

Buddhist Spirituality and Social Action:

The Collected Writing of
Phra Paisal Visalo

Edited by Jonathan S. Watts



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With gratitude and respect I dedicate this book to my teachers
whose wisdom and guidance deepen my understanding
about spirituality and social action:

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu
Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (PA.Payutto)
Luangpor Khamkhian Suvanno
Sulak Sivaraksa



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Introduction

A Monk's Life to Empower the People

Few monks in Thailand dare speak up against the clergy's feudal dictatorship that breeds nepotism and corruption. Far fewer monks understand the modern challenges Thai Buddhism is facing and how to cope with them. These qualities make Phra Paisal Visalo one of a kind, yet there is more. He has been the leading Socially Engaged Buddhist monk in Thailand since the turn of the millennium because of an incredible range of talents and activities. Unlike some monks who ordain as children and remain ignorant of the world, Paisal was an activist in the democracy and student movements of the 1970s, coming under the direct tutelage of renowned Socially Engaged Buddhist Sulak Sivaraksa. After taking ordination in his late 20s, he trained under one of Thailand's great Northeast meditation masters, thus developing a deep contemplative practice that many urban monks fail to receive. His teacher, Ven. Khamkhian Suvanno, was also known for his community development work, helping Paisal to round out a complete education in grassroots development work. Paisal has since become a leading figure in numerous social activist projects from community development to environmental protection to non-violence training and, finally, end-of-life care. As a highly respected public intellectual, he has written a vast number of important articles and books on the problems with the present Thai monastic system and the role of religion in Thai civil society. In this way, we might regard him as the epitome of what it means to be a Socially Engaged Buddhist. This volume provides a full view of his talents and insights through his own words.

Youth Activism & Ordination

Born on the 10th of May 1957 in Bangkok, young Paisal Wongworawisit grew up in the politically progressive atmosphere of the 1970s. He became involved in political movements in high school, but his religious bent was evident right from the start. While most student leaders were discussing Marxism and revolution, Paisal worked with a small group of friends to advocate non-violence. While enrolled in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Thammasat University, political ideologies of the right and left clashed in 1976 culminating in a state massacre of students on campus. Many students fled to the jungle to take up arms with the Communist Party of Thailand. Paisal was arrested and briefly jailed before being released. Although under threat from the right-wing government, he refused to join the revolution. “I believe in non-violence. I don’t believe in the so-called people’s wars,” he said.

Paisal and a small group of peace activists then formed the Coordinating Group for Religion in Society (CGRS) to work on human rights issues and non-violence. It was the only politically-active non-governmental organisation in Bangkok at that time. Things were tough. Paisal lost himself in risky political activism and academic writings, so much so that he became burnt-out both physically and mentally. Paisal’s experiences during this period continued to inform his life and writings in subsequent years. The sections “Religion and Society” and “Non-Violence and Political Action” in this volume show these influences as well as the maturation of his thought after ordination.

When the tense political atmosphere began to ease in 1979, with the government granting amnesty to the student fighters, Paisal entered the monkhood on 5 February, 1983 to “recharge his batteries.” He recalls, “I was exhausted from work. I was stressed. I thought I needed merely three months to meditate and to revitalise myself.” But he never left the monkhood again. “The more I practice dhamma, the stronger my faith is,” he explains, “and the more I realise the value of a spiritual life.” This faith and value shine forth in the opening section of the volume of “Dhamma Teachings.” For all his social activism and sophisticated intellectual thought, Phra Paisal has always had a playful, sensitive, and creative style that has enabled him to pen numerous essays on the practice of dhamma in a style reminiscent of one of his central influences Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

Socially Engaged Buddhist Monk

After eighteen years in robes, Paisal became abbot of Wat Pah Sukato, located in the mountains of Chaiyapum province. Its distance from Bangkok, however, has failed to mute his activism. The monk is still the focal point in several non-governmental organisations that advocate Buddhist activism, non-violence, and inter-religious dialogue. In 2001, he was given the Pridi Banomyong Award for his outstanding work in peace activism. His organisations are also critical of consumer culture and the government’s “greed-driven” development policies, which destroy nature, moral restraints, and communities. Phra Paisal also served as editor of the environmental newsletter *Anurak* and the anti-nuclear newsletter *Jabta Nuclear*, aspects of his life well

represented in the section on “Environment”. For decades, Paisal was the driving force behind the Sekhiyadhamma movement of monks and nuns who apply Buddhist teachings to organise villagers to develop community empowerment. One of the group’s goals has been to prove that alternative models of development based on the religious values of contentment and simplicity are not only possible, but also crucial for the livelihood of future generations. The essays in the “Development” section of the volume show how he has communicated this work internationally to audiences, especially in Japan.

Author & Advocate of Buddhist Reform

Phra Paisal is also well-known for his works that shed light on the problems of Thai Buddhism and the challenges the religion faces in the information age. “Thai Buddhism has three main problems,” he says. “The problems involve the teachings, the clergy, and the lay Buddhists themselves.” Thai Buddhism, he says, has lost its mystical and social aspects. “We’re only interested in our needs, not those of society.”

Meanwhile, the clergy is fraught with weaknesses. “Monks are generally weak intellectually, morally and spiritually,” he charges, blaming this development on the monks’ authoritarian education system and rigid lifestyle. Concurrently, he said, nepotism is rife and corruption in the clergy’s closed and autocratic governing system encourages bad monks to abuse their positions while constantly increasing the clergy’s power chain through money and favours.

Lay Buddhist society does not fare much better, he said. Not knowing the true essence of Buddhism, lay Buddhists end up pampering monks with material possessions, believing this will buy merit, well-being, success, and a sweet after-life in heaven. He also notes that the proliferation of lay Buddhist movements, which have tended to eclipse the role of monks, are also full of pitfalls. Governed by consumer culture, the new religious groups are often geared to serve their followers' individualistic and materialistic needs, he observes. To make Buddhist teachings relevant to the younger generation, Paisal initiated a website in the hope that more and more youngsters would learn about Buddhism from the Internet. He has also campaigned to sensitise the public to see merit-making as a way to help others in society rather than a personal investment in an after-life in heaven.

While his research in Sangha reform may provide some answers as to how clerics and devotees can meet each other half-way through various checks and balances, Phra Paisal does not believe change will ever come from within the clergy. He says clerical reform, here or elsewhere, shows that change almost always stems from external pressures, be they alternative movements from the fringes or direct forces from secular power centres. Whether he is successful in his goals, or fails, Phra Paisal sees his duty and life's mission as providing knowledge in Sangha reform and proposing ways to empower both monks and lay society against the dangers of a consumer culture. "I don't expect to see change in my lifetime," he says, "but we must do what we can to inject new life into Thai Buddhism. Otherwise, it will wither away." This essential

aspect of his life work is represented in the section “Buddhist Reform”.

Facing Death Mindfully and Peacefully

In the early 1990s, one of Phra Paisal’s old friends from the student activism days, Supaporn Pongpruk, was diagnosed with serious breast cancer. While she remarkably healed herself for many years using alternative therapies, she finally succumbed to the disease in 2003. Her decline and death was all managed in her garden home in southern Thailand with the support of numerous *kalyanamitra*, including Phra Paisal who guided her through the final stages of life. This experience pushed Phra Paisal into a new area of engagement, end-of-life care, creating the Peaceful Death Project, a network of religious and medical professionals working for more integrated spiritual and physical care for the dying. These efforts have led to a profound change in the care of the dying in Thailand. Paisal’s teachings on these issues are found in the final section of the volume on “Death”.

Editor’s Appreciation

I met Phra Paisal as a young 25-year-old staff of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) at our 4th annual conference in Thailand in 1992. With his light, thin frame enveloped in a huge lounge chair, he was reading intently, as usual. Although only in his mid 30s himself, Paisal was already renowned in the Thai engaged Buddhist world for his sophisticated critiques of

the monastic Sangha and the Thai political system. The fortune of meeting him during this conference extended into a blessing of the decades I have been able to call him a dhamma friend, teacher, and collaborator.

Phra Paisal, myself, and a small core of others formed in 1996 the INEB Think Sangha, which created a forum for sophisticated Buddhist critiques and methodological responses to the critical issues of that era. A number of his essays produced in *Think Sangha Journal*, which I edited, are contained in this volume. Later, in the 2000s, with the aforementioned death of our good friend Supaporn, who had been the Executive Secretary of INEB, we embarked on parallel paths in end-of-life care work. Based in Japan at the Jodo Shu Research Institute, I enlisted Paisal to offer a chapter on end-of-life care in Thailand for our book *Buddhist Care for the Dying and Bereaved* (Wisdom Books, 2012), and this chapter is also included in the volume. During these years, Phra Paisal made frequent trips to Japan to campaign against Japanese companies engaging in deforestation in his home region of Chaiyapum, speak about “holistic Buddhist development” or *kaihotsu* in Japanese, and witness the destruction of environment and human lives in the Fukushima nuclear disaster. He may, or may not, have also enjoyed a bit of the World Cup which came to Japan and Korea in 2002, having become a rabid soccer/football fan well before Theravada monasticism could take a hold of him!

Beyond all these moments of spiritual friendship, I am also deeply grateful to Phra Paisal for offering me a new place to visit and practice at his hermitage Wat Pulong in Chaiyapum. After the demise of my root teacher, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, in 1993 and the return to the United States of my mentor, Santikaro, in 2000, I

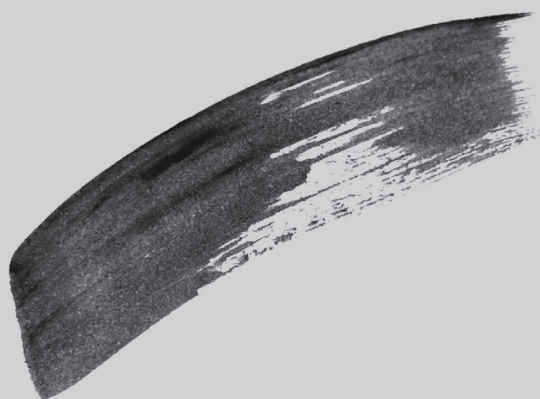
needed a new place to practice that had the same spirit of Buddhadasa's Suan Mokkh back when both of these teachers were active. Phra Paisal is not *just* a great public figure but an amazing person and friend to me and so many who have had the privilege to get to know him. I offer the work of editing this volume as a return on the incredible merit I have received in my years of knowing him.

Three Bows,
Jonathan S. Watts

International Buddhist Exchange Center (IBEC) &
Japan Network of Engaged Buddhists (JNEB)

Kamakura, Japan
July 2, 2025

Biographical portions of this introduction as well as quotes come from the essay, "A Monk's Life Mission to Empower the People" by Santisuda Ekachai, written in 2001.



01

Dhamma Teachings



When the World Is Just a Joke

Humankind possesses the power of creation. We have invented numerous innovations, but eventually our own creations return to “create” us back by influencing our thoughts, behaviour, and lifestyle.

We developed technology only to let it run our lives by dictating the way we live, our hobbies, and our life goals—for example, when we aim to have our own car before the age of thirty. Technology even dictates the way we express our love and relationship with others.

Similarly, we set up the value of gold or diamonds, so that eventually gold has become the standard by which we assess value in our society. Imagine the way you might feel if you go to a fancy social event without any gold or diamond jewellery.

To take another example, languages are human inventions. However, at the same time, humans are also the invention of languages. Our views and feelings are much dictated by languages. We feel differently when we are called “sir” as opposed to “tramp”. The power of language is not limited here as it also intricately and deeply but unnoticeably controls our thinking processes and our opinions about life.

Amongst those powerful words is the word “my”. We usually call things that we have “mine”. This word really makes us think that these objects are actually ours in the sense that they are under our power and control; that we can direct them in any way we please; and that they will always be “ours” forever and ever. Sadly, this is not the truth. Even more sadly, whatever we think is “mine” actually “owns” us. We, in fact, “belong” to them and not the other way round.

When we buy a nice shiny new car, as soon as we think it is “ours,” we will fall under its control in the sense that we will always be worried about it and taking care of it. We are so controlled by that new car that we cannot stop being worried if it is parked somewhere unsafe. We would definitely be upset if the car is scratched and even go crazy if it is stolen. Have you started to see who controls who?

Therefore, anything that we think is “ours” is in fact our boss, our controller, and our owner. As soon as we think that the money we have is ours, we will then become its slave. We will do everything to protect it from, say, thieves, even if our lives are endangered. Apart from that, we are most likely to work very hard in order to make more money, not unlike a slave who spends his life filling his boss’ treasure chest. This urge to “make money” is an uncanny addiction, so that many of us forget to use the money

but instead focus on making it. In a way, the money is using us.

The power of “my” extends beyond material possessions to human relationships. If we start to think that another person is ours, we will suddenly fall under that person’s control. Our lives, happiness, and unhappiness will depend on what the person does or says. Very often, people commit suicide just because this special someone acts in a cruel, heartless way. All these start from our own thoughts that this is my lover, my parent, or my child.

A mother always complains, because her son spends too much time on computer games. The son gets annoyed and decides not to speak to his mother, spending even more time in front of the computer screen. One day, the mother cannot stand it any longer. She demands that he speak to her, otherwise she will kill herself. The boy’s silent response causes such deep disappointment in her heart that she actually commits suicide.

In this case, the more the mother thinks that her son is “hers”, the more she falls into his power and the more she becomes unhappy, as a result of her own expectations. Her thoughts have destroyed herself and perhaps others around her.

Look carefully, there is nothing in the world which upon becoming “ours” will not assert control over us, even our own thoughts. We always think that our thoughts are ours, but in fact they are rather outside our control. There are many things that we want to forget, but they always come back to haunt us. Another example is when we hate someone and cannot stop thinking about that person, although that is something we do not want to think about at all.

Thoughts are like beings. Once they come into existence they want to remain that way. This is why they try to make us think about them as often as possible, so that they do not disappear.

The more we think, the stronger the thoughts become. Notice that when we are by ourselves, streams of thought flow continuously as they are tricking us to keep them alive. Apart from that, they also want us to protect and defend them against any opposition. This is why we argue with those who disagree with our opinions. Sometimes we even have to wage war in order to defend our views, be they religious or political. The fact that we allow our thoughts to push us into killing must indicate that we are under their power.

The strange thing about thoughts is that once we attach to them, they can push us into doing many things, even if these things yield adverse effects on us. To take another example, a man really adores his own back garden. He spends a lot of time on it and tries to make it look perfect at all times. He does not allow anyone to walk on his grass for fear that the grass might be damaged. Does the back garden belong to him, or does it, in fact, own him?

One day he discovers that there are moles underneath the garden, damaging his beloved object. He tries in various ways to get rid of the moles but to no avail. Eventually, he decides to fill the moles' holes with petrol and burn them all up. The moles die, as he wishes, but his garden is also totally destroyed.

When we want to triumph over someone or something, this thought will push us to the limits and tell us to do anything in order to win, regardless of what we might lose in the process. Isn't it true that very often things that we lose are those we love the most?

Why is it that once we think that something belongs to us—be it money, people, ideas, or fame—that thing takes control and we become possessed by it? The answer is our attachment to it. Once

we are attached to something, we cannot help but be affected by it emotionally. It can make us happy or sad. Maybe we should try to control it, make it subject to our will? However, how many things in the world can we truly control? We cannot even control our body in the sense that we cannot stop the aging process, nor the illnesses inside it. Nor can we control our mind; we don't even know what we will be thinking in the next minute, let alone being able to calm it down when we are angry, for example. Therefore, the more we try to control, the unhappier we become. We might think that we gain some happiness from the control, but this is only momentarily. Then, we are back to unhappiness again.

The more we want, the more we lose. The more we think that we are the controllers, the more we become the slaves. However, once we let it go, we will get it back. When we are free from attachment to everything in the world, it will come back to us and belong to us in such a way that does not cause any pain or unhappiness. This is the truth of the world. It may sound like a joke, but the world is just joking with us.

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Translated into English by Surutchada Chullapram.

The Happiness that You Can Grow

True happiness cannot be bought. It is something we have to cultivate ourselves. There is a Chinese saying, “If you want three hours of ecstasy, try gambling. For three weeks of rapture, go traveling. For three months of bliss, get married. Build a new house, and you will enjoy three years of heaven. But, if you want a true and lasting happiness, grow and live with trees.” Growing trees makes us happy not only when we see them blossom, but when they also give us fruit and shade. We already experience the feeling of joy the moment we put the seeds into the soil, pour the water over them, and till and take care of the land constantly. As the seeds grow into saplings, and eventually bigger trees, so does our sense of happiness. Those who have spent time living in the midst of nature know how what seems to be a life of monotony is indeed a blessed one, brought about by innate peace and tranquility.

To have a chance to grow trees, to take care of the environment, to become a part of nature, that is, to me, real happiness. We should not be just the beneficiaries; we should also take an active role in the nurturing of our surroundings. Nowadays, such opportunities have become few and far between; the wild woods have been continuously shrinking. We need thus to join hands in bringing them back. That is the beginning of growing happiness by our own hands.

At the same time, what is no less important is to take care of “a tree” in our own heart. When that flourishes, so will our peace of mind. The question is: how is the tree faring? Is it growing healthily? Or has it been withering away? How much are we attending to this tree in our own mind? Most may not realise that there is a tree inside each of us that needs looking after. We may not be aware at all if it is still alive or it is wilting away. This is because we often spend little time with ourselves. Much of the time, we keep ourselves busy with things from the outside, like friends, work, TV, shopping, and so on. We think they are indispensable. We look outward to avoid the problems inside. The tree in our mind has been neglected. It becomes vulnerable to pests, weeds, and drought. But now is the time to go back and nurture our own tree.

This is not difficult at all. When we do something good, when we give something away or make someone happy, we are watering the tree inside us. We have been taught to believe that the more we possess, the happier we will be. Thus, a number of people think happiness can be purchased; they run after things to fulfill their craving all the time. Few realise that the happiness gained from giving away is more profound, more refined; it waters the

tree inside our mind. And when that grows, prospers, it will give flowers, fruit, shade, and an unsurpassable peace to us.

The Jit Arsa volunteer programmes have drawn a number of people to various projects. Many participants talk about the discovery of happiness in the process. At the end of a two-day tree-planting project, a lady confessed that she initially felt overwhelmed at the sight of the barren hills in front of the temple. She felt like she was just a clump of lowly grass. Having planted numerous trees, her spirit soared. She no longer felt like the grass. She now feels like the trees. The trees in their minds have grown. Just two days of working on something meaningful with other people has given her the energy. From the grass, she suddenly becomes the trees. It is so instant. It is up to us how we will grow, take care, and nourish them.

Our happiness is not different from the tree. When it is small, it needs water from the sky, from the gardener. As it grows, the tree does not only spruce upwards; its roots also dig deeper into the earth. When the roots reach the water source, even in a drought, the tree will continue to stay green, because there is a constant supply of water underneath.

Thus, even dry, parched earth may have some source of water underneath. Some of us may feel every now and then like the sun-scorched earth, desolate and without any hope. We seek happiness from traveling, searching for delicious food, fun, and excitement. But such feelings do not last. It is like a tree that still depends on water from the sky. It will wither in the dry season. But the tree with roots digging deep into the soil, reaching the fount of water inside the earth, will be able to absorb the happiness from within. It is already inside us. When we have time to be with ourselves, to experience the various phenomena of the mind, we will become

aware that both suffering and happiness is up to us, to our ability to get in touch with the depth inside ourselves.

From giving, doing something good, helping others, spending time with oneself, we begin to touch inner peace and gradually realise true happiness. This is called spirituality. In the secular realm, happiness is already with us. We are, however, usually not aware of it until we get sick. Only then shall we realise how happy we were yesterday. We kept looking for something else, unaware that we were already happy, with our good health, friends, family, and someone we love. We did not recognise our own happiness. Our heart kept yearning for something else all the time.

During a talk organised by the Komol Kheemthong Foundation, Pramual Pengchan described his climb up Doi Inthanon. Before he reached the top of the mountain, he became exhausted and finally got a lift from a passing driver. On the way down, he was awed by the scenery on both sides of the road. He was amazed at the beauty of nature. Then he understood that he could not see and appreciate the beauty on the way up, because his mind was concentrated on reaching the top of the mountain. This reflects the reality of life that people are not happy, because their minds are always in the future towards wishes and dreams, wealth, fame and glory, and success in their career. We long for happiness in the future even though it is right in front of us.

People today are not happy, because they cannot appreciate the good things they already have in the present. We keep looking for the happiness that lies ahead. When it has not yet materialized, we suffer. When we run after happiness, thinking that we will achieve it at the end of our destination, we then forget that we can make it real everyday by spending time with our children and family, by doing exercise, by meditating or doing something

we love. Instead of concentrating on the future, we can begin to pay attention to today, to appreciate what we have in every moment. To pay attention to the present moment does not only mean to be content with what we have, but also to not worry about the past or the future. Most of us suffer because we carry things that have already passed or worry about what's yet to come. If we can live in the present, we will become more peaceful. We will have better concentration, but nowadays many of us tend to be more interested in what we don't have yet or what we have already lost.

To nurture mindfulness, to be constantly alert, is to open our heart to happiness in the present. It helps our mind to reach inner happiness and the spiritual side of us. Only then shall wisdom arise, and we will not be afraid of anything.

The tree is not afraid of the sunlight. As it grows and branches out, it can transform the sunshine into shade. Its roots are not afraid of waste, because they can transform it into nourishing food, fragrant flowers, and tasty fruit. When we look after our mind, always contemplating with mindfulness and wisdom, we will not be afraid of suffering, loss, pain, and even death. We will be able to transform suffering into happiness and misfortune into blessing. It is like a tree that can transform the heat of the sun into cooling shade and waste into sweet fruit and flowers.

But we have to invest in all this by growing and nurturing of both the trees in nature and the tree in our own mind. Only then will they flourish, growing deep and tall, to give us shade and happiness.

This is a translation of an article that summarised Phra Paisal Visalo's closing speech on the celebration of the tenth anniversary of Sarn Saeng Arun magazine and was published in the bi-monthly for May-June 2007 edition.

On Living Mindfully:

Greet the New Day with a Smile and Mindfulness

When waking up to a new day, we should realise how lucky we are to have today. Many of our fellow beings went to sleep last night and never woke up again. Yesterday was their last day on earth. We, too, might have left the world like them, had it not been for a variety of factors that make us live today.

We should, therefore, greet the new day as a precious gift. Greet it with a smile. Don't allow the mind to be sad or depressed. Don't demand anything from the world. Don't let the mind worry about things that have not yet come, nor be frustrated with what you have not attained. Don't forget that we are already very fortunate to have today.

Since death can befall us anytime, every morning when we wake up we should realise that today might be our last day. When awake, we should have the intention to make today valuable, by filling it with good conduct, benefit for the common good, and

generosity to others.

We should be in hurry to do things that are important or meaningful to life. Don't put it off, or let less important things such as fun, entertainment or socialising steal most of your time until you do not have the opportunity to do worthy things—giving back to people to whom you owe gratitude, taking time for your family members, and making time to develop your own spirituality.

Making the best of today also means not allowing negative emotions and desires to dominate your mind until it is full of suffering and desolation. Since we cannot be certain that we will live until tomorrow, we should live today with happiness and cheerfulness. Do whatever is good for life and invite positive feelings to fill your heart. Don't be fixated with the past or weigh yourself down with worries about the future. Be firm in staying in the present moment as best you can, and open your heart to the realities that unfold each and every moment with a mind that is fully alert and awake. It is only the present moment that is real.

Nowadays, we live one-third of our lives in a state of sleep. Even when awake, more than one-third of the day might be lived in delusion. We then do not really live. We only walk-sleep. This is a waste of time. Isn't it better if we live each day, each hour, and each minute with mindfulness? It is through mindfulness that you can live your life to its full value. This is how to live with your full heart.

Begin a new day by immediately being alert to mindfulness after you wake. It may still be dark outside, the sun may not have risen above the horizon, but our mind will be radiant with alertness. Mindfulness will drive away lethargy and replace it with clarity, enabling us to do our morning chores with alertness.

Throughout the day, we should constantly observe our mind and do our activities mindfully. Be aware of the proliferation of thoughts and emotions. If so, our whole day will be light and full of bliss. We can generate beneficial actions without slipping or getting discouraged. We can pursue our priorities without postponement or absent-mindedness.

The whole day can be blissful even when we are surrounded by confusion—that is, if only we smile at reality, live mindfully, are fully awake to each and every moment, and are constantly aware of the uncertainties of life.

This article was translated from an article in Chaobuddha monthly magazine, January 2010 and published in the Bangkok Post February 23, 2010.

Every Moment Is New:

Open-mindedness
and Staying in Touch
with the Present
Always Brings a
New Experience

The river stream that runs past us is never the same stream. The candle that is alight and burning is not the same candle. Everything that occurs before our eyes, or in our mind, is never the repetition of the same thing. They are constantly new and ever-changing. Like the hands on a clock, they appear to be still, but they are in fact moving all the time.

The same is with our body. A stream of birth and death is occurring there all the time. Each day, over 50 million cells die. Each and every bodily organ is continually replenishing itself. This is true not only with our skin and hair, but also with our bones, lungs, liver, kidneys, and heart. It is estimated that in seven years' time, our whole body will become nearly entirely new. Nearly nothing old is left, except for the brain, perhaps.

This is particularly true with the mind, which is continually born and dies in great frequency. Just like a fluorescent light or a TV screen, the great frequency of their flickerings give the impression that they are sending steady light. Even when we are thinking about the same subject matter, or even when our anger lasts for days, the things that occur in our mind are always new. The anger that we felt a moment ago is not the same as our anger in this present moment. Just like the flame of a candle, its flame the previous second is not the same flame now.

Nothing is repeated. Everything is always new. If we open our mind to get in touch with the present moment, we will see and experience newness all the time, be it concretely or abstractly. The repetition only exists in our thoughts, but it does not exist in reality.

When we open our mind to watch the river stream; when we are not attached to an old mental image we have created; or when our mind is not clouded with thoughts, we will be able to see a different stream that never fails to give us new, fresh feelings, as well as new discoveries.

When we chant our prayers with mindfulness on every single word; when we are not just reciting out of habit or chanting with our mind elsewhere, then we will discover that the prayers are always fresh, with new dimensions for us to contemplate on, although we have chanted the words for hundreds or thousands of times.

Keep observing our body that moves, the mind that breeds thoughts, the breathing that continually goes in and out, year in and year out, on the same path. For every breath and every walking step can shift our mind to a different dimension to see life and

the world in a new light, in ways that we cannot imagine. This is because every breath we take and every step we walk is never repeated; they are always new.

Bangkok Post *August 31, 2010.*

Organisations of Goodwill:

Managing Goodness Is an Aspect of Corporate Responsibility

Good companies are adept not only in human resources and knowledge management; they are also strong in managing goodness. This fostering of goodwill does not just serve the company or the public. It also generates happiness and spiritual development among their personnel, which ultimately benefits their organisations.

Here is what companies and organisations can do to create an energy of goodness:

Encourage employees to share their past good deeds, stories of generosity, or how they have conquered their temptations. When we listen to others' good deeds, we generally feel inspired to do good also. Stories of kindness nurture the seeds of grace in our hearts. Listening to colleagues' stories of what makes them feel good also enables people to know each other better. After such sharing sessions, many say they never knew their colleagues had

such good hearts, because in the work environment they often see a side they don't like as much.

Create opportunities for people to share suffering in their lives. We know our colleagues mainly through work. We rarely know about them on a personal level, although their personal lives can affect work. For example, someone comes to work late frequently without the boss or co-workers knowing why. So she got criticised by everyone. If there are opportunities to share, then we will know she has to take care of a disabled mother or father with Alzheimer's disease. This sharing activity fosters mutual empathy, which will significantly improve the work atmosphere. It also encourages people to be thoughtful to one another.

Give one another praise and encouragement. The goodness in our hearts is energised when we receive encouragement or approval from others. In most organisations, however, opportunities for compliments are few and for criticism are many, so that people tend to see each other negatively. Encouraging people to show appreciation for one another strengthens their resolve to do good. It improves work relations and also boosts a positive attitude and thoughtfulness for others, as well as for ourselves.

Work together and share responsibilities. Distance hinders understanding. Lack of mutual understanding makes one see the other side negatively, leading to negative relations and mutual aversion, thus increasing the gap. But if we have a chance to work, plan, and take responsibility together, the proximity will help foster understanding. If there is a chance to share on a personal level, they can provide support for one another.

Serve the community or help the needy together. This activity outside work strengthens people's relations in the organisation as well as boosts the power of goodness in people's hearts. Exposure to the suffering of others will make them realise how small their problems are. After doing community work together, there should be a chance for participants to exchange experiences, which will trigger new thoughts and inspirations.

Support inner development. This means supporting people in the organisation to be mindful, to let go, and to get in touch with inner peace. This can be attained through several means apart from meditation. This inner development activity will enable people to feel happy with work and have better relations with co-workers. It will also bring out their positive energy to serve the public and their organisations better.

Turn the work environment into a place of learning and fun. Work can be fun, creative, and educational given the right attitude and a favourable atmosphere. The environment should foster cooperation rather than competition. It should generate creativity, sharing of experiences, deep listening, mutual appreciation, and advice. This kind of environment makes work a channel for self-development, not just something one does for a living. Whether these activities are possible or not depends on the structure of the organisation. It is easier in an organisation where:

- relations are more horizontal than vertical
- the hierarchy is not complex, people are more or less equal
- the structure is more of a network than a top-down pyramid
- co-operation is valued more than competition

- the decision is not top-down or authoritarian but based on objectives and participation
- profit-maximisation and material gains are not the indicators of success
- employees' happiness or the public good are taken into account
- self-interest is not held above the common good

Life can move forward with happiness if the mind is full of goodwill and free from ego. This developed mind can unleash an energy able to move the organisation ahead. In the same vein, a developed organisation supports its employees to develop mind and life, thus creating a cycle of grace.

Life is a vehicle. It moves when there is a destination to reach. For a valuable life, the goal is to be able to help fellow human beings, to attain the highest value of humanity and to realise the maximum potential from being born. The journey towards that goal is our way of life, our work. We then should make our life and our work a path to develop ourselves and to help others. The driving force is goodwill and understanding, in other words, compassion and wisdom. The organisations that can provide these causes for goodness are successful in creating happiness for all.

Bangkok Post *September 28, 2010.*

Making the Best of Bad Situations

The Buddhist Lent is not only for monastic men and women to undertake rigorous retreats. The three-month period, starting from the first day after the full moon of the eighth lunar month can be a time for everyone to start anew: to contemplate one's life, to vow to correct past mistakes and to initiate new, auspicious steps towards something better.

For the past six years, the Phuttika Network, a coalition of socially engaged Buddhists, has launched several campaigns specifically designed to coincide with the Lent period. In a popular booklet called *Smart Ways of Making Merit (Chalard Tam Boon)*, the coalition recommends scores of ways beyond donating money to monks and temples for people to make merit.

Phra Paisal Visalo, a leader of the network, recently came up with a timely new campaign: *Smart Ways of Thinking* (*Chalard Tham Jai*), which encourages people to face crises—be they the loss of property, health problems, or problems at work or in relationships—in a more calm and constructive manner. The booklet for the campaign consistently suggests that events that seem unfortunate may actually be blessings in disguise. Below are some excerpts from the booklet.

When Losing Property

Whining and fuming will not help you retrieve what has been lost. Remember, you still have many other things that might be more valuable than what is gone. But we tend to grieve over our loss (or what we have not yet acquired) rather than appreciate what is already in our hand.

Try to pay attention and give appreciation to what you have at the moment and let go of the past. You will suffer less as a result. Better still, think of how lucky you are not to have lost more than what you did.

Incidents of loss can actually teach you some invaluable lessons: to be more cautious and mindful, and, more importantly, to realise that losing and departing is but a fact of life. If you cannot let go of minor things, how will you be able to withstand a bigger loss down the road?

Indeed, you should learn to prepare your mind all the time. When you are aware that nothing will stay with you forever, you will not suffer when it is forever gone from your life.

When Going Bankrupt

Financial bankruptcy does not mean that your whole life will have to collapse, too. Remind yourself of the many good things you still have, such as your family and the people you love, your friends, and, last but not least, your own life.

You are still a valuable person—to yourself and to many other people. Success and wealth do not make a person; it is the good deeds they have done that count.

It is never too late to start anew, all you need is your breath and your brain. Don't forget to use past mistakes as your teacher.

Everyone will have a fall sooner or later, but when it's time to stand up, pick up something to guide you in your next move.

When Facing Poverty

First of all, ask yourself if you are really poor. Having less than others does not necessarily mean you are poor. A number of people feel poor because they compare themselves with others despite the fact that they already have everything they need. You may not own a car or a house but look again, you already have a lot of comforts in life, don't you?

As soon as you feel contented or satisfied with what you have you will no longer feel poor and miserable.

The feeling that one is poor is largely a matter of perception. When we crave something, we will feel poor. Try to avoid comparing yourself with others. Do not fall prey to the bombardment of advertisements. Appreciate what you have. You will realise that you are not at all poor. You may not have much in terms of material wealth. But you have a loving family, some good friends, good health. To have a full stomach, to be able to sleep soundly,

to be free of debts—there are so many reasons to feel grateful in your life.

Difficulty can be beneficial. It helps to make you strong, patient and self-reliant. Those spoiled by a comfortable life are usually weak, unable to accept failures, and tend to have poor health.

The most important form of personal wealth is one's virtues and wisdom. In Buddhism, the pinnacle of these is called *ariya-sacca* and is a sign of those who are truly rich. Those who have it will feel contented with what they have; and they will have real happiness. This is the kind of wealth we should try to accumulate as much of as possible.

When Falling Sick

Let just the body fall sick but not the mind. Otherwise you will have twice the problem. True, sickness is not a good thing. But when it happens, learn to accept the fact. You can even benefit from it. Now is an opportunity to get a rest. A number of people use the convalescent period to become closer with their family or to study dharma.

The physical symptoms are also a signal for us to review the way we live. Are we overworked? Do we sleep enough? Are we eating the right food?

Are we deprived of exercise or stressed? One valuable lesson from getting sick is to learn to make our lifestyle a healthier one. More importantly, the physical ailments teach us about the impermanence of life, that sickness is part and parcel of living. Such awareness will teach us to let go of our attachments, and also not to be reckless. We will come to appreciate every second we have left in our life as well as the value of good health.

When Losing an Organ

If the loss of a body part is needed to lengthen your life, so be it. Life is more important than any given part of the body. Even in the case of an accident where amputation is required you can still consider yourself fortunate. After all, you are still alive and not undergoing a worse ordeal.

The value of your life is in your good deeds, not in your physical appearance. As long as you continue your good deeds you should be able to respect yourself. The loss of an organ should not be an obstacle to doing good things, both for yourself and others.

True, one's daily life may become more difficult, but it is the mind that cannot accept the change that can cause the most suffering. The more one clings to the past, the more difficult it is to accept the present. The best thing to do now is to let go of the past, accept the reality, and move on with a steady mind.

To begin anew with changes to your body cannot be too difficult. Human beings have a wonderful capacity of adjusting to anything. It may be hard today, but tomorrow, things will become smoother.

Feeling Unhappy at Work

You should find out the cause(s) of unhappiness at work. Is the job too difficult? Is there no end in sight? Unfriendly colleagues? Unfair bosses? Low salary? Don't forget to ask yourself: How much do you put in to this job?

Being able to work happily comes when you love what you are doing. Then, even if it is difficult and there is no sign of a successful result or the boss is treating you badly, you can still derive happiness from your work.

To love what you do may come when you feel confident in it or see its meaning—that it is serving the public or people you love or that it enables you to maximise your potential.

It is not difficult to find happiness at work. Be committed to what you do. Do not let yourself drift away or expect quick results. It requires mindfulness, the ability to keep your mind in the present, to do the work at hand. Happiness will follow as a result of this.

What you do is not as important as how you do it. Do you work because you like it or because of the money? Are you working with concentration and mindfulness or is your mind drifting? If your mind is not in the right state, you will have difficulty at work no matter how many times you change your job. We may not be able to have the job of our choice, but we can choose to do what we do happily.

When Losing a Job

At least you will now have the time to look for a job that really suits you. It could even be better than your old one. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple Computers, was fired by his own company. He recalls the incident as one of the best things that ever happened to him. After being fired, Jobs started several new projects including what became Pixar, the highly successful animation company, as well as a company that developed the technology used in iPods.

Losing a job may lead some of us to go back and help our parents at home. For others, it is a time to do something that they have long wanted to do but have been putting off, entering the monkhood, for example, or studying dharma.

Do not worry that you will be jobless for the rest of your life. Never let your confidence be eroded by one incident. One important piece of advice: try to make the best of the free time you have. Do not waste it by being despondent, idle, or just drifting away. Shake off past disappointment and move ahead. Better days are waiting for you. Life does not end today.

When Heartbroken

Disappointment in love does not mean the end of everything. You may have lost something, but you still have many precious things left. To fail at love does not mean you are good for nothing. So many people still love and care for you, such as your parents, family, and friends. Do not let just one person determine your value or control your fate.

The past is the past. As long as you do not carry it or cling to it, it can have no effect on you. The more you carry it around, the more suffering you will have.

That person may not be your soul mate. To lose him or her may actually give you the freedom to search for the one who really suits you.

Being heartbroken also teaches us that life is not all about success. Disappointments are a fact of life. They also make us stronger so that we will be able to withstand future disappointments.

When Facing Criticisms

First of all, ask yourself if the criticisms are based on the truth and are fair. If they are, even in part, you should consider them when

trying to improve yourself and your work. Just take the gist of it and ignore the accusatory or inaccurate words.

Lord Buddha said the wise one who shows us the mistake is guiding us toward a treasure. Look deeply. In criticism lies many invaluable things. They help us to see the other side of the truth—something we or our friends may not be able to see before. They help us to understand the speakers better and to know how to deal with them in the future.

Another valuable lesson when one is being criticised is to realise the truth of life, that praise and criticism are just two sides of the same coin. Nobody has ever received only praises. The more one has praises bestowed on them the more he or she is subject to gossip and criticism. Thus, one should not be swayed by either praise nor criticism.

Indeed, the more we enjoy receiving praise, the more upset we are likely to be when facing criticism. If we don't want to suffer from being criticized, we should avoid be overjoyed when praised, for the louder we laugh, the harder we will cry.

Written in 2007.

New Year Blessings:

The Gift of Inner Calm

The New Year is a gift-giving occasion. However, we mostly think about giving gifts to others, overlooking giving ourselves a gift, too, particularly what is valuable to our minds.

Giving clothes, hosting feasts, taking someone out to dinner, to the movies, or the likes ... these are the gifts that please the physical senses.

But our mind needs some treats, too. This is an important matter, but much overlooked and seriously lacking. What is it that the mind needs? It is inner calm and happiness, which we are in great shortage. That is why most people are yearning for inner calm.

We should take the time to infuse our mind with the calm within. Happiness and inner tranquility will only emerge when we have mindfulness, mental concentration, and insight. These things will nurture equanimity in our mind, which will help us to live our life smoothly.

I would like to suggest that we use this New Year to give our mind the gift of inner calm. And we should not do this only on New Year's Day. We should keep on doing it, because every day is a new day for us. For the rest of the 364 days, I would like to suggest that we give a present to ourselves by living a life of mindfulness, by constantly practising meditation, and by cultivating insight, for they will eventually transform into inner peace and happiness in our hearts.

Just a little bit of meditation every day is very beneficial. The time we wash and clean our body each day amounts to more than an hour. We spend just as much time nurturing our body by consuming food. But we don't pay much attention to our mind. We should pay more attention to our inner life. Let's give our mind tranquility. If we can do so, our New Year will be meaningful, and our life will be more worthwhile.

The New Year is also a blessing-giving time. It is traditional to wish each other good fortune, such as longevity, glowing health, happiness, a strong body, and work success. However, good fortune comprises both opportunity and one's readiness. Opportunity means the situation and timing, which involve many other people, something that is dependent on many external factors.

Winning first prize in the lottery. Being promoted to higher position. Winning a raffle. These things are often considered luck, which comes from external factors. But to have real good fortune also depends on internal factors, our readiness within. We might hit gold, but if we are not ready, it will turn into defective luck. We might win tens of millions of baht from winning the lottery, which is indeed a rare luck. But if we don't know how to spend money wisely, or if we spend it on heavy drinking and heavy partying, our life will plunge and probably end up in deep debt. Being drunk

from celebrating the prize money, we might crash into an electricity pole when driving home. This is broken luck. The opportunity is there, but it becomes damaging because the internal factor, our mind, is not ready.

If we want to have good fortune, it is not enough to wait for an opportunity. We must prepare ourselves to be ready, with mental readiness, in particular. This comes from being mindful, insightful, careful, and knowing enough. This is in accordance with what I mentioned earlier, the need to give oneself a present through the cultivation of mindfulness, mental concentration, and insight. If we have these mores, our mind will be calm and composed, and our life will constantly meet good fortune. If we are ready within—being mindful, insightful, and prudent—we can turn every opportunity into good fortune that makes our life meaningful. Even when opportunity is not at hand, or when we face obstacles, our readiness within will help us transform any adversity into good fortune. When we fail in our work or our love life, we will be able to see it as not a misfortune, but good luck—that is, if we know how to think wisely, we will know how to learn from what happened. If we have discernment and mindfulness, then we have the inner readiness to turn a crisis into luck and opportunity.

For this New Year, I wish you all the attainment of inner peace. I wish you the opportunity to help one another cultivate mental concentration, practise meditation, and nurture happiness within. I wish you becoming the source of moral support for one another to develop the mental readiness, so you can turn whatever you are facing into opportunity.

May your mind be governed with mindfulness and shining with firm mindfulness, so you have access to luck and opportunity at all times. I wish you success both in life and spirituality. What-

ever comes into contact with your mind, may it be the source of high spirits that emanate to your loved ones, relatives, and friends around you.

This is an edited translation of Phra Paisal's New Year talk at the Komon Kheemtong Foundation in 2003, published in the Bangkok Post on December 28, 2010.

What Matters: Thinking about Choices

A yuppie businessman's car lost its balance and hit a pole by the side of a road. The man got out of the car and screamed, "My Mercedes! My Mercedes is ruined!" A bystander, an old man, tried to talk some sense to him. "Why worry about the car? Better worry about your arm. It was thrown over there." When the young man saw his arm, he cried out, "Oh gosh, my Rolex!"

Forget the bloody scene for a moment and think how the reactions of this yuppie man go against the Buddha's teaching. Sacrifice money for organs, sacrifice organs for life, and sacrifice money, organs, and life for the attainment of dhamma. Instead of being glad to survive the accident, the man in the story felt sorry about losing his car and his watch. He saw his assets as more important than his life.

Materialism distorts our values and confuses our priorities. For many of us, money and material possessions have become more important than life. More often than not, they are more important than our body. That's why so many people risk their lives or hurt themselves by having unnecessary cosmetic surgery for better looks.

Let us look within ourselves to see if we, too, value material possessions more than our life and dhamma. We may not be as stupid as the yuppie in the story, but are we the kind of person who would want to commit suicide if our business went bankrupt or our property was destroyed in a fire?

If a robber put a knife to our throat, would we think of resisting in order to protect our money, even if it meant risking our life? Have we ever hit our children in anger when they lose or break things? If so, we should ask ourselves what we love more, our children or the material stuff? Have we ever thought about lying so we can make more money?

Here is an anecdote to end this story: A very stingy millionaire was caught red-handed trying to steal buns. He was sentenced to choose between paying a 1,000 baht fine, being caned 100 times, or eating 100 buns at one go. Of course, the greedy millionaire chose the bun-eating choice. After stuffing himself with 50 buns, he could not eat any more, so he asked for the caning instead. After 50 beatings, he could no longer stand the pain, so he asked to pay the fine.

When back at his house, he smilingly told his wife, "Those people are so stupid. They don't even know when they are being taken advantage of. Just by eating a number of buns and putting up with a number of beatings, I was able to delay the time I had to pay the fine for hours."

*This story is from a book in Thai entitled Sa-Ra-Khan: Dhamma through
Funny Stories published by Sathira Dhammasthan, 2009.*

Reaping What We Sow: Be Prepared to Be Treated as You Treat Others

After only three years, the marriage of Ponsak and Somsong was already on the rocks and they quarreled all the time. That night, like every night, they went to bed angry at each other. Ponsak suddenly remembered that he must get up very early the next day. He wanted her to wake him up, but being conceited, would not speak to her first. So he wrote a note and gave it to her. The note read: "Wake me up at 6 o'clock in the morning."

The next day, he was woken up by the sound of the national anthem from a school nearby, which is played at 8:00 a.m. He was angry at his wife and planned to explode at Somsong the minute he saw her. When he reached for his glasses at the head of the bed, however, he saw a note on a piece of paper. It read: "Wake up! Wake up! It's 6 o'clock!"

The story above shows we should be prepared to be treated the same way we treat others. Don't expect from others more than what we give them. If we want others to speak to us, we must speak to them first. If we want friendship from others, the place to start is ourselves. Whatever we do, it comes back to us. It's normal. Hence the old saying, "We reap what we sow". It's how the law of karma works, isn't it? If we want to achieve anything, we have to put an effort in it. If we remain angels, don't ever hope to get help. To invest just one and to expect one hundred in return is like overcharging. In the same vein, if we want our children to be good and compassionate persons, we cannot neglect the children when they are young. We cannot just pamper them with money or materials without giving them time, love, and care. We also must be good role models for the kids. If we want quality children, then we also must be quality parents.

These days, we often hear complaints against the young generation that they are materialistic and slaves of fashion from Japan and the West. That there is nothing in their heads but to find concerts to scream their hearts out. Before we adults go on complaining, why don't we ask ourselves why the kids have become like that. Is it because of the environment we have created for them? Isn't the society which is obsessed with materialism and the blind following of foreign cultures the inheritance the kids receive from what their parents have created? If so, how can we expect the children to be any different?

The teachers who want their students to achieve must invest time and efforts in them, as shown by the story below. Prof. Boonchoo must lecture his class on Mondays during this semester. Often, he could not make it because of his moonlighting at a private

company on the same day. He solved this problem by having his assistant take his recorded lectures to class so the students could listen to the tape. One day, he happened to finish his meeting at the company early, so he rushed to class. When he entered, he found an empty room. The recorded lecture was on. But there was not one student there. Only tens of tape-recording machines on the student's desks at work, recording his recorded lecture. Action equals reaction. This is a universal law.

This story is from a book in Thai entitled Sa-Ra-Khan: Dhamma through Funny Stories published by Sathira Dhammasthan, 2009.

Slave to Our Thoughts

A businessman had nearly finished his meal in a restaurant when a stranger approached. “Hello, Kittichai,” the newcomer shouted. “What happened? You used to be so short, how come you’re so tall now? You’ve got such fair-skinned too, before you were as black as coal. And your ears are sticking out more than they used to.” “Sorry, I’m not Kittichai,” the businessman answered in a firm tone of voice. “Wow,” the stranger exclaimed. “You’ve even changed your name!”

When we are convinced about something, we tend to hold fast to that conviction. Even when new evidence or information contradicts our beliefs, we still won’t give them up. Instead, we continue to find plenty of reasons to support that conviction.

When we believe deeply in something, sometimes our eyes, ears, or other senses will be shaped by those beliefs. A millionaire who believes that her maid stole her diamond ring will see signs of the crime in whatever the maid does. But when she finds the

ring later, stuck in a gap between two desks, she no longer sees those signs.

Our thoughts affect our perceptions. And we can always find countless reasons to support our ideas. That is why we often come across people who have been duped but, despite being presented with proof of the fraud, still continue to have faith in the conman. Our minds have sophisticated defence mechanisms to protect them from being attacked. We also use these mechanisms to reinforce the conclusions we have come to and make them more unshakable. Realising this, we should be careful not to trust our own thought processes because they can make fools of us, if we don't understand how they work.

Thoughts are good servants but bad masters. Therefore, we should be constantly mindful, never letting them become our masters, never letting them dominate us to such an extent that we let ourselves be driven by them, believing them to be true.

The following story reminds us not to be get carried away by our own thoughts: Pakpoom paid a visit to Phuket for the first time. While he was waiting for his friends at the bus station, he saw an elderly, well-dressed man standing nearby. So, he asked him for the time .“Excuse me, what time is it?” he asked. Looking at him contemptuously, the man snapped: “Get lost!” Pakpoom was stunned. Then he said: “I asked you politely for the time so why did you speak to me like that?” The old man pretended not to hear. But when Pakpoom pressed him for a response, he let out a long stream of words:

“I know what you're up to. First you ask me for the time. If I'd answered, then you'd have started talking about the weather, the sea, your travel plans, and other things. Once we felt more familiar with each other, I'd feel obliged to invite you to visit my

house. What would happen after that? You'd meet Metinee, my lovely daughter. Then you two might develop a liking for each other. Eventually, you might ask her to marry you. Me? Let my daughter marry you? No way! How could my daughter live with a man who doesn't even have a watch of his own! So to prevent all these headaches from happening, I'd rather risk being considered a bad-mannered person than tell you what time it is!"

This story is from a book in Thai entitled Sa-Ra-Khan: Dhamma through Funny Stories published by Sathira Dhammasthan, 2009.

The Practice of Happiness

Everybody wishes for happiness. Whatever we wish for, be it good health, luck, wealth, love, success, or not facing difficult situations, they are all manifestations of happiness.

Unfortunately, we usually find happiness short-lived and rare to come by. So, we come to another wish. How can we find happiness forever?

Phra Paisal Visalo said the irony is that the harder we strive for happiness, the further we are from it. To attain genuine happiness, we need to stop and have time for ourselves to take an inward journey to discover the spring of joy, the monk said. The keys to happiness, he believes, are already in our hands.

“Happiness is intrinsically natural for us. It dwells in our heart. We cannot realise it, because we spare very little or no time at all to contemplate life. With life in the fast lane, we hardly see who we are, what is essential for our living, what we truly want in

life,” said Phra Paisal at the launch of the book *Kam Kor Tee Ying Yai*, which he co-wrote with Arthit Yam Chao.

“Our view that happiness is out there to be found from people, material goods, fame, positions, or awards blinds us from seeing the truth,” he added. “Happiness is not about earning or maintaining the status quo. It is about feeling and being happy.”

The first step may be cultivating the view that happiness is not everlasting. “Like everything else in nature, happiness changes and subsides. If we can accept this law of impermanence, we will be permanently happy.”

Happiness cannot be bought or consumed, said Phra Paisal. It comes to us when we learn to let go of our selfishness, cravings and desire to own things, including happiness. “When we stop demanding that nature, people, and things will be as we please, then we will be able to taste the sweetness of joy.”

Attachment is the root of our sufferings, said Phra Paisal. “We hold on to the ‘me’ and ‘mine’ so much that we are enslaved by whatever we cling to. For example, when someone stains or scratches ‘my’ car, it feels like ‘I’ am stained and scratched. In this sense, ‘I’ have become the car.

“If we ease up our grasp on ‘my’ car, yes, the car may be ruined, but our mind will not be,” he said.

The degree of our suffering is relative to the size of our “self.” The bigger our ego, the more our suffering, Phra Paisal said.

While Buddhism teaches us to be “nobody,” consumerist society encourages us to be “somebody,” driving us to go after money, fame, rank, wealth and power.

“The ‘big’ ego becomes an easy target where suffering can hit without a miss. For example, one may go to a restaurant and feel

upset for not being waited on instantly. Or, if you thought that you were 'someone,' you would not like to have to line up for service."

"When we are angry or arrogant, we are separating ourselves from the others. It is this separation that blocks us from the flow of happiness."

In short, Phra Paisal said, what we need to do to realise happiness is to scrape off our ego, which brings about selfishness and separation. He urges us to be "an empty boat," which is not affected by low or high tides. "Ultimately, supreme happiness comes when there is no 'one' who is attached to suffering or happiness."

To this end, the monk offered some practical advice:

Say, "I'm sorry," and "never mind."

We are not angels. As human beings it is natural for us to be imperfect and prone to make mistakes, said Phra Paisal. But these days, he went on, we say sorry too little and too late. Consequently, we are relentlessly living in feuds at home, at work, and in broader society.

For example, "Sorry" from doctors could prevent doctor-patient relationships coming before the courts. "Sorry" from the government may help heal the wounded hearts of Muslims in the South who feel justice is not being served. An apology might have stopped the situation from becoming so violent. "Sorry" said by parents may prevent children from ending up in juvenile detention centres.

"Sorry," said Phra Paisal, seems to be the hardest word, because we associate it with failures, mistakes, incompetence, and weakness, which we feel we must not show to others.

"When we say sorry, we are not losing face. We are losing delusion. It is a noble act. It shows one's humility and compassion

to feel others' suffering," said the monk.

It needs understanding and courage to make an apology, he added. "One needs to take off the many heavy hats we are wearing, like education, seniority, experience, ranking, social status, and just relate to one another as human fellows."

The sooner one says sorry, the quicker one can mend conflicts and restore relationships. Most importantly, Phra Paisal emphasized, it is a perfect tool to scrub off one's ego.

"When we sincerely feel and say sorry, our mind will be light and liberated. But if we remain headstrong, resisting our mistakes, we are harming ourselves. Our heart becomes hard and cold, our ego gets stronger, and thus our sufferings are deepened."

Like giving an apology, forgiveness also sets our heart free from anger, grudges, or sorrow that weighs us down. At times, it cannot be helped that people hurt us with their deeds and words. It is thus crucial that we learn to cultivate a forgiving mind, said Phra Paisal. "We can all make mistakes, thus we all need forgiving." The sooner one forgives, he said, the sooner one will be happy.

Say "thank you" and offer compliments.

"Thank you," he said, is not merely a social courtesy. When uttered from the heart it can promote our happiness, too. How? Because it takes optimism and humility to say.

Those who are hard to please or see themselves as above others may find it difficult to appreciate or see others' contributions and goodness, said Phra Paisal. They may see only flaws and give complaints and criticism rather than compliments. In this manner, one is likely to feel upset, dissatisfied, frustrated, and far from happy.

To be able to thank someone or something needs both truthful and positive perspectives. This outlook can be cultivated and trained, said Phra Paisal. Appreciating the little things in life, the small things people do or say to us, will bring joy and make us smile.

Most importantly, Phra Paisal said our sharpened positive outlook will help us through difficult times. “This inclination can help us see the bright side of suffering and make our plight manageable and not so miserable.”

Learn from suffering.

Phra Paisal urges us to take the bull by the horns: “Be happy when suffering comes as it provides us a chance to shake off our ego,” he said. We suffer because we cling to suffering, he added.

There are two main kinds of situations that make us suffer, explained the monk. The first is losing what we love and desire. When we lose people, things, positions, or circumstances we prefer, we become miserable and angry.

The second situation that makes us suffer is facing what we hate, be it people we don’t like, physical or emotional pain, criticism, failure, or disappointment.

“When faced with these situations, do not try to push or bury them away. When you suffer, try to see that it is not ‘you’ but the ‘self,’ the ‘delusions’ that are suffering. You need to allow these delusions to suffer so as to tame them. Things won’t appear as we please, accept it as it comes with humility.”

Set time for oneself.

It is impossible to be truly happy when one is always on the run. To realise happiness, Phra Paisal says we need to slow down and give ourselves more time in solitude. He advises us to take time off each day to install happiness in our bodies and minds.

Sadly, people are always running out of time, both for themselves and for others. Our attention can be scattered between many things—schedules, meetings, work and other activities—making it difficult for us to focus on really important issues in life such as what truly constitutes happiness.

Ultimately, Phra Paisal wishes that we will be aloof from being “someone” who feel happiness or suffering. “Then, you will attain permanent happiness.”

