

A Study of the Predominant Values in Buddhism

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1. Short History of Religiosity in Thailand

ACCORDING TO A LEGENDARY ACCOUNT, originated in Sri Lanka, Buddha in His life time, had visited Thailand (Suvannabhumi according to Sri Lankan Legend) at least once, when he visited a Brahmanist hermit named Saccabandhatapasa on the Saccabandhagiri Mountain. He taught the hermit the way to deliberation and gave him a token of his authentic enlightenment by leaving his miraculous footprint on that mountain. Now it is believed to be the Buddhabad Mountain in Saraburi Province.

The Mahavansa Chronicle of Sri Lanka narrated how King Asoka the great of Sri Lanka organized the third Council of Buddhism to distinguish the Theravada Buddhism from other sects. The Chronicle went on to tell how the Great King of Peace sent out in the Year 303 of Buddhist Era the Theravada monks with the mission of witnessing an authentic way of Buddhist life to nine states: Kashmir, Misor, South Bombay, North Bombay, Maharath, Persia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Suvannabhumi. The last name meant at that time all the territories of Indochina Peninsula. All documents show that *Nakornpathom* of Thailand was at that time the most prosperous city state. *Nagara* means "city" and *Pathama* means "the first". The big and oldest pagoda of Nakornpathom also proves that it must be a memorial of a great event. It can be thus assumed that the two Venerables sent by King Asoka came to Nakornpathom, the first Capital of Suvannabhumi, around the year B.E. 303 or 240 Before Christ. Their names are Sona Thera and Uttara Thera.

The two Venerables (Thera) realized that the people in this region were not devoid of religiosity, but they had already in their hearts the Primitive beliefs mixed with Brahmanism, brought by many Brahmins before them. They did not think of globally overthrowing the old culture, but of how to purify it and implant upon it the new vision of life according to the Dhamma discovered by Buddha. Thus they succeeded in establishing, for the first time, the Theravada tradition on the soil of Thailand.

We find an inscription saying a King of Srivijai constructed a Mahayana Temple, laying its foundation on 17 April, 775 A.D. It was the time of King Sailendaravansa who spread the Srivijai Kingdom far and wide. Southern Thailand also underwent strong influences of Mahayana accordingly. However Theravada survived side by side with Mahayana.

Since A.D. 1 many groups of the Thai race immigrated from the Southern Provinces of China and established themselves in the Northern part of Thailand. They brought with them the Theravada mixed with elements of Mahayana as professed in their old homeland.

The Khmer Kingdom accepted Hinduism since the beginning of its History. It underwent the Mahayana influences from the Srivijai expansion around the year 800. Since then, both faiths, Brahmanism and Mahayana, shared their influences in the Khmer culture. Such culture influenced all the Khmer Empire during 1000-1200 A.D. which marked the highlight of the Khmer expansion. The Center, the North and the East of Thailand were under this pressure with the principal feudal states as Lopburi, Sukhothai, Srithep, Phimai, Sakol Nakhorn. However, the Thai people still keep their own culture and religious background--Animism and Theravada--alongside the new faiths in Brahmanism and Theravada. However the Sanskrit language was adopted as Sacred Language for both the Brahmins and monks.

Around 1050 A.D., the Burmese King Anuruth the Great expanded his empire to Lanna, the most Northern part of Thailand. He imposed together with his power, his religious faith in Theravada Buddhism adapted to the Burmese Culture, called Bukam Buddhism, with Pali as the Sacred language.

Around the year 1277 (B.E), King Ramkhamhaeng the great invited a monk, from Nakhorn Srithammaraj, who had been ordained according to Sri Lankan Order (Sri Lanka Vangsa), to establish Theravada Buddhism according to the Sri Lankan Order in all his kingdom. Little by little, all the monks adapted themselves to the regulations of the new Order, but the previous beliefs and practices still went on as the religious foundation of the Thai people.

Since then the form of Thai Buddhism is determined up to date. It may be called Syam Vangsa or the Thai Order of Theravada Buddhism on the World level.

2. **Background of Theravada**

Buddha said before his passing away that no one would replace Him as head of Religion, but His Teaching would guide all His disciples, who might drop some tiny articles if necessary.

The more conservative disciples thought that the word "tiny articles" is relative and ambiguous. For those who wanted to drop or change anything might consider it tiny. The safe way to preserve unity was to keep strict to Buddha's own

words, otherwise the result would be divisions upon divisions. To realize this ideal, Kassapa Thera headed the first Council. It took the 500 Theras 7 months under the patronage of King Ajatisatru of Magadha to complete the task of the First Council. It started just 3 months after Buddha had passed away into Nirvana. The Conservatives were called "**Theras**" while the progressives were called "**Achariyas**."

