

C H A P T E R V I I I

RELIGION AND MODERNIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY

THAILAND

CHAPTER VIII

Religion and Modernization in Contemporary Thailand

In regard to continuity and change in modern Thailand under impact of science and technological transformation certain specific questions may be posed in regard to Buddhism. What are the social roles of Thai Buddhism in a changing world? How do the Buddhist religious institutions absorb modern elements? To answer these questions on Thai Buddhism, one has to examine its real quest for modernization through reinterpretation of merit and merit-making with a view to participation in developmental activities and thereby promote national integration.

1. The Existing Patterns of Institutional Strains between the Sacred and the Secular Order

In response to the modernizing influences which are changing Thai economy, polity, military and education, the traditional interaction patterns between the monks and the laymen, especially in the urban centres have come under considerable modification. These relationships concern former roles in education, welfare and spiritual advice, including the performance of ceremonies and rites related with merit-

motivation of Thai men and women.

Looking back to Thai history particularly in the pre-1920 period, one finds that the Thai society was overwhelmingly dominated by clustered village communities in which a wat was an indispensable component. A wat belonged to everyone in a village around which the patterns of social life were organized for the betterment of the village community. As a centre of social life in a village a wat used to play social roles as follows : educational institute for the young boys of a village; philanthropic home for the poor and the disabled; clinic, a rest house for wayfarers, a meeting place and an entertainment centre for a village, a supreme court for a village community, a cultural centre, a house of arts and a museum, a cooperative storehouse of needed items of supplies for common use, accessible to every villager, a public administration centre where the village head or commune chief could call a meeting of the villagers for the purposes of communication, possibly a conscription place during times of war and a sacred place for the performance of ceremonies and rites closely related to village life.¹

More importantly, the kings or rulers and their subordinates are said to have been students of the reputed scholar monks. The former are believed to have often sought advice on spiritual, intellectual, and to an extent on practical matters. On the

whole there were strong bonds between the religious and the secular systems which broadly worked together for the good traditional Thai society.

At present most of Thai social functions have been taken over by the secular institutions both private and governmental, especially in the urban sectors of life. As a result, the communication link between the rulers and the ruled i.e., peasant masses via the intellectual monks has got severed with manifold consequences.

The rulers and to an extent the subjects, i.e., peasant masses of today are losing the sense of social commitment to the institution of wat. The traditional practice of construction of a wat, a practice symbolizing a meritorious act, universally followed by the ruling elite in the traditional Thai society has been more or less on the wane since the reign of King Rama VI. Elite philanthropy is directed gradually into making donations to open or enlarge secular schools and colleges that cater to the educational needs of the modern time. If in some way things do not change, then it may be that consequently a wat will be out of place in Thai society in the near future. A wat will be a thing of the past - a museum or an archaeological site for the generations still to come.

In 1975 I had a look at the wats both in the rural and

urban sectors, i.e., wats at Ban Wangchai and Ban Nampong both rural and the urban wats at Khonkaen (Wat Srinual and Wat Dhat, all located in Khonkaen Province in the Northeast and wats in Bangkok-Dhomburi Metropolis (Wat Sraket and Wat Mahadhatu). I found that the Nakdham-Pali courses of study are common for all of them except for the Wat Ban Wangchai with no operative Pali Study courses. None of those who attend these courses at the wats claims to be a native of the respective communities, of which the wat is a part. Neither layman teachers nor students are engaged in these classes. This shows that education which is meaningful to serve the needs of the communities is not provided within the respective community wats. It should be noted that many of the young of these communities attend schools at the places outside the wats. The young of the community have no faith in the education provided by their respective wat as also in the traditional practice of ordination for educational achievement. The traditional patterns of wat education have become weakened if not completely replaced.

I also found that modern semisecular, if not wholly secular courses of studies are operative at Wat Nampong, Wat Srinual, Wat Sraket and Wat Mahadhatu. At the former two wats adult education schools are in action to meet the educational demands of the respective communities. At the last wats the

monks and novices are found to attend the semisecular courses of the study run by Mahachula Buddhist University and also the adult education school run by other wats. In these instances the educational activities are reorganized in such a manner that some links between the laymen and the monks are reestablished. Thus more laymen are getting involved, some as students, some as serving teachers and others as administrators, who are drawn from their respective communities. The wats of Bangkok-Dhonburi Metropolis are an exception because none of their resident students claimed Bangkok-Dhonburi as his native place. Here neither teachers nor students who are laywomen get involved in the wat education. The institution of wat no longer commands its former prestige as a seat of learning.

Table 8.4 reveals that the duration of joining a monastic life is increasingly getting shorter : a three-month period of Buddhist Lent is the longest period monastic experience for merit-making preferred by the boys of today especially in the urban centres. This is due to the needs of modern times, especially from the economic standpoints. The well-educated persons are rarely oriented into a monastic life for more than a period of three months.

Observing the merit-making behaviour with regard to the morning food-offering to the monks, one finds that the pattern especially the morning round for collecting alms as followed

Table 8.1 : Monastic Life Experience of 158 Ex-monks by
Length of Residence (based on empirical study in
Thailand 1975).

	Number	Less than one year	More than one year but not more than five years	Five years or more	Ten years or more
		%	%	%	%
Rural	80	27.21	10.75	9.49	3.16
Urban	78	38.60	4.43	1.89	4.43
Total	158	65.81	15.18	11.38	7.59

by the monks at Wanghai village as indicated earlier, works also at the wat in Khonkaen municipal area to a considerable extent, but is totally changed in metropolitan Bangkok-Dhonburi. In Bangkok-Dhonburi a novice or monk individually goes from house to house or along street after street for the morning alms. This is done at one's discretion and there is hardly any well-ordered pattern. No time is fixed though it takes place during 6 to 9 a.m. in the morning. In this regard the behaviour of monks and novices is loosely regulated.

The morning meal-offering as followed by the villagers of Ban Wangchai is no more in practice at Wat Dhat, Wat Srinual, Wat Sraket and Wat Mahadhatu. Hardly are the laymen of the urban sectors found offering daily meals or gifts in kind to the monks within a wat except on festive days. Some religious-

minded people make offerings in the form of cash rather than in kind, weekly or monthly.

By and large in the urban wats a monk or novice individually takes the morning and midday meals. Hardly is there a common dining-room shared by the resident monks at Wat Sraket. The midday meal if not both the meals, is for the most part prepared by a monk or novice himself or his temple boys. They considerably depend on the supply provided by their native people especially their parents. The five or eight precept observance and religious services followed by the villagers of Ban Wangchai, is hardly followed by the people of urban residence.

Formerly, merit-making was closely associated with various forms of social welfare organized within the wat compounds, and it served the purpose quite well. Presently various forms of social welfare now taken over by the secular sectors, are becoming dissociated as a form of merit-making. The only remaining form is that of merit-storage for the next life. Here, the modernists raise the question about the next life or world beyond and make fun of it. Consequently the young people start doubting or questioning about merit and merit-making and even the belief in rebirth. They are not certain about it. Thus a big question mark in their mind, remains unsatisfactorily answered.

