

TOWARD A BUDDHIST SOCIAL ETHICS: THE CASE OF THAILAND

by Tavivat Puntarigvivat*



Buddhism is often criticized as a religion that, being mainly concerned with personal salvation, lacks a social ethics. Although this may seem to be true, Buddhist teachings on personal conduct do contain principles that could be reinterpreted and extended to a social ethical theory. Thailand offers a good framework in which to approach Buddhist social ethics, for it provides an opportunity to examine socio-political issues under the global market economy at a structural level and from a Third World point of view.

Buddhist monks in Thailand are part of a unified hierarchical sangha (community of monks) which in turn is controlled by the government. Every day, they also eat food donated to them by Thai people, the majority of whom are poor and oppressed. This situation makes it possible to look at Buddhism from a social justice perspective, and thereby add a new

dimension to the Buddhist hermeneutics for the poor. If greed is understood not just in individual terms but also as a built-in mechanism of oppressive social structures, then to reduce or eliminate greed through personal self-restraint will not be enough; these social structures will have to be changed as well. Many Buddhists seek liberation (Pali: nibbana; Sanskrit: nirvana) by practicing meditation, but they do not pay sufficient attention to the way the society in which they live is organized. I wish to offer a challenge to Buddhist ethical values by interpreting liberation as necessarily involving social as well as personal liberation.

The Thai Political Economy

Absolute monarchy was ended in Thailand in 1932. A revolution led by a small number of members of the civilian, bureaucratic, and military elite brought about a radical change in the power structure by placing the monarchy under a constitution. Influenced by the Western idea of democracy, they introduced a new political system in Thailand. Since then the country has experimented with democracy for sixty-five years, during which politics has been overwhelmingly dominated by the military, with seventeen coups d'état or attempted coups, and sixteen revisions of the constitution. During this time, influenced by the global market economy, Thailand has also experimented with capitalism. From 1932 to the fall of Phibun's regime in 1957, it was ruled primarily by the military under democratic constitutions. The monarchy was suppressed, and the economy was dominated by state-owned enterprises. From the 1957 coup by Sarit Thanarat to the fall of Thanom-Praphat's regime in 1973, Thailand was under a military dictatorship without a constitution. There was an increase of private enterprise and capitalism. During the same period, the Thai monarchy gained wide respect both among the people and the military.

The 1973 student-led revolution and the middle-class revolution of 1992 were the first uprisings by the people in the modern history of Thailand. Although neither revolution changed the fundamental social and political structures of the country, they demonstrated that ordinary people, especially the middle-class, have become increasingly powerful in Thai politics. From the mid-70s to the mid-90s, there was an economic boom in Thailand within the global market economy dominated by the United States, Western Europe, and Japan, but this was accompanied by a widening

[Income gap](#) between urban elites and the rural poor, the destruction of the rain forests, and deterioration of the natural environment. This economic expansion, which saw the rise of an affluent upper-middle class, was interrupted by the economic crisis of late 1997 and early 1998.

During successive regimes from 1973 to the present, the military maintained control, staging a number of coups and dominating parliamentary government. The monarchy continued to win wide support from the Thai people, gaining the power to negotiate with the military, as seen by the king's intervention in the resignation of Thanom Kittikhachorn in 1973 and of Suchinda Khraprayun in 1992, as well as in the appointment of Sanya Thammasak as prime minister in 1973 and Anand Panyarachun in 1992. Pro-democracy movements, especially

the middle-class revolution of 1992, gained international support in the post cold-war era. Business elites became more influential in Thai politics as a more democratic parliament and a civilian government gradually took shape. The sixty-fifth anniversary of Thai democracy in 1997 marked a turning point when a reformed constitution, to which many people contributed, was finally promulgated.

In summary, since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, Thai politics has gone through five stages, from constitutional military rule and military dictatorship through democratic experiments and ideological conflict to the rise of a middle class and the promulgation of a reformed constitution. It is the hope of Thai people that when the new constitution has been fully applied, they will experience a more genuine democracy and Thai politics will have entered a new era.

The social and economic development of Thailand within the global market economy in recent decades has increased the division between urban and rural society. Industries and services have been emphasized in the cities, while the agricultural sector in rural areas has been neglected. Education and economic growth have been concentrated in Bangkok and other urban areas, leaving most of the rural population, especially in northeastern Thailand, undereducated, poor, and far behind in access to public services. Tenant farming and agribusiness corporations have uprooted traditional farmers from their own lands and pressured many younger men and women to migrate from the countryside to the cities in search of jobs. This social dislocation has brought about a continuing decline of rural social structures, tradition, and culture, and has created the problem of overpopulation in the big cities. Most of the young male migrants have become low-wage laborers in construction, factories, and service businesses; since the 1980s, many have left to work in the Middle East, Taiwan, Brunei, and Singapore. Many young women from the countryside, particularly from the north, have become prostitutes in Bangkok and other cities. More recently some have traveled to Japan and elsewhere to work in prostitution.

