

# THE SOVEREIGNTY OF DHAMMA AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT : BUDDHIST SOCIAL ETHICS IN RURAL THAILAND

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The political tradition of Buddhist social ethics invalidates Max Weber's claim that Buddhism is an asocial, other-worldly religion. I argue in this paper that while Buddhist social ethics do have a worldly orientation they are, nevertheless, inconsistent with capitalist values. This is because religion subordinates and incorporates economics and politics. I also present a case-study of a peasant leader in Northern Thailand to show that this tradition is by no means confined to national political figures and intellectuals, as the literature suggests<sup>1</sup>.

## Buddhist Social Ethics

The early Buddhist philosophy of kingship, according to Gokhale (1966 : 15-21), viewed the state not as an end in itself but as a means to a higher goal. The *Dhamma* (Buddhist moral law) was declared supreme—it was the ruler of rulers. The king's function was to bring about a moral transformation in the nature of his subjects. This he was to achieve through his own exemplary conduct and by the establishment of law and order, justice, and prosperity so as to create equal opportunities for spiritual development.

E. Sarkisyanz has aptly named this political tradition "Buddhist social ethics", so as to underscore his rejection of Max Weber's thesis (1965 : 36). Weber, in the *Religion of India*, claimed that Buddhism failed to stimulate an inner-worldly ethic of action. Buddhist mysticism was asocial in character (1958 : 213). "The mystic, acosmic love of Buddhism is psychologically conditioned through the euphoria of apathetic ecstasy" (Ibid : 208). Elsewhere he states : "Also the specific form of Buddhistic 'altruism', universal compassion, is merely one of the stages which sensitivity passes when seeing through the nonsense of the struggle for existence of all the individuals in the wheel of life . . . not, however, an expression of active brotherliness" (Ibid : 213).

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Buddhist social ethics (which have persisted in various forms to the present day) have been embodied, through the medium of the Pali canon and its commentaries and Buddhist legends, in various kinds of ideal rulers with whom historical Buddhist kings have closely identified.

One mythical ruler is related to the early Buddhist theory of the emergence of the state. In the Digha-nikaya section of the Pali (or Theravada) canon history is conceived in cyclical terms. At the beginning of the World Cycle was the Golden Age, the age of the bountiful wishing-tree from which objects were obtained freely. All men were then virtuous. But later morality degenerated. Greed, deceit, theft, and violence became rife and a state of anarchy ensued. Humans decided to elect one among them to be king and to entrust to him the task of establishing law and order, justice and harmony. The first king was thus called the Great Elect (*Mahasammata*). In return for his protection and guidance his subjects agreed to surrender to him one sixth of the rice crop. Sarkisyanz claims that this myth represents an early theory of government by social contract (Ibid.: 15). Reynolds, however, adds a note of caution. The *Mahasammata* was acclaimed by the people because of his personal charisma. It was this charismatic aspect that was emphasised in the commentaries and other later literature. For example, by the fifth century A.D. the *Mahasammata* was identified as a *Bodhisattva* (Future Buddha) and later as the particular *Bodhisattva* who eventually attained enlightenment as Gautama Buddha (1972: 19).

The *Cakkavatti* (Universal King) is another mythical ruler who is idealized throughout the canon and commentaries (Ibid.: 20). His birth is attended by miracles and later his charisma summons up the wheel which normally dwells in the ocean. The wheel is identified with both the solar disc and the Dhamma. The *Cakkavatti* proceeds to conquer the four continents and establish his universal authority. Yet his rule is carried out by the power of the Dhamma, not by military force. He honours and worships the Dhamma and is ruled by it. He is *Dhammiko Dhammaraja*, a righteous ruler who brings prosperity and happiness to his subjects (Gokhale 1966: 20). When he dies his subjects erect a stupa over his remains. The wheel returns to the ocean where it stays till the advent of a new *Cakkavatti*.

