

# Present Trends of Buddhism in Siam, Its Millennial Movements and a Positive Future of the Sangha.

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Recent news coverage in Siam clearly shows that consumerism has come to dominate Thai values i.e. people in all social strata are driven to make more money, either by selling drugs, arms or their daughters in order to entertain a more luxurious lifestyle. In general, Buddhist monks are no exception to these present trends even though the Sangha[community or assembly of monks] is supposed to set an example for lay society in simple living: to be non exploitative to oneself and others, to live in harmony with natural environment, to be contented and to be self sustaining and to be generous to all sentient being.

As late as 1928, when J.B. Pratt wrote his famous book *Buddhist Pilgrim: Pilgrimage Buddhism*, he had this to say:

The influence of Buddhism on the Siamese people is generally admitted to be, from the moral point of view, excellent. This is the chief reason, many missionaries will tell you, why Christian missions have made such slow and slight progress, especially in those parts of Siam, like Bangkok, where Buddhism is at its best and at its strongest.

The Buddhists are so satisfied with their own religion that it is difficult for them to see the need for another. So the missionaries tell me. Buddhism is, moreover, probably the greatest force for democracy in Siam. The poorest peasant may become a monk, and once a monk, he is spiritually on the level of the King. For the happiness of its adherents, Buddhism also does much: it teaches its followers that this is an ideal world; that the forces which ultimately control it are moral forces; that what a man sows he inevitably shall reap; and that death is not the end.

The picture has since altered tremendously. A senior official in the Foreign Ministry has openly stated that Thai Buddhism has no spiritual or emotional input to sustain him in dedicating his life to service. He is nominally a Buddhist, but to be transcendently inspired he has chosen to belong to a Hindu cult. He finds the charismatic leadership of the cult mean-

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ingful and spiritually uplifting. I fear that this is not a unique case. Many Thai have turned to be Born Again Christians, to embrace Suffism, Tennkoism, become devotees of Rev. Moon, not to mention varieties of Buddhist Sects from Taiwan and Japan.

Within the traditional Thai Sangha itself, charismatic monks must now have magic or supernatural powers in order to influence followers and the successful ones use the mass media effectively. Abbot Goon would not be well known nationwide without the full support of the mass media – which itself earns quite a lot of money through advertisement and news coverage on his costly amulets. During the recent general election campaign, an ex-prime minister and a candidate for the future premiership sought blessings from him. Even the King praised the abbot for his success. His financial gain is supposed to be good for social welfare and social service. Yet no one asks whether it is right or wrong for Buddhist monks to make money – even for a good cause.

The core value of Buddhist renunciation is to have nothing to do with money and sex. This is because money links directly with greed, and sex with lust. A monk who has sexual intercourse ceases to be a monk instantly, despite the fact that he may still wear yellow robes. A monk who misappropriates even small amounts of money also immediately ceases to be a monk. By touching money, being attached to money, or owning any amount of money, a monk violates the rules laid down by the Buddha. If a monk confesses sincerely to a minor offence, he could be forgiven. However, in the case of ownership of and delighting in money, confession will not help; a monk has to throw the money into the river before asking for forgiveness from the Sangha. The monk cannot be purified even if he gives the money away for a good cause.

On the full moon, new moon and half moon, a lay person can follow Buddhist monks more seriously by taking the eight precepts instead of the usual five precepts which should be adhered to daily. On these Holy Days called *Wan Phra*, the lay person may, from midday on, abstain from sex and food as a way to reduce lust and greed. The tenth precept concerns money and applies only to monks and not to the laity who must earn their living and so have to deal with money. Hopefully, this will be with “right livelihood” and not by trading in slavery, arms, drugs, animals, poison and the like.

