





*King Mongkut*



## KING MONGKUT IN PERSPECTIVE

by

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### I

Many people in the west nowadays are searching for that elusive abstraction, the Asian mind, as if Asia were a unit and all Asians had the same habit of thought. The search, in proving its own futility, may nevertheless be instructive, for it may encourage a more selective approach.

King Mongkut's career is a useful introduction.<sup>1</sup> At its outset it exhibits the ancient traditions of palace and religious life, drawn principally from India, that were once common to most of Southeast Asia; at its apex it exhibits these traditions being adapted to modern needs. This painful but necessary process King Mongkut guided with a sure hand. By preventing the breakdown that occurred in neighboring countries, he saved Siam from the schizophrenia whose consequences so often plague relations between east and west today.

King Mongkut mounted the throne of Siam in the middle of the 19th century, when European imperialism was tearing Asia to pieces. Among the empire-builders there were many brilliant and courageous men; King Mongkut was one of the very few Asian leaders who could match them. While other rulers were feebly giving in to the conquerors or exhausting themselves with futile rage, he kept his country free. While others hoped to withdraw into safety by shutting out western influences, he recognized—as the Japanese were to recognize a few years later—that the only way for an Asian country to survive was to absorb these influences and modernize itself. He had seen the fatal result of China's attempt to shut out the west. Almost alone among his countrymen he realized that the Chinese were really beaten in the Opium Wars, he did not believe their propaganda that they were granting treaty rights to the British only as a gracious compromise. Siam must not follow their example; Siam would have to break with the conservative isolationism of the recent past, admit foreign trade

and foreign ideas, revamp her old institutions. Her future rulers would have to learn the intricacies of western thought and science, diplomacy and statecraft. The key to all these things was language; and he himself had taken up the study of English at a time when his countrymen thought it the merest eccentricity and called him a fool.

He had a sense of urgency. What western nations had taken centuries to do, Siam must accomplish in decades. During his seventeen year reign he transformed the country's whole outlook. Establishing diplomatic relations with England, France and America he opened the land to a lifegiving flow of foreign commerce. Resolutely opposing the forces of inertia he opened men's minds to new ideas. He set up printing presses, built roads and canals, and issued the first modern currency to take care of the requirements of his country's expanded trade. He reformed the administration, installed foreign advisers in government departments, called in English officers to improve the army and organize a police force. He stimulated education at home and sent young men abroad to study. He reaffirmed the freedom of religion and encouraged the Christian missionaries in their educational and medical work. He raised the condition of the slaves and insisted that the law should treat all ranks of men impartially.

His reforms constitute one of the strangest revolutions in history. They were not at all dictated by popular opinion, for there was no such thing at the time. Nor were they concessions extorted from an Absolute Monarch by a group of young liberals—for he himself was both the Absolute Monarch and the leader of the liberals,

The spectacle of an Absolute Monarch voluntarily taking these bold steps in the direction of modern democracy at a time when his subjects had never even dreamed of the idea is a paradox that bewilders a westerner's imagination. Yet it is a spectacle that fits well with the best traditions of Buddhism. King Mongkut was neither the first nor the last Siamese ruler to prove himself

more progressive than his subjects. But he made more significant changes than any of his predecessors. And it was he who charted the course his successors were to follow—a course which has made Siam, in the space of a few score years, into a modern nation with an honored place in the free world.

Great as these achievements are, King Mongkut's reforms in the religious field have an even deeper meaning. When he saw the old beliefs breaking down under the impact of western materialism, he did not look on in helpless dismay. Being both a philosopher and a man of action, he breathed new life into Buddhism and made it a more vigorous power for the alleviation of human misery.

Some day, if history ceases to be one-sided and adopts a more comprehensive view of the world, King Mongkut's name will rank higher than the names of the empire-builders. For the moment, however, he is hardly known in the west except in the grotesque caricature popularized by Rex Harrison in *Anna and the King* and by Yul Brynner in *The King and I*.

Hollywood and Broadway are only partly to blame. They have thrown in some ill-chosen humor and some antics that are a shock to anyone who knows the courteous manners of Siamese ladies and gentlemen—but these additions are more peccadilloes. The real fault lies in the two books they ultimately spring from—*The English Governess at the Court of Siam* (London, 1870) and *The Romance of the Harem* (Boston, 1873)—both written by Anna herself, who was Mrs. Anna Leonowens in real life but “Anna Owens” in her melodious transformation.

Anna came to Bangkok in 1862 to serve as governess to King Mongkut's children. Widowed when young, she had suffered much; but suffering had not brought resignation. She was a brave woman, in fact a good deal braver than necessary if she could have seen how groundless her fears were. Hovering on the fringes of reality, often escaping into make-believe, she had an acute sense of melodrama and absolutely no sense of proportion. This, I think, is the true picture of Anna as revealed by unguarded passages in her own books.

How different is the radiant self-portrait she offers when she is on the alert! Here the dedicated woman, whose beauty exposes her to special risks, is seen gently uplifting the barbarians: this self-portrait is nobly conceived and sensitively executed.

It is also absurdly unreal. Anna misjudged the requirements of a monarch who insisted that her only function was to teach English. Her chastity remained unassaulted and her tactful evangelism ignored. After five years in Siam she returned to the west, ready to make some startling announcements.

Anna writes well. Her prose is lively, and for the most part free of pomposity. With her sharp eye for landscape she is at her best when evoking a visual impression. A profusion of small errors and a muddled topography pass unnoticed, as far as the ordinary reader is concerned.

Interested in Siamese life in all its phases, Anna made serious, though spasmodic, attempts to describe it intelligently. She took the trouble to learn a certain amount about Buddhism but here she was beyond her depth. Her best passages on the subject are slyly plagiarized from earlier writers: her own opinions, when she ventures them, are of little value. She never grasped the significance of Brahmin ceremonial at the Court of a Buddhist country, and she confounds one of the best-known monasteries in Bangkok with the Brahmin Temple.

If her self-portrait is flattering, her portrait of the King is quite the reverse; and it is all the more misleading because it is made to look like an impartial and carefully-balanced assessment of a complex personality. She praises him for his scholarship and his keenness of mind, his devotion to his people and his zeal for reform; and these qualities she illustrates with an abundance of well-chosen incident. She makes a sharp distinction between his public and his private character: are we to understand that the virtues of the first were too well-known to be denied, while the faults of the second were known only to herself? When she enlarges on his cruelty, angry rages, and unrestrained lust,

I cannot say how far she was the victim of malicious gossip or misunderstanding, and how far she herself originated the accusations.

"I have tried to give a full and faithful account of the scenes and characters that were gradually unfolded to me as I began to understand the language," she says somewhat timidly in her first book. But Siamese is a tricky language, and it is clear she never really mastered it. When the palace ladies and their servants were telling her the truth, it is doubtful how much of it would penetrate; when they were regaling her with calculated lies, or having a little joke at her expense, they would make sure she understood what they were saying. Probably, however, she drew less on these sources than she would have us believe, and more on the gossip of the European community and her own imagination.

Such is the mood of *The English Governess*. She was already far away from Siam when she came to write *The Romance of the Harem*, and her store of pertinent facts was running low. She relied more heavily on plagiarism, transposed and doctored up to look like eyewitness accounts or direct quotations from reliable observers: "So strange will some of the occurrences related in the following pages appear to Western readers," she shamelessly remarks in her preface, "that I deem it necessary to state that they are also true."

The method she used sparingly in the first book is carried so far in the second that it gives itself away. Glancing through some earlier writer on Siam, or even on neighboring countries, she would seize on a lurid story that appealed to her; she would remove it from its context and transpose it to Bangkok in the 1860's; and then, after a moment's reflection, she would re-write it with a wealth of circumstantial detail, and with contemporary men and women as the protagonists. King Mongkut, being the principal target of her malice, became the posthumous victim of this reckless method; I shall cite specific instances later.