The widening gap in both income and education between urban and rural society has turned Thailand into two worlds: the world of the urban rich and the growing middle class, and that of the rural poor and city slumdweller. In 1996, the population was approximately 60.5 million. The top 20 percent of the people in the income pyramid possessed almost 60 percent of the country's [wealth](#), whereas the bottom 20 percent (approximately twelve million people) owned only 3.5 percent.⁽¹⁾ While the demand for democracy among urban Thais is increasing, it remains a low priority in the countryside where economic concerns are primary. If Thai democracy is to grow, the conditions of rural people need to be dramatically improved, reducing income and educational differences between them and their urban counterparts. Unfortunately, the Thai government, under the influence of multinational corporations and international capitalism, has failed to address the real problems facing farmers and rural people. Government development projects tend to draw human and natural resources from the periphery to the center, leaving the country people in desperate poverty.

Structural Poverty: From the Perspective of Thai Prostitution

Thailand has world-wide fame -- or rather shame -- for its well-established prostitution and sex industry. Many Western and Japanese male tourists go to Thailand simply for a "sex tour."⁽²⁾ Donald K. Swearer points out that although Thailand has over a quarter of a million monks in thousands of monasteries throughout the land, it still has more prostitutes than monks.⁽³⁾ A great number of young women in Thailand, desperate in their search for a better life, have been drawn into the sex industry. (The international sex industry exploits adults and children of both sexes, but the vast majority of prostitution and sex workers in Thailand are women and girls.) In the past, many of them were tricked or even forced into prostitution by mafia gangs. Today they are pressured by structural poverty, consumerism, and sometimes a distorted idea of "filial piety." Although prostitution is illegal in Thailand, the government, because of the inefficient and corrupt bureaucratic system, seems unable to help these unfortunate young women. Prostitution, of course, is against the teachings of the Buddha, but the Thai sangha hierarchy has said virtually nothing about this issue.

Under the present system, Thai farmers find it difficult to sustain their families through agriculture. The harder they work, the deeper they find themselves in debt because of their dependency as tenant farmers. Both sons and daughters are driven to leave home in search of work, but it is easier for women to find a "job" because they can quickly become prostitutes, [earning more money](#) than factory workers.⁽⁴⁾ This has led some poor rural families to send their daughters to towns and cities for "jobs" to support their families.

In the Thai local tradition, especially in the north, parents prefer the birth of a daughter to that of a son. While a son can help his parents in the rice field, a daughter can help in both household work and farming. After marriage, the daughter continues to serve her parents because a Thai couple traditionally establishes their family close to the woman's parents. Usually both a Thai son and daughter hold to the traditional values of filial piety, but a daughter is especially valued because she can do more for her parents. Unfortunately, this traditional Thai attitude fits in quite well with the exploitative structures in which young rural women can find "jobs" in the urban areas, even if such work exposes them to the threat of AIDS.⁽⁵⁾ (The proportion of people in Thailand infected with HIV is among the highest in the world.) Prostitutes send more [money](#) back home to their desperate families than do male or female factory laborers. Their sin is forgiven and they are treated well in their village.

Prostitution is basically a byproduct of unjust economic and social structures and the most obvious form of gender oppression. Although the phenomenon is well-known in Thailand, few Thai people talk about it in public. Today Thai feminists and Buddhist social activists are beginning to speak up in defense of the rights of their mothers, sisters and daughters, reminding society that prostitution represents a distortion of traditional cultural values and is caused by modern structural poverty.⁽⁶⁾ Prostitution and other economic, social, and political problems must be addressed by a new systematic code of Buddhist

social ethics which encompasses the whole range of national issues, including human rights, drug abuse, economic exploitation, and environmental degradation.

Outsiders may argue that these young women could live a simple life at home in the country, and survive by working at their traditional tasks in the household and rice fields without having to resort to prostitution. Contemporary pressures, however, are extremely powerful. Development projects undertaken by the central government have brought roads, radio, television, and popular magazines to the villages, spreading the religion of consumerism. People are no longer happy with older lifestyles.⁽⁷⁾ Traditional values are threatened by desperate poverty, the inability to possess land, and agribusiness; meanwhile, the new values increase the demand for consumer goods. Most rural Thai families are torn apart by these forces, and under such circumstances, it is hard for young men and women to stay home and be happy in rural areas. Today most rural villages, especially in the north and northeast, are populated only by those left behind, old people and children.

Buddhist Base Communities in Thailand

In the face of these forces, only a revitalization of Buddhist values can help rural people retain a level of self-sufficiency and independence. In the past, before the modernization of Thailand under capitalism, the Buddhist monastery was the center of village life and Buddhist monks were its cultural leaders. The Buddhist sangha provided villagers not only with Buddhist teachings, culture, and ritual, but also education, medical care, and occupational advice. In such a community, the spirit of sharing and cooperation prevailed; villagers shared a common local Buddhist culture. However, this Thai rural social structure, with the Buddhist sangha at its center, has collapsed under the impact of economic dependence, social dislocation, and cultural transformation.

