

Urban Thai Buddhist Attitudes to Development

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Abstract

In recent years in Thailand several movements have grown up around particular monks or wats which have become sufficiently large and enduring to represent a challenge to mainstream Thai Buddhism. Some of these, such as the Wat Phra Thammakaaay movement, were partially based on interpretations of Buddhism which reflect the political and economic aspirations of Thai society. Others, such as Santi Asok, were more sectarian and less easy to characterize from an economic and political point of view.

This paper considers a range of urban Buddhist movements with particular reference to their varying concerns for development and then presents data from a 1993 survey of the attitudes toward these movements held by monks at one of the Buddhist universities in Bangkok. Consideration will also be given to the role of lay nuns (*mae chii*).

The following thumbnail sketches of five major movements in the early 1990s provide some necessary background for examining the results of the survey of Buddhist monks.

The Movement Around Kittivuddho Bhikkhu

Little is known about Kittivuddho prior to his ordination as a monk in 1957 at the age of twenty-one. He was ordained into the Mahanikay Order and took up residence in Wat Paak-naam Phasi Charoen in Thonburi. He later moved to Wat Mahathat in Bangkok. Although not formally schooled in Pali, he "staked a claim to being a significant interpreter of the Buddhist scriptures" (Keyes 1978, 148) by setting up the Abhidhamma Foundation College of Wat Mahathat in 1967.

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Kittivuddho was perhaps better known for founding Cittabhavana College in Chonburi, where hundreds of monks and novices each year received instruction in a wide range of practical skills. It is quite exceptional in Thailand to see monks driving tractors and operating lathes and oxyacetylene equipment, but, according to Kittivuddho, "monks are people in the world; they should help the world too" (Keyes 1978, 149).

The foundation stone of the Cittabhavana College was laid by Queen Sirikit in 1957, and two years later the King and Queen both took part in the opening ceremony. Among the founding presidents of the college was General Thanom Kittikachorn, one of the three military dictators toppled in the October Revolution of 1973.

Kittivuddho's rightist politics, exemplified by his leadership of Nawaphon and his view that the killing of communists is not a sin, are well known and need not concern us here. What is interesting from the point of view of this study was his ability to combine rightist, centralist politics with programs for social improvement. He believed that social and economic inequalities are the result of kamma, but nonetheless that where possible these should be ameliorated—by monks if necessary.

In 1987 Kittivuddho proposed that wats should set up rice mills. Later he put his weight behind General Chavalit Yongchaiyuth's tree-planting program in the northeast. He espoused social improvement without participatory democracy.

The Santi Asok Movement

Whereas Kittivuddho and his followers remained firmly within the Thai Sangha and closely in touch with the centers of ecclesiastical and secular power, the Santi Asok movement had strong roots in the provinces in the northeast. Its founder, Phra Phothirak, was born in Si Sa Ket in 1934 into a Sino-Thai family. He was ordained in 1970, first as a *chiipakhaaw* (eight precepts), then as a monk. He was deeply influenced by the ascetic practices of Luang Paw Man and the forest monks in the region, with the result that when he eventually abandoned both the Thammayut and Mahanikay Orders, he continued to wear brown robes rather than the more familiar orange ones.

Phra Phothirak's checkered career involved him and his followers in controversies with other monks over such issues as vegetarianism, and in 1973 he set up his own religious center at Nakhon Pathom. He refused to register the center with the Department of Religious Affairs and resigned, first from the Thammayut Order, and then, after re-ordination under pressure from the Sangha into the Mahanikay Order, he resigned from that as well.

Phra Phothirak maintained that Buddhist doctrine and practice were handed on by the Buddha to his followers and that there were no scriptural or historical grounds for any regulatory state bureaucracy. Thus Phra Phothirak and his followers refused to accept the authority of the Mahatherasamakhom

(Supreme Sangha Assembly) and both Orders, and wore brown robes. Their ordination procedures were therefore contrary to both Sangha and secular law. Like Phra Kittivuddho's monks, Phra Phothisarak's followers learned a variety of practical skills such as operating lathes and radio equipment. Women could become full members, and meditation practices based on some of the Buddha's most gruesome techniques were taught: a rotting corpse was installed on the roof of one of their buildings for this purpose.