2. Stagnation of Progress in the National Sangha

Among the social roles of Buddhism which have been on the decline since the 1920s, the most important is that of the national education. After the death of King Rama V, the public education organized by the state was gradually separated from that organized by the Buddhist Sangha at the expense of the religious Order. In its later development the secular education has been organized in such a manner that the wat based on education has ceased to be included in the national education, and thus has been considerably undermined. Consequently the peasant poor have been denied the privilege of education, especially the higher education run by the state. These places are far off "urban centres" and are too costly by peasant standards.

Thus eliminated, the religious Order has become passive in its role performance and has been losing its intellectual leadership, which in turn has led to break down of other useful social roles. During the last three decades (1920-1950) the Buddhist Order was in the state of stagnation and rested on its oars, enjoying its former privileges.

Now the traditional education (Pali-Nakdham Studies) does not meet the public needs any longer. The education at two Buddhist Universities is either not within the reach of the

rural monks and novices or is not in popular esteem. Those pursuing the education for improving their prospects strive for the required training which is available in institutions outside of the wat. They get themselves enrolled at private institutes of education when they are barred from the state-run units. All this has met with a strong objection from the traditional elites including some seniormost monks in authority. This has led to a clash between the traditionalist seniormost monks and the radical young monks. The latter, when compelled to attend traditional education, demand reform of the existing education so as to meet the public demand. The former see the latter's educational demands as irrelevant to the religious context, and insist on the traditional education. Such tension or strain leads to frustration on the latter's part, causing serious conflicts amongst the Order itself. The Hunger-Strike Protest held at Wat Mahadhatu, Bangkok, in 1975 is an expression of such frustration.

As a result, the radical monks have lost faith in their leaders. They are ^{losing their} faith even in religion itself. The more frustrated they are, the more deviated from the established religious norms they become. Such deviant behaviour patterns have done more harm than good to the religious Order.

The frustrated monks who seem to have less commitment to

their institution, no longer care for the interests of their religious Order. They are now men for themselves. Inspired only for educational achievement they try all possible ways to get themselves educated outside the temple walls. Their behaviour is loosely controlled, provoking resentment from the public. They no more live up to their own religious principles or commitments.

On the other hand, those who have lost educational motivation resort to corrupt folk practices such as black magic, soothsaying, spellcraft, incantation, astrology, amulets and talisman, accumulation of material wealth etc. at the cost of the doctrinal Buddhism and the ecclesiastical institutions. The practices of this sort belong to popular Buddhism mentioned earlier, which ^{are} comfortable earnings from the superstitious public. However such magical practitioners do more harm than good to the Buddhist Order in particular and to the public in general.

All these are symptoms of social ills in the Thai national Sangha. The deviant behaviour patterns of the monks representing the so called progressive forces are properly channelized and regulated and result in an ineffective administration on the part of the Sangha. This has also provoked dissatisfaction and averse sentiments from many sectors in the society, which

puts the blame on the Buddhist Order in general. A protest organized at Thammasat University in 1975 known as the Buddhism Operation Week / ~~11/11~~ was an expression of anger against the compromising of the Buddhist Order.

The religious elite are not strong enough to come up with matured ideas and rational action so as to cope up with such undesirable social forces. This trend appears to be linked with similar speculative trends of weakness and immaturity especially in the national polity and economy.

At the moment Thai Buddhism is very much confused and remains stagnated both at the social and the cultural levels. This is the consequence of the cultural and political conditions in the post-Chulalongkorn period (1920s) which have continually hindered institutionalization of the religious perspective of Buddhism toward freedom, distributive justice and equality of opportunity for all human individuals. The failure of the 1932 coup in instituting the spirit of its constitution in actual practice had latent consequences like cynicism and loss of faith in human intentions in general. The scientific and technological progress or evolution has not been matched by innovations in the Buddhist culture. The crisis of human faith in the efficacy of Thai religious Order bears similarities to the impact of science, technology and

rationality in Europe in the modern era as pointed out by Bellah² and the Indian Hindu culture in the post-Geeta and the post-independence periods as noted by Panchanadikar.³ In India the disrupting and yet the inevitable impact of Western scientific and technological diffusion was contained by Gandhian innovations of civic ethical Satyagraha or non-violent civic pursuation for change of heart of an oppressor. It was a search for freedom from fear, and commitment to truth, non-violence and non-exploitation. How the Thai Sangha has responded to the challenges of value vacuum in the wake of Western impact and its unadapted acceptance is analysed in the following section. This is followed by an account of re-interpretation of Thai Buddhism by two outstanding scholar-monks of the Buddhist Order in Thailand, providing the fundamentals for a new revival and rejuvenation.

3. Reinterpretation of Merit and Religious Modernization

In an over-all in recent time, the established relationships between the Buddhist Order and secular order in Thailand have been weakened. In particular, among the better educated urban-residents Buddhism has been losing much of its relevance. Its social functions particularly in education have been gradually taken over by modern westernized social organizations both private and government. Where a traditional style of life has been changing, the functions of the Buddhist religion have

become more or less ornamental and ritualistic. "The Sangha" observes Phra Rajavaramuni, "is in danger of losing its traditional roles in Thai society".⁴ Some religious elite at the Seminar on "Buddhism and Contemporary Thai Society" held in August 1969 and sponsored by the Siam Society are to the point.

Thai society is deviating from Buddhism. The roles of religion that used to prevail in the society are now disappearing gradually. Many men of modern times see no importance in religion and particularly have unfavourable attitudes towards the institution of monks, after having seen some defects. They do not see the function that Buddhism still has in the society.⁵

Again on the same occasion, in his inauguration address to the seminar the Minister of Education made the following points : The important fact is that society has changed. If religion remains unchanged it will be a dead or non-living thing. If Buddhism does not keep up with society.... the new generation will lose faith in it. The Buddhist Church and the kingdom must cooperate, otherwise the future will be very dark indeed. Faithlessness and paganism would come to take place of the true religion.⁶

He went on to say that because of the strong Western influence in Thai education and the outmoded training of the monks, society and religion have become increasingly separated.

Religion was confined mainly to traditions and ritualism. To break this deadlock, one recommendation was advanced : Monks should undertake the functions of teaching in schools and universities and ought to have contact with the ordinary people's home and affairs. Visiting sick people in hospital should be another function of monks. The new generation still has need of religion, but monks never take an opportunity to come into contact with them. The students, who help in development works, thereby, lack relationship with monks.⁷ Another recommendation is of a similar intention : Now monks ought to try to regain their reputation by reforming the institution of monks. Otherwise the religion and society will drift further apart and in the end become completely severed.⁸

All these observations are the sincere expressions of the traditional monks and laymen of standing, from both the government and private sectors, who have had no doubt about the social role of Buddhism in Thai society. They all have tried to revive the religious roles of Buddhism relevant to the modern context. These active groups of well-placed laymen, include those who are members of the Buddhist Association of Thailand, The Thai Young Buddhist Association, the World Fellowship of Buddhists, and to some extent the Siam Society. Several of them have been influenced by the reform and reinterpretation attempted by Buddadasa Bhikkhu and recently

impressed by the reflections of Phra Rajvaramuni. Their organized activities include social welfare, Buddhist studies and material assistance to the monks and novices who are actively engaged in intellectual activities and social programmes.

The modernists of ecclesiastic order are to be found at the two Buddhist universities of Mahamakut and Mahachula. These two universities offer a modern educational programme both religious and secular to their students. Their graduates are active in the Buddhist Sunday School movement, in the upgrading of the education of the provincial monks, and the poor peasant boys, in the religious propagation, and in the rural social welfare and community development programmes.

