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Contextualising Thai Buddhism

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Abstract

Many scholars and historians working on religion in Thailand take for granted the centrality of Theravāda Buddhism in Thai society. Buddhist scholars and alike have been fascinated by the richness of Thai Buddhism and its manifestation within the Thai society and culture. Accordingly, Thailand has a prevalence of Buddhism that ranks among the highest in the world. Thai Buddhism still maintains the dominant force of Thai culture and civilisation even in the age of globalisation. Nevertheless, some have argued that Thai Buddhism is in decline and in a state of crisis. The main authority of Theravāda Buddhism is losing its grip as many other religions and new forms of Buddhism are increasing their stakes in the Thai society. On the whole, this leads to both favourable and unfavourable circumstances for Thai Buddhism in the present context.

This paper is fundamentally to question these issues and offer a consideration of contemporary Thai Buddhism. Some issues are predominantly historical or comparative, while others are based on an empirical study of contemporary Thai Buddhism. The overall aim is to provide an up-to-date review on the contextualisation of Thai Buddhism in general.

Introduction

The intention which motivated this paper was a desire to ‘put Thai Buddhism in its place’. Many discourses about Thai Buddhism have been dominated by discussion of Theravāda Buddhism; indeed many scholars have ‘epitomised’ the Thai society in terms of Theravāda. Accordingly, the term ‘Theravāda’ echoed widely in a present genre as a dominant school of Buddhism and Buddhism of Thailand. We can see this as a privilege of the ‘Buddhist’ aspect of Thai society but recently there is a stress on ‘difference’ and contrast of Theravāda in Thai Buddhism.²

Contextualising Thai Buddhism besets with difficulties. In Western societies religion is generally felt to be clearly separated from other fields of social and political life, so that it can be studied for its own sake. In Thailand, however, it is hardly possible to separate Buddhism from other fields of socio-economic and cultural life, with which it is closely interwoven. There is not even a real equivalence of English term for religion in the Thai language³.

Reflecting this complexity, Phra Brahmaganabhorn (Prayudh Payutto), a leading Thai Buddhist venerable scholar writes, ‘the history of the Thai nation which is also the history of Buddhism. The Thai nation originated over 2,000 years ago. Also in that same period Buddhism came and has played an important part in the Thai history ever since. The Thai

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²Suchit Wongthet, a leading Thai academician uses the term ‘Theravāda’ in an adjective form. This indicates that the notion of Theravada is concrete and solidified. He writes, ‘the reason for the inefficiency of the national post-graduate education of Thailand is caused by the ‘Theravada ideology’ which mainly means memorization of teachings (vāda) of teachers (thera). Nobody is allowed to infringe or doubt. In the process of change, if one does not reduce or terminate the ‘theravāda approach’, everything else cannot be changed or it would be very difficult to change that no change can take place at all.’ This is published in Thai language in Matichon daily newspaper on 14 May 2008.

³The term ‘sāsana’ which is generally translated as religion in Thai language is in fact means ‘teachings.’

nation settled firmly in present-day Thailand 700 years ago. Also seven centuries ago it adopted the present form of Buddhism.’⁴

By ‘putting Thai Buddhism in its place’ I do not mean denying its importance but rather trying to identify its importance relative to other aspects of social life which might also be considered axial to Thai society and culture, and subjecting the fascination it has had for scholars to critical scrutiny. The sources for its study are richer than for other aspects of Thai civilisation, but are unequally distributed, in terms of region, period and social level. It shows the assimilation of Buddhist culture and Indian religions and their adaptation or accommodation of Thai beliefs and practices.

In contextualising Thai Buddhism, I find that it is equally important to contextualise the term Theravāda first because Thai Buddhism itself is categorised under the Theravāda Buddhism. In fact, the term Theravāda is ambiguous in its recent uses. Bringing this issue into the light Peter Skilling writes, ‘‘Theravāda Buddhism’ is a seemingly inoffensive and transparent term, and Theravāda Buddhism’ is taken for granted as an integral feature of the religious landscape of India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. A recent collection of essays uses the term without attempting to define it and without asking to what degree ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ is a valid marker for the subjects studied. A chapter entitled ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ in a recent book on Buddhism uses the word ‘Theravāda’ and cognate forms forty-one times in about seven pages of text (not counting captions and side-bars).⁵ Is there anything surprising in this? Perhaps not: but when we consider that the term Theravāda is an *extremely* rare term in Pāli, and that for nine hundred years it was scarcely *if ever* used in the Pāli or vernacular inscriptions, chronicles, and other texts of Southeast Asia, this might give us pause.’⁶

He writes further that ‘Research into these sources suggests that ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ is a colonial or globalized construction, one of the ‘religions’ or ‘faiths’ defined to satisfy census needs, to contrast with Christianity. In the pre- and earliest colonial period, non-Christian religions were grouped in several ways, and Buddhism was subsumed with Indian, Chinese, and Japanese religions under the category of ‘idolaters’ or ‘heathens’. Gradually Europeans realised that the religious life of certain groups or societies was centred on ‘Buddha’, and gradually they realised that this Buddhism had different forms or schools. Exactly when ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ was invented as a discrete category, and how this category eventually entered the consciousness of ‘Theravādin societies’ themselves, remain to be established. I suspect the process began in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is a point that needs to be clarified if we are to understand the history of Theravādin Buddhism.’⁷

Truly, many scholars site that the term Theravāda was once appeared as a label of a Buddhist school in the 4th century Buddhist manuscript entitled ‘Dīpavamsa.’ However, there is no historical evidence to prove that the form of Theravāda mentioned in the Dipavamsa is in fact the same Theravāda of the present time. Moreover, the occurrence of Theravāda in Dipavamsa itself is out of place as no texts earlier or later to Dipavamsa ever referred or hinted the existence of Theravāda as a distinctive school of Buddhism.

