

# **A Modern Trend of Study of Buddhism in Thailand: King Mongkut and Dhammayuttikanikāya**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will examine King Mongkut's attempt to develop an interpretation of Buddhism consistent with Western science and learning. This attempt marked the beginning of a fundamental epistemological shift in doctrinal Thai Buddhism. The theoretical shift, which continues to have significant religious implications today, involved the rejection of the layered or hierarchical notion of truth which underlay traditional Buddhist teachings and its replacement with the notion of a single, universal, and all encompassing truth.

Although Theravada Buddhism has been the national religion of Thailand since the Sukhothai period in the thirteenth centuries the popular understanding of traditional Theravada Buddhism was often clouded by the mythological and popular overlay mixed with magical beliefs, superstition and mixture of Brahmanistic rites. These aspects of Thai Buddhism became problematic for many Buddhists when they were exposed to Western science, ideology and authentic Buddhism. King Mongkut found all these were practiced in the wrong way conjoined with delusion and far away from the true teachings of Buddha. He referred this kind of belief as 'Acinnakappika' or 'Acinnakappikanikaya' meaning the type of Buddhism traditionally inherited without openness, without light and no further explanations were given.

King Mongkut viewed that the authentic Buddhism has a unique principle of a single, universal and all encompassing truth. Rejecting the superstitious beliefs that had attached themselves to Buddhism in the course of centuries, he preached Buddhism in its pure form based on Pali Canon instead of Commentaries. He showed that Buddhism, if properly understood, contains nothing that is contrary to common sense or in conflict with science and it is primarily a moral system thoroughly suited to modern needs. Commenting on King Mongkut's critique, Jasse Caswell, an American Presbyterian missionary observed that King Mongkut totally demythologized Buddhism that included a rejection of 'everything in religion which claims a supernatural origin'. Reformation made by King Mongkut resulted in improving monastic discipline in an effort to bring it closer to the vinaya, and he also deconstructed and reinterpreted many traditional Thai Buddhist teachings. This new trend of practice formed the nucleus of a new, stricter group of Thai Buddhism named Dhammayutika or Dhammayutikanikaya meaning 'those adhering to the accurate doctrine.'

King Mongkut's legacies continue to have significant religious implication to present day. Following King Mongkut's emphasis on returning to the original teaching of the Buddha Prince Vajiranyanavaroṣa, his son and the founder of Thai Buddhist education system repeatedly states that he hopes other will make further explorations in the direct study of the Pali Canon as a source for spiritual guidance, and that the commentaries are to be accepted only when they are in line with the Canon. Referring to such implications today many scholars write that popularizing the notion of advancing knowledge in Buddhism rather than simply elaborating on inherited tradition was the necessary condition for the twentieth century scholarly contributions of Phra Dhammapitaka (Payutto) and innovative doctrinal interpretations of Buddhadasa (Thanissaro 1997; Swerer 1999:202).

In addition, King Mongkut's emphasis on meditation set up a strong tradition of deep meditation practice which led to the establishment of the Thai forest tradition later led by renowned meditation masters like Venerable Phra Ajarn Mun. This kind of modern trend of exploring Theravada Buddhism initiated by King Mongkut were considered a daring innovation in Thailand and it led to initiate a group of 'progressive' Buddhist monks who are always seeking to learn and who dare to do new things to uphold the correctness and purity of Buddhism. This also led to modern development of Thai Buddhist education system including the establishment of present Buddhist universities.

## **Introduction**

Buddhism entered into Thailand from different periods and directions. There were both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, Buddhism that Thai people have adhered continuously from Sukhothai period to present day has been Theravāda Buddhism which has been received from Sri Lanka directly and indirectly. Therefore, the term 'Theravāda Buddhism' in this paper means the Sri Lankan style of Theravāda Buddhism in general and the Theravāda Buddhism of the Ratankosin period (1782—present) of Thailand in particular. This study is set within a modern trend of study of Theravāda Buddhism led by King Mongkut and ongoing implication in the present Thai Buddhism with a backdrop of King Mongkut's writings. King Mongkut authored over 100 articles, both in Pāli and Thai. His Pāli works alone were 35 in numbers which is the highest quantity of Pāli literature ever written by any other scholars in the Ratanakosin period.

Buddhism in Thailand has influenced the society and vice versa. During the period of King Rama III (1824-1851), there were periods of great change in studying Thai Buddhism in which Prince-monk Mongkut (who later became King Mongkut from 1851-1868)