Apart from these groups, one still finds a good number of modernist monks scattered and similarly active various wats, both at the capital and the countryside.

Obviously, their organized activities are directly or indirectly motivated by the concept of merit-redefined and redirected. Similarly some ranking members of the Sangha, the government and the Thai Buddhist Association have been interpreting merit and merit-making behaviour as conducive to nation-building and modernization. Social and humanitarian

service is regarded as morally good, comparable with the Dhamma and being meritorious in itself. One can gain merit by giving alms and services or comfort not only to the monks or temples but also to one's parents, elders, the blind, the poverty-stricken, the orphaned, the weak or the suppressed. Any such help is translated into merit. One also gains merit by avoiding antisocial behaviour patterns aroused by illusion, hatred, anger annoyance and such other things. They also argue that community development activities, such as, building of public schools, wells, bridges, roads, etc. earn merit just like the contributions to temples, because the former also promote progress and encourage cooperation.⁹

In addition to these, the monks should impart knowledge to the people and teach them that community cooperation is just as good, as giving for religious purposes. By enhancing the welfare of the people, the prosperity of Buddhism and the state is also advanced. Since the welfare or happiness of the people is identified with meritorious action, everyone should take part in such welfare activity. The monks should also play an active role, especially that of spiritual, intellectual and moral leaders in programmes organized by either private or governmental agencies, for the good of the people.¹⁰ To act as wandering ascetics bringing help, advantage and happiness to the people, in the way the Buddha used to encourage

his disciples is the basic obligation of the monks. The people should be helped for their well-being through ethics, education and work.¹¹ All this seems to suggest that, what is good for the people or the nation is meritorious and good for Buddhism and vice versa.

In this connection the observation made by Evers, who interviewed a sample of 25 higher civil servants on the problem of merit in modern Thailand, is of some interest here. Fourteen out of the 25 respondents believed development programmes to be meritorious; only one respondent completely rejected the idea. Nine informants thought the construction of roads and canals to be meritorious, while four disagreed. No one believed merit was earned in building new factories.¹²

In the opinion of the majority of Thais, monks should remain monks. They should uphold religion in the traditional way, providing for the ritual and merit needs of the populace, teaching and practicing the Dhamma and serving the people with the needed advice, fortune-telling and amulets. The Sangha, as organization is a traditional institution that is not oriented towards modern pastoral activities. Monks join their religion for traditional reasons and not to revitalize Buddhism or to change society. To most Thais merit-making is a part of the traditional way of life. Wat-centred activities make merit. One makes contributions to collective

ritual, the building of temples and the ordination of one's son. These activities offer an opportunity to acquire all the merit desired.¹³ The information collected from the 229 monks and novices as given in Table 8.2 points to the prevailing trends, in regard to Monk to laymen exchanges.

Table 8.2 : The Roles often Performed by Rural/Urban Monks upon Invitation from Laymen (based on empiric inquiry, Thailand, 1975).

Categories	Number	Clergymen		
		Rural : Wangchai- Nampong	Urban	
			Khonkaen munici- pality	Bangkok Matropo- litan
		%	%	%
1. Soothsaying and ceremonies such as marriage, house- warming, black magic, incantation and funeral rites	160	24.45	19.65	25.76
2. Public sermons (Dhamma- preaching)	58	8.07	9.60	7.86
3. Teaching at secular educational institutes as schools and universities	9	0.87	1.74	1.31
4. Other activities or no response	2	-	0.87	-
Total	229	33.19	31.88	34.93

The social welfare and social development programmes and modern education, as worked-out for practising monks by the modernist religious heads, function fairly well, and are gradually gaining popular recognition.

In regard to Buddhism and its role in modern education, Tambiah's observation is quite suggestive : "The infra-structural basis is the modern Sangha's role as an educational network providing the channels for geographical and social mobility and for intellectual aspirations of important segments of population - the poor peasants, who can not afford the expenses for secular secondary and higher education. Historically the Sangha has always played this role but in the modern times it is intensified to a degree never previously known!"¹⁴

As discussed earlier in Chapter VII, the national education used to function under the and the same office, organized with the help of the Buddhist Order since the establishment of Sukhodaya Kingdom, but has been taken over by the secular order recently since 1920, resulting in dissociation between the religious and the secular. The Buddhist Order was confined within the walls of the monasteries but it has striven maximally to regain its lost ground in education.

In this a bird's eye view of the templeboys known as

"Dekwat", who reside in a wat and enjoy the facilities provided by a wat is to the point. It is not surprising that the templeboys of the urban wat-residence particularly in Bangkok are equal to or outnumber the monks and novices. Most of them move to an urban-based wat in order to seek educational opportunities, attending the educational institutes from the primary to the university level and a wat in effect serves as a much needed hostel. Some monks in Bangkok particularly those from the Northeast have as many as ten to twenty templeboys for whom they have accepted responsibility. Monks find it difficult to refuse parents who ask that their children be accepted as templeboys for the sake of their children's education.¹⁵

In this context one may refer to the templeboys of Wat Nampong-Wangchai, Wat Dhat-Srinual in the Khonkaen Municipality and wat Sraket in Bangkok observed by me in 1975 as shown in Table 8.3. Almost all of them are students who are accommodated on the basis of their educational pursuit or aspiration. They attend the nonwat educational institutes. None of the residents of Wat Sraket claims Bangkok as his native place and they are reported to have come either from middle class or from low-income families from provinces. None of Dhat-Srinual monastery residents claims to be a native of the municipal town and they are reported to have come from village-based

families. They are accommodated with the help of the monks or novices of the same localities or by those who are well acquainted with their parents directly or indirectly.

Table 8.3 : Templeboys Availing Themselves of the Facilities in the Four Wats while Seeking Educational Opportunities, Thailand, 1975.

	Resident student			Resident non-student
	Primary	Secondary	Higher Education	
Wat Wangchai-Nampong	-	5	-	1
Wat Dhat	7	21	3	-
Wat Srinual	10	27	4	2
Wat Sraket	2	88	29	13
Total	19	141	36	16*

* The figure includes those who have just become a layman and are about to leave a wat permanently.

As it stands, some of them are provided with the free-of-charge residential facilities and food by a wat or a monk while other expenses are borne by their parents. Some are entirely sponsored by some monks. They are supposed to extend their possible services such as cleaning works, food-preparation

etc. to the monks or novices who act as their mentors or guardians. In a similar manner at least 80% of the temple-boys over the kingdom as discussed earlier in Chapter IV, must have been accommodated in wats for the same purposes. In Bangkok-Dhonburi Metropolis in particular, about 9914 templeboy-students from the country, mostly 14-20 years of age live under the monks and novices in some 200 monasteries.¹⁶

In fact, the practice of the sort is a kind of educational apprenticeship that has emerged in a new form, transforming the traditional pattern of monkhood. As the advanced modern education is in the hands of the secular order and those in the yellow robes are deprived of such required education as already noted, several boys who are intelligent but lack the means for education resort to some possible help extended to them by a wat in the form of templeboys in preference to that of ascetic or monastic life. Through this process many of those from the rural poor and weaker sections in the society are being initiated to modern education, and also exposed to traditional acculturation through national symbols both religious and secular. Significantly, it is the wats, especially those in Bangkok-Dhonburi and other urban centres, that act as the cultural agents through which the parochial village folks and folk culture are assimilated into the urban or city culture and the universal cultural symbols of the

Thais, namely, kingship, religion and nation, resulting in the national integration.

