoo Chob of Wat Pa Summanusorn, Loei; and Luang Phoo Waen of Wat Doi Mae Pang, Chiangmai. The teachings and charismatic character of these forest monks have converted numerous monks to the vocation of practice and helped spreading meditation throughout the country. They also inspire lay people to be more concerned with the attainment of *nibbana*, the total release from samsara existence, than a good rebirth.

Meditation as practiced by the forest monks is a continuity of the meditation tradition in Buddhism over centuries. Meditation techniques used and taught by the forest monks are contained within the scope of the Theravada texts such as the *Satipatthana Sutta* and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*. Despite the periodic decline and reform of the monastic order in the country, this tradition has persisted more or less intact. Many forest monks particularly the elderly are residing at urban wats and ennobling them to be meditation centers for monks and lay people. The number of wats specialized in meditation or teaching has been increasing in Bangkok and other urban areas. Even the famous Wat Bovornniwet and Wat Mahathat, the traditional sites of "learning" and which house the two Buddhist universities are propagating meditation for lay people as one of their main activities. Other well-known urban wats that have specialized in meditation are Wat Paknam and Wat Pleng in Thonburi, Wat Boromniwas in Bangkok, Wat Dhammakaya in Pathumdhani, Wat Asokaram in Samutprakarn, and Wat Tha Sung in Ayudhaya Province.

While the forest monks are carrying on the age-old tradition of meditation and reinvigorating it for the laity, the village/town monks are devoted to the traditional vocation of "learning", studying the Dhamma and Pali at the wats' schools preparing themselves for the *naktham* and *prayok* (ecclesiastical) examination in three levels of Dhamma studies-Third, Second, and First Grades; and seven levels of Pali studies-Third through Ninth Grades. Completion of both courses takes from seven to ten years. The two *wat* institutes in Bangkok, now known as Mahamakuta Rajawidyalaya and Mahachulalongkorn Rajawidhyalaya, were raised to the status of Universities in 1945 and 1947, respectively. In addition to basic Dhamma and Pali instruction, they are now offering a Bachelor of Arts and a Master degree in Buddhist Studies and other secular subjects. Many of the monks who passed the *naktham* and *prayok* examination and/or were graduated from the two universities used to disrobe and take up secular jobs, usually going into teaching, ecclesiastical administrations, and civil service. Yet those who remain are repositories of Dhamma and have made significant contributions to Buddhist scholarship.

The most prominent scholar-monk in present-day Thailand is Buddhadasa of Southern Thailand who, after passing the *prayok* examination, has been a prolific writer since the last four decades. He produced a large number of books concerning the doctrines and practices of Buddhism. Many of which are used as reference books by monks and lay people. His lectures, commentaries and sermons have strong appeal to academics and educated public. In all his work, he has demonstrated by scientific methods that Buddhism can be used effectively to solve the problems of human life and society, irrespective of the age. His invaluable contribution to Buddhist scholarship has been recognized by many Thai universities, which recently have given him honorary

doctorate degree as a praise of his contribution. Another famous scholar-monk is Phra Prayudh Payutta whose expoundation of the Dhamma in his monumental work, *Buddha Dhamma*, has won him wide acclaim.

While Bhuddhadasa and Phra Prayudh are using their intellectual competence to advance Buddhist scholarship, many of the learned monks are popularizing the Dhamma through modern media. Foremost among them are Phra Pannananda of Wat Chalapratana and Phra Phayom Kalayano of Wat Suan Kaew. Both of them are gifted speakers and leaders in the popularization of Buddhism making it more appealing and relevant to everyday life. Their sermons always find ready publication and distribution through the press. The teaching of Phra Pannananda appeals most to general public, whereas that of Phra Phayom find more enthusiastic acceptance among youth and children.

The urban wat is usually located in the community. The monks and lay people are therefore closely related. Their relationship is characterized by reciprocity. The monks depend on the laity for food and material support. Walking with alms-bowl and making himself available to receive food offering from the laity may be viewed as begging. Actually such is a part of the discipline that trains his mind to humility. Besides, the monks give the laity the opportunity to earn merit through giving. The acquisition of merit is the primary motivation in the life of Thai Buddhists who are much concerned with the nature of merit-making acts, their occasions, content, grading, and effects. Generous giving to the monks and the *wat* are actions that rank very high in terms of merit.