I believe that the recent uses of the term ‘Theravāda’ was first used to mean early form of Buddhism only in 1950 at the founding conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) in Colombo, Sri Lanka where representatives from 27 countries in Asia, Europe and

⁴Phra Rajavaramuni (Prayudh Payutto), *Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World: A survey of the Buddhist situation against a historical background*. Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group, 1987: 11.

⁵Kevin Trainor (ed.), *Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide* London: Duncan Baird Publishers, revised edition, 2004, pp. 120–131.

⁶Peter Skilling, *Ubiquitous and Elusive: In Quest of Theravāda*. A paper presented at ‘Exploring Theravāda Studies: Intellectual Trends and the Future of a field of study’ organised by Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2004.

⁷*Ibid*,

North America met for the first time on the same platform to found the WFB. It was a very successful campaign to substitute the original term of ‘Hinayāna’ which is seen as pejorative. It was so successful that after a half century the term ‘Theravāda’ Buddhism was already taken for granted as the original form of Buddhism that still exists even today.

Skilling concluded that ‘Theravāda has now become a universal term, a ready-made label which gives us ‘Theravādin meditation’, ‘Theravādin psychology’, ‘Theravādin art’, ‘Theravādin iconography’, and so on. These terms are in part products of globalisation: with the migration of Thai, Lao, Burmese, Khmer and Sinhalese to the West in the second half of the twentieth century, Theravādin communities have had to establish their identity in a multi-cultural world. One might also suggest that this is an age in which packaging and labelling are seen as essential to identity. Ambiguity is not tolerated. Whatever the case, Theravāda today is a self-conscious identity for many, although not, ironically, in the societies from which it has sprung. For many Thai, for example, the primary marker of identification remains to be ‘Buddhist’ (*pen phut, pen chaophut, naptuphraphutthasāsanā*). To say ‘to believe in Theravāda’ (*naptutherawāt*) is unnatural.’⁸

Skilling also states that ‘the overuse of the term Theravāda in historical studies has led to several misconceptions. One is the idea that there existed some sort of monolithic religion, or institutional entity, called ‘Theravāda’ that spread throughout the region. This obscures the fact that the *sanghas* that renewed their ordination lineage in Sri Lanka were, as soon as they returned to their own lands, autonomous or rather independent entities. They invoked their Lankan credentials as a claim to ritual purity, but they did not maintain institutional links with Lanka. The new lineages established their own identities; more often than not within one or two generations they fell into dispute and split into further independent lines.

This state of affairs arises from the nature of ordination, of the independent system of self-reproduction of Buddhist monastic communities. The history of ‘Theravāda’ is, then, a history of ordination lineages. It is not a history of ‘sects’ in the sense of broad-based lay groups, as in reformation Europe.’⁹

This then raises a question on notion of Thai Buddhism which is identified as Theravāda Buddhism because it looks though we have been imposing the term ‘Theravāda’ in our studies to create artificial and ahistorical entities. Therefore, I am using Theravāda, in this paper, rather loosely for conventional purpose only. The present use of Theravāda is irrelevant to Theravāda as it appeared in the Dipavamsa. It becomes acceptable to see Thai Buddhism includes many forms of non-Theravāda entity within the same label. For example, it is silently accepted that the new forms of mighty Dhammakaya and strict Santi Asoka group become part of Thai Theravāda without formal announcement and any judiciary law. Only difference between these two recent Thai Buddhist movements would be that while Dhammakaya movement is officially under the mainstream of Thai Buddhism Santi Asoka was denounced by the mainstream Thai Buddhism.

This becomes a modern problem to contextualise Thai Buddhism under the same roof of Thai Theravāda. Is this indicator of development or decline of Thai Buddhism in the present context?

Arrival of Buddhism in Thailand

The historical origins of Buddhism in Thailand are obscure. Some scholars claim that Buddhism was brought into Thailand nearly as early as Sri Lanka, in the time of King Asoka (circa 269-237 B.C.E). This view is based partly on tradition and partly on archaeological

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

findings dating back to Asokan period. It is believed that the monks Sona and Uttara, who were sent to Suvannabhūmi (the golden land) by the Mauryan king Asoka in the third century B.C.E., arrived in Nakon Pathom thirty miles southwest of Bangkok, but historical evidence fails to corroborate the legend of Asoka's emissaries. Others are of the view that Thailand received Buddhism much later. According to archaeological findings and other historical evidence, it is safe to say that Buddhism first arrived in Thailand when the country was inhabited by a Mon-Khmer ethnicity who then had their capital, Dvārāvātī, at a city now known as Nakon Pathom (Pāli: Nagara Pathama). The great pagoda at Nakon Pathom, Phra Pathom Chedi (Pāli: Pathama Cetiya), and other historical findings in other parts of the country testify to this fact as well as to the fact that Buddhism, in its varied forms, reached Thailand at four different periods, namely:

- I. Theravāda or Southern Buddhism
- II. Mahāyāna or Northern Buddhism
- III. Theravāda lineage from Burma (Pagan) Buddhism
- IV. Theravāda lineage from Sri Lankan Buddhism

I. Theravāda or Southern Buddhism

The first wave of Buddhism introduced to Thailand was that of the lineage of Venerable Sona and Uttara, the emissaries sent by King Asoka of India after the third Buddhist council. This is proved by various archaeological remains unearthed in the excavations at Nakon Pathom, such as the Dharma Chakra, the Buddha footprints and seats, and the inscriptions in the Pāli language, all of which are in rocks. Of course, all these artefacts show that it was from the time when culture of Buddha image yet to be common. Later when Buddha statues were began to cast in India, Indian traders also brought this culture of casting Buddha statues into Thailand. The earliest Buddha images of Thailand were influenced by Gupta and post-Gupta style of India particularly some in so-called European style, with both legs simply hanging down. This indicates that the first wave of Buddhism introduced to Thailand must be directly from North India.