Buddhism and national development

Supported by the reinterpretation of merit and Buddhism, several community development programmes have been launched with the participation of the monks at both national and local levels, severally or cooperatively by the Buddhist Order and the Government. This is a kind of legitimization of more rational merit and merit-making.

Several ranking senior monks have deeply felt and argued that monks should be well-trained and conversant with modern subjects or learning, if monkhood is to command respect. While being spiritual leaders, they should also be intellectual leaders. The rural wat should remain the socio-religious centre of the village and the monks should cooperate with the secular provincial and district authorities. Some leading senior monks in Bangkok are interested in a more active engagement of the monks in social welfare activities. They claim that the social welfare policy of the Sangha predates that of the government. The Sangha should actively support the community development programmes of the state.

To implement the joint programmes a training is to be

given to the participating monks. The main responsibility for this devolves on the various institutions concerned. At the two Buddhist universities, training commenced with a set of revised syllabi of study. In recent years these facilities have been expanded by establishing new schools at many places, such as, Nongkhai, Nakorn Srithammarat and Chonburi etc. and starting training programmes at wats in the country. The training programmes include (1) the Project for Encouraging the Participation of Monks in Community Development co-sponsored by the Buddhist universities and held at Mahachula; (2) the Project for the Participation of Monk-graduates in Upcountry Buddhist Activities sponsored independently by either Buddhist university; (3) the Dhamma Development Programme at Wat, Prasingh, Chiangmai; (4) the Programme for Spiritual Development sponsored by the Abhidhamma Foundation at Wat Mahadhatu, Bangkok; and (5) the Dhamma Charik Project with its centre at Wat Benchamaborpitr, Bangkok and Wat Sisoda in Chiangmai primarily aimed at the encouragement of the monks to participate in the national plan of assistance for the hill tribes in the North Thailand and sponsored by the Fifth Regional Ecclesiastical Governor on behalf of the Council of Elders and the Department of Public Welfare, Interior Ministry. Added to these are (6) the Dhammatuta Training Sessions for propagation of Buddhism within Thailand held throughout the country and (7) Overseas Dhammatuta Programme which is headquartered at

Wat Boronvires, Bangkok. The Department of Religious Affairs is involved directly or indirectly in all these programmes.¹⁷

The first, second and fifth programmes are the most far-reaching ones and the first two are of a more permanent nature. The programmes are financed by the government and/or some private organizations, such as, the National Arts Conservation Association of Thailand, the Asia Foundation and the Ford Foundation. All the three are here taken for the purpose of illustration.

To begin with the first programme, it was initiated at Mahachula in 1966 and its main objectives are : 1. To maintain and promote the monks' status as refuge of the people by providing them with religious education and general knowledge concerning community development. 2. To encourage the monks and novices to participate in community development and thus help the existing community development programmes to achieve their aims. 3. To promote unity among the Thai people and thus help to promote national and religious secularity.¹⁸

The programme is in conformity with the national development policy of the government. Upcountry people put their trust and confidence in the monks. Obedience and cooperation in any activity become automatic if request comes from the monks. In an age of accelerated development, community

programmes are sure to be effectively accomplished with monastic help and cooperation.¹⁹

The trainees include monks with qualification of either the Advanced Study Grade in Nakdham or any Pali Grade, selected by the Executive Committee from the provinces of their residence, and monk-graduates with B.A. from the Buddhist University. They are to be trained in specialized fields, such as, public health, sanitation, home economics, community or village development, vocational promotion, applied psychology, conservation of national arts, conservation of natural resources and selected laws concerning the daily life of the people in addition to Buddhism and Thai history. Table 8.4 gives a number of the trained monks who were sent to the different operational places of their native provinces in the country.

Table 8.4 : Number of the Trained Monks Assigned with the Community Development Activities, 1966-1972, Thailand.

Year	Number
1966	34
1967	80
1968	26
1969	64
1970	40
1971	59
1972	235
Total	533

Source : Adapted from Mahachula Curriculum and Activities 1973 (B.E. 2516), (Bangkok:Mahachula Buddhist University), p. 90.

The second programme is the Project for the Participation of Monk-graduates in Upcountry Buddhist Activities which is specifically carried out by Mahachula so as to meet the requests made to the university by the provincial communities through Provincial Ecclesiastical Governors. Financed by the Asian Foundation at its initial stage and later by the Thai government through the Department of Religious Affairs the programme was started in 1962 and is still in force. The monk-graduates are sent out to take up the assignments in different provinces especially those of remote and border areas in the country. Their assignments cover :

- (1) leading positions in the communities as teachers in Nakdham-Pali Schools and/or monastic private schools.
- (2) Assistance in the establishment and/or expansion and operation of such schools.
- (3) Teaching special moral lessons in community schools when invited.
- (4) The founding and/or conducting of Buddhist Sunday Schools.
- (5) Various kinds of propagative and moral activities, such as, forum, moral lessons transmitted by radio etc.,
- (6) Meditation lessons and practice.
- (7) Participation in community development programmes.²⁰

While the field-data collection for the present study was on in 1975, there were three monk-graduates under this programme who were actively at work in Khonkaen province. Table 8.5 indicates the increasing participation of Monk-graduates in the Upcountry Buddhist activities.

Table 8.5 : Number of the Monk-graduates Assigned with the
Upcountry Buddhist Activities Sponsored through
Mahachula Buddhist University 1962-1973, Thailand.

Year	Nos. of operational provinces	Nos. of active monk-graduates
1962	1	1
1963	3	5
1964	9	10
1965	13	25
1966	16	21
1967	18	21
1968	9	12
1969	8	10
1970	8	8
1971	13	24
1972	21	34
1973	28	42
Total	46	213

Source : Mahachula : Curriculum and Activities 1973 op. cit.
p. 89.

The last programme in the series is the Dhamma-Charik
(Lit.: Wandering Dhamma) Project which is preferably organized
as to encourage the monks to participate in the national plan

of socially uplifting hilltribes of the country as well as to draw them into a national life through Buddhism.

In 1965 the Thai government through the Department of Public Welfare launched the programme of Buddhist missions to the hilltribes of North Thailand which was to be carried out by members of the Thai Buddhist Clergy, the Sangha. Since then the programme has run as a joint effort of the state and the Sangha whose main objectives may be summarized as follows :

(1) To develop the economic and social conditions of hilltribes so that they may contribute to the national development, by promoting community development among the hilltribes grouped in settlements. (2) To induce the hilltribes to accept the important role of helping to maintain the security of national frontiers by instilling in them a sense of belonging to the nation. (3) To strengthen sentimental ties (of Thai) with the tribal people and to create loyalties (of the tribal people) to the nation through development of strong belief in Buddhism.²¹

Each dry season, monks recruited from Bangkok, including those from Mahachula and from the northern provinces have been sent in groups of 3-5 members to live in the centres established in areas where the tribal people have already experienced some contact with workers of the Public Welfare Department. The Bangkok monks spend two months in the mission stations while the local monks spend four. The Dhamma Charik monks have

worked among Meo, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, Akha, Karen and Tin peoples. The methods used by the Dhammacharik monks include the exposing of the tribal peoples to the clerical behaviour, teaching them how to make merit, encouraging them to be ordained as Buddhist monks or novices. Associated with these are possible attempts to give them a basic moral instruction and guidance in health and sanitation, particularly food habits; to teach them the Thai language; to persuade them to listen to news broadcast by both the local and national radio stations; and to expose them to the documentary pictures with the help of the government officials. Meanwhile the technical training in secular occupation is carried out by the government officials. Some of them have been ordained as novices or monks - twelve in 1965 and forty-six in 1967. A few were brought in Bangkok, trained in modern education at Wat Benchamabopit and finally sent back to their native locality. Some are still in the robes.²²

In spite of the unfavourable cultural and natural environment some of Mahachula monk students did join the programme every year during 1967-1972. Table 8.6 shows a number of the participating Mahachula monk students (excluding those from other institutes) encouraged by the university.