Apart from serving as the “field of merit” for the laity, the town monk teaches the Dhamma to the laity and performs various rites including those of life-cycle (concerning birth, marriage, death, house-building, etc.) and festival rituals for the laity. The monk also acts as its moral mentor, psychological councilor, personal and social adviser. Yet despite such social service role accompanying the vocation of learning, a number of village/town monks still feel dissatisfied with the vocation. In contrast to forest monks and conservative town monks, these monks are socially active monks who want to make a more active contribution to the material and spiritual welfare of the people. They have no intention to trodden the solitary, meditative path to liberation. Neither do they want to devote their energy to learning and teaching abstract doctrines. They want to break away from tradition by engaging in “labour” and by emphasizing on the importance of working to assist people in poverty-stricken areas. These progressive monks are now labeled “development monks” (*Phra Pattana*).

The movement was started some 30 years ago by a small number of rural monks in the Northeast and some other poverty-stricken regions. Drought, water scarcity, salty soil, low level of health and lack of communication have aggravated underdevelopment of the Northeast. Almost every year, peasants await in vain the arrival of the monsoon to start the agricultural season. Policy makers are expressing the need for action *now* before time runs out for effective remedial measures if the future of the region is not to be lost beyond recovery. This year, it is estimated that about 1.6 million rai of farmland are already damaged and some 49,958 families in 3,557 villages are in distress. In spite of the government’s recent decision to allocate a sum of 139 million baht as Disaster Relief Fund to assist the victims in nearly 40 of the country’s 73 provinces and the Army’s plan to under-take the Royal Compassion Project, there is skepticism among the region’s

population about realizing the set and declared goals. Some even feared that there may be more of rhetoric and political sale-talk than substance to the declarations. Within this atmosphere of doubt more people are turning to the monks at the wat in their villages for assistance as they did in the past.

Moved by the miseries of the community, some rural monks had taken upon themselves to provide leadership to development activities to relieve the villagers of their wretched lot. One of the pioneering monks in the Northeast is Phra Kam Khien, the former abbot of Wat Bhukhao Thong in Chaiyabhum Province. Fifteen years ago nearly everyone in the Village Ta Mafai, where the wat is located, was involved in violence (a result of strifes and conflicts), gambling and alcoholism. These vices had the negative effects on the life of the community. They caused social disharmony in the village. The increasing indulgence of the villagers in such vices prompted the monk, originally trained in the forest monk tradition under Phra Acharn Thien, a famous meditation master, to interrupt the pursuit of the vocation of meditation to devote his energy instead in leading the villagers from such vices. His real concern for their welfare, his dedication to community service work, and his model behaviour gradually won the hearts of numerous villagers. Consequently, violence, gambling and alcoholism were decreased. Aside from teaching the Dhamma the monk undertook social work such as the construction of roads, the digging of wells, and the setting up of a cooperative and a day-care center. When the villagers were able to carry on these monk-initiated activities by themselves, Phra KamKhien retired to his forest hermitage, Wat Sukata, to continue his vocation of meditation.

In his secular work, Phra Kam Kien usually worked with his close associate, Phra Buntham, a disciple of the same meditation master, Phra Acharn Thien. While the former tried to solve the problem of the poverty of the villagers by leading them out of vices-gambling and alcoholism, Phra Buntham devoted his energy to improve the natural environment for them. People in the Village Na Khae living near the monastery are poor and a part of their poverty arises in connection with the natural conditions of the area. The soils are not suitable for cultivation-they are characterized by shallow depth, coarse sandy texture and a deficiency of humus. The situation has been aggravated by drought and occasional flood, caused by deforestation made by squatter farmers and logging companies. When Phra Buntham arrived in that village some 15 years ago, the villagers were so overwhelmed with this problem that they had no heart to find solutions. Many migrated to other areas and those who stayed were depressed and felt powerless. The monk tried first to awaken them to regain strength and confidence, and then gave the lead and example to them by working on the denuded land of the *wat* by himself with the purpose of showing to the villagers that the ecological damage in the village and outside could be ameliorated without waiting for help from the government. He considered the reclamation of draught-stricken and salty soil in the arid areas of prime importance. If no solution was sought, villagers would never be able to escape from poverty engendered by a lack of crops. In his rehabilitation of the barren land, he first grew local coarse grass and scrub which such soils could support and used this natural vegetation as fertilizer. When the soils were improved, he replaced them by fast growing trees, which were later gradually substituted by timber and other indigenous trees such as *teng* (*shorea obtusa*) and *rung* (*pentacme suavis*).

As a result of the long and arduous effort of Phra Buntham, the vast barren land of 1000 rai belonging to Wat Phon Thong, where he is now residing, has been completely reforested. He has brought back trees and hundred of birds and squirrels to the wat. Seeing his success, villagers began to have confidence in coping with their unfavorable geographical condition. However, once the whole area is completely reforested, it will be difficult for the monk to change the attitude of the whole village towards nature from that of exploitation to the Buddhist one which tends to foster conservatism. To be successful in such endeavour, the monk may have to undertaken another ambitious project e.g. the introduction of the new agricultural techniques, which could result in better use of existing farmland and thus lessen forest destruction. But this work needs a lot of resources and cooperation from government agencies. If villagers are poor, indebt and unable to earn sufficiently for their living, they will do nearly anything for their survival, including deforestation.

