

embodied in economic and political ideologies is the principal one. The Buddhists, the Christians, and all religions must be united, learn from one another, and cooperate, if their message is to be meaningful and liberative for men and women in the world of constant transformation today.

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Abbreviations

- TL **Theology of Liberation, History, Politics, and Salvation**
by Gustavo Gutierrez, Orbis Book, Maryknoll, New York, 1973.
- MT **Minjung Theology People as the Subjects of History**
edited by the Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia, Zed Press, London, 1983.
- TPE **Thai Philosophy of Education** (in Thai Language)
Phra Rajavaramuni,
Kledthai, Bangkok, first edition March 1975.
- RD **Religion and Development** (in English)
Sulak Sivaraksa, first edition, Church of Christ in Thailand, 1976.
- BA "Buddhist Agriculture", by Prawase Wasi, in
Turning Point of Thai Farmers.
edited by Seri Phongphit and Robert Bennoun,
Mooban Press, Bangkok, 1988.
- RCS **Religion in Changing Society Buddhism, Reform and the Role of Monks in Community Development in Thailand**
Seri Phongphit, Arena Press, Hong Kong, 1988.

ON REINTERPRETING THE DHAMMA : TOWARDS AN ADEQUATE THAI SOCIAL ETHICS

If Siam stands	eternal,
We Thai will al-	so live;
But if Siam falls,	how can Thai be?
It's all as if	Thai name perished. ¹

The above poem expresses the ultimate concern for the Thai as Thai. As the ultimate concern, it aspires to articulate the Thai Ideal of nationhood or national identity. For King Wachirawudth, the author of the poem, the identity of the Thai nation involved the total unity of three symbols: *chat* (nation: the land and the people), *sasana* (religion: Buddhism), and *phra maha kasat* (king). For him this threefold identity was the ultimate reality for which all true and patriotic Thais must be willing and proud to sacrifice even their lives in its defense, protection, and support. Defending and supporting this Ideal of Thainess was conceived of as the only source for lasting peace and honor. Because of its ultimate claim and power, commanding total allegiance and devotion from all Thai, the *chat-sasana-phra maha kasat* trinity takes on a religious character. It is precisely this kind of "religion" that has served to constitute the Thai nationhood, to unite the Thai people, and to provide the Thai people with a sense of destiny. It is this reality that scholars such as Robert Bellah have called "civil religion."² And it is this reality which is meant here by "Thai Dhammocracy." And finally, it is this "Thai Dhammocracy" which we are attempting to retrieve and reconstruct in this article.

First, I shall briefly describe and evaluate a "typical" attempt to deal with the problem. This is the celebrated seminar on "Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Society" in Bangkok in August, 1969, under the joint sponsorship of the Siam Society and the Buddhist Association of Thailand. Second, I seek to retrieve and reconstruct the fundamental structure and intentionality of the traditional Thai Buddhist ideal social order, especially the *anachak* (temporal) dimension. This is in fact a retrieval of the fundamental intentionality of the ideal Buddhist kingship, since that was precisely the symbol of the Thai order throughout her long history. And in performing this task of hermeneutical reconstruction, I shall draw on the insights and accumulated wisdom of certain selected scholars as well as undertake a fresh reinterpretation of the sacred texts and religious and political symbols. Then finally, I shall conclude

the article with a discussion of the significance of kingship in the Thai traditional ideal social order.

'Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Society': a monastic approach

Moved by a deep concern for the viability of Buddhism in modern Thailand, two of the staunchest supporters of Thai Buddhism, the Siam Society and the Buddhist Association of Thailand, jointly sponsored a three-day seminar in August of 1969. Participating in that occasion were official and unofficial representatives of the king, the government, the Buddhist monastic order (*sangha*), and the general public. A member of the Privy Council, the Minister of Education, the President of the Buddhist Association, the President of the Siam Society, high ranking monks, editors, professors, authors, students, and foreigners were among those present. It was a grand assembly, well publicized and well regarded. That the event was of great importance is beyond doubt. Simply perusing the published volume of its Minutes gives one a sense of the enormous public attention given to that seminar.³

On a deeper level, the basic intention of this seminar was well formulated by Buddhadasa in this introduction to the published volume. "A seminar", he says, "is rooted in the human fear of the encroaching danger and on his struggle to escape from it in order to save himself."⁴ "But we often do not get that far in most of our seminars", he goes on to complain, "because we tend to use the occasion for intellectual assault on the other or for exhibiting our own intellectual arrogance and verbal sharpness, often with an eye to gain publicity....A true seminar should focus on how to get out of the heap of suffering. It should involve the real victims, not just the dilettantes as we usually see. A true seminar should be like a major surgery, getting at the root cause of all problems which we have called suffering."⁵ In Buddhadasa's view, that particular seminar did not adequately deal with the heart of the matter, the Buddha Dhamma, giving more time to things periphery and instrumental. In order to get at the heart of the matter, he suggests, we must transcend the outer garb, the literary interpretation, and get down to "the fundamental intention" of the Lord Buddha's Teaching.