Santi Asok achieved considerable prominence in the mid-1980s when one of its most charismatic members, Chamlong Srimuang, was elected Governor of Bangkok. Chamlong was born in 1935 in Thonburi. He went into the army where he became a member of one of the élite 1960 seventh class of Chulachomkhalao Military Academy, popularly known as the Young Turks. Chamlong shared the anticommunist sentiments of this group, but distanced himself from people like Thanom Kittikachorn, whom he considered corrupt. But he maintained contact with Kriangsak Chommanand and Prem Tinsulanonda, both of whom became prime ministers.

Chamlong's high moral profile and opposition to corruption in high places won him many friends, especially among the middle classes who resented their wealth being siphoned off by the establishment, but he also made many enemies. In May 1992 he achieved considerable prominence in the popular campaign to overthrow prime minister Suchinda Kraprayoon, a struggle which was only resolved by the personal intervention of the King.

Although Santi Asok was committed to social improvement and democracy, its sectarian tactics made it suspect in the eyes of the Sangha hierarchy, and, as we shall see below, among young monks as well. Social critic Sulak Sivaraksa described Santi Asok as "too attached to goodness, too intolerant of others," and Phra Phothisarak as "stupid, but very charismatic" (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 July 1991, 23).

The Wat Phra Thammakaay Movement

The Wat Phra Thammakaay movement had its headquarters at Wat Phra Thammakaay (Mahanikay) to the north of Bangkok. It was based on the teachings and meditation techniques of Phra Mongkhonthepmuni (Luang Phor Sot), a former abbot of the Wat Paak-naam (Mahanikay) in Thonburi, who died in 1959. Princess Sirindhorn laid the foundation stone of the headquarters in 1977, and the movement subsequently attracted a wide range of middle-class supporters and powerful establishment figures, including Generals Arthit Kamlang-ek and Chavalit Yongchaiyuth. Its members dominated all the Bangkok campus Buddhist associations, except for Mahidol (medical) University.

The movement's name was derived from the Mahayana doctrine of *Trikaya* (Three Bodies), according to which the absolute nature of the Buddha is associated with his body of essence or truth or *Dharmakaya* (Thai: *Thammakaay*). According to Ninian Smart (1964, 55):

In brief, the Buddha becomes a manifestation of the Absolute: Absolute equals *nirvana* equals Buddhahood. This links up with the Three-Body formation ... The Absolute [equated with the Truth-Body of the Buddha] phenomenalizes itself as the celestial Lord and on earth as the historical Buddha.

The Absolute can be considered as multiple phenomena seen from a higher point of view (as in the *Diamond* and *Heart Sutras*). It is therefore possible to think in terms of two levels of truth along the lines of Sankara (or even Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, see below).

Luang Phor Sot parted company with mainstream scholars of Buddhism at this point by claiming that Dharmakaya is a spiritual body which forms the basis of human physical and mental existence. It is located in the middle of our bodies in the region of our stomach. Meditation (*samadhi* rather than the more exacting *vipassana*) reveals "bright gems" which disclose ultimately even more refined spiritual entities.

The two levels of truth made it possible for the movement's followers to allow for supernatural events which would otherwise be incompatible with the philosophical rationalism of reformist Buddhism. Thus, for example, the deputy abbot of the Wat Phra Thammakaay recorded a story whereby a lay nun (*mae chii*) at the Wat Paak-naam flew into the air to push away an atomic bomb about to fall on Bangkok so that it fell on Japan instead:

You may ask why it fell on Japan and killed so many people. I can answer by saying that the power of *dhamma* pulled it to Japan when the Japanese were bellicose and wanted to make war. That pulled the bomb in their direction. (Phra Thattachiwo, quoted in Jackson 1989, 204)

Japanese visitors to the wat remain unconvinced by this explanation!