Phra Nan of Wat Samakhi in Surin Province is another pioneering monk in the Northeast. Being a meditation practitioner himself, the monk tackled the problem of poverty among the villagers in Village Ta Sawang, by initially urging them to practice meditation. On the spur of the moment, his approach might sound irrelevant and even escapist. But the practice of meditation he urged on them was not used as a way of escaping from the problems and frustrations of real life. It was rather employed as a means to lead their minds from being too engrossed in material things and above all to train them to develop, ability to concentrate on the very problems they encountered and to face them in depth. Once this ability developed they could begin to analyze the problems objectively and were able to find a clear-headed, unemotional solution to the problems. Through such analysis, the villagers began to realize that the problem of poverty was not a problem for each one, but that of the community as a whole and thus needed to be worked out collectively. The practice of meditation was also used to make the villagers curb their egoistic desires as well as to be aware of the interdependence of the self and the others/community. Besides, insteading of making them depressed, an escapist meditation, as taught by Phra Nan, helped the villagers to build up such awareness and to face the hard facts of life realistically with courage and confidence. The villagers, accordingly, were encouraged to face the problem of poverty earnestly and to make concerted efforts to solve it. Having regained self-confidence, which they had lost because of the overwhelming problems they had gone through, they could work together on the finding of solutions. When they were ready, the monk mobilized them along with other residing at his wat to undertake collective work such as road construction and farming. The participation of the monks in such work encouraged the villagers to work harder and more energetically. They set an example to show that a lot of the community could be improved when monks and lay people worked side by side.

One of the prevailing problems in the Northeast is the problem of indebtedness on part of the peasants. This problem is a consequence of their indulgence in gambling and alcoholism. It is also a result of exploitation by those insensitive merchants who instead of engaging a fair deal with the peasants beat down the prices of their products as these peasants search to sell the hard-earned fruits of their labour.

To relieve the villagers of debt the monk encouraged the villagers to give up gambling and alcoholism and, at the same time, to undertake collective work. The monk then established a village center for distribution of fertilizer to peasants. Formerly the

peasants had to spend unreasonable amount of money to buy imported fertilizer. Many got into a large sum of debt and the money lenders expropriated their farm products. With the establishment of a fertilizer center, the villagers were encouraged to produce their own compost from organic materials and cattle manure. They could also buy chemical fertilizer there at a more reasonable price. The monk also inspired the villagers to set up a village cooperative for the purchase and sale of rice by themselves without the middlemen. It helped the peasants to get a better price for their rice and thus reduced their debt burden. At the same time, the cooperative enabled the villagers to learn to trust and work with one another. Barns were built to stock rice to be sold only when the price was favorable. Villagers therefore were not under compulsion to sell off the harvest at available prices as they formerly had no stocking space.

The concept of “cooperative” is new to the community where individualism was highly valued. At first, the monk found it difficult to ask the villagers to stock their harvest at the community’s barn and to treat it as the property of the cooperative. Most of them wanted to maintain their own stock and to sell according to their own sense of timing. Through his untiring teaching, they came to see the value of cooperative, which organized on reciprocal expectations, and thus joined in the cooperative effort plan. The teaching of charity concomitant with the establishment of the village cooperative was to moralize the poor and to socialize the rich. Each member joining the cooperative had to buy a share not by giving money but by depositing rice according to the economic ability of the villagers concerned. Borrowers could get rice for their own consumption and had to pay interest in the form of rice at the time of harvest and the stock remained available for the benefit of all. The rich had to contribute more rice to make it possible to lend to the poor, and were asked not to borrow for purposes of profiteering.

The monk’s initiated cooperative has proved to be a success. There were only 80 member households to begin with. But after four years, all the households in the area joined in and the cooperative, had to expand to open seven branches in other villages where again most villagers joined. The cooperatives dealt not only with rice as they became also bargaining agencies for villagers. The city merchants had to go to the cooperatives to buy rice and other farm products while the cooperatives secured items such as fish sauce, oil, salt and other household needs from wholesalers and sold them cheaply. The cooperative later, at the suggestion of the monk, expanded its service by buying land for the poor villagers to work on and consequently helped to reduce their debt burden. Luang Phor Nan also initiated the establishment of credit unions to encourage saving among villagers particularly youth and school children. The credit unions also served as a lending agency for villagers who turned to credit unions for loans and no more to the money-lenders in town, as they saw that credit unions were operated for mutual benefits and not for profiteering.