Table 8.6 : Number of the Mahachula Monk-students Participating in the Dhammacharik Project 1967-1972, Thailand.

Year	Nos. of participating monks	Operational region by provinces	Remarks
1967	40	Tak, Maehongsook,	The number is on the decline in consequence of the responsibilities being taken over by the ordained and trained tribal monks and novices.
1968	40	Chiangmai, Chiangrai	
1969	42	Nan, Pitsanulok,	
1970	42	Loei and Petchabon	
1971	80		
1972	10		
Total	254		

Source : Mahachula : Curriculum and Activities, 1973, op. cit. p. 92.

The degree to which Thai Buddhism can play the new role which the Thai government and the Buddhist Order have cast for it is open to question. It is too early to assess fully the future course of the programmes. By and large the first two programmes and the Dhamma Development Project, as above, have succeeded as evaluated by Sweaver²³ and Piker,²⁴ while the last one (Dhammacharik), the Dhammatuta Programme and the Programme for Spiritual Development seem to have had less success because of their late beginning and their alignment with political ends, as assessed by Keyes.²⁵ The religious elite are well aware of this fact and things are rectified.

The redefinition of merit and merit-making in terms of activities oriented to social service is an important development in Thai Buddhism. In fact, it is not difficult to find such activities in Thai society in the past, but they seem to have been rather poorly organized. How well or poorly such activities based on the redirected merit-making will work remains to be seen.

Mass communication through merit-making : Merit-making in Thailand is manifested in many different forms of human organization for communication. In this context, festivals like the Kathin, Phapa and Songkrant festivals are significant.

The Kathin Festival : The Kathin festival is popular among the Thai people from the head of the state down to the commoners, even among those of faiths other than Buddhism. It takes place every year throughout the kingdom, after the three-month Rainy Retreat. Through it the people of different social backgrounds, occupations and rural-urban cultures, are brought into a face-to-face contact on the basis of common value of merit-making.

The Kathin is offered to the village wats by the urbanized residents, both monks and laymen, especially from Bangkok-Thonburi. The key persons are monks or laymen (both sexes) of the rural localities who had moved to urban centres for their

educational or occupational aspirations. After they start earning their living or are well-established in Bangkok-Thonburi they are reminded of their former village, temple and school. They feel like improving these traditional institutions of their native place. This requires some funds which can not be met by any single individual but by donation from many. Most funds come from donations based on merit-making activities of Buddhist religion especially the Kathin and the Phapa. These donations may go entirely to a community or village wat, or school, depending on decisions taken by the wat committee and the concerned donors.

The Phapa Festival (literally forest robes) originally refers to the robes cast in the forest or somewhere by someone unknown to a monk and no body claims ownership of the robes. A Buddhist monk short of the requisite robes may be allowed to take such cast robes. Whosoever can offer such needy monk a better one replacing it is believed to earn merit. On this basis the Phapa gets institutionalized in Thailand with a view to merit-making. Its recent development includes not only robes but also many requisites and donations not only to a monk or a wat but also to the weak people as well.

The way the Phapa is organized is by and large on the same as the Kathin. But the former is not limited by time factor, and can be organized at any time, during the dry season

(April and May) when more people are relaxing. During my field-data collection in 1975, there was one Phapa organized by the Bangkok residents under leadership of Phramaha Sawaeng and presented to Wat Ban Wangchai. It brought along with it some 120 people of Bangkok by private buses to the Wangchai village. They spent two days and one night at the village : some stayed overnight with some villagers, while the rest were provided with all possible facilities by the villagers within the wat compound. The Phapa-makers and villagers (unknown to one another before that) had a face-to-face contact : chit-chatting, sharing the food from the common kitchen provided by the villagers at the common table and common merit-making. They were found in a jubilant mood. The concept of pollution was not much in sight nor any social discrimination except for the fact that some behaviour patterns (how to talk, how to eat, how to act etc.) were obviously patterned after the city culture of the guests from the cities.

In two days' time they saw village life at work. At night folk shows were staged as also motion pictures screened simultaneously. The phapa ended with an offering of certain goods including one electric generator and some 16557.20 Baht to the village wat, part of which would go to the village school as announced on the wat noticeboard. The Bangkokians left a good impression behind while taking some folk elements

with them. It was told that the Phapa of the sort started in 1949, making possible the first direct contact between the Bangkokians and the villagers, and this was the sixth one.

With a look at the records of wats of Nampong, Srinual and Dhat, comparable instances of gifts were found, but different in degree and frequency. Similarly, intervillage, interprovincial, and interregional kathin and phapa festivals are carried out to serve the same purposes or aspirations.

From these instances, one may suggest that contact and communication between the urban and the folk cultures is getting established, mediated through the merit-making values and tradition of Buddhism. The overt behaviour patterns of the now urbanized ex-villagers with their city culture are exposed to the villagers and their folk culture, such as, dress-patterns, mannerism, food-preparation and food habits. They in turn, bring in for a time their central Thai dialect (official language) and aspect of their city life-pattern. Associated with these is the communication through the modern mass media technology in the form of cinema shows arranged for village folks during festivities. Along with the entertainment films, there were also the documentaries showing the cultural happenings in Bangkok-Dhonburi Metropolis and other parts of the country. These were provided free by the Government public Relations Department. Here was a meeting of two Thai cultures,

whereby the village people with their folk culture get to assimilate the cultural symbols of the city culture in Thailand.

Since the 1940s or even earlier mass communication through modern technology has reached the villagers the village wat. Now the state-run T.V. is within the reach of villagers through both private and governmental agencies. The former folk styles of traditional mass communication organized by a wat are gradually being transformed and replaced by the state-run radio and T.V. and the privately run newspapers and theatre. With the lapse of time the traditional modes of communication seems to be losing ground. However, they still continue effectively and contribute to ongoing development as well as national integration. Similarly a number of public schools, halls, bridges, roads, hospitals etc. are yearly being added helping integration of the rural communities with the national main stream. This is a byproduct of the reformed styles in merit-making symbolism.

However, there are instances of merit-making is being exploited to serve the interests of some cunning politicians and corrupt racketeers. Occasionally the collected funds and related activities are reported to have been misused for promoting personal interests. At any rate such things do not go unchecked nor unpunished. The festivals, especially the

Phapa, are being brought under control through rules and regulations now being formally adopted by the Council of Elders.