The *Cakkavatti* is closely linked to the Buddha. Immediately after his birth Gautama Buddha is examined by court sages and is found to possess the thirty-two bodily signs and eighty secondary marks that distinguish a Great Man (*Mahapurisa*)—that is, a man destined by fate to be either a Universal King (in the temporal domain) or a Buddha (in the spiritual domain). Also, Buddha's first sermon following his enlightenment sets rolling the wheel of dhamma which is a privilege normally reserved for a *Cakkavatti* (Reynolds 1972: 13). Finally, one canonical text (the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*) states clearly that the same royal funerary rites are performed for the Buddha as for a *Cakkavatti* (Bareau 1969: 15).



The charisma of a Cakkavatti has also a marked soteriological aspect by association with the ideal of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is a Buddhist saint who, out of lovingkindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*), renounces Nirvana in order to liberate mankind from suffering. A Cakkavatti named Samka is, according to prophecy, destined to prepare the way for the coming of the fifth and final Buddha, the Bodhisattva Mettaya (or Ariya Mettaya). The unified world-state established by the Cakkavatti will be a re-creation of the material utopia of the primeval Golden Age. In this utopia men shall hear the words of the Bodhisattva Mettaya. The Cakkavatti will then renounce his status and wealth and his army and the masses will achieve salvation by becoming monks.

The Bodhisattva ideal is also a persistent theme in the stories of the Jataka commentary. They illustrate the exemplary virtues of the Bodhisattva Gautama in his previous existences as an animal, god or human being. One of the most popular Jatakas in Theravada Buddhist countries is that which describes Gautama's penultimate existence as King Vessantara. In this story Vessantara is banished by his subjects for having given away a magical elephant. He then retreats to a hermitage in the forest prepared for him by Indra, king of the gods. Later he gives away his wife and children to Brahmins. Eventually, he renounces his life as an ascetic (*rishi*) and returns to his kingdom where, out of lovingkindness, he sets free all creatures and, out of generosity, brings wealth and prosperity of his subjects.

Finally, another profound influence on the tradition of Buddhist social ethics has been the historically-based model of Ashoka, the celebrated Indian emperor who reigned in the third century B.C. The Mauryan empire was created by Ashoka's grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya, to rid north-west India of the Greek army of occupation led by Alexander the Great. Chandragupta was advised by a brahman minister called Chanakya who is identified with Kautilya, the author of the treatise on statecraft, the *Arthashastra*. This political pragmatist was the architect of the Mauryan empire. Ashoka, as heir to this Machiavellian-style tradition, launched a violent campaign against Kalinga to extend the boundaries of his empire south-eastwards to the Bay of Bengal. It appears that the bloodshed that ensued inspired a religious conversion in Ashoka and his commitment to early Buddhist political ideals. Ashoka's edicts testify to his personal religious piety—his pilgrimages, his support for religious establishments, and his missionary zeal. They also proclaim his concern for the morality of the citizenry; for example, his appointment of Dhamma Officers (*Dhamma-mahamattas*) to oversee the Sangha, care for prisoners, administer charities for the poor, and so on (Reynolds 1972 : 28; Sarkisyanz 1965 : 28). The edicts also



exhort citizens to behave morally and great emphasis is placed on generosity and non-violence to all living beings (Ling 1973: 195, 197). One edict describes Ashoka's welfare measures such as the planting of banyan trees for shade, the cultivation of orchards, the digging of wells, and the building of rest-houses "with the intent that man may practice the practices of the Dhamma". "This can only mean", says Sarkisyanz, "that these welfare benefits were meant by Ashoka to make it easier for his subjects to observe the Moral Law—if not to provide them with leisure opportunities for meditation towards the pursuit of Nirvana" (1965: 28).

Max Weber's view of Ashoka's piety is more cynical. He saw Ashoka as a patrimonial ruler who was astutely aware of the political usefulness of Buddhism as an instrument for social levelling (e.g. the destruction of the privileges of the warrior *kshatriya* caste) and as a means to pacify the masses after expanding his empire by force (1957: 235, 240). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the more idealized view of Ashoka, perpetuated by epigraphy and legends, has been over the centuries a powerful model in the Theravada Buddhist world. The special paradigmatic attraction of Ashoka is to be found in his total image, that is, in his cruelty and his piety. "Indeed," says Reynolds, "this is central to his appeal as an ideal monarch; it is what makes identification with him by ruler after ruler believable. It is not simply the majesty of his imperial power which appeals; it is the attraction of power tamed by righteousness" (1972: 39).