Anna's two books, after having quite a success, lay unnoticed for many years. More recently they have had a series of reincarnations.

Mrs. Landon reduced them to a single volume and more coherent form (*Anna and the King of Siam*, New York, 1943). Careful readers will exonerate her from any share in the blame for giving a false picture of the King. She stresses the constructive factors more than Anna did; but her stated purpose is not to describe him objectively, it is to exhibit him through Anna's eyes without correcting the faults of Anna's vision. She refuses to vouch for the accuracy of Anna's account; it is, she says, a romance with an historical setting, *not* a history; it is "probably seventy-five per cent fact and twenty-five per cent fiction based on fact."

In the musical comedy and the film the truth loses out altogether, and King Mongkut presents the astonishing appearance of Rousseau's Noble Savage with a bow to Gilbert and Sullivan. These trifles are intended more to entertain than to instruct, but it is disconcerting to find them advertised as if they were documentaries.

Even more disconcerting is a reissue of *The Romance of the Harem* (under the title *Siamese Harem Life*) in London in 1952, illustrated with drawings that are a fantasy of every seraglio from Turkey to China, and with an introduction by Miss Freya Stark containing the following description of Anna among the Court ladies: "Harrassed and indomitable, she loved the women in their royal slavery and trained a new and happier generation of children to carry light into the future: and few people can have wielded a stronger influence in that corner of Asia."

It has become almost an article of faith among westerners that every virtue the Royal Family have displayed since Anna's time stems from her tactful inculcation of Christian ideals. Yet virtue was not unknown in Siam before her arrival, and a cool assessment suggests that Anna did not loom very large in the life of King Mongkut and his children.

## II

At the beginning of the 19th century, Siam was rapidly recovering from the disasters of the Burmese wars which had laid the country waste a generation before. <sup>2</sup>

The ancient capital, fifty miles north of Bangkok, had once been a city larger than the London of those days. For more than four hundred years it had been called "Lovely City of the Gods, Glorious and Impregnable". It had been splendid with tall white palaces and gilded spires—an Oriental Venice whose canals carried in stately procession the Royal barges, carved in the shape of slim dragons saddled with gleaming pavilions. The merchants of Europe and Asia had traded in its markets, while tributary princes sent silks and jewels and golden trees in offering to its mighty ruler. In its hundred monasteries the yellow-robed monks engaged in deep meditation, doing obeisance to the Buddha whose images were endlessly repeated in bronze or gilded stucco. But the strength of its armies did not match the splendor of its buildings. The Burmese captured the lovely city, stripped it of its greatest treasures, and left it a smoking ruin.

A year or two later the Siamese drove out the invaders, but they did not attempt to rebuild the old capital. Instead they founded a new one, farther down the river at Bangkok. First on the right bank and later on the left, palaces and monasteries began to rise, their architecture reproducing the remembered glories of the past. Massive white walls supported tier on tier of tile roofs which overlapped one another like the bright-colored capes of some fantastic cloak. Huge gilded cobras writhed along the ridge-poles or swooped down upon the gable ends to terrify evil spirits. Artists, painting the interior walls in rich and sober colors, created timeless landscapes in which the Buddha received the homage of princes who wore the costume of the Siamese court, while the gods and heroes of Sanskrit poetry sat serenely in palaces that were the very image of those now rising in the new "City of the Gods". Boat after boat came down the river laden with treasures that had been hidden from the invaders, raft after raft bearing huge old statues of Buddha rescued from the ruined cities. The river banks at Bangkok were mostly

reserved for religious establishments and princely mansions, while the ordinary people lived in floating houses built of paneled wood, the gable ends reproducing in humbler convention the protective cobras of the mighty. These floating houses were comfortable and convenient, for in the fierce heat of the tropics there was always at least a little breeze on the water; the river was a ready-made laundry, bathroom, and highway; and the people were amphibious, learning to swim and paddle a canoe almost as soon as they learned to walk.

At that time Siam was still a medieval country with little interest in the outside world. Wars at home, plus the French Revolution and its succeeding troubles in Europe, had brought to a standstill her once-thriving trade with Britain, France and Holland. She remembered almost nothing of these old contacts except how to cast cannon and use musketry, how to make up one or two medical recipes, and how to prepare a certain kind of French confectionery. She had no diplomatic relations with any country except China, no commerce with any countries but China and India. There was not a single pure-blooded Siamese who could speak any European language, while the only European residents were the French missionaries and a handful of Portuguese traders; the American missionaries did not arrive until 1828. When commercial relations with Europe were at last resumed, progress was slow, and the first British trade missions that arrived were not able to accomplish much.

But, in spite of many restrictions on business, European merchantmen and Yankee clippers presently began to arrive in increasing numbers. A young Siamese nobleman, impressed with their superiority over the Chinese junks, employed British and Portuguese shipwrights to supervise the building of the first modern ship, which he presented to the King. The Government built more such ships, manning them with crews under European officers. But except for the missionaries, with their devotion to good works, most of the foreigners the Siamese saw were adventurers who reflected little credit on their respective countries and aroused no desire to learn more about these distant lands.

As there were few roads, people relied for the most part on water transport—the rivers of the country supplemented by a vast network of canals. Medicine was primitive, consisting chiefly of sorcery plus a few empirical treatments with herbal remedies or massage. Notions of geography and astronomy were based on the traditions of Indian myths. There were no universities, and no schools outside the monasteries. Printing was unknown; books were scarce and expensive, for they existed only in the form of palm-leaf or paper volumes laboriously copied by hand.

The Buddhist religion was professed by the entire nation. But many of the monks were lackadaisical, and their beliefs were a strange distortion of the great Doctrine preached by the Buddha in India more than 2300 years before. The Buddha, rejecting magic and ritual, had taught an ethical and psychological system in which the gods had no significant place; he had but a single aim—mankind's release from suffering—and proposed a very direct method of achieving this aim by discipline of self and kindness to others, based on a proper understanding of the law of cause and effect. But in the course of time the Doctrine had become largely a matter of form and ritual, mystical trances and observances to assure rebirth under happy conditions. For people believed quite literally in transmigration. Not only human beings, but all living creatures, were subject to it. The actions, good or bad, of any creature in this life would determine his status in the next one. Neither demons nor gods were immortal: they had once been men, and were now being temporarily punished or rewarded for actions in some past life. The chain of reincarnations would go on endlessly; the creature who was an animal today might be promoted for good actions to be reborn as a prince in some future life, while today's god, careless of the morrow, might be reborn as a pauper's child or a cripple. In their desire to store up a credit balance that would entitle them to a fortunate rebirth, people were inclined to neglect the major virtues in favor of mechanical "acts of merit", each of which had a predetermined value—so much for endowing a monastery, so much for presenting food to monks; so much for freeing a caged bird, so much for giving

alms to a beggar. But if Buddhism, with its countless opportunities for merit-making, took care of the future life, there were the everyday problems of present existence to be faced—finding money, warding off accident and disease, softening the heart of the beloved. These matters were controlled by myriads of unseen spirits who haunted land and sea and sky. There was a spirit in every tree and rock, in every pool and stream, in every cloud and star. Spirits caused rain or drought, good crops or bad, success or failure in love and gambling and warfare. Though their malice was easy to incur and hard to escape, they could be placated with offerings of food and flowers or coerced with spells. To-day only the simple take such spirits seriously; but in those times nearly everyone, no matter how cultivated, believed in them and devoted much effort to their propitiation.

Though western travelers to Bangkok had no trouble in seeing all these evidences of hopeless backwardness, few of them were then able to glimpse the subtle vigor of Siamese culture. It was too alien, too exclusive for them to appreciate. For the Siamese were the inheritors of an ancient and refined tradition, in which the people had little part, but which centered about monastic and palace life.

Some monks lived as hermits. They submitted their bodies to ascetic rigors, purified their minds with mystical disciplines, tamed with their gentleness the birds and timid deer of the forest. Some spent their lives in metaphysical speculation, and though they might accept without question the most fanciful premises they were quick to detect a faulty syllogism. Some lived in close-knit communities in monasteries. Deeply versed in the scholarly tongues of the past, they copied endless manuscripts and devoted themselves to education.