Written in 2007.

The Art of Eating: The Buddhist Way

After returning from a visit to a temple in the Northeast of Thailand, a Western woman told her friends never go to that place, saying that the monks there did not like one another. “When they eat, they never speak even one word to one another,” she said. “How can they then expect respect or faith from us?” Obviously, this lady did not understand Buddhist monks’ practice concerning eating. Monks eat in silence because for them, eating is part of mindfulness training.

In the West, eating may be viewed as a time for socialising, but according to Buddhist mores, which do not only govern monks, eating is part of dhamma practice. Most of us think eating is only a physical activity. In fact, eating has a spiritual impact on us. It does not only matter what we eat, but also how we do the eating. Many people like to talk while eating. Others get lost in worries instead of being mindful of what they are doing. Apart from getting indigestion, these people tend to get stressed easily, which

can lead to ulcers. This pattern of eating also fosters an unsteady mind that cannot concentrate.

If we eat in the right way, not only our physical body is nourished, but also our mind. Don't forget that our mind also needs food. What is the food of mind? First, it is serenity. While eating, our mind should get some rest from having been put to use all day. So, try to eat in peace, without thinking about anything, while concentrating on the business in hand. We will discover that our sense of taste becomes much sharper. If our mind wanders, bring it back to eating again. This is what we call mindful eating. The result is the cultivation of peace and concentration. We will find this concentration useful in our other activities.

Apart from serenity, the mind needs wisdom and awareness. Buddhism also sees the time of eating as the time to be aware of the difference between real and false values. The real value of food is to sustain and nourish our body and our lives. The false value of food, meanwhile, is taste and any status attached to certain foods. If we are attached to the tastes or presentation of foods, if we are constantly looking for popular or famous eating places, then greed will gradually grow in our mind, along with the cholesterol in our bloodstream. This is why in true Buddhist tradition, we are prompted to remind ourselves of this with a prayer called *patisangkayo* before beginning a meal. The aim is to make us aware that we should eat the food for its true value and not to submit to our desires.

Today's generation might feel that this prayer is too old-fashioned, suitable only for monks. But if we apply its essence to make us aware of the purpose of eating before we begin meals, we will be able to nourish our mind with wisdom.

There is another awareness that is extremely important, which is our life is dependent on so many things. Eating time is a good time to reflect on this truth, because the foods that we eat actually come from the labour of so many people involved. Foods are the product of so many lives. They are inseparable from their own sources of sustenance: soil, waterways, forests, clouds, rain, sky. When we eat, then, we owe to so many people and so many lives. We should, therefore, at least express our thankfulness to them and dedicate merit or emanate compassion to them. This is why monks, in the spirit of thankfulness, say the *anumodhana* prayer after meals. In this spirit, monks also perform the ritual of *kruadnam* (the pouring of water to dedicate merit or express thankfulness to all beings) every morning and evening. More importantly, the awareness that we owe our life to others helps us try to live in a meaningful way; a way that is worthy of the sacrifices of so many people and many things, which make our being possible.

This consciousness is certainly not a matter for monastics only. It is extremely important for everyone of us. Mealtime is the time to reflect on how our life is interconnected with others so that we can see things in proper perspective; according to reality. This outlook helps us to foster a conscientious life. Buddhism considers this outlook a kind of wisdom.

Life is not divided into separate fragments. When we eat, we should not only nourish our bodies but also our minds by eating mindfully while cultivating wisdom in our hearts. This can be done by constantly reminding ourselves to see the true value of foods, by not letting ourselves be engulfed by their false values, and by simultaneously being aware that we owe our lives to others. As such, we should live our lives meaningfully.

Ultimately, eating according to a Buddhist perspective is not only concerned with the physical and spiritual realms. It is also inseparable from the social dimension. We must be always aware of whether what we eat and how we consume affects others on the planet. The manufacturing of many foods and products come from processes that destroy the environment, exploit the poor, and torture animals. If we are going to eat and consume according to true Buddhist tradition, we must avoid all such foods and products. If not, our action is tantamount to supporting ongoing exploitation.

Body, mind, and society are interconnected. They become one in almost every activity in our life, including eating. Our eating, therefore, is not a matter of putting food in our stomachs. It is an act of developing our mind and our society.

Written in 2009.

Teaching Children to Make Merit

Boosting Social Immunity

Parents not only want their children to be successful, but also to have a happy and moral life. It is meaningless if their children, despite their wealth, are still ridden with suffering or are corrupt and addicted to vices.

But it is not easy for us to live a moral and happy life these days. Youngsters need to be immunized against all kinds of vices around them, so they are not lured onto the wrong path. They also need to learn to think, seek virtuous things and live a meaningful life.

Knowledge helps children to be smart. But if you want your children to be happy and good, you need to teach them what merit (*boon*) is, because it can help stave off all sorts of vices from your children. It can help them solve and manage life's problems as well as nourish them spiritually with inner peace and happiness.

Boon means cleansing. Firstly, it is the cleansing of one's deeds so one can live a moral life that benefits both oneself and others. Secondly, it is the cleansing of one's mind from the blues as well as the fire of desire so that one can cultivate a wise mind that is not driven by emotional impulses. *Boon* also means the blissful feelings that come from doing good deeds.

The Givers Get Happiness

Boon starts when we know how to give. Giving (*dana*) helps erase ourself-centredness. The mind that is always on the take is narrow and selfish, making that person unlikeable and making it difficult for that person to be happy.

Children grow up safe and sound, because they receive what they need from others from the time of their birth. If they do not learn how to give, they will believe that they are always entitled to get things from others.

Kids should learn that life is about give and take. They can learn from the trees, for example. The tree takes nutrients and water from the soil, but they also give back humidity and dry leaves to nourish the soil in return.

But giving does not mean an exchange or a duty. Forgiving essentially gives us happiness. Teaching kids to give, therefore, amounts to teaching them to be happy from their own generosity. The truth that the givers get happiness is what all children should learn.

This is why parents in the old days take small children to temples to give alms to monks so they will want to do that on their own when they grow up. One is blessed for giving alms to

monks, but the blessing from *boon* also comes from giving to the distressed. Children can make merit just by giving away their toys to poor children or by donating money to the handicapped.

Apart from money and materials, giving life to animals is also a merit-making act. Simple kindness such as freeing fish that are stuck in mud and returning them to the waterway, or watering wilted plants, is also considered *boon*.

Lift the World with Generosity

Teach your children that what they give or how much it costs is not as important as the thoughtfulness itself. You can help your children tremendously if you teach them that even when they have limited energy and money, they can make great merit equally as powerful as that of grown-ups if they are thoughtful. You should teach your children that our qualities are not measured by age, success, or fame but the quality of our hearts.

Take 12-year-old Duanghatai Sotisawapak, for example. She is proof that we can give a greater thing than money if we have empathy. When the teenage girl found out that her cousin had cancer, she drew a comic book to raise funds for her cousin's medication. Her comic book might not have been polished, but her generosity powerfully moved many. Thanks to public donations, her cousin is almost cured now.

Or take 14-year-old Gaewjai Laonipon. Every night, she would accompany her parents, who are volunteers of the Poh Teck Tung Foundation, to rescue accident victims. She helps jot down the addresses, car plates, or even takes the injured to hospital. The girl's self-sacrifice is hard to match.

Putting in one's time and energy to help others is also a merit-making deed. Children should learn that they can do this kind of

boon every day in their daily life. For example, picking up broken glass or litter, helping out with school chores, carrying things for the elderly, helping the blind cross the street, growing trees in public areas or doing household chores.

Non-exploitation

To help others, we must start by ensuring that our own conduct does not cause harm to other people or to the public. Harmful acts include taking life, stealing, corruption, violating what is cherished by others, or being addicted to intoxicants. The *boon* from refraining from these acts is called *sila* (morality, virtue) in Buddhism.

By teaching children not to exploit other people or the public, you give them a fence to ward off harm, for a simple mistake can lead to tragedy. You should not remain passive if the children commit what seem to be trivial mistakes, such as stealing their friends' pens, copying others' homework, cheating on exams, or killing ants and worms.

Good deeds not only prevent us from exploiting others but also from exploiting ourselves. Those who do good bring happiness both to themselves and to those around them.

Wise consumption or simplicity is also part of Buddhist morality. We should not be excessive in our eating and living. We should eat nutritious food and not let greediness harm our bodies.

This includes appropriate use of technology. For example, children should learn how to use mobile phones only when it is necessary, watch TV only after finishing homework, or play computer games moderately. Children also should learn to save, not to flaunt wealth, not to overspend nor be addicted to shopping or such vices as gambling and night entertainment.

Make Merit with Your Heart

We can make merit at all times wherever we are, whether or not we have money. We can make merit without doing anything if we train our mind properly so that it generates positive feelings, such as admiration for others' fortune, not envy.

Teaching your children how to be happy for others will give them the seeds of goodheartedness. Children should also be taught not to go it alone in their good efforts but to give an opportunity for others to join in. Wishing others to share the blessings from one's good deeds is also a *boon* in itself.

Humility is also a merit-making deed. Children should be taught not to look down on others just because they are younger, less educated, or poorer. They should also be taught not to be overbearing with household maids. Humility as a merit also includes not being prejudiced against people of different faiths.

Making merit with our heart leads to a positive and happy mind. Envy and arrogance, meanwhile, lead to anxiety and stress. We should teach children to train their minds so they can smartly manage external stimulants affecting their emotions.

Training for a Calm Mind

Meditation calms the mind by effectively extinguishing anger. For a start, children should be taught to breathe in slow, deep breaths at least four to five times when they feel angry.

But meditation is effective when practiced regularly as part of daily life. The methods vary. For example, focusing on the breathing in and out, or walking slowly and calmly. It will be more effective if parents join the children in meditating. Only five

minutes of this practice every day will do wonders in your mental development.

For small children, games can help. For example, the robot game. Ask the children to move each body part slowly and separately, just like a robot. The rule is that they must observe every sensation that arises during the movements. This method helps make it fun for children to learn to cultivate mental concentration as well as consciousness of one's body.

Actually, we can practice meditation with all our activities. We can teach children to be mindful when brushing their teeth, washing dishes, or doing homework. We should also teach them to do one thing at a time. Not eating and reading at the same time. This can help strengthen one's ability to be focused.

Bedtime is a good time to teach children to cultivate mental concentration and calmness. This can be done through simple prayers, followed by the paying of homage to the Buddha, dhamma (his teachings) and sangha (the community of monks), and then to parents and teachers. Children should make their minds calm for a while before going to sleep.

Projecting compassion is an effective mental practice that can protect oneself from anger. Accumulated anger is like fire burning our heart. Parents should teach children to emanate good will and compassion before going to sleep.

Cultivating compassion is also possible through regularly expressing admiration and thankfulness for other people and things around us. Children should be taught not only to be thankful for their parents and teachers but also for maids, drivers, janitors, etc, who help to make sure their lives run smoothly.

They also should learn to be thankful even to the trees, the mountains, the sea, as well as things they use, such as pencils,

bags, blankets, cars, etc. This helps instill gentleness, concern for the environment, and frugality.

If children are still very little, teach them to water plants, or to keep a pet. You can also teach them to wish the plants and their pets to be happy and free from all suffering. If they do this regularly every morning and evening, their hearts will be brimming with compassion.

Emanating compassion is a great merit. The Buddha says the blessings it brings are greater than giving alms to the Buddha or to 100 enlightened monks. This is because it is the deed that directly makes one's mind positive.

Training for Right Thinking

After training the mind to be calm, the next step is training it to be wise, or to have right thinking. Your children should learn to use goodness to guide their deeds, not using their likes and dislikes. They should be taught that when rebuked, even when they are not happy with it, they should ponder if the reprimand is correct or not. This attitude will help ease your children's distress and help them to benefit from rebukes.

Likewise, children should learn early that when eating, they should not go for what please their palates, but for that which is useful for their bodies and is also economical. This right thinking helps your children learn what right consumption is and how not to be slaves of consumerism.

Right thinking also can be cultivated by exposing children to useful information. You should help your children listen to good guidance, to read good books, or to watch useful TV programmes. You should also be with your children when watching TV so you can give your kids appropriate guidance.

Teaching your children to do good deeds is itself a merit-making act. If they follow your teaching, they are joining your *boon*. The right *boon* is one that makes one's mind pure, clear, calm, and full with true happiness.

You may be ready to give your children all the material things they want or need. But one thing you cannot forget is to teach them to know what *boon* is and to live a life full of merit.

What a great inheritance you can give your children!

Ten Ways to Make Merit

1. Give money or other materials
2. Cultivate generosity and refrain from bad deeds
3. Keep the mind calm
4. Sacrifice one's time and energy for others or the public
5. Be humble
6. Appreciate the successes and good deeds of others
7. Help others to do good or to share in one's own merits
8. Listen to dhamma or good thoughts
9. Give dhamma and good thoughts to others
10. Think rightly in line with virtue

This is a translation of the Thai language booklet entitled "Teach Children to Make Merit", published by the Network of Buddhists for Buddhism and Thai Society in 2003 and supported by Thai Health Promotion Foundation.



02

Buddhist Reform

Spiritual Materialism and the Sacraments of Consumerism: A View from Thailand

The distinction between religious faith and consumerism is becoming increasingly vague these days. Although religious worship may involve physical objects, such as Buddha images, living within a moral discipline to keep oneself grounded in dhamma is required in every religion. Nowadays, religious faith has been altered to the degree that it means purchasing auspicious objects to worship. One's faith (*saddha*) is no longer measured by how one applies it, how one lives life, but by how many holy or sacred articles one possesses.

Many Bangkok monasteries as well as those in the provinces have transformed into trading centers for such auspicious objects. In these temples, it's not just a few ordinary photographs, encased amulets, and *yantra* (lucky cloths) that are bought and sold, but an incredible diversity of products, like protective lockets to hang

from your rearview mirror, fancy matted pictures, figurines, and signs with magic phrases (like “The House of Richness”). Before long there may be specially blessed watches and consecrated calculators for sale. No doubt there are willing buyers already; it’s just a matter of who will start producing them.

If we examine some religious rites that have developed recently, we can see clearly how infatuated people become with sacred objects. Some phenomena, although they spring up quickly and last only a short while, nonetheless turn into big business overnight. In one instance, people developed a belief about the special powers of a certain kind of bamboo from one village in Thailand. More than 20 different kinds of sacred objects made from this bamboo were available within a few days of the “discovery” of its potency. Soon, hundreds of thousands of *baht* were being generated each day in more than 200 shops that mushroomed in the once sleepy, peaceful little village.

Consumerism rests on the principle that happiness and success come about through consuming or purchasing things, not through creating or realizing it by oneself. This belief causes people to see religion as merely another aspect of consuming, rather than something that should be applied and practiced. The result is that religion has become superstition, and a low form of superstition at that. (Higher forms of superstition as well as special vows made with the hope of receiving worldly happiness, while they too rely on sacred objects, at least retain some basic morality or moral practice.)

There are many people “seeking” religion who are bothered by all the fuss surrounding auspicious objects but, unfortunately, they are still influenced by consumerism. Some go to temples

seeking peace of mind, but in terms of their expectations, they are more like tourists at a resort: “If we have money to pay for the service, then tranquility will just come on its own; we don’t have to actually do anything.” When they realize that the “for peace to be possible, one has to make efforts that” involve staying in a tiny, lonely sleeping hut with no running water or electricity in the middle of the forest, and a good long walk to get there as well, their determination fades quickly, and they turn tail, get back in their cars, and go home.

Another form of religious consumerism is the desire to rack up spiritual experiences, like seeing *nimitta* (signs, images, visions), visiting heaven and hell realms, and going into deep meditative states of absorption. This is no different than tourists who visit all the famous national parks, but who are happy just to drive around and check out the view from behind the windshield and stay in air-conditioned hotels, rather than walking in the forest, pitching a tent, and experiencing peace and quiet. Such people only want strange and new experiences; it never occurs to them to work away at the illusion of “self.” They are interested in the “instant coffee” kind of religion where the results are quick and immediate. They won’t commit themselves to a single long-term practice or stick with a single teacher but hop around from this temple to that practice center, and often wind up being deceived by some charismatic phony, who promises quick liberation.

A superficial comparison of this kind of person with those whose primary concern in life is money—

thinking always of profit, following stock prices during the week, going out shopping on the weekends—indicates that these two groups are exactly the opposite. The first group is religious in a strict way; the second are materialists. However, looking more

deeply, we see that they both are composites of religion and consumerism, and it is difficult to separate the two. The first group professes their religion in a consumeristic way. The second is religious about their consumption; in fact, they are so religious about it, that we can call it a new religion: The Religion of Consumerism.

Broadly defined, a religion is a system of thought and beliefs that meet deep human needs, particularly that of security in our hearts. We can achieve security on one level through various means. Lots of possessions, money, our health, success at work, being honored or famous—these are all primary factors (although not so long-lasting) for our security. Each religion has the initial function of providing hope or a promise to people that if they do good, make merit, give alms, trust in God, pray to or beseech Him in the proper way, then they will have longevity, good standing, power, good health and prosperity. On a higher level, religions help provide meaning for people's lives, or at least help them know who they are, how to lead their lives, and in what direction to go. In another sense of the word, religions help people to get beyond their confusion and doubt. Those who have faith or trust in their religion are likely to have resolute strength and energy.

Consumerism functions, up to a point, in the same way that religions do, starting with answering physical needs. People today are obsessed with accumulating wealth and property. It's not just a matter of how much you have; what or what kind is equally important. There are loads of people who are willing to spend 100,000 *baht* on a Rolex watch and invest millions in a Mercedes Benz. This is all because of their basic insecurity. For such people, ten leather handbags from the Banglampoo flea market do not provide the same security as a single one of the "real thing" made by Louis Vuitton. Similarly, people are even able to buy false cer-

tificates and degrees without feeling anything is wrong, because the satisfaction that comes from being called “Doctor” outweighs any guilt. (But if their phoniness is exposed, well then, that’s another story.)

Consumerism gives purpose to life as well. People who are completely submerged in it will have no hesitation or doubt because they are very focused—focused on looking for things to consume. The newly graduated have no confusion; they know that they are working towards getting a car within two to four years. The businessman has his sights set unwaveringly on the billion *baht* house. There are all kinds of things that obsess people, even to the point where they work so much that they sleep less than strict meditation monks. When it goes this far, we can rightly call it religion. What should we call this kind of strong faith, if not religion.

There was a period when communism performed this function for many people. They treated the Party like God, committing their lives to it. So it was no surprise that when the ideals of communism were destroyed, they felt directionless and didn’t know what to do with their lives. For many, the confusion was quickly alleviated by embracing consumerism. The energy and vitality they once gave to the party was now directed towards the stock market and figures in accounting books. Life took on meaning once again.

We should understand that it is not desire alone that drives consumeristic behavior. People’s beliefs or world view is a crucial factor. One reason that consumerism has power is due to the set of (seemingly rational) ideas, which say that happiness comes from consuming and that the more one consumes, the more happiness there is. At the same time, this set of ideas holds that all problems have material solutions. The city has traffic problems? Just buy

a computer to design a traffic system. You're putting on weight? Buy some diet pills. Your figure is starting to sag in places? Just get some plastic surgery. Want to be more popular and respected? A Benz is the thing you need. The sacred power of technology lies in more than just its ability to provide rational backing for materialism and consumerism. Making them "scientific", it also transforms technology itself into one of the components used in the rituals of consumerism.

Apart from security in their minds, humans have a deeper need, and that is to transform into a "new person." The Religion of Consumerism has both rituals and practices that bring about this transformation. In the past, young Thai men who had passed through the monkhood would be known as *kohn sook*, literally "ripe people", with connotations of being ready or seasoned. Some religions even try to build a new character, by giving the person a new appellation. But for deeper change, one must follow religious principles, for example, the practice of meditation.

Consumerism goes far in answering this deeper need. A great, great number of people use consumerism as a way to build a new ego or become a new person by purchasing those products that support their self-image. Taste is not the only thing that draws young people to buy soft drinks, but it is also the young consumer's desire to be one of the "new generation" or to have personality like the pop star on the commercial. Ads these days do not try to sell the qualities of the products but sell the qualities of the star or the model hired for the job. An image is being peddled to the consumer, an image that is obtainable by using that particular product.

Just as the advertisements aren't really selling a product, the producers aren't really creating a product. They are creating a

brand name, which interests consumers far more than the benefits and quality of the product. If there isn't some chic or elegant image associated with it, that brand will be worthless. For this reason, some companies are able to reap ridiculous profits by selling the rights to attach their name to products when they have nothing whatsoever to do with their production. For example, the clothing company Pierre Cardin makes an incredible amount of money by selling the rights to use its name on over 800 different products, from perfume to sunglasses. It is for reasons of image that Nike has announced publicly that it is not a "shoe company"; it is a "sport company." Shoes do not have the appeal to consumers that sports do. People don't just want a pair of shoes; they want to be an athlete like Michael Jordan. So people buy the brand of shoes that will link their sense of self with that of their favorite star. In terms of the effect in one's mind, the purchase of a pair of shoes is actually not so different from the purchase of an amulet of Luang Pau Khun. Luang Pau Khun is one of the more popular monks in Thailand these days, famous for his squatting position, a propensity for smoking, and superb fund-raising skills. Many believe that wealth, health and other worldly benefits are assured to those who don amulets with his image.

So consumerism has more than just a material aspect; people's trust, beliefs and views play a very important role as well. When you consider consumerism in terms of the functions that it performs as well as the attitude and understanding of people who are under its influence, it is not so different from other religions. But in the final analysis, the Religion of Consumerism cannot truly answer the deeper needs of humanity. It will never make its followers feel completely satisfied. One who never feels like he has enough will never be able to quit striving and struggling, and will never be

able to find real peace. Even worse, when one gives oneself over to the doctrine of consumerism, it is very difficult to realize the fact that it is peace which is the deepest aspiration and need for life. The desire for material things covers and obscures that deepest and finest wish, leaving one ignorant of life's real needs.

The Religion of Consumerism provides only temporary fulfillment, giving meaning to life only in the short-term. No matter how much stuff you have, in the end, it will all seem rather empty and meaningless, because fulfillment in life cannot arise when one is entangled with and overusing material things. Life's meaning is revealed not through building a new ego, but by delving deep until seeing that "self" is illusion. Consumerism offers no refuge for our lives, whereas even consuming religion itself cannot satisfy our deepest wish.

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Buddhism for the Next Century: Toward Renewing a Moral Thai Society

At the Turn of Two Centuries

As the end of 19th century approached, Siam was faced with the powerful force of Westernization, which brought great excitement and anxiety to the Thai elites. Equally dramatic was the change of Siamese society in response to this external pressure. One interesting aspect of that change was the transformation of Thai Buddhism, in general, and of the Thai monastic Sangha¹ in particular. There was no change in the history of Thai Buddhism as powerful and intense as the one that occurred around the turn of the 20th century.

¹ Henceforth, referred to simply as “the Sangha,” according to Theravada custom.

Two years before the end of the 19th century, the Thai Sangha, under the leadership of Prince Wachirayan, was at the forefront of introducing a modern education system throughout the country. Schools were built in many temples. Temples all over Siam became centers for the dissemination of new ideas and information to the people. A new syllabus introduced rural youth to Western style mathematics and science. Standardized script and language replaced local languages. It should be noted that while such a syllabus was promoted enthusiastically by the Thai Sangha, it was doggedly resisted by its Burmese counterpart.²

Three years after the dawn of the 20th century, the Thai Sangha was thoroughly reorganized as never before. All monks in the kingdom were incorporated into the same structure under a centralized leadership in Bangkok. The centralized and bureaucratized administration system, then considered “modern” and “effective,” was introduced to one of Siam’s oldest institutions.

In the meantime, the Sangha’s education system was overhauled. New curriculum, new teaching and learning methods, and new texts were developed. Buddhist teachings were reinterpreted, leading to a new “scientific” orthodoxy. One innovation that should be mentioned was the introduction of Siamese script to replace Khmer in writing religious texts.

It is apparent that Thai Buddhism and its Sangha at the turn of the century were highly dynamic and vibrant. It was an important agent of change not only in the area of Buddhism it self but also in other aspects of Siamese life. The role of the Sangha in the

² Wyatt, David K. *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 217.

creation of a modern nation state, for example, is beyond dispute.

Such dynamism is in sharp contrast with the state of the Thai Sangha at the turn of the 20th century. Instead of being an agent of change, it has become a hindrance to it. The Sangha education system, especially the ecclesiastical one, is obsolete. Its hierarchy and governing structure, modeled after colonial administrations, are out-dated and squelch monks' creativity at every level. Under the present structure, any real reform can take place only at the "periphery," and stops there because of the strong resistance inherent in the hierarchy. Instead of leading, the Sangha is merely a follower, and not a very competent one at that. Innovation is possible only through individual monks, never by the Sangha as an institution.

Despite the stark differences, the conditions of the Sangha at the end of both centuries are closely connected. The obsolete systems of the current Sangha, such as, the educational and administrative, are in fact the legacy of the changes of one hundred years ago. Over time the reform led by Prince Wachirayan has become an obstacle to any real change, even when that change is vital and necessary.

Consequently, the Sangha fails as a moral force. The morality and behavior of monks are increasingly questioned, while virtuous monks struggle to strengthen the morality of society as a whole. Moral decline manifesting in widespread crime, corruption, drugs, and various social problems, throughout the country and in the temples themselves, indicates the failure of the Sangha as a moral force.

Worse than that, Thailand's moral decay reflects a more worrisome fact: Buddhism as it is generally practiced in this country has failed. It's not true that Thai society has become increasingly

secularized as was anticipated by some theorists. The fact that meditation has become popular and widespread among the middle class, and the rapid expansion of some schools, Dhammakaya, for example, are signs of a Buddhist revival. Thai society is increasingly religious. The question is why morality in Thai society is increasingly debased. Apart from questioning the role of the Sangha, we need to investigate Buddhism as currently practiced as well.

The Lost Ultimate

With out the reform initiated by King Mongkut, and further developed by his son the Prince Patriarch, the beliefs about Buddhism of Thai people today would be much different. The reform that he began as a monk in the early part of the 19th century has shaped modern Buddhism with its rationality and scientific orientation. The kind of Buddhist teachings that he propagated through his Thammayutika sect left almost no room for superstition or transcendental worlds. Reference to heavens and hells according to the three worlds paradigm was greatly reduced and belief in them was downplayed in its significance. He only recognized the heavens and hells of the mind.³

While abandoning the three worlds paradigm that had informed Thai Buddhist belief for many centuries, King Mongkut placed more emphasis on achievements that can be fulfilled in this life. He was the first Thai king to turn his back on the aim of being reborn as a future Buddha. This does not mean, however,

³ King Mongkut criticized traditional teachings that evoke images of hell and heaven “as if threatening with hell, luring with heaven.”

that he was more concerned about attaining *nibbana* in this life. Though he referred to *nibbana* occasionally in his writings, he seemed to regard it as a remote ideal beyond the reach of people. His teachings, especially for the laity, instead stressed worldly and practical achievements.⁴

Although a wave of Westernization was sweeping Thailand at the same time, King Mongkut's Buddhist reform was not aimed at making it more responsive or adaptable to modernity. His objective was to purify Buddhism through the process of returning to the "roots," making it true to the original teachings and practices of the Buddha. But while rejecting traditional Buddhism as a distortion and deviation, the Buddhism he introduced was Western influenced in its empirical approach and its stress on this-worldly achievements.

Western influence was even more apparent in the teachings of later Thammayutika leaders, especially Prince Wachirayan. *Nibbana*, the ultimate reality which was treated as a remote ideal by King Mongkut, was virtually ignored in the age of Prince Wachirayan. There was no room for the ultimate truth-reality in the kind of Buddhism which he propagated among the general people. In *Nawakowat*, his primer that has been the standard and fundamental text of Thai Buddhists for the last eighty years, the section *ghipanipatti* (code of morality for the laity) mentions nothing about the ultimate goal (*paramattha*). In discussing attha (goal or benefit), only temporal and mental goals are referred to. He considered *nibbana* unnecessary, not only for the laity, but also

⁴ He was perhaps the first Thai to initiate the birthday party (for himself), reasoning that longevity is one of the "highest gains." To celebrate the birth of one of his sons, the blessing he gave was only for worldly happiness, departing from the tradition practiced by his predecessors.

for the monks. This resulted in the phrase “*nibbana realization*” being removed from the vow of candidacy in the ordination ceremony.⁵ In his teaching, the benefit of morality was emphasized only in temporal terms, without indicating any connection to the ultimate or spiritual goal. Meditation has also been ignored in the entirely bookish modern Sangha education system.⁶

Attempts at returning to “the original” always end up back with “the new,” since one inevitably looks at the past through the eyes of the present. Returning to origins invariably involves processes of interpretation and selection. What one sees and brings back is always different from the original. In other words, the original remains the same only if it is left as it was. Once we interact with or “contact” it, however respectfully and carefully, it becomes something new, smeared with our “fingerprints.”

The “Original Buddhism” that King Mongkut discovered after intensive study of the *Tipitaka* is, therefore, a Buddhism mixed with his own opinions and influenced by his world view, consequently mirroring the ideas existing in the social milieu in which

⁵ Concerning those who attain *nibbana*, he once mentioned that, “There is no person like that nowadays.”

⁶ Prince Wachirayan’s sect, Thammayutika Nikaya, played a significant role in promoting this orthodoxy throughout the country. Though Phra Ajarn Man Phurithatto and his disciples belong to this sect, their meditative style of practice and emphasis on the realization of *nibbana* had no influence on the official orthodoxy propagated from Bangkok. They were mainly on the periphery of the Sangha and, oftentimes, were criticized and threatened by the hierarchy of their own sect. Despite being respected by the hierarchy later, their popularity among people was used, both by the monastic and state hierarchies, to promote Sangha consolidation and national integration in remote areas, especially in the Northeast where they were based. See Taylor, J.L. *Forest Monks and the Nation-State* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993).

he was embedded. Further, his version of Buddhism would not have become so widespread without the reforms of his son, Prince Wachirayan, the Supreme Patriarch in the reign of King Rama VI.

His unification of the Sangha was successful not only in terms of administration but also in shaping along the same lines the understanding of Buddhism among Thai monks. For the first time in Thai history, the different teachings and practices of Buddhism based in different localities were replaced by a “standardized” orthodoxy introduced from the expansion minded capital.⁷ The new centralized structure not only enabled the standard Buddhist curriculum to be adopted effectively throughout the kingdom, but also gave rewards and punishments to local monks based on their response to the central policy. No less important were the texts for propagating the new orthodoxy, still in use today, ninety percent of which were written by one person, Prince Wachirayan.⁸ King Mongkut’s Buddhism, previously confined to his small sect, thereby became the official orthodoxy of the Sangha.

Prince Wachirayan, however, did more than popularize the teaching of his father. As the new nation-state was forming, Buddhist teachings were interpreted and selected which fit the needs and agenda of the nation’s rulers. Obligation to the state and its rulers⁹ was emphasized as a supreme Buddhist value. Even

⁷ Concerning the conflict between the local monks and monks representing the Bangkok hierarchy, and how the former were later subjugated and domesticated, see Tiyanich, Kamala. *Forest Recollections*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

⁸ Ishii, Yoneo. *Sangha, State and Society*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 94.

⁹ A similar process has occurred in recent decades with sects like the Dhammakaya movement and capitalism.

Thailand's active engagement in World War I was encouraged and sanctioned by the Prince as a virtuous act, conforming to the teaching of the Buddha. This justification of war was later reinforced by King Rama VI when he declared that waging defensive war was not against Buddhist morality. Under his reign, Buddhism was used to energetically promote and support nationalism.

The highest goal of Buddhism is to attain spiritual liberation and be free from suffering. However, since the age of Prince Wachirayan, this liberating aspect of Buddhism has been increasingly overlooked. Buddhism has been reduced to a code of morality, concerned with only good and bad.¹⁰ Such moral Buddhism was popularized further through the modern curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education to every school throughout the country.¹¹ Moreover, such morality is merely memorized but not practiced, and therefore is not internalized.

It is apparent that in the past hundred years, Buddhism has been transformed to fit with modernity. Ironically, while superstition was supposedly removed from Buddhism in the process of purification, Western rationality, scientism, and nationalism replaced it, resulting in the removal of transcendental and ultimate aspects. In other words, traditional superstition was replaced by modern, foreign superstition.

It is also ironic that despite its emphasis on morality, the official Buddhism has failed to strengthen the actual morality of Thai

¹⁰ Chuangsakun, Srisuporn. *Kwam Plian Plan kong Kana Song: Suksa Karanee Thammayutika Nikaya* [The Change in the Sangha: Case Study of Thammayutika Sect]. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1986).

¹¹ Sathaanan Puttatham, Suwanna. In *Rat Thai* [Buddhism in the Thai State]. (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Institute, 1986).

society. While morality has been propagated continuously in the schools and media for many decades, and while large numbers of people go to make merit in the temples, moral degradation is still a grave problem for Thailand today. One explanation is that this kind of Buddhism lacks “the sacred.”

“The sacred” (*saksit*) here refers to that which is beyond the five physical senses, and is inaccessible and unexplainable by mere rationality, but which, nonetheless, can be attained or realized by the mind. It has a quality or power that those who access it can receive and benefit from. It is a refuge or security for those who believe. Its dynamism is beyond social codes and is incomprehensible to the untrained mind. The ways to realize it are diverse, just as there are many ways of conceiving of it.¹²

There were many forms of the sacred in traditional Buddhism, for example, deities, miracles, revered objects, and natural sites. Belief in heaven and hell played an important role in strengthening people’s sense of morality. Some of the ancient laws, for example, the opium prohibition law of King Rama II, evoked the fear of hell to dissuade people from opium consumption. Once Buddhism was reformed to be more scientific, there were no tangible sacred things to take the place of deities, heaven, spirits, and the like. Even the Buddha was demystified to be made more human.

¹² The Thai word *saksit* is derived by combining *sakdi* (status) and *siddhi* (power), both of which are more Hindu in meaning and origin than Buddhist. The definition of “the sacred” given here is purposefully as broad as possible and attempts to span the entire spectrum of what people take to be sacred, some of which are discussed below. This definition also includes *nibbana* as understood in the Pali Suttas. At this point, we need not distinguish clearly between the truly sacred and its sublimations and perversions (as understood by Buddhism).

Nibbana or the ultimate is, in fact, another form of the sacred, the unconditioned aspect (*sankhata*). Yet it, too, was removed from official Buddhism. The moral code of official Buddhism has been rationalized as well. People are expected to practice morality through the sheer force of intellect and rationalization, but intellect alone is not effective enough to develop a moral life. Morality has to be deepened to the spiritual level. Faith or fear of the sacred's power, experience of inner peace, and connection with the ultimate through meditation, are all necessary spiritual conditions for maintaining one's morality. With the absence of the sacred, the moral code of official Buddhism no longer had any spiritual support or meaning.

Another consequence of the removal of the sacred is the spread of "malign" superstition. For their own security, ordinary people need the sacred. Once the sacred cannot be found in official Buddhism, they are tempted to look for it outside Buddhism, that is, in superstition. Usually, these superstitions were once a part of traditional Buddhism. Buddhist reform, rather than get rid of superstition, merely expelled it from the temples. Once outside the temple, there were beyond the control of Buddhism and thus became amoral. This degraded form of superstition, aiming to gratify any desire, does not require any morality on the part of the client. This lack of moral obligation is the main factor that differentiates malign superstition from the superstition that was part of traditional Buddhism.

Despite its anti-superstition inclination, official Buddhism has contributed to the wide dissemination of the very superstition it sought to suppress. The more it tries to expel superstition from the temples, the more superstition spreads to them. This is another irony of official Buddhism. Moreover, the superstition that is now

spreading to the temples is simultaneously gaining control over Buddhism, and not vice versa as before.

This kind of superstition fits well with the new influence - consumerism. On one hand, consumerism stimulates sensual and material desire, motivating people to seek superstition as a quick and easy way to get what they want. On the other hand, consumerism has commodified superstition, making it easily accessible and diversified, as well as marketing it with modern methods and technology. In short, consumerism increases both the demand for and the supply of superstition.

With this kind of superstition, people just wait for worldly achievement to arrive. Success is expected to come easily, through purchased amulets, without making any effort or practicing Dhamma, such as, diligence, honesty, and self-contentment. Morality is therefore regarded as unnecessary for daily life.

The wide spread of superstition throughout the country, even in the temples, is the sign of official Buddhism's failure in its attempt to remove superstition. It also indicates the influence of consumerism on current Buddhism. Both phenomena reveal the weakness of Buddhism that can be traced to the reform of King Mongkut and Prince Wachirayan.

Structural Problems

The situation discussed above is the consequence of the new orthodoxy that, however, is only one aspect of the reform. Equally important is the structural aspect of Sangha reorganization begun in the time of Prince Wachirayan and continuing until now. Under the new centralized structure, monks of all localities in the country came under the power of the hierarchy, thus making them less re-

sponsive to their own communities. Moreover, allowing the state to exert influence in many important aspects of the Sangha, this new structure virtually transformed the Sangha into an extension of the state. Monks are therefore more inclined toward the state than the people.

The reason that the Sangha stays close to the state is mainly because the Sangha's leadership believes that its unity, cohesion, and orderliness depend upon the state's support. But the price of having state protection is the loss of autonomy. Further, many religious affairs that were once in the control of the local communities, for example, the bestowing of ecclesiastical rank and the establishment of temples, have been monopolized by the state almost completely.

In fact, there are other factors that contribute to the widening gap between the monks and the people. Some of them are the institutionalization of such social services as education and medicine, which were once provided by the monks, the decline of ecclesiastical education, and the lack of motivation in providing education for monks. Compounded by the centralized and bureaucratized structure, these factors contribute to the reduction of the Sangha's role in promoting morality in Thai society. It also obstructs any attempt to reform the Sangha or improve its social role in response to the changing world. With this structure, merely maintaining the moral standards of the monks is almost impossible as shown by the Sangha's failure to cope with all the recent scandals.

New Reform Movements

Throughout the past hundred years, Thai Buddhism has never

lacked attempts to reform itself. After Prince Wachirayan's reform, the attempt by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu is the most prominent. In fact, the former had a lot of influence on the latter, especially in terms of the scientific and rational approach to Buddhism, and the anti-superstition inclination. However, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was able to go beyond Prince Wachirayan; he recognized the supreme value of the ultimate. He did more than anyone else in the recent history of Buddhism in bringing the ultimate goal back to its central place in Buddhism. Moreover, he tried to make it more accessible to ordinary people. His teaching aimed to integrate the ultimate into ordinary life, making transcendence and worldly life inseparable. In other words, *nibbana* has been reintroduced as the sacred for the committed Buddhist, in place of superstition or miracles. Furthermore, his idea of "*nibbana* here and now" brings the sacred closer to us in every moment of daily life, without needing to retreat to the forest as monks.

Though he also regarded Buddhism and science as identical, his understanding was different from Prince Wachirayan, more profound and less imitative. Instead of defining Buddhism to fit with Western science, Buddhadasa defined science to conform with Buddhism, that is, as involving not only physical aspects that can be experienced through the five senses, but also including mental processes that can be experienced with the mind, the sixth sense. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's "Scientific Buddhism" is, therefore, the science of timeless ultimate truth with meditation as an integral "technology."

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's ideas find an echo in Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto's teachings, which present Buddhism in its totality with its highest goal found in spiritual liberation through the realization of ultimate truth. The ultimate is not some remote ideal for

the unworldly life; instead, it is relevant and necessary for people of this world, both monks and laity. While Buddhadasa Bhikkhu encouraged his followers to live with “void-free mind,” Bhikkhu Payutto stressed that noble ones who attain at least the first level of enlightenment are needed by the present world. *His Constitution for Living*, however comparable to Prince Wachirayan’s *Nawagowat* in popularity and content, concludes with the chapter entitled “Attainer of Dhamma: A Liberated One,” making it strikingly different from Prince Wachirayan’s orthodoxy.

It should be noted that science has a significant influence for both Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Payutto. (Both enjoyed studying and experimenting with machines and new technologies when they were young.) Like Buddhadasa, Bhikkhu Payutto elevates Thai Buddhism beyond the worldly realm of Western science. He recognizes the limits of science. Thus, it should be complemented by Buddhism in order to have a better and deeper understanding of the truth, and to use it in a constructive way. However, one cannot help being impressed how the scientific approach contributes a great deal to his thought and writings. Like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, his emphasis on the human being’s potential to realize the ultimate truth through his own wisdom and effort is likely influenced by the humanism on which Western science is based. This does not mean that humanism is alien to Buddhism or that it belongs only to Western science. Rather, it is highly probable that the humanist influence of science contributed greatly to their perception and recognition of humanism in the Buddha’s teaching, leading to their emphasis on and explanation of the supreme potential of the human being. Without humanist ideas, it is difficult to notice and present the humanist approach to Buddhism as they did. This is the reason why traditional Bud-

dhism seldom explained human potential in such a way. *Nibbana* was understood traditionally as a remote idea that could be attained only through merit accumulation over countless lives. Hence, no serious effort is made to realize *nibbana* in this life.

Despite their popularity among the middle class, and especially the well-educated, the teaching of both monks has not been well received among the Sangha leadership. Their thought and writings have influenced only low ranking monks or those on the periphery, for example, “the Suan Mokkh movement.” Until now, Sangha education institutions, including the Sangha universities, still adhere to Prince Wachirayan’s orthodoxy. Curriculum and texts developed and written by Prince Wachirayan eighty years ago remain in use in both the Pali and Nak Tham systems, whereas none of the books by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Payutto are studied as texts in the Sangha’s ecclesiastical education system.

No contemporary monk in Thailand has put forth greater effort to reform the Sangha education system than Bhikkhu Payutto. He was the first monk to warn the Sangha and government about the value of higher education for monks. Despite some success after thirty years of effort, only secular education for monks receives support and improvement, while monastic and Dhamma education is still quite stuck in the past, both in terms of curriculum and administration. The failure of “reform from within” initiated by him reflects the strong resistance so deeply rooted in the Sangha structure. This has resulted in the sharp decline of the ecclesiastical education system. Inevitably, monks increasingly have lost their position of leadership in Thai society. Instead of leading the laity to live with wisdom and higher morality, they follow the laity along fashionable trends. Nowadays, is there any trend more powerful than consumerism?

Under the Dominion of Consumerism

Consumerism is the latest ideology having a strong influence on Buddhism, after Western science and nationalism had already shaped it for almost a century. While science and nationalism had their impact on Buddhism systemically through its redefinition by the elite, consumerism has shaped Thai Buddhism not through the conscious effort of any individual but because of its own internal weakness.

With the influence of consumerism, the Buddhist community is converted into a marketplace where not only amulets but also merit and ceremonies are sold as commodities. During the past few decades, Thai Buddhist teachings, beliefs, and practices have been transformed dramatically, taking on many of the characteristics of consumerism, as follows:

- Materialism: Wealth, not happiness, is preached and expected as the goal of religious practice.
- Stimulation of desire: consumption of all sorts are encouraged, including consumption of religious experience, for example, visiting heaven and catching “a glimpse of *nibbana*.”
- Money-orientation: money, not effort, is the most important factor for religious achievement. Once merit is commodified, it can be accumulated with the aid of money. Even religious experience and tranquility are expected from offering money as merit making.
- Instant results: religious services and practices are expected to give instant results. Superstition becomes attractive since it promises to give quick and easy results.

- Individualism: Religious practice aims to satisfy individual desires, without any concern for the consequences that befall others.

The proliferation of consumerism has contributed a great deal to the rise of superstition since both complement each other in many aspects. Consumerism stimulates desire and the maximization of profit while superstition offers a “short cut” to worldly achievement. Consumerism commodifies as many things as it can, while superstition sells many commodities, such as amulets, talismans, rituals, and “*nibbana* certificates.”

Once consumerism spread into the temples, superstition followed it. Temples, however, not only consume superstition, they also reproduce it. As previously mentioned, temples, once propagators of official Buddhism which is anti-superstition, are now increasingly dominated by superstition. This failure in getting rid of superstition is partly because it lacks the sacred in which people can confide. It leaves no room for a mystical Buddha, deities, heaven, miracles, and so on. Even the ultimate *nibbana* is pretty much ignored, if not perverted. Despite efforts by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Payutto to revive the significance of *nibbana*, they have not been accepted much by the Sangha hierarchy and education institutions. Not surprisingly, official Buddhism’s influence increasingly declines even among the monks.

Those who turn their backs on official Buddhism, however, do not necessarily turn their ears to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Payutto. Despite the sacredness of the ultimate, which both teachers try to bring closer to the life of ordinary people, only the few can connect with it, since such connection is possible only through meditation. For most people, who are not much

interested in meditation, the sacred that they can connect with is not the one that is experienced directly with their own minds but the one that is based in faith and is embodied in physical objects that can be perceived with the five senses, for example, Guan Yin (Kannon), Luang Por Toe appearing through a medium, or the Buddha's mystical power embedded in an amulet. Temples that offer access to this materialist aspect of the sacred can attract large numbers of people. The more they can adapt to consumerism, the more successful they are likely to be. No example is more prominent than Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

A clean and orderly atmosphere is the first impression most visitors have about Wat Phra Dhammakaya, but it is the sacred that binds the large number of followers to this temple with tenacious faith. Besides its reputedly powerful miracles, its sacred is immanent and touchable. Its sacred is characterized by the Buddha's "dhamma body" (*dhammakaya*) and *nibbana*. Its *nibbana* and the Buddha's *dhammakaya* are not only a permanent self (*atta*) but also perceivable like matter (having physical qualities like cold and soft). Moreover, ordinary people (that have not advanced in meditation) can have contact with the Buddha's *dhammakaya*, through their "rice offering to Dhammakaya in *nibbana*" ceremony.

The sacred alone is not the only reason for Dhammakaya's rapid expansion. Its success in drawing people (arguably almost a million followers) is also due to its adaptation to consumerism. *Dhammakaya* not only promises worldly achievement to its followers, but also uses marketing techniques to create a demand for merit through "direct sale." Merit is commodified and diversified in different forms for followers to have more choice. Competition is encouraged between volunteers who solicit donations and

rewards are given to those who can achieve the highest amount of donations. These techniques are derived from the idea of its leader that, “Buddhism is an excellent commodity that gets bad sales because of the lack of good marketing strategies.”

A “mega-church” like Wat Phra Dhammakaya is only one aspect of consumerized Buddhism. Another aspect is the many small temples with widely diverse practices and beliefs. There are many temples that mix up various symbols, ceremonies, and deities, for example, mixing the Buddha, Guan Yin, and Shiva together in the same temple. This can be explained by the increasing social differentiation in Thai society, creating diverse beliefs and demands for different religious experiences. Such religious behavior is better characterized as religious “consumption” than religious “practice,” since it is driven not by strong faith in a particular practice but by desire for self-gratification, or even desire for a “taste” of religious experience for a while.

What lessons can we learn from the cases of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, the religious cocktail, and the rise of superstition?

1. Uniform or standardized Buddhism is a thing of the past. Thai Buddhism is returning to diversity again, perhaps to a greater degree than before the Prince Wachirayan reform.
2. In the past, uniform Buddhism was possible because of state and central Sangha control. The trend in the above is a sign that Buddhism is becoming independent of the state and the Sangha hierarchy, returning again to the hands of the people.
3. Consumerism is gaining influence in shaping Thai Buddhism, partly through the “consumption” and selection of ordinary people.

4. The beliefs and behavior of Thai people are deviating increasingly from Buddhist teaching and are rather more about self-gratification than reducing selfishness.

Toward the Reform Needed Today

A Buddhism that is under the dominion of consumerism is not conducive to the good life and a peaceful society. Instead, it chains our lives to suffering and enslaves us to material things, not to mention increasing social conflicts. Even the worldly achievements that it promises are hardly realized since it does not encourage effort, self-reliance, or cooperation. The current economic crisis in Thailand is the most recent example of how its promise has failed.

The consumerist domination is only one aspect of the problems that face Thai Buddhism today. Liberation from consumerism is therefore only part of the solution, although a vital and necessary one. The revival of Buddhism needs a comprehensive reform that copes with other factors as well. In short, there are three main factors on the part of Buddhism that have had a great impact on the beliefs and practices of Thai Buddhists, and on the quality and role of the monks during the past century, resulting in the decline of morality in Thai society. These factors are:

1. Teachings that became official orthodoxy
2. Sangha structure and its relationship to state and society
3. Buddhist education

Real reform of Thai Buddhism is possible only when these factors are addressed effectively.

Beyond Science

As earlier mentioned, rationalized and scientific Buddhism, though welcomed by the educated and middle classes, has reduced Buddhism to superficial teachings, void of spiritual depth. The situation was made worse by a nationalism that became a religion in its own right. Such secularized Buddhism lacks the vitality needed to resist materialism, and thus is easily corrupted by the consumer capitalism that goes hand in hand with demoralized superstition.

Science and rationalism are not the aspects that should be rejected. They become problematic, however, when they are allowed to define Buddhism, resulting in the rejection of teachings that do not fit with materialist science or that transcend rationality. It should be noted that science and rationalism can lead us to some levels of truth, but not all. The ultimate is a level of truth inaccessible to them and thus becomes one of their casualties.

No matter what attitude science has toward the ultimate, the key point for Thai Buddhists is to bring the ultimate back into Buddhism. Nibbana, or liberation of mind, should be integrated into daily life through the effort of ordinary people. This is the true sacred that should not be absent from Buddhism, wherever it is taught, even in schools for children.

At the same time, other forms of the sacred should be allowed a role in Buddhism. Deities, miracles, amulets, and others from the realm of superstition, if used skillfully, can be instrumental in leading people to higher levels of Dhamma. The point is that they should be guided by Buddhism, and not the other way around.

Nothing can provide a more solid basis for one's morality than the ultimate truth. Once the mind is liberated from defilement and delusion, real happiness and peace is realized, with no ill-will

or desire to harm anyone remaining. Though ordinary people may not attain the ultimate fully, a momentary experience of it is possible and will have a tremendous impact on their lives and their relationships.

For those that cannot experience the ultimate, lower levels of the sacred, when approached with a proper attitude, can restrain one from doing evil or harming others. Ordinary people that lack sufficient training always need such sacred beliefs to a certain extent. According to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, unless one is an *arahat*, the Buddhism that one practices is never a pure one. A certain degree of superstition will continue to creep into one's practice. Hence, he concluded "Buddhism still needs superstition."¹³

Restoring the Social Dimension of Buddhism

Thai Buddhism is increasingly individualized; everyone practices and adapts it arbitrarily for her or his own benefit with less and less intervention from the state, Sangha hierarchy, or even one's own family and community, as was previously the norm. With such an attitude, Buddhism is easily used to gratify oneself or to meet one's personal desire, without concern for others, not to mention nature and the spiritual dimension.

It is highly likely that Buddhism will continue to be reduced to a personal level of teaching. In fact, this is no new trend. In the past, the benefits of the five precepts, for example, were always explained only on the personal level, that is, contributing to a peaceful, happy individual life, while the benefits to society were

¹³ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. *Putthasatkap Sayasat* [Buddhism and Superstition]. publisher and date not given.

rarely mentioned. Though there are many teachings on one's obligation to society (such as *aparihaniya-dhamma*, the dhammas never leading to deterioration only to progress), they were less emphasized than teachings on person-to-person practice (like the teaching of the six directions).¹⁴ Even teachings about the four sublime states of mind (*brahmavihara*)—the interpersonal attitudes of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—received more attention than the principles or Dhamma on which equanimity is based.

According to Buddhism, since one has obligations to oneself, others, society, and Dhamma, there are teachings for all four categories. However, only the first two categories are stressed. Nowadays, we do not live in villages anymore, but in a broader more complex society. In such a society, there are not only personal and interpersonal relationships. There are also social relationships, relationship with society as a whole, which is increasingly global. Peace and harmony in society and personal happiness do not depend only on proper behavior among individuals, but equally depend on how we relate to our own society, for example, how we abide by the law, take care of public properties, and respect the social heritage and traditions. Buddhist teaching on our duty to the public world or society, therefore, should be emphasized and applied appropriately to the modern world in no less degree than teachings on personal relationship. More on this point will be discussed later.

¹⁴ The six directions represent duties toward parents, spouse and children, teachers, friends, servants and employees, and spiritual guides.

Restructuring the Sangha

The Thai Sangha is now facing three main organizational problems:

1. the centralized and inefficient structure
2. the close relationship with the state
3. distance from society

The complexity and diversity of the present society demands a dynamic Sangha if Buddhism is to play a significant role in contributing to the good life. To be more dynamic, the Sangha has to be decentralized and more open for initiatives from monks on every level.

Instead of its current top-down orientation, the administration by the Council of Elders should be more responsive and accountable to monks throughout the country. Their participation should be encouraged in the process of developing important plans or schemes, for instance, Sangha education policy. Nowadays, most of such plans are developed by bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education with only token participation allowed from ordinary monks.

Apart from more participation in shaping various plans and schemes, administrative responsibility should be decentralized to all levels. This will enable local monks to be more responsive to their particular situations and develop closer relationships with the people.

Administration on the regional and lower levels can be improved if an administrative body is created to assist the head monk (*chao khana*) on each of these levels. Members of such administrative bodies, of course, should not be appointed (the

current practice) but come from direct election by all monks in the respective constituencies.

Relationship with the State

A balanced relationship between the Sangha, rulers, and the people has always been essential for Theravada Buddhism's health. Nowadays, the Sangha, however, leans closer to the state, so much so that the former became an extension, or even a tool, of the latter. Such a relationship contributes to the rigidity of the Sangha, since it is in effect a powerless bureaucracy under the control of a corrupt one, and creates nothing but inertia towards constructive change.

The Sangha consistently loses more than it gains from this relationship. Unlike individual rulers in the past, modern states have no heart to care for enlightenment or the Dhamma. The state's domination of the Sangha (or Church) is never for the sake of Sangha or religion, but only for the state itself. Obviously, the Sangha should keep its proper distance from the state and decrease dependence on it.

For that to be possible, the Sangha should not depend on the state for its budget. It should seek more financial support from civil society for its activities. Besides donations from individuals, financial support from civic bodies is a necessary alternative to state support.

Secondly, the Sangha should have more autonomy in its own administration, without relying upon the Department of Religious Affairs (Ministry of Education), which acts as the secretariat for the Council of Elders. Monks now have sufficient potential for self-government, which is enshrined in the new constitution.

Sangha self-determination should be supported by decentralization of responsibilities to lower levels, as mentioned earlier.

Thirdly, the Sangha should depend less on state sanction and approval of its religious affairs. State involvement in the establishment of temples or the appointment of high-ranking monks, for example, should be minimized. Title promotions, if worth preserving, should involve representatives of people from all walks of life rather than give a dominant role to the state.

Sangha Relationship to Society

In the past, temples were both supported and checked by their surrounding communities. The widening gap between the temples and their communities contributed to misbehavior of monks on one hand, and to the unresponsiveness of monks to the plight of surrounding communities on the other hand.

A closer relationship between the Sangha and society can be developed by more involvement of civil society in religious and Sangha affairs. A lot of support that the Sangha now receives from the state can be offered by civil society instead. In the foreseeable future, the budget for Sangha education and administration, for example, can be provided by “provincial councils”. These civil bodies are being nurtured on the provincial level throughout Thailand to represent all groups in each province, as part of the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan. Such bodies should reclaim the responsibilities that are now monopolized by the state, and return them to civil society, that is, the people. These responsibilities, of course, should include promotion of religious affairs, which so far has been in the hands of the Department of Religious Affairs.

Besides the provincial level, civic bodies should be created on more local levels in order to work with and give support to the Sangha on corresponding levels. Such coordination will forge closer relationship between the Sangha and civil society on all levels. More support and checks from society is essential for the improvement of the quality of the monkhood.

