

Liberative Elements in Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand today

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The following essay is a slightly edited version of a paper delivered at the 5th Inter-Religio Conference on "Liberative Elements in Asian Religions," which was held in Seoul earlier this year. The author, well known to readers of these bulletins, is active at home and abroad in encouraging cooperation between Buddhist and Christians in both intellectual and practical spheres.

As religion is not a mere intellectual and philosophical issue, but a human experience, or perhaps better, a way of life, I would like to take up the topic of liberative elements in Thai Buddhism in terms of my personal involvement with it – emotionally, intellectually, and intuitively.

Thailand has undergone rapid change during the past thirty years. Industrialization is replacing traditional agricultural modes of production. Urban centers are far behind. Religion is being drawn forward, resisting the change on the one hand, and readjusting itself and following the main current on the other.

Paradigms are changing in all sectors of life. This is true not only in urban centers, but also in the rural areas, although on a lesser scale. Changes in the world of religion are particularly noticeable in the cities, where new religious movements catch on better than they do in the villages.

Dr. Prawase Wasi, a leading Buddhist layman, has made a synoptic study of the three leading movements in Thailand today, saying that the Santi Asoke movement emphasizes Sila (rules); the Dhamma Kaya, Samadhi (concentration); and Buddhadasa, Panna (wisdom). All three, each in its own way, is making efforts to renew Buddhism for the modern world. Each of them meets the "requirements" of a specific class. Santi Asoke is popular among those who look for more strict rule, dis-

cipline, and order. Dhamma Kaya has middle class followers from urban centers who seek peace of mind and take refuge from the confusion of the workaday world in a peaceful, meditative weekend. Buddhadasa's followers come from the educated class and intelligentsia who need no "institutional emblem" and feel free to practice Buddhism in their daily life. These three represent the best known movements in Thailand.

Buddhadasa was accused more than thirty years ago of being a "communist." Today, in his eighties, he is no longer a controversial figure though he continues to maintain that Buddhism will survive even under communism. He has been recognized by most academic institutions, and receives a doctorate *honoris causa* nearly every year.

Dhamma Kaya was in the headlines some years ago for the expansion of their center into the neighboring paddy fields in a Bangkok suburb. The events were a kind of "Narita airport" conflict in miniature. Santi Asoke has suffered the most, as its head and some seventy monks were arrested early in 1989 and are still embroiled in juridical process. The main source of contention is their independence of legally recognized Buddhist structures. Politically, their persecution amounted to an attack against the ruling governor of Bangkok, one of Santi Asoke's most important followers. It was before the election campaign for governorship that Santi Asoke was stormed. In spite of this, "Maha Chamlong" gained another landslide victory in January of 1990 and was reelected for another term.

The main source of these troubles have been militant Buddhists, monks and laymen, of the legal Buddhist institution. The right wing of this institution is represented by Phra Sophon Kanaphorn, who plays the role of a protector of Buddhism. The left wing, popular among educated class and intellectuals, is represented by Phra Thep Vethi, one of the most distinguished intellectuals, who plays a role not unlike that of the Catholic Cardinal Ratzinger, protector of the *doctrina fidei*. Within the legal institution are numerous other small currents. Several hundred monks can band together to form their own "institution" within a closed circle. Many such groups are involved with popular beliefs, astrology, and occultism.

In the recent years, the militant right and left wings made themselves known to the public through their attacks against the Catholic Church for what they see as its crypto-proselytism, and against the Santi Asoke movement for their "heresy." In neither case did their cause win public sympathy. On the contrary, the media, aware of their own ties

to Buddhism, urged the Buddhists to clean their own house first. Furthermore, they pointed to “bad” Buddhist monks and laymen as the real enemy of Buddhism and insisted that the preservation of Buddhism means the serious practice of Buddhism.

At the same time the public has come more and more to welcome the role of the followers of Buddhadasa who avoid direct confrontation with the legal institution and are articulate in their criticism of society and of the misbehavior of those who call themselves “Buddhist.” Venerable Panna Nanda Bhikkhu and Phra Phayom have particularly distinguished themselves in this respect. They have earned the sympathy of the public not only for the content of their sermons but also because of their “style,” – fluent, up-to-date, and critically straightforward. (These two monks and other “followers” of Buddhadasa did not give their support to the militant groups in the two above-mentioned conflicts.)

Two other groups merit mention: a group of young monk students at the two Buddhist Universities in Bangkok and a group of development monks in the rural areas.

There are about 2,000 student-monks in Bangkok, most of them stemming from poor families in the rural areas. For many of them, becoming a monk is the only way to have access to higher education. During the three-year flowering of democracy from 1973 to 1976, a group of student-monks joined movements of students, workers, and farmers to take part in demonstrations on the streets of Bangkok. Since that time, they have kept pretty much to their temples and classrooms. However, changes are taking place in these universities. After their fourth year of study, the student-monks are given a year of “internship” in the rural areas, where most of them come into contact with development monks. There they learn to assist in the education of novices and monks, but also how to help communities in their development.