As an example of this radical reinterpretation, Buddhadasa deals with the five precepts which are required of all Buddhists. Instead of the traditionally bland recital of (1) do not kill, (2) do not steal, (3) do not commit adultery, (4) do not tell a lie, and (5) do not drink intoxicants, he unites all five precepts under the theme of non-violence. For Buddhadasa, the five precepts require their adherents to abstain from doing violence to (1) the life and body of man or animal and other living things, (2) other people's property, (3) that which

is dearly loved by others, (4) other people's rights and identities, and (5) one's own conscience and intellect.

For Buddhadasa, only this kind of radical reinterpretation is adequate to combat the great danger at hand. He calls the great danger "materialism", which has taken the upper hand in Thailand only recently. For him there is only one sure way to deal with this pressing problem: all Buddhists must know exactly what it means to be a Buddhist. That is the principle of Dhamma, which may be simply stated as the dread of doing evil and the courage to do the meritorious (*kliad baap and kla bun*). Finally, Buddhadasa concludes that the Thai people, laymen and monks alike, have fallen victims to this dreadful materialism, leading us astray from caring for that which is truly Dhammic. To save our souls we have to return to the root and to the real intention of the Buddha Dhamma; nothing else is adequate.

A careful reading of the minutes of this famous seminar reveals the "monastic" approach and presuppositions of the whole event. By that I mean the approach which presupposes that the continued existence and lumination of the Buddhist monasteries, populated by dedicated monks, is essential to the viability of Thai society. To the organizers and the participants in that seminar, the problem at hand was conceived in these terms. As one participant remarked:

the important fact was that society has changed; if religion remained unchanged, it would be a dead or non-living thing. If Buddhism could not keep up with society, no young men would volunteer to enter the monkhood in the future. The new generation would lose faith in it. Nowadays it is already difficult to find monks at the abbot rank in provincial temples. The Buddhist Church and the Kingdom must cooperate, otherwise the future would be very dark indeed. Faithlessness and paganism would come to take the place of the true religion.⁶

Furthermore, the monastic approach assumes that it is the monks' duty to teach the Buddha Dhamma to the people. And in light of the fact that Thai society has greatly changed, the monks must know how to choose the true Teaching and to apply it according to the times and the new requirements of the society. In short, the monks must know how to interpret the Dhamma to suit the needs of the times. As a young monk intellectual puts it, this reinterpretation is justified because, "the teaching of the Buddha, handed down long ago, must now be contained in much thicker clothing and is now much more difficult to penetrate....Therefore, the monks must try to peel off the thick clothing so that the people of the modern society can see the core."⁷ Otherwise both Buddhism and the kingdom face a real danger.

This monastic approach is typical of the contemporary discussion of "religion" and "politics" in Thailand. Basic to this approach is the sharp distinction between the *thang lok* (worldly way) and *thang tham* (spiritual way) and their separate domains – *anachak* and *sasanachak*. In this context, *karnmuang* ("politics") refers to the struggle for power and only in the *anachak* realm. In this sense, there should be no *karnmuang* in the *sasanachak* realm. For, according to this view, *karnmuang* is full of dirty tricks and greed. In order to help lessen such greed and tricks, it is the individual's own responsibility to "seek out" *sasana* ("religion" or the spiritual realm). The Buddhist monastic order as the institutional expression of the *sasana*, symbolized by the yellow robe, is normally the place where one can "find" *sasana*. And the primary function of the monastic order is to be ascetically pure and available to those who take the trouble to seek them out. The *sasana*, in short, has no business with *karnmuang*, except very indirectly. That is to say, a man of *karnmuang* may "apply" some of the teachings of the *sasana* which he, in his private capacity such as his listening to the sermons on Buddhist holy days, may still remember. The *sasana* at best serves *karnmuang* as restraint when man of *karnmuang* may go overboard. A man of *sasana* would, in this connection avoid entering *karnmuang*. This is the monastic approach to "religion" and "politics". As shown below, such an approach is inadequate.