Sangha Education and Role of Women

Restoration of the complete Buddhist teachings and the reorganization of the Sangha must be supported by reform of Sangha education, as it is now in serious decline. Ecclesiastical education is outdated, that is, unable to provide an appropriate understanding of the Dhamma, while secular education for monks is either insufficient, of poor quality, or too “worldly” (offering no basis for understanding the world from Buddhist or spiritual perspectives). The current Sangha education system needs reform in a comprehensive way, including curriculum, learning methods, texts, facilities, teacher training, and management. Under the existing Sangha structure, true Sangha education reform is almost impossible because it requires a great deal of energy and initiative, which can hardly be expected from the twenty septuagenarians in the Council of Elders in whom all Sangha power is centralized.

As a part of Sangha reform, the role of other Buddhists outside the Sangha should be a matter of serious concern, especially the role of women. So far, less opportunity is given to women than men as far as Dhamma training and dissemination is concerned. The stark difference between monks and nuns is one clear example. The potential of women to study, practice, realize, and teach Dhamma, clearly, is not inferior to that of men. If the

former receive energetic support from society, they will make an invaluable contribution to the Buddhist community and society as a whole, much greater than before. Bhikkhuni ordination is one option for women that should be taken into consideration by Thai society. However, other options should be developed, too. Creation of new forms for female monks and the promotion of the status of nuns (*maechi*) in order to win the respect they deserve from society, no less than monks receive, should be developed concurrently, regardless of the outcome of the long drawn out bhikkhuni controversy.

Time for New Social Role

All the reforms mentioned above can be called internal reform or “reform for one’s own welfare.” According to the Buddha, there are three kinds of welfare or benefit: one’s own welfare (*attattha*), the welfare of others (*parattha*), and the benefit of both (*ubhayattha*). The third shows that the preceding two go hand in hand and cannot be separated. Consequently, reform for one’s own benefit is just half of the reform that is needed, and on its own will not get us very far. The other half is reform for the welfare of others, that is, of society as a whole.

The predominant social function of Buddhism nowadays is in ritual services, while its moral and spiritual influence has been drastically reduced. The only sign that Thai society still adheres to Buddhism is the Thai peoples’ relationships to temples and monks, as expressed through giving alms food, merit making, and, recently, attending retreats. However, if we consider the relationships among people throughout society itself, we see that the influence of Buddhism is actually much weaker than in the past. Selfishness,

lack of generosity, and worse, exploitation, crime, corruption, and misuse of public properties are increasingly prominent in Thai society today.

There are two kinds of social relationships: vertical and horizontal. A Buddhist influence is more prominent in the former, as reflected in the relationship between laity and monks, children and parents, and even people's relationship to the sacred like the Buddha, Buddha relics, and merit. But horizontal relationships, beyond the narrow circles of relatives and friends, is more influenced by consumerism and materialism, than by Buddhism.

Buddhism's influence on vertical relationships, however beneficial it may be to individuals and society, is not enough. Buddhism must expand its role and influence to horizontal relationships, in order to increase generosity among people, to overcome violence and crime, and to work for more peace in society. Such a role cannot be achieved merely through preaching, as before, but needs to be radically rethought and dramatically adapted.

Outline for Strengthening Morality in Thai Society

Thai society badly needs binding moral forces that encourage and help people to live together with goodwill, harmony, generosity, and cooperation, and which will make society more desirable and livable. It is important to note that such forces, while weak in Thai society as a whole, actually still exist in small, intimate circles of family, kinship, and friends. In these circles, everybody treats each other with honesty, sincerity, and love. Impolite or selfish behavior—however obvious they are in the streets, cinemas, public places, and even temples—are rarely found in these small circles. In other words, Thai people do not lack morality; it's just

that they apply it only to their immediate acquaintances. The question is how morality can be expanded to other people and to the rest of society.

For Thai society to have a stronger moral basis, Buddhism can play the following roles:

1. Extending the Context of Morality

Why do Thais act morally only with their acquaintances? Mainly because the morality taught in the temples and schools not only stresses the interpersonal level as earlier mentioned, but is likely to be confined to one's immediate acquaintances. For example, there are the "six directions," a frequently heard teaching in Thailand, which stipulate mutual responsibility in six kinds of relationship: the relationship between children and parents, wife and husband, student and teacher, worker and boss, lay people and monks, and friend and friend. (Note that five of these six pairs or relationships are, traditionally, vertical ones.)

Such a teaching is well suited to the village community where everybody knows each other. Modern society, however, is more complicated. In daily life, one does not relate with only one's acquaintances, but also with people outside one's small circles. Until now, traditional Buddhist teaching has given less importance to this latter kind of relationship. Buddhist moral teaching should, therefore, be redefined to include broader relationships. If the six directions teaching is to be improved, for example, at least one pair of relationships essential to the modern world, should be added: seller and buyer.

Modern people relate to each other not just through interpersonal relationships, but also through institutions, organizations, and systems that are impersonal in nature. Thai society requires moral guidelines for these impersonal relationships as well. Buddhism should develop this kind of morality; otherwise, its influence in Thai society will be limited.

2. Developing Social Consciousness

Social consciousness here means concern for society and commitment to its welfare. There are many Buddhist teachings supporting this attitude, that is, teachings on the welfare of both oneself and all others. However, “others” has traditionally been defined as persons and not as society as a whole. Though there are many teachings on obligations to the community, community is usually understood as small units like intimate familiars and villages, and seldom as the broader unit of society. Partly because Thais are most familiar with relationships on only the personal level, community to them is always confined to that which is personalized or consists of persons with whom they have direct relationships. Such familiar, tangible community is different from society, which is more abstract, consists of unknown people, and involves impersonal relationships, those that result from organizations or systems.

Teachings on responsibility to community, not only need more emphasis, but also need to be defined in broader terms so as to include all of society. Suitable teachings for this purpose include the seven conditions of welfare (*apar-ihaniya-dhamma*), meritorious action through rendering services (*veyyavaccamaya*), and willingness to give a

helping hand to the community (kinkaraniyesudakkhata). Here, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's idea of Dhammic Socialism is most relevant: its ethical system emphasizes obligation to the society and the good of the whole, not just personal benefit or that of other individuals.

3. Expanding Social Relationships

A moral attitude or moral understanding is but one factor in moral behavior. Another equally important factor is social relationship. Thai people apply morality in a narrow way because their social circles are small; their social interaction is usually limited to the people with whom they already have personal relationships. It's rare that people of different backgrounds, professions, and localities, and who have no previous personal relationship, will come together or work together. Social interactions based on common objectives or ideas is much less frequent than those based on existing personal bonds. Unsurprisingly, cooperation on a wider scale, either for mutual benefit or public good, is rare.

Relationships confined to one's own small circles are conducive to a narrow mind, whereas expansive (horizontal) relationships contribute to a "civic mind." Expansive engagement helps broaden one's realm of concern: from self concern to concern for others; from concern for family to concern for community and society (and the world); from concern for people to concern for all of nature. With this attitude, one's own welfare and the public welfare are considered identical since one has developed a strong sense that one is part of society and society is part of oneself.

It's essential that Buddhist monks and laity support self-help groups of various kinds, from Dhamma study groups, to co-operatives, to organizations for environmental conservation and community development. Monks can play an important role in enlarging horizontal relationships among people, through creating and nurturing networks among these groups. In addition to helping broaden their attitudes and concerns, expansive social relationships will develop people's confidence to carry out public activities on a wider scale. As mentioned, there are many Buddhist teachings that can be applied to this work.

4. Building Trust

Trust building is one significant benefit of collective action and enlarging horizontal relationships. Making acquaintances and working together are direct sources of trust. Trust is also strengthened by the norm of reciprocity developed through regular cooperation and networks of relationships. Once a norm of reciprocity is established, defectors and "free riders" are easily sanctioned by the public. Social sanction of defectors develops trust and confidence among people to cooperate with each other. Not just the result of cooperation, trust also encourages cooperation, either for mutual benefit or public good. Cooperation is impossible if people do not trust each other or suspect that opportunists will exploit their efforts. Trust is, therefore, an important form of social capital.

The presence or absence of trust is not purely a matter of attitude. It also depends on social conditions. In a society where a norm of reciprocity is established and social sanctions are effective against the defectors and opportunists,

the level of trust is high. Hence, it is not enough to preach to people to trust each other. Appropriate social conditions have to be developed as well. Expanding horizontal relationships, through developing networks of civic engagement, is a vital condition for trust. This can best be done from practical grassroots activities in which people work together for mutual benefits agreed upon by all. The tight and wide network contributes not only to active and intensive engagement among people but is also essential for effective sanctions toward the cheater. In a society where horizontal relationships among people are narrow and civic engagement is low, trust is weak and so is cooperation for society's welfare.¹⁵

The above helps explain why the attitude of "everyone for oneself" is so prevalent in Thailand today. Trust is low. So is society's capacity to impose a high cost on the defectors and cheaters since they have weak ties and low engagement with society. Corrupt politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, other elites, including some monks, increase the problem by capitalizing on this weakness. Thus, a network of engagement and expansive horizontal relationships is needed for Thai society. It will increase the capacity of society to punish the defectors and thus foster trust among its members. With a high level of trust, people have more incentive to cooperate with others, beyond their small circles of personal acquaintances.

¹⁵ See the relationship among trust, cooperation, and networks of civic engagement in Putnam, Robert D. *Making Democracy Work*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Again, for Buddhism to be an effective moral force in Thai society, it needs to do more than just preach about morality. It also needs to help create the social conditions required to sustain and support the morality it preaches. This can be achieved through broadening horizontal relationships, that is, supporting self-help groups, community cooperation, and creating networks among diverse communities. For a start, the monks must learn to develop such networks among themselves on local and more distant levels, and then expand the networks to include villagers, NGOs, progressive business people, and others.

Free Society from Consumerism

The promotion of morality as mentioned above emphasizes cooperation and concern for the welfare of others. In Buddhist teachings, this is mainly categorized under *sila*. To be firm, *sila* must be based on *samadhi* (a strong, well-trained, integrated mind) and *panna* (wisdom). Morality promotion has to give importance to the world view and mental qualities of people to be successful.

Buddhism can play a significant role in both areas. Thai society also needs this contribution from Buddhism, since Thais are now overwhelmed by consumerism, which is becoming a kind of religion, one devoid of wisdom and peace of mind. Suffering and conflict in relationships are increasingly intensified on every level because of the selfish consumerist world view and values.

Thai society needs a Buddhist perspective to replace consumerism. For decades, the former has been subjugated by the latter. It now should be revived and presented in a way relevant to the modern world. There is now increasing interest in dynamism, for example, the dynamic and holistic nature of Buddhist perspec-

tives. Its spiritual perspectives are also needed to balance the extreme materialism prevailing today.

Buddhist values such as non-violence, self-contentment, and freedom of mind are no less important. These perspectives and their value system should be developed as a world view for society. They should be integrated as a goal for life and direction for society, constituting a basis for collective vision and strategy. Concretely speaking, instead of aiming for the unlimited growth of wealth and consumption, society should take meaningful happiness and a higher quality of life as its goal.

For this to be possible, a body of knowledge based on Buddhist perspectives and the corresponding value system has to be developed to offer an alternative explanation of reality and to provide practical solutions to existing problems. Fortunately, due to its emphasis on natural law and experience, Buddhism can draw on the more useful contributions of science in this endeavor. Yet, without creating its own body of knowledge, an idea cannot develop into an effective societal world view. Buddhism must be true to itself.

Replacing consumerist ideology with a Buddhist world view is essential for freeing society from consumerism and its source - capitalism. It would simultaneously strengthen Buddhism. Buddhist weaknesses, either on the level of orthodoxy or institutions, are, to a large degree, the result of the consumerist invasion. If Buddhism cannot liberate itself from consumerism, it has no future. The best way to do this is to help Thai society be free from consumerism, too.

Dual Mission

An individual's welfare and the welfare of others are intimately

related. Helping Thai society to be free from the grip of consumerism is the best way to help Buddhism itself. Similarly, strengthening Thai society will strengthen Buddhism too. This means that reforming Buddhism, as already mentioned, must go hand in hand with reforming society. The latter is vital for the welfare of Buddhism, because the reorganization of the Sangha is almost impossible without support and pressure from society at large. If Thai society remains weak, lacks proper understanding of Buddhism, and has no concern for public affairs, we cannot expect society's support in the reform of Buddhism.

Buddhist reform cannot be separated from social reform; they are "dual missions" that concerned people must carry out together. The civil society movement, a recent attempt to create a stronger society, must give priority to the reform of Buddhism since Buddhism has such great potential to help liberate civil society from the domination of state and capital. Reforming Buddhism is the only way to liberate its potential to support civil society.

This article began with the question of how Buddhism can be a strong moral force for Thai society. Buddhism, in decline for decades, has lost that status. Restoring the wholeness of the teaching and reorganizing the Sangha is the first stage in reviving Buddhism. It needs to reform its role in society, too. In the end, its new role in helping to elevate society will in turn help elevate itself out of its decline and thus become more viable.

This double mission challenging Thai Buddhism will be a decisive factor in determining the status and fate of Thai Buddhism in the next century.

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Goodness and Generosity Perverted:

The Karma of Capitalist Buddhism in Thailand

Introduction

The custom of making merit (*punna*)—lay people providing monastics and temples with material requisites—constitutes the core of popular Buddhist worship and practice in Theravada Buddhism. The *dana* (generosity) embodied in providing these requisites is the key concept in this practice, which is one of the three main methods of making merit. *Dana*, however, has broader meanings and applications. For example, as one of the Ten Perfections (*parami*), it is the simplest yet also the highest practice of perfection for the bodhisattva, and is thus equally suitable to lay and monastic alike. When we understand *dana* in this broader and deeper way, it transforms from a ritual act of merit making into an ethical act of doing “good,” the literal meaning of *punna*. If we want to understand sangha as authentic community life, rather

than in the more narrow terms of the male monastic Sangha, we need to see *dana* in such a way—as a reciprocal act of circulating “the gift,” being the glue that bonds lay and monastic, male and female, senior and junior, together.

Unfortunately, *dana* and *punna* have often not been understood in this way. In the period of high economic growth in certain Theravada Buddhist regions over the last thirty years, capitalism has exacerbated the ritualistic nature of *dana* and *punna*. Especially in Thailand, capitalism has intensified the shift from understanding *punna* as “goodness” to “merit” by commodifying it in terms of money. In this way, *dana* is no longer an act of service but the money to buy such services. The sense of reciprocity—of circulating “the gift”—is being lost, while materialism, individualism, and alienation increase. When wealth rather than character or service to others becomes the basis for being a good Buddhist, various forms of social injustice such as patriarchy and economic discrimination are legitimized. This essay examines these problems and also considers the potential for authentic *dana* and *punna*. It concludes by looking briefly at a movement developing in Thailand to restore merit making as the gift of service.

Dana: Teachings and Ideals

Let’s begin with a quick summary of traditional teachings on *dana*. Then we can better understand how the practice of giving has changed, as the understanding of *punna* has been perverted by capitalism. In early Buddhism, *dana* is explained in various ways. It is commonly described as the first of three bases of good, meritorious activity (*punnakiriyavatthu*) (D.iii.218; A.iv.239; Iti.51).

Along with *dana*, ethics and virtue (*sila*) and mental cultivation (*bhavana*) are generally considered the three basic practices for householders. They are not considered equivalent to the Noble Eightfold Path and lead at best to happy rebirths (A.iv.239). On the other hand, monastic practice is usually described in terms of the three trainings (*sikkha*), which place more emphasis on meditation and wisdom. These are equivalent to the Noble Eightfold Path and can lead to ultimate liberation. Thus, the *punnakiriya-vatthu* formulation puts more stress on pre-meditation aspects believed more accessible and suitable for householders.

Because mainstream Theravada considers Buddhist lay people incapable of awakening liberation since they lack the required monastic renunciation, they are taught to focus on accumulating *punna* for the sake of better rebirths, a practice that will eventually develop into the purity of monastic renunciation in some vague future. The effect is that *dana* is commonly seen as the main practice for householders, while study and meditation, as well as keeping a more refined ethical discipline, are the concerns of monastics. Traditionally, this has meant that householders are givers of *dana* and monastics are recipients. These cultural forms have guided Southeast Asian Buddhism for centuries and may have been effective within their conventional limits. Nonetheless, the *punnakiriya-vatthu* and three trainings overlap and are both suitable for sincere Buddhists, whether monastic or lay.

Another understanding of *dana* places it among the perfections (*parami*).¹ Both Theravada and Mahayana list *dana* first

¹ Generosity (*dana*), virtue (*sila*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), discernment (*panna*), energy/persistence (*viriya*), patience/forbearance (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhitthana*), good will (*metta*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).

among the “virtues for crossing over” the seas of egoistic becoming to reach the further shore of nirvana. A remarkable passage in Buddhaghosa’s *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, a Theravada classic, presages the Mahayana in its explanation of the parami:

For the Great Beings’ minds retain their balance by giving preference to beings’ welfare, by dislike of beings’ suffering, by desire for the various successes achieved by beings to last, and by impartiality towards all beings.² And to all beings they give gifts, which are a source of pleasure, without discriminating thus: “It must be given to this one; it must not be given to this one.” And to avoid doing harm to beings they undertake the precepts of virtue ... Through equanimity (*upekkha*) they expect no reward. Having thus fulfilled the Perfections, these [divine abodes] then perfect all the good states classed as the Ten Powers, the Four Kinds of Fearlessness, the Six Kinds of Knowledge Not Shared [by disciples], and the Eighteen States of the Awakened One. This is how they bring to perfection all the good states beginning with giving.³

² In other words, the Four Divine Abodes (*brahmavihara*) of loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).

³ Buddhaghosa. *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*. Trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: The Buddhist Publication Society, 1991). pp. 352–3; Vis.ix,124.

To free ourselves from suffering, and to live a life of compassion, we must give. What a beautifully simple and powerful perspective! We start by giving what comes relatively easy and gradually learn to hold nothing back, not even ourselves.

Jataka of Dana

The *Jataka* are Buddhist versions of standard folk tale material. Primarily ways to make moral points, they purport to tell of the Buddha's former lives as a bodhisattva—for example, as a hare who immolates himself in a starving Brahmin's fire to feed the ascetic and sustain him on his path. In another *Jataka* story, the Bodhisattva is a prince who offers his own blood so that a starving tigress may nurse her cubs. Giving occurs without calculation; recipient and donor are both elevated within the path of perfections. However, offering one's flesh and blood is not the ultimate charity, for that occurs under the bodhi tree when all clinging to "self" is released.

Ultimately, we perfect the virtue of generosity by giving all that we have, and then ourselves—all of ourselves—until nobody is left. The *Vessantara Jataka*, the final and most famous of all the birth stories, illustrates the unlimited giving of the bodhisattva. This tale has had an incalculable influence on the cultures of Southeast Asia; anyone seeking to understand these Buddhist cultures must know this story. It describes a life focused on giving until it hurts, with devas, parents, and all of nature supporting, even requiring, altruism. The drama of Vessantara's life illustrates the great emotional complexity and turmoil in giving away social position and responsibility, wealth, family, children, and finally his beautiful, loyal, and beloved wife Maddi. The dramatic ten-

sion becomes high as those dearest to him suffer as a result of his giving.

At the age of eight, Vessantara thought to himself:

All that I give comes from without, and this does not satisfy me; I wish to give something of my very own. If one should ask my heart, I would cut open my breast, and tear it out, and give it; if one ask my eyes, I would pluck out my eyes and give them; if one should ask my flesh, I would cut off all the flesh of my body and give it.⁴

As he matures into manhood, Prince Vessantara is given immense wealth many times over. Whatever he is given, Vessantara passes it on. Gods and kings collude in giving him even more—to give away! Finally, he is asked for and willingly bestows the auspicious white elephant that arrived with his birth. The people of Sivi cannot accept the loss of this sacred, rain-bringing, battle-invincible elephant to a rival polity. Though they can find no fault with Vessantara, they demand his banishment, and his father, the king, gives in to the mob's demands. So Vessantara begins to suffer for his generosity.

The price is an ascetic life for himself, his wife, and their children—and the real punishment for this big-hearted giver is seven months of nothing to give. Isolated in the forest, he finds himself unable to perfect himself further in the practice of giving. Our exiled ascetic hero's first big chance to give is to the evil Brahmin

⁴ *Jataka* (J.vi.486). Vol. VI. Trans. E. B. Cowell & W. H. D. Rouse. (London: Pali Text Society, 1981).

Jujaka, whose wife demands Vessantara's son and daughter as her slaves. Vessantara can only but give. The children's parting from their father and longing for their mother (away gathering food) is heartrending for all. Maddi arrives late to find the children gone and her husband in dumb silence. The pathos is touching, disturbing. Yet the story makes it clear that Vessantara had to do what he did. That is never questioned. It is his purpose in life, necessary for his future realization of Buddhahood.⁵

Later, when Maddi's turn comes, the suitor is the god Sakka, disguised as a Brahmin. Vessantara gives her away immediately, and she obeys. However, this is merely a test, arranged by Sakka to help move the story along to its climax. Maddi is returned as soon as Vessantara and she have passed the test. The children, however, undergo abuse, beatings, and hard work from Jujaka, who accidentally takes them back to Sivi and ends up ransoming them to Vessantara's father. The tale ends happily with Vessantara reinstated in Sivi and everyone reconciled except Jujaka, who gorges himself to death. Having passed the tests and fulfilled his destiny, Vessantara enjoys boundless wealth to give away until the end of his days.

From the perspective of this final *Jataka*, *dana* is the final parami to be perfected. Thus, *dana* is both first and last. What is often portrayed as the most basic virtue turns out to be the culmination as well, the last perfection fulfilled before the bodhisattva is ready for his final birth. This shows that the spirit of *dana* runs throughout and perfects all the *parami*. For the bodhisattva, there is no tolerance, wisdom, and compassion without wholehearted

⁵ Not that he was aware of future awakening (*nirvana*); this is retrospectively added to the story, as so often happens.

unlimited giving. One must give completely of oneself in order for compassion and the other perfections to be realized.⁶

***Dana* for the Sake of Community**

Shakyamuni Buddha's own life story is marked throughout by generous giving and receiving. In the traditional accounts, his great awakening depends on the *dana* of Sujata, a serving girl, and Sotthiya, a grass cutter. Her sweet milk rice and his fresh cut grass sheaves give the Buddha-about-to-be strength and comfort for the supreme final effort. To these are added gifts of nature—a cool river for washing away accumulated ascetic grime, a friendly forest in which to meditate, the shade of trees, and the songs of birds. Finally, the Naga snake king provides his great hood for protection from weather and malevolent forces. Thus, the Buddha's supreme human effort was not entirely individual; it depended upon the collective circulating charity of many beings. In return, liberated from personal concerns, the Buddha gave his entire life in service of the dhamma.

The teaching of *dana* continued through the Sangha founded by the Buddha. Monks and nuns walked mindfully out of forests and ashrams, across fields, through the pathways of villages and streets of cities, stopping at houses to beg silently. Not merely a stereotype, the practice still survives today in Southeast Asia and helps sustain Buddhism as a living reality. We can picture the shaven head of a nun or monk gently bowed over a bowl as a village child, housewife, or old man offers a spoon of rice, a dollop

⁶ This is perhaps an early example of *bodhicitta*, so much emphasized in the Mahayana.

of curry, a piece of fruit. *Dana* is especially powerful when it supports the sangha, which understood according to the original emphasis (*supatipanno* “those who practice well”) includes women and householders. In this way, the four assemblies of laity and monastics, male and female, interact through the practice of *dana*, thereby making the religious tradition whole.

The Buddha praised gifts given to a community of serious practitioners (*sanghadana*) over gifts given to individuals, even the most exalted of all (himself). Giving to the Thus-Gone-One who no longer needs anything is valued less than giving to those who are training in the way, their guides, and the community that will keep this noble way alive. Such *dana* is for the sake of maintaining the centers of tradition, learning, and cultivation that support all who follow the way, whether home-leavers or householders. Individually, only buddhas fulfill the highest ideal of practice; by including the noble community, even struggling members are uplifted so that they contribute, too.

This is the Sangha of upright conduct,
Endowed with wisdom and virtue.
For those people who bestow alms,
For living beings in quest of merit,
Performing merit of the mundane type,
A gift to the Sangha bears great fruit.⁷

⁷ Here, “Sangha” refers to the four kinds of noble ones, the exemplars of dhammic life, and the leaders of the community of the Buddha’s disciples. S.i.233. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*. Trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 333.

Community, as understood in early Buddhism and as practiced in Buddhist cultures, naturally involves different levels of *dana*. However, consumerism and other modern forces have made this time-honored approach to community precarious. The Thai experience illustrates this well.

Traditional Buddhism throughout Thailand and Southeast Asia has had an agrarian village base. Here, “doing good” (*tambun*, *bun* from *punna*, “goodness,” or more commonly “merit”) is the central operative value. The most prominent practice of *tambun* consists of giving food to the monks, especially when they are out gathering alms, as well as making other donations to the temple. Before capitalism took over in Thailand, such *dana* was almost always in kind, since there was not much money in village economies. *Dana* supplied the material goods needed by the monks personally and for daily maintenance of the temple. Because the temple served as community center, “town hall,” clinic, counseling center, news exchange, entertainment stage, and market, in addition to its religious and spiritual functions, supporting it meant supporting the entire community and most of its activities. In fact, until modernization, temples were communal property more than monastic property (though this was not the case in all Buddhist societies). Generosity sustained them.

For their part, the monks were expected to live simply and unselfishly, to look after the temple and to uphold traditions. When somebody wanted to talk about a problem, or the weather, the monks would listen. When a ritual, blessing, or chant was needed, the monks would go. They were available around the clock, like country doctors used to be in the United States. Actually, many of the monks were country doctors. Being around, being available, and being helpful were central to the life of village

monks, including the itinerant meditators who would come and go.⁸

Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya, a.k.a Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto, the leading Thai Buddhist scholar and writer of recent years, concurs that the core principle of the old system was *bun*, goodness.⁹ *Bun* is what circulated within the religious economy of Thai life, back when the divisions between family, economics, community, politics, religion, and personal life were tenuous. Villagers gave what they had to give and considered “good,” worthy of giving: their best food, robe material, betel nut, tools, materials for repairing temple property, labor, and craft skills. The monks gave advice, consolations, blessings, rituals, teachings, meditation instruction, leadership, writing, and other specialized skills. Most important, the participation of monks gave religious meaning to daily acts of decency, generosity, and kindness, elevating these from the realm of mutual obligations to spiritual significance.

Bun circulated within fairly large loops connecting infants with grandparents, the better-off with the poor, women and men, temple dwellers, ancestors, spirits, even honored water buffaloes. The temple dwellers might include an old abbot who had been around for years, an itinerant or two, newly ordained “temporary monks” from the village or nearby, novices, nuns, temple boys, and senior citizens. Thus, the giving was seldom binary and tended to circulate widely. As *bun*, *dana* circulated as the blood of the community so long as its members understood goodness mutually.

⁸ Kamala Tiyavanich's *The Buddha in the Jungle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2003) provides abundant illustrations of this.

⁹ From a Thai language talk given at Suan Mokkh in the late 1980s.

The Commodification of *Dana* and *Punna*

As noted earlier, Buddhist lay practice has tended toward simplified versions of dhamma practice, such as the *punnakiriyavatthu*, in comparison to the more difficult practices recommended for monastics. Since Brahmanistic and Hindu influences have always been strong in Theravada Buddhist countries, it is not surprising that the common Buddhist understandings of *karma*, *dana*, and *punna* have become distorted by such influences. In particular, the lay practice of *dana* has often become limited to making ritual offerings to the monks in order to gain merit (*punna*) towards a better rebirth. As the monastic centered tradition continued to emphasize that lay followers, especially women, could not attain enlightenment in this lifetime, lay practice continued to devolve into performing or sponsoring rituals towards securing an advantageous rebirth. “Senior monks discouraged sermons on [essential] principles and teachings such as not-self (*anatta*), dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*), thusness (*tathata*), and voidness (*sunyata*). Supposedly, these were too difficult for ordinary people to understand. For the masses, moral teachings based on ancient—and not particularly Buddhist—beliefs about karma, rebirth, merit, heaven, and hell were considered appropriate and sufficient”.¹⁰

Here, too, the *Jatakas* have played an especially powerful role as myths that influence popular beliefs. For example, the *Mahajanaka Jataka* (J.vi.35) implies that if one has accumulated enough merit in past lives, one will be spared from misfortune or

¹⁰ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. *Heartwood from the Bodhi Tree: The Buddha's Teachings on Voidness*. Trans. Santikaro Bhikkhu. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1994). p. xvi.

get lucky in this lifetime, often through the divine intervention of certain gods. However, Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto remarks, “Overemphasis on rebirth into heaven realms and hell realms ignores the good which should be aspired to in the present . . . Good actions are performed for the sake of profit. Overemphasis on past and future lives ignores the importance of the qualities of moral rectitude and desire for goodness, which in turn becomes a denial of, or even an insult to, the human potential to practice and develop truth and righteousness for their own sakes”.¹¹ Such limitations and distortions are to be expected in popular religiosity; they are part of the local culture over which ordinary people have some control. Modernity brings in powerful influences that villagers have little influence on.

Capitalism intensified this shift away from the operative principle of goodness and onto money, that is, from bun to baht (the Thai currency). Increasingly, donors give baht or food purchased with baht, rather than prepare food and other offerings themselves. Village skills and handicrafts have suffered, partly because they were not voluntarily practiced and learned at the temple. More time was spent in the fields working on cash crops; economic migration to urban areas increased; and children saw less of their parents. Communal work and shared labor disappeared; even the temples had to start paying. People no longer wandered through or hung around the temple as they used to. Things that did not earn money were devalued. Eventually, Buddhism was expected to aid economic success, magically if not concretely.

¹¹ Payutto, P. A. *Good, Evil and Beyond: Karma in the Buddha's Teaching*. Trans. Bruce Evans. (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1993), p. 50.

In many towns nowadays, monks queue up at dawn before market stalls where ready-made food offerings are for sale. Such commercial food usually includes additives such as MSG and sugar and contributes to poor health among many monks. Donors queue up on the other side, pay their baht, pick up a tray, and take their turn putting food into the waiting monks' bowls (or buckets carried by temple boys, depending on how many offerings are purchased). Then donors and recipients go their own ways. All very efficient, in the wonderful way of consumer capitalism, with donors putting less time and care into their offerings and monks, accordingly, appreciating them less.

Rather than food offered as bun in promise of better karmic fruits, baht is given in hope of more baht (and dollars)—successful business ventures, passing exams for career advancement, winning the lottery. The monks, too, have become more money-minded. Monastic titles are linked to funds raised and spent on temple buildings (not to mention what goes into the envelopes passed under tables, e.g., for permission to travel abroad). Temple services such as the large funeral industry cost money and are treated as investments by temple committees, complete with outsourcing of flowers, coffins, and catering. City monks indirectly probe how much *dana* will be given—cash in envelope—before deciding what meal invitations to accept. Of course, monks travel, study, and live in the same consumer economy as everyone else and thus need money. Nothing is free any more.

The magical side of popular Buddhism, too, is now much more about money and making money, than about protection from spirits and disease. Amulets are big business. Stories circulate about people getting rich after donating to a certain monk (e.g., Luang Pau Khun) or temple (e.g., the infamous Wat Pra

Dhammakaya). Luang Pau Khun became famous during the 90s economic boom when rumors spread of people, including royalty, getting rich after making donations to him. The rumors may have been spread by those around his temple who benefited from the large influx of “merit makers.”

Wat Pra Dhammakaya is a still unresolved scandal concerning misuse of temple funds. The abbot personally invested in gold mines, which he attempted to justify as contributing to business efficiency in producing devotional objects “marketed” (Dhammakaya uses such terminology themselves) at margins that would make ordinary entrepreneurs drool. Dhammakaya has unabashedly embraced capitalism, often distorting the Buddha’s teaching to win followers amongst the merchant and professional classes. For a while, the abbot was suspended pending resolution of criminal charges. However, these charges were dropped two years ago during the Taksin regime. There is some speculation that the abbot—believed to be the source of all buddhas by the most cultish of his followers—curried favor with the Taksin government so that the charges were dropped.

The degeneration of the practice of *punna* into such crass forms of spiritual materialism also promotes a kind of spiritual class-ism, reminiscent of the Hindu caste system. In such a system, the rich are better positioned to gain favorable rebirth because of their wealth. Also, not unknown in other religions, such as the medieval Christian Church’s selling indulgences in Europe, rich Buddhists attempt to buy their way into heaven by building large, gaudy stupas and temples. Wat Pra Dhammakaya again serves as an appropriate example:

[Dhammakaya] not only promises worldly achievement to its followers but also uses marketing techniques to create a de-

mand for merit through “direct sale.” Merit is commodified and diversified in different forms for followers to have more choice. Competition is encouraged between volunteers who solicit donations and rewards are given to those who can achieve the highest amount of donations. These techniques are derived from the idea of its leader that, “Buddhism is an excellent commodity that gets bad sales because of the lack of good marketing strategies.”¹²

Perhaps what is of greatest concern here is the distorted karmic understanding that rich people have earned their merit and, hence, deserve their elevated status. This likewise implies, of course, that people who are poor also deserve their situation. This simplistic equation reverses the causality properly taught in Buddhism. Its corrupted logic reflects a deterministic understanding of karma that ignores the role of structural violence, for often it is economic and other social factors that force the poor into professions that violate the lay precepts and create bad karma, such as working in slaughter houses (killing), prostitution (unskillful sexuality), fraudulent marketing (lying), drug dealing (use of intoxicants), and downright theft. Generally, monks have little understanding of social factors and merely focus on the individual level and disembodied tenets memorized in their dhamma classes.

Recovering Sangha by Making Meaningful Merit

When the great Thai Buddhist reformer of the past century Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was young, his mother taught him a mantra

¹² Visalo, Paisal. “Buddhism for the Next Century: Toward Renewing a Moral Thai Society.” In *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium*. Ed. Sulak Sivaraksa. (Bangkok: Santhirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation & Foundation for Children, 1999), p. 242.

while taking care of the family's rice field. "If birds eat our rice, that is *punna*. If people eat our rice, that is *dana*" (so don't be angry with them). Buddhadasa once compared three different types of merit making with how we wash our bodies. The first type are those who sacrifice the lives of other beings in performing a supposedly meritorious ceremony, which is like washing the body with muddy water. The second type, likened to pouring perfumed water onto the body, refers to those who make merit with a belief that they will be rewarded somehow and be reborn in heaven. The last type, cleaning the body with pure water, is the highest level of merit making as the person fulfills the deed selflessly and without any attachment to the result.

Recovering sangha is one way that we can create non-consumerist breathing space. Since they have more material resources than society's poor, monastics, too, ought to consider *dana* as something for them to give. While this commonly occurs in forest practice temples, it is not common in city temples. From the other side, lay practitioners need not be limited by old stereotypes. Their practice of generosity need not be confined to giving only to monks. One can give to other people, and even animals, for this is a practice that can be carried out in various ways.

Traditional Approaches to Reciprocal Merit Making

The attitude that helping other people is also a merit making practice—that offering *dana* to monks is not the only way to do *punna*—can, in fact, be found in traditional Thai culture. There are many traditional practices in the North, as well as other regions, that are based on this attitude. For example, *tan tod* is a

practice where requisites or *dana* (*tan*) are offered to poor people by laying (*tod*) them near their houses and then lighting a fire-cracker to alert the recipients. It is believed that one can obtain as much merit from this practice as offering *dana* to monks. Unfortunately, such practices have recently fallen into disuse, whereas offering *dana* to monks still prevails, giving the impression that *punna* can be obtained only through practice and rituals involving monks. In the past, however, offering *dana* to monks and acts of community service were never distinguished. Since the temple was the center of community life, utensils offered to monks, for example, were often borrowed by villagers for feasts on various occasions, e.g. at a wedding, ordination, or funeral.

As Thailand has modernized, the focus of village activities has shifted from the temple to secular institutions, such as modern schools and other social services provided by the government. Monks have become marginalized and their roles confined to strictly religious rituals like funerals and of course merit making. In this way, *dana* offered to monks has become more and more confined to their personal use in the temples. In other words, *punna* involving monks is increasingly divorced from community service.

In 1980, the Coordinating Group for Religion in Society (CGRS) initiated a new form of merit making called *pa pa khao*. *Pa pa* are the Thai words for “forest robe” and *khao* means “rice.” This practice is adapted from the traditional one of offering robes to monks (*pa pa*), which is a popular ceremony in which people collect money and offer it, along with robes, to monks for various purposes, e.g. building temples or supporting monastic education. In this new ceremony of *pa pa khao*, rice is collected, as well as money, in order to support rice banks or rice cooperatives in the

local villages. Rice banks and cooperatives have been set up in many villages to assist indebted villagers by providing them with cheap rice or rice loans at low interest. In some years, however, due to drought, these projects could not get enough rice to help their members. To address this problem, those living in other villages have initiated *pa pa khao* to raise rice and money for the affected villages. Such practices not only help rice banks and cooperatives to function properly but also raise funds to support other village projects, such as educational funds for the young and free school lunches.

During the last decade, *pa pa khao* has been increasingly practiced in the north and east. It has become popular because of the belief that much merit can be acquired by doing it. In the more traditional *pa pa*, the ceremony ends when money and robes are offered to the abbot. With the increasing use of cash money in modern merit making, however, *pa pa* has been manipulated for corrupt ends, usually due to lack of transparency in the temple administration, especially the temple's bank account. There is a saying about *pa pa* money that "half goes to temple, and the other half to the (lay) committee." Although the new practice of *pa pa khao* is not impervious to such corruption, there is an important shift in the direction of the money. The abbot, instead of keeping the offering for monastic purposes, gives the rice and money to villagers for community projects. Thus, the traditional role of monks in community service, which has been ignored for decades, is being restored and strengthened.

It should also be noted that these practices are initiated by villagers in the surrounding areas, in the spirit of helping fellow villagers who are in trouble. In this way, the practice helps to strengthen the network of local villages and serves as a basis for

cooperation among villagers in the area. In addition to sustaining existing rice banks and helping cooperatives to function properly, *pa pa khao*, which is now performed almost every year, plays an important role in supporting new rice banks and cooperatives in various villages. Apart from *pa pa khao*, which assists rice banks and cooperatives, there are also *pa panangsue*, which collects books to support rural literacy and education, and *pa patonmai*, which collects seedlings and plants for reforestation.

In addition to applying traditional ceremonies for community development, new social programs have been set up based on the concept of *punna*. *Satcha sasomsap* or “savings with truthfulness” is one example. *Satcha sasomsap* is another type of local savings bank where people keep their savings and receive cheap loans, enabling them to avoid commercial banks and moneylenders. *Satcha sasomsap* was initiated by a monk, Pra Subin Panito, who successfully organized almost three hundred groups in many provinces. More than half of the villages in his home province of Trad have set up such groups.

What makes *satcha sasomsap* distinct from ordinary local saving banks is the reliance on Buddhist virtues such as truthfulness. Every member of *satcha sasomsap* is required to make and keep a pledge of truthfulness that the same amount of money will be deposited in the group bank every month. This promise of truthfulness helps to maintain their commitment to the group. The concept of *punna* is another principle of these groups. Members are told that their participation is a way of practicing *punna* since their savings can be used to help people in trouble. In the process of making loan decisions, priority is given to people who are in trouble, such as needing money to pay medical bills or school tuition for children.

This is another attempt to revive the traditional virtues of compassion and generosity. In the past these virtues were so integrated into the life of village people that they could be seen in all details of their daily life, such as providing drinking water in front of houses, giving food and lodging to strangers, building shelters for travelers, giving a helping hand with rice harvesting, constructing houses or roads, etc. All these acts of cooperation were regarded as the practice of *punna*. The systematic organization of *satcha sasomsap*, however, has developed this practice to another level. Rules and regulations are laid out for collective decision-making and transparency. Another difference is that money is mobilized, instead of labor as in the past. Further, these funds circulate within the local village economy rather than being siphoned off to distant financial centers. These are examples of applying merit making practice to structural issues such as supporting community work and reducing poverty.

New Approaches to Reciprocal Merit Making

Ideally, the goal of merit making encompasses three levels. The most basic is to bring about material well-being in the present, encouraging peaceful co-existence in society. A higher level is to elevate one's mind so that the merit maker becomes a better person morally. The ultimate level is to develop one's understanding of dhamma so that one is no longer enslaved by the uncertainties of life. This combination of the material, moral, and spiritual dimensions of each meritorious act improves both the individual and his or her society as a whole. This expansive notion of *punna* is essential for creating social harmony and well-being. It is also the basis of a strong and healthy civil society. In accordance with

this, attempts have been made to promote a proper understanding of *punna* as taught by the Buddha. The Network for Buddhism and Society is one of a few groups in Thailand that have launched programs along these lines during the past few years. It started its campaign by publishing a handbook for *punna* practice called *Smart Punna Practice*.¹³

The handbook begins by introducing the reader to the three bases of meritorious action (*punnakiriyavatthu*) earlier, as well as seven others that are part of the popular tradition: humility (*apacayana*), rendering service (*veyyavacca*), sharing or giving out merit [i.e., getting others involved in meritorious service] (*pattidana*), rejoicing in other's merit (*pattanumodana*), listening to right teachings of the dhamma (*dhammassavana*), teaching the dhamma properly (*dhammadesana*), and correcting one's views (*ditthujjukamma*) [D.A.iii.999]. The handbook also suggests new practices of *punna* and *dana* that are beneficial to recipients and that contribute to social and spiritual well-being.

For example, one can join a group of friends to cook food for the orphans, the disabled, or persons infected with HIV. Those with artistic skills may arrange some recreational activities for the underprivileged. One group often neglected is prison inmates who certainly appreciate compassion. Paying visits to the elderly can also teach one about the age-old truth of life's transience. There are no limits to this alternative merit making: sparing free time to teach street kids, reading books to blind people, or volunteering for the community or at a local temple. In fact, the easiest way to make merit is simply to be good to those around us, be they our own parents, children, siblings, or neighbors. A caring gesture or

¹³ Chai Worathammo. *Smart Ways of Making Merit (Chalat Tambun)*. Ed. Paisal Visalo & O. Chettakul. (Bangkok: Komol Kheemthong Foundation, 2001).

a smile can bridge the gaps among people. Why wait until the last moment of one's life to do good to each other? The true nature of merit making is "opening up"—learning to be compassionate and accepting towards every human being, regardless of differences in social status, religious beliefs, political ideologies, and so on. Discrimination is a form of violence and bad karma, often committed unconsciously and breeding more violence in return. The ultimate merit comes from opening our hearts to each other.

Some people believe that every religious act must involve elaborate rituals. In fact, recitation of prayers and other customary rules are simply tactics to enhance collective harmony and to prepare the bodies and minds of participants before a meritorious act begins, like cleaning a bowl before filling it with water. However, these rituals are not always necessary and, in themselves, do not bestow any sacred power to the performer. Fundamentally, a genuinely meritorious act of giving must provide the recipient with what he or she truly needs. Moreover, the amount of the donation is less important than the good, pure will in wishing well for other beings. Whether we are inviting others to make merit together with us, or are being asked to join in the activity, a meritorious deed is done with a joyful heart, not out of pride, fear, or with a competitive motive. Buddhism emphasizes that a charitable deed should be guided by mindfulness and wisdom in order to ensure that the meritorious deed will yield a wholesome result.

The beginning of *vassa*, the traditional rainy season retreat, was the occasion for launching the handbook mentioned above. Within three years, it received such a good response from the public and media that it was reprinted forty times, amounting to nearly 200,000 copies. The handbook has become popular as a gift or souvenir for important events, such as birthdays, anniver-

saries, and funerals. Most people buy this book (or give it to their friends) because it opens their eyes to the proper practice of *punna*. It helps them to realize that *punna* can be practiced at any time and has nothing to do with an unintelligible religious ceremony.

In 2003, another handbook was published, a smaller and more concise collection of merit making practice with the title 30 Practices of *Punna* for the Well-Being of Life and Society. At the back of the booklet, the addresses of non-profit organizations are provided for those who want to do meritorious acts by volunteering or donating money. For those who seek spiritual well-being, places to do meditation in various parts of the country are also included. The booklet was put on sale at gas stations in Bangkok one week before the beginning of the vassa. Again, within a few days the booklet became very popular with much positive coverage in the media. Nine reprints have already been made, totaling 200,000 copies. The fact that both handbooks are still in demand reflects the enthusiasm of modern people to know and participate in creative *punna* practices that contribute to the well-being of both individuals and society. People are showing that they want an alternative to conventional *dana* practice that is wasteful, ritualistic, materialistic, and just another form of consumerism.

Conclusion

Phra Sekiyadhamma (a national network of socially concerned monks) and the Network for Buddhism and Society have been working to expand the practice of these reinvigorated forms of merit making to the national level. This year the Network for Buddhism and Society wants to take a further step in initiating concrete social action, hoping to persuade Thais to make merit by

doing voluntary work during the *vassa*. Many non-governmental organizations are participating in this project, which has chosen the issue of children as the central theme. Officials in large private companies are the target group of this campaign. Thousands of volunteers will be recruited from the private sector to participate in various projects aimed at improving the quality of life for children in various ways, e.g. education, environment, media, social welfare, and human rights. This campaign not only aims to create a new attitude towards *punna* and *dana* among the Thai public but also seeks to create a nationwide voluntary movement based on the concept of *punna*. It is designed to revive the concept of *punna* as a cultural force for the well-being of society as a whole, instead of being limited to temple or religious rituals.

Though such a social movement motivated by *punna* is not yet well established, there are already many individuals committed to social activities based on the concept of *punna*. Given the bases of meritorious action (*punnakiriyavatthu*), one can see that *punna* is essential to all aspects of well-being (physical, social, mental, and spiritual) for both the individual and society. Every time *dana* is offered properly, it not only reduces personal selfishness, but also contributes to social harmony and peace. This also applies to the other bases of *punna*. If *punna* is misunderstood, however, one's practice tends to become a Brahmanistic-style offering for divine blessing or a capitalistic motivated exchange for more profit. The tradition of *punna* is still powerful and has great potential for social reconstruction, especially in countries where Buddhism is prevalent. As this essay has shown, it can provide an important social virtue for a uniquely Buddhist civil society. However, unless *punna* is properly understood and practiced, through the proper education and propagation of Buddhism among lay

people as well as monks, its potential will not be actualized for the welfare of all.

Co-written by Santikaro and Phra Paisal Visalo in Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice. Ed. Jonathan S. Watts (Bangkok: International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 2014).

Santikaro and Phra Paisal Visalo have been long time partners in the struggle to reform Thai Buddhism. Both have been deeply influenced by the pioneering efforts of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto. They are not only concerned to rectify erroneous understandings of core dhamma principles, but also work to see that these principles play a guiding role in the development of Thai society. This essay is an attempt to bring together their written perspectives on the nature and significance of dana (generosity) and punna (goodness/merit) into one essay. While the two halves of this chapter were written separately, we hope the reader will find enriching the shared perspectives of these two spiritual friends (kalyanamitta).

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Portions of this essay are based on Santikaro’s article “Practicing Generosity in a Consumer World,” which appeared in *Hooked!: Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume*. Ed. Stephanie Kaza (Boston: Shambala Books, 2005).

Thai Buddhism in the Next Decade:

As Thai Society Moves
with the Times,
so Does Its Religious
Beliefs and Practices

Ten years ago, some observers raised doubts over the widespread practice of meditation retreats among the middle-class as if it was just a passing fad. What we witness today has shown that meditation retreats continue to grow and are steadily expanding into all sectors of the middle class. It is the same with other interests in dhamma, such as attending dhamma talks and reciting prayers. Dhamma books have become in vogue, and many of them have become best-sellers. Dhamma CDs and other forms of dhamma media have also become very popular. All these factors point to a certain prospect that the current awakening of dhamma interests among the middle-class will remain a marked phenomenon in Thai Buddhism in the next decade.

To start with, meditation retreats will continue to grow and become one of the principal forms of “practicing religion” in Thailand. Dhamma books will also continue to be one of few book genres that will be in demand. However, this phenomenon will be taking place amid a great diversity of religious beliefs and practices beyond the predominant Thai Theravada Buddhism. We will witness a greater influence from the Mahayana and Vajrayana streams of Buddhism among practitioners. Even in Thai Theravada Buddhism, we will also see a greater diversity in the tradition as a result of different interpretations and focuses.

In Thai Theravada Buddhism, some groups will focus on the strict upholding of religious precepts and disciplines. Some will stress on meditation practice. Some will practice concentration meditation, others vipassana or insight meditation. Some will focus on the cultivation of mindfulness, others on prayer recitation and traditional merit-making. Even in meditation, both the samatha (concentration) and vipassana (insight) meditation methods will be divided into many different branches of practices.

This religious diversity will be taking place in parallel with the growth of lay Buddhism. Lay Buddhists will be playing greater roles in religion, and we will eventually see the emergence of a new Buddhism with lay people as core leaders instead of monks. More lay groups will organize their own meditation groups led by lay teachers outside temples. Even in religious rites, we will also see more lay Buddhists organizing their own rituals performed by their group leaders instead of monks. Many factors contribute to this lay Buddhism phenomenon.

1) The suffering of the middle-class

Many in the middle-class are successful professionally, but they have found that success does not make them happier. On the contrary, their suffering increases, both from work stress and from worsening inter-personal relationships. They have found that money cannot alleviate their suffering, so they turn to dhamma.

A greater number of people are also seeking refuge in dhamma after they have experienced work failure or tragic incidents in their lives, such as the loss of loved ones or being inflicted with illnesses such as cancer. The 1997 economic crisis also played a part in pushing people in distress to start practicing dhamma.

Our country might not experience the crisis of such magnitude again. Yet, our society and the cut-throat economic system which focuses on competition and winning will inevitably produce many losers. This group of people need healing for their minds.

Moreover, the next decade will see not only increasing economic and political uncertainties. The risks from all sorts of natural disaster will be much higher. The result is more worries, more stress, more suffering for the people. It is natural then that many of them will turn to dhamma or religion for spiritual security.

2) Nostalgia for Thai identity

Thais are nostalgic for the lost or imagined Thai culture as a result of rapid social and cultural changes caused by the influx of Western influences and accelerated by the forces of globalisation. They have begun to take an interest in Buddhism and meditation as a means to strengthen their Thai identity.

3) Increasing social diversity

The multiplicity in society has been mushrooming following the socio-economic diversity generated by globalisation. People nowadays not only have diverse professions and ways of life, they also have multifarious tastes and needs. When they are interested in Buddhism, they do not only choose to subscribe to the schools of thoughts and practices that fit their likings, they also adapt those beliefs and practices to respond to their different needs. Moreover, they also bring the beliefs from other religious streams into the mix. Therefore, there is a tendency that there will be a great diversity in the belief and practices of Buddhism among practitioners.

4) The decreasing influence of the monastic Sangha

Following the Sangha's declining clout, their roles will be limited to only rites and rituals, and less relevant to people's lives. As monastic misconduct continues to be more publicly exposed, the Sangha elders will still fail to win back public faith. Consequently, the middle-class, who are interested in Buddhism, have to turn to one another. This process is eased by the more opportunities nowadays for lay people to study Buddhism by themselves. For example, the *Tripitaka* and other important scriptures have become more readily available. So have books, CDs, websites, dhamma TV programmes, and meditation courses led by lay meditation teachers.

Although the interests in Buddhism among the middle-class will continue to grow in the next decade, this does not mean growth for Buddhism itself. This lay Buddhism phenomenon is taking place amid a myriad of social malaises that are ever intensifying, which reflects the over-all declining morality of people in

society. Crime, murder, theft, rape, corruption, domestic violence, abandoned infants, and neglect of children and the elderly—these social problems do not only show society’s collective failure to instill morality among the populace, they also reflect the declining influence of Buddhism in society as a whole.

Actually, even among those keen on Buddhism, the tendency is that their practice and observance will be individualistic. The main purpose is to respond to their own needs without paying attention to society or other people. Many people turn to Buddhism to cope with stress and to seek inner calm. They then are not interested in taking part in public activities to help others, for fear that they will affect their peace of mind.

Many of these people are devoted to making merit with monks in order to accumulate the *boon* or merit that will help them to have prosperity in this present life or to have happiness in the next life. Meanwhile, they overlook the downtrodden, believing that helping them will give them less merit than their helping monks.

Of late, there have also been new misunderstandings about karma. For example, the belief that if we help save someone’s life, that will enrage that person’s *jaokamnai* wen or “vengeful spirits” who will become intent on taking revenge on us. There is also the belief that by sharing our merit with others in our prayers will erode our stock of merit. These beliefs actually go against Buddhist teachings. Yet, they have become widespread, and they will become even more so in the next decade. Here is why: Individualism. The practice of Buddhism marked by individualism is the result of the way Buddhism has been promulgated in Thailand in the past several decades. It is the fruit of the reform of Thai Buddhism a century ago, which has eroded the social dimension of Buddhism.

Consequently, the practice has come to primarily focus on the development of one's meditation. Helping other persons or society has become secondary, overlooked, even. As the value of individualism has become a widespread phenomenon in modern Thai society through capitalism and consumerism, people have become even more focused on their self-interest. In this system, one's needs come first. When they turn to dhamma practice, it is aimed for personal happiness on a very superficial level. The practice is not really aimed to reduce greed, mental defilements, and attachment to the ego. The generosity, the willingness to help others or the common good, then, is lacking. This is one of the reasons why social problems have not declined at all even when more Thais have actually turned to dhamma practice.

In the same vein, when the goal of dhamma practice is not to attain a deep and thorough understanding of one's mind until one sees the attachment of self and ego, then it becomes very easy to get lost in that attachment of perceived goodness or one's image as a good, moral person. Conceit grows. As a result, we frown upon whoever thinks or practices differently from us or judge them as bad people. This is why many dhamma practitioners supported the May violence last year. This is also why more widespread dhamma practice does not mean violence in Thai society will decrease in the next decade.

Another distinct characteristic of popular Thai Buddhism in the next decade is teachings that are concise, easy-to-understand and practice, and promise of fast results. This comes from the modern Thais' mentality and way of life which focuses on speed, convenience, and tangible results. These teachings will explain the complexity of the modern world in an easy to understand way, so much so that it becomes superficial. They will not demand too

much sacrifice and difficulties from the followers. Just donate and put one's mind in the right place without changing one's way of life or giving up selfishness. These teachings will be highly popular. They also share common traits in their ability to respond to the followers' worldly needs, such as riches, social status, and fame. One centre attracts the public with this slogan, "life saved, diseases cured, wealth and fame". An important part of this trend is widespread consumerism, which does not only commodify religion and dhamma teachings that are easy and fast to consume. It also shapes the public's beliefs that money is an important tool to attain worldly happiness and success.

In parallel with this phenomenon is the flourishing of commercialized Buddhism, or the commercialization of superstition, to be exact. We will see the market expansion of amulets and charms believed to bring quick wealth without having to invest effort or perseverance. These talismans may relate to Buddhism, come from other cults, or mix with one another until it is impossible to identify what is Buddhist, animistic, or Bhraministic. Although the Jatukam Ramatep amulets have already lost their popularity, the next decade will certainly see new products to give people hope and consolation amid the uncertainties in their life and in the world at large. Dependency on these talismans will remain a mainstream belief and practice, which reflects the religious understanding of the majority of Thai people.