Another important work of Phra Nan was the redirection of the traditional Buddhist ceremony (*thod phaa paa*). This ceremony is a highly popular ceremony for making donations to wats. It has been used as a means of fund raising to donate money to the wat of one’s choice. Phra Nan used the *thod phaa paa* ceremony towards the support of village cooperative’s projects (such as the revolving fund) and for the purchase of land to rent to the poor. Thus, the tradition of merit making was re-oriented from donation to the wat to efforts for mutual help especially to help the community to stand on its own feet.

Another pioneering development monk is Pra Banyat of Wat Pa Dhummada in Nakorn Ratchasima Province. His work to alleviate the plight of the poor peasants includes the establishment of a water buffalo bank and a rice bank within the large compound of his wat. Water buffaloes have been used in the Northeast as draught animals in wet-rice cultivation. The buffalo bank is set up to enable peasants who do not have the resources to raise buffaloes to work in the field to hire these draught animals for the cropping season, at minimum rates, to be paid by in rice grains. Should calves be born during the rental period, the peasant concerned gets credit and he is entitled to keep the second calf as his own. Since its inception in 1979, the bank has proved to be an asset to poor peasants, living near the wat and in neighboring villages. It now has 400 buffaloes available to those who need them. Similarly, the rice-bank is set up to enable the needy peasants to secure seedlings at the beginning of each agricultural season, without having to turn to the loan-sharks at exorbitant rates of interest. The bank is used as a means to decrease the indebtedness of the peasants and to serve as community store where rice-grains, collected from the renting of buffaloes, are kept for charity-i.e. for needy villagers. Aside from this innovative work, the energetic monk established a model village settlement to advance the image of a "Buddhist village". Prospective settlers were poor landless peasants and selected according to their commitment to observe the five Buddhist precepts particularly those concerning avoidance of gambling and alcoholic drinking. Members of this village were urged to apply the Buddhist principles to their life and work. Among these principles charity (*dana*) and pleasant speech (*piyavaca*), are stressed. Charity is extended from its traditional meaning of giving offerings to the monks and the *wat* to include the sharing of labour, food and energy with one another for community development. Pleasant speech, another Buddhist concept, is emphasized and place in the community. It involves the use of kinship terms of address (e.g. "elder brother", "younger sister"), which is a traditional Thai manner, and gentleness of behaviour. Such practice also reflects the Buddhist Right Speech, one of the Noble Eightfold Path, which considers lying slandering, gossiping as evil acts with bad results in future life. The economy of this village was based on organic agriculture with the use of plant repellants instead of insecticides, and non-chemical fertilizer in place of the chemical type which is usually more expensive. The monk is also going to revive the traditional integrated farming to restore the eco-system and to decrease the debt burden of peasants in neighboring villages. Instead of growing only one single cash crop, such as rice, tapioca or sugar cane, as advised by the government peasants, will be encouraged to use their age-old integrated farming technique of growing a variety of crops on their farmland together with raising fishes, cattles, pigs and chickens around the farm. Previously such farming technique put nature in balance. There was no need to buy fertilizer for the dungs of the animals raised around the farm were the best natural fertilizer freely available. No pesticides were needed. A certain kind of insect would eat a certain kind of plant. And since the crops were grown in rotation, chances were that the number of insects were naturally controlled. By replacing this self-sufficient agricultural technique by the modern one with great emphasis on the cultivation of a single cash crop, export villagers have to work harder and suffer from more tension leading to mental and other problems. They have to buy food, fertilizer, pesticides, and so on. As a result nearly all of them are in debt. What they earn is less than their expenditure. Their debt has increased year by year. Though this age-old integrated farming alternative will not make

villagers rich people, it will make their economy more self-reliant and thus reduce/eradicate their indebtedness. The fluctuating price of rice, for example, has no effect on their livelihood. With integrated farming, they do not need to sell their rice at a too-low price. They can rely on other product.

All these pioneering monks are concentrated in the Northeast, because the people of this region are very poor and need more help. Further, the region has been plagued by drought and occasionally by floods. While there might be looked upon as problems arising in connection with the natural environment, the more important and pressing problem is the problem of poverty resulting from these geographical conditions. Moreover, there is the problem of landlessness as well as indebtedness on part of the peasants, and there are prevailing vices among them in form of gambling, and alcoholism. These monks were engaged in development work because they had special sense of obligation to the poor villagers on whom they depend for offerings and basic facilities. These villagers in spite of their poverty provided them with sustenance. The monks felt compassionate of them and wanted to make themselves service available to them, so that their poverty could be alleviated and the quality of life is raised.