### Buddhist Socialism

A modern interpretation of Buddhist social ethics is "Buddhist socialism". This political philosophy is clearly a moral and political response to the iniquities and tensions created by European imperialism and capitalism. It has been espoused in one form or another by politicians, lay scholars, and monks—for example, U Nu of Burma, Pridi Panomyong and Buddhadasa of Thailand, and Vijayavardhana of Sri Lanka.

Buddhist socialism conceives man as a social being and attempts to relate man's sociality to the notion of natural man. A uniquely Buddhist conception of natural man is to be found in the canonical myth mentioned above of the original perfect society and its disappearance. According to U Nu (the former Prime Minister), the primordial age of abundance (the age of the bountiful Padeytha tree) lacked private property and class conflict. Private property only emerges with man's moral decline and the development of greed (Sarkisyanz 1965: 210–212). Buddhadasa, the well-known though somewhat unorthodox monk, has clearly been influenced by the same legend though he has given it his own peculiar interpretation. "Pure nature is



socialism. Nature provided for sufficiency... Primitive man had no culture. He was naturally socialist. Nature did not allow him to hoard, because there was no means of storing a surplus... The origin of society's problem lies in the abnormal person who was the first to start hoarding and appropriating property by force.... That is, the problem of society arose because humanity deviated from the path set down by nature and by Buddha. Nature is the root of socialism and the root of morality" (Buddhadasa 1974: 27-33). Pridi Panomyong (the socialist politician) idealised the communalism and absence of private property among the primitive hunters and gatherers of Thailand. "They had no personal landholdings, but organised themselves collectively into small societies.... A highly developed communal system was observed in Thailand fifty years ago by Prince Damrong, the Minister of Interior.... He reported that the tribal people he saw were happy and content and compared them to a socialist society" (Morell 1972: 405).

Buddhist socialism aspires to re-create the primal age of abundance. In some cases this is expressed in terms of the Buddhist millennial prophecy. In a socialistic welfare state, proclaimed U Nu, the vanished era of the Padeytha tree would return triumphantly (Sarkisyanz 1965: 212). Again, Pridi Panomyong, in his socialist Economic Plan of 1933, urged fellow members of the People's Party not to hesitate to lead the Thai people "out of the place where they can gather the fruits of the tree of life. There at last they will be able to feast on the fruits of happiness and prosperity in fulfilment of the Buddhist prophecy to be found in the story of Ariya Mettaya" (Landon 1939: 373).

From the perspective of Buddhist socialism freedom from economic want is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for spiritual enlightenment. But socialism is a lower truth because it overcomes economic suffering only. Buddhism is a higher truth because it delivers man from spiritual suffering (Sarkisyanz 1965: 196). Or to use Tambiah's words: "Socialism and Buddhism are complementary and stand in a hierarchical relation" (1973: 17). It logically follows that Buddhist socialists also assert the superiority of the spiritual over the material. The lay scholar Vijayavardhana states that "man becomes free only when his mind, and not animal instinct, dominates his course" (1953: 603). For Buddhadasa, Buddhism contains both materialism (*wadthuniyom*) and spiritualism (*manoonyom*) but religion must not be a slave of materialism (1974: 11, 12). Pridi Panomyong, although in many ways strongly influenced by Marxism, still "seems to attribute ultimate primacy to the spirit in accordance with Buddhist doctrine" (Morell 1972: 406).



Buddhism is superior but not separate from politics and economics. In short, Buddhist socialism denies the autonomy of politics and economics from religion and morality. The economic system of socialism, says Buddhadasa, (1974: 21) must include morality (*thammiko sangkhomniyom*). Elsewhere he claims that "politics must be something sacred" (Ibid: 11). In a similar vein Vijayavardhana argues: "The purpose of religion is to inspire men with a motive that derives its worth from its power to transmute the secular activity of the world into sacredness. As soon as the life of religion becomes autonomous.... it becomes impotent" (1953: 596).