Such phenomenon may be cause of worry for the learned in Buddhism, who view such belief and practice as a violation of the Buddha's teachings. But it is difficult to foresee the Sangha taking any action to create proper understanding. The Sangha is very weak and will become even weaker in the next decade. The number of monks and novices will drastically decrease. The knowledge

of monks and novices will also likely decline as a result of the education failure of the Sangha dating back decades, and there is no sign for any improvement. That is not all. The monks' overall behaviour cannot restore public faith in the Sangha, because they themselves are caught in the trap of consumerism. Monks then cannot provide spiritual leadership or wisdom for Thai society. Worse, they play an important part in the growth of the business of animism. This will continue to happen amid neglect and inertia from the Ecclesiastic Council as ever before, which is why monastic misconduct and scandals continue unabated.

What has already happened and will happen more in the next decade is the proliferation of independent faith groups and cults in the Sangha that teach and practice differently. Even though they might violate the teachings of the Buddha, the Sangha cannot do much about it. The widespread use of connections in the Sangha on every level will further aggravate the situation, preventing the Sangha from being the refuge for the public.

In this scenario, the Buddhist group that will play an important role in the next decade is the Dhammakaya Temple. It has a very strong organization with a corps of 3,000 monks who have been through intense training. Moreover, it is backed with gigantic funding and a nation-wide network of monks and lay supporters. The temple also enjoys a good relationship with many elders in the Ecclesiastic Council. Its influence at the top, in the middle, and at the grassroots levels combined with its ownership of modern communications media will have a significant impact on the beliefs and practices of a large number of Buddhists in the next decade.

One last point is the increasing roles of women. In the past two decades, women have been playing more roles in Thai Buddhism, not only as the supporters of monks but also as an import-

ant force in lay Buddhism. Their roles in the realms of academics and practice have helped Thai Buddhism to be relevant to the way of life of people in modern society. One of the consequences is the emergence of female ordination. The ordination of *bhikkhuni* and *samaneri* might not be welcomed by the Sangha and many conservative Buddhists in the past decade. But I believe that the number of *bhikkhunis* will certainly grow in the next decade. It will be difficult for the Sangha to stop it, and despite how hard it tries, opposition will not receive substantial support from the public.

The number of Thai *bhikkhunis* in the next decade will not be enough to create serious concerns to the elders. There will not be any strong *bhikkhuni* in the near future. Still, female ordination will provide an alternative to many women. However, *bhikkhuni* ordination will remain an important debate in the next decade as will the question of Buddhism as a national religion. This reflects the decline of Buddhism in Thailand, which is rooted in the weaknesses within Thai Buddhist society and which insists on blaming it on outside threats from other religions and negligence of the government.

Bangkok Post *February 7, 2012*

Patronage System Breeds Malaise in the Monkhood

The problems surrounding the Dhammakaya temple and its abbot Dhammachayo are serious in themselves. But they also reflect larger and more acute malaises in the Thai Buddhist clergy. For starters, the Sangha Council's controversial ruling on the Dhammakaya issue has posed questions over each elder's moral judgment and the serious flaws in the clergy's governing system. More specifically, the crux of the problem is the closed clerical system, which centralises governing power within a small group of 20 elders without any internal monitoring and auditing mechanisms. It is a system that is accountable to no one. The lack of transparency has given rise to rife nepotism and abuse of power in favours to the elders' networks. The emphasis on personal ties explains why the elders turn a blind eye to misconduct by wealthy monks. Worse, they continue to back these influential monks, giving them tacit support or even moving them up the ecclesiastical ranks, which helps the monks expand their networks further.

That the Dhammakaya temple and Dhammachayo have managed to stay popular throughout these years also shows the weakness of Buddhists themselves, for they have little understanding of dhamma principles in Buddhism. There are widespread false understandings even concerning the most basic matters in Buddhism, such as *boon* or merit. For example, many believe the more they donate, the more merit they will gain. This is *tam boon* or making merit to acquire more things, not to let go of things according to Buddhist teachings. When there is misunderstanding at this basic level, there is no need to talk about their understanding of higher dhamma, such as *nibbana*. Not knowing what Buddhism is about, it is easy for them to be misled by false teachings and ready to turn a blind eye to irregularities of their gurus. In other word, the Dhammakaya controversy shows a lack of knowledge of Buddhists themselves about their own religion. It also reflects a failure of the clergy and the clergy's education system.

In addition, the popularity of Dhammakaya, especially among the middle class, is linked to the widespread misconduct of mainstream monks. Monks' scandals do not only routinely make headlines, but people see with their own eyes what monks should not do every day. Fed up, many in the middle class feel attracted to the Dhammakaya monks who appear more strict and orderly. Not realising that the teachings of Dhammakaya and the conduct of its abbot have more far-reaching adverse impacts, they fiercely oppose any moves by the clergy to punish Dhammachayo and Dhammakaya, while letting other rogue monks get off scot-free. Punishment or not, the more crucial question is why we have rogue monks in every nook and cranny. The answer does not lie only in the inefficiency of individual abbots or the elders in the Sangha Council.

The main problem is the governing system of the clergy itself. The closed and unaccountable system breeds problems and fosters widespread violations of monastic codes of conduct. This centralised system has not only rendered the elders weak and inefficient, it has put their moral standards up to public question.

Bangkok Post *March 3, 2015*

Not in Need of a “Status Crutch”

*Constitution Drafting Committee chairman Prasong Soonsiri
is correct when he points out that Buddhism does not need
to be labelled the national religion.*

The decline in morality and continued disarray of Buddhism over the past several decades have prompted many Buddhists to try to strengthen the religion. One of the measures has been a call that Buddhism be declared the official national religion in the new constitution, whose first draft will be finished today. In the past, Buddhism was an inseparable part of Thai life, history, and culture. Today, however, Thai people live a life that is increasingly separated from Buddhist teachings. The proof is in the sharp rise in crime, widespread corruption, domestic violence especially against women and children, proliferation of gambling, promiscuity, and the unprecedented obsession with occult practices and talismans. All these raise the question: Is Buddhism still part and parcel of Thai life?

There is nothing wrong with the campaign to name Buddhism as our state religion. The problem is that we can't make it true by writing a passage down in the constitution. Suppose we had a new constitution with Buddhism codified as the state religion today, do you believe that crime, rape, or corruption cases would go away? Do you believe Thailand would cease to be a paradise for the flesh trade? Do you believe people would stop killing one another?

The only difference would be an increased sense of puzzlement among foreigners or people who uphold different religions: Since Buddhism, which preaches compassion and peace, was made the national religion, why are Thais still doing violent and vile things? It does not take a clause in the constitution to make Buddhism our state religion. What it takes is a return of the Buddhist teachings into the hearts of the people.

While the government's support would be necessary to realise the mission—an issuing of legislation to correct structural flaws and a provision of financial assistance or capable personnel—it is not as important as cooperation from the Sangha Council and the general public.

Among proponents of the state religion status, an argument seems to prevail that Buddhism is in decline due to lack of state support, thus the proposal that the national status would help. Some urge that the government allocate more budget to Buddhist organisations or activities. But do these organisations suffer from poverty? The answer is: not at all.

The Sangha Council and temples around the country receive massive amounts of donations from the public. Where does the money go? To buildings, mostly. A hundred million, or sometimes a billion baht, can be spent on majestic chapels and temples, but

little can be found to sponsor education for monks and novices, or to organise courses on moral ethics for youngsters. The irony is that whereas some urban temples have in their coffers billions of baht, many rural-based ones struggle with scarcity—some cannot provide enough food for their monks and novices.

The problem with Buddhism, therefore, is not the lack of support from the government but the lack of awareness among Buddhists of all levels of the woes within. Try contemplating these questions: How much better would Buddhism be if richer temples were to help with or sponsor the education of monks and novices from poor, rural temples? How much in terms of Buddhist education would we gain from the money that goes straight into the construction of grandiose edifices or the making of talismans?

The responsibility lies at all levels, starting with the Sangha Council, the Buddhist clergy's governing body. For the record, the education of monks is at a crisis stage. More than 80% of monks and novices flunk either the Dharma or Pali studies while 100,000 of them do not have the chance to study for the entry-level Nak Tam Tri Dharma examination. This is not to mention the quality of the education. At present, each temple is responsible for the education of its monks. The Sangha Council only takes care of the examination. Even though repeated calls have been made that a reform of monks' education be conducted, the council has consistently ignored them, despite its having the full authority to do so. Under the circumstances, there is little the government can do or contribute.

King Rama V actually once tried to initiate a reform in monastic education. The King established the Maha Mongkut Buddhist University and Maha Chulalongkorn Buddhist University with the hope of educating monks so that they could give guidance

to people in a rapidly changing world. Even though the King's attempt was fully supported by his brother, Prince Wachirayarn, then abbot of Wat Boworniwet and head of the Tammayut sect, the overhauling and upgrading of monastic schools and curricula was stopped after a few years because of opposition from senior monks, who viewed that monks had no business learning about new things or the secular world.

The push for Buddhism to be labelled a national religion stems from the belief that its stability—even prosperity or decline—hinges mainly on the government. But has the government shown any achievement in that respect? Can it take care of even basic problems such as making temples alcohol-free zones? Even though it is against the Five Precepts to drink alcohol, it is common practice in many temples during festivals. It seems only the local monks and communities are in a position to tackle such a problem, but apparently they can't. Why? Because monks have become weak and the communities complacent. Now, do we think that if we write in the constitution that Buddhism is our national religion, we will rid our temples of alcohol?

So far, we have covered only problems regarding monks. However, a big part that contributes to the suffering of Buddhism has to do with the decline in people's morality. The best the government can do in this regard is to force children to study more moral courses or the general public to listen to more sermons—the usual stunts that have proved a miserable failure in instilling moral ethics in people's minds. Indeed, what the government can do to strengthen people's morality is to come up with measures, both legal and institutional, that will prop up the much-weakened institution of the family. For example, what can be done to allow modern parents to spend more time with their children? Or, what

can be done to prevent materialism from spreading all over the mass media? These are actions the government can take to help shore up ailing morality.

But these are measures we can actually push forward or achieve without having to designate Buddhism as the state religion in the charter. Being Buddhist is in the mind and in conduct. It is not in a label or brand. Indeed, the labelling, if allowed to go through, would put a blind on these problems and prevent them from being properly addressed. Why? Because the Buddhist communities would then have an excuse not to do anything and shift the responsibility to the government—"It's the state religion, isn't it?"

There is a major concern that the designating of Buddhism as the national religion would cause a religious rift in the country, where about 5% of the population belongs to other faiths. The feared belligerence would not occur if we all followed our religious faith with an open mind. The reality, however, is far from ideal. The reality is many groups of people are so absorbed in their own beliefs that they can't open their minds to different ideas or perspectives. This is especially true when fervent nationalism is brought into play.

We have witnessed people who have issued personal threats and curses against academic scholars who argued that the first stone inscription at Sukhothai may not have been made by King Ramkhamhaeng as believed. We also saw public harassment against the academic who questioned the existence of legendary figure Tao Suranaree. Some people still protest against women entering the inner sanctum of the stupa (*chedi*) where sacred relics are enshrined. These events happen so frequently that they call into question whether Thai people still practice tolerance as

taught by Lord Buddha? This drop in tolerance is not a healthy background for the designation of Buddhism as the state religion, as the move would inevitably make people equate being Thai with being Buddhist—a dangerous idea that could lead to discrimination against people of other religions as well as those of the same faith who happen to think differently.

With such a concept in mind, it would be easy to fall into the ultra-nationalist trap of calling those who do not support the state religion—or in the future any move to benefit Buddhism at the expense of other religions—as being un-Thai. This trap has proved to be the trigger that tipped conflicts into bloodshed in the past. On this note, it is important now that both proponents and opponents of the state religion campaign start to show tolerance and stop condemning people who support different ideas.

The thing is, differences of opinion have become a normal thing in the present. We have to live with them. And the only way we can live with all these opposing ideas and campaigns is to practice tolerance. There is an anecdotal story about Dr. Dan Beach Bradley, an American missionary who came to Bangkok during the reign of King Mongkut (1851-68) to proselytise Christianity. One day, Dr. Bradley stopped by a shop selling Buddha images and started to condemn the worship of a Buddhist icon. As this is a tropical country, Dr Bradley got tired after a while. The shop proprietor sympathised with the tired missionary and so invited Dr. Bradley into the shop to sit down and rest. Then, he inquired why Dr. Bradley thought so. Dr. Bradley was very impressed that the shop owner did not show animosity back to him, so he wrote the story down as a record.

What the shop owner from the reign of King Rama IV did represent was religious tolerance and what it's like to have Buddhism

enshrined in our minds. If Buddhism is firmly rooted in our minds, there is no point of writing it down in the charter.

Written in 2007

Buddhism at a Crossroads

Hundreds of protesters led by monks and nuns took to the streets recently to demand a Ministry of Buddhism. Leading reformist monk Phra Paisal Visalo believes their proposal falls short of addressing key problems.

The importance of Buddhism to Thai people cannot be overstated. That is one reason why hundreds of people, monks and nuns included, marched to Parliament House early last month to demand setting up a Ministry of Buddhism. Such a ministry would mean the state would provide a budget and personnel to address the problems threatening the country's main religion. But should we put the future of Buddhism in the hands of the government? I would argue that if we truly wish to restore and support Buddhism, we have to find ways to involve lay people and communities in the process.

History Tells Us Something.

In the past, Theravada Buddhism thrived here amid a balanced relationship with the government, monastic Sangha, and lay communities. The Sangha guided people in the path of dhamma, while the government and people were responsible for supplying monks with necessities and for monitoring their practices. When the three elements worked well together, the religion flourished.

Another history lesson: Buddhism's disappearance from India did not have to do with the invasion of Muslim armies, as many believe. Hinduism came under attack as well, but clearly survived. The reason behind the decline of Buddhism in India was excessive state patronage. This led monks to congregate at the then-prominent Buddhist university, Nalanda, and lose touch with lay communities. Over time, ordinary people came to believe that religious matters were the only concern of monks. When Nalanda was destroyed, Buddhism had no solid ground left on which to continue.

In Thailand, over the centuries, it is true that the monarchy played an important part in upholding the religion. Royal support, however, was limited to important monasteries in the capital and big cities. The majority of temples and monks survived by public support. The monarchy's ability to ensure that monks stayed within the bounds of the monastic *vinaya* was also limited, even when the monarchy had absolute power. During the reign of King Rama I, 128 monks were disrobed. That number increased to 500 in the reign of King Rama III. Even so, attempts to clean up the Sangha were limited to temples in the capital.

The practice and discipline of monks who lived far from Bangkok was controlled by their local communities. It is undeniable that this sort of local social control is what helped Buddhism

to survive until today.

Buddhism began to decline when the three-pronged relationship of government, monastic Sangha, and lay communities lost balance. The downturn began about 100 years ago, when the Sangha was pulled towards the state and away from the community by the Sangha Act, more widely known as the *Ror Sor 121* bill. It was first implemented in 1903 and unified Buddhist administration under the Sangha Supreme Council.

As religious affairs came under government control, communities had less say. The temple, which traditionally belonged to the community, was classified by law as an “asset of the religion” and came under state control. The villagers’ voice was no longer a factor when it came to many issues, including questions about whether certain temples should be built or maintained. These issues were now up to the State.

The State took control of promotions within the monk hierarchy. Although part of that power was later returned to the Sangha Supreme Council, the effect remained the same - lay people were kept at a distance from monastic matters. Eventually, people paid less attention. The problem is that religious affairs have not been a priority for the State. That is one reason why we have seen so many serious problems with monks and monasteries and why there has been a call for the establishment of a Ministry of Buddhism. It is not fair, of course, to place all the blame on the state. We cannot dismiss the fact that lay people have turned their backs on the religion as well.

Take the alarming deterioration in the quality of education for monks. Are ordinary Buddhists aware of this? Have they shown any interest in tackling the problem? While a massive percentage of donations go to construct ordination halls and

other temple buildings around the country, only a tiny amount is allocated to schools for monks and novices. Setting up a new ministry might mean a bigger budget for the well-being of monks and the religion, but it would definitely weaken the three-pronged relationship even further. If such a ministry was set up, lay people would become even more complacent about religious matters.

The existing Department of Religious Affairs is not very large, but people still expect it to resolve every scandal involving monks. Lay people no longer think that it is their job to shore up the religion. This tendency would become more pronounced if the department was upgraded to a full-fledged ministry. The ministry would take over even more of the functions that used to be the responsibility of lay communities. These functions would serve, in turn, as more justification for expanding the ministry's budget and powers. Once you have an official body taking care of the organisation of temples, lay people have no room to contribute. It's even possible that people would stop making merit or supporting their local temple, because they'd figure the government was doing it.

One can look at any rural society for evidence of the adverse impact of government intervention. Whenever State mechanisms and financing arrive, villagers quickly depend on them to solve all problems. They stop helping themselves and one another. Is there now any village where people are willing to use their own initiative to build a new road or repair a bridge? Most villages will only do so when they get money from the state or the Township Administrative Organisation. Without financing, villagers won't work together on such issues, even if it's for the common good.

There is no question that the idea for a Ministry of Buddhism was put forward in good faith. But we can't ignore the negative effects it would have on the duties of individual Buddhists. The

central question is: What is causing the decline of Buddhism? Is it a lack of money? Patronage? Power? Or, a lack of awareness among Buddhists? If money and power are the answer to problems, why do we still have a plethora of social ills? The Interior Ministry is equipped with wide powers and an enormous budget, but it can't seem to cope with problems like drugs, crime, and gambling.

The key to solving problems in Buddhism is the active participation of civil society. Instead of raising a leviathan ministry, the government would do well to mobilise the public to take an active part in matters concerning the religion. One solution it should consider is setting up a decentralised system of committees for the administration of religious affairs at all levels, from the national down to townships. These committees, which would have to be recognised by law, would be tasked with administering and supporting matters concerning the religion, including expanding spiritual knowledge, promoting Buddhist ethics and promoting education for monks. The committees would be sponsored by the government and paid for with local taxes. Members should be elected in the same manner as members were elected to the National Constitution Drafting Assembly.

An assembly of Buddhists should also be established to monitor the work, policies, and budgets of these administrative committees. Both organisations should contain monk and nun representatives. Both would provide forums for religious and lay people to exchange views about the religious situation both nationally and in their localities. Such forums could consider issues, such as making sure that monks maintain discipline, deciding how to deal with those who stray off the rightful path, and screening men before they enter the monkhood.

Reviving the role of lay people would help restore balance in governing the religion. It would be a longer process, but we really have no choice. State control might bring quicker results, but in the long run would just exacerbate the problem. The proposal to establish both local administration committees and the assembly of concerned Buddhists does not dismiss the role of the state.

The government must continue to play an active role in maintaining the well-being of Buddhism and monks, partly through the soon-to-be-established National Buddhism Bureau. That office would maintain a close working relationship at all levels with the local committees for the administration of religious affairs. It would serve as the government's agent in allocating budgets for the committees and assembly. To maintain the health of the religion, the government should promote the active participation of the public, not takeover the public's job. That's why we shouldn't look to the proposed ministry as the answer to restore Buddhism in national life.

Written in 2009





03

Environment

A Buddhist Perspective on Learning from Nature: at Phra Paisal's Temple School

“Listen to the trees speak, hear the stones teach dhamma.”

Buddhadasa Bhikku

I would like to welcome you to Thailand, especially to this area. As some of you may know, Chiang Dao is well known not only for its natural heritage, but also for its association with Buddhist saints. Many famous monks lived, stayed, and practised meditation here, especially on the mountain of Chiang Dao. As a result, local people consider it a sacred place. Even now, many monks still come to the mountain. Some come here for a pilgrimage; some for a retreat. Some stay for weeks and months in the forest to practise meditation.

In fact, it is not just here at Chiang Dao where ecological, cultural, and spiritual values converge. Many natural sites or things in the country are regarded not only for the physical benefits they bring, but also for their role in soothing the soul. When villagers look at a natural scene, like the forest or mountain, they do not see a source of materials that they can use for their physical needs. They see a place of spiritual meaning, whose value might not be easily calculated, but can be felt in the heart. In other words, when local people look at a forest, they do not think of it as a natural resource or a habitat for wildlife. They consider it home to what they believe is sacred – divine beings that reside in trees or the gods of the mountain.

In paddy fields, we will find not only rice seedlings or paddy ears, but also the venerable Mae Phosop, or Goddess of Grain. In the same vein, a river or stream is not just a source of our drinking water but also an abode of Phra Mae Khongkha, Goddess of Water, who watches over and protects the resource.

It has long been a tradition for Buddhist monks to visit the forest for meditation. In fact, many monasteries are located right in the forest, like my monastery in the Northeast of Thailand. This tradition in which monks live and practise meditation in the forest was formed by the close connection between Buddhism and nature. The history of Buddhism and the life of Buddha himself are intimately linked with nature. According to legend, the Buddha was born under a tree. He attained enlightenment under a tree, the Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*). He spent most of the 45 years of his mission as the Buddha in the forest. He also passed away under a tree. So we can see that Buddha had a close relationship with nature. His disciples also preferred and advocated living in

the forest.

The question is: Why are Buddhism and nature closely related? I think it is because the purpose of Buddhist meditation is to understand the essence of nature – the essence of the world as it is. According to the Buddha, the word “dhamma” (nature) covers all aspects of nature – not only the physical, but the mental and spiritual aspects as well. That is why the Buddha advised all Buddhists, especially monks, to practise and learn from the forest, from nature. There are many aspects of nature from which we can learn and benefit. The Buddha tried to encourage his disciples to have a proper attitude towards nature.

The learning-from-nature emphasis is not limited only to Buddhism, though. If we look around, we will find that an appreciation of nature as a source of spiritual well-being has long been embedded in human beings from every race around the world. It began to change only about a few hundred years ago.

Provider of Necessities, Inspirations, and Peace

Nature benefits us in many ways. First of all, it provides us with necessities of life: food, shelter, medicine, and clothing. Even more basic than that, water – which we can't live without – is also derived from nature. And, of course, this includes the very air we breathe.

The second benefit is what I call sensual pleasure. By sensual I mean the sights and sounds of nature. We do not only exploit natural resources in terms of food, goods, or mining, but we also learn to appreciate them. When we get up in the morning, we see a beautiful dawn. We hear bird songs and we smell flowers. So, we obtain sensual pleasure from seeing, from smelling, and from touching.

When we visit an island or the sea, we feel happy. The happiness is inspired by the sight and sound of nature – of the sea, an island, or the sky. In this sense, nature becomes a source of culture, an origin of arts and sometimes of entertainment. People go to the outdoors to ski, swim, or hike. These sensual pleasures may not help us earn a living, but they enrich our experience.

More importantly, we can learn to feel at peace, or to experience peace itself, when we are in the midst of nature. This third benefit is one that not many people understand. When we are in the forest, we will learn to appreciate not only its natural beauty but also peace in our mind.

The serenity is different from pleasure. To feel pleased, excited or joyful, the mind must be stimulated. To feel peaceful, the mind must be free. In this sense, peace of mind is more refined than pleasure.

I think this third aspect is what people really need. However, it is not easy to experience it sometimes because of outward distractions to our busy mind. When we put ourselves in natural surroundings, we may feel anxious or uneasy at first. But after a few days in the forest – a few days in nature without a television, cell phone, MP3 player or iPod – we may feel peace developing gradually and slowly in our heart. Indeed, peace is the nature of the mind with which all of us can come into touch when we stay in the tranquil, natural world and rid ourselves of distractions. I think this third benefit is the reason the Buddha advised his disciples and all Buddhists to live and practise meditation in natural surroundings so as to find that peace.

When we look at the sky at night, we may first wonder at its beauty. Once you learn to be aware of your mind, you will sense a feeling of peace that gradually develops. When you are at that

stage, you don't care about seeing something spectacular. Rather, you experience a peaceful feeling of being under the sky at night. I think this is a natural reaction to nature. Deep in our hearts, this is what we want. We seek peaceful experience. We are hungry for peace of mind, and that hunger can be addressed when we are in nature.

Once you find yourself in the midst of nature, try to live in its harmony as much as possible, without intervention from technology. I think one can develop a friendship with and respect for nature because I am confident that deep in our minds we long to go back to nature. There was an experiment in a hospital where they compared patients who stayed in a room with pictures depicting a scene from nature or with windows opening out to a green view, to those in a bare room with no access to nature. It turned out that patients in the room with some elements of nature recovered better than those without.

So, I think it is in our instinct to be connected to nature. However, many people are turning to technology now. They think about artificial things. Once they learn to get in touch with their original nature, they like to return to the forest.

Wisdom Like Dewdrops on a Leaf

Is this all that nature has to offer? According to Buddhism, there is more. Nature not only gives material necessities, sensual pleasures and peace of mind, but also wisdom.

While the feeling of peace is temporary, wisdom endures. Nature can reveal many truths to us. When we see an old leaf falling from a tree, for example, we realise the transient nature of life. There is a Japanese saying that in a dewdrop on a leaf, the truth of life can be shining.

Nature also reminds us humans of how tiny we are. In the middle of the sea, the mountains, or under a vast blanket of stars, we become aware of our own insignificance. Self-centredness is pure ignorance. Underneath it all, we are not any different from an ant or a speck of dust, but we often forget this basic truth.

Nature also teaches us that true freedom has nothing to do with material possessions. A bird can fly everywhere with just its two wings. Isn't it laughable to boast our freedom to travel when every time we go on a trip, we usually fill up our car with all the gadgets? Indeed, the more we own, the less free we become.

I think wisdom is the most important thing we can harvest from nature. It is the main reason why the Buddha advised his disciples to spend time in natural surroundings, especially in the forest, to learn about one's self and to learn about the nature of existence. With that realisation, one can be free from attachment, which is the main cause of suffering. When we see a falling leaf, if we are mindful enough, we realise that all things are impermanent – not just the leaf or tree but also our own life. When we look at the cloud, we see our inter-relationship with nature. We see that the sun, the moon, the sky, the rain, the river, the sea, the animals, and human beings are all connected in one way or another. That complex web of connection can sometimes be seen in a puff of cloud or a small drop of water.

I think this fourth aspect is very important for us to understand. Ajahn Mun, a renowned forest monk, who lived 70 years ago, is one of the Buddhist saints who achieved enlightenment in this area, in Chiang Dao. One day, a senior monk asked him how he could understand dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha, without ever attending a formal school. Ajahn Mun replied that for those with wisdom, dhamma is everywhere. Ajahn Mun

understood dhamma deeply because he learned from nature. We can do that as well, if we learn how to read into these truths that nature reveals to us.

The lesson from nature can be like radio or TV signals. They are everywhere, but we cannot perceive them until we have a radio or TV set that can transform the signals into comprehensible sounds or images. Wisdom from nature is like that. It manifests itself everywhere. The question is whether the mind is open or receptive enough to understand the revelation.

Tall Trees Have Deep Roots

The close relationship between Buddhist teachings and nature is very special to me, not just as a Buddhist monk, but also as a social activist. I'm involved with many social activities concerning human rights, peace, non-violence and forest conservation. I find that to sustain those activities, we need a solid foundation. We need strong and deep roots. It's like a tree. A tree can grow tall and spread its branches only when its roots are deep enough, or expansive enough.

When you see a big tree, you exclaim: Oh, it is very tall! The canopy is very dense; the branches extending wide. If you could examine its roots, you would see that the tree can grow so tall because its roots can reach as deeply. Without the deep roots, the tree wouldn't stand tall. Without the expansive support underground, it can't branch out. It won't be able to withstand a storm or survive all kinds of predators.

What have I learned from a tree? I learned that if we cultivate the mind to be profound enough, we would be able to reach a source of pure joy deep inside it. That inner joy from within our

own hearts would serve as our sustenance, as nourishment, that helps us to carry on any task with stamina and happiness.

All of us have two aspects to our life. There is an external element - our work, livelihood, and relationship with others; and an internal one, which sustains our external activities.

The external and internal aspects of our lives cannot be separated. When we develop our inner life to the point that we can tap into a source of happiness within, we will be strong enough to overcome obstacles both in work and in life. We may be criticised. We might even fail. But we will still stand strong because we are nourished by an inner source of fulfilment.

Many people equate happiness with outside factors – money, praise, fame, or admiration. But the truth is that all these things are not meant to last. They change all the time, easily too. If we allow our state of mind to depend on these things, it will be ever changing and constantly chaotic as well. We won't be able to find peace. But if we focus on cultivating our inner life, we will find self-contentment from within, which will nurture other activities we are engaged in. This is spirituality.

You can learn a lot from a tree. It transforms everything, good or bad, to produce positive results. It turns animal carcasses or dead leaves into beautiful flowers and delicious fruits. The bad can be transformed into the good, if the roots are healthy enough.

Even in the dry season, a big tree remains evergreen, whereas a small shrub withers. A lot of trees remain green even in the heat of summer in Thailand. The leaves don't fall because the roots are deep enough to reach into water underground when there is no rain. Even though the sun is scorching, the trees still stand and give shelter to animals.

What does this mean to us? Or what does it mean to me? It means that if we have this spirituality, we can tap into a source of happiness deep in our inner being. We can endure the hardship of daily life. We may face criticism. We may fail. But we'll still feel fresh and strong and happy because deep in our minds we can touch the source of happiness.

A Peace of Mind Beyond Praise and Blame

As a social activist, I try to cope with suffering and change both in our life and the world around us. To achieve this, meditation is the key. The first goal of meditation is to find peace of mind. We can do it by staying in a quiet forest. Then, we have to be mindful and aware of our negative feelings – anger, hatred, disappointment, or sorrow. Once we learn to be aware of our state of mind, we learn how to be free from emotions, to let them go.

In the beginning, we become peaceful when all is quiet around us. A serene forest, majestic mountain or calm sea can give us solitude. We absorb silence from the forest and plant it in our mind.

If we are in a place that is very noisy, it is difficult to find peace. However, once we learn how to maintain inner peace with mindfulness and self-awareness, we can be peaceful even when we are in the middle of a city, in the street, or amid a crowd. True peace is one that is established in the heart. The environment is a facilitating factor, not a necessity.

The impermanence we see in nature is no different from that of fame, success, prosperity or our own existence. It's subject to the same law of impermanence. So, when we achieve fame, when people admire us, we have to understand that this will not last. It

will change. Fame can be replaced by scandal. Praise can turn into gossip. Good health can change to sickness. Success can become failure. In fact, someone made an interesting point that success is a form of failure that will show up in the long run – that in success is hidden failure. The observation is similar to a Buddhist saying that health and sickness are one and the same thing. The Buddha once said that death is in life, sickness is in health, and ageing is in youth. These things cannot be separated. If we can understand this truth, we will not be impressed by fame, good health, prosperity or success, because we are aware that they will soon change. They will soon transform into the opposite.

Somebody once asked me how to deal with criticism. What can we do to avoid being angry or sad when criticised? I told them the trick is not to be overtly happy when people praise you because if you feel joy in the face of admiration, it is inevitable that you will become sad and angry in the face of criticism. This is the rule of life, the rule of the game. If you feel happy when you win, you will feel sad when you lose.

When we learn that goodness and badness are two sides of the same coin, and that they can change back and forth, we will be able to stabilise the mind. We will remain calmer and more collected when something happens to us, whether it is good or bad.

This is what I call peace. This is peace we can learn from meditation. This is peace we can cultivate from the truth that nature reveals to us. For me, this kind of practice and understanding helps me to face fluctuations in life -- a success or failure of work. It helps me not to feel disappointed when things do not turn out the way I wish. Someone might ask if this kind of life is boring. To me it is not, because the real source of happiness is in the mind. It

does not come from external conditions. Internal happiness lasts longer.

In Buddhism, there is no separation between our own nature and that which is outside us. That is why there is a correlation between what happens in nature and the quality of the mind. When I teach meditation to city people, I remind them to try to observe and appreciate nature in their daily lives, in their everyday surroundings.

If the mind is open to nature, we will feel free, even in prison. During World War II, many people were incarcerated in concentration camps, like the one in Auschwitz. Although they were put in the most terrible surroundings, some managed to survive. These people said that they had the heart to live on because they could see a beautiful flower outside the window or a bird that perched outside a window in the harsh, cold weather. Seeing a tiny and fragile seedling emerge from the hard soil could inspire people to keep up hope and keep on fighting. This is a lesson from nature. This is what I try to remind people – that you can learn from nature wherever you are.

As I have always stressed, in the beginning of our practice we can learn the truth from nature by being in it. Then, once we have sufficiently developed the mind, we can learn from nature inside us. I think the nature inside us is very important. When people say, “Go back to nature,” we should not think only about going back to nature out there in the countryside, but also going back to the nature inside us. It’s very important.

Ethics from Nature

The wisdom that we can develop from nature can be divided into

two categories. The first concerns the truth of existence known as the Three Marks of Existence or Three Dhamma Seals: 1) Impermanence (*anicca*), that is, all conditioned things are in a constant state of flux and eventually cease to exist; 2) Unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), that is, nothing found in the physical world or the psychological realm can bring lasting deep satisfaction; and Non-self (*anatta*), that is, nothing has a separate existence or a separate life, but everything has to “inter-be” with everything else. These come under the category of truths that we have to realise.

The second category concerns an ethics to be gained from nature. For example, we can learn about the diligence of ants or bees. These small creatures work diligently all the time and never know what “hopelessness” means. We human beings sometimes feel discouraged and despair. But do you see despair in an ant or a bee? Never! If we destroy an ant’s nest or a beehive, they just start building it again. They never feel desolated. The ants or bees may move to another place if they feel unsafe, but they would never stop building a new home. Thus, when you feel despair, you can observe these tiny creatures and feel empowered.

There is a tale of a monk in the Buddha’s time who felt dispirited by the meditation routine. One day, he saw an elephant that had become stuck in a big hole. Although a long time had passed, the elephant did not stop trying to pull itself out of the hole. Then, the monk understood: If a beast like that elephant did not give up easily, why should he? As a result, the monk continued to practise meditation until he attained enlightenment. This is what I call a lesson on ethics from nature.

We can all learn from plants, even small shrubs. Last year, I organised a spiritual green walk-athon called “Dhammayatra,” which involved trekking through several hillside communities

in the Phu Khong area of Chaiyaphum province in northeastern Thailand. For seven full days we had to trudge along under a scorching sun. Everyone was feeling hot and tired, and our party was close to total disarray.

At one point we walked by a small shrub. Diminutive and fragile-looking, it had sprouted up right by the side of the road. The intriguing thing about it was its bright red flowers. Despite the sweltering heat, the flowers had turned to directly face the sun, their petals fully open, almost as if they were greeting it with a smile. Seeing that, we all felt suddenly refreshed. If those dainty blooms weren't afraid of the sun, how should we be?

Plants have the ability to transform sunlight into shade. And they are great teachers, too; there are so many things to be learned from them. When we humans have problems, we should try to emulate plants - to turn hurdles into lessons, suffering into happiness.

In my monastery, I stay by a big pond. In October, a kingfisher usually pays a visit. The bird is alone. All day, it perches on a lotus pod in the middle of the pond. The sun is strong but the kingfisher sits there in equanimity. I feel ashamed when I see that kingfisher. This is because sometimes I feel unhappy to be alone. I feel restless and I cannot stand the heat for long. But the kingfisher remains there, looking calm and cool like a hermit.

When the kingfisher is able to catch a fish, it's happy even though the fish is small. It is always content with what it has. Unlike the bird, I sometimes am not satisfied with what I have. I want more things. I want them better. And I want them bigger – or more high-tech, like a more modern computer. But the kingfisher seems perfectly fine with what it has, perfectly happy in its solitude. So, when I start to feel restless, I think of the kingfisher and I feel

better. I have learned many things from this kingfisher, so I regard it as a teacher. This teacher of mine always comes by towards the end of the rainy season, before winter starts. It reminds me to be content with a solitary life.

The first time I spotted the kingfisher, I admired its beauty. It has beautiful wings and magnificent plumage. That is what I called sensual pleasure. After a while, that pleasure cultivates a sense of peace in my mind. When the mind is at peace, I start to see dhamma in the tiny kingfisher.

I think we can learn a lot from other animals, too. In the beginning, we may see only their beauty. But when we reflect on their nature or behaviour, we see something about ourselves. We get in touch with goodness inside us – the feeling of being at peace. We realise some truths and virtues that are necessary for leading a good life—such as how to cooperate with one another, how to co-exist in peace, even how to sacrifice—from what we see in plants and animals.

I would like to tell you a story about an incident that happened a few months ago in Canada. I didn't witness it myself. A person mentioned it in a letter to me. It goes like this. A goose somehow got trapped in an iced-up stream. I don't know how it got there in the first place. However, the temperature dropped very quickly, and the goose was caught in the ice.

Then, a flock of swans arrived. At this point, the writer became anxious because geese and swans do not enjoy a good relationship. She was afraid that when the swan saw the goose, they would attack it. But what happened was truly amazing. When the swans saw the goose, they tried to help it. Four or six of them tried to peck the ice off the goose's feet. They did so for a long time, until the goose could lift up its feet.

Still, the goose could not fly away because its wings were held down by ice flakes. The swans thus helped preen feathers on the goose's wings until it could extend and fold them freely. Once the goose regained its strength, the swans continued on their way.

I think this is an astonishing account. It teaches that compassion exists beyond species. We can learn a lot about cooperation from these animals. This is another kind of wisdom that we can learn from nature, from the world of animals, besides wisdom in spiritual terms.

A Guiding Light

The benefits of nature come in many aspects and dimensions. That is why Buddhism emphasizes how to live in peace with nature, to let it guide us to mental calm and serenity.

When the mind is free from distraction, the truths from nature can enlighten it. These truths are omnipresent, but we do not always see them because the mind is not free enough. It is only when the mind is still, when we are mindful of things around us, that we will realise these lessons from nature. When we can achieve that, it will seem like there is light in the mind. With that light, the darkness will disappear. Sorrow and sufferings will have no way to hide.

The late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, whose centenary of birth we are celebrating this year (May 2006), set up Suan Mokkh Forest Monastery so that we could live in harmony with nature. When people came to visit him at the monastery, he would advise them to go “listen to the trees speak and hear the stones teach dhamma.”

The more we learn from nature, the freer we will be from

suffering. The wisdom that we gain will lead us to peaceful bliss even when we are no longer in natural surroundings. We will feel peaceful in a busy city, on a street, or in the workplace, because we know how to put suffering away from our heart.

When there is a light of wisdom in the mind, we will not feel gloomy when people say bad things about us. We will be mindful not to take it personally, but to consider if we can make any use of the criticisms. As it is often said, sufferings are not there to be lamented. Rather, they are there to be analysed. When we can develop this right attitude, we will remain calm no matter what happens in life.

An enlightened mind will lead us to lasting peace. Wisdom is thus the ultimate benefit we can gain from nature. Indeed, if we look deeper into the matter, we will learn that human beings and nature are inseparable. We are no more important than nature, as nature is no more important than us. In the end, human beings and nature are one.

Earth Expeditions Chiang Dao, Thailand June 13, 2005

Towards an Interfaith Alliance for the Rainforest

Without nature, human beings are nothing. Our existence is possible because of air, water, food, and other requisites provided by nature. Not only survival, our well-being also depends on the generosity of nature. We feel relaxed and become peaceful when we are surrounded by the forest, sitting near the river, or touched by the wind from the sea. Even spiritual development is attainable when our mind is open to the ultimate truth manifested through nature.

We, the Buddhists, owe a great deal to nature. The origin of Buddhism was found in nature, since the Buddha attained enlightenment under a tree in a forest on the bank of a river. His first sermon was delivered in a forest. Many of his disciples achieved the enlightenment in the forest as well. It is not an exaggeration to say that the connection between Buddhism and nature is inseparable.

Nature deserves our respect and gratitude. Even the Buddha expressed his appreciation for the tree that sheltered him during his practice for enlightenment. Buddhists are, therefore, obliged to conserve nature out of gratitude. According to Buddhism, even breaking the branch of a tree that has given one shelter is as vicious as harming a friend who helps us.

Buddhists are advised to live in harmony with nature. Though we need nature to sustain our life, we should do it gently in the same way a bee collects pollen from the flower, neither polluting its beauty nor depleting its fragrance.

But what is happening now is quite alarming. Nature is being destroyed all over the world, even in Buddhist countries. Forests are slashed and burned in the name of development. Many species, which we Buddhists regard as friends in the cycle of birth and death, have become extinct. Now, we are going to reap what we sow. We are facing an ecological crisis that is threatening our survival as a species.

The ecological crisis we are facing now is fundamentally a spiritual crisis. Deep in our mind we are disturbed by the sense of lack. In our quest for fulfillment, we get lost. We mistakenly believe that material acquisition will fulfill our lives, so we try to accumulate material wealth as much as possible, at the expense of nature. In spite of enormous material wealth, we never become fulfilled. We are not aware that the sense of lack will disappear only when we attain inner peace, not by gaining more material possessions.

Without inner peace and fulfillment, human beings will not stop destroying nature for material gratification. This is one of the issues in which all faiths can play a significant role. Every

faith emphasizes the importance of inner peace and spiritual fulfillment. Each can help people to realize inner peace and freedom from excessive material desire. Cooperation among various faiths is badly needed, since faiths are vital elements in the struggle against extreme materialism, which is the main reason behind global environmental destruction, especially massive deforestation.

Faiths are also one of the most powerful cultural and social forces that can inspire people all over the world to work together to protect nature for the common good of the humanity. They can join hand-in-hand to support sustainable development and stop any policies that destroy nature permanently for short term benefit. Any attempt to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor should be sanctioned by all faiths, since this gap contributes to environmental destruction in various ways. All faiths should consult and come up with alternative economics that aims for the enhancement of well-being—physically, socially, and spiritually—through moderate consumption.

There are many Buddhist communities in Thailand, especially Buddhist temples, which are working to protect forests in different parts of the country. Many Buddhist traditions are applied to instill in people a sense of respect and gratitude toward the forest. They are also mobilizing to stop illegal logging and deforestation. However, these attempts are not enough. More initiatives need to be undertaken, and they should be done in cooperation with other faiths in the near future.

Interfaith alliance is an important contribution to forest protection. I am happy and feel honored to be part of this initiative.

Nobel Peace Center, Oslo June 19, 2017

The Journey of Life:

A Spiritual Walk in
Chaiyaphum Benefits
not only Mother
Nature but the
Walkers Themselves

Today is the first time that I carry a heavy load with the lightest of hearts. It is the last day of the annual *dhammayatra*, a semi-spiritual, semi-ecological walk held by a group of monks and laypeople in Chaiyaphum to raise awareness of environmental degradation in the Lampathao watershed area. Every day we march on, often under the scorching sun, for a few kilometres from one village to the next. Twice daily we stop at a temple, either for lunch or for the night's rest. The food is rudimentary as is the accommodation. The scenery on both sides of the country roads we take seems mostly a vista of perennial monotony. Nothing much grows here besides cassava, eucalyptus, sugar cane, and weed grass. Only every now and then do we come across trees of any substantial size or flowers of unusual shapes and varieties.

And yet little by little I start to feel a sense of indescribable bliss expanding inside me. There is an inner contentment, peace, and freedom as if I have tapped a spring of life within myself while trudging up and down the hills and plateaus along with hundreds of other *dhammayatra* walkers, my companions on this one-of-a-kind spiritual journey.

Aware of the long hours of heat and dust, on any given day I deliberately try to bring as little as possible with me while walking. The rucksack can be put on the common luggage pickup trucks provided by those who set up the programme. I carry nothing but a bottle of drinking water in a ready-made strap, a camera, a *pakhaoma* loincloth to protect my head and a small carry-on bag to keep cash and coins. Still, even with such minimal belongings, I usually end up being one of the last of the entire group to arrive at each destination.

But this morning, after the first few steps, I notice two sisters, both in an advanced age, struggling with the bags of food and clothes they brought along with them. The old ladies just joined the pilgrimage the night before, in a rather impromptu fashion as they were visiting the same temple as our group. Thus, they knew little about preparation protocol. A middle-aged woman offers to help with one of the sister's belongings and I with the other's. After all, this is an opportunity to make some concrete merit right on the spot.

And while carrying the sister's two heavy plastic bags, I discover to my great delight that I can feel the load in my hand but without it being a burden on my mind.

"The body may suffer, but the mind doesn't have to; just be aware of the heat, the frustrations, and the pain without the mental attachment to any of those sensations," advised Phra Paisal

Visalo to fellow walkers on the morning of my arrival.

“Oh! And don’t forget to smile as you walk too,” added the monk as we started lining up in front of the temple.

Now in its 10th year, the Lampathao *dhammayatra* has attracted a steadily growing number of participants. From a small gathering of a dozen or more locals, the movement has evolved into a unique phenomenon where hundreds of people from different corners of the country take part every year in the arduous trek as “representatives of nature”. According to Phra Paisal, a mind that is sensitive enough will be able to hear the wails of Mother Earth, which has long been suffering from abuse at human hands.

Years ago, the Lampathao watershed area was among the most fertile in the Isaan region. Phra Paisal said his mentor, Luang Por Khamkian Suwanno, used to talk about the wild elephants, tigers, deer, and other beasts that once roamed Pu Lankha forest, where the Lampathao River originated.

However, in the mid 1960s, the Thai government began issuing logging concessions. Following the loggers were villagers seeking new land on which to earn a living. They cut down the remaining trees and turned the plots into fields of cassava, jute, and other cash crops promoted by the authorities. Listening to Phra Paisal describe how in those massive logging days the sounds of the falling trees could reverberate for hours, I try to imagine how wonderfully lush the Pu Lankha forest must have been and how sad to see the dry, barren hills with little sign of life surrounding us now.

The *dhammayatra* walk seeks in part to bring practical aspects of Buddhism to life. The forest is of vital importance to every being, not least the so-called dhamma practitioners. We can discover dhamma, says Phra Paisal, because of the very fact that

nature has been there for us to observe her marvellous successive changes as well as provide us with generous sustenance. So we choose "walking" as a way to send her crucial plea to the public; that we are willing to go to great lengths at our own expense to share our concerns for the well-being of our Earth mother.

But we are not only walking for the nature without but also the nature within. As I trudge forward, step by step, I learn to appreciate the value of having little. The less we carry, the freer we become. Just by opening our eyes we can see pretty flowers dancing in the periphery. When our ears are attuned to the quiet tempo of our heart (and the small drum played by a monk to mark our footsteps), we can also hear the soft, gentle rustle of the wind frolicking among the leaves.

And we become happy quite easily. A glass of cool water offered by the villagers quenches thirst right away. The occasional breeze that comes amid the relentless midday sun is something to be grateful for. Eventually the chaotic rhythms of the city, where every day our life is dictated by desires, worries, and anticipations, melt away as we march on.

Contrary to some preconceptions, *dhammayatra* is not an exercise in self-torture. The longer I walk, the more impressed and moved I become with this simple way of educating the mind that Lord Buddha has imparted onto us. I can be stronger and more persistent than I ever thought I could be.

Having a try at walking barefoot, I start to enjoy the cool, soothing feeling of connecting with the earth directly as well as to meditate on each step carefully lest I step on sharp-edged stones or pebbles. I have also learned not to fret about "minor" things—somehow we survived without much ado the nights at those temples with only two toilets to serve the hundreds of us. Slow as

I am, at least I manage to make it at the end of each day. There is no deadline, no competition, no particular goal to strive for. The most important step is the step I am taking at this very moment. And the most important people are those who are in front of, next to, and right behind me.

Without engaging in small talk, I become aware that my fellow walkers can all be my teachers, for various lessons.

There is a mother and son pair who quietly go about picking up rubbish along the way. The little boy asks his mum why they have to clean up after others. I can't catch the mother's reply, but the scene reminds me of Phra Paisal's talk one morning when he cited an African proverb to the Isaan villagers about how we must do our best to keep the environment in good shape for future generations. After all, he said, "Nature is not a heritage passed down from our ancestors but something we have borrowed from our descendants."

Then there is the lesson of perseverance. A young, long-haired lad has been tagging along behind the group day after day trying to pick up as much of the rubbish strewn along the way as he can. The rubbish bag in his hand grows heavier and heavier the longer he walks, but he shows no sign of giving up this seemingly futile mission. I ask him why he is doing this, and his succinct answer pierces my heart, "Because I can't pass it by without doing something."

On this "journey of life", each of us can become a guiding light for another, knowingly or not. At times, I feel so exhausted that I toy with the idea of giving up (and hopping on the stand-by pickup available to those who need to rest). Then I think of that young, blind woman who walks on and on, sometimes barefoot, a few metres in front of me. Nong Gig—that is her nickname—came

with a friend whose arm she may be holding, but her defiant spirit probably has no need for such a clutch. When I meet her again by chance, I ask for her secret. Her face all tanned, she says she can stick it out, because she learned about a 74-year-old man who came with his daughter. "If the old man can make it, why can't I?," she says matter-of-factly.

Even the Isaan folks have taught me some simple pearls of wisdom. In one village, having dropped behind the rest of the group as usual, I ask for directions from a middle-aged woman who is passing by. The kind villager tells me how glad she feels to have a chance to offer us some lunch at the community temple. Such simple generosity towards strangers is rare in the big city with all its material abundance verging on excess and extravagance.

While relating the problems of deforestation and the spread of toxic chemicals in the soil and waterways, Phra Paisal cautions against blaming it all on the local people. The government's policies, such as promoting cash crops and not addressing the widening social inequality among the populace, have inadvertently played a large role in the polluting of the world. Our consumerist lifestyle, sucking up resources from rural areas, is no less an accomplice. If we can view everything with an impartial and understanding mind, we will be able to see the larger picture. And perhaps we will understand why the folks here may support a certain politician despite his fundamental flaws and in contrast to the opinions of their more educated, city-based counterparts, says Phra Paisal.

During the week-long *dharmayatra*, the procession is marked by flags of different colours fluttering cheerfully in the wind. There are the saffron-coloured wheel-of-dharma flags, the

tri-coloured national flags, the flags carried by the young and old, men and women, in shades of green, yellow, pink, orange, blue, and purple. The colours are only used temporarily to help in the division of volunteer labour among the participants. No more, no less. If we could realise the folly of attaching to a dogma, a person, a belief, wouldn't we live a richer, freer existence that could benefit more people, not least ourselves?

The theme of the 10th *dhammayatra* is, incidentally, "to go against the stream". The trek may be more difficult in the beginning as we struggle against the altitude of the land. Yet the higher we go, the cleaner and fresher the air and water and the greater number of trees. As we reach the higher plateaus and look back on the plains below, we come to recognise the beauty of the countryside much better. Likewise, Phra Paisal says the higher up we stand, the less discriminatory a view of the world we will have. We will see humans as humans, not as rich versus poor, Thais versus foreigners, yellow-shirts versus red-shirts. And way above the earth, we will no longer be able to distinguish between national borders. We will see beyond the worldly divisions between humans, and between humans and other beings. The wisdom of seeing oneness in everything will spring forth as we drop our own greed, anger, and ignorance.

The last stop is in sight. Only a few hundred metres and we will reach the main hall of Wat Pah Mahawan, Phra Paisal's forest temple where a traditional Isaan *bai-sri* ceremony will greet us. But the end is in fact only the beginning, I have come to realise. For the real *dhammayatra* is a life-long journey, which will continue until our last breath, with the present step being the most important one.

By Vasana Chinvarakorn Bangkok Post published January 26, 2010

Global Warming vs Dhamma Cooling

*“Dhamma is indispensable during this time.
Nature and dhamma are inseparable. Before restoring nature,
we should restore dhamma in our mind first.”*

The natural environment around us has plunged into a catastrophic state. But have we ever noticed that the natural environment inside our body, which includes our peace of mind, is also entering the same situation due to our boundless greed and over consumption? As the world’s temperature steadily soars, the temperature inside our mind is also heating up rapidly.

Consequently, global and mental warming situations are not so different, since both phenomena are equally crucial. They need to be cured simultaneously, since internal heat can affect the external environment. We all should bear in mind that we can survive only if nature survives.

Virulent Threats

According to Phra Paisal Visalo, the abbot of Wat Pa Sukhato in Chaiphum province, the major cause of global warming and other environmental problems stems from humans' detrimental attitudes towards nature.

"Humans fail to realise that they're part of nature. They can survive and maintain their race throughout the passage of time, simply because of nature's mercy and hospitality. Humans should be grateful to nature," suggested the monk who has devoted his life to protecting the forests in Chaiphum.

"Humans think that they're the master. What we commonly see in this technological-driven era is humans trying to control nature and overly, irresponsibly, and unmindfully exploiting it," Phra Paisal added.

According to the monk, the incessant exploitation of nature happens, because humans think that real happiness comes from the ability to possess a large number of material things, but they are still not gratified.

"They think that the more they have, the happier they are. Their success in life can be measured from the number and kind of cars they own and the price of the house, land, and other possessions they have, including money in their bank account. With this attitude, people highly compete to consume and possess more, with consumerism as the stimulator and the capitalism as the supporter," he said.

Is Our Greed Unquenchable?

Human greed has never been fulfilled, because people still want

more and more, resulting in the ceaseless destruction of nature in order to pamper their luxurious and wasteful life. Yet, their happiness has never increased in line with their material wealth, which can be seen in the high rate of suicides and patients with mental disorders and neurosis.

“Such attitudes and consequent behaviours make people ignore and estrange themselves from nature. They are even estranged from themselves. They immerse themselves in many unnecessary activities like talking on the phone almost all the time, shopping, and surfing the net. Everything they do contributes to the ruin of nature,” said the monk.

It’s no exaggeration to say that our natural environment is in crisis, because our interior nature is out of balance. Deep down inside people feel alone, depressed and hopeless. That is why they are trying to indulge themselves with material things.

“No matter how they succeed in transforming nature into a wide variety of consumer goods, assets, and money, humans can’t be full and their soul is still empty,” stressed the monk.

A Cure for Our Mental Imbalance

The monk pointed out that the natural environment can’t be restored to its healthy state as long as humans’ internal nature is still unstable. The elixir that can bring a balanced mind back to all during this crisis is “dhamma medicine,” specially concocted by Lord Buddha. “Dhamma is indispensable during this time. In fact, nature and dhamma are inseparable. Before restoring nature, we should restore dhamma back to our mind first. People must be aware of the fact that we’re a part of nature. Our survival totally depends on the survival of nature,” Phra Paisal said.

Apart from curing our sickness, dhamma also provides us with many precious lessons on sustainability, self-sufficiency, loving compassion and spiritual happiness, he added. “Nature teaches humans to enjoy a simple life and encourages them to embrace happiness, which derives from peace of mind, making merit, helping others, and being at one with nature.”

The monk went on to say that anyone who seeks mental tranquility and adopts dhamma as their guide will be lighter, calmer, freer, and happier. “This type of mind will be ready to wholeheartedly protect and save nature. It’s a mind that won’t take advantage of nature, people, community and society. It’s a mind that can return serenity and peace to the world,” said the abbot.

A Simple Yet Noble Happiness

In this era of consumerism, humans greedily hunt for material happiness and along the way they fail to expose themselves to a more noble happiness. When people start controlling and reducing their desires, material happiness becomes less attractive. “Happiness occurs easily when humans feel enough. And when that happens it’s no longer necessary to exploit nature.” Everything in nature teaches lessons about dhamma and the truth of life, but only if we open our eyes and attentively listen to it.

According to Phra Paisal, those with an agitated mind will be calmer when surrounded by nature. Their heart will easily fill with goodwill and when they look deeply into their mind, they can cultivate mindfulness, concentration, and spiritual wisdom.

The open-minded can learn several chapters of dhamma from nature, whether it be the impermanence of life or the well-knitted connection of all lives. Nature also teaches us the lessons of morality

and dedication, from the generous trees that provide shade and shelter to animals, the ants that are diligent and persevere to build their kingdom, and the birds that fly happily with no material burdens. “Nature is the greatest while we’re just a tiny life form. Nature teaches us to be humble and understand our real status. We’re just a small part of it. When we feel humble, we will not be arrogant, and we will get closer to nature.”