The aristocratic arts flourished in the palaces. Kings and princes, aided by batteries of ghost-writers, composed poetry of a high order. They were the patrons of sculptors and painters, they maintained companies of skilled musicians, they loved to encourage the classical ballet. Cunning artisans made furniture for them,

inlaying it with mother of pearl or painting it in black lacquer covered with a neat wilderness of flowers and tendrils in gold. For the dancers they fashioned expressive masks of papier-mâché and costumes stiff with embroidery. Scrupulous workmanship and a sure sense of design marked all the paraphernalia of princely life—from niello vases to golden jewelry accented with rough gems, from palanquins and howdahs to gaming tables and chessmen. The ladies of the palace, hidden away from the sight of all men except their lord, beguiled their uneventful leisure with graceful pastimes. They accompanied their singing with instruments of music as a lovely to look at as they were sweet to hear. They carried the domestic arts to an unheard-of virtuosity, weaving and embroidering delicate cloths, preparing bouquets of delicious food, devoting a whole day to the construction of elaborate flower-pieces whose beauty must soon fade in the cruel sunshine.

### III

The King was an absolute monarch, the Lord of Life, the incarnation of Deity itself. His subjects were his chattels, who existed only for his pleasure. All who approached him, whether ministers or slaves, crawled on hands and knees, reverently keeping their heads on a lower level than the August Feet. When he traveled the people were forbidden to look at him. Worshipped as a god and entitled to the most abject obedience, he was nevertheless much less absolute in fact than in theory. All his actions had to conform to iron-clad custom, and he was at the mercy of the educated classes. There was no fixed law to decide the succession; when a ruler died the new King was chosen by a council of princes and high officials. Their usual choice was the eldest son of the King and his Queen, but it might be some other prince—and more than once during the past centuries the death of a ruler had been the signal for a coup d'état.<sup>3</sup>

King Mongkut was fitted for his career of benevolent revolutionary and religious reformer by an education that must be unique in the annals of monarchy. When he came to the throne he

was already forty-seven years old, and he had spent more than half his life as a Buddhist monk.

He was born in 1804. Being the eldest son of the King and Queen, he was regarded as heir-apparent to the throne. At the age of twenty he became a monk, for it was the custom, then as now, for all young men who could do so to assume the Yellow Robe for a few months so as to get a more exact knowledge of their religion. But ten days later his father, the reigning King, died suddenly. The council, meeting to choose a successor, unexpectedly decided in favor of Prince Mongkut's elder half-brother, who was the late King's son by a wife of non-royal rank. Though his dynastic claims were therefore not so good as Prince Mongkut's, he was selected on the ground of his long experience in statecraft, since his late father—always more interested in art and literature than in government—had for many years relied on him to run the country. Prince Mongkut, knowing the council had acted under pressure, felt cheated. But he resigned himself to the situation; and now, though he had intended to remain a monk only a few months, he decided to stay on indefinitely—protected by the Yellow Robe from the dangers of politics. As it turned out, he did not again become a layman until twenty-seven years later, when he ascended the throne upon the elder half-brother's death.

A westerner might suppose that such a long withdrawal from the cares of ordinary life would be the worst possible preparation for a ruler. On the contrary, it gave him an acute sense of reality and a knowledge of people he could not possibly have got amid the artificialities of palace life. The Buddhist monkhood is a startlingly democratic institution. Its members are drawn from all levels of society, and distinctions of rank depend on function and seniority rather than birth or worldly position. Though the monks do not take perpetual vows, they must follow the precepts strictly as long as they stay in the order: they must refrain absolutely from intoxicants, sex, luxury, lying, stealing, taking life, handling money. They must observe no less than 227 different rules that govern all the minutiae of their daily conduct and manners. They

can have no possessions except the yellow robe, the begging-bowl, and a few personal necessities. They get their food by going forth in the morning, traveling with downcast eyes on foot along the road or by canoe in the canals, pausing only when called by a pious householder who offers to fill their alms-bowl. They must not ask for anything, nor refuse to accept any food offered, nor eat anything after midday.

Such a discipline as this leaves its stamp on a man's character. Prince Mongkut learned at first hand the meaning of humility and self-abnegation, the meaning of loyalty and friendship. In accordance with the usual practice, he made long pilgrimages on foot to different parts of the country, living on such food as the peasants and fishermen put into his begging-bowl. His travels gave him a knowledge of geography that was rare in those days of poor communications, while his friendly talks with the people gave him an insight into their minds and needs such as few rulers ever attain. In his monastic career, religious fervor and restless energy spurred him on; but common sense and a rather skeptical mind guided him. No doubt at first he believed in the spirits and the magic that pervaded Buddhism—for in those days who did not?—but it was not many years before he learned better.

The first monastery where the Prince took up his residence was Wat Smṛai. Now known as Wat Rājādhivāsa, it lies on the left bank of the river in a populous section of Bangkok; but the city was much smaller then, and the monastery lay far outside its walls, in a quiet wood. It was an establishment of "meditative" monks—a strange place, overgrown with trees and vines which these monks, with their exaggerated respect for all forms of life, would not allow to be cut. Their meditations were not the vague musings that we associate with the word: they were self-induced trances that followed a prescribed system. Like Yoga, it was a system of special postures and breathing exercises, austerities and mental acrobatics, designed to give the practitioner complete control over all the functions of his body and mind. When properly done, these practices led to unusual clarity of thought, perhaps even clairvoyance; but they were also supposed to confer supernatural powers.



Observing the real benefits of the system, Prince Mongkut perfected himself in it; but he was disappointed because it could obviously not do all it claimed. Who had invented it, he wondered; what had the Buddha himself taught about it? His companions in the monastery could not tell him: devoted only to semi-magical processes, they cared nothing for the scholarship that could answer these questions.

Since only a small part of the Buddhist scriptures had been translated into Siamese, he had to learn Pāli. So he moved to the Great Relic Monastery (Wat Mahādhātu) inside the city walls, where that language was taught. Having soon mastered it, he plunged into a painstaking study of the texts.

These were years of inward spiritual distress for him. What was the real meaning of the Doctrine? The scriptures were immensely long and contained a wide variety of teaching; perhaps he already felt there was a certain inconsistency in them. One thing at least he was sure of: the Siamese monkhood as it was in those days was a sorry representative of the devoted Community the Buddha himself had organized to carry on his teachings. The rites were observed in a mechanical and sometimes slovenly way, discipline was lax, many monks were corrupt, few of them cared for scholarship. The ardent young Prince thought of quitting the Order altogether: was it not a travesty of Buddha's law for him to remain among these men who gave it only lip service? In an agony of doubt he went with candles and flowers into the monastery hall, where a great image of Buddha, remote but gentle, gleamed in the semi-darkness. Here he made an offering to the spirits of heaven, beseeching them to send a sign to guide him. A few days after this he met a monk belonging to the Peguan sect, which seemed to be more faithful in carrying out the ancient rites. Prince Mongkut accepted the encounter as a miraculous sign, and resolved to follow their rites and practices with the greatest strictness, even in such small details as the pronunciation of Pāli words and the manner of wearing the Yellow Robe.

But presently Prince Mongkut came to realize that there were more important things in Buddhism than these formalities. In the ensuing years a number of young monks who shared his point of view gathered around him. They were zealous but open-minded students, eager to know the Doctrine and follow it. In his many discussions with them his ideas developed rapidly. If Buddhism was to be anything but a mockery, if it was to be a power for good, it must be true and honest. In 1837, when he was made Abbot of the "Excellent Abode" Monastery (Wat Pavaranivesa), these monks became the nucleus of a new sect he founded to spearhead a reform movement within the church. The very name of the new sect (Dhammayutta) was a constant reminder to its members that they must "Adhere to the Doctrine." But precisely what was this Doctrine they were to adhere to? Certainly it was not the Doctrine as usually preached in those days, for that contained much that was contrary to common sense. It should be Buddha's own Doctrine, stripped of all apocryphal matter. So the first duty of the new sect must be devotion to study in order to determine exactly what that was.