What is needed in rural Thailand today is what I call "Buddhist base community,"⁽⁸⁾ with leadership from well-educated or well-informed Buddhist monks or laity. Such a community would seek to promote the enduring values of Thai culture, which are ultimately rooted in a religious worldview. Cultural identity would be fostered through the adaptation of such values, and Buddhist social ethics would become guidelines for action. The economic model of such a Buddhist base community would be one of relative self-sufficiency rather than market dependency. Buddhist teachings, as well as the increase in self-respect and self-confidence likely in a society based on such teachings, can reduce the impact of consumerism, which in recent years has been exacerbated by omnipresent advertising on television and radio and in popular magazines. A renewal of cultural values, along with practical advice from well-informed professionals, would help rural Thais regain economic independence and improve their physical well-being.

Buddhist base communities offer a more participatory democratic model for society. By regaining cultural and economic independence, the rural sector of society can take a more active role in promoting Thai democracy. Once relative

economic self-sufficiency, political decentralization, and local cultural independence is established, rural villages could solve many local problems in a new way. The task of rebuilding a healthier rural society belongs to all Thais, with a pivotal role to be played by Buddhist monks, who are widely respected, demographically represent the rural people, and reside throughout the country. It will be useful to look more closely at different types of Buddhist base communities already existing in contemporary Thailand. Some of them are centered around individual activist monks, while others are organized more as networks of people.

A. Phra Khamkhian's Community

Phra Khamkhian Suvanno's community at Tahmafaiwan in northeastern Chaiyabhum is an exemplary Buddhist base community centered around a charismatic leader. Through Khamkhian's leadership, the Tahmafaiwan community has significantly improved life in nearby villages, both physically and spiritually. It has become a grass-root movement, struggling to achieve a relatively self-sustaining local economy and self-determined local polity, while working to alleviate ecological problems.

Khamkhian, a forest monk and dedicated meditation teacher, has campaigned to help poor people in the northeastern rural areas where he has established "rice banks" and "buffalo banks," which function as independent local cooperatives where poor people can borrow the necessities for agriculture, such as grain and water buffalo. If necessary, they can borrow rice for their own consumption. When they produce a surplus of rice, they deposit it in the rice bank. When a borrowed buffalo gives birth, half of the young buffalo belongs to the farmer and the other half belongs to the buffalo bank.

Khamkhian believes that the villagers' constant battle with poverty and hunger is due to their being caught up in the main-stream, greed-motivated economy. He encourages them to be self-sufficient by raising their own vegetables, digging family fishponds, and growing fruit trees, instead of producing a single crop like tapioca or eucalyptus and buying food from outside the village. Near his forest monastery, he gave a plot of land to one family to try vegetable gardening without chemical fertilizers or pesticides, and the experiment was successful. To broaden the villagers' perspectives, he has encouraged them to go on study trips to other northeastern villages that have been successful in this kind of integrated farming.

Khamkhian has managed to preserve against encroachment about 250 acres of lush, green forest atop the mountain, the only greenery visible amid vast tapioca fields that stretch as far as the eye can see. He plans to send monks to live deep in the forest, so that villagers will not dare damage the sanctified area, which has been declared a forest monastery.⁽⁹⁾ Khamkhian has also led the villagers' fight against local authorities who have supported illegal logging, a struggle which has gained some degree of self-determination for the community in regard to local polity. By attacking consumerism with a renewed affirmation of Buddhist social

and ethical values, he has helped the Tahmafaiwan community win some measure of local cultural independence.

B. Phrakhru Sakorn's Community

Phrakhru Sakorn's community at Yokkrabat in central Thailand is another exemplary Buddhist base community centered around a particular leader. Before Sakorn Sangvorakit came to Wat Yokkrabat at Ban Phrao in Samutsakorn, most people who lived there were impoverished illiterate farmers. The area was often flooded with sea water which destroyed the paddies and left the people with no means of subsistence. Realizing that poverty could not be eradicated unless new crops were introduced, since salt water was ruining the rice fields, Sakorn suggested planting coconut trees, following the example of a nearby province.⁽¹⁰⁾

Once the people of Yokkrabat started growing coconuts, he advised them not to sell the harvest, because middlemen kept the price of coconuts low. With assistance from three nearby universities that were interested in the development and promotion of community projects, the people of Yokkrabat began selling their coconut sugar all over the country. In addition to the coconut plantations, Sakorn got the villagers to grow vegetables and fruits, encouraged the growing of palm trees for building materials, and the planting of herbs to be used for traditional medicine. Fish raising was also encouraged. Within a few years the people's livelihood improved significantly.⁽¹¹⁾

Sakorn believes that a community's basic philosophy should be self-reliance and spirituality. He encourages residents to determine what they need in their family before selling the surplus to earn money and buy things they cannot produce by themselves. In this way, villagers depend less on the market. This principle of self-reliance also underlies the community's credit union project; members are encouraged to borrow money for integrated family farming rather than for large enterprises in cash crops. Since Sakorn is convinced that there can be no true development unless it is based on spirituality, in addition to the projects in economic development he has taught the villagers Dhamma -- the teachings of the Buddha -- and meditation.⁽¹²⁾

Sakorn trains the younger generation of monks and novices for leadership and encourages them to take greater responsibility for their own local community. Although he "disrobed" some twenty years ago, he has continued to support the community.⁽¹³⁾ The self-reliance and ethical values he has inculcated have made Yokkrabat an exemplary Buddhist base community in Thailand.