Besides these Northern monks, there are a number of pioneering development monks in the Northern and the Central working to alleviate poverty among villagers. The most revered monk in the North is Phra Dhepkavi of Wat Daraphirom in Chiangmai. His development work is undertaken on a wider scale for it covers many villages. The work is carried out through the Foundation for Education and Development of Rural Area, established 15 years ago to serve as a NGO (Non-Government Organization). Through this foundation, Phra Dhepkavi could mobilize monks and layman to put concerted effort in working for the spiritual and material welfare of people living in a cluster of villages around the wat. The Foundation usually works in cooperation with each village council. Previous work, undertaken by the Foundation under the leadership of Phra Dhepkavi, included the teaching of the Dhamma and the implementation of development project in various fields. The project involved the establishment of revolving fund and rice/buffalo banks to benefit the poor, daycare centers for pre-school children, cooperative, village libraries, medical units; and the operation of training programs in vocation and leadership. These programs were steered towards human resource development in the village. Housewives were trained in food preservation, cloth weaving, knitting and embroidery, dress-making, and artificial flower making, while youth and men were instructed in handicrafts, ceramics, refrigeration, air-conditioning, auto mechanism, and photography. All these skills led to self-employment and thus generated higher income for villagers enabling them to live more decent lives. Social activities of the foundation planned to expand include the adequate supply of water for irrigation and drinking, the improvement of sanitation, and the provision of electricity to poor areas. While we have no objection to this ambitious project, we hope that the Foundation will also expand its work to those villages in Phra Yao and Chiang Rai provinces, where many people are living off the wages of sin. The whole villages are being supported by the money earned by their young women working as prostitutes in the cities such as Bangkok, Hat Yai, Pattaya, and even in other countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. It is not poverty alone that is the main cause of prostitution. The cultural value of gratitude also plays an important role in this phenomenon. Men can show the gratitude to their parents by being ordained as monks but women are unable to follow this tradition. Usually, parents in these villages

would expect their daughters to work hard for the family as a way of showing their gratitude. Prostitution has become a new way for women to bring money into the family and thereby to fulfill their obligation to their parents. The existence of these villages and their cultural values are great challenges to the development monks and particularly to Phra Dhepkavi's Foundation.

One of the most well-known development monk in the Central is Phrakhrui Sakornsangvorakij, the abbot of Wat Yokrabat in Samutsakorn Province. Twenty years ago, the people in the Yokrabat Village were very poor, indebt and unable to earn sufficient living. Tension and violence prevailed throughout the village. The monk studied the land and decided that it was suitable for coconut plantation. He then studied coconut cultivation and became an expert in it. Following his plan, the monks grew coconuts around the wat and the people followed the example. The abbot gave them good coconut bred which yields over two liters of sugar a night. Eventually, every villager earned 200-400 baht per day. The abbot also encouraged them to grow other fruit trees to supply needed fruits to the market. With income raised people were happy and joined the monk's effort to further develop the community i.e. constructing bridges, roads, digging canals and building an earth dam to prevent flooding. When villagers had enough for their subsistence and were economically secured, crime and violence were eradicated. Today, the people in the Yokrabat Community are relatively well-off. To prevent them from being engrossed in materialism the monk is now teaching them meditation concurrently with the cultivation of new cash crops to raised their income.<sup>14</sup>

All these monks represent only a small portion of rural monks whose community development pioneering work has established a new vocation for Thai monks. Their engagement in secular work was solely motivated by their compassion. The villagers who gave them material support were very poor and they needed help. One of the negative effects of development in Thailand nowadays is the absence of equilibrium between urban and rural growth. There are prosperous urban sectors and poor rural areas plagued by draught, poverty, disease and the grave shortage of needed health services. The monks used the skills they had developed in their secular lives, and limited available resources to help the community solve various problems faced. These monks usually started with only one project in accordance with a specific local need, but had to end up with many faceted work. This was because the problems the villagers confronted were interrelated so much that these problems could not be separated from one another. Poverty has many causes-cultural, nature and social. Only an integrated approach could solve it.

The problem of draught in the Northeast cannot be solved overnight. Nor can it be eradicated simply by individual effort. While the government was contemplating on the long-term plan to affect change in the ecosystem of the region, these monks initiated some measures to remedy the situation, as life cannot wait for perfect solution. Such activities ranged from simple well-digging to the difficult work of reforestation. The success of their work helped restoring self-confidence to the poor villagers and thus oriented them towards the belief that they *could* do something to improve their wretched lot. No matter what this confidence may lead to, the monks were successful in creating

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<sup>14</sup>All data about the work of these development monks were collected in the field during 1987-1989.

such confidence in them by the teaching of the Dhamma and above all by engaging in labour as concrete examples.