How Grass and Rocks Teach Dhamma

All life is inseparable and nature always can teach us several lessons of dhamma if only we open our eyes, pay attention, and listen.

Phra Paisal recalled that someone once asked Luang Pau Mun, one of the greatest meditation masters, how he learned so much about dhamma, since he didn’t study much. The senior monk answered that, “For those who have wisdom, dhamma can be found in every nook and cranny.” Meanwhile, Bhuddhadasa Bhikkhu always suggested that visitors to his forest hermitage Suan Mokkh (Garden of Liberation) learn how to listen to the trees and rocks that teach dhamma all the time.

“Those who hope for mental prosperity should set aside time to be in nature. With our humble mind, we will see both dhamma and our inner nature, which lead to the understanding of the truth of life. Several revered monks became enlightened because of nature. When they saw a falling leaf or a wrinkled lotus, they realised that their time in this world was limited. This is a wisdom derived from exposure to nature.”

Nature has been giving for so long, while humans have been taking. It is now time for all of us to take care of our generous provider. “As nature is in great peril, we should not take advantage

of her. Humans should be generous and grateful to nature by fully safeguarding it, whether through reforestation, recycling, protecting wildlife, and raising awareness of environmental problems,” Phra Paisal said.

Global Warming vs Dhamma Cooling

Natural conservation work is somewhat time-consuming, and it is an uphill battle as long as there are selfish people who show no respect for nature. The monk encouraged everyone, nature lovers in particular, to be patient.

“We should not be disheartened or feel uncomfortable. If we understand that protecting nature is like practicing dhamma, we will feel more peaceful. While the world’s temperature is soaring, we should not be frustrated. If we protect nature with our suffering, everything will turn out to be harmful to ourselves. We should not be hotter like our world. With a calm and cool mind, we can create good things for the Earth,” the monk emphasized.

By Chompoo Trakullertsathien Bangkok Post August 20, 2009



04

Development

Buddhists Engaged in Social Development

Recently in Thailand, the view that Buddhism has nothing to do with society is becoming widespread. Most people think of it as having ritualistic ceremonies or as a method of dealing with personal problems. However, during the past twenty years, there have appeared among the monastic Sangha a small number of monks who try to confront the problems of society and among the people head-on. This is causing Thai people to change their attitudes toward Buddhism. Such monks are called “development monks,” and they are mainly active in the agricultural regions of Thailand.

The economic development that has taken place in Thailand over the past few decades has widened the difference in the quality of life between cities and rural villages, bringing to the villages poverty and environmental destruction. The development monks, while integrating themselves in the village society, have begun

to confront the problems of villages suffering from poverty and environmental destruction. The economic development that has taken place in Thailand is not that different from that which has occurred in the other Third World countries. More attention is placed on industry than on agriculture, and, in order to reduce the spending of those involved from the industrial sector, the prices of agricultural produce were pushed way down. Thus, the life of farmers is fraught with troubles. Further, economic development was promoted in order to supply great amounts of natural resources to the market at cheap prices, with the result that once beautiful mountains and rivers have been destroyed. That is why a number of villagers have begun to question the merits of economic development.

Development monks can be divided into three groups: The first group is devoted to benevolent activities, such as building facilities for orphans, hospitals for people suffering from AIDS/HIV, and other charitable works. The second group is mainly active in an economic manner, organizing cooperative society with shops in the villages and even water buffalo banks. They have also created savings cooperatives (credit unions) so that people will not have to take out loans at high-interest rates and have encouraged the production of traditional folk crafts. The third group is involved in environmental problems, working mainly to save and protect the forests and the rivers.

These activities of the development monks did not, at first, attract the attention of people living in the cities. Yet through the steady continuation of these activities, connections were made with NGOs both in Thailand and abroad, and their activities gradually became more widely known in the villages and cities. The

activities of the Thai development monks were intimately related to those of the NGOs from the beginning. The NGOs offered support to the activities of the development monks in various ways, such as for the creation of networks among the development monks and even dispatching volunteers to help support their activities.

However, I feel that among the contributions of the NGOs, what was of the utmost importance was that they provided the development monks with various analytical points of view. Whether they were involved with problems of environmental protection or ameliorating poverty, the staff of the NGOs supplied the development monks with various ways of looking at how these problems were related to the structure of society, the economy, or the development of Thailand itself.

Formerly, development monks and other Buddhist groups who became involved with social problems took part in the kind of activity that deals with the problems right before their eyes. For example, if there were children suffering from starvation, they fed them; if there were people suffering from disease, they brought them to the hospital. However, if anything is going to be done at the source of environmental problems or poverty, it is necessary to understand the social structure that forms the background to individual problems. Up to that point, the activities of development monks seem to be no different than giving an aspirin to someone suffering from a headache. Through that, the pain might be reduced, but concerning the fundamental cause of the headache, it is not a sufficient approach. Concerning that, the staff of the NGOs taught them that just giving someone an aspirin is not enough.

However, the relationship between the NGOs and the development monks is not just a one-way type of providing them

with something. Rather, the development monks have also had a positive influence upon the NGOs. One of the things they imparted was the importance of being aware of the significance of the spiritual aspect when engaged in their activities, which was one weakness of the NGOs, who could be said to have focused too much upon political and economic problems. It might even be said that they undertook their activities upon the premise that the villagers would become happy if they could live their lives in the midst of material wealth. Now, economic development is certainly important, but through bringing the new sense of values of what might be called “consumerism” into village society, the villagers’ peace of mind was disturbed. Yet, concerning this problem, I feel that the staff of the NGOs were not sufficiently aware of this matter. Furthermore, among the NGO workers there were many who were indifferent toward spiritual matters. They were so busy with their activities that they did not have the leisure to pursue spiritual matters, and they themselves ceased to be able to feel happiness. There are even cases in which confrontations broke out among the NGO workers. When that happened, the development monks were able to teach the NGO staff about the significance of attaching great importance to peace of mind while carrying out their activities. In my own experience, I believe that it is necessary for Buddhist monks and Buddhist groups and the staff of NGOs to share their knowledge with each other.

In Thailand, as in other Buddhist countries, cooperation between Buddhist groups and NGO staff is essential in promoting development. What they must cooperate on is the creation of a sound civic society, which requires comprehensive or holistic development in order to create. What I mean by “comprehensive or holistic development” is not just economic development—social

development must take place, as well as development concerning environmental issues, and it is even necessary that spiritual development be part of the overall process. In order for such comprehensive or holistic development to take place, it is necessary for both sides—Buddhist monks and groups and the staff of the NGOs—to meet in cooperation in order that they might supply each other with what the other side lacks. In terms of activities, it is necessary to make political and economic reforms in relation to the issues of poverty, human rights, and the environment. At the same time, what might be termed “spiritual development,” or “development in a spiritual sense,” must also take place.

The problem at present is the importance of resisting rapidly proliferating consumerism, which can be said to be the common enemy of both the Buddhist groups and the NGOs. This is because consumerism creates a structure in which the poor are exploited, the environment is destroyed, and the spiritual peace of the people is thrown into confusion. Especially in the recent spread of globalization, consumerism has increasingly become more and more intense. Not only in Thailand, in many countries the number of poor is increasing, widening further the gap between the rich and the poor. While the gap between the rich and the poor widens in a single country, the gap between rich and poor countries also grows ever greater. Within that context, it seems as though consumerism is just like the dominating religion. Within globalization, what is receiving special attention is the concept of free trade. The three slogans of globalization are often given as: “liberalization of the market”, “the privatization of public enterprises”, and “the deregulation”. While these aspects are being emphasized, the budgets for social welfare and various types of subsidies and funds to support the sick and the aged are being cut. The situation is

such that the poor are now suffering more than in the past. In the midst of that ever worsening suffering, it is important that the NGOs and Buddhist groups cooperate more fully than ever before to try to stop the situation from getting even worse. In order to do that, I feel that it is necessary for them to learn from each other as well as to create a new way of life and a new sense of values that encompasses both the material and the spiritual aspects of life.

Through the cooperation between NGOs and Buddhists, the following four categories of activities can be done:

- 1) the protection of human rights and engaging in the humanitarian activities in support of those who suffer. It is crucial to lend assistance to the poor, the elderly, orphans, and other needy people. That is not enough, however.
- 2) the restructuring of society in order to reduce the structural violence, i.e., exploitation and lack of social justice, which is the root cause of poverty and suffering. As I mentioned earlier, although there has already been quite a lot of cooperation between NGOs and development monks, still the situation is becoming ever worse.
- 3) the creation of a new sense of values or spirituality as a countermeasure against consumerism. In particular, speaking as a Buddhist, I believe that there is a need to make it clear that Buddhism is not something that simply consists of performing rituals; rather, it is an active religion that teaches us about how we can achieve peace of mind and happiness.
- 4) the activities of peacemaking. Today, there are many wars and conflicts going on around the world. Up until now,

Buddhists have taken various opportunities to articulate the importance of peace, but in fact there are very few cases in which peacemaking and preventing wars were tackled in earnest by the Buddhists. I have heard that during the past few years, many Japanese have visited Palestine and worked there as peace workers, and, at times, even served as human shields. I have heard that some Buddhists from this Japan Buddhist NGO have become involved with this problem. From now on, I believe that Buddhists must become involved in the problem of peace much more seriously than ever before.

Keynote speech given at the Buddhist NGO Network's inaugural meeting in July 6, 2002 at Zojoj-ji Temple, Tokyo, Japan.

Care, Conscientization, and Mobilization: What Buddhist Monks Can Contribute to the Nuclear Issue

From November 6-7, 2012, I was fortunate to take part in a delegation of Executive Board members of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) to Fukushima Prefecture. During this brief visit in which we met a variety of people across the prefecture and within the 20 km exclusion zone from the nuclear power plants, I could feel the pain and despair of the people in both the old and the young. I came to learn of the pain they feel at the uncertainty of their future with no guarantee of when they can go back to their normal lives. They also have immediate concerns of how to earn their living, especially those farmers who cannot grow food or sell their products. They also had worries about their health and the health of their families and those in their community. Many of them have been broken by the psychological stress of all these concerns.

I learned also of their feeling of betrayal by both the central and local governments. For years, they had believed in the safety of the nuclear power plants, but then came to learn of the dangers first hand. Now the present government, both central and local, does not help them, still saying that it is safe especially for those people beyond the 20 km area. Although they know it's not safe, there is little they can do about it. This sense of betrayal by their own representatives is another heavy burden they carry. I feel sympathy and I feel their pain and trauma.

Amidst this, I was very impressed by the courage and commitment of the Buddhist priests we met in Fukushima. Because of their bonds with their temple members and community, they have felt strongly to remain in their temples to support others who have remained and others who have evacuated. They have done much to encourage their communities to be hopeful and to not despair by making their temples a refuge as a place of inspiration for rebuilding a good life. I was particularly impressed by Rev. Toku-un Tanaka, one of the Buddhist leaders in the evacuated areas, for his commitment to serve as an inspiration to other people.

A Multi-Level Buddhist Contribution to the Nuclear Issue

1) Mental and Spiritual Care

My temple is located in Northeast Thailand, a region called Esaan, which is quite similar to Fukushima in being very rural, based in an agricultural economy, and rather economically impoverished. The people in my region have for many years struggled to earn their way of living while being exploited by government development schemes. Like Fukushima and other rural parts of Japan,

we have experienced depopulation and the deterioration of community. Amidst such conditions, I think one of the first actions of Buddhist monks and priests is to support the morale of the people.

The people of my region, and of course the people of Fukushima, have felt pain, despair, and lack of hope for the future. A Buddhist priest, however, can help them reorient to the present and see that there are things they can do now. I think that it is still possible to have spiritual well-being despite facing a lot of problems. In this way, the radioactive fallout in Fukushima should only affect us physically and not mentally or spiritually. We should not allow the radioactivity to undermine our mental and spiritual well-being.

Much of the pain and suffering of the people in Fukushima is about the future which has not yet come, specifically concerning their health due to the effects of the radiation. I do recognize that these concerns are very legitimate. However, I have been working for some years now with the terminally ill in Thailand and have met many people with advanced cancer. Some of these people have learned how to limit the effect of the cancer to the physical level and not let it affect their mental and spiritual level. They are still able to lead good lives and live happily, because they live in the present moment. They don't worry about their death with is in the future. I have also met many people in Thailand who have gotten HIV, but some are able to smile and to live happily despite the uncertainty of when they might die of AIDS.

This is the experience of those who have already become ill and gotten cancer, but the people in Japan have not gotten cancer yet. Their suffering is not yet physical but more on the mental and spiritual level, because they are too much occupied with the future. I do not want to sound insensitive and appear like I am

trying to judge the people of Fukushima at all. Rather, I think it is important to reflect that this is a window of opportunity, especially for Buddhist priests who can help to reduce the mental and spiritual suffering of the people. They can help the people to realize that radioactivity may have an effect on them physically but not mentally or physically. Such a realization can help them live happily in the present moment.

Buddhist priests can, of course, impart this understanding through traditional Buddhist methods of teaching meditation and giving dharma talks. However, they can also organize self-help groups to share and discuss the experiences of the people. As I saw in my experiences in Thailand, many cancer patients have become inspired by other patients who have gotten cancer yet can smile and have a happy life. Such groups help people to share their experiences and to learn from each other so they can free themselves from painful experiences. Such groups can provide inspiration and encouragement from other people who have already recovered mentally from the shock of having gotten cancer.

In this way, I learned during our visit to Fukushima how people with connections to the Chernobyl disaster have come to Fukushima to offer various kinds of support based on their experiences. However, this process can also be done among the people of Fukushima themselves. There are some people who have been able to face the anxiety and work positively with it, and these people can help others who are still struggling deeply with such anxiety. The key is creating a space with people who can understand them and listen to them mindfully. Buddhist priests can play an important role by providing such spaces in their temples and serving as facilitators to make such groups active.

I have seen two examples of this in Japan already. During our

trip to Fukushima, we met Rev. Shoki Matsuda, a Zen priest at Senrin-ji temple in Da-te City in Fukushima some 50 kms from the nuclear power plants. Even before the incident, he was teaching his community Zen meditation and forming various kinds of community groups, like a school for children, to support their mental and spiritual well-being.

The second example are the Buddhist priests who offered various types of support groups, especially tea parties, to help victims with their trauma and mental suffering in the days and months after the tsunami. The people of Fukushima are, of course, not just suffering from anxiety about the future but are also holding on to much pain from the past, such as losing loved ones in the tsunami, having to evacuate their homes indefinitely, and then losing elderly family who died suddenly in this process. Bereavement and loss is another area of mental and spiritual care that priests can support their communities to overcome. This involves not suppressing such feelings but becoming aware of them. There is a process to do this through sharing, understanding, and helping them to discover meaning to these past experiences. I have found that when people gain a new perspective on a past experience, especially concerning grief and loss, they can overcome it or at least come to accept it.

In 2004-2005, I did some such work in southern Thailand after the devastating tsunami that hit that region. We used a group process of sharing and listening to their loss while helping them to be aware of their grief, not suppressing it, and learning to live with it. I have also done similar work with my Buddhika Network for Buddhism and Society around anticipatory grief with terminal patients and their families, getting them to prepare for the loss that they know is coming. It has been encouraging to see

the increasing interest since the Triple Disaster on March 11th among Buddhist priests in Japan to more intensively train in such counseling skills as Buddhist chaplains.

2) Conscientization to the Rights of the People and Mobilizing a New Society

Amidst the anger and feeling of betrayal by the government, I was frankly surprised to see that the people of Fukushima have not risen up *en masse* to protest or fight against the administration more strongly. They do complain about the unreliability of the national and local governments, yet I got the sense that they are somewhat still submissive to them. I think this is due to the political system of patronage in Japan. The local and national governments in Japan rely on a patronage system of providing roads, bridges and any kind of such infrastructure to the people, which also enriches construction companies and workers based in these areas. While of course it's nice to have such facilities, it also creates a paternalistic relationship in which the people remain as children and the government as the parent. As we can see, many people in Fukushima still do not want to protest nuclear power, because they have been under the patronage of the government's scheme to build nuclear reactors.

The result is a relationship of inequality where the government does not have to be accountable to the people. However, if the government does something wrong, it is our right and our duty to protest it. I think it's better that the people of Fukushima feel rage, rather than just despair, and so try to prod or protest the government on any level. This has certainly happened in my region in Thailand where the people don't just complain, they fight. In Thailand, the government is not good at giving the people what

they need in terms of infrastructure and material well-being. The people in the countryside feel the government is unfairly good to the people in the cities, and they are no longer willing to accept this, so they have been rising up.

Groups like the Assembly of the Poor and the Red Shirts have become popular in Northeast Thailand, because they have risen up against injustices brought against them by the central government. I have been active to support the activities of the Assembly of the Poor, because they have maintained a strict policy of non-violence and have not threatened to resort to violent acts against their opponents. While I have been sympathetic to the anger of the Red Shirts, I have not supported them, because some people within the movement who have used threats of violence, directly or indirectly, in their activities.

Another aspect of the Assembly of the Poor that I support is that the villagers themselves are the leaders and control the strategy, whereas the Red Shirts, both national and regional levels, are mainly directed by political elites connected to the Thai Rak Thai party of exiled, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. My concern is that they never fought for democracy until Thaksin was removed from power and sent into exile. While the Red Shirts have fought for justice and the fair treatment of the rural people from the center, they have not rejected the patronage system. Rather, they embraced the populist patronage policies of Thaksin which made him so popular in rural areas during his regime. On the other hand, the Assembly of the Poor has been engaging in grassroots campaigns since 1995 to fight large scale development schemes, like the Pak Mun Dam, which have adversely affected the environment and the well-being of the people in Northeast Thailand.

In this way, the first step is conscientization of social issues and the rights of the people. It is important for social activists, which includes Buddhist priests, to conscientize the people that it is their duty to actually pressure the government and fight rather than just be in despair and to complain. While Buddhist priests should not mobilize people through anger, they should encourage the people to rise up. To become active in this way, one first submits petitions, which some activists in Fukushima have done. However, if these are ignored, then there is a need to hold rallies and to demonstrate or conduct a march. While some activists in Fukushima have tried to do this, the turnout for such events has been low, which I think again shows the power of the political patronage system in Japan. In this case of recovering from the radioactivity in the environment in Fukushima, the people cannot expect any more assistance from the government; their livelihood and their future is in their own hands. Even so, they must remind the government of what is their responsibility. In many countries, nonviolent direct action, including civil disobedience, is the last resort on which people can rely to make government accountable.

In this way, the people have to take control of their own livelihoods, since encouraging people to be hopeful and also to participate in social protest are short term activities. In the long term, both political and economic decentralization is needed, because nuclear energy is a symptom of the strong centralization of the economy. This nuclear incident also reflects the centralization of agriculture, because it affected other parts of the country in terms of food security, since Fukushima and Northern Japan provides agricultural goods, meat, and fish to the major urban areas around Tokyo.

In this way, I think Buddhist priests should offer the people an

alternative vision of the future; one that is more decentralized and regionalized or even localized in terms of energy generation and agricultural production. Priests should be capable of offering such a structural vision in order to help their communities understand the root cause of the problem, that is, the structural aspects of the problem. I think this cannot be done individually, but collectively by group brainstorming, because it is not easy to identify a practical and achievable vision that is an alternative to nuclear energy and centralized agricultural production.

We can see now that these rural communities in Japan are very weak. Only the elderly remain, while the young have left to live in the big cities. As such, these regions are very vulnerable to any shocks that can further break down families and the community. We have had the same issues in my region in Thailand, so we have worked to strengthen the community and make it an enjoyable and livable place. We teach people not to seek prosperity in the cities, but to build a hopeful future where they are. This is very difficult in such as social climate today, but there is still some room to accomplish it. We work to make the community productive in terms of economy, especially food production, which in turn requires a good ecosystem and healthy environment. This is why forest conservation is important in my community, because it can contribute to the production of food and the physical well-being of the community. We also work on cultural and spiritual re-development, because people need to learn to be content with a simple life in the rural areas. People who learn this understand that happiness is in the mind and that spiritual well-being is as important as material well-being and consumption. If people can find happiness in the mind, they will need to consume less and less. This is what Buddhist priests can help them realize and attain.

Reflections and Recommendations for Buddhist Asia

One of the first lessons of Fukushima for the rest of Asia to learn is, of course, the danger of nuclear energy, because in Thailand and many other Asian countries now, nuclear energy is being offered as the safe and ecologically sound alternative to fossil fuel energy. Japan is very famous for its discipline and efficiency, but their failures to use nuclear energy safely show how dangerous and expensive it is in the long run. Thailand, on the other hand, is well known for its lack of discipline and its weak regulations, so I think it is vulnerable to a disaster that is much worse than Japan's.

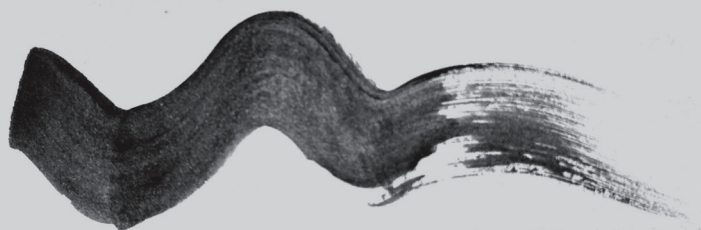
A second clear lesson is the risk of the centralization of development and of the ideology of infinite growth. The Japanese have had faith in indefinite growth, which is why they have followed the path of the centralization of the economy in terms of energy and food production. I think we should learn from Japan that this puts everyone at risk, because the entire system becomes threatened when one event goes wrong within it. We should lessen this risk by adopting a decentralized, regionalized system of production. The idea that we have to pursue infinite growth at the expense of all other things is very dangerous.

A final lesson, which would be for the monastic Sangha in Asia, is the commitment we have seen from some of these Japanese priests in Fukushima to remain with their people. They have not abandoned them as they have struggled with these problems and have supported them in their physical, social, mental, and spiritual needs. In this situation, the priests have had an opportunity to run away from the dangers and risks perhaps more easily than ordinary people, but the ones I have met have not run away from the problem. They have had the courage to risk their well-being and

their lives to help people. To be a *kalyanamitra*, a spiritual friend, a true friend in times of trouble, is what Buddhist priests should do.

At the same time, they should find an alternative to the present situation, like Rev. Hidehito Okochi has done by developing green technology from the basis of temple activities. This alternative vision building should run counter to centralization and be in harmony with the environment. Buddhist priests should not just preach about such an alternative future but also develop the tools and the way to such a future. This is simply following the way of the Four Noble Truths: to identify what is the suffering in modern society and what are the root causes, both structurally and spiritually; then to present a vision of a better life that is free from suffering in terms of both the individual and society; and finally, to provide the tools to attain this vision.

From Lotus in the Nuclear Sea: Fukushima and the Promise of Buddhism in the Nuclear Age. Ed. Jonathan S. Watts. (Yokohama: International Buddhist Exchange Centre, 2013)



05

Religion & Society

Integrating Spirituality into People's Politics

During the past decade of the 1990s, Siam has witnessed the rise of civil activism throughout the country in various fields ranging from environment, education, and agriculture to constitutional and democratic reform. This is not only a middle-class phenomenon; peasant farmers have been actively involved in all these forms of activism, utilizing protests marches, demonstrations, hunger strikes, mass sit-ins, and other forms of nonviolent direct action. One of the most important recent examples is the three-month rally in front of Government House organized by the Assembly of the Poor, a large and broadly based movement of people affected by dam construction and other government mega-projects that have robbed them of their traditional livelihoods. Simultaneously, separate protests were staged in key provinces throughout the country against the construction of power plants

and gas pipelines, all of which were approved by the supposedly democratic government without local people's approval, not to mention valid environmental assessments and other requirements stipulated by the new constitution.

These incidents represent not only the conflicts between government and the people. They also reflect the broader conflict between the power of capital and society as a whole. The latter conflict is one of the world's major conflicts in this age of globalization. From this perspective, different civil actions in Thailand—ranging from protests against such global agencies as the WTO and UNCTAD; campaigns like that against GMO products; and the political reform movement against money politics—are but part of the global response to capital's dominating power in different aspects of peoples' lives, both private and public.

The Invasion of Capital

Globalization has been propagated with the promise of better living within a borderless world. What really happened, however, is a world under the threat of capital's hegemony. Never before has capital's power been so widespread, able to invade and dominate every level of society, and every aspect of life. The recent wave of liberalization, privatization, and deregulation not only decreases the role of the state, it also increases capital's capabilities to weaken and undermine society—simply for capital's own greedy purposes. Altogether, capital's hegemony undermines three aspects of society—namely, the material (living conditions), social, and spiritual.

Material and Living Conditions

At the community level, natural and community resources are sacrificed for the unsatiated growth of the business and industrial sectors at the expense of rural areas. Forest and biological diversity are decimated by logging companies, dam construction, petrochemical agriculture, and local infrastructure schemes. Water, now an economic commodity whose life-giving value is increasingly denied to the poor, is diverted to cities of commercial importance. While soil is increasingly degraded and eroded due to deforestation and aggressive farming practices, rural lands are gobbled up by the rich. Once their all-important physical resources are depleted, the traditional livelihood of villagers is undermined practically forever.

Not only community resources, but also state's resources (budget, personnel, equipment, and power) are exploited mainly for the growth of capital. Through the state's machinery and systems (the political, economic, and educational), capital power dominates and manipulates infrastructures and policies for its own benefits. A few of the policies that reveal this distortion are the unbalanced development policy that has diverted community resources to feed the incessant growth of the business and industrial sectors; the agricultural policy that has increased farmer's dependence on world markets; and education plans that have transformed human beings into labor for the market.

The recent policies of liberalization, privatization, and deregulation have destroyed the social safety nets that benefited the poor and have allowed market mechanisms to control basic services that were previously provided by the state. This makes them less accessible and more expensive for the poor, thus worsening their standards of living. Thus, the poor are both undermined and

excluded by the new economic mechanisms.

Social

Once natural and physical resources become scarce, communities quickly disintegrate as competition tends to increase among the villagers. An “I-for-myself” attitude replaces that of cooperation. The situation deteriorates further when the customs and culture that once unified communities are prostituted through their commodification for the sake of the tourist industry, homogenized through the Bangkok centered education system, and pushed aside by the new “factory culture.” Relationships in the community and family are also affected by the migration of the youth and middle-aged to the cities for better paying jobs, leaving the elderly and children behind. On the national level, a widening gap between the rich and the poor increases estrangement among the people. Their perspectives are now so polarized that they have very few things in common as people living in the same country, proving the stock politicians’ phrase “Thai brothers and sisters” a lie.

Spiritual

Thanks to a market economy that increasingly dominates local communities, money value has penetrated into the life of the people, paving the way for materialism and consumerism to dominate their minds. Each trying to enrich himself materially as much as possible, everyone tends to regard each other as either an enemy to compete with or a victim to exploit. Not only is the sense of connection with others weakened or lost, people are isolated in increasingly rootless and self-centered egos.

In the meantime, rich, poor, and the middle classes alike are subject to more stress, anxiety, and frustration because of the intense competition. No matter how much we get or accumulate, we still doubt the meaning of such a life and feel overwhelmed by the sense of lack, which is expressed in different forms of dissatisfaction, such as concerning wealth, bodily appearance, and social status, not to mention feelings of loneliness amidst the scurrying crowd. We moderns are tantalized into finding the meaning of life beckoning seductively but always out of reach.

Unsatiated Growth of Capital Leading to Violence

All of the above problems are either manifestations of violence in themselves or lead to violence in different forms, which are multiplying in most of our societies. The economic system and policy that rob villagers of traditional livelihood and natural resources, leads to widespread poverty, which is nothing but structural violence. It spills no blood, directly, but inflicts suffering to death, not least because of malnutrition. Such structural violence also leads to open physical violence as it stirs up protests by people all over the country who are its victims. Oftentimes, the government and vested interests respond to these non-violent protests with violence—police dogs and truncheons, thugs, arrests, dispossession, and extra-judicial killings—resulting in many deaths, injuries, and the break-ups of families.

Simultaneously, the very same materialism and consumerism that undermine human and natural relationships on every level, further lead to crimes such as robbery and domestic violence. Whereas relationships were once imbedded in a common moral sphere, the culture of self-indulgence places few restraints on desires, even the basest ones.

Fundamental to this structural and physical violence, is the peaceless mind that is dominated by greed, anger, hatred, fear, and the individualistic attitude that regards others as either enemy or victim to be exploited. This state of mind is harmful to both oneself and others, and thus can be regarded as another form of violence.

Violence in society, family, and the mind is encouraged by another kind of capital, namely, illegal or underground capital, such as in drug trafficking, gambling, and the trade in women and children. A good deal of crime and domestic violence is not only caused by the organized crime that run these underground businesses, but also by people who are addicted to their products. Further, due to organized crime's pervasive influence on the political system, it often appropriates state power to its illegal ends, such as military and police complicity in the drug trade.

The growth of underground capital is fueled by the opportunities that legal capital creates. The disintegration of family and community, for example, helps create the demand for narcotics and supplies bodies to the sex industry. Globalization also strengthens the criminal economy. The liberalization of trade and services, for example, enables underground businesses to grow internationally, makes it easier for them to move their illegal wealth in support of their activities, and helps them establish powerful connections all over the world. Without the unchecked growth of legal capital, the criminal economy could not globalize and become as powerful as they are now. In other words, growth in organized crime is a natural corollary of economic globalization.

Civil Activism as Politics for Peace

Since unchecked growth of capital power is the cause of wide-

spread violence, peacemaking in any society must include attempts to check the power of capital and prevent it from becoming a new tyranny. In this light, civil activism against the invasion of capital is absolutely necessary for a peaceful society. Such activism can be called "politics for peace." For civil activism to be a powerful agent of peace and effectively reduce different forms of violence, strategies of confrontation (protest and popular pressure) and constructive programs (development activities and issue-oriented alternatives) are not sufficient. Any civil movement that aims for genuine peace must promote and model alternative structures and systems capable of replacing the existing ones maintained by structural violence. Moreover, an ideology or world view that is free from capital's domination, materialism, and consumerism is a prerequisite for civil activism to be a "politics for peace."

The civil movement's ideology is characterized by its emphasis on cooperation, egalitarianism, horizontal relationships, and social concern. Though these values make the civil movement's ideology distinct from its capitalist counterpart, they are insufficient for the former to be a powerful alternative to the latter. Another necessary aspect of the civil movement's ideology is spirituality. Spirituality is about the inner life on which every social activity is based and provides our most important sources of strength. Spirituality is essential for us to work continuously and energetically for the greater common cause without being easily burnt out, co-opted, or falling into self-serving ego trips. It also enables us to be peaceful and happy inwardly without much dependence on external wealth or recognition.

Briefly speaking, there are two aspects of spirituality: world-view and values.

Worldview: Spirituality includes our insights into the deeper nature of human beings and the universe we inhabit. It realizes that every human being has the potential to attain the highest freedom, that is, freedom from suffering. It sees that there are many levels of happiness and finds the real source of happiness in the mind that is free from attachment, not in the acquisition of material things. A genuine spiritual worldview not only perceives human beings in their deepest sense but also recognizes their place within the broadest context, namely, seeing human beings in intimate connection with all beings in the universe.

Value system: Spirituality is reflected in and achieved through such values as self-contentment, simplicity, compassion, and non-violence. In this light, harmony and balance in relationships with other people and the rest of the natural world is emphasized rather than growth of the individual at the expense of the others. These values provide the heartfelt stirrings and motivations needed to turn visions, theories, and strategies into genuine action for peace.

Spirituality is the crucial element most often missed in the ideologies of most civil movements. It isn't surprising, then, that civil movements oftentimes unconsciously and inevitably adopt materialist worldviews and value systems as their own. Such adoption is expressed through the lifestyles of movement members, such as entertaining oneself with brand name products or luxurious consumption. Groups reveal this in how they run their organizations and business, for example, holding meetings in hotels like the business sector does. Moreover, materialism is frequently integrated within their social vision. Material and physical well-being becomes the primary objective of their activities, programs, and alternative systems and structures. Sometimes,

social values and well-being are included in its objectives, such as, promoting civic virtues, strengthening trust, and increasing social capital. Spiritual well-being, however, is almost always ignored.

Yet, any social activity that ignores the spiritual aspect is doomed to failure. Any development project that succeeds in raising incomes or diminishing the poverty of the people, but ignores helping them to be free from materialism, may end up turning them over to the mercy of the market or transforming them into good customers of the trans-national corporations. In the long run, their livelihood and social well-being will be affected by excessive consumption, indebtedness, competition, and tension in the community. In other words, such development projects risk failure in the long run. They are merely reformist. Radical politics must also be spiritual.

Consumerism and Spiritual Gratification

Spirituality is so important to civil activism that it determines whether a civil movement's ideology is able to resist or even replace consumerism, which is currently the most powerful representation of capitalist ideology. Consumerism has spread so pervasively throughout the world not so much because it provides physical comfort or convenience, but because it gratifies, or promises to gratify, the spiritual needs of people, albeit temporarily. In other words, it functions as a pseudo-religion in its pretense of meeting the deeper needs of every human being, namely, the desire to have an improved identity, to be a new person, or to recreate oneself.

Consumerism succeeds because it makes us feel that we will have a better self and essentially a better person through pos-

sessing brand name products—especially through consuming the image that both sells the product, which may be in itself useless or trivial, and is the main source of value. Consumerism also gives us the freedom to choose the appearance of a new and better self through cosmetic surgery. It gives us a purpose in life, namely, to accumulate and consume as many objects as possible. Such a clear and concrete objective makes our lives seem meaningful to a certain degree.

It also promises to reduce the sense of lack. We feel something lacking when we sense the gap between the ideal and the reality of our being. By consuming the products, services, or images presented by consumerism, we believe that our reality moves closer to the ideal, and thus reduces the gap. In actuality, the gap will never be closed since the ideal and our expectations always move further away, mainly because we are exposed constantly to new products through the media. The sense of lack persists because we realize that once the products are consumed, the happiness we attain is never up to our hopes and dreams. The gap between expectation and reality inevitably maintains the sense of lack and self-discontent. We therefore are motivated unconsciously to acquire and consume more and more with the deluded expectation that the sense of lack will finally disappear. It is a game of futility.

From a Buddhist perspective, the deepest sense of lack is the result of our intuitive knowledge that in the depths of our being the self does not inherently exist. From this awareness, fundamental insecurities and fears emerge, disturbing our minds every now and then. Regardless of our attempts to suppress such inklings, they repeatedly come up, though distorted into the sense of lack and so we try to clutch at anything as our true self. In this light, consumerism provides products and images of self for us to grasp.

In other words, it seems to satisfy the deepest, or spiritual, need of every human being. Since nothing that it provides is identifiable as a true self, it cannot satisfy in the long run; it works temporarily, creating more needs later.

Spirituality as Critical Element of Civic Ideology

The ideology of civil movements can't replace or challenge consumerism, unless and until it can provide better solutions to the spiritual needs of people. That's why spirituality must be incorporated into civil activism. To begin with, spirituality should be incorporated into the civil movement's world view, so that it can give better answers to the questions of existence, such as, "What is suffering and its causes?", and "How can freedom from suffering be realized?" Rather than thinking that unsatiated desire is the problem, we tend to think that failure to fulfill the desires is the problem. We are like the addicted gambler who says that, "Gambling is not my problem; I like it. The problem is my \$100,000 of debt." One reason for consumerism's popularity is its ability to divert people's attention from their real suffering and its causes. People assume that lacking sufficient money to buy things, not limitless desire itself, is the real problem. They, therefore, try to acquire more money instead of finding out what's wrong with their own minds and the social systems that mirror the greed and delusion structurally.

A spiritually informed civic world view can provide the broader perspective that there are many levels of happiness. Material happiness is just one level of happiness. Camaraderie and healthy family life provide emotional happiness. Deeper than that is spiritual happiness, which helps reduce one's dependence on

material accumulation. No ideology can give a better explanation about how to attain deeper happiness, as opposed to the superficial pleasure of unsatiated consumption, unless it incorporates spirituality as part of its world view.

Apart from being incorporated into the civil movement's vision of life, spirituality should be part of its social vision as well. Spiritual wellbeing should be the objective of the programs, systems, and structures that are proposed as alternatives to the existing ones that promote structural violence. Spirituality should be part of the civil movement's organizing principles and mode of relationships (e.g., sharing, cooperation, and compassion). Finally, a spiritual worldview and values should be integrated into the way of life of each member of the civil movement, especially its leaders.

Since spirituality is an antidote to materialism and consumerism, a civil movement based on spirituality can be ensured that it can challenge the power of capital without being contaminated by materialism and consumerism. Simultaneously, it can critique and challenge the false religious institutions that betray their spiritual origins in favor of temporal power and wealth. With spirituality, civil activism is no less than politics for peace. It not only resists the unsatiated growth capital and its structural violence, but also reduces the sources of violence in society, namely, the greed, hatred, anger, and fear in the minds of people. Spirituality is essential for harmonious relationships within society, since it enables people to attain inner happiness and contentment with a simple life, therefore reducing competition and antagonism, while encouraging sharing. Genuine spirituality includes kindness and patience towards others, a willingness to set aside personal agendas, and the ability to sacrifice for the common good. Most

of all, the inner harmony of mature spirituality inspires harmony in others. Spirituality is also the guarantor that civil activism is peaceful and nonviolent. It deepens and broadens the perspective of activists so that they realize that the causes of social problems are not from persons themselves but from something within them (selfishness, delusion, attachment) as well as something beyond them (unjust structures like the economic system, oligarchic politics, and materialist-oriented education system). This allows activists to be less judgmental and blaming, and more tolerant and nurturing of individuals and groups despite their imperfections.

With spirituality, one realizes that simply eliminating “the bad apples” can’t solve problems. Only by transforming internal worldviews and external structures through peaceful means can problems be solved. Resorting to violence only worsens situations; old worldviews become more fortified and violent structures more rooted or increasingly defended by violence, while vicious cycles of violence grow stronger.

Ultimately, the real objectives of civil activism are not stopping dam construction, halting pipeline projects, or gaining compensation for lost lands. More important than all of these is to replace the unjust structures and reduce structural violence, along with changing attitudes and worldviews. Both can be achieved only through non-violence and compassion. Non-violence can open the hearts of people, while compassion can expel the anger, and thus enable them to see the real causes of their problems and sufferings. The wisdom that arises is required for one to see solutions and alternative to violence. Besides, inner peace from spirituality can restrain the mind from indulging in anger, dwelling in hatred, or reacting out of fear, which are the inner sources of violence.

With spiritual inspiration, one can continue the struggle and retain the ideal of civil activism without getting stuck in the trap of materialism, falling victim to greed and becoming a turncoat to the powers that be, or ending up burnt out and leaving the movement. Thus, spirituality provides the steady, consistent motivation needed for long-term grassroots peace work.

In brief, spirituality is essential to civil activism in all its phases: from the development of ideology and social vision, organization of the movement, staging direct actions, and running development projects to the way activists and the people live out daily life. Spirituality also forms the basis of peace on every level; personal, operational, and structural. Therefore, contrary to general belief, spirituality is an integral part of people's politics. Without it, people's politics is either a short-lived reaction to the powers that be or power politics in disguise.

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The Dynamics of Religion in the Age of Globalization:

Lessons from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan

The disruption of traditional communities, the economic marginalization and political repression of peoples, and the offensive thrust of secularism—all of which are modern phenomena—contribute to the revival of religion in the age of globalization. This article notes three new forms of religious revival around the world. These three are: the rise of fundamentalism, the explosion of new religions, and the growth of “consumer religion”. These religious phenomena indicate that spirituality is a part of human nature that needs to be fulfilled. However, to be relevant to the modern world, religious reforms are necessary to limit the devastating effects of consumerism and to help strengthen civil society. Spiritually enriched religions and civil society need to cooperate in order to redirect globalization for the benefit of humankind, instead of serving corporate interests. Globalization from the

grassroots needs to be developed to check globalization from boardrooms.

Introduction

Globalization is not a recent phenomenon. The current phase of it, however, is unique mainly because of its intensity and its pervasive influence beyond the borders of nations and in every aspect of modern life. This is mainly due to technological advances and the virtual downfall of communist camps.

Globalization is one of the strongest forces that has a profound and wide effect around the world. It does not only have a deep impact on economy but also on various aspects of life and society, including religion. On one hand, the globalization of humanist values—i.e. human rights, equality, democracy, and feminism—has enriched religion and civil society. On the other hand, the global network of telecommunications and transportation has enabled many religions to spread around the world, making their visions and core values easily accessible. Globalization also enables religious groups and civil societies around the world to connect and cooperate as a global force in challenging greedy corporate capitalism. On the other hand, however, globalization plays an important role in making many religions more materialistic, or even obsolete.

This article is an attempt to explore the interface between religion and globalization in three Asian countries: Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan. It also tries to find out the impact of globalization on religion and the religious responses to globalization in other parts of the world. Such an investigation will enable us to

gain a deeper understanding of the potential of religion and how to make it more relevant to the world in the age of globalization.

Summary of Findings

My research was done in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan, respectively, from January 15 to June 30, 2002. These countries were chosen mainly because of their different cultural backgrounds representing the influences of different religions, i.e. Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism.

Indonesia

Islam has played an important role in political and social life in Indonesia. Rather than confined to the private realm like many religions, Islam's influence in Indonesia has been manifested in various dimensions of public life. This can be seen, for instance, from the fact that the largest mass-based nationwide organizations in Indonesia are all Islamic.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are the largest mass-based organizations in the country that identify themselves with Islam. Both claim to have many millions of supporters. Both not only promote Islamic beliefs but are also actively involved in social welfare, education, health care, business, and politics. Since one of my research topics was the relationship between Islam and globalization, I investigated how NU and Muhammadiyah responded to this phenomenon. I started with the question of their responses to modernity.

For many outsiders, Islam seems to be against or incompatible with modernity and its core values, i.e. democracy, human

rights, feminism, liberalism, pluralism, and capitalism. Contrary to this general belief, I found that Islam in Indonesia not only gets along with but also absorbs and is influenced by modernity. One of the good examples is NU.

NU is usually regarded as a “traditionalist” Islamic organization. It was established in 1926 with the aim to defend “traditionalism” and orthodox Islam from attack by the growing modernist movement. The traditional Islam that NU defends is the one that gives authority and leadership to traditional scholars or *kiai*. *Kiai* in this traditional Islam are in a privileged position, since they are the only ones capable of interpreting Islamic law. In preserving orthodoxy, NU has established boarding schools or *pesantren* where future *kiai* study under senior religious scholars and spiritual leaders. The traditional curriculum, strict discipline, and traditional lifestyle in almost 200,000 *pesantren* all over the country is another reason for NU’s reputation as a traditionalist Islamic organization.

Despite its mission as a defender of tradition against modernity, NU has embraced or absorbed many modern values. It has, for instance, tolerance or a liberal attitude toward other spiritual traditions, including indigenous ones. NU and its former leader and ex-president of Indonesia itself, Abdurrahman Wahid, are strong advocates for pluralism in Indonesia, where Muslim and non-Muslims should coexist peacefully. It also adjusts itself to the political, economic, and social change of the country. Apart from supporting democracy since the Suharto era, NU has adapted itself in accordance with economic development. One of its initiatives during the past 10 years is creating small-scale projects in the fields of banking, agro-industry, and co-operatives to ensure that its membership benefits from the country’s rapid economic

growth. In the field of education, NU has reformed *pesantran* by adding secular subjects to the traditional religious curriculum.

Interestingly, anti-modern Islamic groups, instead of growing out of traditionalist backgrounds like NU's, come from those who graduated from modern universities or have backgrounds in modern education. Many informants that I have interviewed said that many fundamentalists or extreme Muslims graduated from such secular universities as Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta or Institut Teknologi Bandung. An NU member in Yogyakarta told me that it is very rare that students from *pesentran* (traditional religious schools) or Islamic universities (IAIN) join fundamentalist groups. According to them, those who have a comprehensive and proper understanding of Islam would not turn to fundamentalism. Only those who have a partial knowledge of Islam are drawn to fundamentalism. That is why fundamentalism appeals to the graduates of secular faculties in secular institutes.

This explanation can be applied to members of Muhammadiyah, which is the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah has a reputation as a "modern" Islamic organization. Being modernist, Muhammadiyah was against traditionalists from the beginning of its establishment in 1912. It was because of the attack from modernist organizations like Muhammadiyah that NU was established to defend traditionalism. Muhammadiyah has modern education as its base. While NU is famous for its *pesantran*, Muhammadiyah has been recognized for its effort in building modern high schools, colleges, and universities. According to NU members, Muhammadiyah is less tolerant toward other spiritual traditions. In its attempt to establish "pure" Islam in Indonesia, local tradition is rejected. Any practice that mixes local tradition with Islam, though acceptable to NU,

is criticized and disregarded by Muhammadiyah. With its narrow view due to a partial knowledge of Islam derived from modern institutes, according to NU members, Muhammadiyah members are easily drawn to fundamentalism.

In short, Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism in Indonesia are the products of modernity. Modern education has contributed much to the growth of these factions of Islam. An Islamic scholar from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences told me that secular universities have become the centers of Muslim radicals. The campaign for the requirement of Muslim women's veils in Indonesia started 20 years ago at these universities. Until then, women donned the veils or scarfs only when they went to *pesantren* or religious schools. After the campaign initiated by radical students in secular universities, women started to wear the veil in public on every occasion, even when shopping or going to the movies. This radical movement also successfully demanded that university administrators provide places of worship on campuses. It was not long before this movement spread beyond the campuses. Places for worship now can be found in every virtually all public places and offices.

The rise of Islam in Indonesia indicates that modernity and Islam can coexist. The rise of modernity does not always mean the decline of religion as anticipated by secularization theory. Contrary to general belief, modernity can contribute to the growth of religion or religious movements. NU is an example of traditional religious organizations that have expanded their activities and increased their influence by employing modern strategies and operations.

From its attitude toward modernity, it is logical to say that traditional Islamic organizations like NU are not against global-

ization. With its policy to support the economic development of the country in connection with the global market economy, NU has embraced economic globalization as part of reality. As for Muhammadiyah, its response to economic globalization seems to be the same as NU. Both traditional and modernist Islamic organizations, however, are not happy with cultural globalization, which is identified with Westernization and consumerism. This sentiment is also shared by fundamentalist groups, like Laskar Jihad. Globalization, however, has had positive cultural effects in helping the Islamic world grow closer and have more confidence in itself. Wearing the veil or Islamic dress is no longer regarded as inferior to western dress.

Regarding Islamic dress and its relationship to globalization, a point needs to be mentioned here. The veil is now popular and is even sought by highly educated women and those in hi-society circles. In Indonesia, expensive veils designed by prominent artists, influenced by fashion designers in New York or Paris, can be found in luxurious department stores and have become a symbol of high social status. In other words, expensive veils and Islamic dress have been transformed into commodities for consumption by the middle class, similar in fashion to global branded names. This is undoubtedly an effect of consumerism, which is conveyed through globalization. The role of consumerism in defining and transforming religions will be further discussed later.

The Philippines

I arrived in Manila in early February, just a few weeks before the 16th anniversary of People Power I. The bloodless “revolution” that overthrew one of the strongest dictatorial regimes in Asia was pos-

sible not only because of the people's power but also because of the crucial influence of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church in the Philippines has played an important role in many political crises that ended up in "peace", including the People Power II which was being celebrated during the week of my arrival.

The impressive role of the Catholic Church in People Power I has inspired many people, especially intellectuals and political activists, to abandon Marxism and leftist movements to embrace Christianity instead. Various groups inspired by Christianity were formed to do social work among the poor in cities and rural areas. Faith and prayer are regarded as an integral part of the struggle for justice and welfare of the people.

Amid the preparation for the People Power I celebration on many university campuses, I witnessed one of the largest religious gatherings in Manila. Every Saturday night, hundreds of thousands of people from various parts of the country came to meet and listen to the sermons of a man named Mike Velarde. These people were just a small faction of a large religious movement, the El Shaddai, which claims many millions of members all over the country. It once claimed a constituency of 8 to 10 million members worldwide. This huge gathering is not interested at all in People Power I. They came to pray and receive blessings from Brother Mike. Besides the preaching by Brother Mike, many followers are invited to share their stories about the power of God that works in their lives through spiritual, emotional, and physical healing. Members of the El Shaddai believe that any miracle is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit within every believer in Christ. The gathering, which lasts 5-6 hours, ends with the practice of tithing, a major attraction of the movement. It's believed to be a tool of "economic empowerment" that will bring fortune

and material prosperity to believers. This practice is encouraged by Brother Mike who always mentions in his sermons how his financial problems were solved when he began to tithe.

Though this movement regards itself as a part of the Catholic Church, it has its own structure and practice separate from the church. It has parish-based local chapters as well as non-parish based communities or prayer groups. More than 1,000 chapters and groups are places where the followers do weekly, mass healing rallies and prayer meetings. The fact that this movement can draw millions of people from the ordinary parish church and practice indicates that the former is more attractive and appealing to the people. In other words, the established church fails to meet their needs. A Catholic scholar told me that the church has lost touch with people. Its conventional style of sermons are very formal, rigid in its dogma, and focus on only the spiritual dimension, while ignoring physical and material needs of people. Such a style of sermon does not appeal much to the poor. However, in the El Shaddai gatherings, members are entertained by music and show-biz-oriented sermons, which place emphasis on the financial problems of the members. This explains the popularity of the El Shaddai among the poor and people from the lower middle class. It is people of this sector that constitute the major constituency of El Shaddai.

El Shaddai is just one of many new religious movements that have grown side by side with the established Catholic Church. Despite the church's unique position in public affairs, its position as the sole authority on the religious or spiritual life of the Filipino is in decline. Many people turn to other religious movements, many of which are charismatic ones, not only for hope and relief from hardship in life, as do members of the El Shaddai, but also for an

alternative source of meaning for life or guidelines for living in the changing world. Filipino society is now undergoing dramatic change. Rapid economic change through market-driven economic development not only creates a wider gap between the rich and poor, thus supplying many members to movements like the El Shaddai, but also escalates the process of social stratification and increased diversity. Globalization, as shown below, has played an important role in creating fertile conditions for such economic, social, and cultural change. In an increasingly diversified society, it is difficult for any established church to maintain its sole authority on religious matters as before. The emergence of new religious movements is, therefore, the apparent reality of the Philippines.

Pervasive consumerism, which is part of cultural globalization, also has an effect on religion. Under the influence of consumerism, material prosperity and quick fortune become the goal of life. With this attitude, people expect religion to make them rich and prosperous. Religious groups that promise quick prosperity, therefore, attract a huge amount of people and tend to grow quickly. This is one of the main reasons that groups preaching “prosperity theology”, like in El Shaddai, has drawn millions of followers in less than 10 years. The Philippines is not unique in this regard, since we can find many newly emergent movements preaching prosperity theology in other countries as well. It is safe to say that prosperity theology is now a global phenomenon.

Japan

Japan is a country where established spiritual tradition has lost its vitality. The main function of Buddhist priests of virtually all sects is to perform funeral ceremonies and provide death-anniversary

services. Their responsibility has more to do with the dead and the next world than the living and this world. Apart from ritualistic services, no social role is expected from priests. Buddhism is, therefore, reduced to funeral religion.

Japan has proved, however, that Buddhism can survive in a highly developed country. This tells us that even in a prosperous and technological advanced society, people still need religion, however ritualistic or other-worldly it is. In fact, it gets along with such society very well. Buddhist funerals have become a big industry involving huge amounts of money on which several business sectors depend. The funerals itself has become a business in which priests sell religious services. Even ranks of posthumous Buddhist names for the dead are rated according to the amount of money offered by relatives. In other words, funeral Buddhism is well entwined with the capitalist economy.

Secularized traditional Japanese Buddhism and its decline in public influence seem to confirm secularization theory. This is only half of the picture, however.

The other half is the rise and diffusion of new Buddhism, which is the part of the new religious movement in Japan. The religious passion of the Japanese has not dried up yet. It just flows through the new outlets. Since World War II, new religions “sprouted one after another, like bamboo shoots after rain”, as observed by Kazuo Kazahara. Many new Buddhist movements have developed into mass-based organizations. Among them are Soka Gakkai and Rissho Koseikai. Both organizations not only try to integrate Buddhism into the daily lives of their members but also participate in public affairs in their own way. Both are engaged in peace and humanitarian activities, domestically and internationally, though Soka Gakkai extends its agenda into politics through

its unofficial arm, the Komeito party.

These new religious organizations have gained many followers during the rapid modernizing process in Japan. Heavily modernized Japan after World War II has seen the decline of the agricultural sector and the migration of people to cities. It was not long before these people experienced alienation and economic hardships in modern urban culture. They longed for the traditional values and communal relationships that were eroded in the big cities. New religious organizations met these needs and grew very quickly, such as Soka Gakkai from a tiny band of followers in 1951 to 8 million in 1980. According Prof. Daisaburo Hashizume, a prominent sociologist of the Tokyo Institute of Technology, Soka Gakkai's members are mostly lower middle class who migrated from rural areas to cities and had economic problems, as well as a sense of alienation. Soka Gakkai not only provides them with places and relationships where they can feel a sense of community, but also gives them the hope to relieve their economic burden. Soka Gakkai is an example of new Buddhist organizations that, rather than focus on ancestor worship and the next life, are concerned about this life and worldly achievements. Such worldly orientation is undoubtedly one of the influences of modernity on religion in Japan and other countries as well.

Soka Gakkai is also an example of how globalization has effects on religion. Despite the fact that the vast majority of its members are Japanese, it regards itself as an international movement. Internationalism is stressed by virtually every branch of Soka Gakkai. During the past few decades, it has extended its branches to all parts of the world. In 1992, it claimed that there were about 1.26 million believers in about 120 branches worldwide. In other words, the religious beliefs of Soka Gakkai have

been increasingly globalized, at least among its members around the world. This is also true of El Shaddai, which has spread from the Philippines to different parts of the world, and claims to have 8-10 million members worldwide. Globalization is the process that not only brings the center to the periphery, but also brings the periphery to the centre. Through this process, many religious organizations in Asia become internationalized within a few decades.

Many religious organizations in Japan, though not internationalized in terms of membership or structure, are internationalist in terms of concern. Many of these organizations are concerned about the suffering of people in other countries, i.e. Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Nepal, and those in Africa. Some have organized humanitarian projects in these countries, while others give financial and technical aid through local groups. These organizations are either run by members of religious establishments, like AYUS and Shanti whose members are mostly priests from the Jodo Pure Land denominations and the Soto Zen denomination respectively, or by new religious groups, like the Niwano Peace Foundation which is an official arm of Rissho Koseikai.

A newer trend of spirituality or religious passion, however, has been developed in Japan. Until 1995, new religions and cults have experienced constant growth. The sprout of new religious groups has led to the phenomenon dubbed as “the rush hour of gods”. But after the Aum Shinri-kyo incident, which involved the gassing of the Tokyo subway by a doomsday cult, the Japanese public has become suspicious of the new religions and cults. New religious organizations, especially the most recent ones, suffer from a standstill in growth. People are reluctant to join those groups. Religious passion, which previously flowed through new

religious organizations, has started to find a new expression.

For the youth, spirituality is increasingly personalized or more individualistic. More and more people prefer to have their spiritual passion manifested in personal lifestyle. Collective spiritual quest, as practiced by older generations, is being replaced by individual endeavor. The religious passion of the younger Japanese generation is now expressed through internet communication. Another outlet of their religious passion is through new novels or literature. Recent novels by Yoshimoto Banana and Randy Taguchi, which have the air of mysticism and occultism, are cited as examples of this phenomenon. Their popularity is earned by the fact that they activate spiritual curiosity and meet the spiritual needs of young people, who are now longing for mysticism and cultural roots that appeal to the heart. Yet they also want freedom to explore and pursue the spiritual quest on their own, rather than follow anybody or be restricted by any organizational rule.