C. Phra Prachak's Community

In 1991, when Thailand was under military dictatorship, the Thai military threatened Phra Prachak Khuttacitto, a Buddhist monk who was campaigning to preserve a large rain forest in Buriram, Pah (the Thai word for forest) Dongyai, from further destruction. He was arrested and thrown in jail. It was the first time in the history of Thai Buddhism that a monk in robes was jailed by the

authorities.(14) Although Prachak was later released, he had to defend himself in court and was left in a position in which he could hardly resume his work.

In 1992, during the civilian government of Chuan Leekpai, the deputy Interior Minister went to see Prachak at Dhammachitra Buddhist Center in Buriram and promised him and the villagers that the government would cooperate in protecting the remaining forest in the area. He asked Prachak to leave the forest but promised to build thirty cottages for monks, along with a hall, a water tank, and a road in an area of 40 acres outside the forest. He promised Prachak that the Forest Department would send fifteen laborers to help him look after the forest, working twenty days a month for eight months during the initial stage of the project.(15)

The promise has not been fulfilled. A hall was built, but only through the personal effort of Prachak and with financial backing from the people. Prachak asked the Forest Department to send tools, a car, and a communication radio to help in the task of protecting the forest, but to no avail. Without such equipment, the fifteen assistants can do little to stop the felling of trees and protect the forest. After the first eight months, the Forest Department reduced working schedules to only fifteen days a month for the next six months and then stopped the project. Meanwhile forest-destroying gangs intensified their operation and the cutting of trees sharply increased. In other words, under the supposed cooperation between Prachak and the Forest Department, the destruction of the forest has accelerated. The government even publicized this situation to convince the public that monks and villagers did not have the capacity to protect the forest.

There were many attempts to discredit Prachak and to erode his support. A rumor was circulated that he was paid a lot of money by the government, which caused people to stop making donations for his work. Government officials gave money to some villagers and not to others, with the intention of causing misunderstandings among them.(16) The villagers finally divided into three groups. The first, the majority, turned their attention to new plots of land provided by the government. The second group accepted patronage from the influential people who were behind the illegal loggers and withdrew support from Prachak. The third and smallest group continued to support his forest-conservation efforts, since they realized that if the forest was completely destroyed, villagers would find it extremely difficult to survive, and the area would face serious problems of drought and water shortage.

Although Prachak's campaign was held back by government authorities, it represents a grass-roots Buddhist struggle to respond to ecological issues. Under Thailand's military dictatorship, the government openly used its authority to destroy the forest for its own benefit. This prompted people to organize and protest. Today, under an elected civilian government, the process is more subtle yet equally destructive, since the bureaucracy remains unchanged and influential people use covert tactics to invade the rain forest.(17) Through his campaign against environmental degradation, Prachak has helped awaken an ecological conscience at the national level.

D. Buddha-Kasetra Community

Buddha-Kasetra(18) is a group of Buddhist base communities in northern Thailand organized under common leadership. It has established a number of schools to care for orphans, juvenile delinquents, and economically deprived children in the north and northeast of Thailand. Its goal is to build strong Buddhist base communities in rural Thailand to fight poverty, consumerism, and the structural exploitation created by a centralized bureaucratic government.(19)

The first Buddha-Kasetra school, established at Maelamong in the northern province of Maehongson, began its self-support program by growing their own rice and vegetables, producing organic fertilizers, and raising cows to produce milk for the school children as well as to supply milk at a cheap price to the local communities. They also initiated some small commercial projects to produce traditional foods and desserts, weave and sew clothes, and make bricks and concrete posts for construction. All the teachers and school children, in addition to school work, participated in occupational training and manual labor. There was a project to establish a public health center within the community to care for the health of the local people. The Buddha-Kasetra school was able to be self-sufficient in most aspects of its work. Three more Buddha-Kasetra schools were established -- at Nongho in Chiangmai, at Khunyuam in Maehongson, and at Nonmuang in Korat. The number of school children and teachers keeps growing. The Buddha-Kasetra is especially interested in the issue of the exploitation of women and children. It has campaigned to protect women's and children's rights and to alert people to the problems of prostitution and child abuse in northern Thailand. At the Buddha-Kasetra school at Nongho, girls and young women from poor, marginal family backgrounds are admitted to the school for education and occupational training, as well as instruction in Buddhist ethics. There are six teachers, all female except for the principal, Phasakorn Kandej, and eighty-six female students ranging in age from thirteen to eighteen. If these students were not admitted to the school, it is likely that most of them would have resorted to prostitution.