In such teaching, great emphasis was put on correct understanding of the law of *kamma*. Villagers were encouraged to disassociate fatalism and quietism with this moral law. The law of *kamma* was not iron necessity. The villagers were not condemned or fated to live in wretched conditions. Just as our present lives are conditioned by past deeds, so can they be remade by our present acts. The accompanying activities initiated by the monks to alleviate poverty consisted of the eradication of gambling and alcoholism, the promotion of collective work such as farming, cooperatives, rice/buffalo banks, credit unions, revolving funds; and the operation of income generated training programs. Some of these activities were carried out so successfully that the monks were requested to extend them to other areas. Among these successful projects is Phra Nan's initiated cooperative project in Village Ban Tha Sawang in Surin Province, which, by popular demand, was later expanded to other villages in Surin and other neighboring provinces.

The use of indigenous resources was stressed in many monk-initiated development work particularly in the field of agriculture and medicine. The traditional integrated farming technique and the use of non-chemical fertilizer and plant repellants were encouraged as a means to eradicate indebtedness of the villagers resulted from buying expensive chemical fertilizer and insecticide. At the same time, village level technology was emphasized. Organic agriculture within the compound of the wats was quite a success. But to make it work on larger scale, a lot of ground work needs to be done. While in case of health, people accept indigenous system (i.e. using medical herbs) without any reserve, the introduction of indigenous technology has not been enthusiastically received. This is simply because, for most Thai people, modern technology, though much more expensive, has more "prestige" value. Modern technology is generally associated with persons of high status and is prestigious; indigenous technology, on the other hand, is consorted with backwardness and inferiority. This cultural attitude is reinforced by government developing agencies which tend to consider imported technology from Western countries superior to technology of other origin. Extension services are oriented towards the introduction of modern technology and its input. Thus, it will take quite a long time for the monks to convince the villagers to change their attitude and to appreciate indigenous technology.

As mentioned earlier, it was compassion that motivated the pioneering development monks to engage in secular community work. Since Thai monks have no clerical salary and depend on the laity for their subsistence, these monks had to make use of their wats' limited donated money as seeding money for development activities. Sometimes they had to use the money out of their pockets, gaming from their relatives. Once the project got started and full participation from the villagers was secured the project was sustained mainly by the voluntary work of the villagers and by pulling resources. The cooperation that the monks usually received from the villagers was mainly due to the veneration given to them by villagers. The latter were also attracted by their selfless dedication to development work to benefit the community and by their exemplary and/or charismatic character.

The monks' involvement in the material welfare of the villagers is not diametrically opposite to the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha himself sympathizing

with the frailties and shortcomings of lay people and being awarded of the social and economic condition of the masses devised some of his teachings to alleviate the misery of the people caused by poverty; but it is obvious that without a certain degree of material and economic security no moral and spiritual progress can be achieved. There are innumerable examples where the Buddha showed special mercy to children and fallen women, nursed the sick and saw to it that the hungry were nourished and the naked were clothed before he taught the Dhamma. Though the quality of spiritual life rarely rises in constant proportion with material prosperity, at the level of starvation no spiritual progress is possible. The Buddha demonstrated this when he gave up self-mortification and asceticism and later denounced it as a worthless endeavour. Following the Buddha, the pioneering monks, before any preaching, put their efforts in the material uplifting of the rural areas first, so that poor villagers could have sufficient means, acquired lawfully by their own efforts, for their subsistence and thus would be able to listen to the Dhamma.

Their poverty is the basic social injustice in Thai society. By giving such help, the monks are responding compassionately to their cries for justice. When looking at the limited resources these pioneering monks always have and their lack of modern secular education, one has to commend the monks for the amount of achievement they have made in solving problems of poverty in the community concerned. One must also commend them for the creation of self-confidence and self-reliance ability in the community. The raining of necessary skills and trades which the monks organized for poor villagers and the wise involvement of the monks to get development projects started and to let the villagers take over later helped to foster the concept and practice of self-reliance, understood without the exclusion of contact with others. The emphasis on the liberal use of indigenous resources that are found in a given area contributes further to the development of this self-reliance ability. This building of such ability and self-confidence is perhaps the most important contribution that these pioneering monks have made to development process in Thailand. It was the reason why the monks could mobilize villagers not only to participate but also to take over the direction of village development. Through their work, the monks teach us that development has not been a global model. Each community has to define its own goal and process of development with consideration of its material and cultural resources as well as the removal of constraints that prevent its members from the realization of their full potentials.