Assertions of the primacy of the spiritual over the material imply also that human freedom and the perfect society can only be achieved by moral change. It also follows that class conflict can be resolved by moral revolution without resort to violence. Vijayavardhana devotes a whole chapter to the question: "Is violence essential?". He utterly rejects the "gospel of class war and its belief in the inevitability of world revolution" (1953: 26) and concludes that violence is not justified in any circumstances because it is incompatible with Buddhist morality (Ibid.: 223,431). Pridi Panomyong recognizes the importance of the class struggle and the need for political action against the upper class but he has been consistent in his hope that this will take the form of parliamentary democracy and that violence will be avoided (Morell 1972: 418).

Belief in the superiority of Buddhism raises an important issue concerning the Weber thesis. Tambiah agrees with Sarkisyanz that Buddhist social ethics "are indeed a far cry from Weber's deduction that the ideas of monastic Buddhism cannot stimulate rational this-worldly activity". But then Tambiah qualifies his support for Sarkisyanz's critique by adding: "Weber is right in a way he did not anticipate; Buddhist ideas appear to stimulate and to legitimate a kind of socialist and welfare politics that subordinates economic activity of the capitalist kind" (1973: 18)<sup>2</sup>.

2. Buddhist socialism and European Utopian socialism are similar in some significant respects. Utopian socialism also denied the autonomy of economics and politics from religion and morality and the superiority of the spiritual over the material (Gruner 1973: 156). It furthermore rejected violence and class war (Ibid: 147, 173). The major difference, as I see it, is that Buddhist socialism has tended to retain marked paternalistic features, even to the point of advocating the retention of benevolent monarchy. Thus Buddhadasa proposes that Thailand should reject royal absolutism but not a system of kingship based on the ten exemplary virtues of kingship (1974: 11). Again, even though the Burmese monarchy was destroyed by the British in the nineteenth century, U Nu was much later accused by the Burmese Anglicised elite of "acting in accordance with the Buddhist monarchic inclinations of the Burmese people" (Sarkisyanz 1965: 211).



### The Buddhist Social Ethics of Bun Khamwong

That Buddhist social ethics may find expression in rural variants is exemplified by the case of Bun Khamwong, a peasant leader in Northern Thailand. Bun was born in Baan Talaad, a small market town about thirty kilometres south-west of Chiang Mai city. His parents were relatively prosperous peasants. In his youth he spent several years as a novice at a local temple where he acquired a basic education in Buddhist doctrine. From the point of view of his religious training his return to lay life was inopportune. After the Second World War Baan Talaad developed into a centre for opium trafficking and Bun was soon attracted away from farming into the more adventurous and lucrative life of the opium trader. He prospered for a while until he was sentenced to six months imprisonment following the discovery of his opium cache by the police. This period of confinement had more than a sobering effect and seems to have been responsible for a radical change in Bun's attitudes and behaviour. After his release he retreated to a forest hermitage where for three years he practiced austerities and systematic meditation.

Bun ended this voluntary period of seclusion determined to free local peasants from poverty and exploitation. He has maintained a regular discipline of one meal a day and retreats seven days a year for meditation. He is often identified as "Nau Bun the hermit" (*Nau Bun ryysii*), but he sees himself also as a man committed to action in the world for the welfare of local peasants. He sustains this image of a man of action by riding a magnificent stallion wherever he goes, sometimes at a furious pace.