Although the monastic view was dominant in this seminar, there were also a few participants who held a modified version of this monastic view. Let us call this view "modern Buddhist". The modern Buddhist subscribes to the basic distinction between the "spiritual" and the "worldly" ways and all its derivatives. The point of departure for him is his willingness to "reinterpret" the essential meaning of the Buddha's Teaching. As the passage quoted earlier suggests, the modern Buddhist must try his best to peel the outer garb from the core of Buddhism, so that the real Dhamma will be brought to light. On this reinterpretation, many of the modern Buddhists present in the seminar strongly recommended a more active role for Buddhist monks, such as visiting the sick and the poor, a role never sanctioned by orthodox Theravada Buddhism. Moreover, they were willing to allow Buddhist monks access to the "modern way of life" such as cars, televisions, and refrigerators, within the basic Buddhist *vinaya* (discipline) that these things are handled for them by the *vaiyavachakorn* (layman in attendance). The intention behind these modern Buddhist modifications, however, is the voluntary adaptation of the Buddhist ways so that the "real Dhamma" of Buddhism would speak to contemporary men.

There are at least two basic problems with both the monastic and the modern Buddhist approach to the discussion of social order (in their terms, *sasanachak* and *anachak*). The first is their tendency towards institutional conservatism, and the second is an inadequate and misleading dichotomy between the "spiritual" and the "worldly" ways. First of all institutional

conservatism has been often used as a justification for maintaining the status quo, at the expense of the dynamics of historical and circumstantial reality, in the fulfillment of human needs. On top of this, or perhaps more accurately behind it, the sharp dichotomy between "religion" and "politics" has led to the moralistic condemnation of political power and material concern as inherently inferior if not entirely evil. At the same time, it has led those who cannot accept this monastic view to forsake or ignore the monastic realm altogether and turn instead to embrace uncritically the Western idea of Progress, or "Democracy", or even Communism as their new religion. This is the state in which we live today.

Finally, as a consequence of both institutional conservatism and misleading dichotomy, much time, energy, and resources have been wasted on secondary issues. In the judgment of the most astute observer among their ranks, the Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, that seminar "missed the heart of the matter", the central conception of the Buddhist Dhamma, "focusing instead on the external, the trivial, and the instrumental."⁸ In short, the typical monastic approach to the problem of *sasanachak* ("religion") and *anachak* ("politics") leaves much to be desired. A new and more viable approach is sorely needed.

Fundamental intentionality of the Thai tradition

In the following pages, I shall attempt to retrieve or reconstruct the fundamental intentionality of the Thai tradition. It is both an embodiment of a hermeneutical method in search of the self-understanding and self-discovery by way of a critical and interpretive analysis of the Thai religious and political symbols. And since this paper focuses on the *anachak* (temporal) dimension of the Thai Dhamma, it follows that the texts chosen for our purpose be those which deal primarily with the temporal matters. Therefore, the texts chosen deal with the idealized past of the Thai people rather than with the Buddhist Pali Canon. Written by monk and court scholars as well as by literary kings and princes, these non-canonical yet idealized texts were unmistakably inspired by the spirit of Buddhism and borrowed liberally, from both canonical and post-canonical sources. As far as government and administration were concerned, these texts had more influence on the kings and rulers than the Pali Canon. Nonetheless, it cannot be overemphasized that the authority of these texts rests on their appeal to the Buddha Dhamma, articulating it in modes and contexts appropriate for the kings and rulers. In this connection, it should be noted that in post-1932 Thai history, these texts have been almost entirely ignored by the modern power elite and scholars. It is my contention that if the authentic Thai tradition is to be properly understood, these texts must be taken

seriously.

Analyzing these texts is precisely the intent of this article. As a first step, let us note some basic tenets of Buddhism, internalized by all good Thai Buddhist from birth.

(a) **A doctrinal statement of the Buddhist point of view.** – Doctrinally speaking, the Buddhist point of view begins with the phenomenal world, and deals primarily with the nature of existence. A Buddhist experiences something because he is in relationship with it. This "something" is life, conditioned (*dukkha*), ever-changing (*aniccang*), and not-yet-fully-known (*anatta*). But in Buddhism life is meant to be rightly comprehended and fully realized as freedom in the state of *nibbāna* or perfect existence. To achieve this goal, the Buddha taught four essential principles of life which he discovered from his own experience and meditation. Known as the Four Noble Truths (*Ariya Satya Si*), they include:

(1) **Dukkha** refers to the nature of existence which is characteristically imperfect. There are three aspects or states of existence: (a) ordinary suffering, the state of physical pain and mental anguish; (b) the state caused by changes for the worse; and (c) that state of conditionedness or not being free. It is the Buddhist position that this conditioned phenomenal existence (*dukkhata*) is to be transcended.