Apart from the Aum Shinri-kyo incident, individualism, which is a dominant value in the age of globalization, is one of the major factors leading to the change of spiritual quest. Neoliberalism in economy, the free market ideology, and consumerism are all globalized values that worship individualism. While living in the age of globalization, it is almost impossible to escape the influence of individualism on various aspects of life, including religion and spirituality. During the past 200 years, Japan has witnessed a constant shift in religiosity, from new Buddhist sects to new religions to individual spirituality. It's yet to be seen how the individual spirituality of Japanese people will fully develop. What is certain is that globalization does not mean the end of the spiritual passion of Japanese people. The most that globalization, and modernization, can do is to change the expression or the form of spiritual

passion. The rest is beyond the power of this global process.

General Observations

Apart from interviews and exposures to events and activities, published works is also a method I employed in this research project. My paper research covered religious dynamics around the world in relation to globalization. This enabled me to put into global context what I found in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan. In other words, it helped me to understand religious dynamics in these Asian countries as an integral part of a global phenomenon. The following are my general observations on the dynamics of religion in the age of globalization:

The Revival of Religion

Contrary to the prophecies of many academics, religion did not begin to disappear during the twentieth century. Countries around the world have experienced religious revival in different manifestations. During the past three decades the number of Christians in Asia and Africa has multiplied three times to 300 and 360 million. In the US, the Christian Right has developed into an influential movement. Islam is another religion that has spread rapidly and intensively in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the former Soviet republics. Even Buddhism has gained popularity in the West, while reviving constantly in the Buddhist-dominant countries in Asia. Factors contributing to the revival of religion mentioned below are related closely to modernization and reinforced by globalization:

1. The Disruption of Traditional Communities

Modernization has contributed much to the decline or disintegration of traditional communities, resulting in mass migration to the cities. Feeling rootless, alienated from urban culture, with a lost sense of belonging, many people find comfort in religion. Many religious groups help them to adjust to modernity and give them a sense of belonging. In the Middle East, Islamic lifestyle helps them to make the transition from a rural to a modern urban culture (Armstrong, 2000). Meeting the psychological needs of these people is the main reason for the growth of religious movements around the world. One example, besides Soka Gakkai, is the Christian Right movement, whose expansion is strong among low-middle class and service workers recently migrated to the metropolitan areas (Castells, 1997).

2. Economic Marginalization and Political Repression

The government's failure to improve the economic situation of people, and increasing polarization in the process of modernization and development, pave the way for religion to play social roles and thus gain more recognition from people, especially the poor or the marginalized. In the face of political chaos and crushing poverty, Africans find the church is the place they can go for material assistance and relief (Woodward, 2001). Although many organizations do not provide material assistance, just giving the promise of prosperity and the hope of economic relief is enough to draw massive followers. The Winner's Church in Nigeria is one of Africa's fastest growing churches. Within a dozen years, it has opened branches in 32 countries on the continent. Similar to El Shaddai, it preaches prosperity to members who come for salvation from economic hardship (Onishi, 2002).

In the Arab world where freedom is restricted and few pathways are allowed for dissent, the mosques turn into places to discuss politics (Zakaria, 2001). Islam has become a powerful ideology in challenging corrupt governments and the Islamic organizations are often the only outlet for opposition. The more repression from government and foreign forces, the more popular are the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hizbullah. Their popularity, however, is earned not only through their active involvement in dissenting politics, but also through their social services, medical assistance, and temporary housing provided to the poor.

3. The Offensive Thrust of Secularism and Liberalism

Modernization is always accompanied by the propagation of secularism and liberalism, which goes against some religious values. In the process of modernization, religion has been gradually marginalized or even repressed.

The widespread practice of sexual permissiveness and pro-abortion acts, court rulings that religion be confined to private life and that prayer be disallowed in U.S. public schools, for example, are among reasons that convince many Christians to fear their religion is being destroyed. This is also true of Muslims who have experienced secular offensives in such countries as Turkey, Egypt, and Iran. In Iran, for example, women were forbidden by the Shah to wear the veil. In Egypt, Islam was regarded by Nasser as the cause of the nation's ills and had to be subordinated to the secular state. Fearing that Islam was about to be eliminated, many Muslims began to fight for the survival of their religion. Thus, the rise of the Islamic fundamentalist movement as well as its Christian counterpart in the US which felt that "only a dark and turbulent sea of despair stretches endlessly ahead...unless we fight" (Arm-

strong, 2000).

4. Mental Stress and Spiritual Problems

Under the influence of modernity, worldly achievement and material prosperity has become the aim of life while inner peace is ignored. However, after attaining worldly achievements, many people do not feel happiness. Unsatiated desire drives them endlessly to pursue a dream which is never fulfilled. Extreme materialism drives people to stress, anxiety, restless mind, and the feeling of the emptiness of life. It is these people who feel the need of inner peace that is never achieved through incessant material acquisition. To these people, religion can provide them the way to inner peace and a sense of personal fulfillment.

Buddhism is popular in the West mainly because of its meditation techniques that can relieve stress and restore internal balance. Prayer to God and Allah is also increasingly practiced, especially by people who feel insecure with the uncontrollable and unpredictable fluctuations in business, personal life, and the globalized world.

Religious Phenomena in the Age of Globalization

The religious revival in the globalized world has three new manifestations that should be noted here:

1. The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalist movements are modern phenomena, which has increasingly strengthened in the age of globalization. Despite their anti-modern attitude, they themselves are the products of modernity. The influences of modernity can be found, for in-

stance, in the literal reading of scripture, pragmatic rationalism, nationalist attitudes, and modern strategies and operation. This is not surprising because leaders of fundamentalist movements are, or were, mostly the product of modern education, as can be seen in the case of fundamentalist and radical Islamic groups in Indonesia, previously mentioned.

Although religious fundamentalism originated before the age of globalization, it has developed into a powerful force in this era. Its expansion is undoubtedly the consequence of globalization. Globalization contributes to the growth of fundamentalist movements in these principal ways:

- The pervasiveness of secularism and liberalism: Secularism and liberalism has spread and penetrated every corner of the world through a global network of communications and global tourism. The most prominent secular value that comes from these global networks is consumerism, which worships sensual gratification at the expense of religious values. The aggressive invasion of consumerist values increases the fear of religious conservatives that their religion is being destroyed and that the only way to preserve the faith is to unite and fight back.
- The spread of conspiracy theory: A belief that is firmly held by most fundamentalist movements is the theory that a conspiracy of evil forces is planning to destroy their religion. Globalization does nothing but encourage this belief. Christian fundamentalists in the U.S., for example, believe that a “world government” enacted by the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization are at work to destroy their country and their

religion (Castells, 1997). Islamic fundamentalists share this view, believing that a global network led by the US and Israel conspires to destroy the Islamic world.

- The loss of certainty and control over life: In the face of rapid changes in the globalized world, people also feel the loss of certainty and confusion. To regain a sense of certainty, many people turn to religion for a clear explanation of what is going on in the world. Fundamentalism can meet this need very well since it has clear and simple answers to every question people have in mind. Political, social, and economic chaos can be explained away, for example, by conspiracy theory, apocalyptic prophecy, or as God's punishment of a sinful world.

2. The Explosion of New Religions

Apart from the rise of fundamentalism, the explosion of new religions is another prominent religious phenomenon in the globalized world. While fundamentalism is an attempt to return to the past and traditional values, and regards itself as part of conventional religious institutions, new religions separate themselves from conventional ones and develop their own identities. Though some of them still identify themselves with established religions—either as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam—many movements start brand new religions with their own belief systems, symbols, texts, and supreme entities.

According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, there are 9,900 distinct religions and 2 or 3 new religions created every day. Some studies estimate that there are more than 10,000 new religions. In Japan, the estimated number of new religions varies from 800 to a few thousand (Wilson, 1999). This does not include

new groups or denominations that separate from established ones. Including such groups would multiply the numbers 3 or 4 times, since in Christianity alone new denominations or churches independent of the main branches are already up to 33,000.

The explosion of new religions undoubtedly reflects the failure of conventional religious institutions in responding to the needs of people. Rapid changes in society escalated by globalization make it difficult for established institutions to adjust themselves. Most of them still cling to obsolete traditions and world views, while many are plagued with scandals and corruption. This paves the way for new religions or new denominations that make quick adjustments to grow and draw more followers. A key to the success of the new religions and new churches in Africa, for example, is their ability to help people survive in all the ways they need, including finding a partner (Lester, 2002).

It should be noted the needs that new religions have met are not only spiritual, but also social, and economic or material. Although some do not give material assistance, they do give hope to followers that the economic burden will be relieved by an act of God. El Shaddai and the Winner's Church are clear examples of successful new religious groups in developing countries. In developed countries, like the US, one of the fastest-growing churches is the "megachurch", which provides the space for family gatherings and facilities for sports and entertainment. It also arranges meetings for people to help each other, thus creating a sense of community that is lost in modern cities (Trueheart, 1996).

3. The Growth of Religion for Consumerism

Amidst the revival of religion around the world is the pervasive spread of consumerism, which through corporate-driven global-

ization has developed into a global culture in its own right. To many people, these two phenomena look contradictory, since religion is regarded as a spiritual matter while consumerism is about materialism. This distinction, however, is irrelevant in the age of globalization since many religions today promote consumerism or transform into consumerism in a religious cloak.

Consumerism is a powerful world-view which has deep effects on the attitude and way of living of people around the world. Through consumer attitudes, virtually everything is transformed into a commodity for sale. Health, education, culture, happiness, relationship, and identity are all for sale or believed to be accessible in the market. With money, everything can be bought for consumption. Prosperity or material acquisition becomes the goal of life.

This attitude has influenced people's approaches to religion. Religion is expected to give blessings for prosperity, rather than offer a refuge for inner peace. Even among those who desire the latter, money is regarded as the means for spiritual fulfillment. Spiritual experience is something that can be realized not by practice or making efforts but by buying through "donation". It's unsurprising, then, that many religious groups adjust themselves to this consumer mentality by becoming "consumer religions", or religions that promise material success by selling religious services. Thus, it's no wonder that religions, both new and conventional, sprout up in highly consumerized countries like Japan, where a funeral service can cost you more than tens of thousands of dollars.

The following are some characteristics of consumer religions:

- focusing on materialistic values

- using money as the main tool
- instant and convenient
- creating more “need” to “consume” religious services
- individualistic-oriented

Consumer religions can be found among both conventional religions and new religions. Dhammakaya (Buddhist, Thailand), Foguangshan (Buddhist, Taiwan), El Shaddai (Christian, Philippines), and the Winner’s Church (Christian, Philippines) are examples of consumer religions that have gained popularity around the world.

Implications: Religion Forever

Religion is an undeniable reality in the globalized world. In fact, it is going to stay with human beings forever. Ultimately, we are all religious animals. Deep in our heart, we all need religion. Religion, however, has various forms. It may manifest in conventional forms or secular ones. Among the latter ones are nationalism and communism. Although originally as political ideologies, nationalism and communism, once and still, fulfill a religious role for millions of us. That’s why people are willing to die for it. This is also true of consumerism.

However technologically advanced we are, we cannot escape from our spirituality. Spiritual drive always plays a role in our life, consciously or unconsciously. Although our effort may look “secular”, it is always driven by spiritual yearnings. Desire for immortality, salvation, self-fulfillment, being real and grounded, etc. are all spiritual yearnings that are behind our struggle, individually and collectively.

Even science and technological progress in the West, as David Noble suggests, has their true inspiration in the quest for transcendence and salvation (Noble, 1997). David Loy, from a Buddhist perspective, points out that the growth of the nation state, corporate capitalism, and mechanistic science was driven by the collective attempt to resolve spiritual lack, which was once taken care of by the pre-Reformation Catholic Church. He concludes that, “The history of the West is not a story of gradual secularization, for we can never escape the burden of our lack and the need to transcend it.” (Loy, 2002).

To acknowledge and understand our spiritual need is the key to a good life. To ignore or reject it is to let it drive us unconsciously and perversely. Such ignorance also leads us to the worship of quasi-religions that promise secular redemption. Consumerism is now the most powerful quasi-religion whose growth is driven by unacknowledged spiritual hunger. The real problem of such a quasi-religion as consumerism is that it can give us only temporary comfort, but leave us in endless hunger. On top of that, the endless crave stimulated by it leads to social disintegration and environmental destruction on a global scale.

The Need for Religious Reform

We need religion to understand our spiritual needs and help us to fulfill them. Many religious organizations, especially established ones, have failed to do this. Preserving obsolete traditions and their privilege is their top priority. Moreover, they have exploited the spiritual needs of followers for their own advantage. Religious reform is, therefore, badly needed. To be able to quench spiritual hunger, religious organizations themselves have to be inspired

and enriched spiritually. That means they have to be free from materialism and consumerism. This also applies to new religious organizations, many of which have developed into establishments and enjoy privileges as well as material fortune.

Spiritually enriched religions and religious organizations not only provide an inspiring and healthy alternative to consumer religion but also to consumerism as religion. Rather than the outcome of spiritual vacuum, the pervasion of consumerism is the consequence of spiritual hunger. To people who are spiritually fulfilled, consumerism has no appeal at all. Religion that can meet spiritual needs is, therefore, a powerful force to check the growth of consumerism and limit its destructive effects. For civil society to survive the pervasive invasion of consumerism, it needs to cooperate with spiritually enriched religions and support religious reform. For civil society to avoid being overwhelmed by consumerism, it has to be spiritually informed. To struggle against consumerism without inner peace or spiritual immunity is to risk being consumed by consumerism on the one hand or being burnt out on the other hand.

Catering to Material and Social Needs

Spiritually enriched religion, however, should not confine itself to spiritual matters. Catering to material and social needs is a mission that religion cannot ignore, especially in the globalized world. During the past few decades, corporate-driven globalization has contributed significantly to the growth of poverty and economic disparity on a global scale. According to the UNDP, during 1970-1985 global GNP increased by 40%, yet the number of the poor increased by 17%. Even in a rich country like the US,

poverty has increased as well as the gap between the rich and the poor. The richest 1% increased their wealth by 28.3% between 1983-1992, while the bottom 40% of American families saw their assets decline by 49.7% during the same period (Castells, 1998).

Increasing poverty and inequality in almost every country demands the care of religion. It also gives the chance for religion to play a positive role in society and, consequently, the chance to grow and be more relevant.

Globalization from the Grassroots

Although the growth of consumerism and poverty is the consequence of globalization, it does not mean that religion should be against globalization.

Globalization, though reversible, is a reality that is difficult to avoid. To be against globalization at all costs may push one to the other extreme, i.e. religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is not a healthy response to globalization. It has grown out of fear and is full of rage that easily leads to violence. Although fighting for the survival of their religion, fundamentalist movements frequently act in ways contrary to their religious values, i.e. compassion and tolerance. Fundamentalism also creates division in society, through its narrow and rigid distinctions between “we” and “others”.

Rather than go against globalization at all costs, we should redirect it for the benefit of humanity, instead of serving global corporate interest. Instead of allowing globalization from CEO boardrooms to exploit the world, globalization from the grassroots needs to be developed to stop the destruction and restore the balance in nature and harmony in the world.

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The Problem of Fundamentalism and Violence in Religion: A Buddhist Experience

“Fundamentalism” was first used by American Protestants almost a century ago to distinguish themselves from “liberal” ones. However, it is now widely used to identify any militant groups or movements in any religion that are characterised by following traits:

- Against democracy, pluralism, religious toleration, and free speech
- Fear annihilation by offensive secularism and modernity
- Inspired by a glorious history
- Selectively retrieve certain doctrines and practices of the past
- Militancy and piety

Thai Militant Buddhists

Though there are a number of militant Buddhists in Thailand, strictly speaking, they are not “fundamentalists.” Though they long for the glorious past of Buddhism, they tend to feel at home with the modern life, get along with modernity, and make no attempt to adhere to pious practices of the past.

The militant Buddhist movement has grown out of the fear that Buddhism will be wiped out or lose its outstanding status in Thailand. They are very worried by the following developments:

- The decline of monks’ leadership in all aspects
- Fierce criticism against monks and disrespect of Buddhism
- Indifference towards Buddhism among the people
- Growing widespread Islam piety and Christian converts

Though the decline of Buddhism is primarily caused by the low quality of monks and people’s indifference to Buddhism, the militant Buddhist movement tends to blame other religions, i.e., Islam and Christianity, as the main reason for the current situation. It is believed by many Buddhists, for example, that other religions are behind the scandal of monks, especially those reported in the media. Rumours have been widespread that Muslim ministers in the governments try hard to push for a privileged status for Islam. Militant Buddhists are worried that there is a prayer room for Muslims in every airport and central train station. In their opinion, the increasing piety of other religious followers is harmful to the status of Buddhism in Thailand.

The violence in Thailand's three southernmost provinces helps fuel the growth of the militant Buddhism movement. In the past three years, many monks were killed, many temples were burnt down, and hundreds of Buddhists lost their lives. It is believed among Buddhists that Muslims there want to wipe Buddhism out of these provinces, where Muslim is followed by the majority. Though this is the intention of extreme Muslims who regard these provinces as formerly being an Islamic state, the majority of Muslims still believe in peaceful co-existence with Buddhists.

The prospective retreat of Buddhism, especially in the three southernmost provinces, has stimulated militant Buddhists to call for special measures to protect Buddhism. They repeatedly call for official recognition of Buddhism as the state religion, and mass rallies have been held for months during the constitutional draft a few months ago. Rallies are also used in protests against any media that portray monks in a negative way. Now they are also proposing a law that prohibits criticism against monks, Buddhist teachings, and the Buddha.

The most worrisome is the demand by militant Buddhists for heavy military suppression of unrest in the south. This approach is believed by militant Buddhist to not only protect the lives of Buddhist lay people and monks but to also keep Buddhism alive there. However, I am afraid that such aggressive military solutions will exacerbate the violence, increase the hostility between Buddhists and Muslims, and put all people, including Buddhists, in more dangerous situations, not to mention the erosion of the spirit of Buddhist teaching.

Sri Lankan Militant Buddhists

There is some similarity among Thai and Sri Lanka Buddhists in

the sense that they are more militant than fundamentalist. The militant Buddhists in Sri Lanka believe that Buddhism there is threatened by the prospect of Tamil secession from the northernmost region. They have a strong conviction that the entire Sri Lankan island is an historic Buddhist land that cannot be divided. That is the main reason for their full support of military action against Tamil rebels during the past two decades. Any attempt for conditional peace, which involves granting autonomy of a Tamil state in the north, always faces aggressive protests by Buddhists led by militant monks. Some monks have even taken part in an armed movement, i.e. the JVP, against secession.

In fact, the issue of primary concern among militant Buddhists is maintaining the dominance of the Sinhala ethnicity. They want Sri Lanka to be the land of Sinhala, which upholds the Sinhala language as the official one, and regards the religion of the Sinhala, i.e. Buddhism, as the foremost one. For them, the Sinhala and Buddhism are inseparable. The glory of the Sinhala is the glory of Buddhism. What is good for the Sinhala is also good for Buddhism. Such belief gives rise to the close connection between Sinhala nationalism and Buddhism. It has been shown throughout history that once nationalism and Buddhism stick together, Buddhism is likely to be used to support nationalism at its own cost.

This can be applied to Thailand where Thai ethnicity or Thai nationalism and Buddhism are closely related. To be Thai is to be Buddhist. This is the belief that has been reinforced by the Thai state for many decades. Buddhism is, therefore, used to support the Thai state. It was previously used to justify war by the Thai government, and there is an attempt now to use Buddhism in support of military action in the south.

Free from Attachment to Religion

Buddhism is against all forms of violence. Killing for whatever reason is never justified by Buddhism. However, Buddhism, as well as other religions, can be used to instigate violence in different forms, including war for religious propagation and preservation.

As mentioned before, religion, as an identity, is used to reinforce a self-centered attitude or superior conceit among devout believers, while nonbelievers are labeled as evil. Moreover, an extreme attachment to religion can contribute to a strong conviction that holds that anything is permissible for the glory of religion. In other words, deviated religious adherence could be a license to kill people of other faiths. This attitude is apparently shared by a number of fundamentalists or extremists.

It should be noted that this extreme notion does not only exist just among religious fundamentalists but also among secularists, which include communists, neo-conservatives, or even environmentalists. In numerous incidents, millions of people were killed by extreme secularists, like the Nazis and communists. Some extreme environmentalists have even declared recently that, “everything is permitted.”

Buddhism can contribute to violence if attachment to the religion has gone extreme and nurtured conceit. It is, therefore, very important to be on guard against attachment to one’s own religion. The Buddha even warned his followers not to cling to his teaching since clinging can lead to the suffering of oneself and others. He likened his teaching to a raft that we use to reach the shore. Once we get ashore, we should leave the raft behind and not to carry it further. The following form of contemplative mindfulness of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Order of Interbeing is a good reminder for Buddhists and all religious who care for peace:

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for.

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We shall learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to other's insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.

In an age of widespread violence, all religions, including Buddhism, have a mission to create peace. At least they should avoid being the source of violence themselves. To achieve this, these values are indispensable, namely: compassion toward those in suffering, courage to face all difficulties, wisdom to understand profound causes, and self-awareness to overcome conceit, attachment to ideas, and craving. All these moral forces can strongly inspire believers to take on the difficult tasks as shown in history. On the contrary, religion has recently been used to propel killings among believers.

The time is ripe for religion to drive their believers to sacrifice themselves to protect the lives of others and bring peace to the

world through compassion, courage, wisdom, and self-awareness stemming from their deep personal transformation. There is no other way for peace to prevail in the world.

Written in 2007

On the Path toward Peace and Justice:

Challenges Confronting Buddhists and Muslims

It had long been a conviction among Western intellectuals and academics that religions would disappear from the world in the 20th century due to the advent and hegemony of Reason and Science. Although time has proven the inaccuracy of this prediction, this creed was still prevalent even in the mid-20th century. Many leading sociologists at the time continued to assert that by the 21st century, religions would fade away. Four decades ago, Anthony Wallace, a well-known anthropologist specializing in religions, even asserted in his *Religion: An Anthropological View*:

The evolutionary future of religion is extinction. As a cultural trait, belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world, as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge...The process is inevitable.

Nowadays, however, no serious Western thinker or academic entertains the idea of the end of religion. It has been clear to almost everyone that religions have regained their influences in every part of the world during the past 25 years. They have played crucial roles not only in the daily life of their adherents but also in politics and public life. In several countries, religion has helped trigger political changes and even regime change. Books on religion have become international bestsellers. Religious symbols or icons have been valorized by the market; some have even been used to add value to products. Needless to say, public campaigns that pick up enormous financial contributions are oriented toward religious issues.

Similar to other religions, Buddhism and Islam have not only revived and thrived in countries that have long upheld them but have also begun to prosper in the Western world. The rise of both religions may be attributed to far-reaching economic and social changes wrought worldwide during the last few decades—e.g., urbanization, disintegration of families and traditional communities, alienation, isolation, and hyper-tension. At the same time, the advent of new values and consumerism have contributed to existential angst—the meaninglessness and emptiness of life—in many people. They feel insecure, an anxiety compounded by the inflows of transnational forces, especially from the West, which are perceived as undermining local identities and cultures. All these are factors that have induced a vast number of people to turn to religion and to hold on to religion as the anchor or pillar of their lives in a time filled with uncertainties.

Religion and Social Healing

No one would doubt the role of religion in social healing.

Religion may serve as an important pillar to help “stabilize” life. It has given a sense of direction to many people’s lives. It has made them confident in their identities, and has given them security and a modicum of happiness amidst troubling and complex social currents. As such, religion has helped alleviate the mental sufferings of a great number of people in a way modern institutions will never be able to do.

However, the role of religion should not be limited to only pacifying the troubled minds of its followers. This is especially true in the present context where there are great sufferings in society. They are not simply a matter of existential anxiety and loneliness, but also result from grinding poverty, material deprivation, and lack of access to education and medical care. The latter form of suffering emanates from exploitation at the individual as well as the structural level—e.g., cheapened labor, diverting local resources away from local use and management, unjust distribution of incomes, etc. All these occur simultaneously with human rights abuses or the denial of the basic rights of citizens, such as the rights to voice one’s opinion, to assemble, to hold mass demonstration, and to participate in the decision-making process of the government. These are all vital rights that help improve the people’s quality of life.

Now this situation is happening amidst the widening gap between the rich and the poor, a huge gap that is completely unprecedented. It is occurring in a time when a minority possesses and controls massive wealth on a scale that is unheard of. This is a form of injustice that is readily apparent. It may be also interpreted as a form of violence, because it condemns millions to lives that are short, nasty, and brutish, resulting from poverty, hunger, and easily preventable diseases. At the same time, this injustice has

bred mass demonstrations, which often end in bloodshed when state officials have tortured or massacred demonstrators. As long as this injustice persists, the victims will eventually take up arms as their last resort. This has been the case in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Thailand to cite a few random examples.

Injustice and violence constitute the reality facing Buddhists and Muslims in many countries in Asia. It cannot be denied that this reality contradicts the basic principles of both Buddhism and Islam. Both religions were created to enable people to live together peacefully and compassionately. Both respect the sacredness of life and the great potentialities of every life. It is clear that both religions do not teach their followers to single-mindedly pursue personal happiness. Rather, they insist that happiness at the individual level is inextricable from happiness at the social level. The happiness of others must also be cultivated, and here “others” refers not only to one’s family members, friends, or neighbors but to everyone in society and in the world. Therefore, the elimination of injustice and violence in order to nurture peace and justice in society (and in the world) is a duty that Buddhists and Muslims cannot renounce.

Dual Obligations

In order to cultivate social justice and peace, religious people have dual tasks, which I will call “external obligation” and “internal obligation.”

External obligation means pushing for social change. In other words, it does not simply refer to interpersonal activities. Rather, it also includes political activities. Justice and peace will not emerge if a helping hand is lent only at the interpersonal level; for instance, in the form of material donations or taking care of the

sick and needy. Put differently, structures that contribute to social injustices and violence must also be amended or transformed. For example, power should be decentralized to enable the people to make decisions on matters that directly impact their lives and to make the political system more democratic, transparent, and accountable. At the same time, there should be actions for what is known as redistributive justice—the just distribution of incomes, land reforms, and progressive taxation. These will help dismantle structural violence and foster justice and peace.

Religious people tend to perceive social problems as simply emanating from personal flaws. Politicians are corrupt. Villagers are lazy or addicted to gambling, thus they are poor. Hence, they only seek to redress problems at the personal level. They demand for good and honest leaders. They lecture villagers on the virtue of diligence and the sin of gambling. They only tend to provide assistance to individuals. These are necessary but insufficient undertakings. They should also focus on the structural level. This does not merely entail legislating laws to counter corruption and to oppose ruinous activities (e.g., leading to the squandering of wealth), because the causes of social suffering are much more than corruption and ruinous activities. New laws alone will not be able to contribute to changes if there are no parallel and complementary changes in other systemic elements or institutions.

To be able to do so, religious people must understand structural problems. They are complex and are interrelated to various other dimensions, such as politics, economics, society, culture, and so on. The same approach that can be used to solve familial or community problems, which largely focus on the individual level, should not be used to tackle social problems. One will not be able to correctly grasp social problems and propose viable solutions if one does so.

As for internal obligation, it means understanding and practicing one's religion in order to fathom its essence. This is a very important duty since it will lead to profound personal transformation and facilitate one's being with others. The failure to do so will trap the religious people in the formalities or superficialities of his or her religion. The narrowness of this view may contribute to a kind of fundamentalism and may obstruct both personal development and desirable social change.

Not infrequently, religious followers or movements are only interested in matters or only demand for things that benefit their respective religions—for instance, the demand to have a specific ministry to oversee their religion. In this context, a religious group or movement has become like an interest group—similar to a business association or a chamber of commerce. This is lamentable as religion should be concerned about universal values, about benefiting humanity regardless of differences.

Transcending Religious Barriers or Demarcations

Both Buddhism and Islam recognize the unity of humanity, seeing every human being as a friend or a fellow sharing the earth. Understanding the essence of one's religion will enable both the Buddhist and the Muslim people to appreciate this bond and to have compassion for one another. Differences in terms of religion, language, and nationality will not pose barriers. However, quite a number of Buddhist and Muslim people divide and classify other human beings in terms of religion, race, nationality, language, etc. This has not only led to division between “us” and “them” but also to indifference or callous disregard for the others—even to the point of seeing the other as the enemy.

This view negatively impacts social justice and peace, because the religious people will only be concerned about members of his or her own religion, and justice and peace will apply to only the members of the same religion. He or she will not care about (or will not be able to perceive) the injustices and violence suffered by the members of other religious communities. Last year, Thai Buddhists experienced revulsion when some monks and novices were murdered in a temple in Pattani province. A section of the temple was burned down, and the Buddha image was destroyed. Many wanted vengeance against the perpetrators of the crime. However, they felt no remorse when approximately 80 Muslim demonstrators suffocated to death after they were arrested and piled in army trucks while being transported to a military camp in that very same province.

It seems that many Muslims also share the same view as the aforementioned Buddhists. During a meeting of the National Reconciliation Commission, I suggested to my Muslim colleagues that they should publicly condemn the murder of the Buddhist monks in the case mentioned above, a tragedy that is believed to be perpetrated by a number of Muslims. However, my Muslim colleagues declined to do so, fearing that it would make them the target of criticism or negative reaction from the local Muslim inhabitants.

As I've already said, religious people tend to overlook the crime or injustice committed by the member of their own religious community. On the contrary, they will clearly see a crime or an injustice when it is perpetrated by a member of a different religious community. When a monk who was my friend was savagely stabbed to death in the northern part of Thailand, there was no moral outrage among Thai Buddhists in the kingdom. In fact, the murder received scant attention. One of the reasons for this is that

the murderer appeared to be a Buddhist. Yet there was moral outrage when Buddhist monks were killed by Muslims in the South of Thailand. Likewise, I learned that when Sunni Muslims bombed a Shia mosque in Iraq during the Ramadan period last year (and there have been several more bombings), there was virtually no denunciation of the crime among Sunni Muslims worldwide (including Thailand). At the same time, there is an endless round of moral outrage among Muslims whenever Muslim inhabitants in Iraq (whether Sunni or Shia) are killed by American soldiers.

I believe that any Buddhist or Muslim people who knows the essence of his or her religion will not be able to remain unperturbed whenever a fellow human being (and it does not matter which religion s/he is from, or if s/he has a religion for that matter) is abused in such manner. This is because religion is supposed to enable human beings to transcend the various barriers that have been artificially constructed by humans themselves. Religion opens us to the fact that we are human beings before we are Muslim, Buddhist, Thai, Malaysian, Indonesian, Sinhalese, Tamil, etc.

Religion can be a force for justice and peace, because it profoundly transforms human beings enabling them to have compassion and generosity toward all humans. Identities or “brands” in terms of nationality, race, religion, ideology, etc. will not be able to sever the ties of humanity. When we are unable to grasp the essence of our respective religions—when we are trapped in the symbolic and ceremonial aspects of our respective religions—then religion may turn into a major obstacle to justice and peace.

It cannot be denied that at present almost every religion in the world, including Buddhism and Islam, is being used to fan the hatred of others or to justify violence in the name of God or other absolute value. We can see this in communal violence in India,

Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, etc. It is interesting to note that religious people who have picked up arms to fight one another feel they are genuinely upholding the teachings of their respective religions.

There must be a very strong inspiration for a person to voluntarily sacrifice his or her life. For many people in the world, religion serves as this inspiration. The depressing thing is that nowadays religion is able to incite people to willingly die in order to kill others but seems to lack the power to inspire them to sacrifice their lives so that others may live.

Religion should be a force for peace, but this aspect of religion is waning. When millions worldwide demonstrated against the planned American invasion of Iraq in 2003, religious organizations did not constitute the majority in the antiwar movement. When Israeli troops besieged Ramallah in Palestine in 2002, many innocent civilians were killed. Subsequently, many international activists went to Ramallah to serve as human shields against Israeli troops and tanks. They were willing to risk their lives. Most of them, however, did not belong to any religious denomination.

Of course there are religious people who are working for peace. However, one of their preferred activities is holding peace conferences. On the contrary, the religious people who worship violence are willing to die in order to take the lives of others.

At present, a question that is worth pondering is to what extent Buddhism or Islam is able to serve as a powerful inspiration for its followers to sacrifice their lives to save the lives of others—or at least to convince followers to struggle for global justice and peace through non-violence without being anxious for their own personal safety. This will be possible when there is no “us” versus “them”. I feel that this is one of the major challenges confronting

Buddhists and Muslims who believe in justice and peace.

Transcending Religious Bigotry

Reaching the essence of religion liberates one not only from the delusion of identities that divide human beings but also from the narcissistic attachment to one's religion or sect; that is, seeing one's religion or sect as perfect and superior to all others. This delusion has been the cause of countless acts of violence and tragedies in the past. Buddhism itself had fallen prey to this delusion. When Japan invaded China, Manchuria, and Korea 70 years ago, Japanese Buddhist leaders extolled the invasion, even praising it as a "sacred war inspired by the great compassion of the bodhisattava". They felt that Buddhism in China and Korea was deformed and lowly and that the one in Japan was authentic. It was thus the obligation of Japan to bring authentic Buddhism to China and Korea—and to India. This would ultimately entail "transforming the world into the pure Buddhist land."

Other religions have committed similar tragedies. Attachment to one's religion extinguishes compassion for other religions, leading to actions or practices that are contrary to religious teachings and that destroy rather than nurture religion. This is a lesson for both Buddhists and Muslims. It challenges them to think of ways to prevent such tragedy from resurfacing in the future.

Collective Action against Violence

Buddhists and Muslims should not only be compassionate and open-minded, and thus not take part in violence perpetrated in the name of religion. They should also help prevent violence from being unleashed in the name of religion. We must not forget

that whenever thousands or tens of thousands are killed in a land where a religion has deeply planted its roots, that religion is a failure. This is because all religions reject violence and nurture compassion. It is already worrisome whenever a religion is not able to prevent the outbreak of violence, because it shows that it lacks the power of peacebuilding. It is far worse whenever a religion directly incites violence for it points to its moral degeneration or disintegration.

Seen in this light, Buddhists and Muslims bear responsibility for the state of violence in many countries in the present, including Thailand. They have not only been unable to prevent or mitigate violent situations but have at times also allowed violence to be committed in the name of religion—even if the actual perpetrators constitute a minority.

Perhaps most religious leaders and people do not support and believe in violence. However, their passivity or inaction enables the few who worship violence to hijack religion and to use religion to legitimize violence at will. This is a major problem confronting religions worldwide and is a condition of violence in many areas of the world.

Therefore, it is highly pertinent for Buddhists and Muslims to put an end to violence done in the name of religion. At least, they should collaborate and condemn the killing of people or of members of different faiths without fearing retaliation by armed extremists or fundamentalists. At the same time, they should cooperate with one another to protect religion and religious places—along with the personal security of religious leaders, monks, etc. They should also work together demanding religious people to strictly uphold compassion and forbearance according to religious teachings, to advocate fraternity and the sacredness of life,

and to refrain from violence in solving a problem or dispute.

Of course, this proposal may be against the grain of mainstream currents, which goes by the dictum “an eye for an eye.” It requires a lot of moral courage as well as perseverance to be able to fulfill this task. As such, we must try to go to the heart or the highest ideals of religion. Being at one with the highest ideals will nurture us and enable us to persist steadily on our course despite the gravity of opposition.

Learning from Each Other

The last point I would like to make is that bridges must be constructed between religions, between the followers of different religions. Working together to denounce violence committed in the name of religion may serve as an important stepping stone for more extensive and intricate collaboration in the future. On the one hand, Buddhists and Muslims should collaborate to bring about positive social changes along the lines of justice and peace. We shouldn't forget that violence isn't simply about bloodshed. It also includes exploitation and the deprivation of basic necessities and the lack of access to education and public health. Here, cooperation between Buddhists and Muslims is still weak, because they are too fixated on the gains and interests of their respective communities.

Aside from cooperation in terms of justice and peace, working together on other public issues, including increasing daily contacts or interactions, is also essential, because it helps bridge both religions together and helps reduce any misunderstanding, which may be a source of hostility between them. Due to limited contacts or interactions, religious people of different religions

learn about one another largely through the mass media or even the grapevine. As such, things may be distorted or added, contributing to misunderstanding.

Increased interactions between people of different religions may be facilitated by regular meetings or by collective activities, such as trips to important religious sites, celebrations of religious days, cultural exchanges (e.g., the arts and music), social work, and even organizing sports events—keeping in mind the traditions and practices of participating religious communities in mind.

More challenging, however, is the willingness to learn from and about one another, particularly concerning religious teachings, beliefs, and practices. As a Buddhist, I think we can learn a lot from Muslim people, especially about cultivating a sense of justice and developing strong communities through religion; that is, binding “worldly” and religious communities together. At the same time, I feel that Muslims can also benefit from Buddhism. They may find Buddhist teachings on compassion, tolerance, interdependence of all sentient beings, and Dependent Origination useful.

Through open and continuous dialogues, I believe there will be improved understanding between Buddhists and Muslims. We will find that a lot of the differences between us have been exaggerated by a great magnitude and that the differences between us serve as no legitimate reason to divide us into “us” and “them.”

The road to justice and peace will be blocked as long as we cannot see through “the brands” that we and others “wear” and as long as we cannot appreciate the human ties that closely link us all together. Therefore, we should all treat each other as brothers and sisters. Wouldn’t this enable us to make our religious duties, which are geared toward the highest ideals, more complete?

Written in 2006



Non-violence and Political Conflict

Non-duality and Non-violence

Non-duality

People tend to see the world in dualistic way by differentiating things into two opposing categories: good and evil, happiness and suffering, success and failure. Each category is supposed to be separated from each other. Together with this distinction is the preference to one against another.

Non-duality is the negation of such dualistic thinking. Fundamental to non-duality is the idea of interdependence of the world, conceptually and physically. Good is dependent on bad. We cannot identify good without referring to bad. The darkness of shadow exists whenever there is light. Desire for happiness always involve being preoccupied with suffering.

Opposing categories not only exist side by side with each other, they also exist within each other. Suffering constitutes a part of happiness, and vice versa. In coldness we can find heat, and vice versa. According to non-duality, the world is a non-plural, integral whole, not the sum of discrete things.

Non-duality is the core teaching of Buddhism, which places emphasis on the interrelationship of everything. Non-dual perception is crucial for one to achieve spiritual liberation from *samsara*, which revolves around the attachment of opposing categories. Not only in spiritual development, but also in worldly activities does non-duality play an important role.

Non-violence

From a Buddhist perspective, non-violence should not be merely a method or strategy of struggle, for worldly purpose. It should also be a spiritual practice for peace and righteousness, personally and collectively. For that to be possible, non-violent action should be based on non-duality from beginning to the end.

Non-distinction between I and Others

Non-violent action should not aim just for one's own benefit. It should be initiated for the benefit of others, too. Such non-violence is possible only with non-dual thinking that does not make a distinction between "I" and "others". When others suffer, oneself experiences suffering, too. Non-dual perception leads to compassion that inspires non-violent action.

Negation of Black-and-White Perception

In conflict and confrontation, one tends to see opponents on the wrong side, or worse, on the evil one. Such perception makes one, who is considered good, feel justified to use any method against them, even resorting to violence, on behalf of righteousness.

With non-dual thinking, one is aware that no one is absolutely wrong or absolutely right. An opponent's behavior is always interrelated to our own. The ruler always acts badly and cruelly with the consent or support of their people. How can 30,000 English military govern 300 million of Indian without the consent of the latter, asked Gandhi.

The misbehaviors of people oftentimes are the consequence of unhealthy social structures and systems, which are supported or maintained by us. We, therefore, cannot deny our responsibility for their misbehaviors. Non-duality not only reminds us that we are always involved in contributing to their undesirable behaviour but also tells us that we should not see the world in black and white, such as "We are good and they are evil".

Since we are involved, though indirectly, in the misbehaviors of someone, we cannot claim the right to use, or support, violence to get rid of them. And since evil also dwells in our heart, we have to restrain ourselves from using violence to others. Violence nourishes evil; the more one uses it, the more evil develops in one's heart; and finally it transforms one into an evil person. Police who frequently use insidious methods against criminals finally become criminals themselves. In other words, in the police dwells the seed of the criminal. Thich Nhat Hanh expresses succinctly this non-duality of reality in this poem:

I am the child in Uganda, all skins and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.
I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean,
after being raped by a sea pirate,
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable,
of seeing and loving.
I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his “debt of blood” to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

Non-dual thinking is the solid base for non-violent action. With it, one is aware that only non-violence can bring an end to evil. The most violence can do is to eradicate “evil doers” temporarily. It cannot get rid of evil. Evil still exists as long as two factors are intact: unhealthy and unwholesome social systems and the evil in the hearts of people. Both factors cannot be transformed or eradicated by violence. Only non-violent action can do so by creating alternative systems and enriching ones’ hearts with love, compassion, and inner peace.

Violence not only fails to eradicate evil, in the long run it also increases the number of “evil doers”. New evil doers that emerge are from the perpetrators of violence (though on behalf of “good”) and the victims of violence by the former.

Non-dual Action by Non-action

By its own nature, non-violent action is to be based on non-duality for the following reasons. From a non-violent perspective, action and non-action are not separated. Non-violent action oftentimes is expressed as non-action, i.e. non-cooperation, refusing military conscription, sitting in front of the factory or the line of tanks.

Non-distinction between Meditation and Action

According to dualistic thinking, meditation is distanced from action, as are spirituality and social activism. But from the non-dual thinking of Buddhist non-violent activists, they cannot be separated. Social activism is a part of spiritual development. It helps cultivating such wholesome qualities, such as compassion, and helps one to learn how to transform anger and hatred.

While social action is a part of meditation, meditation can be a part of social and political action. Gandhi's ashram, where people came to meditate and live a simple life, was a very influential political statement and action that shook English colonialism at its core.

The non-dual nature of meditation and action is also expressed by the Buddha's teaching: Protecting oneself is protecting others. Protecting others is protecting oneself.

Action without Actor

Any action that is done with the sense of "I" as the actor is at risk of being used for one's own personal benefit, despite its original aim to serve the others. Once the sense of "I" as actor emerges, that action becomes "mine" and thus the attachment. Conflict and

hostility is developed once “my” work is criticized or disagreed with. Once one tends to take criticism personally, relationship is undermined.

Apart from our relationship, the attachment of “my” work also brings suffering to “I” as the actor. If “my” work fails, “I” fail too. If “my” work succeeds, one is attached to the success and hence suffers when failure takes place.

Non-dual thinking helps one to be aware of non-difference of action and actor. In other words, there is action but not actor. With this attitude, a non-violent activist’s attachment to work and its outcome is decreased. One can work in harmony with others despite criticism or obstacles. Evaluation can be done objectively, without bias. This enables non-violent action to be a spiritual practice of high order: learning to achieve liberation from the delusion of “I” and experiencing true happiness

Conclusion

Non-duality is the crucial element of non-violent action in every phase. Non-duality also redirects non-violent action in accordance with Buddhist principles. In other words, Buddhist non-violence should be based on non-duality.

Written in 2003

Spirituality in the Age of Extremes: How Can We the Public Face the Challenge?

The discussion on religious teaching or spiritual dimension today seems to contrast the burning issues of the looming war which command much attention of people the world over. However, against this backdrop, the pondering of spiritual aspects does seem to be profoundly relevant. Even though the titling of today's speech is very much a coincidence with the start of the Iraqi War, I simply hope it helps shed some light on the event and helps you look forward beyond the existing quagmire.

The Dark Age of Extremes

The violence of this war is simply a tiny part of the nature of modern time, which may be referred to as the Dark Age (*kali yuga*) or the age of extremes. The latter was the term coined by Eric Hobsbawm since the last century, whereby he named the 20th century “the age of extremes” in his famous historical work. The last century saw extremism in various unprecedented ways including the occurrence of the Second World War, the Holocaust, the massacre in Rwanda, atrocities in the Middle East and Cambodia, not to mention the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the heinous political suppression in China and Russia, which was a reflection of this extremism. Despite the closing of the last century, the age of extremes does not seem to cease. It keeps haunting us in this present century, though it may manifest in a slightly altered manner. This century can be counted on as an age of extremes from any angle, in particular the extremity in economy, i.e., the unprecedented gap between the rich and the poor. The combination of wealth owned by the three richest people in the world exceeds the Gross Domestic Production of the 48 poorest countries combined. The wealth of a few hundred rich people in this world exceeds the wealth belonging to around 2.5 billion people in the world, or a half of the global population. This is a horrible extremity. Amidst the abundance of consumer products, 3 billion people have no access to basic infrastructure, 1.3 billion are left with no clean drinking water, and 800 million without food. This is another yet extremity.

The amount of money used for ice cream consumption in Europe and the USA is double that of the budget needed to provide basic education for countries around the world. We simply need

\$6 billion USD for the provision of basic education worldwide, but ice cream expenditures stand at \$11 billion USD, almost double. The expenditures on perfume in Europe and the USA are as high as \$12 billion USD incomparable to the amount needed for the acquisition of clean water and basic infrastructure for the world population, which only accounts for 9 billion USD.

This is another economic extremity in the so-called globalization age, which illustrates the nature of chaos. In addition to the said extremization, there is also the polarization of nations ever more increasingly and obviously. On one hand, we see the rise of globalism along with the expansion of globalization. On the other hand, tribalism as happening in the Balkan peninsula, India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka is also expanding. On one hand, we see the growth of global organizations of both the state and society such as WTO, NAFTA, etc. On the other hand, the underground crime networks of illicit trade, such as drugs, prostitution, human trafficking, etc., are also expanding. There is a division between the world of materialism and technology with the world of religiosity and traditionalism—*Jihad vs. McWorld*, which is the title of a book by American political scientist Benjamin Barber.

This is another extreme symptom of the present world. We are facing the most extreme kind of capitalism, which holds that human traits and human destiny are prefixed at our genetic level, whether it be our inclination toward adultery, our sacrifice, our intellect. All these social traits are presumably controlled by our genetic settings, a material formation in our cells. Mind (emotion) is viewed simply as a biochemical reaction in our brain, which is merely a material mass. Even faith in God is believed to be already part of our brain mass. On one hand, we see the extremity of materialism, and on the other hand the extremity of spiritual-

ism, whose believers simply leave the destiny of their lives at the mercy of God. New cults and the belief in spirit mediums emerge every day. Particularly in Japan, despite its advanced material growth and technologies, there exist 120,000 cults with their own exclusive gods nowadays. This is another extreme aspect of today's world.

We may notice the increasingly obvious polarization markedly separated by disparity in the economic status, politics, religions, skin colors, and beliefs. Despite that, what is more obvious is perhaps the division between “they” against “us”. Our relationships have become ever more divisive. Interpersonal communication becomes more difficult. Our bias and antagonism have risen to the surface. The definition of the age of extremes or chaos is based on this blatant divisiveness between “they” against “us”. We become ever more distant to each other as a result of economic factors, political factors, or religious factors. The harsh realities in the Balkan peninsula, between India and Pakistan, and in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine, as well as in other small nations clearly indicate the ever more glaring divisiveness and polarization, in particular during the post-9/11 period.

The Clash of Civilization between the Traditional & the Modern

Another threat that has been perpetuating this divisiveness is the attempt to shift the conflict between the USA and Muslim nations to the level of cultural and civilization clash. Coupled with the declaring of the phrase “those with us or against us”, the anti-terrorist efforts led by the USA can easily lead the world into a violent age of extremes. Of course, in this highly polarized

world, none of the space is available for a third party, or the so called “grey area”. It should be noticed that the age of extremes in the last century was very much attributed to differences in political ideologies, be it fascism, Nazism, socialism, communism, etc. But at present, it seems religions have played a pivotal role to nurture these extremities, including those taking place in the Balkan peninsula, the Indian subcontinent, and Afghanistan. Even the antagonism during the anti-terrorist war, most obviously between President Bush and Bin Laden, is very much stemmed from religious belief. It is not only Bin Laden who attempts to prove his faith in God, President Bush also believes that he is chosen by God to become the president. He has been miraculously saved from being a drunkard into a leadership to lead the war against the Axis of Evil. He believes that it was a will of God for him to wage war against the Axis of Evils. His devout faith in God assures him the righteousness of war against Iraq. He never showed hesitancy to decide to launch a war against Iraq, even though he spent much more time to ponder before he eventually ordered the halt of the stem cell research. But for the war on Iraq, it did not take him long to decide, despite the fact that it would affect many lives. Without a doubt, the strong faith in God’s will really played a major role in this decision making.

What are the factors that mess up the role of religion with politics in this age of extremes? There are a couple reasons that we might explore.

Firstly, modern state, modern development, and modern political ideologies and institutions have failed to fulfill the wish of people in the lower class. Previously, people placed much hope in the government to bring the benefits of development to the people and that prosperity was very imminent. Instead, in

many countries massive poverty and the displacement of people has occurred. A number of people have lost faith in democratic institutions and ideologies, as they have become just a tool for a handful of people. Meanwhile, many political ideologies including socialism or nationalism are found not to offer solutions to many problems. In many instances, nationalism also fails to unify people, as obviously observable in the case of the Arab patriotism that fails to serve as a unifying drive for the struggle of the people.

Amidst this situation, the only refuge that people can resort to is “traditional capital”, namely, the commonly shared religion and ethnicity, a predestined identity, which is powerful enough to unify people in their struggles for their survival. In many countries, religion has been used as a tool of liberation by people to fight against oppression committed by their own elite and foreign powers. This draws a parallel between the use of nationalism by indigenous people in the last century to fight against imperialism with the use of religion, ethnicity, and race in the present century as a powerful tool for the lower class people to fight against oppression unleashed by their own compatriots and foreigners. In the midst of this situation, it is not just the people who are inclined to draw on religion, but the religion on the people as well. It needs people’s power as a basis to fight for religious causes, to fight against secularism, against liberalism whose many principles contradict religious tenets, such as freedom in abortion, in lifestyle and in sex. All of these unorthodoxies are not acceptable to many religious believers, in particular religious conservatives. Religions in many countries have been suppressed and marginalized as well. Their influence on social institutions has declined including their forced distancing from education. It is increasingly obvious that religions have declined and gradually lost their social ground, the

incidence of which gave rise to fundamentalism in Egypt, Iran, India, and even in the USA. In Thailand, this trend is noticeable, too.

What has emerged is the politics of identity, in which religions have played a major role. The identity-oriented politics, such as those based on ethnicity and religion, have become a major trend in today's world. It represents the dissent of people who have long been oppressed. It is their struggle for survival in an aggressive and furious manner and easily leads to violence. This trend undeniably shares certain characteristics with the rise of Nazism, which resulted from the imagined oppression of the German by the Jew. A false impression was created among the Germans that the Jews were colluding at the global level to crush the Germans, for example, in their collaboration with the Bolsheviks on the Eastern front. The Germans viewed the Bolsheviks and the Jews as the same group. On the Western front, led by Britain, they also felt the Jews dominated. This conspiracy theory partly contributed to the rise of Nazism and later on the Holocaust. Similarly, the fundamentalists fear that religion's roles have been marginalized by certain colluding efforts. One consequence is the spread of hatred throughout the world, which has become popular in many countries. The culture of hatred predominates even among the middle class and the educated population. We used to hold that fundamentalism and terrorism simply predominate among the oppressed lower class, but now they have become more popular among the middle class and the educated people. The Indian middle class is the main supporter of the BJP party, which holds extreme fundamentalist values. Many of those involved with the 9/11 event were found to be highly educated, not just people from the lower class, as we used to understand.

Therefore, propelled by the deep divisiveness in economic

status, culture, and social status, the culture of hatred, which comes in the cloak of religious fundamentalism and terrorism, has become a major trend in the world. This highlights the role of religion or spirituality. However, the realm of spirituality is not confined by religiosity. It exists in any human being and stays very close to their humanness. In the age of the widespread culture of hatred in the form of tribalism, ethnicism, and religionism, the spiritual dimension is an indispensable factor to balance these extremes and the hatred trend.

The Spiritual Dimension

What do I mean by the spiritual dimension? It means the profound consciousness of human beings in our common unity beyond race, religion, language, gender, and political ideology. It is a deep awareness of the interconnectedness of all sentient beings, not just among human beings but between human beings and nature. Spirituality upholds the values of every life that should be protected. As we delve into the depths of spirituality, our mind will become vast, teemed with abundant loving kindness and selflessness. This occurs as we experience the supernatural state beyond space and time, beyond daily mundane exposure, beyond dualism and the separation between “they” against “us”. Spirituality is thereby a non-dual state.

The separation between “they” against “us” or dualism is the basis for the widespread of the culture of hatred around the world. As we see “they” against “us”, therefore, anyone apart from us is automatically regarded as our enemy. The black-and-white worldview can easily lead to increasing polarization. Religious persons, in particular, are prone to be trapped by this perception.

They draw a strict line to differentiate between the good and the bad. If anyone does not behave in accordance with their predesignated values, they are accused of being bad, and therefore, it is justified to use any means to get rid of them. Bin Laden sees the world in this black-and-white way. For him, the Americans stand for the evilness that has brought a decline to Islam, and they deserve to be destroyed. Bush takes the same worldview. He views certain countries as the Axis of Evil and must be rid of by any means, as we can see from what he is doing now.

The black-and-white worldview or the over emphasis on moral clarity justifies the efforts to get rid of those thinking differently from us and being viewed as evil. With this worldview, those people tend to be obsessed with the urge to eradicate “evil” and to take action that makes them feel good for having carried out virtuous roles. It makes them become even more confident in their own goodness that they are there to destroy evil. The more they destroy evil, the better they feel. This has led to the perpetuation of the culture of hatred, the trend to label others as “evil” who need to be gotten rid of even with the use of violence, and the necessity of war—but it does not make one feel guilty for committing that.

The foundation of spirituality is a non-dualist worldview. We do not tend to polarize and drawing a line between good and evil is not that easy. Good and bad are not absolutely separated, both well exist in ourselves. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author who was victimized in the age of extremes under the rule of Stalin during which he was detained in a concentration camp, once said:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

In the course of ridding the world of evil, is there any guarantee that we will not become the evil ourselves?

The Culture of Hatred

Similarly, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot wanted to eradicate evil by sacrificing the lives of millions of people, and their periods of rule in turn have become the symbol of evil in modern history themselves. This culture of hatred has spread far and wide in a short period of time as it offers ready-made, stereotypical answers, based on a clear and simple black-and-white worldview. For example, during Nazi German rule, it was simply said that the deterioration of Germany was attributed to the Jews. In India, it was simply said that the decline of Hinduism was attributed to Islam. And now, we hear some people pointing their finger to Christians and Muslims as the conspiring power behind the deteriorating situation of Buddhism in Thailand. This culture has also been nurtured by some politicians who want to gain popularity through the cultivation of this hatred. The government wants an easy scapegoat to bring attention away from their own failures, and they tend to point their finger at certain groups, certain religions, certain ethnicities, which are the minorities but seen as threats to the nation.

The mission to preempt this culture of hatred must be taken by the public, in particular, intellectuals. We should not be obsessed with this dualistic worldview that tends to draw the line between good and evil. We have to strive to search for the truth, which usually becomes the very first victim of the culture of hatred, in particular, during the situation in which image of the opposite side is distorted into evil and the like. For example, with this worldview, the Iraqis then become “the devil”, the Americans become “the demon”, and this and that religion are falsely accused of being the reasons for the deterioration of certain countries, etc.