Bun's achievements in political life have been considerable. Beginning in 1965 he encouraged the formation of farmers' groups (*klum chaw naa*) in Baan Talaad sub-district and set up a committee to coordinate their activities. He was most closely identified with the Huai Manaaw group in Sankham, a village about one kilometre from Baan Talaad. He started it and served as its chairman for several years. This group was one of the most dynamic in the district. District officials held it up as a model of success and used its meeting hall as a showplace for visitors. As the elected chief of the nearby Khun Khong dam Bun also played a key role in democratizing and improving the local irrigation system. In 1968 he established the Khun Khong Dam Development Association comprising water users from twelve villages. The aims of this association included the improvement of irrigation facilities and dispute settlement, the reduction of transport costs and middleman profits for cash crops, and the purchase of cheaper chemical fertilizer. In 1974, in alliance with a Democrat Party candidate, he established a much larger irrigation association called the Peoples' Federation of Just Water Users. Membership comprised users of twenty-seven dams and its major aims were to pressure the Government for funds to build a large reservoir



in the hills to improve the supply of water in the dry season and expand the area of land under irrigation. Both the K.K.D.D.A. and the P.F.J.W.U. are now defunct but this is due largely to opposition by the bureaucracy which is intolerant of organizations that attempt to assert autonomy from state control. In 1970 Bun initiated a scheme for the resettlement of poor, landless villagers in a largely unirrigated area about four kilometres north-west of Baan Talaad. Bun named the settlement "Baan Myang Bon" (The Heavenly Village). In 1974 the village and surrounding land was chosen as the site of a government land allocation project. The King of Thailand has since given a large sum of money to build a reservoir in the nearby foothills in order to irrigate land allotted to settlers.

The influence of Buddhist social ethics on Bun Khamwong is revealed in the following case related to his juridical powers as chief of the Khun Khong dam. A dam chief has the right to conscript any cultivator using water from the dam. In October 1968 Bun ordered all water users from villages under his jurisdiction to assemble to carry out certain irrigation work. But thirty-five peasants from the village of Pa'ooi refused to attend, claiming that their village (being located at the end of the canal) received insufficient water. As dam chief Bun had the right to impose a fine of up to 50 *baht* (\$2.50 U.S. approx.) on each user who absented himself without sending a substitute. Bun told me that at first he had intended to fine the Pa'ooi villagers 20 *baht* each but eventually decided, to use his words, "to forgive them and set them free". He considered the decision of such importance that he set down an explanation in writing as follows:

"All men are capable of doing wrong. Indeed a person who does no wrong is one who does nothing at all. Even criminals are not bad all the time. Compassion is the mark of a Great Man (*Mahaburut*). Such a man is pure of heart and just. He is even willing to take upon himself the punishment due to others and forgive his enemies who wish to kill him. Why, therefore, should we refuse to forgive these thirty-five men who, rather than being our enemies, have assisted us in the past?"

*Mahaburut* is the Thai borrowing from the Pali *Mahapurisa*. A *Mahapurisa* or Great Man is, as explained above, a Bodhisattva who has certain physical characteristics by which people recognize his destiny to become either a Universal Ruler (*Cakkavatti*) or a Buddha. Ashoka is identified in legends as a Great Man.

The Jataka stories are another important influence on Bun's Buddhist social ethics, especially the Vessantara Jataka described above. In Thailand the Vessantara Jataka is called the Great Jataka (*Mahachadok*) and in Northern Thailand a major temple ceremony called *Bun Phra Wet* is devoted entirely to its recitation. The Vessantara story was the principal source of inspiration for Bun's dedicated concern for



the moral and economic welfare of the local peasantry. Thus he told me that, since his release from prison, he had steadfastly endeavoured to emulate the exemplary virtues of the Bodhisattva Vessantara (*Phra Wesandon*), the most important being lovingkindness (*metta*) and generosity (*dana*). The paradigm of Vessantara inspired Bun to undertake the austere life of a hermit (*ryysii*) for three years, to give up his wife and children and, when he returned from seclusion, to set up the Huai Manaaw farmers' group and bestow upon it a gift of 10 *rai* (1.6 hectares) of riceland. Similarly inspired was the mortgaging of the rest of his land as security to enable hundreds of local farmers to obtain chemical fertilizer on credit from a private firm.