(2) **Dukkha-smudaya** refers to the nature of causation affecting imperfect existence. This principle posits that if *dukkha* or conditioned existence is to be transcended (*nirodha*) and if perfect freedom (*nibbāna*) is to be realized, then the nature of causation must be rightly understood and its operative principles mastered. Generally speaking, in Buddhism the process of conditioned life is viewed as one stage of the continual phenomenal changes (*samsāra*) caused primarily by greeds (*lobha*), anger (*dosa*), and misconception (*moha*). This principle of causation has been classically expressed in terms of the law of kamma which, in the words of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, may be stated as follows:

Happiness and suffering are the results of their own causes, that is, the person's deeds. The results of any person's action must fall on that person with certainty and justice... All creatures have their own *kamma*, and their lives turn in response to their former *kamma*, interacting as both cause and effect, without a break. We call this interrelationship *samsāra*.⁹

(3) **Dukkha-nirodha** refers to the ultimate freedom in perfect existence or transcendence. This principle concerns the ending of causa-

tion (second principle) and thus the disappearance of *dukkha* (first principle) whereupon freedom in perfect existence (*nibbāna*) may be attained. This twofold dimension of *nirodha*, stopping and realizing, is achievable by the practice of the fourth and final principle of life, *magga*.

(4) **Magga** refers to the Middle Way or the Eightfold Path, the principle whose actualization results in the fulfillment of the first three principles. Discerned in meditation, the Middle Way is the way between two extremes; between, for example, devotion to sensual pleasures and devotion to ascetic self-mortification. As the elaboration of the Middle Way, the Eightfold Path consists of the following: right understanding, right thinking, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right attention, and right concentration.

By emphasizing the rightness of these eight life activities, Buddhism recognizes that they may be done imperfectly or even be distorted. Such an imperfection or distortion is what is meant by the *bap* ("sin") in the Thai language. Imperfection or distortion of the truth or purity of life leads to suffering and evil in Buddhism. In the world of everyday life, this implies the perfectability or progress from the phenomenal and conditioned existence toward the state of perfect freedom. In this connection, Buddhism provides a fourfold principle, called *brahma-vihāra* or the four sublime states, which has come to be taken by the Thai people as both descriptive and prescriptive of the Buddhist ideal of human life.

Remembered by heart by most Thai, including those who are non-Buddhists, this principle of four sublime states includes: (a) *mettā* ("loving kindness"), (b) *karunā* ("compassion"), (c) *muditā* ("celebration"), and (d) *upekkhā* ("equanimity"). *Mettā* or "loving kindness" means the promotion of the welfare and well-being of all, friends and enemies alike – goodwill toward all and vengeance toward none. It is in the same category as *agape* in the Christian theology. *Karunā* or "compassion" means taking care not to inflict any harm, unhappiness, or suffering on others and helping to abolish or alleviate cruelty and sorrow of fellow human beings. *Muditā* or "celebration" in Buddhism means gladness in other's success and achievement, subduing personal envy and jealousy, but producing joyfulness and merriment instead. And finally, *upekkhā* or "equanimity" aims at promoting a sense of detachment or neutrality particularly in the face of tragedy or sorrow. It encourages an appreciation of things for what they are, so that resentment or approval is not expanded into a distortion of reality or unjust practice.

This is a brief account of the common core of Dhamma which has for many centuries constituted the basic content of moral and ethical instruction in the Thai social order. Before the establishment of modern schools around the

turn of the century, the Buddhist temples (*wat*) were primarily responsible for this instruction. Today the public as well as the private school systems are charged with the responsibility, generally without any meaningful cooperation from the Buddhist monks. However, for the village folk, who comprise the overwhelming majority of the Thai people, the *wat* and the monks continue to be their primary source of moral and spiritual guidance. In terms of scholarship, these matters have been, by and large, under the influence of the conservative monastic approach. As such, it is doctrinally oriented. Nevertheless, it has served the Thai order well, providing the order with doctrinal and psychological security, particularly on the personal level. But in light of the present crisis of the Thai order, it is highly doubtful that this monastic approach to Dhamma will be adequate. For it is a long jump from these doctrinal statements and their monastic instruction to a Buddhist understanding of government and politics. When the Thai kings enjoyed "absolute" power, this approach to Dhamma was more or less adequate, for according to tradition, the kings had to undergo many other elaborate and involved processes of training and education in addition to this monastic Buddhist education. But when the Thai constitution drastically changed in 1932, a reinterpretation of Dhamma as the vision of the new Thai order is called for. Let us begin with the question: What is Dhamma?