Similarly, the Songkrant festival (April 13-16) or Thai traditional New Year in a modified form possibly adapted from Indian tradition by Ayudhya as a Thai Buddhist practice plays the same role. The first day of Songkrant is a national holiday. It usually falls on April 13, when, according Brahmanic reckoning, the sun leaves the sign Pisces and enters that of Aries. The Thais consider this to be New Year's Day and good reason. It is celebrated between 13-16 April. The Songkrant marks a change in the seasons of utmost importance to the cultivator - the end of the long dry season and an approximate beginning of new rains. It is, therefore, associated with water, water-throwing, the ceremonial bathing of images of Buddha and of venerated abbots and respected ancestors. These include rites and processions suggesting or inducing rain.²⁶ It is also connected with the merit-making dedicated to the deceased kin. Nowadays it is often celebrated in association with the Phapa as outlined above.

For purposes of this Phapa ceremonial the city people pour in by buses, trains or private cars to the provincial or rural commitments, particularly so in the northern and north-

eastern provinces. This custom possibly extends to Burma, Malaysia, Cambodia and Laos. From the standpoint of its social function it more or less plays the same integrative role as those just indicated above.

The earlier preference for Songkrant festival seems at present to be shifting in favour of the New Year of January 1, particularly in the urban centres. Comparative distributions of those who participated in the former as compared to the latter are as shown in Table 8.7.

Table 8.7 : Comparative statement of the Rural/Urban Laymen taking part in the Annual Songkrant Festival and Other Festivals as Compared to those Celebrating the Modern New Year during 1972-1975 period (based on field work in Thailand, 1975).

	Number	Rural		Number	Urban	
		Male %	Female %		Male %	Female %
1. Songkrant : 13-16 April	57	21.10	8.94	19	4.36	3.93
2. Modern New Year (January 1)	95	34.73	15.26	95	24.89	16.59
3. Other annual festivals such as Loykrathong, Bun Bangfai, boat- racing etc.	19	5.26	4.73	25	9.17	1.74
4. Taking part in none	19	2.05	8.94	90	24.89	14.41
Total	190	62.10	37.90	229	63.32	36.68

However, the transformation has not worked in opposition to the Thai Buddhist tradition, especially the merit-making behaviour. Here merit is still at work. The Thai New Year of January 1 adopted from the Christian culture is still guided by the concept of merit. On the first of January offerings are made to the monks by the Thai people who do visit the Buddhist temples on this day. The centres of celebration are still in the wat compounds if not organized by a wat, but inaugurated with Buddhist ceremonies.

4. Buddhism and its Quest for Modernization

The account that follows focuses on the redefinition of Buddhism in response to the western impacts of science and technology by two leading Buddhist scholars, namely, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Rajavaramuni (Prayuddh Payutto). They may be classified as modern Buddhist reformers whose contributions are distinctive from each other but each reflect the attempt to restore Buddhism's creative tension for further cultural innovation.

Looking back in Thai history one recognizes that modernizing forces have affected at various time periods. Among these, Indianization and Westernization have had far-reaching consequences. The former was successfully carried out through

Buddhism and Brahmanism prior to the nineteenth century while the latter reached Thai society through Christian missions, and western commercial imperialism at the beginning of the 19th century and onwards.

King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn both sought to revitalize and restore earlier and more vigorous forms of Buddhist beliefs and practice, so as to strengthen the Kingship in terms of purified Buddhist ideas by subordinating magical Brahmanic accretions while seeking to unite the Western with neotraditional cultural perspective. Unfortunately its later development, especially 1920 onwards failed to sustain it. Presently Thailand is in the state of confusion in regard to cultural values and priorities.

At this critical juncture two modernist monks, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Rajavaramuni have enunciated their redefinition and reinterpretation of Thai Buddhism, as was earlier done by Prince-monk Mongkut. Their work and thought go back to the original doctrine of Buddhism or Buddha dhamma. An account of their social and intellectual backgrounds and basic trainings are to the point in the context.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu is one of the controversial monks in Thai national Sangha. Born in 1906 in the rural environment in the southern province of Suratdhani, he was ordained at

the age of twenty. After a period of traditional monastic studies he retired to the forest for a period of six years to meditate and to study. Then he returned to a more normal monastic routine, eventually becoming an abbot of a famous monastery in Caiya. During the past two decades he has devoted most of his time and energy to the building of Mokkhapalaram, popularly known as Suan Mokh - a forest hermitage, thereby meaning "the Garden of Salvation". There he and his follower monks about 40 in number, are actively preoccupied with their religious movement. He has also a number of wealthy and upper-class layfollowers.

"In his late sixties, B.B. (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu)" writes an American anthropologist, "is the most scholarly and intellectual Buddhist monk in Siam. Some Thais consider him the most important figure in Thai Buddhism since King Mongkut. A large, outgoing and energetic person, he is a voluminous writer, TV personality, religious entrepreneur, and teacher to thousands of Thai laymen and hundreds of monks, foreign as well as Thai whom he has reached with his message".²⁷ In addition he has a good command of English which has helped to establish his popularity among the scholars, both Thai and foreign.

Another modernist reformer monk is Phra Rajvaramuni (previously Phramaha Prayudh Payutto), who has won popularity

among Thai Buddhist monks and laymen, of both conservative and progressive leanings. Born into a peasant family in 1938, in Supanburi, a province in the Central Plain, he started his monastic life as a novice at the age of twelve in his home district, when he was unable to attend secondary school on account of his poor health. His motives for entering the Buddhist Order were largely educational and social rather than religious, as is true of many young Thai boys in the rural sectors.

During his novicehood he began his monastic training by attending the traditional courses of Buddhist doctrine and practice (Nakdham and Pali Studies). Unlike many young novices, however, he found himself becoming absorbed and engrossed in his studies, and more and more attracted by the teachings of the Lord Buddha. His interest took him to a temple at Supanburi provincial Capitol and later in Bangkok, respectively. With facilities provided to him by Wat Prapiren in Bangkok he was found attending the Nakdham-Pali Study courses run by his own wat and others, and the university degree courses of modern education at Mahachula Buddhist University, simultaneously. He was the first young novice who completed the highest grades of the Nakdham-Pali Studies while attending the final year of the university degree course and completed his B.A. with First Class Honours in the following year, 1961. On the basis of his

himself or herself to the Eightfold Path, which Buddhadasa symbolizes by the boat.³⁰

His approach leads him to make some claims that seem antithetical to conservative norminative symbols system of Theravada Buddhism. For instance, he says that nirvana is to be found in Samsara, implying that The Lord Buddha said that things which occur naturally will pass by the same token. We should thoroughly understand one of the shortest, fairest and most useful dicta : wherever there is suffering, the cessation of suffering must be there. If samsara occurs naturally, then it must also fade away naturally. Do not separate the occurrence and the cessation; by whatever means and whenever, the samsara rises it will recess in the same manner.³¹

This has met with a strong reaction from the conservative camp of Buddhist intellectuals but Buddhadasa argues that a distinction between everyday or conventional language and Dhamma language or the language of true Buddhism, must be from the highest level. For example on the level of the conventional language the Buddha is taken to be simply a historical person. In the Dhamma language, however, "the Buddha is one and the same as that truth by virtue of which he became the Buddha and anyone who sees that truth can be said to have seen the true Buddha."³² Utilizing the same distinction, on the level of conventional language Buddha Dhamma means the scriptures or

academic merit he was officially ordained as a full-fledged monk, being patronized by His Majesty the King Bhumipol, the present king of the country. Later on he was conferred by the king, the titles of Chaogun, Phra Srivissuddhimoli and Phra Rajvaramuni in the increasing order of significance, in the Buddhist Order.