According to Buddhism all the lay professions involve exploitation of oneself and others. Even those of us who sell books may have a wonderful motive to promote good literature and education; however, once profit is involved, exploitation is inevitable, one way or the other. Even those of us

who teach may not realize that we too exploit our students – knowingly or unknowingly. Not to mention that husband and wife also exploit each other, even when they are in love. It is much worse, when they are no longer in love. And if they love their family too much, the selfish motive will drive them to exploit those outside their own circle.

This is why Buddhaghosa, a great commentator, said that to lead a homeless life or non-exploitative life for one's own benefit as well as for the benefit all sentient beings, one has to receive holy orders or take on the homeless life of a mendicant. It is through the practice of meditation that a celibate monk can synchronize the masculine and feminine elements in himself to make a wholeness of life without any need for a sexual sleeping partner of the same or the opposite sex. Today, this basic understanding is greatly lacking among most contemporary Thai monks and lay people.

Another issue is that while Thai Buddhism was very well suited to a simple agrarian society or the feudal court, it has not adapted its teaching to the changing needs of a rising middle class, nor of a more complex modern or post modern society.

Further, Thai Buddhism was officially made a state religion in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. This has resulted in the gradual taming of Buddhism since the role of a state religion is to support the King and the centralization of the Kingdom. Hence State Buddhism lost both its vitality and its role in checking the absolute power of the ruling elites, as it has done so throughout its long history – at least in South and Southeast Asia. All *Jataka* stories [stories of past lives of Buddha] mention wicked rulers and warn people that power always corrupts. Wise people should be careful not to have “unmindful” involvement with power and money.

With Buddhism as the official or state religion, monks who were popular leaders, such as Khru Ba Sri Vijai of Chiangmai, had much difficulty with the central authority of the Supreme Sangha Council in Bangkok. The millennial movement in the Northeast was crushed militarily in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The Abbot of Wat Baromnivas in Bangkok itself, who preached against the First World War, had his title and position removed by King Rama VI, although what he preached was basic to the teaching of the Buddha. He preached that there is no just war theory in Buddhism, and that all forms of violence are condemned.

A short time after the First National Economic Development Plan was drafted some thirty years ago, the government prohibited Buddhist monks in Thailand from preaching *Santuthi*, the teaching of austerity or contentment with what one has. This prohibition was sanctioned by the Sangha

Authority, the official governing body of the monks. The reasoning behind this decree was that the government believed that the teaching of *Santuthi* was opposed to the ideals of economic growth, and hence opposed to development.

This is merely one example of the many ways by which the government has attempted to confine the role of religion to the performing of rituals. The social activism of the Thai Sangha has been significantly eroded during this century.

The late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a revered Thai monk, argued against the government ruling prohibiting the teaching of *Santuthi*. He pointed out that this teaching contributes to real human progress which must focus upon the development of wisdom rather than material assets.

As Buddhists, we try to live according to the “Middle Way.” We are taught not to cling to old ideologies and refuse change. Neither are we to merely chase after new progressive trends and fashions. This concept may also be helpful in addressing the increasing polarization between environmentalists and development advocates.

Development and environmental concerns must go hand in hand. We cannot prohibit economic growth, but we must ensure that the balance of nature is maintained so as to allow us to live sustainably. Moreover, according to Buddhist teachings, physical development should contribute to mental and spiritual development. These are the foundations of the Buddhist model of development.

In the last thirty years, society has advanced materially in many respects, but at the price of social malaise. In its wake it has brought environmental degradation, social disintegration, social crimes, drug problems, slum dwelling, prostitution, and so on.

Consumerism has become the main value, cherished and pursued at any cost by people who, though they have received a modern kind of education, are brainwashed by the media. In the midst of this rampant consumerism, these people as well as many who have moved from rural farming sectors to live in crowded cities, have become disillusioned with the idea that money can fulfil their lives and have tried different ways to quench their thirst for a meaningful life.