Peter Jackson (1989, 212) has drawn attention to the strong similarities between the methods and membership of the movement and those of charismatic groups in other religious traditions:

In addition to selecting only university students for the Dhammadayada programme, only those students who are regarded as having attained a high degree of proficiency in the Thammakaay meditation system are ultimately accepted for ordination. The selection process appears to be oriented towards ensuring that the students who undertake the complete Dhammadayada training are those who are most likely to succeed in future careers in business and government.

The Dhammadayada training induces an almost conversion-like experience among many student participants ... There are many similarities to charismatic Christian movements, including the demonstration of spiritual attainment through supernatural or miraculous experiences, which are taken as signs of the attainment of true wisdom.

One student described the outcome of her period of training as follows:

All of this was a real life experience that I will never forget. The Dhammadayada training was a progress to the beginning of a clear, new path, a new life for me ... We were like people who had been born again, who had found a bright and secure life and a firm destination and goal. (Jackson 1989, 212)

Members of the group appeared to do little to help the socially disadvantaged.

Socially Engaged Buddhism

The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) began in 1989 as a conference of thirty–six concerned monks and laypersons from eleven countries. Its goals included the facilitation and carrying out of solutions to the many problems facing communities, societies and the world and the appropriate training of Buddhist activists. Its areas of concern centered around human rights, women's issues, the environment, alternative education and development, spiritual training and the interpretation of spirituality and activism. The network, which in the early 1990s included 160 affiliates from twenty–six countries, cooperated closely with activists from other spiritual traditions.

In the early 1990s the patrons of the network were Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (see below), Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. However, the moving force behind the Thai branch was Sulak Sivaraksa, Buddhist scholar and outspoken social critic.

Sulak Sivaraksa was born in 1933. On completing his early education in Thailand, he went to Britain where he graduated in law, returning to Bangkok in the early 1960s during a period of military dictatorship. In 1963 he founded the *Social Science Review*, which quickly became the leading intellectual journal in the country.

In the seventies Sulak became the main proponent of socially engaged Buddhism, which he saw as having roots in the Thai tradition which secular ideologies such as communism did not. Following the 1976 military suppression of democracy in which hundreds of students were killed, young activists turned to the Communist Party of Thailand and fled into the countryside. Later, in the 1980s, many began to find Sulak's engaged Buddhism more appealing and joined him in organizing new groups to promote the Buddhist ideals of compassion, tolerance, justice and democracy.

Sulak argued that Thailand must "go to the root of Buddhism, and for me that root is democratic. In Buddhism we are all equal ... Equality means that you respect everyone ... We must work equally with women." (*Nation*, 23 January 1993)

Sulak worked closely with progressive monks, such as the young scholar monks at Mahachulalongkorn University (see the survey results below). He encouraged the monks to study important social issues such as prostitution,

consumerism and the environment, while at the same time trying to persuade secular non-governmental organizations to take Buddhism more seriously:

Now more of them understand Buddhist concepts ... Young people ... say that they have much to learn from the monks whom they previously looked down upon ... Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai listens to the NGOs, and in this way the monks and the NGOs can help the government decentralise political and economic power so that it can help the people. (*Nation*, 23 January 1993)

Among the monks in the engaged Buddhists' network was Luang Phor Prajak Kutajitto, who campaigned vigorously against industrial logging in Buriram in the northeast. In January 1993 he was sentenced to six months in jail for forest encroachment. He was found guilty of having his monastery built in a national forest reserve. But a few days after sentence was passed, the Forestry Department announced that it would officially recognize the positive role of monks in protecting national forest reserves (*Bangkok Post*, 8 February 1993).

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Payom Kallayano

The late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Payom Kallayano are considered together because their interpretations of Buddhism are similar, although, as we shall see, they differ in many other respects. Neither was the leader of an organized movement, but both exercised considerable influence; the two together were ranked highest by the Mahachulalongkorn sample of monks who completed the questionnaire survey early in 1993.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (Phutthathat) was born in 1906 in Surat Thani province in the south. His father was Chinese, his mother Thai. He was ordained at a Mahanikay wat in Chaiya in 1926. In 1930 he went to Bangkok to study Pali, returning in 1932 to Chaiya where he established Suan Mokh, the forest monastery now famous as a meditation center. Phutthathat subsequently wrote and lectured prolifically, but he remained outside ecclesiastical and secular politics. He also managed to maintain good relationships with members of both Mahanikay and Thammayut orders; thus he followed the Thammayut practice of eating only one meal a day and not wearing shoes. He died in the summer of 1993.