(b) *The meaning of Dhamma.* – Dhamma or *Tham* in Thai is, in the judgment of a historian of religions, "one of the richest categories in all history of religions, Thai or otherwise."¹⁰ According to the Pali-English Dictionary, Dhamma refers to "that which the Buddha preached... the order of the universe, immanent, eternal, uncreated, not as interpreted by him only, much less invented or decreed by him, but intelligible to the mind of his range."¹¹ More specifically, Dhamma in the earliest Buddhist traditions refers primarily to the sacred reality which the Buddha discovered at the point of his Enlightenment. For him and his followers, that sacred experience is the ultimate discovery of the Dhamma, the Truth which serves as the source of order in the world and salvation from it.¹²

Particularly in the Thai context, Buddhadasa's discussion of the meaning of Dhamma is typical. For the learned monk-scholar, there are two levels of meanings of Dhamma, the literal and the interpretive. Literally, Dhamma means "to stay by itself or support itself, that is, to exist... Dhamma means everything without exception, from the finest speck of dust... up to things most valuable, and things abstract, such as spirit, thought, feelings, action or *kamma*, and the result of *kamma*, the highest of which is the attainment of *Nirvana*."¹³ Interpretively, Dhamma means for Buddhadasa certain things in certain contexts. In this regard, he distinguishes four meanings of Dhamma. The first refers to Dhamma as the Cosmic Order and its laws. Dhamma in this sense, the Bhikkhu points out, corresponds to Form or *Forma* in Latin. The

second meaning of Dhamma refers to Doctrine or Religion. That is, it refers to "a system of study or observation or action... conceived and undertaken in order to unite men and the highest, which means God or the extinction of suffering – *Nirvana* – whatever the case may be."¹⁴ The meaning of Dhamma in the third sense refers to the realm of virtue, moral quality, righteousness, ideal, and duty. Dhamma in this sense refers to goodness in human character and fairness in human relationships. The fourth meaning of Dhamma refers to the regulative power behind the motion of all beings. This is the equitable power that rights all wrongs, the ground of justice and equity. Dhamma in this last sense constitutes a Buddhist political ethics.

The Buddhist Emperor Asoka (ca. 274-232 B.C.), who became a kind of paradigmatic model for later Buddhist kings, also summed up his religious and political teaching in this single word, Dhamma.¹⁵ Dhamma for Asoka refers to the basic order of the universe and the truth discerned in that order. It is the bond uniting people in various forms of community. It provides a guide and a ground for human action. Self-realization and happiness are based on it. In the words of Richard McKeon, Dhamma "is achieved by action, advanced by instruction, and protected by sanctions; and in turn it provides a basis for policy, education and justice."¹⁶ This leads us to consider Dhammic action.

(c) *Dhamma and time.* – According to the Indian mythology of time, which has been effectively transmitted to the traditional Thai consciousness along with Buddhism, the Universal Dhamma finds its expressions or dispensations in endless cosmic cycles. According to this tradition, each cosmic or world cycle is subdivided into four *yugas* or world ages.¹⁷ Comparable to the Greco-Roman tradition, these *yugas* decline in moral excellence as the age proceeds. Briefly, these four *yugas* may be described as follows: The first, the *Krita yuga*, is the perfect beginning when the moral order of the world is firm on its four legs, like the sacred cow, 100 per cent effective as an all-pervading element in the organism of the universe. During this *yuga* men and women are born virtuous. They devote their lives to the fulfillment of Dhamma. As the life-process of the world-organism gains momentum, however, order loses ground. Holy Dhamma vanishes quarter by quarter, leg by leg, while its converse gains the field. Thus, in the second *yuga*, the *Treta*, the universal body as well as the human society is sustained by only three-fourths of its total virtue. Worse yet is the third *yuga* when the cow of ethical order, instead of firmly standing on four legs, now balances on two. The ideal destroyed, the knowledge of the revealed hierarchy of values is lost. And finally, in the *Kali yuga* or Dark Age, the world subsists miserably on 25 per cent of the full strength of Dhamma. Such moral and social degradation is characterized in a passage of the Vishnu Purana: "When society reaches a stage, where property confers rank, wealth becomes the only source of virtue, passion the sole bond of union between husband and wife, falsehood, the source of success in life, sex