The Buddha-Kasetra Foundation was founded in Chiangmai in 1989, with Phra Chaiyot as coordinator of all its schools and activities. The foundation, which has its own printing press, publishes a monthly newspaper, as well as a number of books on Buddhism and social issues. The foundation has been trying to alleviate the causes of social ills by working with the poor and the unfortunate in a Buddhist base community context, and by training young men and women to be leaders of their own communities in rural Thailand. Although the number is still limited, base communities like Buddha- Kasetra are important in their own right and serve as examples of a new vision of a more humane, cooperative, and service-oriented way of life.

E. Thamkaenchan Community

In 1985 a group of people interested in Buddhism and social and ecological problems came to live together on twelve acres along the Kwai river in a

partially destroyed forest at Thamkaenchan valley.(20) They helped develop the area, which is in the central province of Kanchanaburi, erecting a number of buildings and boathouses, growing vegetables, and planting trees for reforestation. They were committed to the creation of a self-sustaining Buddhist base community by engaging in natural farming and raising cows, goats, and other farm animals. They planted part of the land with herbal plants for the purpose of making traditional herbal medicines. They tried to preserve forest trees and wild animals and were careful to prevent forest fires. Buddhist meditation retreats were held in the community from time to time, and well-known meditation teachers such as Phra Khamkhian Suvanno were invited to lead a retreat. The community also produced paintings as well as books on Buddhism and spirituality.

In 1992 the Riverside School, a school for children from poor families, was established. Paiboon Teepakorn, the leader of the community, is convinced that the right form of education is an important factor in altering the way people think and in creating a new direction for society. Besides the formal curriculum, the students are given occupational training in animal farming, natural farming without using chemicals, local handicrafts, and some knowledge of small engines, as well as training in Buddhist ethics and local culture. After their training, the students are supposed to return to their villages and help their own communities. In a way, Thamkaenchan represents a Buddhist ashrama, helping rural people struggle for a more just society under an exploitative system.

After visiting the Thamkaenchan community in December 1992, James Halloran, an Irish Catholic priest, reported:

The Buddhist spirituality of the members gives them a tremendous regard for creation. Consequently they are deeply reverent towards the natural vegetation of the place, yet have separated a space for some organic gardening. . . The environment is a major issue for the community. . . . There is also a concern with genuine education, reflected by the fact that they are helping a group of needy boys who are not just imbibing school subjects, but a wonderful set of values too. They are courteous, high-minded, and deeply involved with the chores of the community.(21)

The contemporary Buddhist base communities in Thailand are grass-root movements going in the right direction. But their attempts are limited to structural reform, since most of them are concerned with the micro level -- solving the immediate needs or the day-to-day problems of their communities. Macro perspective and praxis, therefore, are needed at the national as well as local levels in order to construct a more serious Buddhist social ethics.

Since the unusual drought and water shortage of 1994, more country people have migrated to towns and cities, adding to the overpopulation and traffic problems in Bangkok and other major cities. The forest fire at Huey Khakhaeng in Uthaitani, a national park with many endangered species and designated as a world heritage site, destroyed some 25,000 acres of rain forest in 1994 and another 125,000 acres in 1998, worsening Thailand's water problems. Despite the prohibition against teak logging and the selfless forest conservation work of

individual monks like Phra Prachak and Phra Khamkhian, the remaining forest has been further destroyed, notoriously at the Salawin national park in Maehongsorn in 1998. Those involved in this destruction of the forest include influential politicians and officials, military and police officers, as well as officials from the Forest Department itself. The unusual flooding throughout Thailand in 1995, the most extensive in fifty years, was partly due to inadequate forests to absorb water from the monsoons. The floods damaged hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural farmland, increasing the poverty of upcountry farmers.

Thailand today faces a systemic problem, as shown by the economic crisis of late 1997 to 1998. Although the country is presently administered by an elected civilian government, the bureaucratic patronage system has remained unchanged and constitutes a major obstacle to the decentralization of power and to social and economic reform. Despite these circumstances, the Thai Buddhist sangha remains silent and inactive, largely due to its bureaucratic administration and individualistic approach to issues. Most monks maintain that if all individuals were ethical, problems would be solved naturally. While there is an element of truth to this approach, it naively ignores the impact of modern economic, political, and social structures on the everyday lives of individuals. A Buddhist social ethics needs to be introduced at a structural level if Thai society is to cope with its contemporary problems.