Prince Mongkut knew that the texts he had to work with were full of inaccuracies. They had been pieced together from fragments that survived in provincial towns when the old capital, with all its books, went up in flames. The most earnest efforts to correct them had not been wholly successful. He therefore sent to Ceylon to borrow another set—seventy volumes in all; then, having assembled the best Pāli scholars in Siam, he had the different versions compared, revised, and copied.<sup>2</sup>

A little before this time he had come in contact with a new and important influence—western thought. It was many years before Anna was to appear on the scene, so he had to be content with the less strenuous but more solid learning of Christian missionaries. A French Catholic bishop taught him Latin, an American Presbyterian minister taught him English.<sup>3</sup> These two men became his close friends. They introduced him to the study of modern science, especially geography and astronomy, in which he became passionately interested; they gave him some idea of comparative religion;

they lent him books. He sent abroad for more books, which he read eagerly and discussed at length with them. As he learned more about Christianity he saw a great deal of good in it, for its ethics were surprisingly close to the ethics of Buddhism; but he would not accept its Bible stories. More than once he gently said to his Christian friends: "What you teach people to do is admirable, but what you teach them to believe is foolish".

But if there were foolish stories in the Bible, were there not just as many in the Buddhist scriptures? The Buddhist writers conceived of the earth as a flat disk surrounding a central mountain on which the gods dwelt: was that not just as contrary to science and common sense as the Biblical account of the Creation? The Prince was too honest to deny it. The absurdities ought to be rejected and the real Doctrine preserved; but how? A critical study of the texts, not in the spirit of faith, but in the light of reason, should give the answer. For it was plain enough that they contain two very different veins of thought.

One of these veins of thought is rational and humanistic. The Buddha is a human being, a wise and gentle teacher. The Doctrine, lucidly exposed, is both a philosophy and a system of ethics. It maintains that no individual—whether animal, man, or god (if gods exist) — is permanent. Each is a compound, a putting together, of elements such as form, matter, and mental qualities; in each individual, without any exception, the relation of the component parts, constantly changing, is never the same for any two consecutive moments. No sooner has separateness, individuality, begun, than dissolution, disintegration, begins too. The single aim of mankind should be to abolish suffering. Belief in God is of no importance, while prayers for divine intervention are both useless and distracting. For the only way to abolish suffering is to do good and refrain from evil. Men must do good, not in order to reach heaven or to please God, but in order to be happy themselves and make others happy; they must refrain from evil deeds not because evil deeds are sinful but because they cause suffering to both victim and doer. Since this philosophy was not easy for simple minds to

grasp, the Buddha tirelessly repeated the great ethical principle: "Take joy in the joys of others, take sorrow at the sorrows of others, be indifferent to your own joys and sorrows" — this program alone would abolish suffering. By rooting out all evil from their thoughts and deeds, men can become spiritually invulnerable and need no longer dread the otherwise eternal cycle of rebirths.<sup>4</sup>

The other vein of thought in the scriptures is pietistic and transcendental. The Buddha has become a kind of super-god who performs miracles with ease, flies about from heaven to heaven, converts myriads of gods to his Doctrine, teaches his disciples charms to tame demons. The righteous worship him with an emotional extravagance in which blind faith crowds out reason. Forgetting that virtue alone can free them from sorrow and the cycle of rebirths, they have invented an easy technique to get to heaven by means of mechanical "acts of merit", such as adoring the towers that enshrine holy relics, or practising the trances.

In passages where the first type of thinking predominates, Buddha's own words seemed to be faithfully recorded. They had the ring of truth; they were the words of a supremely rational man. How could the same man have given his assent to the pompous follies of the other passages? Prince Mongkut had seen how easy it is for mistakes to creep into manuscripts, and he knew that four hundred years had elapsed between the Buddha's lifetime and the writing of the scriptures—four hundred years during which the teachings had been passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The monks entrusted with this huge task of memory had had plenty of chances to make interpolations of their own. Such interpolations threatened to undermine Buddha's true meaning. And the copyists' errors, multiplying over a period of two thousand years, had further confused it.

In a touching passage, which was surely genuine, the Buddha had authorized a certain skepticism. He had begged his disciples not to accept any belief merely because it was handed down by tradition or preached by some respected teacher—even himself; they must test every belief with their own powers of

reason. This was the criterion Prince Mongkut and his followers used, and the reconstruction of the true Doctrine followed naturally. The miracles were exaggerations, the accounts of gods and demons simply parables that had become confused with historical record, the absurd cosmography a spurious insertion.

When the errors were stripped away, the Doctrine re-emerged as a moral system of incomparable beauty. It was this Doctrine to which the reform sect must adhere. A particular way of wearing the Yellow Robe, a particular way of carrying the alms-bowl—these were the external badges of the sect; but infinitely more important was devotion to learning, freedom from superstition, zeal for restoring the great ethical and moral principles to their proper place. In this sect there was no selling of spells and love-philters, no casting of horoscopes, no propitiation of spirits. Prince Mongkut and his followers gave morality a fresh meaning, making, its most serious aspects known to the people at large in terms they could easily understand—this Buddhism was to be the heritage of the whole people, not merely the monks. The services had formerly consisted only of incomprehensible Pāli chanting; but the new sect added sermons in Siamese. They attracted crowds of listeners. Again and again they preached the five main precepts—abstention from falsehood, theft, murder, intoxication, and adultery. They urged both monks and laymen to realize the necessity of self-restraint, kindness, and tolerance in daily life.

By his judicious selections and rejections, Prince Mongkut had created a new Buddhism—or, as he more modestly thought, revived the original Doctrine. He was fond of saying that there is nothing in it that conflicts with modern science. But what of the belief in transmigration, which seems so fanciful to westerners? He did not reject it, but gave it a more philosophic interpretation. He could point to the laws of physics to show that given causes produce given effects. If these laws govern the material universe, was it not reasonable to assume that similar ones govern the moral domain, so that every deed, whether good or evil, is inevitably

followed by its appropriate consequence, either in this life or the future? Though there was no "soul" to be reborn, the "energy of action" was everlasting. Such conceptions were hard for simple people to grasp; and to them, if they had any doubts about transmigration, he gave the simple answer that Buddha himself had given: "If you are not sure, you had better be on the safe side. If you believe in it, you will lead a good life, gain the respect of all, and lose nothing even if it turns out you have guessed wrong. But if you reject it, you will very likely follow your own evil desires; and in this case if it turns out you have guessed wrong you will be like a traveler without provisions."

The new Buddhism made a sharp distinction between different kinds of supposed acts of merit. A few were utterly wrong, such as when misguided zealots killed themselves or cut off a finger as a sacrifice to Buddha: these it roundly condemned. Many were harmless, such as building miniature pagodas of sand or carrying Buddha images in procession: these it tolerated as "reminders" of the Doctrine. But above all it encouraged acts of merit that were of real social value: while only the rich could afford to build monasteries and hospitals, the poor could bridge a stream with a few bamboo poles or remove sharp thorns from a path; all could give alms, in proportion to their means, in money or in service; all could practise kindness and self-restraint.

Prince Mongkut, the mature Abbot of the Excellent Abode Monastery, resolute in his principles and gently scornful of superstition, was a very different man from Prince Mongkut, the unhappy young monk who had made an offering to the spirits of heaven and asked for a sign to guide him. He knew now that the only sure guide is man's own reason. His Christian friends had once thought they were on the point of converting him; but his skeptical nature would never have allowed him to accept any religion that relied on divine revelation rather than human reason. In his view, faith was rather a hindrance than a help to virtue—but if other people found that faith helped them to be good there was no great harm in it. So he gave the missionaries every facility for doing their work, and—far from having any jealous wish to impede their freedom of

speech—he invited them to deliver sermons in his own monastery and to distribute their tracts at Buddhist ceremonies. The Christian body of ethics, as distinguished from Christian belief, appealed both to his reason and to his innate goodness; and it seems to have had some part in the formation of the new Buddhism.