It was at first doubtful as to how the missionary monks would have managed to make themselves understood by the people of the places they landed at or reached. But in the case of the two Asokan dharma emissaries who arrived in Thailand that time, it was rather fortunate for them that there had been Indian traders and refugees living all along the Malay and Indo-China Peninsulas. Some of these Indian tribes were known to have fled from Asoka's invasion before he was converted to Buddhism by the horrors of war. Therefore it is not without reason to say that the first preaching of the Message would at first have been among the Indian themselves and then, through these Indian interpreters, to the people of the country, who at that time are supposed to have been the Mon-Khmers ethnicity.

This also indicates that there might be surface road connecting India and Southeast Asia from the ancient period. I believe that there must be a surface route which directly links Thailand to North India or parallel route to Silk Road connecting countries in lower Asia. This possibility is supported by the existence of ancient north-south route between China (Chendu) and India (Assam) called 'Shoo-hyien-too' which was two centuries older than the Silk Road itself. This route must be an essential source for Thai culture and civilisation connecting Indian world and Southeast Asia. Based on observation of Thai culture it is heavily influenced by North Indian culture rather than South Indian or Sri Lankan. For example, Thai language is heavily rooted on Pāli and Sanskrit languages. Also, most art and architecture, folklores, local technologies and literature of Thailand are derived from culture of Northern India.

Therefore, the first form of Thai Buddhism must be of Asokan Buddhism or the form of Buddhism closest to the time of the Buddha himself. This original form of Buddhism is, of

course, known presently as the Theravāda Buddhism.

II. Mahāyāna or Northern Buddhism

Probably, the trading route between India and Southeast Asia was one of the main veins connecting Lower Asia. Through that trade route it was not only the original Buddhism that entered Thailand but later when Mahāyāna Buddhism flourished in India especially during the reign of King Kanishka who ruled over Northern India during the second half of the first century AD, the Mahāyāna Buddhism also reached Thailand. However, the evidence indicates that the first wave of Mahāyāna Buddhism which entered Thailand through direct route from Northern India was not that strong. By about 757 AD the Mahāyāna Buddhism became a dominant form of Buddhism in the region of Southern Thailand which was ruled by King Srivijaya, a devout Mahāyāna Buddhist king of Indonesia. In Southern Thailand there are many evidence to substantiate that Mahāyāna Buddhism was once prevalent there. This evidence is in the form of stupas or *cetiya*s and images, including votive tablets of the Buddhas and Bodhisattas, which were found in large number, all of the same type as those discovered in Java and Sumatra. The *cetiya*s in Chaiya and Nakon Sri Thammarath (Sanskrit: Nagara Sri Dharmarāja) both in Southern Thailand, clearly indicate Mahāyāna influence in Thailand.

Around 10th centuries onwards the Mahāyāna Buddhism also reached central Thailand through Cambodia. The Suryavarman dynasty of Cambodia extended over the whole of present-day Thailand and spread Mahāyāna Buddhism with a strong mixture of Brahmanism. There is an inscription found in Lopburi, central Thailand dated about 1017 AD which records about the popularisation of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Thailand. The inscription also indicates that there were monks of both schools, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, in Lopburi during those days. There are no indications, however, that the Mahāyāna Buddhism superseded the Theravāda which was well established before Mahāyāna which arrived through Cambodia.

It was not only Mahāyāna Buddhism that influenced Thailand from Cambodia, but much of the Brahmanic culture which survives in Thailand till today could be traced to its origin from Cambodia during this period as well. This period, therefore, can be termed Mahāyāna period. Sanskrit, the sacred language of Brahmanism and Mahāyāna Buddhism, took its root deep in Thailand during these times.

III. Theravāda lineage from Burma (Pagan) Buddhism

In 1057 AD, King Anuruddha (Anawratha) became powerful in the whole of Burma, having his capital at Pagan (central Burma). Anuruddha extended his kingdom right up to Thailand, especially the Northern and Central parts, covering areas presently known as Chiang Mai, Lopburi, and Nakon Pathom. By the 10th century Buddhism in India was already in a state of decline, and contact between Burma and India was then faint. Consequently, Theravāda Buddhism, as prevalent in Burma at that time, underwent some changes and assumed a form which was somewhat different from the original doctrine which is widely known as Burma (Pagan) Buddhism. During the period of King Anuruddha, Burmese Buddhism exercised great influence over Thailand, especially in Northern Thailand.

According to historical evidence, Northern Thailand was once ruled by King Anuruddha of Burma; Central Thailand was under King Suryavarman of Cambodia; and Southern Thailand was under King Srivijaya of Indonesia. It was only about 1257 AD that Thailand's independent state at Sukhothai (Pāli: Sukhodaya) in Northern Thailand was clearly established. By that time, Sukhothai period of Thailand was already enriched with the dominance of Theravāda Buddhism influenced both through Mon, Burma and Sri Lanka and

infusion of Mahāyāna Buddhism together with Brahmanism from Cambodia and Southern Thailand.