It was also in emulation of the Bodhisattva Vessantara that Bun committed himself to free his fellow peasants from poverty. It became his life's aim to ensure that peasants had a "secure livelihood" (*achiib mankhong*): enough food, enough land, and enough clothing. He once told me that he would never use a blanket until the thousands of Thai peasants who suffered from the cold at night had enough blankets. People, he said, must have their basic needs met (*phau kin phau yuu*) before they can begin the search for religious salvation. The "supreme happiness" (*khwaam suk an borom*) of Nirvana should be man's ultimate goal, though he admitted that most peasants aspire only to the enjoyments of heaven (*sawan*).

To Bun the Dhamma must be sovereign. This explains his insistence on incorporating Buddhist ceremonies into the various peasant associations he led. When he became chief of the Khun Khong dam he replaced the traditional propitiation of the dam spirit by a Buddhist ceremony. He began each meeting of the Huai Manaaw farmers' group at Sankham with a recitation of the Three Gems (the Buddhist proclamation of faith in Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha). The grand inaugural meeting of the P.F.J.W.U. was opened by the chanting of fifty-seven Buddhist monks. This was organised by a special religious committee of the federation. For the second annual meeting of the federation Bun had planned a massive and elaborate Buddhist merit-making ceremony (*ngaan tham bun*), though the religious committee eventually decided not to hold it.

Bun's efforts "to transmute the secular activity of the world into sacredness", to use Vijayavardhana's expression, is most impressively demonstrated by Baan Myang Bon. The very name of the settlement, "The Heavenly Village", suggests the utopian aspirations of its founder. A visit to the village immediately dispels any doubt. Everywhere crudely painted signs exhort residents to live virtuously: "The Dhamma protects those who live righteously", "Desire endangers the Dhamma", "He who meditates is an exemplary person", "He who does good, receives good", and so on.



Baan Myang Bon was governed by numerous committees. Bun was formally the chairman (*prathaan*), though villagers usually referred to him simply as "the leader" (*hua naa*). In 1976 there was a central committee of five members, including the chairman. Except for the chairman, committee members were selected by drawing lots. The period of office was for a maximum of one year. There was also a much larger committee with the grandiloquent title of "The Committee for the Protection of Sacred Things" (*Kammakaan Phitak Sing Saksid*). This committee had ten sub-committees with five members each, all appointed by the chairman. They had responsibility for irrigation and agriculture, education, health, village safety, animal protection, commerce and marketing, public relations, religion and for the protection of the village court and Buddhist temple. One significant feature of these sub-committees is that many of them were outwardly secular but the collective title reveals clearly Bun's hope that they would be all inspired by religious values.

Village life in Baan Myang Bon was controlled by strict rules called "village laws" (*kod muu*). Householders who failed to turn up for village work and to attend evening meetings were liable to fines of 10 *baht* and 5 *baht* respectively. Only the ill were exempt and fines had to be paid within seven days. Other rules had more moral undertones. It was forbidden to fire guns or to make loud noises after eight o'clock in the evening; trucks or taxis were not permitted to enter the village in the evening; no illegal objects could be brought into the village; it was forbidden to victimize anyone in the village in any way whatsoever; and it was forbidden to shoot any kind of wild animal (e.g. deer, monkeys, rabbits, birds, snakes), in keeping with the Buddhist injunction against violence to any living being.

Bun's utopianism was, at times, expressed in millennial form. The source of Buddhist millennialism is the canonical prophecies mentioned above concerning the fifth and final Buddha, the Buddha Saviour (*Buddha Mettaya* or *Ariya Mettaya*). Bun proclaimed at a meeting in 1974 that "the age of freedom was the age of Ariya Mettaya". In late 1975 he told some villagers from Baan Myang Bon in my presence that the institution of land reform in Thailand would be followed by the coming of the Ariya Mettaya. According to Bun, there are three stages in Thai history. The first was the age of royal absolutism (*raadchatipatai*). The second is the age of democracy (*prachatipatai*). In this age people are powerful and are only constrained by the rule of law. The final age is that of Ariya Mettaya, the age in which Buddhist morality has sovereignty (*thammatipatai*). In this last age people are "noble people" (*ariyachon*); that is, people who are not angry, not fearful, not apprehensive, and not oppressive. At a meeting at Baan Talaad school Bun claimed that this was the age of Ariya Mettaya and that the members of the P.F.J.W.U. were now "noble people".