The reforms did not please all Buddhists. Some conservative monks held to the old practices from conviction, some from self-interest. Prince Mongkut had no authority to change the church as a whole. But the reform sect, partly because of its intrinsic superiority, and perhaps even more because of Prince Mongkut's personal magnetism, attracted many of the best minds. And little by little the rest of the church was forced to take note of its example and to correct its own most glaring deficiencies.

After Prince Mongkut became King in 1851, he took care not to favor the reform sect over the church in general. He wanted people to do right because they believed in doing right, not because they were commanded to do so.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV

"The King is of middle height, thin, with a somewhat austere countenance," wrote Sir John Bowring, who visited him in 1855.<sup>6</sup>

The frontispiece of Sir John's book is a portrait of the King, reproduced from a tinted photograph. The Royal sitter was about fifty years old at the time, though he looks much younger. But obviously the picture has not been touched up to flatter him, for it shows with candid realism a disfigured right ear and the mouth skewed to one side, as if from a mild stroke. The features are otherwise regular and well-formed, the complexion clear, the eyes frank. Though the face cannot be called handsome, it has a haunting beauty of expression that reveals the man's outstanding qualities: energy directed by common sense, irony tempered with gentleness.

Anna, who first saw him seven years later, describes him as a "withered grasshopper". To her there was something repulsive in both his face and his character—though he had many noble traits, his cynicism was detestable; though his intentions were good, he was always at the mercy of his own angry passions.

Her estimate is too harsh; but I have no wish to replace it with one too favorable. The Siamese official historians—who are as prone as official historians the world over to uncritical eulogy—make him into a model of virtue that seems rather lifeless. He was too large-scale a man to be fitted into the conventional pattern of the Divine King. In Anna's account he at least emerges as a great monarch whose faults, like his virtues, are heroic in proportion. To the Americans who knew him, his skepticism in regard to the superstitions that pervaded the old Buddhism was admirable so far as it went, but it did not go far enough, for he himself remained incurably superstitious—whereas his skepticism toward Christianity went entirely too far. They saw his character as irregular and inconsistent—shrewd but arbitrary; magnanimous but suspicious and easily offended; alternately generous and niggardly, kind and vindictive; a great humanitarian at one turn and petty beyond belief at another. Even his own correspondence reveals him as something of a paradox.<sup>7</sup>

Yet how could he have been otherwise than "suspicious" when so many people were trying to take advantage of him, and when the agents of European imperialism were plotting to reduce his kingdom to a colony? If he had not sometimes been "niggardly", even the vast treasury available to him would have been soon exhausted by the demands on his generosity. If he had not sometimes been "vindictive", many dangerous wrongdoers would have gone free. If he had not sometimes been "petty", he would not have been human,

There is no doubt that he was quick-tempered. Yet more than one incident in his life shows that he did not bear a grudge for long, and he seemed to take real pleasure in forgiving people who had tried to injure him. Perhaps it was because he was



aware of his own impulsiveness that he had preached so earnestly in favor of "forbearance from anger". He knew the practical value of Buddha's advice to his friends: "If others speak against me, there is no reason why you should be angry with them. If you yield to anger, you will not only sustain a spiritual loss, but you will also be unable to judge whether their assertions are true or not true".

Although he was now King, he never forgot that he was still a human being living in a human world. He did not regard his subjects as chattels. He had known them as real people, lived on friendly terms with their brothers and their sons in the monasteries, received their alms and hospitality when making his long pilgrimages. He had known the villagers and country folk as well as the townspeople. He had seen how some officials are just and kindly, others corrupt and grasping. He had talked much with humble men - coolies and slaves, peasants and elephant hunters, fishermen and pearl-divers. He had seen fierce bandits and wandering sea-gypsies. He had ventured into distant mountains and glimpsed the primitive tribes who lived like shy animals in the forest. He knew of the remote matriarchal communities that still survived, ruled by grim-faced women with harems of pretty men. He had seen the pygmies of the south, and heard with horror how the Malay rajahs hunted them for sport. These were all his people; his world was not confined by the walls of palace and monastery, his responsibility not limited to guarding the welfare of grandees and monks.

This sense of duty to his whole people stands out as the guiding principle of every important act in his career, every edict he issued, every reform he introduced.

Twice every year, for five centuries, the Siamese Kings had received a solemn pledge of loyalty from the princes and government officials, who gathered to "drink the water of allegiance" and call down terrible disasters on their own heads if ever they should betray their oath. In former days the monarch himself took no part in it. But King Mongkut introduced a characteristic amend-

ment: when they made their pledge to him, he pledged his own loyalty to the whole people.<sup>8</sup>

Diplomacy and rational contact with Europeans had long been impeded by a custom that required foreigners, as well as Siamese, to crawl on all fours when approaching the August Feet. His predecessor had relaxed the rule slightly, but had received foreigners with distant formality. King Mongkut decreed that they should be allowed to stand up in his presence or assume any other posture that the manners of their country deemed respectful. For his own subjects he permitted the old custom to continue—it was deeply ingrained in them, and though Americans thought it shockingly servile the Siamese felt it much less odd than our own custom of standing up in the presence of a superior.

Four years after he came to the throne, the British mission headed by Sir John Bowring arrived in Bangkok. Previous Kings, wedded to a policy of isolation, had taken little interest in such missions; but King Mongkut welcomed this one cordially, and in record time a workable treaty of diplomatic and commercial relations was signed.<sup>9</sup>

The consequences of the treaty were far-reaching. Foreign trade had been for the most part a monopoly of the Crown and a few powerful officials. Now a host of restrictions and taxes were to be swept away. To make up for the loss of revenue the whole system of taxation had to be revised. Commerce with the British grew by leaps and bounds; similar treaties were signed with other nations; increased business brought increased prosperity.

Europeans and Americans were now no longer such a rarity in Siam as before. They introduced new products, efficient techniques, stimulating ideas. The King and a few of his friends knew these changes were necessary and beneficial; but the rest of his countrymen looked at them with indifference or hostility. The nobles whose monopolies had been destroyed were unhappy; conservative people wondered whether the innovations would not destroy everything that was good in the old traditions. The Siamese are not naturally xenophobes—they have too much curiosity for

that—but a century of isolationism had made them wary. During that period the influence of China had been strong, and they had seen few Europeans other than unprincipled adventurers and greedy empire-builders. (People like the missionaries were an exception.) To the polite and graceful Siamese the bearded foreigners—overbearing, rough-voiced, clumsy—were grotesque: comical and rather repugnant. So the new ideas constantly bumped against a wall of stubborn inertia. It was all very well, the King thought, for him to be acknowledged an Absolute Monarch; but how could he hope to break down the huge passive resistance against innovation? Yet in spite of many discouragements, his resolution did not waver, nor his benevolent ingenuity fail.

His edicts give a fascinating picture of the course of his reforms. Each law starts out rather pompously, with the King's full titles and the formula: "By Royal Command, reverberating like the Roar of a Lion". Then comes an almost conversational preamble, outlining the circumstances and reasons that made him issue the edict, often adding gently ironical comments. Finally comes the decree itself.

One of these laws shows his determination not to shut himself off from his people: "It has been brought to His Majesty's attention that wherever he chooses to proceed by land or water, the authorities always chase his subjects out of the way, ordering them to close all the doors and windows in their houses and shops. Such a practise is graciously considered by His Majesty to be more harmful than good. In the first place, those among the people who are acquainted with His Majesty are deprived of the opportunity to see him. In the second place, houses and shops with closed doors and windows provide the best hiding place for those who wish to hide, among whom none can distinguish between sane men and lunatics. It is hereby provided that henceforth people gathered along the route of the Royal Procession shall not be chased away, but all householders shall be permitted to appear before the sight of His Majesty, so that he may speak to those he knows and gladden their hearts."