Accordingly, Donald K. Swearer characterises Thai Buddhism as eclectic. He writes, ‘prior to the establishment of the major Thai states of Sukhothai and Chiang Mai in the thirteenth century, Buddhism in Thailand can only be characterized as eclectic...These diverse Buddhist expression, in turn, competed with Brahmanism, Hinduism, and autochthonous animisms. Rather than an organized sectarian lineage, the early religious amalgam in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia might be more accurately described as a syncretic collage of miraculous relics and charismatic monks, Hindu *dharmasastra*, Brahmanic deities, Mahāyāna Buddhas, tantric practices, and Sanskrit Sarvāstivādin and Pāli Theravāda traditions.’¹⁰

It is odd enough to notice that François Bizot describes this eclectic nature of Buddhism in pre-modern Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia as a congruence of Vedic Brahmanism, tantrism, and a pre-Aryan Austro-Asiatic cult of guardian spirits and protective divinities. Bizot has characterised this congruence of Buddhism and other beliefs as “Tantric Theravāda.”¹¹ The term is rarely used but in fact it does manifest a true sense of Thai Theravāda particularly the level of Buddhism that anthropologists labelled as folk Buddhism or popular Buddhism. By this it means that under the roof of Theravāda you are allowed to practice non-Theravāda rituals and worship without any hesitation and oddity.

IV. Theravāda lineage from Sri Lankan Buddhism

According to history there are many times that Buddhism was brought into Thailand from Sri Lanka:

1. About 1153 AD, King Parakramabahu the Great (1153-1186 AD) became king of Sri Lanka. Being a powerful monarch and a great supporter of Theravāda Buddhism, King Parakramabahu the Great did much to spread and consolidate Buddhism in his island kingdom of Sri Lanka. The news spreads to neighbouring lands. Buddhist monks from various countries, such as Burma, Pegu (Lower Burma), Kambuja (Cambodia), Lanna (Northern Thailand) and Lan Chang (Laos) flocked to Sri Lanka to study and inherit the pure form of Buddhism. Thailand also sent her monks to Sri Lanka and thereby obtained the ordination rite from Sri Lanka, which later was known in Thailand as Lankavamsa or Sri Lankan lineage. This was about 1257 AD. According to the inscription dated about 1277 AD, it was recorded that King Ram Khamhaeng who was ruling at the time, invited monks from Sri Lanka who were propagating Buddhism in Nokon Sri Thammarath of Southern Thailand to his capital and gave them his royal support in propagating Buddhism and studying the Pāli Canon. This indicates that the form of Buddhism prevalent in Sukhothai period was a form of Theravāda Buddhism that was influenced from Burma and Sri Lanka. As a result, Mahāyāna Buddhism was declined in Sukhothai period. The only form of Buddhism at that time was Theravāda Buddhism but with two different groups of monks: original Thai monks and those monks ordained according to Sri Lankan ordination rites.
2. In 1331 AD, Sri Lankan Buddhism was brought into Thailand from Mon for the second wave. It was recorded in annals that there was a Mon monk named Udumavarapupphāmahāsvāmī who was ordained from Sri Lanka was propagating Buddhism successfully at Matima city of Mon kingdom. Hearing this news, two monks from

¹⁰Donald K. Swearer, ‘Thailand’ entry in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* edited by Robert E. Bushwell. New York: Thomson Gale, 2003:830

¹¹*Ibid.* p.830

Sukhothai named Venerable Anomadassi and Sumana went to study Buddhism with him in Mon. Later they led eight Thais to travel to Mon and got ordination as monks according to Sri Lankan ordination rite but by the Mon monk. This lineage of monks became popular in Sukhothai and King Dhammaraja Li Thai of that period invited Venerable Udumavarapupphāmahāsvāmī to Sukhothai to ordain Thais and teach Buddhism in Thailand. This second wave of Buddhism from Sri Lanka is considered to be the emphasising of Sri Lankan Buddhism in Thailand which was already strongly established.

3. In 1424 AD, there is another record in the annals that Sri Lankan Buddhism was directly brought into Ayutthaya, the capital of Thailand at the time. It is recorded that a group of 33 monks travelled to Sri Lanka and re-ordained on a boat in the middle of Kalyani River. They were studying in Sri Lanka for many years before they returned to Thailand. On their return trip they also invited two Sri Lankan monks to help propagate Buddhism in Thailand.
4. In 1465 AD, King Barom Trilokanath of Ayutthaya period invited Sri Lankan monks directly to Thailand and the King himself got ordination from those Sri Lankan monks. It is worth to remark that it was only in 1424 that monks from Ayutthaya travelled to Sri Lanka to get ordained according to Sri Lankan ordination rite and after 41 years King Barom Trilokanath imported Sri Lankan monks again to Thailand. Perhaps Buddhism in Thailand at that time is declining badly so many monks from Sri Lanka were imported to boost status of state Buddhism in Thailand.
5. In 1565 AD, Mon lineage of Sri Lankan Buddhism was brought into Thailand once again from Mon region.

Based on these historical evidence, it shows that why Thailand became a stronghold of Theravāda Buddhism. Although Buddhism was brought in and influenced Thailand from different countries and different periods, most of them all belong to the original form of Buddhism or were later known as Theravāda Buddhism. Unlike Theravāda Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism in Thailand was not boosted from time to time. Nevertheless, Thai Theravāda is developed out of many Theravāda lineages from different regions. It can be said that Thai Theravāda Buddhism is the amalgamation of Theravāda Buddhism of Pataliputra of Asokan period, Theravāda of Sri Lanka, Theravāda of Pagan (Burma) and Theravāda of Mon. The dominance of Theravāda, however, does not mean that it totally wiped out all other forms of Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism from golden land of Thailand. On the contrary, all other forms of Buddhism such as Mahāyāna and tantric as well as Brahmanism and animism infused into Thai Theravāda Buddhism in a secondary role. These non-Theravāda practices filled some of the religious practices which cannot be fulfilled by the Theravāda alone. Consequently, it becomes a unique Thai tradition and custom to perform Brahmanistic and animistic rites and rituals on the auspices of Theravāda Buddhism and even together with Theravāda monks without an oddity. Therefore, in order to contextualise Thai Buddhism one cannot ignore this heavy presence of unique amalgamation of Buddhism (Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna), Brahmanism and local animistic elements.