In 1996 Benjamin R. Barber published a powerful book titled *Jihad Vs McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World*. McWorld represents consumerism, globalism, and multi-national corporations; whereas Jihad represents tribalism and fundamentalism. Yet both have one value in common. Consumerism and globalism dominate people the world over with material development, mega-technologies, fast food, chemical fertiliz-

ers, Coca-Cola, and the jeans syndrome, without any respect for local cultures, folk wisdom, indigenous medicine. Yet fundamentalism and tribalism also resist any meaningful change or any alternative method of teaching beyond the prevailing one of the tribe or the religious leaders.

In Siam, since the spread of the American development model – which our political elites have blindly followed for the least four decades – the Buddhist Sangha has two responses which could be claimed to belong to fundamental movements.

One is Santi Asoke, founded by Bhodhiraksa. This is perhaps the first Theravada fundamentalism. Its adherents have to wear brown uniforms, follow strict vegetarianism and eat only one meal a day. No luxurious items or stimulants of any kind are permitted – not even tea or ice. The only authority in interpreting Buddhism is the founder himself whom the followers believe to have supernatural power. Although he never studied the Pali language of Theravada Buddhism, he claims to have a special knowledge of the sacred texts.

The practice is severe, and there is no argument on the matter of doctrine or the founder's interpretation. However this movement refuses mega-technologies and globalization. Yet it is involved in local politics, both at the municipal and national levels. It also offers alternative farming without chemical fertilizer and supports traditional medicine as well as holistic food and a simple lifestyle.

Since the movement claims to be the only pure authentic Buddhism, it criticizes the Sangha severely for its compromised luxurious lifestyle and consumerism. Thus the National Supreme Council has asked the Government to declare Santi Asoke to be an illegal Sangha. The criminal court has judged against it and the case is pending at the Court of Appeal.

Another movement is Dhammakaya which dates back to the Venerable Luang Poh Sod, Abbot of Wat Paknam, who claimed to be a custodian of a method of meditation which was popular in Siam prior to when our Sangha was converted to the Sinhala School of Theravada 800 years ago.

This method of meditation is similar to a Tibetan practice which seems to have a lineage in the Shingon Sect of Japan. Meditators are encouraged to see the light within themselves and this light is regarded as the jewel in the triple gem – Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Indeed the clear and bright light is taken to be Dhammakaya, the essence of Buddhahood.

After the Abbot passed away over three decades ago, the lineage passed on to an ordained sister. She taught a group of young graduates from two leading universities who were dissatisfied with worldly knowledge.

They were ordained as monks and spread the Dhammakaya technique of meditation as a new movement. This school later split into two sub-groups, both of which claim to be world movements with the aim of converting everyone to Dhammakaya tradition. They claim that everyone who meditates in this fashion will be materially successful in this world and the next.

The Dhammakaya school has gone along with McWorld and globalism entirely. It has made a lot of money. It expands its various temple complexes at the expense of the poor farmers who lived there previously. Its main temple provides condominiums where the rich can live and meditate in air-conditioned rooms with modern facilities. It provides the best acoustics for preaching. All members must wear white uniforms and must contribute more and more money for various buildings, images and pagodas. The more you donate, the more you will reap material benefit in this world and the world beyond. The top leader is not visible, nor approachable. Yet his teaching is available through various magazines and other media. The movement has a wide appeal to young capitalists, especially of Sino-Thai background, in Bangkok as well as in Hong Kong and Taiwan. It now has a stronghold in Los Angeles. In fact the success of the movement is based on outstanding marketing plans. There have been several key marketing figures who helped to shape the marketing plans and implement them successfully. One of its marketing plans even won an award from the Marketing Society several years back. One main channel for recruiting new members of this movement is through universities and academic institutions.

Its millennial message is that eventually all will join the Dhammakaya movement. Since it never attacks the National Sangha (indeed it submits overtly to the Supreme Sangha Council), it has no legal or cultural difficulty with the Thai authority, despite the fact that its financial gains and expenditures have never been accountable. If this is the case, how then could one look for a positive future of the Sangha.