In the same spirit, he used to come out of the Palace at stated intervals to receive the petitions of the people. He knew that the creaking legal and administrative machinery of the country left plenty of room for abuses: even in the metropolis petty officials were often corrupt, and in outlying regions the vassal princes were all but absolute. He could not reform the administration with one clean sweep; but he gradually broke down the special privileges of the nobles before the law, preparing a long-term modernization plan which was to take effect step by step. Meanwhile he could encourage his subjects, in deserving cases, to by-pass the antiquated procedures by appealing directly to him.

He insisted on the principle of toleration in political matters. Judges had formerly been appointed by the King in his own discretion, but now certain ones of them were to be elected—not, indeed, by the people at large (that would have been an idle gesture in those days when there was no such thing as popular education), but by all the princes and government officials. Here are the terms of his edict establishing the rules of voting: "No one is obliged to confine his choice to the servants of the Crown. On the contrary any person, even though he be a slave, who is believed to possess sufficient wisdom and restraint to be able to give clear and satisfactory judgment in accordance with truth, justice, and the law may be elected a judge .... The electors are further requested not to treat this election as a joke. Nor should they hesitate, thinking that perhaps their choice would not meet with His Majesty's approval. Such a habit of thought should be entirely discarded. For human hearts vary one from the other, and well may the choices in the election differ because it is His Majesty's wish that they be freely made."

There are several edicts dealing with the condition of the slaves. Slavery in Siam was not the terrible institution that it was in some other lands—the slaves, who were immensely numerous and not very hard-worked, usually received the same sort of good-natured treatment as poor relations. But they were at the mercy of their masters, and a bad master could make their lives

miserable. King Mongkut gave the slaves certain definite rights, and took the first steps that were to lead to complete emancipation in the next reign.

He was equally insistent on toleration in religious matters. "No just ruler," says one of his edicts, "restricts the freedom of his people in the choice of their religious belief by which each man hopes to find strength and salvation in his last hour, as well as in the future beyond." Since "there are many precepts common to all religions", it behooves everyone to allow others to practise virtue in their own way. The idea of religious persecution has always been utterly foreign to Buddhism, so this edict was in harmony with its ancient tradition.

There was hardly a phase of Siamese life that did not interest King Mongkut, hardly an activity that did not receive his benevolent or critical attention. The "Roar of the Lion" did not hesitate to assert itself on the most prosaic matters, such as "Advice on the Manipulation of Window-Wedges", "Advice on the Proper Construction of Ovens", "Advice on the Inelegant Practice of Throwing Dead Animals into the Waterways". There was even an advice recommending that the popular name for a certain condiment used in place of salt should be discarded in favor of a "philologically correct" term. But when the Lord of Life found that this law had no effect on the people's language he issued another one repealing it.<sup>10</sup>

He is remembered with particular gratitude by historians and archeologists. He had once regretfully said that "the ancient history of Siam is rather obscure and fabulous"—for the great bulk of historical records had been burned up with the old capital, and the Annals, having been put together from scattered fragments and carelessly copied manuscripts, showed little regard for exact dates or common sense.<sup>11</sup> The old legends, he thought, must be squeezed for what truth was in them, and the rest rejected; history must be restored as the Doctrine had been. He scoured the country for old manuscripts, assembled a first-class library, started the first museum. Sir John Bowring saw the beginnings of it:

"ornaments of every character—many *lusus naturae*, such as extraordinarily-formed horns of the rhinoceros and tusks of the elephant—many statues from Europe, porcelain vases from China—ancient garments worn by former kings—specimens of elaborately-carved ivory and wood—gold and silver ornaments, with jewellery in endless variety—many statues of Buddha, one of which is said to be of massive gold..."<sup>12</sup>

In the course of his pilgrimages as a young monk he had gazed in wonder at the huge mysterious monuments that lay broken in far off jungles; he had rescued ancient stone inscriptions, including the famous stela of the great Rama Kamhaeng who ruled at Sukhodaya in the 13th century.<sup>13</sup> Now he invited French archeologists to come and study these antiquities, in the hope of laying open the secrets of the past by using modern techniques. It was a good beginning, which was to yield impressive results in later reigns.

At the same time he was doing these things to preserve the culture of the past, the King was giving new vigor to the culture of the present. He had a sure taste in literature and art: in boyhood he had sat at his father's feet listening to the Kingly poet reciting his works, or followed him while he inspected the progress of some new painting that was to brighten the walls of monastery or palace. King Mongkut could write classical poetry bristling with the traditional Sanskrit, and Pāli chants that are models of literary style. But these, he knew, were of little use for the general public: for them he wrote in clear and homely Siamese. Painting and sculpture should not exist solely for the pleasure of the elegant few; they must also be mobilized for the great work of enlightening the masses. The people's social life had always centered in their local monastery compounds, where there were plenty of ceremonies and fairs at which laymen could combine pleasure with merit-making. Previous Kings had encouraged the use of monasteries for education; books were few, but wall paintings could teach secular matters as well as religious. King Mongkut's half-brother, when restoring the great "Bo-Tree" Monastery (Jetavana), had commanded the artists to turn it

into an encyclopedia in stone and pictures that would expound all the traditional knowledge: astrology and geography, the races of men and demons, military science, anatomy, medicinal herbs and the Yoga technique of massage.<sup>14</sup> But with the arrival of new ideas of science from the west, all this became an obsolete curiosity—to be carefully preserved for historical reasons, but no longer to be relied on for serious instruction. The Excellent Abode Monastery was more up-to-date. Upon its walls artists painted steamboats and railways and scenes from contemporary life—even a picture of the English Derby that is a lively copy of an Alken print.

The King was a great builder. He liked adapting European architecture to Siamese needs. His preference was for cool stuccoed buildings of one storey, ridge-roofed and colonnaded, whose aspect recalls in simpler form the glories of the late Greek Revival in South Carolina and Louisiana—but with judicious touches of the Chinese decoration that had been popular in the previous reign. The combination was harmonious and suitable—and not so bizarre as it sounds, for the formula is basically the same as Chippendale's.

The summer palace the King built at Petburi is a dream of beauty: here on the summit of a big hill that rises steeply out of a boundless sea of rice-fields, the white oblong buildings ramble in free improvisation; while around and among them, now grown into a wilderness, are hundreds of frangipani trees, whose name in Siamese—rhyming with the word for “anguish of heart”—recalls the wistful fragrance of their flowers.

What of his private life? What of the big harem which has aroused feelings ranging from envy to hilarity in American audiences?

Anna describes it with all the timeworn stage-properties that Victorian writers kept on hand in case they wanted to depict the organized lechery of Oriental despots—the eunuchs, the hideous sufferings of the women, brutality of the sensual monarch. Her account is really too absurd to stand unchallenged; and recently

a Siamese statesman, who is also an historian, has gone to some pains to set the record straight.<sup>15</sup>

It is quite true that King Mongkut had scores of wives, who presented him with an innumerable offspring. But large-scale polygamy was not a mere device of Royal lewdness. Like the god Indra, whose heavenly court is adorned with thousands of lovely nymphs, tradition insisted that the King, who is Indra on earth, should be served by a large harem. Royal polygamy was also a recognized instrument of statecraft: the King could cement the loyalty of vassal princes and powerful nobles by marrying their daughters. Finally, it was always desirable for a King to provide a numerous succession. King Mongkut had been married and had two children before he became a monk; but during his twenty-seven years in the Order he had faithfully observed the rule of celibacy. When he ascended the throne it was his duty to make up for lost time and have as many children as possible.