Contextualising Thai Buddhism

Currently, Thailand has a prevalence of Buddhism that ranks among the highest in the world. The national statistic shows that there is more than 95% of Thais practice Buddhism.¹² There are approximately 35,616 live Buddhist temples (monks residing) and 5,943 Buddhist temple relics (no monks residing) in Thailand and over 251,997 monks and 69,607 novices (2009).

¹²Buddhism 95%, Muslim 3.8%, Christianity 0.5%, Hinduism 0.1%, other 0.6% (2007)

Based on majority of adherence, Buddhism is considered to be the state religion of Thailand (However, it is not directly mentioned in the constitution of the country). Thai style Theravāda Buddhism is central to modern Thai identity and belief.

Officially, Buddhism has a special role in Thailand as it is one of the Thailand's national Three Institutions. Nation, Religion and Monarchy are embedded in the heart of every Thai and have been enshrined in every legal document including constitutions. Each Thai is reminded of the three institutions every time he or she looks at the flag. The specific institution of "religion" among this inviolable trio encompasses Buddhism first of all. But it also demonstrates the middle way. The Thai institution of religion, by tradition and by law, means freedom of religion, and peaceful co-existence of all beliefs.

In almost any city or village one will find orange-robed monks on the streets in the early morning accepting gifts of food from women and men. This ritual provides an opportunity for the giver to gain merit and the monks to provide their daily sustenance. The temples have been the organising institutions of most communities as they have been the centres not only of religious life but education, health care, rituals, and community meetings. As development proceeds and the government provides specialised agencies, these functions of the temple are being displaced while the more distinctly religious functions remain. The temples are the sites of rituals and festivals, which are Buddhist and animist.

It is also important to know that not only do 95% of the Thai people claim to be Buddhist, they are for the most part serious about their religion. There is an old saying in Thailand that 'to be Thai is to be Buddhist.' This is in contrast, for example, to modern Japan where most people do not find religion to be very important in their lives, although they continue to follow the old Buddhist and native Japanese Shinto religious rituals during life's special occasions, such as at wedding, funeral, birth, and important holidays such as New Year. Thai people normally feel their religion strongly, and it has a major impact on their lives and thinking.

Large percentages across all sectors of the Thai populations believe in most of the basic aspects of Buddhism which include other spirit beliefs. From a sociological perspective, research¹³ finds that women appear to be somewhat more religious than men, and older, less educated, and rural people are more religious than the younger, more educated, and urban people with regard to Buddhist belief. But with regard to the more animist or "superstitious" beliefs, there are some interesting anomalies apparent in the Thai society. For example, younger Thais are more likely to make vows to spirits; the more educated are more likely to engage in spiritualism and fortune-telling; and urban people are significantly more likely to practice both types. This suggests that economic development has had a slightly greater impact in diminishing the significance of Buddhism than it has the animistic-spiritualistic elements of Thai religion.

However, at present we can say that some urban nature in Thailand has shifted from the study made in 1990s. A simple survey of popular books among educated and urban populations in Thailand shows that books on Buddhism are at tops of the best seller list. This tells us that middle class educated Thais are keen in reading books on Buddhism. Recently, it has been noticed that the Buddhist book publication industry is getting bigger. Moreover, looking at the numbers of student enrolment in two state Buddhist universities of Thailand (which are operated by Buddhist monks under the Royal Thai government), it shows that the number of lay students pursuing for Buddhist degree is remarkably increasing year after year.

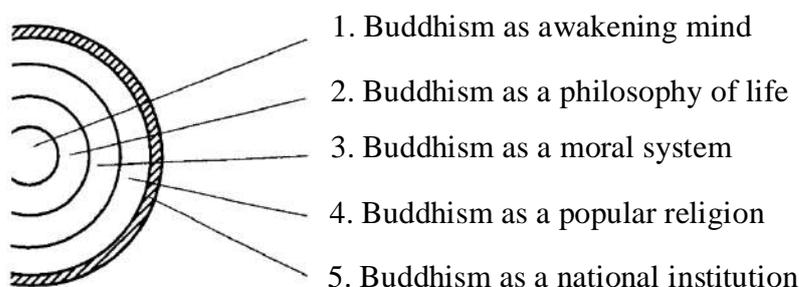
¹³Sunataree Komin. 1991. *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavior Patterns*. Bangkok: National Institute of Development Administration.

A remarkable indicator of Thais' respect for Buddhism is the fact that some 80 to 90 per cent of all young males who identify with Buddhism in Thailand become monks for at least a few months in their lives – usually in their late teens or early 20s. While monks, they live the usual Spartan life in their monasteries, sleeping on the floor, abstaining from all drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity, abstaining from eating after midday, all the while meditating and learning Buddha's teachings. So accepted is the tradition of all young men entering the monastery at least briefly that private corporations and government agencies must give automatic time off from work for them to do so.

The entrance into monkhood can be conceived of as a *rite de passage* for the young Thais. One is not considered to be fully mature until one has fulfilled this rite. Having being ordained, he is to be considered fully mature, moral, and educated in village terms. It is not surprising that a girl will shy away from marrying one who has not yet been a bhikkhu or monk and is thus immature and not yet a full man; in village terms 'khon dip' or 'unripe person.'