In Buddhism, the basic teaching is the Four Noble Truths: The Truth of Suffering, the Truth of the Cause of Suffering, The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering. Those monks and laity who are trapped by consumerism and the social structure do not want to confront suffering. They try to escape from it, hence the luxurious lifestyle which is harmful to oneself and others. They blindly adhere to it in the hope that they can perhaps be happy with material comfort.

In a paper presented to the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, Venerable Pa Payutto, a well-known contemporary scholarly monk, listed the three main perceptions leading the world to a dead end in development:

1. The idea that humankind is separate from nature and that humankind must control, conquer or manipulate nature according to its desires.
2. The perception that fellow human beings are not “fellow human beings”. Rather than perceiving the commonalities shared among all people, humans have tended to focus on the differences between them.
3. The perception that happiness is dependent upon the abundance of material possessions – that human being will only find happiness through a wealth of material possessions to feed their desires.

As the first two points listed above have been discussed extensively elsewhere, I would like to limit my discussion to an exploration of the third point.

The attaining of material or physical satisfaction is not the main goal of Buddhist practitioners. This contrasts with current development models. The goal for Buddhists is the happiness which can be obtained without being tempted or lured by the slightest sensuality. Physical development is only necessary to the extent that it contributes to spiritual liberation.

Based upon this, Venerable Payutto suggests that development must be concerned with four aspects: physical development, the development of discipline (proper conduct), mental development and spiritual development.

In terms of physical development, we must seek to attain a balanced relationship with our environment, a relationship which will benefit both people and nature. Nature can be developed to the extent that basic necessities are attained. Appropriate consumption should lead to more sustainable living.

The concept of discipline is aimed at promoting conduct which does not cause harm to, or exploit, other individuals or the larger society. Thus actions should contribute to rather than erode communities.

Mental development is aimed at conscientizing the mind to make it more able, fresh and joyful. This contrasts with present notions of development which do not lead to happiness, and cause suffering and stress due to the competitive element introduced in society.

Ultimately, Buddhists are taught to “practice” in order to achieve wisdom or understanding of nature. This encompasses the arts and sciences, and moves beyond them to attempt to understand nature holistically as it really is, with impermanence, suffering and selflessness.

Thus we can see that theoretically Buddhist development does not stress material satisfaction. The material realm is only considered to the extent that it allows spiritual development.

The Buddha created a community, the Sangha, to follow the Buddhist path. The way of life of this community was centred around simplicity, holism and compliance with the laws of nature. The discipline of the members of the community reflected a genuine concern for natural preservation and social sustainability.

Buddhist monks and nuns are taught to reflect before consuming the four basic necessities – food, clothing, shelter and medicine. They are encouraged to take only what is needed to sustain themselves. Clothes are not worn for ornamentation, food not eaten for its delicious taste, homes are not built to maximize comfort and medicines are taken only when absolutely necessary.

Thus, throughout history, the Sangha or community of monks has been respected and revered by the lay community. They have been central in the day-to-day lives of the people, providing education and traditional health, and encouraging morality and community cohesiveness. The first university in Siam was located in a temple, as are numerous primary and secondary schools today.

And there are monks who are aware that they themselves come from the poorest of the poor, who suffer more and more materially – not to mention legally and culturally. They have now found out that being a monk and being a lay person are really interrelated. They want to help the laity to be liberated from suffering and quite a number of them do so in very meaningful ways. I will quote a few instances to illustrate my point.

(1) Surin is one of the poorest province in the north-east with a large population of ethnic Cambodians who were told by the government that they were second class citizens since they could speak Khmer more naturally than Thai.

Since the development decades from the 1960s onward, modern roads and electricity reached Surin. Later, even foreign tourists visit Surin annually to see the elephants playing football with human beings. The result is that the Thai officials and the rich merchants in town benefit from development policy and tourism but the majority are much worse off. Instead of being poor yet contented farmers, many locals are now landless labourers in the land which was once theirs. They used to go to the forest for food and herbal medicine. Now most of the forest has gone. Debt has driven them to drugs and superstition. They lost all hope. They sell their children to be child labourers or prostitutes. Yet they are not better off economically or socially.