Buddhist Social Ethics: A Structural Analysis

Historically, Buddhism arose in India at the time when the Aryan civilization flourished. Unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the main concern of religious leaders and philosophers during the time of the founder was not political liberation from social conditions, but personal liberation from human psychological suffering arising from the cycle of birth, old age, sickness, and death. Although the Buddha also taught ethical principles regarding the social, economic, and political well-being of people, the main theme in Buddhism was personal liberation from psychological suffering. Since social and political conditions have changed tremendously in Thailand, I maintain that Buddhism needs a structural vision and a new emphasis on social liberation.

Before the country became modernized, Siam -- the original name of Thailand -- was a traditional society whose values were articulated in terms of Buddhism. The name was changed to Thailand by the government of Phibun Songkhram, soon after he became prime minister in December 1938, as a step toward westernization or modernization. Although Siamese people, measured by modern economic standards, were poorer in terms of material wealth and public health, members of older generations report that they were generally happier and more humane than the Thai people today. The contrast between yesterday's Siam and today's Thailand, however, developed over time as a consequence of basic economic and social changes, themselves the product of government efforts to modernize the country. This modernization has shattered the self-sufficient economy of local communities and centralized the relatively self-sustained polity of the provinces. Ultimately, this process has tied the country economically to the global market economy, and politically to the new

international order. These economic and structural changes have had a great impact on all social and cultural aspects of Thai society, and consequently have affected the social values and well-being of the Thai people.

A retro-utopian view, such as Buddhadasa's dhammic socialism,⁽²²⁾ which uses the older form of traditional Buddhist society as a model for a contemporary society, does not take sufficient stock of the intractable nature of structural problems. If the life of the Thai people in the past was "better" than today, it was mainly because of the self-sufficiency of their local economy and the decentralization of political power, ensuring the integrity of local culture and social values. To advocate a change of form without changing the underlying structure is to miss the point. To ask society to return to an older form of Buddhist society is to advocate the impossible, and to risk ignoring the systemic nature of modern problems (in Buddhist terms, *dukkha*). Without changing unjust, inequitable and violent economic and political structures, a dictatorial dhammaraja is not so different, in today's context, from an absolute dictator, and a sresthi with a rongthan is not very different from the contemporary beneficence of the exploiting billionaire.

Buddhist social ethics must do more than advocate mindfulness and the ideal of simplicity. To construct a healthier Buddhist society requires a change of the economic structure into one of more local self-sufficiency, and the political structure into one of more local decentralization, with moral and cultural values adapted to a contemporary context. Only then can Buddhist social ethics take root in society as it did in the historical past. The Buddhist spirit of loving-kindness, compassion, sharing, and cooperation expressed in Buddhadasa's dhammic socialism will then prevail, at both a personal and structural level.

If we consider Buddhist social ethics in contemporary Thai society from a broader perspective, we are forced to recognize that greed, hatred, and delusion,⁽²³⁾ which Buddhism identifies as the root of all harmful things, currently prevail. A systematic and structural greed can be found in the present economic system, in which millions of traditional farmers have been uprooted from their farmlands by tenancy and agribusiness, causing massive dislocation, unemployment, and poverty. Centralized political power and an economic system of dependency have caused group hatred to arise as elites grow richer while the vast majority of people are driven into greater poverty. A structural delusion comes from the expanding influence of commercial advertising in the mass media, leading local people to discard their cultural values and embrace consumerism.

In order to overcome greed, hatred, and delusion, a person needs to change not only his or her personal conduct or lifestyle, but also the system that creates them. Buddhist ethics, such as the Five Precepts (*sila*), needs to address this structural change more vigorously. For example, the first precept is to refrain from killing and harming living beings; in applying this to a poor country like Thailand, it becomes clear that the military budget, which comprises a large portion of the GNP, should be reduced. The violation of human rights, including political or economic assassination, the torture of prisoners, and child abuse, has

to be halted. There must be an end to the slaughter of wild animals, especially endangered species. The rain forests that shelter wild animals need to be recovered and preserved. Obviously, if the moral precept forbidding killing were made more meaningful, many of these measures could be implemented.

The second of the Five Precepts is to refrain from stealing. If we look at the situation in Thailand, we will see that a more just social structure is needed in order to prevent politicians, the military, police, civil servants, and businessmen from engaging in corruption and systematically robbing the common people. Furthermore, destruction of the rain forests and degradation of the environment and world's ecology are stealing the future of our children and grandchildren.

The third precept is to refrain from sexual misconduct. Prostitution is a systematic violation of this rule, a problem Buddhists need to take more seriously. Among other things, a substantial improvement in the economic well-being of rural areas, as well as the enforcement of laws punishing those profiting from the business of prostitution, are needed to reduce pressure on rural young women to resort to prostitution.

The fourth of the Five Precepts is to refrain from false speech. Buddhists need to advocate truthfulness, even when this means challenging the status quo and a corrupt system that often violates this demand. Political and bureaucratic reforms, laws guaranteeing a free press, multiple political parties, and grass roots participation in democracy are required to establish and maintain this precept at a structural level. The fifth precept, to refrain from intoxication, is systematically violated by the widespread drug trade. The smuggling of drugs from Thailand has contributed to the worldwide drug problems, and this must be stopped. In general, if a Buddhist social ethics is to have any significant meaning for contemporary society, Buddhists must reexamine the Five Precepts not just at a personal but also at the structural level.