Too much abstinence from material goods increases the burning craving for them. Yet when the mind is engrossed in material things, its inclination for spiritual development is less. Thus concurrently with their economic activities, the pioneering monks devoted their energy and time to the teaching of the Dhamma to stimulate spiritual development among villagers using it also as a means to put reign on materialism which these villagers might cling to once they are well-off. Villagers were asked to practice morality and meditation. The practice of morality includes the observance of the five precepts particularly the avoidance of gambling and alcoholism; and the adherence to the Buddhist other-regarding virtues such as love, charity, and honesty. Thrift and self-restraint in consumption was also emphasized in the teaching of the Dhamma. At the same time villagers were asked to practice meditation for 15-20 minutes before plunging into concrete action so that the usual egoistic motivation may be avoided in the undertaking of development work. This cultivation of spiritual development in the individual is considered of great importance in Buddhism. Though the teaching

emphasizes on the self and the community, it puts more stress on the importance of moral development of the self as it is a key factor for the progress of the community. Without the moral fiber of its members, the community cannot make any real progress.

Collective work and village cooperatives were used to implement the concepts of social equity and justice in villages. The former emphasized equal sharing of time and energy, while the latter eradicated exploitation of poor farmers by rich town merchants. The monks' untiring efforts in raising the quality of life of poor villagers are in a way a means of bringing justice to these people who have done nothing to earn neglect from society. It is unjust to let them live in such a wretched condition.

Nowadays, it is common to see numerous monks and novices working in villages in the Central, the North and the Northeast. Some are working with government officials, and some are working on their own initiatives to alleviate the unhappy lot of rural people. Even in the urban areas, one still finds monks engaging in various social welfare work for the urban poor ranging from the giving of free lunches to school children to the establishment of day care centers for pre-school children. Community development is now accepted as a vocation worthy of pursuing by monks. But in the earlier years, the social efforts of the pioneering monks did not receive much enthusiasm. Phra Nan and Phra Kham Khien, for example, were even suspected by authorities of being communist sympathizers. With the passage of time, their work was appreciated and considered to be a model for socially active monks to follow. The authorities even praised them because they helped to fulfill the main purposes of the government development project i.e. the material uplifting of the rural areas. The two Buddhist universities, Mahachulalongkorn and Mahamakutta, well-known for their dedication to traditional "learning", reformed their curriculum to include modern secular subjects such as psychology, sociology, education, health science, and agriculture in addition to Buddhist studies. They also started to produce graduate monks in community development (*phra pattana*). Most of the graduates were sent to rural areas to put their new knowledge to work. Others set up training centers for rural monks in different provinces of the Northeast. The recent establishment of a branch of Mahachulalongkorn University in this poverty-stricken region is a proof of the sangha's commitment to rural development. Monk-students are required, as a part of their practicum, to use the branch as the base for their involvement in community development work. The modernization of clerical education and the support of high-level monks have made possible large scale sangha's social service programs in Thailand. There is no doubt that in the present crisis of transition to modernity when there is still a shortage of competent government officials and the large majority of villagers still have the negative feelings towards the latter, the sangha is playing an important leadership role in the modernizing Thai society.

While the social efforts of the development monks are to be commended and there are undoubted benefits for the poor people served, a word of caution is necessary. Though their work is appreciated, monks are not expected to be occupied in development work all the time. They should play only a catalytic and marginal role in any development work whether in rural areas or in the poor urban sectors. It must not be forgotten that the main vocation of the monks has to do with following the Buddha's way to the total release from samsara existence and all miseries. That is also the ultimate goal of development in Buddhism. Helping people through development work is only a part of their activities and concern. Above all, village development is the responsibility of the

people and government agencies concerned. Once the villagers could help themselves and/or government agencies could secure cooperation from them to undertake development work, the monks should retreat to devote their time for the vocation they have taken upon themselves. As monks, Buddhism demands from them not only the consecration of themselves to the others, but also the full development of their own power for the realization of its ultimate goal, *nibbana*.