In early 1976 I said to Bun that district officials opposed the P.F.J.W.U. because it wasn't legal. Bun replied that he didn't want there to be any law, for in the age of the rule of the dhamma (*thammatipatai*) there was only village law. The fact that Baan Myang Bon, as noted above, was governed by "village law" suggests that for Bun the perfect society of Ariya Mettaya provided an archetype for the development of this utopian village.

Yet the millennial aspects of Bun's Buddhist social ethics are not based on a passive acceptance of the miraculous arrival of the Buddhist golden age. Rather, his way of thinking fits Bauman's definition of "active utopianism". An active utopia, says Bauman, is an ideal society that is "not so much bound to come as one which should come" and one that "will not come to pass unless fostered by deliberate collective action" (1976: 17). The millennialism of U Nu, Pridi Panomyong, Buddhadasa and Vijayavardhana is also activist in this sense. The Buddhist millennial prophecies serve them all as a prototype of the ideal society but all emphasize that its attainment depends on human will and human effort (Sarkisyanz 1965: 178; Landon 1939: 373; Buddhadasa 1974: 51; Vijayavardhana 1953: 600, 671).

To my mind the Buddhist millennial prophecy of the Ariya Mettaya was just one component of Bun's rhetoric of moral regeneration. In early 1976 I asked the chairman of a local farmers' group what he understood by Bun's statements about the Ariya Mettaya. He replied that Bun did not mean that the coming of the Ariya Mettaya in person was imminent but simply that the age of freedom was at hand. But it would only be realised if people became "noble people" (*ariyachon*) – that is, "good people who understand the Dhamma and understand themselves". For example, Bun believed, he said, that "noble people" would be willing to give up some of their land to those who did not have enough.

Moral regeneration also precludes the class struggle. Rich and poor, according to Bun, could be good or evil. Thus there were two types of capitalists: "blood-sucking capitalists" (*naai thun naa lyat*) and "good capitalists" (*naai thun cai phra*). In 1968 he said that two years earlier he had met in Bangkok the chairman of a farmers' group from Nan who claimed that this province would soon be Communist because of the rich landowners who exploited the local peasantry. These were "blood-sucking capitalists". By contrast, Khunnai Dii (a wealthy plantation owner) and Khun Sunan (the owner of the local tobacco station) were "good capitalists" because they were generous and treated their employees with kindness and compassion. Bun sometimes spoke contemptuously about politicians. They were deceitful; they continuously abused each other; and they were only interested in wealth and status.



But they should be virtuous; they should be like Gandhi and be willing to travel anywhere; they should be like monks and work for the welfare of the people; and they, too, should be "noble people". The implication of these statements is that the class struggle can be avoided by moral change. Of course, any form of violence, whatever the goal, is precluded by the Buddhist moral imperative of non-violence and the Bodhisattva ideal of lovingkindness and compassion.

Bun cannot be considered a Buddhist socialist in the strict sense. I have never once heard him use the term "socialism" (*sangkhomniyom*). Nor did he ever give any indication that he had read any socialist literature. Yet he constantly exhorted local peasants to cooperate, to form associations, and to hold and work land communally. "Buddhist communalism" might be a more apt term for Bun's "socialist" ideas.

As in the case of U Nu, Pridi Panomyong, Buddhadasa and Vijayavardhana, Bun viewed man as being by nature a social being. In late 1975, at a meeting at which he urged assembled villagers to join the P.F.J.W.U., Bun explained the need for cooperation between peasants. The sacred power of a temple, he said, came from the Buddha and from the congregation assembled there. Power does not arise from individuals but only from human cooperation. Cooperation realises itself in the common ownership of property. Therefore, he advocated that land allocated by the Government at Baan Myang Bon be owned by the community as a whole and not divided into separate, private plots. He told me that he was certain that land was held communally before the introduction of title deeds early this century. Individuals did not sell the plots they worked out of fear of punishment by the Earth Goddess (*Naang Thoranii*) who was the guardian of the land.