His correspondence shows that he was a devoted and even tender husband to more than one of his wives, and an affectionate father to his many children. He had a smaller harem than his predecessors, and except for a few of the ladies to whom he was really attached, he set little store by it. He was already well past the first flush of youth; when Anna first met him he was fifty-eight years old. His loyal subjects, wishing to have him for a son-in-law, were more eager to present their daughters to him than he was to accept them. A Royal Edict, reverberating like the Roar of a Lion, puts the predicament frankly: the King has far more wives than he needs. It goes on to set up specific rules by which they can resign and marry private persons.<sup>16</sup>

Although she must have known these facts, Anna asserts that one of King Mongkut's wives, having run off with a monk, was publicly tortured and burned at the stake with the partner of her guilt. The Siamese have always had a horror of death by fire—whether for themselves or anyone else; and even in medieval times they seldom if ever inflicted this punishment. King Mongkut, more humane than his predecessors—and more humane than many



contemporary governments in the west, for that matter—did everything within reason to reduce the severity of punishments.<sup>17</sup> So far from being a sadist, he hated even to sign a death-warrant for a common murderer, and whenever he had to do so he would sit up all night in an agony of mind, repeating to himself passages from the Buddhist scriptures. The alleged burning of the lady and her lover, though described as a public affair seen by the whole of Bangkok, escaped the notice of all other writers, Siamese or European. Anna herself seems to have had some qualms: "To do the King justice," she writes, "I must add here that, having been educated a priest, he had been taught to regard the crime of which they were accused as the most deadly sin that could be committed." She quotes him as saying: "Our laws are severe for such a crime".

But were they? The law provided only that an unchaste monk was to be expelled from the Order, given a beating, and made to cut grass for the Royal elephants. In an Order that numbered scores of thousands, unchaste monks were not so rare that the elephants ever lacked grass; if the punishment had been as Anna says, the gruesome blazes would have been a common sight. Or are we to believe the crime was aggravated by the fact that one of the ladies of the harem was involved? Hardly; for in such a case even the ancient law, which was no longer enforced, provided death by drowning for the lady and by impalement for the man—a cruel enough punishment, but *not* death by fire. King Mongkut allowed his wives to resign at will; and it is a matter of record that when a boatman abducted one of them he was let off with a fine amounting to about six dollars.<sup>18</sup>

The fact is that Anna must have made up the whole story after finishing her first book, for it appears only in her second. She may have gotten the idea from a silly piece of doggerel quoted in a book by an Englishman who had spent several months in Siam many years before King Mongkut came to the throne. It purports to be a translation of an old song—"a lament supposed to be uttered by a guilty priest, previous to his suffering along with the partner of his guilt the dreadful punishment attached to his transgression." The last stanza is worth repeating:

“ Behold the faggots blaze up high,  
The smoke is black and dense;

The sinews burst, and crack, and fly:  
Oh suffering intense!

The roar of fire and shriek of pain,  
And the blood that boils and splashes.

These all consume—the search were vain  
For the lovers’ mingled ashes.” 19

Some of her fabrication are easier to spot—as when she tells us that King Mongkut locked up disobedient wives in a subterranean dungeon in the Palace. Anyone who has lived in Bangkok knows it is impossible to build any sort of underground room in that watery soil. 20

Another episode can be brought to justice by literary detective work. Referring to a new gate built in the palace wall in 1865, Anna says that King Mongkut had some innocent passersby butchered and their corpses buried under the gate-posts so that their restless spirits might forever haunt the place and drive intruders away. Now it is a fact that this brutal form of insurance had been practised in much earlier days. But it was the sort of thing that King Mongkut, who was both humane and rational, was utterly opposed to; no other writer accuses him of resorting to it. There is, however, a detailed account of just such a sacrifice in a French missionary’s report for 1831—long before King Mongkut came to the throne. Anna gives the same details, uses the same phraseology, and carelessly leaves a proof of her transposed plagiarism: she translates the French word *cordes* as “cords” rather than “ropes”. Obviously she had moved the incident thirty-four years forward and accused the wrong man. 21

This is the kind of thing that makes her books so exasperating to the sober historian. Though there is much good in them, it is useless, for not a single statement can be accepted without confirmation from elsewhere. Analysis sheds a rather cruel light on her methods.

## V

Whenever there was a solar eclipse, old-fashioned Siamese thought a demon was seizing the sun in his teeth and trying to swallow it. Then they would set up an ear-splitting din, with rattles and drums and firecrackers, in order to scare the demon into letting go.

King Mongkut's interest in eclipses was more scientific. Even the cares of state had not weakened his passion for astronomy. His private apartments in the Grand Palace, Sir John Bowring tells us, "were filled with various instruments, philosophical and mathematical; a great variety of Parisian clocks and pendules, thermometers, barometers, telescopes, microscopes, statues, among which I remarked those of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, nearly of the size of life.... in a word, all the instruments and appliances which might be found in the study or library of an opulent philosopher in Europe".<sup>22</sup>

He calculated the exact moment when the total eclipse of 1868 would take place. Having determined that it could be seen best from a remote village in the southern part of his kingdom, near the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, he decided to give an intellectual houseparty there to observe it. He invited Sir Harry Ord, the British Governor of Singapore, to sail up with a suite of officers and their ladies, and meet him at the appointed place. The French Government would send a body of scientists from Paris. He himself would bring several of his wives and children, a number of government officials, and some Siamese gentlemen who were interested in astronomy. The party also included the acting British Consul in Bangkok, Mr. Alabaster, who stood high in the friendship of the Royal Family; this scholarly man was working on a book which he later published under the title *The Wheel of the Law*, and which remains today the finest study of Siamese Buddhism in any European language.<sup>23</sup>

The Royal party, sailing down the river and into the Gulf, landed on the coast near the observation point. Workmen had been busy for months clearing a space in the forest beside the

beach, building a great temporary palace and guest-house, sitting up a special observatory. To the astonishment of most of the European guests—who were not yet acquainted with Siamese hospitality and had been looking forward with mixed emotions to the discomforts of a far-off jungle—the food was prepared by a French chef, the carefully-chosen wines were served by an Italian maître d'hôtel, and the champagne was cooled with an abundance of ice, which was then the rarest of luxuries. In the evening, while companies of graceful dancers performed episodes from the Indian epics, the King conversed informally with his guests. They had scarcely expected to see his ladies (don't Oriental monarchs always keep their wives locked up in a stuffy harem?)—yet there they were, neither timid nor aloof, but graceful and perfectly at ease. And nothing could have been more delightful than the Royal children, with their pretty manners and their English chit-chat.

At dawn on the great day the weather was bad. Dense clouds came up from the southwest, and a dreary rain was falling. When the eclipse began, the clouds quite obscured the sun; but a few moments later they broke away. The observations made by the various scientific groups—Siamese, English and French—were a complete success.

Meanwhile the people of the nearby village had been busily beating drums and setting off firecrackers. The King remarked with a smile to his guests that they must not think these people were trying to frighten the demon: they were merely celebrating their sovereign's skill in having been able to calculate the moment of the eclipse more accurately than the European astronomers. 24

The party was over. The Court set sail and returned to the capital. But the King had caught a fever during the trip; his health, instead of mending when he reached home, grew rapidly worse.

In death, as in life, the Buddha's example was his model. Rational men do not think of Buddha as a god: King Mongkut had

long preached against this vulgar error. Far from being disrespectful, he thought Buddha much more entitled to honor as a man than if he *were* a god—for by his human goodness and wisdom he taught men how to escape from sorrow, and so did more for them than the gods had ever done with all their supposed omnipotence. If God existed it was useless for men to try to imitate Him; the "Superagency of the Universe" was by definition inimitable. But men could and should imitate the Buddha—the most courteous of gentlemen, the wisest of philosophers, the bravest of heroes.