## **Conclusion**

Thai Buddhism contains both continuity and change. The Buddhist traditional emphasis on withdrawal from society and indifference from the ebb and flow of life is continued by the wandering forest monks dedicated to meditation. The long vocation of learning is being pursued by town/village monks in the study of Pali and Dhamma at different levels. The work of the development monks represents a new thrust of Thai Buddhism giving validation to compassionate action in society. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the Thai sangha and the laity have been in interdependent and mutual relationship since the time of the inception of Buddhism in Thailand some 700 years ago. Monks depend on lay people for food and other material support, and, in return, the monks serve as “field of merit” for the latter to sow the seeds of good kamma. Monks also perform various religious rites for people of all societal sectors. They also devote their time and energy to the teaching the Dhamma to stimulate spiritual development in Thai society. Even the forest monks, after their moral conquest, make themselves accessible to people teaching them the Right Path to the total release from miseries and samsara existence. Aside from such teaching, Thai monks usually serve their adherents as the latter’s moral mentors, social and personal advisers, and psychological councilors. Each of these service work is done in accordance with each individual request. The development monks expand such service role of the Thai sangha to include the kind of work that primarily benefits the whole community and accentuate it. The story of the pioneering development monks is the story of those monks who sympathizing with the miseries of rural people selflessly dedicated themselves to the alleviation of poverty in rural areas through active engagement in community development work. Instead of just “receiving”, they contributed to the socio-economic development of the community with their time and energy. By doing so, they re-interpreted Buddhism and its role in society, even at the expense of being misunderstood by the more traditionalist sangha. Their story is also the story of Thai Buddhism in its endeavor to meet the material need of local communities and concomitantly to nurture and promote the quality of being truly human and leading really fulfilling lives of morality and responsibility, even if their material condition may not be as comfortable as in other places. The demand for social action from Buddhist monks is not limited to rural areas. Everywhere the poor and the disadvantaged groups are expecting the monks to respond to their cries for justice by providing them not with mere consolation but with material things and actions to alleviate their present suffering. The increased involvement of Thai monks in various social welfare work such as the drug re-habitation program of Wat Tham Krabok and the orphanage of Wat Srakeo is an example of the healthy response made by Thai Buddhism to new social needs.

The reform in the curriculum of the two other Buddhist universities making secular subjects accessible to monk-students is another example of Thai Buddhism’s effort to be related to the modern world. As pressures from the modern world and modern

needs will be increased in the near future, the sangha may have to allow talented monks to participate in secular education at secular institutes and universities. This may eventually lead to the formation of an elite crop of scholar-monks for teaching and research in different branches of human sciences.

Other attempt of Thai Buddhism to relate itself to the modern world involves the rational and social re-interpretation of its teachings. The traditional concepts of Buddhist cosmology such as heavens, hells, ghosts, angels, evil spirits, and rebirth are interpreted as subjective states of mind and not as event, or places having objective existence. Similarly those teachings concerning the origin of life, the law of causality (*paticcasamuppada*) and substratelessness (*anatta*) of the universe and all beings are explained in the lines of modern science. The re-interpretation involves also the bringing into bold relief the social content of an implication of the Dhamma. As reflected in the work of Buddha as, the foremost Buddhist scholar and teacher, key-Buddhist concepts such as “detachment”, “nibbana”, and “merit-making” are recasted in social terms. “Detachment” is translated into “disinterested” i.e. unselfish, public concern and service. “Nibbana”, which has long been understood as total cessation of all activities, attainable after death, is interpreted in terms of the eradication of egoism and whereby the generation of altruistic actions for the others. “Merit-making”, the most influential Buddhist concept in Thai society, which has been confined to deeds for purely religious purposes (e.g. giving gifts to monks and the wat) is re-interpreted to include actions for “secular” causes such as building a road for linkage with other villages. There is also a tendency to consider the secular contribution of modern occupations such as business and industry to Thai society a meritorious activity. The achievement of wealth has long been considered a result of good kamma. But in the past the accumulation of merit for future improvement of kamma was made by giving some portions of that wealth to narrowly conceived religious purposes. As the country is striving to actualize its economic potentialities, business and industry are necessary occupations for the attainment of the status of NICs (New Industrial Countries). In principle one cannot see why such secular activity which brings the benefit to Thai society could not be considered good kamma.

While fostering change in different aspects, Thai Buddhism still retains its own traditional components. It continues to provide its conservative adherents with peace and tranquility of mind, fortitude and consolation in adversity, and the total release from miseries. At the same time for the socially active people, it gives them the moral/religious base for their social actions. The practice of meditation is still believed to be the necessary path to the total release from suffering. Yet it is also reinvigorated for lay people, with frailties and shortcomings, as a practical means for them both to gain temporary relief from the strain and stress of modern life and to purify their action from all egoistic taint thereby making it conducive to social benefits. This creative relationship between meditation and new needs exemplifies the dynamic interaction between the Buddhist tradition and new forces. In this interaction, both change and empower another. The potential negative aspect of the new forces is curtailed, while the relevance of tradition to modernity and modern needs is stimulated and enhanced. By virtue of such enhancement, the Buddhist tradition itself changes, which is true of all traditions that are alive. Such ability for creative change, and for making healthy and flexible responses to new needs accounts for the survival of Buddhism in present-day Thai society as its powerful social/cultural force. Pressures from the demands of new conditions and a

changing world will arise in the future. But we can be optimistic that Thai Buddhism will be able to cope with all these pressures. Our optimism arises from the fact that in Thai Buddhism, or Buddhism in general, there is absence of strong dogmatism and detailed specific norms of moral and social behaviour; and this will allow for tolerance and flexibility in meeting new ideas and values.



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