Toward Buddhist Social Liberation

The mind is not an independent entity; human beings also have bodies. Where the body is, the mind is; they are mutually dependent. Without the mind, the body is not different from other nonliving things; without the body, the mind cannot exist. Physical activities affect the development and quality of the mind. At the same time, the quality of the mind also affects the well-being of the physical body.

We are not born in a vacuum but in a society and a culture. Our life is affected by the quality of food, health care, and the physical environment, as well as one's social, cultural, economic, and political environment. We do not live alone, but in a network of complex social relationships. These truisms bear repeating because many Buddhists believe that they can automatically overcome socio-political problems through inner liberation from psychological suffering. Such a conception of Buddhism lacks a structural perspective from which to address social, economic, and political problems of the modern world.

Such an individualistic attitude might work for a hermit who renounces the world. But most Buddhists are not hermits; they live in a complex, interconnected world. Indeed, today even a hermit cannot avoid this complex nexus. The Thai Buddhist sangha has been controlled by the government since the 19th century. Buddhist monks all over Thailand eat their daily food given them by Thai people, the majority of whom are poor and oppressed, whose sons become poorly paid laborers in construction and factories, and whose daughters are exploited laborers or even prostitutes. Under such circumstances, how can Buddhists avoid their social responsibility?

From a Buddhist social ethical perspective, the solution of Thailand's structural problems is threefold. First, Buddhist base communities all over Thailand should be linked, forming a grass-roots movement to combat social injustice and environmental destruction. Their more self-sustaining economy and relatively decentralized polity can serve as models for a better society.

Second, Buddhist intellectuals and social workers at all levels should learn more from the oppressed. By listening to the poor, they can contribute to Thailand's broad-based reform, helping raise people's consciousness in regard to structural problems, organizing all those conscious of existing structural injustice -- the underprivileged, the middle class, as well as the intellectuals -- and fostering a determination to work for meaningful change.

Third, a more just society could be obtained on the national level by pushing for political reforms advocated by the Buddhist thinker Praves Wasi.⁽²⁴⁾ The newly won constitution, which includes a reformed democratic process with a structural check and balance of power -- including elections, government administration, parliament and the judicial system -- is a first step toward structural change in politics. The Thai bureaucracy, now the biggest obstacle to social and political reforms in our country, needs restructuring in order to become more efficient and decentralized. All those who advocate Buddhist social ethics must continue to work for the political, economic, and social reform and structural change at the national level. By supporting the grass-root movements of Buddhist base communities and a broad-based consciousness-raising process, they can help build a more just society.

As a major world religion, Buddhism deals with the issues of human suffering and liberation from those sufferings. There are, however, two main types of human suffering: psychological and socio-political. Buddhism provides a unique psychological treatment of the problem of human inner suffering through meditation. Liberation (nibbana or nirvana) in Buddhism is basically the liberation from this psychological suffering. As Leonard Swidler puts it, Buddhism uses the language "from below" or "from within," whereas religions with God-centered orientations like Christianity use the language "from above" or "from without."⁽²⁵⁾ From this perspective, Buddhist language and concepts are closer to those of modern critical thinkers. Or as Antony Fernando puts it, the way the Buddha dealt with his disciples is similar to the way a psychotherapist deals with his patients in a clinic.⁽²⁶⁾

Buddhism seems to lack a precise theory and praxis to address the concrete issues of contemporary socio-political suffering and its liberation. Traditional Buddhism provides guidelines for personal moral conduct such as self-restraint, patience, zeal, compassion, generosity, and mindfulness, but these moral concepts need to be reinterpreted in modern context and integrated into a social ethical theory. Buddhadasa's theory of dhammic socialism tends to be too utopian and abstract. Although his theory addresses the issue of "surplus" in a manner similar to Marx's "surplus value," it still needs interpretation and clarification as a social praxis. A comprehensive perspective on socio-political suffering and its liberation from the existing exploitative system under global capitalism, a consciousness-raising process in regard to socio-political suffering and its structure, and the emergence of Buddhist base communities struggling for social justice in solidarity with the poor and oppressed are steps toward the construction of a Buddhist social ethics.