It was a wish to follow that example that made King Mongkut hope to die on the anniversary of his own birth, which had occurred on the full moon day of the 11th month according to the old calendar (17 October, 1804). He was taken ill in August 1868, and it seemed impossible that he could live till the appointed day. Nevertheless by an effort of will, such as he had learned in the Buddhist discipline that submits even natural functions to a large measure of mental control, he managed to do so. To show that he was perfectly conscious to the last he conversed in English and read some Pāli stanzas on death he had written some time before. He gave his ministers some final advice as to the choice of a successor who would bring opposing factions together and carry on the benevolent revolution he had started.<sup>25</sup> He dictated a farewell message in Pāli to the Order of Monks, especially to his former companions at the Excellent Abode Monastery. He begged his closest friends "not to give way to grief nor to any sudden surprise, since death must befall all creatures that come into the world, and may not be avoided".

The King knew by heart the touching words of the Pāli scriptures that tell of Buddha's last hours on earth—how he bade farewell to his disciples, how he passed through all the stages of meditative trance one after another, and how he was finally released into that state in which all evil, and consequently all cause of rebirth, has been extinguished like the flame of a lamp. Pious men ever since have wished to die in the same way—some in the foolish belief that the trances are a short cut to rebirth in

heaven, some in the wiser knowledge that they clarify the mind, some in the mere certainty that they ease the physical pain of death. Now King Mongkut passed into these trances.

What visions did the dying King see? Did the trances bring on that clairvoyance that some people claimed for them? If the future was unveiled to him, he must have seen much to give him satisfaction. He would have seen the throne pass, as he had hoped, to his son Prince Chulalongkorn, who was then a boy of sixteen. The dying King would have seen this Prince reign long and gloriously, bringing the benevolent revolution to success; he would have seen his other sons carrying on his work, one or another specializing in each of the several fields that had engaged his own versatile attention—religion, diplomacy, government, science, archeology. He would have seen among his grandsons progressive leaders to press forward in the course he had laid out. He would have seen his great-grandchildren (of whom the present King of Siam is one) preserving the tradition and receiving their people's love with a reciprocal devotion. The dying King might have seen some funny things as well—things that would have appealed to his sense of irony. For while in his own land he would be remembered with justice and love, in America he would be known as a petulant barbarian or a melodious clown.

But probably his trances brought no such clairvoyance. He set little store by their powers in this respect, and scorned the idea that trances were an easy step to rebirth in paradise. He was much too subtle a philosopher to think of rebirth as involving the survival of a personal soul: the psychic personality, like the material body, was in constant disintegration from moment to moment; the only thing that could possibly be "reborn" was the energy stirred up by every action, good or evil, and continuing forever. When unsophisticated men were in doubt about rebirth, he had reminded them of Buddha's advice to be on the safe side; but he knew this advice was an oversimplification, adapted to the limitations of his listeners.

Yet he himself *had* been on the safe side—not for any such simple reason, but for a far deeper one. For he knew that through the working of a natural law as immutable as the laws of physics, his deeds would be followed by their consequences—consequences that might not be felt by any surviving consciousness of his own, but that would dominate the destinies of future generations in the land he loved. He *had* led a good life, and gained the respect of all (except Anna). Now, even if it were to turn out that he had not guessed exactly right, he would have lost nothing. He would not be like a traveler without provisions.

## NOTES

1. Among the sources I have drawn on for this section are the following: Kaempfer, *History of Japan* (London, 1906); La Loubère, *Du royaume de Siam* (Paris, 1691); Wood, *History of Siam* (Bangkok, 1933); Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Introduction of Western Culture in Siam* (JSS XX); Alabaster, *The Wheel of the Law* (London, 1871); Wells, *Thai Buddhism* (Bangkok, 1939); Pallegoix, *Description du royaume thai ou Siam* (Paris, 1854).

2. In this section I am chiefly indebted to M. Lingat's excellent article, *La vie religieuse du roi Mongkut* (JSS XX), which, as he states in a note, is based in large part on three works in Siamese: *History of Wat Smòrai*, by King Chulalongkorn; *History of Wat Mahādhātu*, by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, and *History of Wat Pavaraniveśa*, begun by the Prince Patriarch Vajirañāna and finished by Prince Damrong. The second and third of these sources were more fully used by M. Lingat in his *History of Wat Mahādhātu* (JSS XXIV) and his *History of Wat Pavaraniveśa* (JSS XXVI,) both of which have furnished me with helpful material. King Chulalongkorn, the Prince Patriarch, and Prince Damrong were all three sons of King Mongkut. M. Lingat, long advisor to the Ministry of Justice, is one of the foremost European scholars of the Siamese language and a leading authority on Buddhism.

3. "The King was taught Latin by the French Catholic missionaries, principally by Bishop Pallegoix. English he began to study in 1845, principally availing himself of the United States missionaries. Mr. Caswell devoted a year and a half to instructing him four times a week, one hour each lesson. He occupied himself with astronomical investigations, and is able to calculate an eclipse." Sir John Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam* (London, 1857) I, 440.

4. In discussing the Doctrine as it was originally conceived by the Buddha I have followed Rhys Davids. Though the accuracy of his view has been contested by more recent European scholars, it remains pertinent because it coincides with the views of King Mongkut and of the highest Buddhist authorities in Siam today.

5. Besides the articles I have cited in Note 2, three works are indispensable to the student of Buddhism in Siam: Pallegoix, *Description du royaume thai ou Siam* (Paris, 1854); Wells, *Thai Buddhism* (Bangkok, 1939); and Alabaster, *The Wheel of the Law* (London, 1871). Pallegoix was the French Catholic Bishop of Bangkok, who taught King Mongkut Latin; Dr. Wells is an American missionary who spent many years in Siam; Alabaster was interpreter at the British Consulate and later Acting British Consul in Bangkok. Alabaster's book is particularly valuable for its description of Buddhist beliefs both before and after Prince Mongkut's reforms; a large section of it is translated from a Siamese book, *The Modern Buddhist*, by Jao-p'yā Dibākara; that author, who was a personal friend of Alabaster, reflected King Mongkut's views faithfully. Princess Poon's *Buddhism for the Young* (Bangkok, 1929) is a booklet of more importance than might be supposed from its modest appearance; the Princess, who is a daughter of Prince Damrong and a granddaughter of King Mongkut, furnishes English readers with a clear and concise summary of the beliefs of educated Buddhists in Siam today. Some interesting information on European influences in King Mongkut's thinking will be found in Prince Damrong, *Introduction of Western Culture in Siam* (JSS XX). A good summary of King Mongkut's career is given by Frankfurter in JSS I.



6. Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam* (London, 1857), I, 441.

7. For this summary I am indebted to Mr. Kenneth P. Landon, who has studied the correspondence and read through a great quantity of missionary records.

8. See Frankfurter, *King Mongkut* (JSS I.).

9. Bowring, *op. cit.*

10. For King Mongkut's edicts, see M.R. Seni Pramoj, *King Mongkut as a Legislator* (JSS XXXVIII); I have also consulted an unpublished manuscript by M.R. Seni Pramoj and M.R. Kükrit Pramoj, *The King of Siam Speaks*.

11. Bowring, II, 279.

12. Bowring, I, 412, II, 313.

13. Coedès, *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam* (Bangkok, 1924).

14. Prince Dhani Nivat Kromamün Bidyalabh, *Inscriptions of Wat Jetubon* (JSS XXVI).

15. See note 10.

16. See note 10.

17. Prince Dhani Nivat Kromamün Bidyalabh, review of *Anna and the King of Siam*, Bangkok Standard, September 1946.

18. See note 10.

19. Neale, *Narrative of a Residence at the Capital of the Kingdom of Siam* (London, 1852). The author, a flippant but well-meaning young man, writes of Siam as he saw it in 1840-41; his account, though superficial, avoids Anna's aberrations. He does not give either the date or the source of the "old song," and nowhere suggests that anyone in Bangkok had ever been burned at the stake. Though it is hard to imagine anyone seriously consulting Neale as a source, Anna knew his book and plagiarized from it freely; her list of "Common Maxims of the Priests" follows the wording of Neale's "Maxims of the Talapoins or Priests" too closely to suppose she took it directly from La Loubère, who was Neale's source.