The majority of these student-monks doff their robes after their study is over, but those who do remain in the monastic life have come to play an important role in carrying out gradual reforms in the traditional structure. Together they form a minority educated group among the some 250,000 monks throughout the country.

The total number of monks may remain unchanged, but the number of monks who remain for long years or for the whole life is declining. Many temples in the rural areas have no monks, or perhaps have monks present only during the “Buddhist Lent” season. Many village communities have to “offer” a contracted yearly honorarium to monks

for their stay at the temple.

The second group of monks that merit attention are development monks. They are engaged in community development in the rural areas. Up to ten years ago, the term *development monk* referred only to isolated individuals involved in social actions in various ways. Now they have come to form small groups in their areas and to build up networks at the regional level. There are at least ten groups of development monks in the northeast, with about thirty members in each group. Nakhonrachasima province is an exception in that the head provincial monk himself is an active development monk. Although not all of the some 3,500 monks of his province are engaged in community development, hundreds of them are. About thirty monks are keeping the about 5,000 hectares of public forest, growing new trees and protecting it against invasion by outsiders. Something similar is going on in Chiangmai. These monks have also become important leaders in environmentalist movements in the rural areas.

The other development monks are mostly leaders in various forms of community development. The most interesting ones are those who have managed to combine meditative and social actions. They claim that without spiritual readiness, economic development can be harmful. They teach that we need to understand our human nature for what it is, for its potentials and its limitations; and that socio-cultural development has to go alongside with economic development.

Development programs of these monks may not appear to differ in form from the ordinary ones implemented by non-government or government organizations. But they are essentially different in that they are rooted in the religio-cultural spirit of the village communities. The monks are mostly native of the villages, or at least of the areas they are working for. Most of them are not highly educated, but they belong to the village culture. Moreover, very few of them are directly involved with popular beliefs and occultism.

Much discussion has surrounded the issue of monks and community development. Many question the direct engagement of the monks in economic projects that are related to “money” and “animals.” Many do not like to see monks involved with economic projects such as village shops and businesses, mulberry plantation and silk worm raising, fish and livestock breeding and raising. The argument these monks give is that they cannot remain in the temple and see the villagers starve, fall into debt, and come to ruin. They must put their position of leadership at the service of the village’s economic and social welfare as well. Once

the situation has improved, they can turn this work over to the laymen, but for the time being they consider their own direct engagement necessary.

The counter-argument advanced by some monks and lay people is that the monks should recognize the potential of the laity and give them the chance to exercise it by offering good consultation and monitoring events without being directly involved with them. Many monks are playing this role and are more and more recognized.

In recent years another role of monks has come to the fore in connection with a problem that is considered by the public as the most appropriate to the status of the monk: forest preservation and reforestation. A generation ago about 60% of Thailand was forest. Today that figure has dropped to a scant 19%. The worst consequence is the deterioration of the rural environment. The forest used to be beneficial not only for its wood but also for the food and medicine it provided. Today villagers have to buy everything from the market. The main cause of this deterioration is the export-oriented policy of the government during the past thirty years. Villagers have started to grow rice and cash crops such as jute, cassava, maize, rubber trees for export, while log traders cut trees for their export business.

The government has closed all forests as of January, 1989. Forest preservation and reforestation have been promoted, but the measures are not appropriate. They have only left room for other forms of corruption and further deforestation. Large enterprises that offer reforestation programs illegally occupy preserved forest areas and plant eucalyptus. All of this has been front-page news for some time now.

The issue of "community forest" was raised with the official closing of the forests. In this regard, the monks are being asked to participate in the reforestation program. The community forest is a renewed natural forest, which consists of various kinds of trees. Communities would have to replant and take care of their forest in the public land around their villages. The ideal is clear but the reality is difficult to realize. Only villages with good leadership can organize themselves for this action. Many monks have provided just this leadership, working for years now without any request or assistance from the government.

Some monks in the northern areas have renovated old pagodas in the forests or set up new ones. The result is that villagers do not invade the land or cut trees in that area. Some monks perform traditional ceremonies for consecrating the streams and the forests, so further insuring that they remain sources of life for the communities. And there are

many other forms of “resistance” to the ruin of the forests from the side of the villagers.

Monks and villagers in Nakhonpathom, a province next to Bangkok, and other provinces in the Northeast put markers on trees in the public forest, indicating the name and medicinal qualities of each. Villagers consider the forest a source of traditional medicine. There are many other ways that monks and laymen work for forest preservation and reforestation. The starting point is to show the villagers proximate use of the forest. As the awareness grows, the villagers come to understand also the other aspects, the holistic relationship of forest and environment.

As Phra Acharn Somnuek in Nakhonpathom has said:

If we monks do not grow trees and preserve the forest, nobody else will do it. It has to start in the temple grounds. Monks have to love trees, keep them and grow them. Trees on the temple grounds are the best temple hall. We can practice meditation in this natural temple hall just as Buddha and his disciples once did.

Seven years ago this monk turned his temple grounds, comprising about ten hectares, into a natural forest.