Luang Poh Nan, a local abbot with Khmer ethnicity, saw the suffering of the people due to their being uprooted from their own culture and spiri-

tual tradition. Since he was a meditation master and a charismatic leader, he persuaded his people to meditate together. Once they became mindful, with seeds of peace, they lost their sense of competition and regained their sense of co-operation. They no longer felt inferior for being Khmer, although they are loyal to Siam. They started farming together and stopped using chemical fertilizers. They use buffalo rather than tractors so there is no need to buy petrol or borrow money to buy expensive machines. They have even started buffalo banks and rice banks. There is no need to go to money-lenders anymore. Farming and harvesting have again become joyful occasions like the old days with songs and dances. They even have a co-operative movement to help other villages and provinces.

At first the government nearly put Luang Poh Nan in jail because he used the word communal farming in his sermons. However, as a famous monk and meditation master, the local authority did not dare to touch him. Now the Sangha has even given him an ecclesiastic title. Khon Kaen University has given him an honorary doctorate and last year the National Cultural Commission named him an exemplary citizen. Besides, the non-chemical rice produced by his people are now sold directly to a Protestant group in Switzerland. The people themselves are now real leaders and Luang Poh Nan is only their spiritual adviser.

(2) Yasothorn is a new province in the north-east. Here people are mainly ethnic Laos rather than Khmer. Phra Khru Supa is a local abbot who works closely with organizations from Bangkok to persuade people to use traditional medicine for both the prevention and cure of illness and to take personal responsibility for health care. The people around his temple are proud of him and they produce more and more traditional medicine for themselves as well as collaborating with the group in Bangkok.

Both Bangkok and Yasothorn have now gone to produce rice and vegetable without chemical fertilizers. Another group called Greenet has now promoted this idea by asking the middle class of Bangkok to have non-harmful vegetables by paying a little more than market price. This not only helps the farmers in the Northeast, but also helps conscientize the people of Bangkok to realize that we are all interrelated. We must fight non-violently together for social justice and a proper natural environment.

Of the 300,000 members of the Thai Sangha, we have a hard core of 300 in the Sekhiyadhamma group. This organization produces a quarterly of the same name that raises awareness of suffering, strives to find out more clearly the cause of suffering, and seeks to eliminate suffering through the Noble Eightfold Path which is based on non-violence.

For this, group friendship or *Kalayanamitta* is very important. The Buddha said “We need to have good friends, good companions and good friendship.” We can learn from others to develop ourselves and to help our society to be peaceful and just, starting with ourselves.

Once we can transform our consciousness to be less selfish, then with the help of good friends we can transform our society to be free from human oppression and exploitation. It may not be easy, but it is possible.

Modern education deals almost exclusively with the head, not the heart, of students. The clever ones are recognized and rewarded materially and financially, although they need not be generous and aware of social ills. Most of the rich and powerful are directly or indirectly unhappy as their exalted positions rests on mass poverty and ecological destruction. This is indeed ignorance (*avijja*) or delusion (*moha*). If Buddhists are to make a meaningful contribution to world peace or the liberation of the modern world from violence and oppression, they must confront the three root causes of this, not only in the individual, but also in society. Therefore these causes of evil must not only exist as something of interest to moralists. All practicing Buddhists must develop “right mindfulness.”

Right mindfulness or *Samma Samadhi* is indeed freedom from the mental suffering arising from greed, hatred and delusion – things that corrupt the mind and cause people to commit all kinds of evils. One could cultivate the mind with seeds of peace and the practice of mindful living in daily life. One can practise this at every moment of one’s life – when breathing, eating, drinking, washing the dishes, gardening or driving a car, as Thich Nat Hanh reminds us: “Once one practices mindfulness, one has peace and happiness inside, and one can share that way of life with others. The present moment is the wonderful moment.”