Five Layers of Thai Buddhism

With a gradual development of Buddhism into Thai society and culture, Buddhism becomes not only a collection of the philosophical and moral teachings of the Buddha as popularly understood; it is more complex and comprehensive. It is a living psychological and social phenomenon as complicated as a man himself. If one contextualises Thai Buddhism carefully enough through functionality, it will look exactly like a cross-section of a tree trunk consisting of a central core and a number of rings around it.¹⁴



Five Aspects of Buddhism

	Layers	Dimensions	Goal	Types of Buddhists
1	Awakening mind	Experiential	True happiness	Meditative
2	Philosophy of life	Intellectual	Knowledge	Intellectual
3	Morality	Social	Good life & Society	Moralist
4	Popular	Emotional	Security	Folk Buddhists
5	National	Political	National Security	Nationalist

1. Buddhism as the Awakening mind

One approach to contextualise Thai Buddhism is taking Thai Buddhism as a pure spiritual practice preserving its core original value. This influenced part of Thai Buddhists to aim for Nirvana (Pāli: Nibbāna) instead of popular heaven or Buddha's pure land. Certainly, the

¹⁴This model is developed by Professor Emeritus Saeng Chandra-ngarm in his booklet entitled *Buddhism and Thai People*. Chiang Mai: Ming Muang Printing Press. 1999:2

highest goal of Buddhism is to be Awakened or to be a '*buddha*' which simply means mentally Awakened One. All Buddhist teachings comprised 84,000 doctrines ultimately lead a dharma practitioner to be fully awakened and elimination of mental defilements. The emphasis on this layer of Thai Buddhism still can be learnt and witnessed through Buddhist sermons delivered by monks who heavily emphasised these true teachings of Buddhism. In terms of practicality, there are a group of Thai monks who are categorised under 'forest tradition' and who do practice seriously toward this path. Under this layer of Buddhism meditation is epitomised and widely practiced.

However, after the 19th century, the trend of Buddhist meditation has changed totally. Instead of limiting meditational practice within monastics Thai Buddhism popularised meditation practice beyond monastery. As a result, it can be seen that meditation is widely practiced at present Thailand both by monastics and lay followers. Numerous meditation centres both monastic based and non-monastic based retreat centres are built all around the country. This layer of Buddhism, of course, less emphasises rites and rituals but more on mental development and self-understanding both through *samatha* and *vipassanā* practices. Therefore, it is not surprising to see modern Thais are keen in deeper practice of meditation and Buddhism. It is surprising to notice that in modern days, meditation centres and retreat centres are crowded with students practicing meditation. This is truly new phenomenon of Thai Buddhism developed within this century.

2. *Buddhism as a philosophy of life*

Compared to the population of Thai Buddhists, the number of Thais who seriously take Buddhism as a means of Awakening mind are still in a very small in number. However, majority of Thais are influenced by Buddhist philosophy. Most Thai knew or heard of main Buddhist doctrines and philosophies although they may not fully understand them. Those Buddhist philosophies have embedded into Thai language and culture. Buddhist philosophies are widely echoed in public speeches and media. In addition to Buddhist sermons delivered by monks, King's royal speeches and speeches of country's leaders always enriched with Buddhist philosophies. Therefore, under this layer of Buddhism most Thai regard Buddhism as their main source of philosophy of life. This layer of Thai Buddhist is widely referred by all walks of life and every field of occupation at least as a point of reference and for inspiration. This tradition keeps Thais close ties with Buddhism. In the time of difficulties, Thai scholars and policy makers always put their effort to find Buddhist based solutions although it might not be efficient all the time. Therefore, one should not be surprised to witness echoing of Buddhist philosophies in their daily life although they do not seriously practice Buddhism.

Answering to the question put forwarded by a Western journalist about status of being a Buddhist among Thais, Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, Supreme Patriarch of Thailand said 'Thais are Buddhist by their culture. Regardless of their going into Buddhist temple and engagement with Buddhist practices they are still Buddhist by blood as only life philosophy Thais knew is Buddhist philosophy.'¹⁵

3. *Buddhism as a moral system*

Another angle in contextualising Thai Buddhism is to see Buddhism as a main source of moral system. Thai moral system is heavily engraved with Buddhist teachings of law of karma and social aspect of Buddhism. The Buddhist idea of merit-making both in a personal

¹⁵Personal communication took place around 1980s.

level and social activities is prevalent in the Thai society. All Thai ethics are grown out of Buddhist ethics. Therefore, many Thais who do not take Buddhism seriously are still influenced by moral system based on Buddhism. Expanding the idea of Buddhist karma Thais have added elaborate conception of heaven and hell as a part of reward and punishment to the Thai moral system which do have greater impact on the Thai society. Most Thais are taught of Buddhist five precepts as a part of moral system. The aims of those moral systems are not only for self-improvement but it leads to social solidarity and harmony.

4. Buddhism as a popular religion

As abovementioned Thai Buddhism is eclectic. Although Theravāda Buddhism is regarded as the purest form of Buddhism Thai Theravāda has developed to be a unique form of Theravāda. For many Buddhist scholars it would be unacceptable when they see Theravāda Buddhists equally partake in Brahmanism and animistic rituals. In a worst case, it is sometimes a Theravāda monk himself who performs those non-Theravāda activities. In this regard, Richard Gombrich divided nature of Buddhism into ‘soteriology’ and ‘communal religion.’¹⁶ He accurately analyses Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism that there is no absolute doubt on Theravāda Buddhism being soteriological religion. However, for lay people aspect of ‘communal religion’ is equally essential. Therefore, if a lay Buddhist worships God or devil or spirit it is nothing to do with soteriological aspect of Buddhism. As long as they follow the Buddhist path for soteriological result, it is part of their communal or popular religion which they used as a means for this life-based happiness and success of their daily activities. Therefore, a safe way to contextualise Thai Buddhism is to include syncretic activities under the label of popular Buddhism.