About 100 years after Buddha's Nirvana, as many Bhikkhus of Vajji, Vaisali state, modified several teachings, 700 Theras met for the Second Council for 8 months under the patronage of King Kalasokaraja and Princess Nandatheri, his sister. The Conservatives called themselves "Sathaviras", while the Progressives called themselves "Mahasanghiksa" and called the Conservatives, "Hinyana" group.

The **Third** and the **most important Council** was initiated by King Asoka the Great in B.E. 303 (about 240 B.C.). Moggalli Tissathera convened 1,000 Theras to Pataliputra City and concluded after 9 months. The Council agreed to send missionaries to 9 regions.

The **Fourth Council** was convened at Anuradhapuri in Sri Lanka by Mahindathera in the year 318 B.E. (about 225 B.C.) under the patronage of King Devanumpiyatissa: 2800 Theras finished it in 10 months.

The **Fifth Council** was accomplished by 1000 Theras of Sri-Lanka at Mahavihar in 12 months. The Chairman was Buddhattathera and King Vattagamamiabhaya of Sri Lanka was the patron. The important result is that the **Tipitaka** was written down for the first time on the palm-leaves; it was about 400 years after Buddha's Nirvana.

Around the year 413 A.D., Buddhaghosa-Charaya wrote commentaries, explanations and put all the Scriptures in order, both in Pali and Singhalese. His form has been held as the standard organization of Tipitaka up to date.

In **Thailand**, the **first Council** was convened by Phra Dhammadinathera under the patronage of King Tilokaraj of Chiangmai in 2020 B.E. (A.D. 1477). It was held in Wat Bodharam for 1 year. The intention was to reorganize the Pali Scriptures that remained from political troubles since the time of Buddhagosacharaya. Such was repeated by King Taksin the Great, King Rama I the Great, King Rama V the Great, King Rama VI, and King Rama IX the Great of Thailand.

3. Development of the Thai Buddhism

The Thai Buddhists, in regard to their obligation, can be divided into 2 categories : the monks and the laymen.

The monks are obliged to belong to one or the other of the orders (nikaya) recognized by the Government of His Majesty, otherwise they are not recognized as authentic Buddhist Monks of Thailand. The recognized orders are as follows:

Theravada Sangha

- Maha Nikaya : founded by King Ramkhamhaeng the Great,
- Dhammayutika Nikaya : founded by King Rama IV.

Mahayana Sangha

- Chinese-Nikaya
- Annamite-Nikaya

All Nikayas are presided by His Majesty the King and the Supreme Patriarch who was also nominated by Him. However, each Nikaya has its Patriarch and is fully autonomous in its consciousness and expression within the range of the common heritage of Buddhism. However, each Nikaya requires from its members to agree upon the common regulations and observances of the order, and also the common heritage of consciousness and expressions of the order.

There are also monks whose orders are not recognized by the official Sangha nor by the Government. Officially they are not monks, but laymen are free to recognize them and venerate them. Such are the Santiasok and the Saccadhamma groups.

Mae-shees have the status of lay women, but most people venerate them as belonging to an order.

A layman is not obliged to venerate only one order. The only obligation for a Buddhist layman is that he has to take refuge, from time to time, in the Triple Gems, that is Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, for his final liberation and as principal refuge in his life. He, therefore, is free to approach monks of various orders, as many as he likes, whether Mahayana or Theravada. He is even free to take an additional refuge in other beliefs than Buddhistic for the welfare of his life. This is the reason why influences on Thai Buddhism are multiple and complicated. The main sources are Thai Animism, Brahmanism, Mahayana of Various forms.

4. *Worship of the Absolute in Buddhism*

If such a question is proposed to the Buddhists in Thailand as: "Is there any thing higher than Lord Buddha?" to be sure, most of the popular Buddhists would say "No". Remember that when I say popular Buddhists, I mean both monks and laymen who have lower religious formation. Both monks and laymen who have higher formation are classified as "Intellectual Buddhists."

The popular Buddhists are used to prayer, though it is not the real prayer, "Buddhang, Dhammag, Sanghang": it is evident from the order of the Triple Gems that Buddha comes first. The popular Buddhists are used to hear and to recite this order from generation to generation. It is, therefore, hard not to be convinced that Buddha is higher than Dhamma and Sangha.