But village society now is not as it once was. Peasants now lack lovingkindness and are unwilling to cooperate and sacrifice for the common good. The spirit of cooperation must be regained through communal landownership and also through the institution of various forms of associations. In January 1976 the District Agriculture Officer held a meeting at Baan Myang Bon to recommend to villagers that they establish themselves as a company (*baurisa*). I objected that the word *baurisa* had capitalist connotations. Bun disagreed. In a rare display of concord with a local official Bun said that *baurisa* was a good word because in Buddhism there were the *Baurisa Thang Sii* ("The Four Protectors"); that is, the four types of person who protected Buddhism. In worldly matters, he added, there were also four protectors. These were federations (*sahaphan*), cooperatives (*sahakaun*), groups (*klum*) and companies (*baurisa*). These four kinds of association encourage human cooperation. Thus in 1968 Bun told a gathering of villagers that the establishment of the Khun Khong Dam Development Centre would serve to promote cooperation in the community.



Yet there were certain serious obstacles to the creation of a spirit of fraternity and cooperation between peasants. Private property was one. For example, Bun once told me about the problem of the flooding of irrigated ricefields near Baan Talaad. The problem, he said, could be solved by constructing many small canals to drain off the excess water. But local peasants were selfish. They were like children who refused to share their sweets with playmates. They were attached to their private plots of land and were unwilling to surrender the smallest piece for the common good. Bun also said that fear was another obstacle to the creation of lovingkindness between peasants: fear of not having enough money, fear that the other person will be better-off, and fear of capitalists. I present below another example that highlights the difference between Bun's Buddhist altruism and peasant selfishness. The conversation is taken from a meeting of the Huai Manaaw farmers' group convened in late 1967 to discuss the building of a dam in the foothills:

Member: "Villagers at Baan Pong will have to be contacted in order to persuade them to use water from the dam. If they want it they'll have to pay. If they don't pay we'll stop the water".

Bun: "When we have the dam and enough water, it will be hard on the people of Baan Pong if we refuse them water. 'Every river flows to the sea'. Therefore, we should give water to all free of charge. 'Do good, receive good' (*tham bun dai bun*).

Member: "If we 'do good' too much we might die! If you take a trip to a distant place and take off your shoes for a friend and walk barefooted with a walking-stick and everything hurts, can you then reach your destination?"

Bun: "That doesn't matter. After one or two steps someone is likely to come along with a motor-cycle and give you a lift and you'll get to the place more quickly".

Member: "If everyone uses water in future there will be many rich people and we'll be poor".

Bun's Buddhist communalism lends support to Tambiah's argument that Buddhist social ethics are anti-capitalist in the sense of being hostile to the selfish pursuit of individual gain. The reason is that religion subordinates and encompasses political and economic life. "Everything", says Bun, "must come under the rule of the Dhamma".

## Conclusion

There is in Theravada Buddhism a long-standing tradition that views as necessary the exercise of political power to establish order, justice, and prosperity as a precondition for spiritual development. In this regard Ashoka's welfare policies served



as a particularly forceful and enduring paradigm. Furthermore, the case of Bun Khamwong demonstrates that this philosophy may be espoused by Buddhists at all levels of society.

Buddhist social ethics, in both early and modern forms, are clearly at variance with Weber's claim that Buddhism is a mystical, asocial religion that cannot generate a positive ethic of action in this world. Yet, Buddhist social ethics assert the superiority of the spiritual over the material and deny the autonomy of politics and economics from religion. This perspective engenders a strong moral antipathy to greed and selfish individualism which may express itself in an opposition to private property and capitalism in general. In this respect Weber was right: Buddhism has no affinity with the 'spirit of capitalism'. Yet, contra Weber, I would argue that this is not because Buddhism is necessarily other-worldly but because of the 'social' or 'socialistic' nature of its worldly ethic.

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