In order to fight against this culture of hatred, we need to cultivate compassion and loving kindness. We need to have a strong conviction in humanness and not simply view other lives as material that can be conveniently rid of, even if they are the real evil. We tend to dehumanize criminals, viewing that they deserve to have no rights and they ought to be eradicated under the rule of law. The case of rampant killings of drug suspects that recently took place in Thailand genuinely reflected the attempt to cultivate this culture of hatred. Under this worldview, it is appropriate to say that these criminals are not human beings and should be shot dead, or we should support the cause to have them shot dead by whispering to local officers and have them kill these people for us. Then the officers can simply claim that these deaths were the result of “silencing the suspects”, the killings among drug traffickers themselves, and can take this death toll as a proof of gain favour for their reward and promotion. Nonetheless, the criminals are also human beings. No one has the right to shoot them down at his or her own will. Even if they are killed by their own fellow criminals, the state has its mandate to investigate, as

they have the right to protection from the state. No defendant can be dragged out from prison and shot. Such incidences are not acceptable to any civilized nation, but those opposed to this war on drug are often falsely regarded as being part of the drug rings. They are accused of valuing the lives of the drug traffickers over the lives of the officers. This is part of the attempt to cultivate a culture of hatred, the dehumanization process, and the devaluation of human dignity.

The Culture of Greed

The culture of hatred is opposite to the culture of greed in many respects. For example, the culture of hatred leads to aversion, whereas the culture of greed cultivates attraction. The culture of hatred tends to extinguish, whereas the culture of greed tends to acquire and accumulate. Part of this culture of greed is consumerism, which has become another predominant trend in the world. It influences people of all ages. Nowadays, some teenagers do not find it wrong to sell their bodies in order to have money to buy mobile phones or cars. Modern people tend to identify themselves closely with consumer culture. The values of human beings are defined by the use of certain brand name products. Social grouping is very much tied with the act of consumption, such as going as a group to attend a pop concert or going en masse to shop in big malls. They tend to group with people who use the same kind of consumer products.

Not a single space in this world can escape from the influence of consumerism enhanced by the advanced telecommunication technologies that broadcast advertisements across the globe. Televisions help to shove the desire to consume. Money becomes

a modern refuge for people, who tend work for their personal benefits. This has many impacts, such as exploitation and environmental degradation. Family ties break down as parents tend to focus on making money and relating to each other through these material values. Community breaks down as everyone is indulged in his or her own benefit. Money has become a medium of relationships in lieu of love and kindness. Under this culture of greed, everyone is viewed as a victim to be exploited, or else, an enemy who desires to take away our benefits. In the course of this mutual victimization, each one of us increasingly feels estranged to oneself, as we are not aware of what we live for, and this frustration tends to grow.

The culture of greed increases impoverishment. The easy access to obtain credit cards has led to huge indebtedness and bankruptcy in many countries, as we can see in Thailand. The other side of the culture of greed is the exploitation of nature—i.e., land, minerals, biodiversity—in order to meet the demand of consumerism. Under this process, everything is commodified, even children, women, tradition, culture, etc. This exploitation has led to environmental degradation and the increase in poverty and wealth concentration. Economic globalization simply exacerbates the process and may not need to be elaborated here again. The liberalization of imports and investment has impacted farmers and the poor, as the prices of goods and raw material rise.

In this age of extremes and chaos, we are faced with these two cultures that share both commonalties and dissimilarities. The culture of extremes, namely, the culture of hatred and the culture of greed, is deteriorating peacefulness in our society. On one hand, the culture of hatred is manifested through the need for self-defense and self-protection by marginalized peoples in

many countries, who carry out their struggle by consolidating their shared identity and culture. On the other hand, the culture of greed is often controlled and steered by the interest groups including the multinational corporations, which benefits from modern capitalism and, in particular, economic globalization.

These two cultures are different in various aspects. The culture of hatred tends to demonize everything, whereas the culture of greed tends to commodify. The culture of hatred creates fear, whereas the culture of greed creates dreams and hopes promising people that the more they consume, the happier they become. The culture of hatred centers around stability, and therefore, places utmost importance on uniting around a shared identity, whereas the culture of greed and consumerism emphasize freedom, even though it is simply limited to the freedom to consume. The culture of hatred is characterized by narrow-mindedness, whereas the culture of greed takes anything for granted. It encourages you to try anything, and at the least you can take it as an experiment. In Thailand, it is trendy for youngsters to stand in beauty contests, and one common excuse is it is just a chance to “gain some experience”. They tend to take things for granted, a major characteristic of the culture of greed, which affirms that there is nothing wrong to do anything or to consume anything. It is simply a desire to “gain some experience”.

Despite these extreme differences, what is shared among the two cultures is the religious aspect. Both these cultures, in certain respects, perform roles similar to those of religion. They make people feel their lives are meaningful and valuable. If we die for religion or for consumption, that simply makes our lives more meaningful. The two cultures promise fulfillment of our life. We feel satiated when we get together to do something, to oppose,

to destroy the other side. As our self-identity vanishes into the group-identity, this simply increases our self-gratification and appreciation. Our identity vanishes and the new bigger identity emerges, when we are in the midst of friends at a pop concert, at a political demonstration, or at a rally to destroy opposing groups. This self-gratification is very similar to spiritual gratification.

These two cultures attempt to deeply address the desire to search for our selfness, our immortal self. Nationalism tends to create the same mental formation. It shows that it is worth to die for a nation, as our name will linger on. Many of the terrorist or fundamentalist groups have been nurtured by the notion of “our name outlives our life”. This reflects the profound yearning for an immortal self, a secure self. These two cultures are, therefore, substantially influenced by some spiritual aspects, which help to enchant many people, even among those who reject religions per se. We can say that the two cultures are new religions, namely, consumerism and modern hatred. They are new religions, but they are artificial religions that do not address the desire inside human mind on a sustainable basis. They may give us pleasure from time to time, but do not bring about genuine peacefulness to this world.

The Role of Public Intellectuals

What can intellectuals and public do in this situation? Firstly, we should not let ourselves be inspired by these artificial religions, whether it be consumerism or the extremes in either religion or ethnicity. It should be noticed that the rise of Nazism was fervently supported by the young generation, including intellectuals, artists, and poets. Similarly, young people and intellectuals gave support

to communism in China, partly because of the spiritual and ideological motivation of all these beliefs. We believe that we can die for cults, after which we will find our lives fulfilled and gratified. We should not fall prey to these artificial religions. We should not let them have influence on and enslave us. There is definitely immense motivation unleashed by these two extreme cultures to stimulate us to consume and to hate one another. As the example cited earlier goes, anyone who wants to stay neutral or is opposed to the violent nature of the war on drugs is condemned and pushed aside as if s/he is unpatriotic or involved with drug trafficking themselves. This is a mechanism that forces us to become part of certain groups in the midst of this hatred or part of the suppression of those we deem “evil”.

Secondly, we need to try to attain true spirituality, which already exists in everyone. True religions will guide us toward these spiritual dimensions, but artificial religions or narrow-minded fundamentalism may lead us to a wrong track. True religions are based on fundamental humanness, namely, compassion and loving kindness, non-exploitation, open-mindedness. They are also based on a worldview beyond dualism that does not enshrine the division between “they” and “us” and does not draw a fine line between good and evil. We should avoid stereotypical views, such as a well-known quotation in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* that goes, “four legs good, two legs bad”. This is an example of a stereotypical worldview, and it has prompted some of us to think that our religion is good and others’ are bad, or Iraq is good and George Bush is bad, or vice versa. This is an example of a dualistic worldview that we must overcome.

We need to go beyond the notion of “four legs good, two legs bad”. True spirituality must enable us to come to terms with the

good and evil that lie deep in ourselves, and to be able to contain them. We must be aware that some cravings, such as arrogance, may be cloaked under our attempt to be ideological or our pretension that we are following the God's will. John Adams, an American statesman of the 18th century, used to remind Thomas Jefferson that:

Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all his laws. Our passions ... possess so much metaphysical subtlety and so much overpowering eloquence that they insinuate themselves.

Our craving has profound and subliminal power to motivate us. It permeates in all our understanding and consciousness, and manipulates them to serve its purpose. Our understanding and consciousness are, therefore, altered to serve the thirst for power.

Thirdly, besides attaining true spirituality, we must be brave to expose distorted and suppressed facts. As I said earlier, truth is the very first victim of extreme cultures. Hatred tends to distort the image of others to be our enemies and hide many truths, as we can see from the looming war. In the age of consumerism, advertisement promotes either the concealment or distortion of these truths. Public intellectuals and the general public must be courageous enough to present the truths beyond the domination of these extreme cultures. In order to achieve that, we must have a liberated mind and a liberated community of friends, all of which shall empower us to expose distorted facts.

Fourthly, we must try to help contain these two cultures,

preventing them from creating further hatred, antagonism, and the exploitation of natural resources and the poor. Many mechanisms, regulations, and political and economic structures have often been issued to promote these two extreme cultures. Laws that stimulate the growth of divisiveness and nurture the desire to exploit and destroy the other side still exist. There are economic policies that simply impoverish more people, as a result of which the poor form themselves into the “Assembly of the Poor” at the Pak Moon dam. This is also an impact of the culture of greed, which exists along with the culture of hatred.

Integrating Spirituality into Social Activism & Non-Violence

Furthermore, we must try to nurture the culture of reconciliation and peace based on a true spirituality that respects the value and dignity of every human life and enshrines the view of brotherhood and sisterhood among the people.

How can we succeed in that? What we have to do is integrate spirituality into social activism and into the social movements and people’s movements in order to forge a culture of reconciliation and peace. Spirituality must play a central role shaping the ideologies and visions of social change movements and people’s movements. Their mobilization and struggle must not be aimed at exploiting or harming the other side, or accumulating more wealth to try to meet our unquenchable cravings. We must be determined to reach peacefulness in our mind and be aware that the supreme happiness of human beings is spiritual freedom, not the material one. Economic wealth and power is not the goal of our desirable society, as being touted at present. Spirituality must be

the core of ideologies and visions of people's movements, that is, it must help us be aware of the unity of humanity, that we are not separated parts, and that we must live in harmony with nature. Nature does not exist for our sole exploitation.

Besides having spirituality as the core of ideology and vision of movements, the process of social change or the opposition or preemption of the said two extreme cultures must have non-violence (*ahimsa*) and loving kindness as the basis. We must be aware that violence gives no solutions to us. We must be aware that the culture of hatred and greed are deeply rooted in people's minds. They are not simply rooted profoundly inside us but also dominate and control us through supra-human structures. They stay deep inside us as well as above us in the form of supra-human structures, namely, the socio-economic structure that breeds more hatred and greed. These two factors cannot be addressed by violence. We need non-violence to try to change people's minds and create a new structure that reflects the true freedom of human beings to replace the old one.

Spirituality including loving kindness and open-mindedness is of significance and must be used to connect people to form networks at both the national and international level. The political polarization based on the differences in our ideologies, religions, and ethnicities is being cited as a reason to distort the facts and mobilize for the destruction of the others, and hence the age of chaos is upon us. In order to contain these forces, we must have loving kindness as a basis for our actions. Loving kindness and compassion have the power to unite people together. As we can see that millions of people in many countries are uniting together to call for peace and to oppose war. What brings them together is the belief in peacefulness. This is the best factor that unites

people and helps them form a powerful global network to preempt the impact of the culture of greed and hatred, which has been supported by the powers that be or the state. People alone cannot fight against power from above, which creates and reinforces these two cultures. What they can do is unite together on the foundation of spirituality, compassion, and the determination toward peace. All these will enable us to resist the trend of this age of extremes.

Written in 2003

Towards a Culture of Peace: A Buddhist Perspective

One of the most accurate and concise descriptions of the twentieth century was made by a renowned and prodigious British musician, Yehudi Menuhin, who said that, “It raised the greatest hopes ever conceived by humanity, and destroyed all illusions and ideals.”

At the dawn of the century, hopes for lasting peace prevailed on earth. Even the First World War was believed to be “the war that would end all wars.” Less than two decades later, however, the Second World War broke out, followed by the Cold War, and its subsequent proxy wars in every corner of the world. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, global peace was expected, and “the end of history” was believed to be imminent. However, that optimism was shattered by civil wars in the Balkans and other countries in Asia and Africa.

The previous century boasts one of the bloodiest eras of all time. Between 1900 and 1989, 86 million perished in various wars. On top of that 48 million people were killed by their own governments, including the ones led by Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot. Many of them were victims of unprecedented, extensive genocides.

The twenty-first century features no better prospects. The first year of this century was marked by international terrorism that triggered anti-terrorism wars all over the world, not to mention civil wars and armed conflicts in 30 countries with a combined population of 2.3 billion. In other words, today a third of the world's population is at war.¹

These wars and armed conflicts are made possible not only by the sole decision of the leaders. Decade-long wars and armed conflicts have been perpetuated by the support of people from all walks of life. They do not just endorse them, but are also willing to shoulder their costs, materially, physically, or morally.

Part of the inclination toward wars and the willingness to absorb their costs has been driven by brilliant political propaganda or powerful political manipulation. However, for the propaganda and manipulation to succeed, one factor is indispensable, namely, culture. Culture involves a collective belief, value, and attitude shared by people in the same country. Part of the culture has been used to justify violence and encourage people to resort to its use. Thus, wars can erupt on a national scale. Such a part of culture can be called the “culture of violence.”

¹ Williams, Jessica. *50 Facts that Should Change the World*. (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2004), p. 140.

Components of the Culture of Violence

According to Buddhism, three fundamental attitudes or mental qualities are essential in thrusting people to use violence and wage wars.

First among them is the sense of superiority, or conceit, regarding ethnicity, race, language, religion, or wealth. Twinned to this attitude is the one that regards people of different identities as inferior. Becoming too extreme, such having a negative attitude results in the denial of one's humanity and to inflict violence on others is just one small step ahead. A case in point is the Holocaust which happened because some Germans regarded the Jews as a "disease", a "virus", or being "subhuman." Similarly, civil war in ex-Yugoslavia escalated rapidly and brutally as people from both sides denied each others' humanity. While the Croats were described in Serbia as "vampires," the Serbians were represented in Croatia's newspapers as "beasts in human form" or "bloodsuckers." During the Gulf War, the killing of retreating Iraqi soldiers was described by the US Marines as "a turkey shoot." A lieutenant-colonel compared the Iraqi troops he saw from his plane with "cockroaches."²

Conceit is conducive to maltreatment against people regarded as inferior. Conceit is more dangerous than morally superiority, since it tends to regard "others" as "evil." Once one is taken as evil, his or her existence is not warranted and he or she needs to be eliminated. Violence against others is, thus, morally justified and the act of violence glorifies the perpetrators.

² Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp 50, 130.

While identity helps to forge unity among people from the same category, it excludes people of different categories who are then regarded as “others.” Hence, the separation between “they” against “us” and the tendency toward hostility. The hostility is rapidly intensified once the sense of “they” against “us” is strengthened by the moral label “we are good, you are evil.” Differences of ethnicity, race, or language can give rise to such hostility, but they cannot be compared to religious or sectarian differences. The more devoted one is to one’s religion, the stronger the sense of one being “good” and the more likely to regard people who believe and behave differently as “bad” or “evil.”

During the Cold War, one important question was, “Which side are you on?” Today it could be replaced by “who are you?”—white or black, Thai or Burmese, Hindu or Muslim, Sunni or Shiite. These identities, especially the religiously related ones, become an explosive political issue that determines the power relationship of different actors in the political arena. It is a powerful force that mobilizes the country’s political resources towards the desired course of action. Moreover, it influences the projection of other people with a different identity as an enemy or a culprit responsible for the decline or crisis in one’s country. The Jews in Germany were, for example, denounced for being the source of all corruption and problems in Germany before and during the Second World War. Politics of identity, therefore, contributes to the current accumulated hatred and wide-spread violence with the support of the existing culture of violence, especially the sense of superiority/inferiority of one’s identity. The politics of identity is intensified by the culture of violence, and vice versa.

The second component of the culture of violence is the attachment to ideas or ideologies. If such attachment becomes

extreme, it can drive believers to do anything, even sacrificing oneself or killing others, to fulfill an idea or ideology. On one hand, the world witnessed the heroic sacrifice of innumerable people during the rise of Communism in Russia, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. On the other hand, massacres that shocked the world have taken place in these countries simply for the eradication of obstacles to the ideology adhered to by the rulers.³

Communism is now on a decline and is being replaced by many other ideologies that command people's minds and drive them towards violence. One of them is nationalism, which can lead to either the restoration of sovereignty or ongoing civil wars. Furthermore, religion is another ideology that can fuel various forms of violence, i.e., international war, civil war, terrorism, and communal violence.

When obsessed with a particular ideology, people who share a different ideology are taken as an enemy and engulfed in hatred; one has no hesitation in attacking the other. With the obsession driven by conceit that supposes ourselves to be morally superior to others, “nonbelievers”, “the morally inferior”, or “evil persons”

³ The following remark by one of Stalin's cadres illustrates the influence of ideological attachment, which in an extreme case, is tantamount to a license to kill people: “Our great goal was the universal triumph of communism, and for the sake of that goal everything was permissible—to lie, to steal, to destroy hundreds of thousands and even millions of people, all those who were hindering our work or who could hinder it, everyone who stood in the way.” Such an attitude also prevailed among the Communist workers in other countries, including Cambodia. During the Khmer Rouge regime, one of its slogans was, “One or two million young people are enough to make the new Kampuchea!” The rest of the population, which amounted to around six million, was dispensable. (Glover, pp. 259, 306.)

are thought to be unworthy for living. With such conviction, some pro-life activists feel in the United States justified in invading abortion clinics and shooting doctors inside. Some extremist environmental activists can also kill animal torturers. Similarly, an obsessive religion can engender a hostile attitude towards nonbelievers, perhaps much more than other ideologies can.

The third component of culture of violence is craving. The most powerful craving nowadays is consumerism, which promises us that the more we consume the happier we become. Such a belief leads to insatiable desires, competition, and exploitation on every level, from personal to global—hence, violence, crime, armed conflict, and wars. It is estimated that about a quarter of wars and armed conflicts nowadays have been triggered by struggles for natural resources. Fighting among different ethnic groups in the same country is also motivated by attempts to control natural resources. The genocide in Rwanda, for example, was linked to competition for land, thus many landowners were killed by people of the same ethnicity in the same village.

Apart from direct violence, exploitation and interest-induced conflict also lead to another kind of violence, such as poverty and famine. Everyday around 1.1 billion or one in five of the world population live in hunger. Widespread hunger and malnutrition exist despite the abundance of food in the world; thus, the problems cannot be attributed to a lack of resources. The real reason is the unjust economic and trade system designed to serve the insatiable desire of a few at the national and global levels, the result of which is a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Every year 9 million poor people die from not having clean water, which could be addressed with 9 billion USD. However, Europeans spend 11 billion USD just for ice cream and 12 billion USD for perfume,

not to mention 24 billion USD spent globally for skin care and 38 billion USD for hair care.

The globalized economy, especially the liberalization of the market, has propelled consumerism, stimulating the desire and competition for natural resources all over the world. Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of Western culture has led to increasing feelings of insecurity. People fear that their local culture will be marginalized and their identity wiped out. The intimidation forces them to fight back to preserve their beloved culture and identity. The notion that their race, language, and religion are superior to others has been reinforced time and again and has led to more entrenched conceit. Along with this, attempts are made to use traditional ideology or identity as a weapon to wage wars against globalization. Robust religiosity and nationalism, thus, exist everywhere, mostly in militant versions, as a reaction to the perceived threats from outside. The growing diversity of ideas and beliefs in the age of globalization has also led to conflicts and hostility even in the same community and, at times, can be attributed as a cause of violence.

In sum, in the age of globalization, conceit, clinging to ideas, and craving are being intensified and contribute to the expansion of culture of violence.

Culture of Peace

The culture of peace is defined by a collective attitude, value, and belief that discourages violence and leads to reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. While the culture of violence is founded on conceit, attachment to ideas, and craving, the culture of peace rests on respect of others, tolerance, and contentment.

Values or attitudes that unite people, regardless of identity and belief, are badly needed in the age of globalization to prevent increasing polarization. Apart from the extreme prosperity that exists amidst abject poverty, the world has witnessed the rise of globalization hand in hand with the rise of tribalism. There is also a huge division between the world of materialism and the world of religiosity, between secularism and fundamentalism. The bipolarity is well registered in many respects in this age of extreme.

The world's divisions can be relieved once every faction opens their minds, respects others' identity, and practices generosity. This can be achieved only when we recognize humanity in each other. We have more things in common than differences, such as, the pursuit of happiness, aversion to suffering, longing for respect, desire to be good, and care for our dignity.

Apart from realizing and giving due respect to our common humanity, a belief in non-violence is another intrinsic value to the culture of peace. Violence helps to settle a problem temporarily, but creates new problems in the long run, or even exacerbates the old problems. Though the use of violence may lead to the elimination of some "evil persons", it can produce new ones as well, including the perpetrators themselves. Violent revolution can neither eradicate all evil people nor create lasting peace. After their opponents are gone, the victors tend to point their guns at each other, and a new round of purging will start.

Last but not least, the culture of peace rests on a simplicity that enables us to experience happiness through good work and a meaningful life. We achieve inner happiness through a peaceful mind free from anger, hatred, and greed. In other words, this is an awareness that happiness is not out there, but right inside our mind.

Religion and Its Contribution to the Culture of Peace

The three fundamental components of the culture of violence—conceit, attachment to ideology, and craving—are essentially self-centered attitudes. It is the nature of ego or self, either personal or collective, that demands everything to support its greatness. Identity, ideology, or material means are, therefore, used by the ego to serve its own interest.

Every established religion aims to reduce selfishness and free one's mind from self-centered attitudes. It, therefore, goes against the culture of violence. By cherishing love, tolerance, respect for humanity in everyone, and pointing the way to inner happiness, each religion is supportive of the culture of peace. In fact, each religion regards peace for humanity as its ultimate objective.

Practicing the teachings of each religion can inspire goodness or a new quality of mind, such as compassion, generosity, and sacrifice for the others. Religion is, therefore, a main force for reconciliation in society. It can help to reduce exploitation or oppression as evidenced in campaigns against war, slavery, dictatorship as well as campaigns for civil rights during the past centuries.

However, undeniably, religion can also instigate violence. Oftentimes, religion justifies violence in different forms, including war for religious propagation and preservation. Historically, religion was frequently used to sanction violence against people who were viewed as not being devout believers. Likewise, so much violence and war are waged in the name of religions.

As mentioned before, religion, as an identity, is used to reinforce a self-centered attitude or superior conceit among devout believers, while nonbelievers are labeled as “evil”. Moreover, the extreme attachment to religion can contribute to a strong convic-

tion that holds anything is permissible for the glory of religion. In other words, deviated religious adherence can be used as a license to kill people of other faiths. This attitude is apparently shared by many fundamentalists or extremists.

It should be noted that such extreme notions do not exist just among religious fundamentalists, but also among secularists including communists, neo-conservatives, and environmentalists. In numerous incidents, millions of people were killed by extreme secularists, like Nazis and communists. Some extreme environmentalists have even declared that, "Any means is permitted."

Religion is also used to support consumerism. Many religious teachings are misused to embrace the pursuit of prosperity and material accumulation. Turning to God or the sacred for fortune and wealth has become a global phenomenon. Religious establishments have become a spectacular showcase of material excess as religious leaders are bestowed with a luxurious life. It is not an exaggeration to say that many religious establishments have become the medium of consumerism and have sanctioned and intensified craving, leading to more competition and exploitation.

In short, religion and its interpretations can be a source of the culture of violence. This is the challenge for believers who wish to see religion as a beacon for the culture of peace.

Beyond Extreme Religious Attachment

Religion has much potential to create the culture of peace. Initially, however, religion has to avoid being the source of the culture of violence.

Religion can contribute to violence if religious attachment has gone extreme and nurtured conceit. To curb this tendency,

religious believers must be encouraged to cultivate critical self-reflection or critical self-awareness that prevents conceit from dominating the mind. In fact, each religion essentially aims to become free from self-centered attitudes. Once one understands deeply the essence of one's religion, selfishness will be gone, and conceit and craving can no longer exist. Anger and hatred will also find no place in the mind. Since one is well aware of conceit in disguise, one is unlikely to be overwhelmed by a dualist perspective of "they" against "us" or pass moral judgment that "we are good" and "you are evil". Critical self-reflection helps one to be aware that the line that divides good and evil is in our mind, rather than "out there".⁴

A lack of critical self-awareness creates a time bomb in our mind that can explode any time. Thus, one can create all forms of violence. Even without weapons in hand, the 9/11 terrorists managed to kill thousands of people with the commandeering of commercial planes. Through the practice of deep and critical self-awareness, one can get rid of the time bomb in one's mind and be freed from conceit and self-centered attitudes.

Once the mental bomb is defused, we will be free, open, and stay aloof from the wall of religion or identity that separates us from others. From there, we can see common humanity in every human being. In spite of holding on to many religions or faiths, all of us are one. In fact, every human being can wear various identi-

⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian Nobel laureate, made this point succinctly clear that, "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

ties, not just being Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim. However, our religious identification can sometimes keep us from seeing others in their entirety. We see them as to what religion they profess or which religious “label” they have, but nothing else.⁵ Such an attitude toward religion obviously narrows our perspective, even though religion should otherwise deepen our mind and broaden our perspective.

Religion can be compared to the “root” that helps to deepen our mind and enable us to feel secure and grounded. It can be more than that, however. Religion should give us the “wings” that free our mind, and help us to see the world and humanity from a broad perspective. From a bird’s eye view, all differences of humans on earth—be it religion, race, skin, language—are undistinguishable. Only our common humanity is apparent.

Realizing the oneness of humanity brings us closer and helps us see each other as friends, brothers or sisters, undivided by religion, race, or skin colour. Anger and hatred will wither away. We will realize by then that our enemy is not another human being, but conceit, craving, attachment to ideology, and selfishness. Eliminating human beings can never be a real solution to problems, which can be permanently solved through freeing the opponent’s mind from negative qualities with the help of love and goodness.

⁵ A Croat remarked on the role of nationalism in reducing people to only one dimension of nationality that, “The trouble with this nationhood, however, is that whereas before I was defined by my education, my job, my ideas, my character, and , yes, my nationality too, now I feel stripped of all that. I am nobody, because I am not a person any more. I am one of 4.5 million Croats.” (Glover, p.152) It is undeniable that religion can play the same role of reducing a person’s identity to one of religion.

The more violence we use, the more anger and hatred develop in our mind, leading to more violent responses. The spiral of violence becomes endless. Thus, the Buddha said, “Conquer anger by love, conquer evil by good, conquer the miser by liberality, and conquer the liar by truth.”

Ultimately, freedom of mind can be achieved not just through renouncing a self-centered attitude, anger, or hatred, but also attachment to religion as well. Any ideology or religion can imprison or fetter our mind. But religion can also give us the wings to fly above the ideological prison. This state of mind happens when the true essence of religion is understood and religious detachment is attained. As Buddha said, we have to use a raft to cross the river. Once ashore, however, we have to leave the raft behind. No wise man would bother carrying the raft with him.

Even when the true essence of religion is not fully understood, being on guard against attachment to religion can be useful for us and others. The following contemplative mindfulness of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Order of Interbeing is a good reminder for all religious who care for peace:

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for.

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views.

We shall learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to other's insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.

Realizing the true essence of one's own religion brings about a deep and comprehensive transformation of one's mind. With free and open minds, all human beings can embrace each other with unbound compassion. We can, thus, witness the common humanity in all persons regardless of identity difference. This can significantly contribute to the culture of peace at the deepest level.

Action for a Culture of Peace

Apart from helping to cultivate deep personal transformation, religion can help to reinforce the culture of peace by promoting change in collective values and attitudes through peace education and media, humanitarian work, and action to stem violence in society.

Peace Education

My definition of peace education is the promotion of values for peaceful co-existence, such as tolerance, respect for diversity, forgiveness, and compassion. Through both formal and non-formal education, people can learn to respect the dignity of human life, regardless of religion, language, race, or ideology. Faith in non-violence and the understanding that violence always begets violence are among peace attitudes that need to be cultivated. In addition to peace attitudes, peace education should embrace skills

for peaceful conflict resolution. Conflict is a fact of life and, like differences in ideas, it can be both negative and positive, depending how it is handled. Learning to deal with conflict constructively forges mutual understanding among parties involved in conflicts.

Peace Media

Peace media should also be an integral part of peace education. Emphasizing our common humanity rather than the bit of difference we share can extensively reduce bias or stereotype toward minorities or people of different ethnicities and religions. Their way of life, traditions, beliefs, and aspirations should be presented in such a way that nurtures better understanding among peoples.

Apart from reducing anger and hatred, peace education and media should play a role in keeping materialism and consumerism at bay. Materialism and consumerism are now the main forces dominating present education and media, even though it is too artificial to quantify reality simply in monetary terms. Therefore, promoting alternatives to a materialistic worldview and happiness beyond wealth or consumption should be an important task to be completed through peace education and media. The value of peace emanates from good work and inner peace should be upheld.

Humanitarian Work

The core values of the culture of peace are love and generosity. Such values are best manifested not through preaching but through concrete humanitarian work. The culture of peace is developed by concerted efforts to relieve fellow humans from all kinds of suffering, such as poverty, physical or mental abuse, exploitation, and oppression. Uplifting the quality of life con-

tributes to the prosperity of a culture of generosity and develops peace in society. Moreover, it also shows that happiness can be attained through giving, not having excessive possessions or consumption. The less egoistic the believer is, the more likely she or he shares the suffering of fellow human beings. In other words, humanitarian work is an important indicator of how much one is free from egoistic attitudes.

Action to Stem Violence

Violence exists at various levels, personal, communal, or national. By reducing or stopping violence, one can show succinctly that violence is unacceptable. The reason that violence is widespread in society is the belief that violence—like domestic violence or capital punishment—is acceptable. Religion should play an active role in stemming all forms of violence, including wars.

Beyond direct violence is structural violence, which creates and upholds the structures that promote or justify exploitation systematically and leads to poverty, sickness, and human rights violations. Structural violence is ingrained in the current economic, political, and judiciary systems that massively inflict suffering on people. Religion should play a role in stemming structural violence.

To achieve this, these values are indispensable: compassion toward those in suffering, courage to face all difficulties, wisdom to understand profound causes, and self-awareness to overcome conceit, attachment to ideas, and craving. All these moral forces can strongly inspire believers to take on difficult tasks as shown throughout history. On the contrary, religion has recently been used to propel killings among believers. The time is ripe for religion to drive believers to sacrifice themselves to protect the

lives of others and bring peace to the world through compassion, courage, wisdom, and self-awareness stemming from their deep personal transformation. There is no other way for the culture of peace to prevail in the world.

Keynote address for the International Conference on Religion and Culture at Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand, June 25, 2006.

The Real Enemy: To Solve External Conflicts, We Must Start at Their Root Cause, in Our Hearts

The violence that occurred on April 10, 2010 on Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue was a great loss for all parties involved, be they the government, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD, Red Shirts) or all Thais. Every one of us lost. If the destruction on that day was called a victory, then it was a victory for anger and hatred.

After the violence, everyone is pointing fingers at the other side, overlooking the crux of the problem. It is the anger and hatred that pushes us into being vindictive enemies. The more we feel angry and hateful, the more vigorous our finger-pointing gets, and the louder our condemnation becomes. So much so we have forgotten it is the anger and hatred in our hearts that has driven us to be part of the violence, directly and indirectly.

Anger and hatred does not hurt others only, it also hurts us. Whenever we let anger and hatred dominate us, it affects our mind, our disposition, our behaviour.

It is hate and anger that has turned people who used to have goodwill towards one another into enemies, ready to jump at each other's throats, to beat up, even to kill in cold blood. In other words, it has turned us into devils without our realising it.

It might be true that a person we hate is vicious and inhumanely cruel, but treating him in such a fashion will make us similarly inhumane. We view him as sub-human, but our action reduces us to his level, or even lower. We do not see him as human because of our hate and anger, which has driven us to destroy our own humanity.

Just because he or she has a different political ideology or wears a shirt of different colour, we view it as enough to brand him or her evil. This results from our presumption that people of that ideology, of this and that shirt colour, are all bad, unpatriotic, and fascists. We may not know them at all, but because they belong to the group or the institution that we despise, it is enough for us to label them as bad.

Rationally, we may understand that a view one holds does not make them a bad person. However, emotionally, the fact that he or she subscribes to the ideology that we detest, or belongs to the group that we hate, is enough to make us hate them. It is easy to see the other side as bad people. For when we believe we are on the side of righteousness, the people on the other side must be the evil ones.

But it does not stop there. When we believe they are evil, we feel it is legitimate to deal with them as we deem appropriate. The reasoning is that we should not let such bad people live and create

more problems. We are ready to condemn them with the crudest language we can find. We are ready to make accusations, lie, or inflict pain on them. But the more we do that with people we label “evil”, the more evil we ourselves become.

When the “angels” are ready to use any means to get rid of the “devils”, they become devils themselves. There is indeed a fine line between “angels” and “devils”. Whenever we let hatred and anger dominate our hearts and minds, angels easily become devils.

Take note: When we fight with the devil, be cautious not to become the devil ourselves. When hate and anger arise, it will push others away from us, particularly the people who are the target of our anger. Strangely, however, the more we grow apart, the more similar we become in dispositions, views and behaviours, which only mirror each other. We similarly believe we are right and the other side is wrong. We are alike in cursing the other side with rude, angry words. Our behaviours, such as making false accusations, are the same.

Isn't it strange that the more we hate someone, the more we behave like them, although we label them evil? The more we want to hurt others, the more we hurt ourselves, because we allow hate and anger to dominate our minds. It does not only put us on fire, it also destroys our image, reduces our humanity, and leads to many actions that we must repay. We plunge ourselves in the deep pit of vengefulness and suffering, out of which is so difficult to climb.

Everyone is human. They love, hate, are happy, and sad—like us. They have dreams and fears—also like us, but we are fixated with the labels we attach to them. For example *prai* (the oppressed), *amataya* (the elites), the UDD, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, yellow shirts), the police, army, or any organisations they belong to. So much so that we cannot see their

humanity. We are so fixated with the colour of the shirts they wear that we cannot see them as a person. When we hate, we see them as the evil we must eliminate. We condemn and demonise them. The more we see them as less than human, the more righteous and more legitimate we feel to hurt them.

The age of catastrophe, which we call *migasanyee*, is a time when people can cruelly kill one another, because we see the other side as just flesh (*miga*), instead of people. We do not have to wait several hundreds of years to enter such an age. We are in the middle of it right now. People no longer see the humanity in others. We will pass through this era when we start to see people beyond the labels, ideologies, and shirt colours and to see the humanity of one another.

What is important is not to reclaim the street space from the protestors. We must return humanity to the yellow shirts, the red shirts, the police, the soldiers. Only then can we live together in peace.

We can only see others' humanity when we interact with one another as humans, when we open our hearts to listen to them instead of just acting our roles or insisting on listening selectively to what confirms our prejudices.

One important dhamma in time of conflict is *sajja nurak*, which means to not be stubbornly attached to the belief that only one's view is correct. One should constantly remind oneself that the view of the other side may also be correct, so we are more open to other people's views.

In conflicts, all sides tend to insist they are right and the other side is wrong. Thus, they are not willing to listen to the other side. This applies not only to the conflicts between the government and the protesters, but also to people who love each other, such as

husband and wife, parent and children. During an argument, is there anyone willing to listen? This is because we are confident that we are right. Because we don't know how to listen, the quarrel gets more serious.

Even when it involves people who love each other, listening is difficult. It is then all the more difficult for people we hate. Because we close our hearts, we are more convinced that "we are right and you are wrong". But how can we be sure that we are 100 percent right or good, and the other side is 100 percent bad?

How can we know if our information is 100 percent accurate? How can we be certain that what they are demanding is wholly out of selfishness? How can we be sure when we have never opened our hearts to listen to their points of view, for we have concluded right from the start that they are wrong and evil?

The Buddha's teachings in the *Kalama Sutta* are very important in this time of conflicts. It reminds us not to believe something "just because we hear it from others, because it is logical, because it agrees with our ideas, because it is plausible, or because the speaker is our teacher." If it is the case, don't conclude that what you have heard or what you have been informed, including the opinions based on that information, are wholly correct.

It is difficult to have compassion for the other side, although it is good for our own mind. But at least we should see them the way they really are. When we all desire justice, we should give justice to others and ourselves by viewing them the way they are. But how can we do that when we are full of prejudices? It is only when we can transcend these prejudices and open our hearts to listen to the other side, when we do not believe so easily, that we can see other people accurately as they are.

It is only then that we will realise other people are not our enemy. Our hatred and anger is.

Edited translation from an article in Thai printed in the Matichon newspaper on April 18, 2010. Published in the Bangkok Post on April 27, 2010.

Abhisit Must Be Brave and Have a Vision

Phra Paisal Visalo—a thinker, writer, dhamma practitioner, and a member of the Committee on National Reform led by Anand Panyarachun—shares his views about the rifts in Thai society. He also advises how to deal with the problems and proposes ways to bring Thailand back to peace.

Q: Amidst the current severe conflicts in Thai society, what dhamma principles do you think Thais should keep in mind?

A: In general, Thai society is facing a big change, with mobilised movements by many groups. Although the conflicts are focused on people such as former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the root of the problems are the changes in the

structure of Thai society in various dimensions. For example, Thais have more political sense now. They might be the lower class, the poor or the lower middle class. They might have accepted the disparity in the past, but not anymore.

Likewise, in many circles such as medicine, in the past, people accepted it when their family member died after a doctor's treatment. But now they feel they have the right to sue the doctor. In a way, the relationship between the doctor and patients has changed. Another point is the level of acceptance.

Q: Is it a good change that people realise more about their rights?

A: Whether a change is good or not depends on the stance and the practice. If you have your rights, but you think only about yours without thinking of others, that can be a problem. For example, a child dies. But the doctor did his best under the high-pressure circumstances such as the huge number of patients.

“Double standard” is another example. If the people who protest against double standards also have double standards themselves, that's not right. The Red Shirts might protest against double standards, but they see everything they do as always right and the government as always wrong. That's not good.

Q: It seems that the problem of double standards is everywhere.

A: Yes, it's in Thai culture. Thai people are cultivated to be self-centred. It's all fair as long as we get a bonus. If we get more than others, then it's needless to talk about fairness. In Buddhism, this is called "autocracy" not "dhammacracy." Dhammacracy is focusing on dhamma, the righteousness. Although I'm disadvantaged, it's ok because it's the right thing. And it's not ok although I'm advantaged.

Q: Is it too pessimistic to say that Thai society is now an autocratic society?

A: I strongly believe it is (stressing his voice). Although we make fabulous claims, they are only for personal or our group's interest. For example, corruption is bad. But many Red Shirts say it's ok if Thaksin corrupts and uses the money to help the poor. That's a double standard.

Q: What dhamma principles should be applied to deal with an autocratic society and changing world society?

A: Many. Firstly, you have to think of others more. People in Thai society now only think of themselves. Thinking of others more is like what Adam Kahane, author of *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change* who came here to promote a Thai version of his book recently, says. Distribute love to others more, and that will help reduce conflicts. But sharing love is not enough. You have to share power. Love without any action is useless. Love and money-giving only, or populism, is no way to solve problems.

Now all sides are saying they are doing it for the sake of the country. But their definitions are different. Some people say it will be a complete democracy when power is in the hands of those who come to power from elections. Others say government officials and the justice system must make the balance.

When conflicts occur, talks are needed. But there was no platform for the Red Shirts, so then they rallied. Therefore, not only love and power sharing are necessary. Stages for negotiation are crucial. We cannot end the problems with force but with rational talks.

Q: How can rational talk be possible? It seems difficult so far.

A: Firstly, trust is crucial. There was no trust among the parties involved, neither from the Red Shirts nor Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. It might have been because of the lessons in the past, so they did not want to give another chance. On May 19, the government said the Red Shirts did not disperse as promised. The Red Shirts said the government did not really reconcile as there was no progress from the events of April 10.

Q: What is the solution, then?

A: Trust must be created. It could be started with a simple condition such as no protests for over a week. If that does not happen, distrust continues. But if it goes well as promised, trust is gained initially. Then the Red Shirts might get some time on National Broadcasting Services of Thailand (NBT) and the Red Shirt's TV station will stop attacking the government.

That happening would create trust gradually. A cease-fire agreement works like this. First one week, then one month, and then talks on bigger issues can happen.

Q: Is a mediator necessary?

A: Yes. But at the end of the day, both sides need to talk. Nelson Mandela and Willem de Klerk did not trust each other at first. Mandela went to see de Klerk at Government House and they barely talked. On the second time, de Klerk visited Mandela in prison. They talked for half an hour. After that, Mandela wrote in his diary that de Klerk listened to what he needed to say attentively, and he was someone he could work with.

Meanwhile, de Klerk told his party members and the Cabinet Mandela that had paid attention to what he had said and was someone he could work with. They talked accordingly. That was the beginning of their talks. Finally, they achieved agreement which led to an election. It took two-three years before that.

Trust must be created through meeting personally. If people can meet without having to hold their “role”, they can see the humanity in each other, then doubts and hatred decrease.

Q: The problem is everybody is sticking to themselves?

A: There must be breaking of the ice. The mediator must do this. When Jimmy Carter met informally with Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat at Camp David for a peace talk to end 30 years of war, the atmosphere there allowed privacy. Then, they began to

set aside their positions so they could understand each other. If the talks had been held officially, they would have held to their own positions and would not have talked openly. They would not have seen each other's good side.

In my opinion, talks might not be the issue now. All sides must first send a signal they want to talk. Now it doesn't seem like that because both the State of Emergency and the Red-Shirts' movement remain.

Q: Do you mean both sides are too extreme at the moment?

A: Yes. Bloodshed really rubbed salt into the wounds and complicated the situation more.

Q: Is autocracy the root of all problems?

A: Partly. Like I said, all problems occurred amid changes in Thai society, not to mention in the world. The gaps between groups are wider while each group is divided into smaller ones. People can be very different, even among the middle class. Globalisation might also share some responsibility. It has led to a society of taking advantage, the war over natural resources, and more monopoly. The lower middle class and the lower class cannot take it anymore. So, they have to stand up and fight for change. On the other hand, those in advantageous positions don't want change. To be straight, the Red Shirts want change while the Yellow Shirts and those in power don't. I cannot say whether what they are calling for can really lead to change.

Q: How long do you think these conflicts will last?

A: In the past, it depended so much on the leader, such as King Rama V. General Prem Tinsulanonda, Privy Council president and former prime minister, tried to end the war between the Communists and the government. The killing continued for almost 20 years before it ended. Actually, Thai society started to change about 10 years ago, but nobody realised the problem. Some might have been aware and begun to talk about disparity and injustice. But most of the middle class who are in advantageous positions did not. This era needs a brave leader.

Civil war in South Africa was prevented by the bravery of Mandela and de Klerk. But the leaders cannot do it alone. They need society's support. The problem now is the power holders, those in advantageous positions fear the changes. For example, they feared that a free election would allow Thaksin to win. They have done a lot to attack Thaksin and fear revenge, so they are in the mode of revenge and defence.

Q: How do you see Abhisit Vejjajiva as a leader?

A: A leader must have courage and vision. Abhisit has courage to some extent. But he hasn't shown it enough, especially during crises. This might be partly because he lacks vision and fears that if he really leads the change, it will bring trouble in the future. If he has vision, he can see that despite problems in the short term, it might be good to change in the long term.

In the King Rama V era, he decided to cede some parts of Thailand, then Siam, to England and France. It needed

courage as the people didn't want it. He faced the pain but with his vision, he saw that sacrificing small parts to keep the majority was necessary. Otherwise, we might have lost it all.

Unfortunately, it's understandable that Abhisit is not the real powerholder, unlike during the King Rama V era, which was absolute monarchy. So Abhisit cannot do much. Although he is brave, he cannot do much as he must compromise with the real powerholders. That might be some limitation.

Q: Who is the real power holder?

A: In my opinion, it is the military. If the military threatened to stage a coup and I'm in Abhisit's place, I might have to think hard. A coup will ruin everything.

For example, the military might give the choice whether to yield to the Red Shirts or a military coup. Actually there's no absolute power in Thailand nowadays. I just believe that if a clever man like Abhisit can find some allies, he might have enough power to push for change although it's not what the powerholders need.

According to what I know, Abhisit is not trying to find allies. His own Democrat Party has also complained. Former party leader Pichai Rattakula complained that Abhisit has not sought his advice. Others in the party said Abhisit just mingles with his own group.

I think Abhisit might have a long-term vision, but he might be surrounded by short-sighted powerholders. He needs to draw allies like King Rama V did to balance the "old power clique." King Rama V found allies from the Siam Nook (Young Siam) group to balance the power with the old power

clique of Somdet Chao Phraya Borom Maha Si Suriyawong (Chuang Bunnag). He then gradually derived or drew power from the old power clique until the group lost its power. They underestimated the young king who took the throne at the age of 14 or 15. If Abhisit can draw allies like that, he will be able to create more concrete changes.

Thai society really needs change. It's in a very bad condition. Abhisit needs to be brave and go against the will of those people to facilitate change. The Red Shirts are an accelerating factor. They won't tolerate anymore.

Q: How long do you think the country will take to get back in to shape?

A: In the past, change was resisted. Military coups hindered it. Although Thaksin hindered change, the military coup made it worse. It did not make any change, but hindered change itself.

Q: How should people deal with conflict mentally?

A: Firstly, they should understand the problem. They must understand that this is not a conflict between persons, but it is the reflection of structural conflict. The root of the problem is injustice, unfairness, disparity, and insult against the poor or the rural people. All of that needs to be changed. Secondly, Thai society needs more patience and acceptance as well as respect for different opinions, the rights of expression for both the Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts. Thirdly, Thai society needs mercy and compassion.

Thai society is now at the point where everybody is a suffering victim. If we don't have mercy or compassion and love for one another, it will be more difficult. Now we should think of others more. In the past, we thought of only ourselves and our groups. Leaders, politicians, and government officials should care for others a lot more. Another important point is now many Thais think they are morally empowered. They see no rights for wrongdoers. No matter if they violate laws or morality, they think they can do anything to them.

Rapists are scummed to death, and drug dealers are killed by police during arrests. It's like wrongdoers don't have any right even to live. They say, "The Red Shirts deserve death as they violated the laws." I think this is another problem that needs to be fixed. Wrongdoers deserve mercy.

Q: To what extent do private groups' campaigning, such as the Positive Network, help?

A: To some extent it does. At least they stop Thais from negative thinking, and then they become more hopeful. We should have many groups like this, but they should not work only on slogans. I would like to see these groups do something positive, not just think positively. They might do social activities or help the poor. Mobilisation like this would bring more hope to society. If they can help push for structural change, that's great.

Q: As a member of the Committee on National Reform, outsiders might see that you all produced only abstract work.

A: That's true. It's abstract. The committee hasn't produced any tangible thing. But it needs to prove itself. We have set a goal that in six months we have to be able to provide society something concrete. Two months have passed, and we are still working on an internal understanding. We are in tune to some extent. This is not easy. The committee members come from various groups. Some have a heart for the Yellow Shirts, some for the Red Shirts.

In the meantime, in the past two months, we have outlined our work. We stress creating fairness to reduce disparity. Creating fairness in five aspects: economic, resources, opportunity, negotiating power, and rights. The next step is an in-depth study to see what measures can be taken urgently to create such fairness. The aspects that are difficult can wait until after the first six months.

We cannot put our hope on the government to make the change. We must propose to society a mobilisation. Anand Panyarachun, the committee chairman, said we will propose the plan to people and send a copy to the government.

*Interview by by Somroutai Sapsomboon Kornchanok Raksaseri
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The Path to Social and Inner Happiness

The Sri Burapa Award is deemed to be a highly prestigious accolade for Thai writers, but I must confess I never expected to give an acceptance speech for the award. Even though I have been writing books for over 30 years, I would never call myself a writer. I am, at best, only an amateur who cannot compare with all the masters bestowed with the same award over the past two decades. My writings do not belong to literary or journalism circles that Sri Burapa pioneered, leaving us with so many legacies. Besides, a monk had never won the award before. All in all, to be receiving the Sri Burapha Award is a matter totally beyond my thinking.

Sri Burapa, or Kularb Saipradit, was one of the greatest writers and journalists for Thailand. He was a real "gentleman", steadfast with idealism and a model of virtue. Thus, I feel very honoured to be presented with an award named after the man.

One needs not stress how the Sri Burapa Award is highly held among Thai writers. However, it should be noted that although the award has brought great honour to the writer, throughout his life, he never received any award, be it in the literary or journalistic fields. Despite his devotion to the country, he was twice put in jail and became *persona non grata* in the eyes of the establishment, which prompted him to live in exile until the end of his days.

Sri Burapa remained at the forefront of the struggle against dictatorship and unjust power. No amount of hardship could sway him from carrying on his mission. This was because his heart was secure, strong, and courageous. As important was his ability to remain unperturbed by worldly allures—be it wealth, fame or glory—and thus he could face the intimidation from those in power and not let himself be used by the capitalists. Thus, he could live like a truly free man.

Such mental strength and steadfastness did not stem only from his belief in idealism or any political ideology. It was also a result of continuous practice of the mind, in particular in meditative contemplation, until he realised how true it is that happiness and freedom lies in the heart. So when Sri Burapa was jailed, he did not wince, for he knew that his mind remained virtually free, and no one could take that away from him.

The idealism of Sri Burapa was not only centred on social change toward democracy, equality, and justice. He valued inner transformation, toward goodness and freedom. So while he called for a democratic and just society, he also worked on improving his own mind. The quality of such a mind that has been well groomed was the firm foundation for his social crusade.

As a writer and journalist, he produced numerous works that called for political and economic change that would bring equality and justice to the public. There is no question about how powerful those writings were during his times. Thailand has changed so much socio-politically since and thus such works may seem out of date nowadays. Yet there are still parts of his life and legacies that are as valuable now as they ever were, especially his espousal of the inner consciousness and morality that underlines a good society and, accordingly, a good life.

Much of Sri Burapa's writings, and his own existence, revolved around the notion of moral consciousness and a steadfast belief in truth, justice, equality, sacrifice, and respect for fellow humans. Another virtue that was repeatedly stressed was the freeing of the mind from greed, anger, and ignorance—the source of true peacefulness.

Such values are universal values that transcend time and place. No matter how much the country progresses or changes, these values can never be abandoned. Even when a country claims a democratic governance from an elected parliament and government, as long as people lack honesty and tolerance and try to exploit one another, there can be no peace. The divisiveness and subsequent chaos will sooner or later lead to a crisis that undermines that democracy itself.

The happiness of any society is not only dependent on progressive economic and political systems but also on the quality of its people. It is true that the quality of people is in part tied to their context, but it is also intertwined with collective values and culture held by that very society. If the prevalent values or culture of that society are geared toward promoting selfishness, exploitation, or divisiveness, then the quality of the people will

accordingly dwindle, weakening the entire society and leading to a total crisis.

Thai society nowadays is deeply steeped in two major cultural trends, what I will call the culture of greed and the culture of hatred. The culture of greed has encouraged the spread of materialism and the belief that the more one indulges in material acquisition and consumption, the happier one will be. In such a culture, people have endless desires and exploit one another, which in turn leads to wide social gaps, rampant injustice, corruption, crime, and environmental problems.

At the same time, the culture of hatred has encouraged the feeling of enmity among one another just on the basis of differences in beliefs, religion, ideology, ethnicity, and social status. The fear and paranoia has made one look at people who think differently as enemies. Nowadays, the seed of divisiveness has spread to the point that one looks at those who wear a different colour as bad people. They have preconceptions that only the bad, the unpatriotic, and the ingrates to the institution would wear such-and-such a colour or subscribe to a particular set of political beliefs associated with that colour code. Each side is too busy labelling the other to see how the others are also humans, so both sides are ready to trample on one another without hesitation.

If the culture of greed is centred on notions of consumption, lust, and glory, the culture of hatred accordingly thrives on those of anger, hatred, and fear, all of which have been eroding the spirit of Thai society and its people to an unprecedented level. It is thus necessary to work together to nurture the spirit of the people so that they can withstand the power of those two cultural strands. One could promote good values that can serve as a guideline for people to conduct their lives, but we should also encourage people

to realise the real happiness of the mind, which is a far more refined and virtuous form of happiness than the material one. Those who have been able to realise it will not be swayed by the temptations of greed and will be willing to help other people. For they are aware that making others happy will make one happy oneself as it helps one to become less attached to the notion of “me” and “mine-ness” and to have a light, peaceful heart.

In parallel to this should be an effort to develop an awareness of one’s own anger, hatred, and fear. People will be able to see how attachment to any single ideology can make us narrow-minded and full of bias, which in turn makes us feel miserable and may even wreak havoc in others’ lives. With mental alertness, it is hard for anger, hatred, and fear to take over one’s mind. We can then see in others their humaneness, suffering, and even goodness, and can forgive and feel love and compassion toward them. In the end, they are also fellow humans who love happiness and abhor suffering just like we do. Even when conflicts persist, be they due to differences in opinion or interests, we should try to resolve them peacefully and not resort to violence.

I am well aware that to bring about a peaceful society requires concerted efforts to make equality, justice, and democracy a reality. However, social change is not only about political and economic aspects but also the spiritual dimension. Actually, the two sides cannot be separated. The spirit of people cannot grow in a bad environment. Likewise, good political and economic systems cannot thrive when the people are not faring well spiritually. Often, however, the symbiotic ties between the two have often been overlooked. Thus, the present push for social change ignores the spiritual dimension, while those who pay heed to spirituality tend to ignore society and to be occupied with their

personal pursuits. What I have been trying to do is bring the two dimensions together.

Naturally, as a monk, there is nothing better than trying to make people aware of and nurture the spiritual dimension in order to lead their lives and society toward a better place. In other words, I try to encourage people to see their own potential to realise the freedom of the mind as well as the goodness and humaneness in others so that they will try to peacefully build a better society together. After considering my skills, I chose writing as one of the means to achieve such goals. I believe that this mission is crucial, especially in times like now when people craft words to hurt, slander, and/or recharge the energy of hatred. What Thai society needs is words that invite people to be compassionate toward one another, to understand each other's sufferings, and to believe in the energy of love rather than in the energy of anger and hatred.

My path toward writing began long before I entered the monkhood. Thirty-eight years ago, while at secondary school, I was similar to thousands of young men and women who woke up and realised the magnitude of problems that were overwhelming the country at the time. My desire to see a more just, egalitarian, and democratic Thailand led me to use writing both to wake up the social consciousness of the people and to criticise the state of affairs. The desire to see society change for the better, for the benefit of all beings, is the primary push that has led me to write continuously. However, writing is only one means. I have been engaged in other social activities, be they related to human rights issues, non-violence, or environmental movements. I view myself more as a social activist than a writer. Although entering the monkhood has somewhat led to a change in my roles, I still

have not given up my writing and public work. Only the focus has changed toward giving more importance to the spiritual dimension, which has been rather lacking in most social movements.

Being a monk who has to practice insight meditation seriously, I can see how social and inner transformation must go hand in hand. The balance between outside and inside work is necessary, if the work for society is to be genuinely for the benefit of the public and not to serve one's ego. At the same time, one will have the inner peacefulness to sustain oneself. This will keep one from swaying with the way of the world, and help one withstand all the temptations while not falling into the traps of anger, hatred, and fear.