Peter Jackson (1989, 131) is correct in attributing the historical significance of Phutthathat's work to his having introduced "intellectual rationalism and practical strictness of the Thammayut Order to Mahanikay monks." He is also correct in underlining his role in having developed King Mongkut's original incomplete rationalism to its logical conclusion by criticizing many traditional Thai beliefs and royal-sponsored supernatural cults. He says (1989, 131):

Phutthathat has combined the intellectual rationalism and modernism of the Thammayut order with a critique of the traditional Thai social

order to create the theoretical foundation of an interpretation of Buddhism which is both rationalist and socially progressive.

But Jackson is not correct when he claims (1989, 125) that Phutthathat indulged in "the judicious selection of texts, careful exegesis and selective emphasis and de-emphasis of doctrines" so as to forge "nibbanic Buddhism ... into a potent expression of contemporary social and political aspirations."

The key to appreciating Phutthathat's approach is to understand that he was reinterpreting earlier Madhyamika philosophical thinking from which Mahayana Buddhism developed. The Madhyamika believed that only emptiness or the void (*sunyata*) truly exists, everything else having a qualified reality. All existence is composed of transitory, impermanent events. But *sunyata* never changes and is absolute truth, absolute being, nibbana and the body of essence of the Buddha (i.e. the Dharmakaya, see above).

Without spelling out the implications of this line of argument, it is not difficult to see how Phutthathat was able to reinterpret the traditional popular view of nibbana so that it becomes an experience here and now. And similarly, rebirth becomes not something uncertain and unclear at the end of life, but a moment-to-moment event in the process of which the self, which is the cause of craving and attachment, becomes progressively weakened as we generate good kamma via wholesome actions.

But how can a busy professional person—a doctor or engineer, for example—generate wholesome kamma without resorting to the time-consuming meditative techniques traditionally regarded as central to the practice of Buddhism? Here Phutthathat invoked the notion of *sunyata* in a novel way: there is a way of doing work in which the mind is characterized by *sunyata*—tranquil, integrated and non-attached.

I once asked Phutthathat whether or not such an understanding of work is broadly comparable to *The Bhagavad Gita's* view of *nish kama karma* or work without attachment. He did not reply, but the similarities are striking; the influence of Buddhism on the *Gita* is often minimized by commentators.

It is important to appreciate the contemporary relevance of Phutthathat's exposition of Buddhism in order to understand why so many people have been drawn to him from all walks of life. To suggest, as Jackson does, that Phutthathat selectively emphasized and de-emphasized Buddhist doctrines to create "a potent expression of contemporary social and political aspirations" geared to "the hope for socio-economic development and material prosperity" is a gross misrepresentation of his methodology, of the history and philosophy of Buddhism and of the motives of the vast numbers of people who visit Suan Mokh every year.

Phutthathat's "here and now" understanding of cardinal Buddhist doctrines gives an immediacy and urgency to this-worldly activity, and his emphasis on the removal of individualistic "I" or "ego" centeredness was consistent with the priority which he gave to social improvement.

Phutthathat's followers included Phra Paññananta, abbot of the Wat Chonprathan Rangsit in Nonthaburi and Phra Payom Kallayano, who was a

student of Phutthathat for seven years, and became abbot of Wat Suankaew, also in Nonthaburi.

Phra Payom's popular sermons were spiced with street-level slang, jokes and irreverent political jibes: "The old monks do not mix with young people. They need someone to listen to. If you speak softly to a big crowd, everybody will either leave or fall asleep."

The following are some of Payom's aphorisms:

Better to suffer when you're young than live to an old age full of anxiety.

Better to die on the battlefield than live as a loss to yourself.