Buddhism in Thailand is challenged by the changes going on in society at large. As in other industrialized countries, religion has come to lose more and more ground. It can no longer play its traditional role. Buddhism used to be a sister institution to the secular political institutions of society, giving a justification and playing a complementary role to the ruling power at national level, and serving as a center of community life at the grassroots level. The new Buddhist groups mentioned at the outset of this essay represent efforts for renewing Buddhism. Buddhadasa has been playing the prophetic role, whereas Dhamma Kaya and Santi Asoke offer newly reorganized structure. They represent a new form of Buddhist institution that has to decentralize the power. There must be a variety of institutions to serve specific groups of interest, areas, and culture. The small groups of development monks in the rural areas of the northeast and the north have less of an institutional nature. Their efficacy lies rather in working in small groups and linking themselves with others in a flexible network.

Buddhadasa once said, “The main obstacles to the attainment of Nirvana are Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.” What he meant was that the Three Holy Refuges have come to be taken materialistically by the

people. Asked why he still is in the official institution, he replied, "I am as if I were not." Buddhadasa has not set up any institutional organization. Those who follow his doctrine must do so by putting it into practice in their daily lives, remaining what and where they are. The change lies in "how" they are what they are.

Buddhism stresses liberation from within the person. And yet paradoxically, institutional Buddhism does not recognize local potential as far as organizational setting and institution are concerned. The hierarchy, the official leadership, still prize unity in uniformity, and not in diversity or plurality. It is the social and institutional order that matters more than the liberative message of Buddhism. Followers of Buddhadasa, Santi Asoke, and Dhamma Kaya are convinced that the Buddhism they are practicing is the "real" Buddhism. The "real" for them is proved by their own experience, not justified by the official institution. Their sense of liberation derives from within, not from structures without. This kind of real liberative power cannot be granted by anyone. It can only be facilitated by appropriate external social organization.

This is the main reason why a good group of monks in the rural areas have started to search for a new role by becoming involved in community development. They feel not only "spiritual" responsibility, but also a responsibility for the welfare of the community and society as such. Their actions are their own initiatives. They are convinced that liberation has to be appropriate.

From the doctrinal point of view, the social dimension is nothing new in Buddhism any more than it is new to any other religion. It is the interpretation of the founder's message that matters. Monks in the rural areas see that their actual situation does not permit them to wait around in the temple for food to be brought to them by the villagers. They know that the temple is no more the center of community life. They have to go out to meet and assist the people in the midst of the many problems that confront them.

The religio-cultural structure of village community remains unchanged. It is the wisdom of the leadership to find out measures to conserve, to renew, to re-adjust, and to recreate cultural traditions which embody Buddhist doctrine within the bounds allowed by the official Buddhist institution.

The experiences of the monks and Buddhist lay leadership in the rural areas are convincing and are of seminal importance for Thai society today. At the same time, I have the feeling that the Buddhist move-

ment in the rural areas are isolated movements. They are making their own way without any serious support from the educated and middle class in urban centers. It is not primarily material support I have in mind, but rather moral support and solidarity. The same is happening with the poor masses in the rural areas and urban centers.

So far there has been no serious reflection on the experiences of the poor in the over 1,000 slums which harbor more than 1.5 million people in Bangkok, the hundred thousands of workers coming mostly from the rural areas, the poor farmers who make up more than 70% of the population, the young students who are searching for the meaning of life in the modern world. They may call themselves Buddhist and more or less practice their faith, but the question has to be asked what it means for them to be Buddhist today, what Buddhism has to do with their daily life. At the same time, there is no systematic reflection on the experiences of development monks, meditation monks, or itinerant monks, and those who live their faith with commitment.

Dr. Prawase Wasi, a committed Buddhist layman, has written a book entitled *Buddhist Agriculture*, which may be the only serious reflection of Buddhist experiences concerning rural development today. It would be interesting if someone in Thailand could write for us a *Small is Beautiful* based on the real experiences of Thai farmers.

Paradigms are changing. The Thai people, confused by the rapid changes, are searching for liberation. Buddhism ought to offer an answer, but the Buddhism of the old paradigm cannot. The Thai people need to reconsider their own roots, to rediscover values for daily life from within their own culture. It is not a matter of going back to the past, but back to the roots, to the values that need to be renewed, re-adjusted, and re-created appropriately. The experiences and models are there, even if only on a small scale. They wait only to be elaborated, expanded, and taken more seriously.

Most criticism of Thai society today points to Buddhism as the real force for a more balanced development. Dr. Chaianan Samudwanit, the well-known political scientist, believes that the actual course of development today is a dangerous one. Economic growth does not make people happier. Thai people have first to ground their development in their own culture, and Buddhism is an essential part of that culture.

While Dr. Chaianan and many academics support the movement of alternative development based on Buddhism, and while Buddhadasa has been offering a framework for such development for over thirty years by stressing the social dimension and actuality of Buddhist

doctrine, the rest of the educated class, academics, and intelligentsia do not seem to have taken the step. Only the interplay of thought and action, of reflection and experience, can reinstate the prophetic role of Buddhism. Only then will liberation move beyond the limits of mere intellectual exercise to become real liberating power.