Notes

1. Matichon Weekly (Bangkok: Matichon Co. Ltd., 1996), April 9, 1996, 36.
2. For more details about prostitution in Thailand, see Pamela S. DaGrossa, "Kamphaengdin: A Study of Prostitution in the All-Thai Brothels of Chiang Mai City," in Grant A. Olson, *Crossroads* 4, no. 2 (DeKalb: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1989), 1-7.
3. Donald K. Swearer, "Dhammic Socialism," in Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, *Dhammic Socialism*, 23.
4. Young women make up about 80 percent of Thailand's low-wage factory workforce. The fire on May 10, 1993, at Kader Industrial (Thailand) Co. Ltd., a factory in the Phutthamonthon area fifteen miles west of Bangkok, which killed at least 213 and injured 500 workers -- most of them young women -- revealed what the working conditions and safety standards in factories are like for most rural women. The blaze may have been the deadliest factory fire in history, surpassing the 146 killed on March 25, 1911, at the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. Factory in New York City. See *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 12, 1993.
5. For more details about the AIDS crisis in Thailand, see Mark A. Bonacci, *Senseless Casualties: The AIDS Crisis in Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Asia Resource Center, 1992).
6. For a Thai feminist view of prostitution, see Chatsumarn Kabil Singh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1991).
7. Sulak Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*, ed. Tom Ginsburg, foreword by H. H. The Dalai Lama, preface by Thich Nhat Hanh (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1992), 3-9.
8. I have refrained from defining "Buddhist base community" in the hope that this concept, which conveys the notion of a community of study and praxis, will be more adequately explicated by the examples in this section. The term itself is obviously adapted from the concept of Christian base communities in Latin America.
9. See Sanitsuda Ekachai, *Behind the Smile: Voices of Thailand* (Bangkok: The Post Publishing Co. Ltd., 1991), 65-69.
10. Sulak Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace*, 50.
11. Seri Phongphit, *Religion in a Changing Society* (Hong Kong: Arena Press, 1988), 48.

12. Ibid., 51-52.

13. In Thai Buddhism there is a tradition that if a monk feels he no longer is fit to live a monastic life for any reason, he can disrobe and become an ordinary man. The status of monkhood does not follow him after he disrobes.

14. In the past, Buddhist monks in Thailand who were arrested by the police were forced first to disrobe before being put in jail. Most of them wore white robes to defend themselves and their status.

15. Aphichai Phanthasen, "The Monk Is Still Destroyed, the Forest Is Still Raped," in *Sayamrat Weekly*, 40th Year, 37th Issue, February 13-19, 1994, 36-37.

16. See Phra Prachak Khuttacitto, "Luangpoh Prachak Khuttacitto: Conservation Monk Whose Determination Has Never Changed," in *Krungthep-Thurakit*, January 22, 1994.

17. Phanthasen, "The Monk Is Still Destroyed. . .," in *Sayamrat Weekly*, 38-39.

18. Kasetra means agriculture. Thus, Buddha-Kasetra literally means "the Buddha's way of agriculture for self-sufficiency."

19. The data in this section are based on my visit to the Buddha-Kasetra communities and my interviews with people there.

20. The data in this section are based on my visit to the Thamkaenchan community and my interviews with the people there. Also see Thamkaenchan Ashrama, Thamkaenchan Education Center, 1-15.

21. James Halloran, "Counter-Witness on the River Kwai," a paper circulated among friends, 7-8.

22. Buddhadasa portrays the ideal leader of a dhammic socialist state as dhammaraja, a leader with the ten royal virtues (dasarajadhamma). He argues that "dictatorial" (Thai: phadetkan) -- meaning to handle things expeditiously by moral people -- is a proper exercise of virtue and wisdom to end the hatred and turmoil and to lead society to peace and justice. Buddhadasa makes the distinction between a "capitalist" (Thai: nai-thun) in the Western sense and a "wealthy person" (Sanskrit: sresthi) in the Buddhist sense. For him, a capitalist is one who keeps accumulating material wealth far beyond what he or she actually needs. A sresthi, on the other hand, is a wealthy person who uses his or her accumulated wealth to build a rong-than (almshouse) for the sake of social welfare. A rong-than was an almshouse or a communal place where the poor could come and receive what they lacked materially. The status of sresthi was measured by the number of their rong-than. If they had no almshouses they could not be called sresthi. The more rong-than one had, the wealthier one was considered to be.

23. [Back to text] In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, it is very common to list these three defilements together when describing the condition of the common man or woman.

24. [Back to text] Praves Wasi was the chairman of the Committee of Democratic Development that set the agendas for political reform supported by Thai intellectuals and the middle class. For more details, see *The Committee of Democratic Development, The Political Reform of Thailand* (Bangkok: Thailand Research FUND, 1995).

25. [Back to text] For more details on interreligious dialogue, see Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

26. [Back to text] See Antony Fernando, with Leonard Swidler, *Buddhism Made Plain: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986).

- TAVIVAT PUNTARIGVIVAT, received his Ph.D. in religion from Temple University, USA and is professor in the Humanities Department at Mahidol University in Thailand and was head of its Comparative Religion graduate program from 1995 to 1997. His lectures and essays on social ethics from cross-cultural and Buddhist perspectives reflect his first-hand experiences as a bhikkhu in the Thai Theravada tradition. He is currently the Research Director at the World Buddhist University in Bangkok.
- This paper was originally published in 'Cross Currents' Fall 1998, Vol.48, Issue 2 and it has been posted here with the written permission of the author.