The intellectual Buddhists understand very well that Buddha is the discoverer, not the inventor of Dhamma. He is the Buddha, because he discovered the right Dhamma and behaved according to the Dhamma. Dhamma, though the second in the order of the Triple Gems, precedes Buddha both in time and importance. Dhamma, in short, is the real Absolute and Buddha became Absolute because He identified Himself with Dhamma in his Nirvana.

Dhamma is the only *ONE REALITY* of the *REALLY REAL*. According to the teaching of Buddha nothing in this world is real but impermanent or *ANICCA*. Everything is subject to change. Its apparent reality is short lived. The only thing which is *REAL* and *ETERNAL* is *NIBBHANA*. So *DHAMMA* is identified with *NIBBHANA*. In other words the Absolute is Dhamma or Nibbhana.

Buddha discovered this Absolute Reality through long persevering meditation till he got enlightenment and became the Enlightened One-Buddha. His teaching is called "Dhamma" because it reflects the Absolute Dhamma for our understanding and grasping the Really Real.

Monks or the Sangha are followers of Buddha. Like their Master they are to teach and show the way how to reach Nibbhana-the end of our life by following the Dhamma of Buddha.

Dhamma is the Absolute. Dhamma renders Buddha, Sangha and so the whole Triple Gems the Holiest. Anything concerning the Triple Gems becomes also holy. The Buddhists since the life time of Buddha, have developed the worship of this kind of absolute according to their faith for more than 25 centuries. The details of the worship vary from culture to culture, but the

essence is not much different from each other. It is natural that the worship of the Absolute is expressed in ceremonies, various kinds of arts, and the way of life.

Ceremonies, etiquettes and customs concerning the Triple Gems are delicate and complicated, e.g.:

1) The ordained monks and even novices are untouchable and tabooed objects of veneration. A monk even from the poorest and most abject family is supposed not to pay respect to any layman however high a position he holds in society; on the contrary every layman, without exception, has to pay respect to him. No layman should share his meal. No layman should sit at a level higher than his. No layman should blame him at any condition -- "Good or bad, let him take responsibility for himself" is the slogan, etc.

2) Anything that you do with good intention for any of the Triple Gems -- Buddha, Dhamma or any monk or novice, you gain merit automatically, even no one knows it. Nobody is there to reward or to punish you for your conduct, but it automatically happens to you as a general rule. Why? You should not ask such a question, because it is such. It is the suchness (Tathata) that governs everything, and unbiasedly rewards and punishes everybody.

5. Arts

An ideal attitude of a man, according to Buddha, is *UPEKHA* which may be translated into English by the word *EQUANIMITY*. This ideal is expressed in all kinds of arts. The Buddhist temples yield an atmosphere of tranquility and equanimity. Buddha is never represented as energetic, but always as a peaceful and equanimous man with an attitude of a strong will, that is gentle outwardly but strong internally. The drawing of the Buddhist artists is curvy in a beautiful orderliness. Dances are slow and modest. Songs are slow in melody and proceed in an uninterested manner.

6. Culture of Generosity

At the end of a pious activity, the Buddhist likes to show his generosity by such an Act of Intention.

"All sensitive beings that share the same suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death,

Be happy and happy, spare all revenge,

Be happy and happy, spare all persecution,

Be happy and happy, be devoid of all kinds of sufferings, both bodily and spiritually,

Be happy and happy, keep yourself away from all kinds of sufferings."

The reason lying under the Buddhist generosity is quite different from that of the Christian, because nothing can prove to the Buddhists that they are all brothers and sisters having the same Father in Heaven, because they don't believe in a common parentage of humanity either in heaven or on earth. In fact, the foundation of the Buddhist generosity comes directly from Buddha's teaching that all living beings are suffering. This is believed to be the natural and general fact. Buddha's teaching just makes it more convincing and more attractive for putting it into practice. Each human being should be sympathetic with all living beings without exception, either men or animals, because life itself is the source of suffering.

How is the belief attractive, as mentioned above? It is because of the "theory of Parmi". Surely this theory is not an evident fact that any common sense can get through it. Only the declaration and confirmation from an Enlightened One can assure it and attract the believers to put into practice.

Parmi means "automatically powerful prestige". "Buddha has Parmi" means Buddha has a kind of prestige that creates merit for anyone who does anything in His favour even in his *inadvertency*, and creates likewise punishment for anyone who does anything in his disfavour. The effect of merit and punishment automatically occurs regardless of anyone's intention or attention. Accordingly Buddhism does not require a personal absolute to control or to supervise morality, because the Parmi has the automatic power to generate effect universally and unbiasedly.