Traditionally, the first part of training the mind is to achieve tranquility (*samatha*), to plant seeds of peace within. The second comprises the technique for understanding the true nature of ones psycho-physical constitution and the true nature of the world. This is *vipassana* or insight meditation, which can be developed into an analytical thinking by way of casual relations or by way of problem-solving. It becomes an internal factor for wisdom or right understanding with the detachment of the ego. In Pali, this is called *Yonisomanasikara*, critical self-awareness, which leads to selflessness. Maintaining *Yonisomanasikara* helps one to be earnest. It helps generate energetic effort and it helps reduce selfish desire.

The Buddha said that the most important element for everyone is to be calm in order to develop self-cultivation and self-criticism. This leads to

real understanding (*panna*). Understanding is different from intellectual knowledge since it comes from both the head and the heart. It helps one to be aware, to be humble, to know one's limits. At the same time, it promotes loving-kindness and compassion to share the suffering of others and to eliminate the cause of suffering.

My own latest projects are an interfaith movement *Alternative to Consumerism* and the *Spirit in Education Movement (SEM)*. I hope both projects will contribute positively to the future of the Thai Sangha.

The *Alternative to Consumerism* project calls for Buddhists, Christians and Muslims to work together to raise awareness of the problems of consumerism and to demonstrate viable alternative ways of living

*Spirit in Education Movement* on the other hand seeks to provide an alternative education which combines intellectual and spiritual learning. We have already run courses including Mindful Meditation, Conflict Resolution, Non-violence training, Community Building, Buddhism and Development, etc. Monks, nuns, and lay people have attended these courses which are held in beautiful, natural locations such as Wat Pah Kao Kongkha (a forest monastery in the Northeast), Wongsanit Ashram and the Children Village School. There was a formal initiation ceremony for the *Spirit in Education Movement* with a public event on December 12, 1995, at Thammasart University. Satish Kumar, programme director of Schumacher College from England gave the keynote speech. Last year we just finished a study abroad programme for students from the Naropa Institute (Boulder, Colorado, USA). The students have participated in a programme organized by us to attend workshops and to visit various development projects. Next year, they will come back with more students. I hope the *Spirit in Education Movement* will provide an alternative to prevailing educational trends which concentrate on the head rather than the heart and reward cleverness without regard to ethics.

At the *Spirit in Education Movement* we try to develop friendships, in the Buddhist sense of *kalayanamitta*, among students and teachers; to learn from each other and from the environment; to develop meditation practice and artistic creativity; to understand and respect indigenous cultures; to plant seeds of peace within ourselves and our world; to develop beauty, goodness and critical self-awareness in order to become transformed personally. This will lead us to care less for ourselves and more for others; to combine understanding and compassion; to work for social justice and ecological balance; and to develop Right Livelihood as part of our Buddhist practice.

The *Spirit in Education Movement* participants do not avoid contact with suffering or become separate from our awareness of suffering in the world,

but try to find ways to alleviate suffering wherever it is found. Above all, they try to understand the ways in which prevailing economic, social and political systems contribute to suffering, and to violence and the culture of violence that surrounds us, in order to provide a countervailing force of non-violence, compassion and understanding.

At the deepest level the causes of suffering are always greed, hatred and delusion. At the more immediate level these causes have become embodied in consumerism; militarism; compartmentalization of thought and practice (e.g. the use of such strategies as “social engineering”); and the separation of efforts to tackle social problems from personal transformation.

With the *Spirit in Education Movement* we hope to understand that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless. Thus we can learn and practice non-attachment to views and become open to receive the truth that resides in life and not simply in conceptual knowledge. I hope the *Spirit in Education Movement* participants will be enabled to learn throughout their entire lives and to observe the reality of the world and within ourselves at all times.