This is possible because Buddhism is a very tolerant religion. Wherever it spread, it became mingled with local, non-Buddhist elements. It assimilated into itself beliefs and practices of other religions. Popular Buddhism is characterised by believing in literal interpretation of the Texts, worshipping Buddha images as living personages, adopting supernatural beings from Brahmanism and local beliefs, animism and other sources and worship them along with Buddha, emphasising rituals and ceremonies to be performed at certain times and places etc.

Accordingly, many scholars point out that Thai Buddhism fits nicely with this category of popular Buddhism rather than a pure Theravāda Buddhism.

5. Buddhism as a national institution

In the beginning of this century, King Rama VI (reigned 1910-25) formulated the three institutions of Thai unity, continuity and identity as Nation, Religion, and King–religion being for all practical purposes Buddhism. These three institutions are highly respected by all walks of life in Thailand. Buddhism is then used as a symbol of national institution and unity. Therefore, it is not surprising to hear nationalist Buddhist claims, ‘to be a Thai is to be a Buddhist.’ Buddhism is tied heavily with national identity. By the constitution, it is clearly mentioned that monarchy must be a Buddhist. Moreover, Buddhism, one of the three national institutions, also opens many political dialogues within its sphere. Many Buddhist holidays are also national holidays. It is essential to understand roles of national institutions to contextualise Thai Buddhism into political arena.

Although this is mostly referred as a symbolic in the past in contemporary Thailand, this aspect of Thai Buddhism is getting blur with the direct involvement of Buddhist monks into

¹⁶Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo*. London: Routledge. 1966:26

the political arena. Monks are directly claiming themselves as a part of Thai population and they claim to have a full right to engage in political activities. This view is different from the ruling monks under the administration of the Ecclesiastical Council of Thailand. The main ecclesiastical judiciary laws are not clear in governing their 300,000 monastics on the stand of direct political engagement. Therefore, it is becoming common in media to see Buddhist monks partaking in political demonstrations and protesting activities in recent decades.

Contextualising Thai Sangha

According to the latest survey (published in 2009) from the Office of National Buddhism of Thailand¹⁷, the total population of monks and novices in Thailand is 321,604. They are divided into two different lineages of Mahānikāya (89%) and Dhammayuttikanikāya (11%). There are 35,616 Buddhist monasteries in Thailand which are categorised into Mahānikāya (93%), Dhammayuttikanikāya (6.5%), Chinese Nikāya (.04%) and Vietnamese Nikāya (.04%). These Wats or monasteries are further categorised into the Wats which are royally sponsored (0.8%) and public sponsored (99.2%).

The administration of sangha is done parallel to the government system. Starting from abbot to chief of sub-district, district, provincial, and regional levels. Mahanikāya and Dhammayuttika monks are independent to each other in terms of sangha administration, however, in the highest level they both are under the same Ecclesiastical Council with the president of the council being the Sangharaja or the Supreme Patriarch.

At present there are 19 members of the Ecclesiastical Council known locally as ‘Mahāthera Samākhom’ (Pāli: Mahāthera samāgama). This Ecclesiastical Council is officially recognised as a national institution. The secretary-general of the Ecclesiastical Council is the ex officio director of Office of National Buddhism.

Among administrative Thai Buddhist monks, there is a unique system of appointing royal titles to go with the seniority, contribution, and administrative responsibilities. There are altogether eight levels of those royal ecclesiastical titles with the Supreme Patriarch on the top and Phrakhrū level at the bottom. The statistic shows that there are 14,540 monks (4.5% of total monks) who hold those different levels of royal ecclesiastical titles in Thailand. Technically, these monks are directly responsible for administrative jobs and continuation of Thai Buddhism.

Regarding Buddhist education for monastics, the Ecclesiastical Council operates two different Buddhist educational systems: Pāli studies (Parien-dhamma) and General Buddhist studies (Nak-dhamma). Pali studies provide nine gradual levels whereas general Buddhist studies provide three gradual levels. Most sangha members are expected to study both system based on an individual capacity.

In addition to the traditional Buddhist education, the Thai government supports two state Buddhist universities¹⁸ which are expanded all over the country with numerous colleges and study centres affiliated with those two state Buddhist universities. These universities offer not only graduate courses but also post-graduates up to doctorate. Roughly, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Buddhist University has 14,000 enrolled students while Mahamakut Buddhist University has 18,000 enrolled students. These students comprised both monastic and lay. Still there are 399 monastic based secular schools providing secular education on top of monastic education for Buddhist monks and novices residing all over the country.

¹⁷<http://www.onab.go.th/attachments/2552.pdf>

¹⁸Technically, Mahāchulalongkornrajavidyalaya University is for Mahānikāya monks and Mahamakut Buddhist University is for Dhammayuttika monks. However, this does not apply to students who enroll in those universities.

The Ecclesiastical Council also train their monks for special tasks. Under the administration of formal ecclesiastical council in 2008, there are 5,551 monks qualified as meditation teachers (Phra Vipassanācārya); 7,378 monks are qualified as sermon givers (Phra Nakthet); 150 monks are qualified as ethical teachers (Phra Cariyānidesaka); 300 monks are qualified for local propagators of Buddhism and 5,778 monks are qualified for training public based on each district.