Such awareness makes me see clearly that social and self-development work cannot be separated. This is similar to what Buddhadasa Bhikkhu spoke of when he said, "To work is to practice dhamma." From seeing writing as a form of social action, I became aware that writing is also a form of spiritual practice. In a way, to write is to affirm the existence of one's self, but it can also be a way to develop oneself at the same time. Through writing, a person presents his or her ideas and feelings to the public arena, to be shared with others, and to receive their comments accordingly. A good writer should be open-minded and accepting of criticism as well as praise. To do so, a writer must try to lessen his or her ego, or at least be mindful of the ripples in their mind when confronting criticisms. Such is a way to practice lessening one's ego.

Buddhadasa once referred to Sri Burapa in his writing: "To practice dhamma is in fact to write. "Therefore, one might rephrase his statement as: "To write is to practice dhamma." I am also reminded of a quote by American poet Robert Frost from which I took to be a good moral lesson: "Education is the ability

to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.” Such a view of education shares much with Buddhism, that is, a truly educated person must be able to keep themselves calm in the face of criticism. I have to admit that I have not yet completely reached that stage, but I also believe that this is the goal I should try to reach, through writing as a form of self-development.

I would like to express my gratitude to the committee of the Sri Burapa Fund who think my writing deserves the award this year. I have decided to accept this award although I see it as actually much greater than me. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Ajahn Sulak Sivaraksa who has played a pivotal role in leading me along this path up until now. It was Ajahn Sulak’s books that first inspired me as a 15-year-old boy to write, even though he knew there would be few people who would read it. It made this boy want to follow in his footsteps, so he took to producing more in the classroom without any fear of reprimand he might have gotten from his teachers or the school principal. Later, when I got to know Ajahn Sulak personally, he even went so far as trusting me, then only a second-year university student, to run *Pacarayasara* magazine. Ajahn Sulak has constantly supported me, by getting my writing published before and after I became a monk. He is someone I respect as a teacher and a model of writing. To receive the Sri Burapa Award, which Ajahn Sulak as well as all the other masters of Thai literature have received, is thus a great honour for me.

This is an English translation of the speech delivered on May 5, 2010 (Thai Writers’ Day) at the Pridi Banomyong Institute. Published in the Bangkok Post May 24, 2010



07

Death

Embrace Death

Life and death are actually one and the same matter. We will die in more or less the same fashion as how we live. If we live in ignorance, our final moment will likely be spent in agony, without any sense of peace and mindfulness. But if we constantly cultivate merits and self-awareness, we should be able to pass away peacefully, being in the state of mindfulness until our last breath.

The life of an awakened one is to be aware of the prevalence of death all the time. There is this ever readiness to confront death. Even when the mind does not yet feel ready, it can be further trained every day as the person performs his or her duty to the best, having accepted that uncertainty is but a fact of life.

There are several methods to cultivate this contemplation on death (*marana-sati*). Just a thought that we will all die sooner or later so we should maximise the remaining time we have is one example. However, for most people, such recollections may not

be enough. They may be keen for a while, but eventually, their lives will fall back into the same patterns of habits, being again indulged in the work or entertainment at hand, while forgetting what is the most important thing to do in their lives.

One simple way to contemplate death is to imagine what might happen to us if a death really took place now. What would we lose? Whom would we miss? There might arise a feeling of pain for those who think they are not yet ready. But such an unpleasant situation might help him or her to be better prepared and to practise for the remaining time we still have, in order to deal with the suffering when the moment of loss actually comes.

Here are some more ideas about how to contemplate on death and dying:

Practice Dying at Bedtime

At the end of the day, the time to rest the mind and the body is a good opportunity to reflect on the inevitability of death. Practice the process of dying as if we were facing it at this very moment.

The suitable posture is to lie down and relax every part of the body from the head to the toes and especially the face. Breathe in and out freely. Feel the tip of your nose and the softness of the in- and out-breaths. Put down every thought, be it about the past or the future.

As the mind calms down, think of how we are approaching death. We just don't know when. Tonight might be the last night for us. Tomorrow might never come. Think of how every breath will dissolve as death arrives. The heart will stop beating. The body will no longer be able to move, and it will turn cold and stiff,

not unlike a useless log. Then think of how every valuable material we have acquired and kept will no longer be ours. They will belong to someone else. We cannot do anything with them. What we used to hold dear will be left unattended.

Moreover, we will no longer have another chance to talk with our children or our beloved. Everything we used to do with them will become the past. We will no longer be able to visit our parents or do anything more for them. There is not even time to say goodbye or to make amends with those we have had grudges with.

All the work has to be left behind too, even those that have not been finished. We can no longer make any further revision. However important that work is, it will have to be abandoned. The same with all the knowledge and experiences we have accumulated, they will all disappear with us.

All the fame, power, and supporters will leave our hands. No matter how powerful we are, we cannot take any of these things with us. Do not expect that people will continue to praise us after we die. Even our name will be finally forgotten.

As we reflect on this, observe our feelings. Do we worry, regret, or have an attachment to any of these? Are we ready to accept these losses? If not, what makes us still agitated? Such contemplation will help us realise that there are a few things that we should do but have not yet done or done enough, as well as things to which we still feel a strong attachment. Such awareness will prompt us to do the important but often overlooked matters, as well as practicing the art of letting go.

Contemplation on Death on Various Occasions

In fact, one can contemplate death any time during the day. When

travelling, by car or boat or plane, always be prepared. If there is something untoward happening in the next few seconds, how should we confront it? What would we think of first? Are we ready to give up everything we feel attached to at that point in time?

When leaving the house, think if this could be our last trip and we may not be able to return to see our parents, beloved, or children again. Is there anything left that we may have regretted for not finishing them first? Are there any conflicts that we may wish we should have reconciled? Such awareness will urge us to try to treat our family better and not let certain issues to be resolved in the future, for such a day may never come.

Reading newspapers, especially reports about accidents or disasters, is another opportune moment to contemplate on the uncertainty of life. Anything could happen without warning; people can die at any place and time. Try to think of how the same thing might happen to us, too. Will we be able to confront it? Are we prepared to die?

Attending a funeral service should also be the time to remind ourselves of the imminence of death. Once the deceased also walked and moved about like us. In the future, we would all have to lie down like him or her, not being able to take anything with us except the effects of our good or bad deeds.

The best dharma teacher is the body in the coffin in front of us. He or she is trying to wake us up from indulgence and heedlessness in life. Whoever believes they still have a few more years to go will have to think again as they attend the funeral of a child or a teenager. Those engrossed in their power should realise that however “big” they may have been, everyone will end up being smaller than the coffin that would contain their body.

Similarly, when visiting the sick person, we should remember that our body will one day be in similar condition. Again, the patient, especially the terminally ill, is like our dharma teacher. Whatever their reactions—anxious, traumatic, desperate—they are teaching us how to prepare ourselves, so that when our turn comes, we may not suffer as much as they do. The sick person, who seems to be in peace and able to maintain his or her composure despite the apparent physical pain, is also showing us examples of how we should likewise prepare ourselves, especially while we are still in good health.

To keep our mind still in time of sickness is the same matter as to keep our mind still when facing death. So, think of the period when we fall sick as an exercise to prepare ourselves for death. Sickness is like the first few lessons before we move on to the most difficult level. If we cannot deal with sickness, how then can we confront death?

Reminders of Death

We could apply anything we come across in our daily life to remind us about death. It depends on one's circumstances and creativity.

Some Tibetan meditation masters have poured all the water from their personal glasses and put them with the bottom up next to their beds. They do this because they are not certain if they will be able to wake up and use the glass again on the following day. The ritual has served like a reminder for the masters that death can come to them at any given time.

A Thai writer has learned about this story and applied it to herself: Every night before she goes to bed, she always makes

sure that every dish has been washed thoroughly. So, if she happens to die in her sleep, there will be no dirty dishes left as burdens for others, she said.

A 55-year-old man used marbles as his “death reminders.” Each marble is equivalent to about a week of living. The man has calculated that if he were to reach the average life span, taken to be about 75 years old, he would have about 1,000 weeks left. So he bought 1,000 marbles and put them in a plastic box. Every week he takes out one marble from the box. The diminishing amount of the marbles reminds him that his days are numbered. It reminds him of the approaching death, which enables him to choose to do the most important thing and not let himself drift away worrying over the inconsequential.

Each person can choose different “reminders”: from the sunrise and sunset; the flower that comes out in a bud, blooms, and finally withers away; a leaf that springs from a tree branch and finally falls down to the ground. They remind us of the transience of life. Lord Buddha once suggested one should view life not unlike the foamy top of waves, or as a dew drop, a lightning flash, they are all transitory, and, thus, is our own existence.

Other Activities to Prepare for Death

We could try an exercise of “letting go” of our beloved people and belongings. Choose seven objects—they could be a person, a pet animal, or something we consider dear to us—and ask yourself if we were forced to give up one thing, what would that thing be. Continue with each of the remaining six objects. We could imagine ourselves being in an unpleasant situation—like facing a fire, an earthquake or an accident—that prompts us to lose each of our

cherished items. What would we choose to keep? And what to give up?

Such an exercise will teach us how to let go. It will help us review our own sets of attachments and to discover what we consider to be the most important in our lives. Some may find they love or worry about their dogs more than their brothers and sisters. Others may be willing to give up everything but not their favourite doll. Still others will choose their computer as the last item to give up. We may uncover something in ourselves that we have not been aware of before, and then we can try to adapt to the changing circumstances. All this is crucial in the preparation for death since ultimately, we will have to lose everything one way or the other. Actually, even when we are still alive, we are bound to lose certain things or people, and often without the ability to make a choice of what we would like to keep and what we would like to lose.

Contemplation on Death and Dying

Here is an example of a guided meditation you can follow every night, as a way to remind yourself of the transience of life:

As you breathe in and breathe out, try to keep your mind in a calm and peaceful state.

Imagine a picture of a beautiful flower. Then visualise how the same flower starts to wilt, losing each petal, one by one. How the once dazzling colours slowly fade away until the whole flower becomes eventually lifeless.

Imagine a scenery of a beautiful landscape at dawn. How the whole sky is basked in the first soft light of the day. Then think of the same place at noontime when the sun is at its fiercest. Time

gradually trickles away until it is now dusk, and finally everything is dissolved into the darkness.

Absorb all these pictures into yourself. Our existence is like the flower that will one day wither away. And like the sun that has to leave the sky every day, we will all have to leave this Earth sooner or later.

We will all have to leave this Earth. Nobody knows when that time will come. Maybe next year. Maybe next month. Or maybe tomorrow.

Let's imagine that today is the last day we will live on this Earth. There will no longer be tomorrows for us. By the time tomorrow comes, our body will be lying still, no longer able to feel anything, even our own breath.

Let's imagine that in the next few hours, every person we have met, talked, and laughed with, those who have always been part of our lives, we will no longer be able to see them again. There is no exception whatsoever.

Imagine the picture of our parents, children, brothers, and sisters whom we have met every day. We will have to leave them all in the next few hours. Imagine the face of our beloved. The time to leave him or her is soon to arrive. Imagine how soon we will have to leave all friends behind. We will no longer be able to see them again.

Think of what has happened this morning. Whom did we see? What did we do? Think of the time we spent during breakfast this morning.

Think of the time we went to see our children off at school. Think of the friends we have met in the meeting room.

Think of all the valuables we have toiled our labour to acquire them. The house, cars, jewelry, money, all the things we

used to hold as dear. We will soon have to give up everything we once owned.

Think of all the work we have loved and devoted ourselves through all these years. Whatever it is, we will no longer have the opportunity to do it now. All the work that is still left undone, there will be no time to finish it now.

Soon the world we have known all our lives will disappear. There will be nothing left. Nothing at all. The important thing is that our whole lives will come to an end in the next few hours.

Now come back to explore our feelings at the moment. How do we feel right now? Are we scared? Contemplate on this fear. Feel it. Acknowledge it. What exactly are we fearful of? Where is this fear located actually? Take in this feeling called fear. Observe our own reactions thoroughly.

Are we worried about anything? What do we think is the hardest to leave behind? our father and mother? our beloved? our children? friends? wealth? work?

Keep your heart still. Contemplate if everything we think belongs to us—are they ours really? Can we take them with us? Or are they just placed under our care, but only for a while. Now it is time for us to leave them so that others can take care of and make use of them instead.

For all the work we have done, now it is time to give it up. It is time for others to carry it on. We have left enough legacies on this Earth. They are now part of this Earth, and not ours. They are no longer what we should worry about anymore.

Our parents, children, brothers, and sisters, and everyone whom we have loved, we have had the fortune to live with them for a while. We have done what should be done. Now it is time for us to take leave. Do not worry that they will not be able to live

without us. We used to leave them on their own before. The only difference is that this time around we will have to leave them longer than before.

We will soon have to leave this body. This body is not ours. We have borrowed it from nature.

We have been given this body for free through our parents. It is now time to return it to nature. It is now time for this body to return to all the four elements in nature—earth, water, wind, and fire.

It is now time for us to shed away every feeling of guilt, anxiety, remorse. Do not let these feelings burden our heart. It is not too late to ask for forgiveness. Now let's ask for everyone we have once hurt or harmed to forgive us. Let everyone of us be free from animosity toward one another.

If we still hold grudges or revengeful feelings toward some people, give them up. Do not let the ill feelings eat us from the inside. Forgive them. Forgive everyone who has caused us to suffer. Free our heart from all the hatred and anger. Let everyone of us live in peace.

Finally, abandon everything we used to hold as ours. Give up everything, including ourselves. Actually, there is nothing that can be thought of as ours, even this thing we called "mine." They are not really ours. Give up every attachment to the notion of self. Do not anticipate about what will happen to us or in what form we will be reborn. Just remember that whatever that is will be suffering (dukkha). There is nothing to grasp or to hold onto. Give up everything, be it the past or the future. Keep your mind in a state of peace, emptiness, and the bliss of complete freedom.

Written in 2009

The Seven Factors of a Peaceful Death:

A Theravada Buddhist
Approach to Dying
in Thailand

Care for the Dying in Thailand

In the past, most people in Thailand died in their own homes. When a person was going to die, a monk or a group of monks would be sent for in order to guide him or her to a peaceful death. Monks would perform Buddhist chanting or remind the dying of the Three Refuges of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as objects of veneration. The dying, with the help of relatives, would perform their last act of merit-making by giving offerings to the monks. In some parts of the country, such as the Northeast, the dying would hold flowers to pay homage to the Buddha's sacred tooth relic believed to be located in heaven where they were hoping to be reborn. If the dying were conscious enough, they would sit upright, leaning against a pillar, and meditate or chant to calm the mind—the ideal form of dying in the Buddhist tradition.

Other normative Buddhist practices for death have also been very important for Thai people, such as cultivation of a peaceful mind at the moment of death for leading to a beneficial next life and belief that a negative state of mind will contribute to a harmful one. The atmosphere around the dying, therefore, was to be peaceful. Cousins would gather around the dying, reminding them of their good deeds in the past and helping to relieve them of all anxiety. Some would ask forgiveness from the dying or vice versa. Everyone was discouraged from crying near the deathbed, as also emphasized in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

However, nowadays the pattern of dying in Thailand has changed. There are more industrial diseases that require long and intense hospitalization. Thus, there is an increased need for palliative care, and this changes the sense of how to care for people in general. There is an increased focus on terminal care, and so spiritual and psychological care have become more important in the hospitals. The concept of holistic health—physical, social, psychological, and spiritual as defined by the WHO—is becoming part of the mainstream and part of actual Thai law. Many hospitals are speaking about these four aspects, which are being put into practice in large hospitals and university hospitals, especially for the terminally ill. However, in practice, it is still difficult to provide such care because of a lack of understanding and skills among staff.

Palliative care is still centered in the hospital in Thailand, not in the home or in hospices. Some hospitals have programs for psychological and spiritual care without religious connections, especially for children. At Chulalongkorn University Hospital, there is the Wishing Well program where children are granted their last

wish. Other large hospitals have encouraged some religious support by providing space for nurses or monks to do this work since doctors cannot do it.

In Thailand, in both the ICU or in a regular room, monks are typically invited to come and to provide the opportunity for the patient to “make merit” (*tan-bun*) or perhaps to guide the patient in meditation. Nurses also have begun to take charge in offering psychological and counseling care. Such counseling often involves calming the patient or helping them have reconciliation with their family. Nurses may also be active in getting the family more involved in supporting the patient, which helps the family with their guilt in not being able to do more. Nurses may even offer spiritual care, like meditation.

Recently, there is more encouragement for doctors and nurses to support home care and to be involved in home care, especially pain control. Pain care management skill is important so as to enable patients to maintain clarity without pain. Doctors may also predict what physical stages will come next. For example, a friend of mine named Supaporn died at home from breast cancer a few years ago with good home support from her doctor. At a certain point, her doctor told her that her breathing would get difficult, so then she began to change her meditation method away from mindfulness with breathing (*anapanasati*) to contemplation of Buddha images.¹

¹For more details of Supaporn’s remarkable death, see *Never Die Alone: Birth as Death in Pure Land Buddhism*, Eds. Jonathan Watts and Yoshiharu Tomatsu (Tokyo: Jodo Shu Press, 2008). Also the video: Supaporn Pongpruk: Learning to Face Death with Grace. <https://youtu.be/LEgaMHjO628?si=kjH7i51ANzbYwrno>

In Thailand, there are only a few hospices. They are not so popular, because the Thai health system is still centralized, and there is not the appropriate infrastructure for them. Today, only the rich can afford to pay for a hospice. The most famous and largest with over two hundred beds is the Dhammarak Niwet Hospice established in 1992 and located on the grounds of Phrabat Nampu Temple in Lopburi, a few hours north of Bangkok. This hospice is specialized for destitute and abandoned AIDS patients and, thus, is not an appropriate place for common citizens. There are also a few Christian and private hospices, but in general home care is more popular than hospice care.

After the success of the Dhammarak Niwet Hospice, other temples began establishing hospices, but they are now on the decline as it is quite difficult to maintain them. Monks still do such work, but on a small, temple by temple level, mostly in the countryside and mostly through home visits. In some ways, this is a continuation of their old, traditional roles. However, this tradition is weakening as monks tend to focus now more on funerals, even in the countryside.

In hospital settings, medical professionals and monks unfortunately do not collaborate well. There is a gap between doctors and monks. Doctors do not know how to treat or talk with monks properly. Unlike Japan, monks are welcomed into hospitals as ritualists or advisors. However, like most other Buddhist countries, they have not been integrated into the care team or the advising medical team. They have to be invited first, usually by a patient or their family, and are not part of the system. They are not on call, but they do often visit hospitals during festival seasons. Unfortunately, not many monks are interested in this kind of work. More and more, monks are being seen as harbingers of death. Thus,

like in Taiwan or Japan, some people feel uncomfortable when they appear. In this way, families are actually better than monks in providing spiritual guidance since they have a close, personal relationship with the patient.

The End-of-Life Care Network established in 2004 coordinates between the personnel of various hospitals and other concerned people like monks to amass and share knowledge on how to take care of the terminally ill. Every two months, this network holds a study session to develop skills and knowledge. Its goal is to promote change in the medical system for more spiritual care for the dying and in the curriculum in the medical schools. Spiritual care training is not provided by medical schools, but this network has begun to offer such training for nurses of all units and some doctors. There is increasing demand but limited human resources in this area. Our network also initiated the Facing Death Peacefully Project, which aims to educate Thai people about peaceful death. Books and other media have been produced to give advice about this topic. It is interesting to find that many hospitals need such advice. Our workshops on peaceful death are now in much demand by many hospitals all over the country.

Buddhist Spiritual Care for the Dying

Illness not only affects the body, but also the mind. Thus, when most people fall ill, they must contend not only with physical pain, but also mental pain. Especially in the case of patients who are close to dying, mental anguish is no less a cause of suffering than physical pain, and indeed it can even be the greater cause. This is because what these patients face right in front of them is death, along with a separation and loss that is final. All this provokes

feelings of fear, anxiety, and isolation to surge up very intensely in a way they have never experienced before.

For this reason, patients need their spiritual well-being taken care of just as much as their physical well-being. Especially in the case of final-stage patients, whom doctors have determined to have no hope of recovery or improvement, taking care of spiritual well-being in fact becomes more important than physical well-being. This is because even though the body is irrevocably breaking down, the mind still has the opportunity to improve. It can cease its agitation and reach a state of peace, even in the last moments of life. Even though the body and mind are closely related, when the body suffers, the mind does not necessarily have to suffer too. One can take care of one's mind such that it does not suffer along with one's body. This understanding is consistent with the interpretation of Ven. Huimin and the Association of Clinical Buddhist Studies in Taiwan.²

In the time of the Buddha, there were many occasions wherein the Buddha and his disciples helped those who were sick and close to dying. The kind of help they gave directly focused on treating the suffering of the mind. In the Pali Buddhist Canon, there are several stories of people on the verge of death who were told by the Buddha to contemplate their imminent death and the true nature of all conditioned things, eventually coming to realize high levels of attainment. Some even became fully enlightened. From these stories, there are two major points to consider:

² Watts, Jonathan & Tomatsu, Yoshiharu. "The Development of Indigenous Hospice Care and Clinical Buddhism in Taiwan". In *Buddhist Care for the Dying and Bereaved*. Eds. Jonathan S. Watts & Yoshiharu Tomatsu. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012).

1. Being ill and close to dying is a time of crisis and physical disintegration, yet at the same time it can also be an opportunity to liberate the mind or elevate one's state of mind. Being ill and close to dying are, thus, not conditions that are negative in and of themselves. If one knows how to use them well, they can be of great benefit.
2. The Buddha's teachings on illness and dying can be classified into two main parts:
 - Incline the mind to have faith in the Three Refuges (the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha) and confidence in the morality one has upheld or good deeds one has done in the past. In other words, incline the mind to recollect that which is good and wholesome.
 - Let go of worries and all things, having seen with wisdom that there is nothing at all that one can hold on to.

These teachings of the Buddha provide an excellent model of how to give spiritual help to dying persons applicable to the present day. This article will show how these principles put forth by the Buddha can be adapted for use by doctors, nurses, family, and friends in helping dying patients. Experiences from real-life cases have been drawn on to create the following guidelines.

1. Extending Love and Sympathy

Dying persons not only have to contend with physical pain but also fear, such as fear of pain itself, dying, abandonment, dying alone, or what will come after death. The fear may cause even more suffering than the physical pain. Love and moral support

from family members and friends is very important during this time, because it can reduce the fear and help them feel secure. One should remember that patients in their final stages feel very vulnerable. They need someone they feel they can rely on, someone who is ready to be there for them during times of crisis. If they have someone who can give them unconditional love, they will have the strength of spirit to deal with all the various forms of suffering that are converging on them at this time.

Being patient, forbearing, sympathetic, gentle, and forgiving are ways to show your love. Physical pain and a vulnerable state of mind can make patients act out in ill-tempered and abrasive ways. We can help them by patiently bearing with these outbursts and not reacting in negative ways as well as trying to forgive them and sympathize with them. If we are peaceful and gentle, it will help them calm down more quickly. Pointing out their negativity may be something we ought to do sometimes, but always in a gentle and loving way. Family and friends need to have mindfulness at all times, which helps us not to lose control of ourselves and keeps our hearts filled with kindness, love, and restraint.

Even if you don't know what to say to make them feel better, just physically touching them in a gentle way will enable them to feel your love. We may hold their hand or touch their arm and squeeze it gently, embrace them, or touch their forehead or abdomen with our hands, while sending them our good wishes. For those who have some experience practicing meditation, while touching the patient, bring your mind to rest in a peaceful state. Loving-kindness (*metta*) that emanates from a mind that is peaceful and concentrated will have an energy that the patient will be able to feel.

For example, when two volunteers from my network came to visit a patient, they found him screaming out of suffering from the pain in his abdomen. They asked if the patient would allow them to receive (or share) some pain from him. After getting permission, they asked the patient to close his eyes while they touched his body gently with their hands. They began visualize his pain as grey smoke emerging from his body and entering theirs before being transformed into a white ray emitting back to him. After about five minutes of this compassionate practice, the patient said that he felt much better. This practice mirrors reiki practice as well as Tibetan Buddhist *tonglen* practice.

2. Helping Patients Accept Impending Death

If patients do not have long to live, letting them know will give them time to prepare themselves while they are still physically able to. However, in numerous countries today, there are a great many patients who have no idea that they have a serious terminal illness and are in their final stages. To let time pass while keeping them in the dark will leave them with less time to prepare themselves. In Thailand, the patient's right to information is not respected very much. Many cancer patients are not informed about their real situation, because their families are afraid that the patients' situation will worsen. Since the doctor wants to have a good relationship with the patients' relatives, he or she has to conform to their wishes. In Thailand, relatives have a big say in dealing with the patient's situation. Volunteers from my network often find that informed consent and "truth telling" are not practiced when they visit hospitals. However, this right is becoming increasingly known and exercised by patients, especially those who have a high level of education. Furthermore, living wills

and advance directives by patients are now legal and are being promoted in Thailand.

Still, telling patients bad news without preparing them psychologically in some way beforehand may cause their condition to worsen. When patients are told the bad news, they need to be given moral support and reassurance that family, friends, doctors, and nurses will not abandon them but will stay by their side and help them to the utmost of their abilities until the very end. In general, doctors play an important role in telling such news, especially if they have built up a close relationship with a patient and earned their trust.

Sometimes, however, it is up to the family to break the news. Many families tend to think that it is better to conceal the truth from the patient. However, according to a survey done of patients in Thailand, the majority responded that they would rather be told the truth than be kept in the dark. Even when relatives try to conceal it, ultimately the patient can discern the truth from the changed manner and behavior of family and friends, such as unsmiling faces, softer speaking voices, or greater effort made to please the patient.

Nonetheless, patients' acceptance of their impending death involves a process that takes a long time. Not all patients can accept the truth after they are told. Some patients may become angry at doctors, nurses, and family for telling them the bad news, or concealing the bad news from them for a long time. There could be several reasons for these emotions besides the fear of death. They could have some unfinished business or other worries. Caregivers must learn to be understanding with angry outbursts. If the patient is able to get past their anger and denial of death, they will be more able to accept the reality of their situation. Relatives

ought to help them express their concerns. If they feel they have someone ready to listen to and to understand them, they will feel safe enough to confide their inner thoughts. Posing appropriate questions can also help them identify what it is that is preventing them from accepting death or help them realize that death may not be so fearsome. As with spiritual care professionals, what relatives can do is listen to them with an open, nonjudgmental, and sympathetic heart. They should focus more on asking questions rather than lecturing or sermonizing. Helping patients lessen their worries about their children, grandchildren, spouse, or other loved ones may help them accept their death.

3. Helping Patients Focus Their Minds on Goodness

Thinking of goodness helps the mind become wholesome, peaceful, bright, less fearful, and better able to deal with pain. What the Buddha and his disciples often recommended to those on the verge of death was to recollect and have firm faith in the Three Refuges. These can be thought of as something virtuous or sacred that the patient can worship. The Buddha also had them re-establish themselves in the observance of morality (*sila*) as well as recollect the good deeds they had done in the past. There are many ways to help incline patients to recollect these things. For example, you can:

- Place in the patient's room a Buddha statue, other sacred objects, or pictures of respected spiritual teachers to serve as aids to recollection
- Invite the patient to chant or pray together
- Read dharma books out loud to the patient
- Play recordings of dharma talks or chanting

- Invite monks, especially ones the patient has a connection with, to visit the patient and provide counseling
- Encourage them to do good deeds, such as offering requisites to monks and making charitable donations

In applying these ideas, one should keep in mind the patient's cultural background and personal habits. For example, patients of Chinese background may respond best to pictures of Bodhisattva Kuan Yin. If the patient is Christian or Muslim, one may use the appropriate symbols of these religions instead.

Encouraging the patient to think of the good deeds they have done in the past does not necessarily have to mean religious activities only. Pride in the good deeds they have done and faith in the beneficial effect of such deeds becomes very important for those close to dying. At this time, it is becoming clear to them that they cannot take any of their material wealth with them when they die. It is only the merit they have accrued through good intentions and actions (*karma*) that they can take with them.

Everyone, no matter how rich or poor, or what mistakes they have made in the past, has to have done some good deeds worth recollecting. No matter how many terrible things they have done in the past, when they are close to dying, what we should do is help them to recollect their good deeds. If they are overwhelmed with feelings of guilt, they may not be able to see any of their good deeds. However, any good deeds, even small ones, will be valuable to them if remembered during this time of crisis. At the same time, patients who have been doing good deeds all along should not let any unwholesome deeds overshadow all the goodness they have done, making them feel badly about themselves. In some cases, family and friends may need to list out their past good deeds as

a way of confirming and reiterating them, giving patients confidence in the life they have led.

One example that I learned from our network concerned a policeman who was trembling despite being in a comatose state. Witnessing this situation, his wife burst into tears, but the attending nurse warned her that her crying would make things worse. She was encouraged to speak good things about her husband. After composing herself, the wife told her dying husband that she was proud of him as a good policeman and loving husband who eagerly helped her to sell food in the market. His son also told him how good a father he had been. Gradually, the patient's trembling calmed, and he died in peace.

4. Helping Patients Settle Unfinished Business

One major cause of suffering that prevents people from dying peacefully is unfinished business. Such anxieties or other negative feelings need to be released as soon as possible. Otherwise, they will cause the patient to suffer, feel heavy-hearted, and push away death, thus making them unable to die peacefully and resulting in an unfortunate rebirth. A patient's family and friends should be very concerned about these matters and be quick to act on them. Sometimes patients may not bring the matter up directly. Those who are around the patient should thus be very sensitive to it and ask them about it with genuine concern and kindness, not annoyance.

Some of the kinds of unfinished business a patient may hold onto are: 1) remaining work, responsibilities, or a will that has not been settled. Families should do their best to find a way to help bring these matters to a conclusion; 2) seeing someone for the last time. If possible, it is best to hurry and contact that person; 3)

angry grudges against someone or hurt feelings and grievances against a close intimate. In this case, it is best to advise them to forgive that person and let go of any anger; 4) nagging guilt over some wrong they had done. This is a major area, which requires further explanation.

Asking for forgiveness is not easy to do. One way to make it easier for dying patients is to have them write down their apology and everything they wish to say to the other person. They can have someone deliver it to that person or choose to keep it to themselves. The important thing is that by doing this exercise they have begun to open their hearts. Even if no real communication has ensued with the other person, there has still been some release of those feelings of guilt. If at some point they feel more ready to talk to that person directly, they may decide to do so on another occasion.

Often times the person that the dying patient seeks forgiveness from is someone close, who is right there by their bedside, such as a spouse or a child. In this case, it is easier if such a person initiates the conversation by offering their forgiveness first and telling the patient they do not bear any ill-will towards them for their past mistakes. However, in order to do this, the person must first let go of any pride or anger they may feel. By making the first move, the person opens the channel for the dying patient to ask for forgiveness more easily.

In Thailand, oftentimes children do not dare to open up to their parents even when they are about to die. Partly, this is because they may not be accustomed to talking to their parents openly. Partly, it could be because they think their parents do not hold their misdeed against them or do not even know about it at all. This could be a serious and irreparable miscalculation. In the

case where the dying person is a parent or elder relative, the children, grandchildren, and other family members may join together to hold a ceremony to ask forgiveness at the person's bedside and select a representative to speak for the group. They can begin by speaking of the dying person's virtuous qualities and the good things they have done for their descendants. Then they can ask for forgiveness for anything they have done that may have caused harm or offense.

5. Helping Patients Let Go of Everything

A refusal to accept death and the reality of its imminence can be a great cause of suffering for people who are close to dying. A reason for such refusal can be that they are still deeply attached to certain things and unable to be separated from them. A feeling of deep attachment can be experienced by people even if they do not have any lingering feelings of guilt in their hearts. Family and friends as well as doctors and nurses should help dying persons let go of their attachments as much as possible, such as by reassuring them that their children and other descendants will be taken care of and reminding them that all their material possessions have to be given to others to take care of.

In giving spiritual guidance to the dying, the Buddha's deepest advice was to let go of all their concerns, even any aspirations for rebirth in heavenly realms. The belief that heaven exists helps satisfy the deep-seated need for the continuance of one's self. However, anything that remains as a basis for attachment will hold their minds back, make them resist death, and be agitated until the end. Thus, when death approaches, there is nothing better than to let go of everything, even the notion of self.

For those whose experience of Buddhism has been limited to

rituals or basic forms of merit-making, however, it is probably not an easy matter to understand the concept of no-self (*anatta*). Nonetheless, family, friends, doctors, and nurses who have an adequate understanding of this truth can advise dying patients to gradually let go of their attachment to self by advising them to first let go of the body, recognizing that we cannot control our bodies to be as we wish them to be. The next step is to let go of their feelings and to not identify with or attach to any feelings as being theirs. Doing this will help greatly to reduce their suffering and pain, because suffering tends to arise when one attaches to pain and identifies with it as being ours. One holds that “I” am in pain instead of just seeing that the condition of pain has arisen.

To be able to let go in this way requires considerable experience in training the mind. However, it is not beyond the reach of ordinary people to do so, especially if one starts training the mind when one first becomes ill. There have been many cases of people with serious illnesses who have been able to deal with extreme pain without using any painkillers at all or only small doses. The method that is widely suggested is the practice of mindfulness of the breath (*anapanasati*), which helps to calm the mind and keep it from identifying with the pain. By keeping their minds focused on the breath or abdomen, they ended up needing to use very little pain medication. Moreover, their minds were clearer and more alert than patients who used many painkillers.

For example, my previously mentioned friend Supaporn, who had developed terminal breast cancer, preferred clear awareness over painkillers. Her regular practice of meditation helped her to withstand the pain with very few painkillers, much to the surprise of her doctor. In the past, there were many people in Thailand who died peacefully in an upright sitting posture, because they

were able to let go of their identification with the pain as being theirs. It could be said that they used spiritual medicine to heal their minds.

It should be noted that a large amount of pain is caused by anxiety, fear, and other negative emotions. Pain can be reduced if the patient is thus relieved of these emotions. In one example that a doctor related to me, a patient was agitated during the terminal stage of his death. The painkiller worked for only ten minutes, after which he began to tremble again. Since he did not know how to do meditation, the doctor offered to guide him in total relaxation. He asked the patient to be aware of each part of his body, starting from the feet and moving to the head. He guided him to be just aware and to relax with the help of light music. After thirty minutes, he became peaceful, both in body and emotion. The doctor also taught his relatives how to help him do this exercise. With this practice, he became more responsive to the medicine, requiring smaller doses to help calm him.

6. Creating a Peaceful Atmosphere

For dying patients to be able to feel at peace and let go of all lingering concerns and attachments in a sustained manner, it is necessary for them to have the support of a peaceful atmosphere around them. If their room is swarming with people coming in and out, and filled with the sounds of people talking all the time or the sounds of the door opening and closing all day, it will naturally be difficult for them to maintain their mind in a wholesome and peaceful state. This includes a peaceful social environment as well as physical one, such as a peaceful family.

The least that family, friends, doctors, and nurses can do is to help create a peaceful atmosphere for them. They should avoid

talk that disturbs the patient. Family members should refrain from arguing amongst themselves or crying. These things would only increase the anxiety and unease of the patient. The states of mind of the people surrounding the dying patient can affect the atmosphere in the room and the person's mind. It is possible even for patients in comas to sense the mental energy of those around them. These findings by our team and our general Thai Buddhist tradition are corroborated by other Buddhist traditions like the Chinese and Tibetan ones. If family and friends can try to keep their minds in a healthy state—not sad or depressed—this will already be a great help to dying patients.

In addition, family and friends can create a peaceful environment by encouraging dying patients to practice meditation together with them. In the method of meditation that I have previously mentioned, mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati*), one style of practicing it is as follows: When breathing in, mentally recite “Bud”. When breathing out, mentally recite “Dho”. When put together, “Buddho” is the recitation of the Buddha's name. Alternatively, with each out-breath, count, “1, 2, 3....10,” and then start again. If it is not easy for the person to be mindful of the breath, they can focus their awareness on the rising and falling of the abdomen as they breathe in and out by placing both hands on top of the abdomen. On the in-breath, as the abdomen rises, mentally recite, “rising”. On the out-breath, as the abdomen falls, mentally recite, “falling”.

Encouraging dying patients to do chanting together with family and friends in a room that has been set up to create an aura of serenity and sanctity is another way to bring about a peaceful atmosphere around dying patients and incline their mind in a wholesome way. That is why some people choose to die in their

homes. For example, my friend Supaporn refused hospitalization and eventually decided to die in her home. She had prepared an atmosphere in her home that was conducive to a peaceful death. She had cultivated a beautiful garden that could be appreciated from her bed. In her room, she had a Buddha image and pictures of her great teachers like Buddhadasa and Maha Ghosananda. Sometimes, she also listened to nice, spiritual music.

I know of another case in which a woman got cancer. She was from a modern, urban, Chinese Thai family, and in her last stage also suffered from toxins in her liver. She declined to get further medication and decided to go home for her last period of life. According to the doctor, she was very likely to be unconscious and in pain during her last days. However, on the contrary, she retained her awareness until the last hour, because she tried to keep her mind in a positive way with the help of her relatives. They reminded her of all the good things she had done in her life. In the final hour, her family chanted Amitabha Buddha's name in Chinese one thousand times, and she passed away almost unnoticeably, like a candle flickering out. This shows what the family can do without the help of monks, and this is why our network has started to hold workshops for nurses, doctors, and families so they can do this process by themselves.

Even though a peaceful mind is important, from the Buddhist viewpoint it is wisdom that is considered the most important thing for a person close to dying. Wisdom means clear knowledge of the truths of life: impermanence (*anicca*), dissatisfaction due to change (*dukkha*), and selflessness (*anatta*). These three truths about all things show us that there is not a single thing to which we can cling. We will find death fearsome if we are still clinging to some things. However, once we fully understand that there is

actually nothing we can cling to, death will no longer be fearsome.

7. *Saying Goodbye*

For those who would like to say what is in their hearts to the dying person, such as saying sorry or goodbye, it is not too late to do so. The important thing to keep in mind is that being able to say goodbye and to guide the dying person's mind to a wholesome state can only be done well if the atmosphere surrounding the person is peaceful and they are not disturbed by any attempts to perform invasive medical procedures. In most hospitals in Thailand, if patients are in the ICU and their pulse weakens to the point where they are close to dying, doctors and nurses will tend to do whatever it takes to keep them alive, such as by stimulating the heart with electric shocks (defibrillation) or using all other available forms of medical technology. The atmosphere around such patients is chaotic, and it is difficult for family and friends to say anything to them. The only exceptions are cases where patients and family members inform hospital personnel in advance of their wish that the patient be allowed to die peacefully, free of any medical interventions.³

³ The life and death of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, one of Thailand's most renowned monks of the 20th century, had a strong influence on Ven. Paisal's views on this matter. Buddhadasa refused hospitalization in his final days feeling his life was coming to a natural end. However, after slipping into a coma, there was a conflict among his caregivers, and he was briefly brought to Bangkok and kept on life support before eventually being able to return and die peacefully in his own temple. Jackson, Peter A., *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*. Revised Edition (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2003), pp. 275-82.

Even if one has said goodbye to someone when they were still conscious, it is still useful to say goodbye again just before they die. As a person's pulse weakens progressively and they approach the moment of death, if family and friends wish to say goodbye, they should first establish mindfulness and restrain their grief. Then, they can whisper their final words in the ear of the dying person. They should talk of the good feelings they have towards the person, give them praise and thanks for all the good they have done, and ask for forgiveness for any wrongs committed. Then they can guide the person's mind to ever more wholesome states by advising them to let go of everything, drop all worries, and recollect the Three Refuges or whatever the person venerates. If the person has some grounding in Buddhist teachings, ask them to let go of the "self" and all conditioned things, to incline the mind towards emptiness, and to keep the mind focused on nirvana; then, say goodbye.

Conclusion

When death is imminent, nothing is more important than a peaceful death. Whatever success one earns in this life, however, it does not guarantee a peaceful death. Only the appropriate quality of mind can enable one to die peacefully. Influenced by a materialistic worldview, people tend to focus on the physical aspects of illness, while ignoring the emotional or spiritual ones. Such an approach tends to increase the suffering of the dying and diverts them from a peaceful death.

A peaceful death is possible when the dying are embraced by love and relieved of anxiety. It is possible when one lets go of everything or focuses on the goodness either in one's life or as rep-

resented by sacred beings. Living a decent life also contributes to a good death. Life and death are actually one and the same matter. We will die in more or less the same fashion as how we have lived. If we live in ignorance, our final moment will likely be spent in agony, without any sense of peace and mindfulness. However, if we constantly cultivate merit and self-awareness, we should be able to pass away peacefully, being in a state of mindfulness until our last breath.

Health care systems should be geared to support a peaceful death, instead of prolonging life at all costs. Saving life is important, but when that mission is impossible, no other choice is better than facilitating a peaceful death by promoting an atmosphere conducive to spiritual practice and spiritual assistance to the dying. Hospitals should not be only theatres to fight with death, but also places where one can be at peace with death.

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Buddhist Perspectives on End-of-Life Care: A Conversation with Phra Paisal Visalo

What does Buddhism say about suffering in general and suffering at the end of life in particular?

In the Buddhist perspective, suffering is the reality that no one can escape from. We are all facing ageing, sickness, separation and loss, either sooner or later. The reason for this is that life is uncertain. Everything in this world is only temporary. But change is certain, that is, impermanence (anicca). Our life is pressurised by internal and external factors which lead to constant changes. Everything ultimately is rotten and disintegrated, that is, suffering (dukkha). There is “no self” (anatta), which is independent or permanent. We can only delay or escape suffering for a while but it is inevitable. What we can do is to alleviate suffering and lessen its effects when it occurs.

However, it is possible that those conditions of suffering can only affect us physically but not necessarily affect our mental con-

ditions. Buddhism believes that every human can cultivate their mind to be free from suffering. Even though we all face ageing, sickness, and death, our minds need not to be painful from these, if only we accept the reality with no refusal and no resistance. Acceptance is the most important factor for us to be free from suffering.

Instead of being affected by physical suffering, we can use it to our benefit; open our eyes to the fact that nothing is certain. Wisdom is also the key success to enlighten our minds to be free from suffering. There have been numerous monks and laypeople who received enlightenment while they were facing suffering due to sickness and the death. In other words, sickness and death can develop our wisdom to realize the ultimate truth and achieve enlightenment.

How relevant is learning from these ideas to end-of-life care of non-Buddhists?

Buddhism believes the happiness is possible at the end of life. There should be no fear when the time has come. Every human has it in his own capacity to be happy, regardless of which religion they profess, or even if they have no religion at all. Peaceful death is possible for all human beings.

What do you consider as a good death?

Good death, from Buddhist perspective, is not determined by the way one dies, or the reason for death. It is rather characterized by the condition of mind at the time of death; dying in peace, without

fear or mental suffering. This is possible when one accept one's own death and lets go of everything – no attachment to anything or any person. Good death is also characterized by the blissful states of existence where one is reborn. Best of all is death with an enlightened mind, achieving the ultimate wisdom concerning the true essence of nature. This enables the mind to be free from suffering and realize *nibbana*, with no rebirth.

What is good life?

Good life means life with well-being, free from sickness, poverty, or exploitation. Good life also means living a life with morality; not taking advantage of others but also doing good deeds for others and society. It involves a peaceful mind, having compassion, and not being dominated by greed, anger and delusion. It is life not inflicted by suffering, resulting from understanding the reality of life and being capable of solving the problems that arise.

Do you think that good living always leads to a good or comfortable death?

Good life could lead to a peaceful death, but not always. When a person is dying, if their mind is in sorrow, or worried about children, parents, loved ones, or could not let go of their properties; if they are guilty or have unfinished business, they might refuse and fight with death at any cost. This will lead to torment, agitation, and restlessness, with a woeful existence after death. Besides, physical pain from sickness may cause patients to be angry and agitated and find no peace at the end of life.

On the other hand, do you think that a good death is possible without a good life?

Good death could happen to those who have an unwholesome life, though it is very rare. This is because those who have an unwholesome life are afraid that they will go to evil states after death. So they are fearful of death. Many suffer from guilt or are haunted by their bad conduct in the past. As for those who are dominated by greed, anger, or delusion, they always find difficulty in letting go of their property or ill will. This will inevitably lead to death in torment. However, if they are lucky enough to have friends who can help them to recall good deeds and let go of everything, their mind can become wholesome and a good death will be possible for them.

Death being certainty in life, how can one prepare for it?

Preparing for death is a necessity for all human beings, because we all will face it no matter how we are or who we are. We should prepare for death by exercising “contemplation of death”. This means we should remind ourselves constantly that we will die sooner or later. We do not know when, where and how. Then we ask ourselves: If we were to die soon, are we ready for that? Have we done any good deeds to our loved ones and others? Is it enough? Are we sufficiently responsible for everything that we have? Are we ready to let things go yet? If the answer is “not ready yet”, we must do good deeds from now on and try to complete those tasks and responsibilities. Finally, we have to learn how to let things go. Doing good deeds means we have nothing to be sorry for. Then letting things go will enable us to face the death and be ready for it now and in the future.

Fear of death is one of the major factors causing distress in the dying. Are there ways of addressing this, irrespective of one's faith?

The fear of death occurs when we tend to forget we all die sooner or later. We may have unfinished business and worry about beloved ones or belongings. One may be fearful of death because one is uncertain about what will happen after death. The fear of death can be relieved if we regularly practice “contemplation of death”, try to do our best to our beloved ones, and try to complete our important tasks and responsibilities. Meditation is a good way to cultivate our minds to accept death: seeing death as a part of life with no fear at all.

Can interventions like meditation assist in alleviating suffering towards the end of life? Even in a person who has not practised meditation till the final days of his or her life, how can this be done?

Meditation helps lessen suffering. At the end of life, when pain occurs, one can focus on one's breath – in-breath and out-breath. Once mind and breath are in harmony, concentration and calmness will take place. Calmness of mind will produce some chemistry in one's body that can gradually lessen the pain. Calmness meditation also diverts the mind from physical pain, and can enable one to be unaware of the pain or feel less pain.

Mindfulness meditation can also relieve suffering. Mindfulness meditation helps the mind to let go of the pain. Instead of “being pain”, mindfulness enables one to be aware of the pain. This will reduce mental pain. Only physical pain will exist.

Experienced mediators can give advice to anyone to eliminate the degrees of suffering. An appropriate and peaceful environment can also help relieve pain. Reminding oneself of good deeds in the past or concentrating on sacred things in which one has faith can support mindfulness meditation as well.

Dr. Suresh Kumar spoke to Phra Paisal Visalo, abbot of the Buddhist Monastery, Wat Pasukato, and founder of the Buddhist Network for a Good Death, August 8, 2014.

Think of Death, Be Happy

Life and death are actually one and the same matter. We will die in, more or less, the same fashion as how we live. If we live in ignorance, our final moments will likely be spent in agony, without any sense of peace and mindfulness. However, if we constantly cultivate merit and self-awareness, we should be able to pass away peacefully, being in the state of mindfulness until our last breath.

The life of an awakened one is to be aware of the prevalence of death all the time. There is this ever readiness to confront death. Even when the mind does not yet feel ready, it can be further trained every day as the person performs his or her duty to the best, having accepted that uncertainty is but a fact of life.

There are several methods to cultivate this contemplation on death, called *moranassati*. Just a thought that we will all die sooner or later, so we should maximise the remaining time we have is one example. However, for most people, such recollections may

not be enough. They may be keen for a while, but eventually, their lives will fall back into the same patterns of habits, being again indulged in the work or entertainment at hand, while forgetting what is the most important thing to do in their lives.

One simple way to contemplate death is to imagine what might happen to us if a death really took place now. What would we lose? Whom would we miss? There might arise a feeling of pain for those who think they are not yet ready, but such an unpleasant situation might help him or her to be better prepared to practice for the remaining time in order to deal with suffering when the moment of loss actually comes.

Here are some more ideas about how to contemplate death and dying:

1. Practice Dying at Bedtime

At the end of the day, the time to rest the mind and the body is a good opportunity to reflect on the inevitability of death. Practice the process of dying as if we were facing it at this very moment. The suitable posture is to lie down and relax every part of the body from the head to the toes and especially the face. Breathe in and out freely. Feel the tip of your nose and the softness of the in-and-out-breaths. Put down every thought, be it about the past or the future.

As the mind calms down, think of how we are approaching death. We just don't know when. Tonight might be the last night for us. Tomorrow might never come. Think of how every breath will dissolve as death arrives. The heart will stop beating. The

body will no longer be able to move, and it will turn cold and stiff, not unlike a useless log. Then think of how every valuable possession we have acquired and kept will no longer be ours. They will belong to someone else. We cannot do anything with them. What we used to hold dear will be left unattended.

Moreover, we will no longer have another chance to talk with our children or our beloved. Everything we used to do with them will become the past. We will no longer be able to visit our parents or do anything more for them. There may not even time to say good-bye or to make amends with those we have had grudges.

All the work has to be left behind too, even those that have not been finished. We can no longer make any further revisions. However important that work is, it will have to be abandoned; the same with all the knowledge and experiences we have accumulated, they will all disappear with us. All the fame, power, and supporters will leave our hands. No matter how powerful we are, we cannot take any of these things with us. Do not expect that people will continue to praise us after we die. Even our name will be finally forgotten.

As we reflect on this, observe our feelings. Do we worry, regret, or have an attachment to any of these? Are we ready to accept these losses? If not, what makes us still agitated? Such contemplation will help us realise that there are a few things that we should do but have not yet done (or done enough), as well as things that we still feel a strong attachment to. Such awareness will prompt us to do the important but often overlooked matters as well as practice the art of letting go.

2. Contemplation on Death on Various Occasions

In fact, one can contemplate death any time during the day. When

traveling, by car or boat or plane, always be prepared. If there is something untoward happening in the next few seconds, how should we confront it? What would we think of first? Are we ready to give up everything we feel attached to at that point in time?

When leaving the house, think if this could be our last trip, and we may not be able to return to see our parents, beloved, or children again. Is there anything left that we may have regretted for not finishing it first? Are there any conflicts that we may wish we should have reconciled? Such awareness will urge us to try to treat our family better and not let certain issues wait to be resolved in the future, for such a day may never come.

Reading newspapers, especially reports about accidents or disasters, is another opportune moment to contemplate the uncertainty of life. Anything could happen without warning; people can die at any place and time. Try to think of how the same thing might happen to us, too. Will we be able to confront it? Are we prepared to die?

Attending a funeral service should also be the time to remind ourselves of the imminence of death. Once the deceased also walked and moved about like us. In the future, we would all have to lie down like him or her, not being able to take anything with us except the effects of our good or bad deeds.

The best dhamma teacher is the body in the coffin in front of us. He or she is trying to wake us up from indulgence and heedlessness in life. Whoever believes they still have a few more years to go will have to think again as they attend the funeral of a child or a teenager. Those engrossed in their power should realise that, however “big” they may have been, everyone will end up being smaller than the coffin that will contain their body.

Similarly, when visiting a sick person, we should remember

that our body will one day be in a similar condition. Again, the patient, especially the terminally ill, is like our dhamma teacher. Whatever their reactions—anxious, traumatic, or desperate—they are teaching us how to prepare ourselves, so that when our turn comes, we may not suffer as much as they do. The sick person, who seems to be at peace and able to maintain his or her composure despite the apparent physical pain, is also showing us an example of how we should likewise prepare ourselves, especially while we are still in good health.

To keep our mind still in time of sickness is the same matter as to keep our mind still when facing death. Therefore, think of the period when we fall sick as an exercise to prepare ourselves for death. Sickness is like the first few lessons before we move on to the most difficult level. If we cannot deal with sickness, how then can we confront death?

3. Reminders of Death

We could apply anything we come across in our daily life to remind us about death. It depends on one's circumstances and "creativity." Some Tibetan meditation masters pour all the water from their personal glasses and put them with the bottom up next to their beds. They do this because they are not certain if they would be able to wake up and use the glass again on the following day. The ritual thus serves like a reminder for the masters that death could come to them at any given time. A Thai writer has learned about this story and applied it to herself. Every night before she goes to bed, she always makes sure that every dish has been washed thoroughly. She explained that if she happens to die in her sleep, there will be no dirty dishes left as burdens for others.

A 55-year-old man used marbles as his "death reminders."

Each marble is equivalent to about a week of living. The man has calculated that if he were to reach an average life span, taken to be about 75 years old, he would have about one thousand weeks left. So he bought one thousand marbles and put them in a plastic box. Every week he took out one marble from the box. The diminishing amount of the marbles reminded him that his days were numbered. It reminded him of approaching death, and this enables him to choose to do the most important thing, not letting himself drift away worrying about the inconsequential.

Each person can choose different reminders: from the sunrise and sunset; the flower that comes out in a bud, blooms, and finally withers away; or a leaf that springs from a tree's branch and finally falls down to the ground. These remind us of the transience of life. Lord Buddha once suggested one should view life not unlike the foamy top of a wave, a dew drop, or a lightning flash. They are all transitory, and thus is our own existence.

4. Other Activities to Prepare for Death

We could try an exercise of letting go of beloved persons and belongings. Choose seven objects, they could be a person, a pet animal, or something we consider dear to us. Then, ask yourself if you were forced to give up one thing, what would that thing be? Continue with each of the remaining six objects. You could imagine yourself being in an unpleasant situation—like facing a fire, an earthquake, or an accident—that prompts you to lose each of our cherished items. What would you choose to keep? And what to give up?

Such an exercise will teach us how to let go. It will help us review our own sets of attachments, to discover what we consider to be the most important in our lives. Some may find they love

or worry about dogs more than their brothers and sisters. Others may be willing to give up everything but not their favourite doll. Still others will choose their computer as the last item to give up. We may uncover something in ourselves that we have not been aware of before, and then we could try to adapt to the changing circumstances. All this is crucial to prepare for death, since ultimately we will have to lose everything one way or the other. Actually, even when we are still alive, we are bound to lose certain things or people, and often without the ability to make a choice of what we would like to keep and what to lose.



“Wherever the Buddha’s teachings have flourished,
either in cities or countrysides,
people would gain inconceivable benefits.
The land and people would be enveloped in peace.
The sun and moon will shine clear and bright.
Wind and rain would appear accordingly,
and there will be no disasters.
Nations would be prosperous
and there would be no use for soldiers or weapons.
People would abide by morality and accord with laws.
They would be courteous and humble,
and everyone would be content without injustices.
There would be no thefts or violence.
The strong would not dominate the weak
and everyone would get their fair share.”

~THE BUDDHA SPEAKS OF
THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA OF
ADORNMENT, PURITY, EQUALITY AND ENLIGHTENMENT OF
THE MAHAYANA SCHOOL~

With bad advisors forever left behind,
From paths of evil he departs for eternity,
Soon to see the Buddha of Limitless Light
And perfect Samantabhadra's Supreme Vows.

The supreme and endless blessings
of Samantabhadra's deeds,
I now universally transfer.
May every living being, drowning and adrift,
Soon return to the Pure Land of Limitless Light!

~The Vows of Samantabhadra~

I vow that when my life approaches its end,
All obstructions will be swept away;
I will see Amitabha Buddha,
And be born in His Western Pure Land of
Ultimate Bliss and Peace.

When reborn in the Western Pure Land,
I will perfect and completely fulfill
Without exception these Great Vows,
To delight and benefit all beings.

**~ The Vows of Samantabhadra
Avatamsaka Sutra~**

DEDICATION OF MERIT

May the merit and virtue accrued from this work
adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four great kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of those on the three paths below.
May those who see or hear of these efforts generate Bodhi-mind,
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,
and finally be reborn together in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Homage to Amita Buddha!

NAMO AMITABHA

南無阿彌陀佛

財團法人佛陀教育基金會印贈

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