If you want a mirror to smile at you, you must smile into it first.

A spoilt child is worse than a broken toilet in front of the house.

People like to be photographed giving donations; if what they give is a true gift, they won't expect anything in return.

If a monk is concerned about how to solve social problems, then he will not think about removing any skirts.

If a dog is given a choice between liquor and shit, then it will chose the shit because it contains vitamins; a person who prefers liquor to shit is more stupid than a dog.

Underlying Payom's colorful allusions is a perfectly correct exposition of Phutthathat's reformed Buddhism. Payom was also very socially committed and was one of the first monks to show concern for people with AIDS by visiting Bumras Naradul Hospital in Nonthaburi where Bangkok's AIDS sufferers were treated.

Early in 1993 Payom "gently chided" the abbot of the Wat Arun Ratchawaram (Temple of the Dawn) for telling members of the rightist National Unity-loving Organisation of Thailand that they should support deposed prime minister Suchinda Kraprayoon in leading a new political party which would be astrologically ripe for power in two years time (*Bangkok Post*, 8 February 1993). The abbot also claimed that a leading politician who had campaigned for motorcyclists to wear safety helmets had made a lot of money as a result of the new law. Various people retorted that senior monks should learn to keep politics out of religion, and comparisons were made between the abbot and Kittivuddho. But it was Payom's tongue-in-cheek comment that caught the attention of the press: "If I were him, I would not say anything that would in any way affect my image."

Results of a Survey

Early in 1993 monks at Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University were given a questionnaire requesting them to state whether or not the movements which

have been described are beneficial to Thai society. The survey was part of a more detailed investigation into urban health care by monks and mae chii. Comparable investigations were carried out between 1978 and 1983 (Gosling 1980, 1985, 1992).

Two hundred and fifty monks (more than half of those undertaking B.A. degrees) in all faculties were given questionnaires by the deans. One hundred eighty-five responded, the majority completing all questions.

Question: Are these Buddhist movements beneficial to society?
(percentages)

	Yes	No	No Response
Buddhadasa Bhikkhu	96	0	4
Phra Payom	97	0	3
Wat Phra Thammakaay	88	4	9
Phra Kittivuddho	88	1	11
Engaged Buddhists	84	4	12
Santi Asok	40	43	17

The "no response" category has been included because it was felt that this indicated a reluctance to respond negatively rather than a genuine "don't know." Everybody at Mahachulalongkorn was familiar with Kittivuddho because he visited Wat Mahathat, which is adjacent to the university, every week; they also knew that at the time Sulak Sivaraksa was facing *lèse majesté* charges and that Santi Asok was under police investigation.

Because Phutthathat was then a household name in most parts of Thailand, it was not surprising that 96 percent of the monks considered his teaching to be beneficial to Thai society. Some of the reasons given were as follows:

He makes society become more disciplined.

(age: 22; home province: *Udon Thani*)

He helps people to solve their life problems.

(26, *Songkhla*)

He makes people know their real personality. (27, *Nakhon Sri Thammarat*)

He teaches people to hold the Middle Way.

(20, *Roi Et*)

He teaches people to know the meaning of life.

(23, *Kanchanaburi*)

He tells people how to use *thamma* to solve society's problems.

(25, *Mahasarakham*)

He develops the minds of the people and improves the standard
of living in society.

(22, *Udon Thani*)

He gives peace to society.

(25, *Si Sa Ket*)

He solves the problems arising from selfishness.

(21, *Nakhon Sawan*)

He applies *silatham* [ethics] to society.

(20, *Lamphun*)

It will be apparent from these and subsequent comments that most respondents were in their twenties and predominantly from the northeast.