Parmi is also the power of Dhamma and itself is also Dhamma. In consequence, Buddha said anyone who behaves well for goodness' sake, automatically gains merit, but to have a perfect merit, one must act with a right view and the first condition of the right view is the acceptance of the Triple Gems.

The Buddhist monks and also the devout Buddhist laymen have Parmi according to the level of right view and right attitude.

We can understand by now the meaning of the Buddhist Generosity. A Buddhist may praise Buddha or generously work for the prosperity of the Triple Gems, just to satisfy his own feeling of awe or esteem, he is praiseworthy and gains a certain merit; but if he does it with the intention to depend on the Parmi of the Triple Gems, he gains the greatest merit that brings him the most prosperity, by which he may choose to be prosperous in the cycle of life or to be prosperous on the way to Nirvana.

It is, then, not surprising to hear that a holy monk like Buddhadasa or Acharn Cha, refuses to be venerated in a special way, but his devotees still go on obstinately, evidently against his will, spending money to build memorials for him, being convinced that they will automatically gain prosperity from his *Parmi*. This is the generosity granted to the Triple Gems--Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

The devout Buddhists also show their generosity towards the poor, the disadvantage and even animals, considering them as the most sufferers of all. There is a controversy concerning vegetation: whether trees, plants and grasses suffer? Some say "yes", and use it as a reason to preserve forests. Some say, "no", and encourage vegetarianism. However the reason that lies behind this kind of generosity is not that this category of entities has *Parmi* in itself, but to be conscious of suffering and to be sympathetic with the most sufferers which is a concrete way of practicing dhamma.

7. *Buddhist - Christian Spirituality to be fostered.*

Orthodox Buddhists are highly spiritual minded. They try to cultivate the spirit of selflessness, detachment and compassion. *TRIPITAKA*, their Scriptures, are a rich source of their spiritual life and strength. Vipassna-Samadhi is a great means for them to achieve self-mastery and a high degree of virtues.

These are the areas I would like to dwell on a little more for the sake of comparison and inculturation.

1. Spirit of selflessness, detachment and compassion.

Buddhadasa Bhiku, a prominent monk in the south of Thailand, made a high contribution to the spiritual heritage of the Thai people, both the Buddhists and the Christians. His attempt was to revive the true gems of Buddhism, especially the true Dhamma for peace and prosperity of Thailand and the whole world. His main talk in his later years was repeatedly on the topic of selflessness or unselfishness. This is really in keeping with the Gospel value, i.e., Kenosis, empty oneself in Christ in order to rise with Him.

2. Meditation-Contemplation- a way to reach Nibbhana, the Summum Bonum or Eternal Life.

Buddhist meditation is an effective means towards self-refinement and enlightenment. It can be used by Catholics with Christian motivation to

turn into a form of contemplative prayer whereby one can commune with God in the depth of his heart. Moreover it can effect in one's soul a change of heart (metanoia) a return to God, a deep sense of prayer.

3. A sense of sacredness

Whatever is related to the Three Gems : Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, is considered sacred. The three are to be highly honored and put on top of everything. They are untouchable by profane hands. The image or statue of Buddha, the Tripitaka, the yellow robe of monks, are all considered sacred objects imbued with sacred power and magical protection.

Jesus taught us to pray ".....hallowed be Thy Name". God's Name is sacred. We should show great reverence by bowing our heads when saying "Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.....", bear good demeanor in the church, pay respect to God's words in the Scriptures etc.

4. A sense of Compassion for all living beings

No violence to all kinds of life, i.e., plants, animals and human beings. Grades of life are grades of purification ordained by the law of Kamma. This positive attitude of life is very much in keeping with the existing movements to promote and safeguard world ecology. Christians should be awakened to give more respect and appreciation to God's marvelous handiworks in nature by destroying nature no more for selfish puposes and by encouraging people to get closer to God through nature.

8. A remark on Inculturation

In my opinion true inculturation must start from the inside because culture is something like second nature to people's thinking and acting. It must have a basis on the conceptual level first before any other outward adaptation and inculturation. We must try to make a contextual theology of catechism by bringing in good points of Buddhist philosophy regarding the concept of Dhamma, Nibbhana and practical ways to right living to reach Nibbhana, the Summum Bonum. Terminology is also a very important element to be coined up in order to relate concepts and ideas of both religions for mutual understanding. Professor Kirti Bunchua was the pioneer in this work. But he met with much objections and oppositions from certain Buddhist fundamentalists. Thus the attempt on inculturation for the Catholics seems to be at a dead end for the time being. Time will come when the Church in Thailand will be more accepted. The Catholics of this country will be no more looked upon as foreigners but Thai.