After his education he has served at Mahachula, his own Alma Mater in various capacities, namely, as lecturer in Buddhist Studies in English, as University Executive Member, and Deputy Secretary-General. The last position held has given him a freehand to reform the educational system of his former institute. He has gained popularity among the Thai intellectuals both conservative and radical when he came out with his reinterpretation of Thai tradition, especially Buddhism, when the Thai Buddhist Order was being adversely criticized in 1973-1975. His work, "Buddhadhamma" won him scholarly recognition. For him revolution must begin with intellectual and moral commitments. To follow these it requires devotion in terms of time and energy.

During his term in office he has gone twice to the U.S.A. as a Visiting Professor on Buddhism and Thai Culture, at the invitation of Pennsylvania University, where he has stayed on for more than two years, since 1976.

Now to turn to their reinterpretation of Thai tradition. Their main works can be fruitfully summarized by keeping in view the concepts of theodicy, sin and salvation as part of a world-view, as also their goal-orientation and its social implications.

World-view and goal-orientation : By and large their works and thoughts go back to original doctrine of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths, the Dependent Origination, the Three Characteristics of Existence and the Eightfold Paths are the core themes on which their reinterpretation and reform are based. Their reinterpretation stands closer to the this-worldly (here and now), humanistic, immediate life concern, than to the other-worldly, the supernatural and the divine (the beyond). Apparently Buddhadasa Bikkhu is seemingly influenced by the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism whereas Phra Rajvaramuni by Hinayana Buddhist philosophy, drawn from the Tripitaka, in which he himself is well-versed.

To both of them Buddhism, already stated, postulates two levels of reality : one, the phenomenal world of every experience, a world of ignorance and illusion and the other, the ultimate world of the karmically conditioned, religious reality. These two levels of reality are not completely distinct nor separate worlds. They are two perspectives on the

same world. These two perspectives on reality are based on a number of key Buddhist doctrines, particularly those of the Three Characteristics of Existence (Tilukkhana) and the theory of the Twelvefold Dependent Origination (Paticcasamuppada). The former deals with the real characteristics common to all beings whereas the latter deals with how all the beings exist (being) in the process of change (becoming). Added to these are the concepts, such as, Karma and rebirth that are the core points of controversy at present.

Dhamma or truth of Buddhism, according to both the reformers, looks at the world of beings at two levels : universal truth (what it is) and ethics (what is should be). From the viewpoint of the former, Dhamma is equated to the true nature of things. It is everything and everywhere. The most appropriate term to denote the nature of Dhamma proposed by Buddhadasa is "Sunyata" or the Void. The ordinary man considers the void to mean "nothing" when in reality, it means everything - everything, that is, without reference to self (Anatta).²⁸ His teachings focussing on the dissolution of the concepts of "me" (Tuaku) and "mine" (khong ku) are particularly representative of this direction.

Buddhadasa's reinterpretation of Buddhism is represented by a model operative at Suan Mokh, a monastery of semi-isolated environment, more in harmony with a wide variety of natural

settings, than with the man-made artifacts. The entire monastery offers a graphic illustration of Buddhadasa's ideal of propagating the original or pristine substance of Buddhism in a form which combines the traditional and modern. The central structure of monastery is an immense concrete "Spiritual Theatre", next to which is an equally large concrete boat, a symbol of the boat which carries one to nirvana. The theatre is a large auditorium built primarily to teach Buddhism through the use of audio-visuals such as films and slides. On the inside walls of the theatre there are murals taken from religious traditions mostly Buddhist, but some from non-Buddhist religious also. They are intended to illustrate the suffering which results from the bondage of the senses to the objects of sense and, thereby, to point the way to the goal of freedom from attachment. This goal is symbolized by a large white circle dominating the room, a symbol for the Buddhist notion of the Void or Emptiness - Freedom (Sunyata).²⁹ Sunyata refers to that which is empty of craving, aversion and delusion. When there is total emptiness or freedom, this is what is called Nirvana (Nibbhana). The condition of emptiness resulting from the complete and thorough elimination of the self-idea and selfishness is what is called Nirvana. This can be summarized by saying : " Nirvana is perfect emptiness" or "perfect emptiness is Nirvana". Accordingly Nirvana can be attained in this world, here and now, by anyone who keeps

teachings of Buddhism. On the highest level, Dhamma is true nature of things. This is summarized by Buddhadasa in a reinterpretation of the tradition, viz. the Four Noble Truths, consist of nature itself, the laws of nature, man's duty to act in accord with the laws of nature, and the benefits derived from such action.³³

In his address to the Buddhist Conference of the Eighth World Fellowship he told, that the principal teaching of Buddhism is identical to the main tenets of other religions; for all true religions seek to reduce and minimize man's self-importance or selfishness and advised its members not to limit themselves to the confines of one particular religion - "for if they do, they are not acting in conformity with the laws of nature since nature recognizes no boundaries and no divisions."³⁴ He went far enough to say "The heart of Buddhism is non-attachment to anything not even the religion itself until finally it is seen that there is no Buddhism",³⁵ thereby meaning that the person after reaching Dhamma, has no-self-anxiety or that there is no way to self-anxiety because the self has vanished. Only Dhamma nature remains.³⁶

In a similar manner, the reinterpretation followed by Phra Rajvaramuni stands closest to the texts as found in Pali Texts especially the Sutta Pitaka (the Collection of Discourses).

His exposition is highly systematized, absolutely in conformity with that of the earlier teachers and texts. It is an interpretation of the pristine teaching, advocating changes on both social and personal levels in a new existential situation. He looks at Buddhism at two contexts : absolute or universal truth (Saccadhamma) and ethics (Cariyadhamma). The former is equated by him with Majjhenadhamma - the Universal Truth or Universal Laws of Nature whereas the latter with Majjimapatipada - the Middle Way, a way to the truth or actualities in life situation, defined by the former for everyone, regardless of monks, laymen, sexes, races and ages. The former is beyond time and space.

In the light of the former, Phra Rajvaramuni's core reinterpretation of Thai traditional Buddhism obviously goes back to the heart of the Buddha's teachings - the Four Noble Truths and the Twelfefold Dependent Origination. The four interrelated questions raised by him are : What does life consist of? How does life turn out to be? How does life get involved? and what should life be? In answer to the first question he points to the Five Groups of Existence (Five Khandhas); to the second question his answer is the Three Common Characteristics of Existence (Tilukkhana : transciency, conflict and nonself). For the third he relies on the Twelfefold Dependent Origination; and to the fourth and the last, he provides the answer by pointing to the Middle Way known as the Noble Eightfold

Path in which are involved Morality, Concentration and Wisdom. He has put more stress on the last one, namely, wisdom.