Recently, there is also a category of provincial level Buddhist Wats which is officially assigned as a meditation centre for public. The number of this category is 962 Wats.

Based on this statistical analysis, Thai Buddhism is in a favourable state. It is not wrong to say that Thai Buddhism is still gripping its stake hold in the Thai society actively.

Contextualising New Buddhist Movement within Thai Buddhism

Within last five decades, Thai Buddhism has been challenged by many new Buddhist movements accordingly we may discern a variety of developments. Emphasis on rational Buddhism remains influential among urban intellectuals (inspired by King Mongkut, Prince-monk Vajiranyanavongsa; Venerable Buddhadasa, Venerable Payutto); tradition-and hierarchical Buddhism are as vital as ever, and coalesce in the new middle class-based Thai Buddhism; others set on serious ethical and religious practice, such as the Santi Asoka cult; others still feel attracted to the discipline and esoteric meditation of the Dhammakaya movement. In the past, the urban intellectuals were the most conspicuous group. They are the people who want to bring modern relevance to old practices, they identify with both Buddhism and ‘Thai-ness’, and they are uneasy about this identification in modern times.

Observing present status of Thai Buddhism Niels Mulder points out, ‘the reform-oriented intellectuals constitute a tiny minority that serves as irritant to all those others who also call themselves Buddhists, and who, if they publish, readily accuse the reformers of disrespect or even sacrilege and heresy. To these conventional believers, who constitute the vast majority, Buddhism is a way of life, an identity, and the key to primordial Thai-ness. Any protest, any attack, on their religious feelings touches a raw nerve. According to their understanding of the Buddhist faith, they are just as good Buddhists as the reformers.’¹⁹

Most remarkable is the role and contribution made by the Dhammakāya movement. The Dhammakāya becomes very popular movement of Thai Buddhism with grandiose Buddhist monasteries and mass numbers of devotees. Each function is participated by hundreds of thousand devotees. This new movement of Thai Buddhism totally breaks off from the traditional Thai Buddhism in style and emphasis. Importantly, they believe that the Buddha is still accessible for human world even today. Buddha is residing up in the heaven. This is utterly non-Theravāda teaching. This creates some controversies within Thai Buddhism both in administrative and public levels. However, this is still acceptable within the Thai Ecclesiastical Council. Recently, Dhammakāya runs its own university registered in the United States of America as it was not acceptable by the ecclesiastical council in Thailand. Although this is a very new Thai Buddhist movement emphasised on newly invented meditation method and organisational skill, the impact within wider Thai society cannot be ignored.

Also within the last three decades, Thai Buddhism was challenged by another new Buddhist movement known as Santi Asoka. This new movement stresses on strict monastic rules and vegetarianism and criticised the mainstream Buddhism publicly. Finally, this movement was legally sued and forced to denounced Thai mainstream Theravada Buddhism. They lost in the

¹⁹ Niels Mulder, *Inside Thai Society: Religion Everyday Life Change*, Bangkok: Silkworm Books. 2000:107

court and denounced Thai mainstream Buddhism. This became a positive force for this movement as they began to run new form of Buddhism without interference of mainstream Thai Buddhism or beyond judiciary of the Ecclesiastical Council. This is considered to be the first successful Buddhist movement to operate an independent Buddhist monastic based movement in Thailand.

Moreover, within last five decades one of the positive developments of Thai Buddhism is the popularisation of meditation courses among public and offering Buddhist education in secular universities. This is considered to be going against the grain development of Buddhism in the twenty-first century globalisation.

Inconclusion

It is important to emphasise again that Thai people take religion quite seriously. Walking through the big cities of Thailand as well as in the countryside, one continues to see most Thais paying their respect to their religion by following important rituals such as putting their hands together in a *wai* when passing a temple or other important religious site, giving alms to monks, and treating them with extensive reverence. Though it is in some decline, the practice of having all young men entering the monkhood for a period of time continues. Over 80 to 90 per cent of young men continue to do so, a quite remarkable number when comparing modern Thailand to other countries, in the West or Asia, with similar levels of economic development.

Although the government agencies have replaced traditional roles of Buddhist monks and Wats, it is still visible to see very many roles of Buddhist Wats seamlessly engraved within the Thai society and culture. Many Thais claim that their traditional respect for the moral principles of Buddhism, along with the religious training almost all young men receiving as temporary monks, has kept the nation's social problems, such as crime, lower than they would otherwise be. But as in all developing societies, there will no doubt be a drop in religiosity among the average Thai person as education and economy expand. It seems, however, that religion in Thailand will remain stronger than in most nations far after extensive economic development has been obtained.

Over ninety percent of the Thais are nominally Buddhists. The non-reformers feel attacked if a small minority of mainly intellectuals tells them that they inferior and mistaken Buddhists, and that their identity-maintaining practices and beliefs are *ipso facto* mistaken as well. To them Buddhism is a way of life and, whether mingled with animism or not, a means of sacred protection and auspiciousness in an unruly world.

Though one cannot deny the impact of globalisation on Thai Buddhism in general, there are equal efforts from Thai Buddhists both monastics and public to keep Thai Buddhism alive and active as an integral part of being a Thai and being Buddhist at the same time. However, many Thais are not interested in spiritual or intellectual depth of Buddhism but rather in survival. To them Buddhism offers protection and security in a world in flux, a thing to cling to, not for the sake of religious way of life but as identity and a means towards blessings. With the onset of modernity and its profound social changes, surprisingly animistic expressions of Buddhism are flourishing and apparently on the increase.

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