The main point of interest clearly indicated by Phra Rajvaramuni is a distinction between Buddhism and non-Buddhist theistic religions, from the practical point of view. His concepts of theodicy, sin and salvation stand close to those of Buddhadasa but are more systematic and concrete, going back to the original form of Buddhism. Throughout his systematic exposition in his "Buddha-Dhamma"³⁷ he insists that nowhere is it found in Buddha's teaching, that the world was created by God and the like. Never is the question of the beginning and the end of the world encouraged nor entertained by the Buddha; nor can they be envisaged. The world is conditioned by the Universal Law of Dependent Origination because the condition of the world at any time is the result of evolution from a condition at a previous time and so on, back into the indefinite past. Of course, there is a talk about powerful gods in Buddhism but they are a concession to the Hindu or indigenous beliefs of the people and they take a relatively unimportant place in the Buddha's teaching.

As regards sin or suffering (Dukkha) to use the Buddhist technical term, it is not originally caused by man's disobedience to God but ultimately caused by ignorance of man, who simply does not know how to live in such a way as to be completely

happy. The Five Precepts, the Eight Precepts, the Ten Precepts and the 227 Precepts in Buddhism, are not presented as commandments or imperatives. The Buddha suggests that sin or suffering and misfortune are caused by unwholesome actions, such as, killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slander, harsh language, worthless chattering, covetiousness, ill will and wrong views. Never does the Buddha issue a command or order about such actions. His teaching is in the form of advice, saying that anyone who does not avoid these actions will create misery as a result of the natural laws of cause and effect. The actions themselves are caused by greed, hate and stupidity in the mind of a man.

With reference to salvation, Phra Rajvaramuni maintains that the Buddha's advice for a remedy of suffering or sin is to remove the cause of it by avoiding the unwholesome actions and by training the mind in such way that greed, hate and stupidity vanish. Each man must do this by his own efforts, though in practice the guidance of an experienced teacher is usually required. In the theistical religions the requirements for receiving the grace of God are repentance and faith, but in Buddhism they merely provide a primary motive for setting out on the path and must be eventually replaced by knowledge or wisdom (Pauya). The path itself may be analysed into three components, namely, morality, meditation and wisdom. Morality is the observing of rules of conduct in day-to-day life, which

meditation is the practice of training the mind by systematic techniques to remove internal turbulence and sluggishness, thereby making mind calm and clear. When a person's mind has been brought into this condition, it is possible for that person to see directly the causes of suffering and the way to remove them. This last phase constitutes the component of wisdom on the path.

In Buddhism, salvation is obtained by spiritual work on the path consisting of morality, meditation and wisdom. The Buddhist strives for the extinction of suffering, a condition that is called Nirvana. Nirvana may be attained in this life before death, or if not, then it may be attained in a future life as a result of further spiritual training. Ultimately it is for the individual by himself to attain Nirvana within a morally ordered and committed life.

Social implication : The two reformers' interpretations and their social implication in the modern context, is of special interest here. Their interpretation appears to go in favour of the practical application of Buddhism to the human conditions in this world rather than in the beyond.

In this connection their core interpretation emphasizes on the freedom of mind, a liberation from anxiety, disturbance, attachment and even the concept of "I" as the centre of action

and selfishness. Such free mind leads to the destruction of the roots of bad actions, such as, greed, hatred and delusion while the opposite can be created and developed, leading to personal and/or social peace and happiness. This can be done by reaching the state of absolute truth or laws of nature through the Middle Way as suggested by Buddhism.

For everyone both layman and monk, with no exception at his or her capabilities, Buddhism is a set of normative symbols pointing to the truth, not the truth itself. Buddhism is, fundamentally, a way to the Truth. This way is the way of meditation, built upon a right view or wisdom. It must be admitted that Buddhism can be no more than the raft ferrying a person or society to the further shore, a shore of wisdom, peace and happiness in life. All beings and becomings are determined by the laws of nature, not at all by God and the like. Man has to understand the laws of nature, and try to benefit as much as possible from such action. To both of them science and technology and material wealth are merely means, with the help of which the life-goal can be attained. They are by no means the goal in life. If they stand helpful to the corruption of a man and society in any form, never are they favoured by Buddha-Dhamma. Things made for material progress must be kept under control. A man should not be ruled, nor entrapped by them but must be master over them. The blind greeds for material wealth are the

antithesis of wisdom. The cultivation and accumulation of material possessions based on such greeds are the antithesis of freedom and peace, leading to strife and war.³⁸

The reformers spell out some of the dimensions of applicability of the truth of Buddhism to everyday life. For instance, they insist that Buddhism has been incorrectly understood as world-denying. On the contrary, only reaching or practising Buddha-Dhamma can life be truly happy and satisfying. To know Dhamma is to know and to be able to act in terms of the laws of nature. As a result conflict is reduced and it is possible to live in greater harmony and peace. This comes about when and because an individual whom has reached Dhamma does not work for a reward but for the sake of the work itself.³⁹

In this connection Buddhadasa's advice is quite relevant : "People misunderstand the meaning of life or work. People as such live in hell on earth. They should be helped by the Buddhist religious virtusoes to reform their characters and minds, until they understand the meanings of life and work, love their work and find happiness in it : to work is to be happy".⁴⁰

On the level of society Buddhadasa sees Buddha-Dhamma as helping to bring about a peaceful society. Although Buddhism is primarily concerned about the individual, it stands on the

principle that the individual who adheres to Dhamma will not imperil others.⁴¹ Precisely because the realization of the truth of Buddhism allows the individual to transcend the power of Karma, he is free from every force that breeds greed, hatred and war. Buddhadasa sees a particular relevance for Buddhism in these confusing and chaotic times, in which materialism reigns.⁴² The most important technique is Dhamma which is, in fact, an understanding of what it means to be fully human, to achieve happiness, perfection and universal love, to which man is to be restored by realizing Buddha-Dhamma.⁴³ In relation to this point the Buddhist ethics and morality as indicated earlier, is the point of their emphasis.

They are of the opinion that the modern Thai Buddhist are obviously alienated from the core doctrine of Buddhism because of the religious activities in the forms of ritualism and ceremonies which are merely its husk and chaff; and recommend that as a true Buddhist one needs no such ritualism, nor priest for communion between men and gods, nor prayer, but acts with one's own will, aided and guarded by one's own independently developed wisdom, concentration and morality.

They both share critical stance toward the traditional norms and symbols of Thai Buddhist culture in which much of the intervening Theravada tradition has been a distortion of the original form of its truth, full of ritualistic habits,

tendencies and practices which keep the Thai Buddhists from preceiving the true nature of Buddhism. All these must, according to them, be carefully reformed and restored to the essential truth of Buddhism. Buddhadasa's approach is the radical one represented by Suan Mokh (Garden of Salvation), a model attempting to recapture the purity of early Buddhism, whereas Phra Rajvaramuni is quite moderate, attempting to reform the traditional norms and symbols of Buddhist culture in Thailand by means of modern education at Mahachula Buddhist University.

What they have tried to do is favourably in accord with the perspective that religion is not identified with secular, society, nor divorced from it as also the notion of rationalization which allows for change within the normative symbols of religion, as related to its cultural context. In line with their thought some projects, such as, the Project for Encouraging the Participation of Monks in Community Development, the Dhammatutta Programme and the Dhamma Charik Project have been launched. All these may be classified as the social focus and participation by the Sangha in a more rationalized form. How far these programmes will work, remains to be seen in terms of a real elevation of Thai people and culture.

Notes and References

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