The difference between the percentage of responses for Phutthathat and Payom was not important, and the high ranking given to the latter (97 percent) was very striking. Reasons given included the following:

He stops people taking drugs.	(27, <i>Nakhon Sri Thammarat</i>)
He is a good preacher.	(24, <i>Songkhla</i>)
He helps the unemployed in a hi-tech style.	(23, <i>Nakhon Ratchasima</i>)
He teaches the youth.	(21, <i>Si Sa Ket</i>)
He helps support the unemployed.	(20, <i>Khon Kaen</i>)
His <i>thamma</i> is good for the youth and children.	(20, <i>Roi Et</i>)
He can be the leader of society.	(29, <i>Loei</i>)
He provides shelter for the desperate.	(24, <i>Nakhon Ratchasima</i>)
He helps the people the government ignores.	(25, <i>Surin</i>)
He supports teenagers.	(20, <i>Maharakham</i>)
He helps people to know their rights in society.	(26, <i>Buriram</i>)
He gives people the opportunity to work.	(25, <i>Si Sa Ket</i>)
He teaches youth to understand <i>silatham</i> .	(22, <i>Nan</i>)

Concern about unemployment, youth and human rights, plus communication skills, seemed to be the main reasons why this charismatic young monk was so popular with the young scholar monks, many of whom have migrated via a complicated system of education and patronage from the poorer provinces to the metropolis.

The Wat Phra Thammakaay movement received a high level of support (88 percent), but also some criticism:

It's good for practising meditation.	(22, <i>Chaiyaphum</i>)
They help people to spend their spare time in the right way.	(27, <i>Nakhon Sri Thammarat</i>)
They teach people to stay calm.	(20, <i>Roi Et</i>)
Their political purpose is not known.	(29, <i>Nakhon Phanom</i>)
They are against the concept of Buddhism.	(23, <i>Si Sa Ket</i>)
They are good for the young.	(24, <i>Chiang Rai</i>)
Not suitable!	(24, <i>Roi Et</i>)
Their doctrine is wrong.	(<i>novice</i> , 27, <i>Khon Kaen</i>)
They should not use money the way they do for training people.	(28, <i>Surin</i>)

The movement was praised for its emphasis on meditation, peace and the young (presumably students), but there were criticisms as well, particularly by respondents from the poorest backgrounds.

Kittivuddho received the same level of approval as the Wat Phra Thammakaay movement, but slightly more "no responses," which may have indicated a reluctance to criticize a monk who spent much of his time nearby.

He is business-like.	(22, <i>Udon Thani</i>)
He knows about the world.	(20, <i>Buriram</i>)

He gives a chance to people with less opportunity.	(20, Buriram)
He's too commercial and over the top.	(21, Si Sa Ket)
He helps monks to be useful to people.	(26, Chiang Mai)
He teaches monks and novices a career.	(25, Kalasin)
He teaches the monk and novice to work.	(22, Nong Khai)
He develops the standard of living of people.	(22, Surin)
He gives jobs to monks and novices.	(25, Si Sa Ket)
He helps the poor to work.	(29, Chonburi)
He's a good speaker.	(39, Suphanburi)

Clearly Kittivuddho had come a long way since the scandals involving a Volvo car and allegations of gun-running for the Khmers. His paternalistic socialism, with its emphasis on training not only monks but also novices from poor backgrounds in practical skills, was clearly appreciated.

Fifteen years earlier Sulak Sivaraksa would have been rated very highly by young scholar monks. But the constant media publicity given to allegations that he committed *lèse majesté* appeared to have taken their toll. But there was still a good measure of support for Sulak and the engaged Buddhists.

He is himself and helps society.	(22, Udon Thani)
He's strong to fight in many ways.	(30, Sukhothai)
He introduces Buddhism to foreigners.	(20, Kampaeng Phet)
He shows the bad side of monks.	(23, Phatthalung)
He shows the link between the temple and the home.	(24, Uttaradit)
He is unreasonable and too self-confident.	(22, Songkhla)
He is a good critic and beneficial to society.	(21, Nakhon Sri Thammarat)
He gives direct comments.	(24, Chiang Rai)
He is destroying Buddhism.	(22, Mahasarakham)
He criticizes straightforwardly.	(24, Surin)
He is good at linking politics and religion.	(21, province not stated)
He teaches youth to understand <i>silatham</i> .	(22, Nan)
He wants to create peace in the world.	(27, Nakhon Ratchasima)

Sulak was clearly controversial, but there was recognition of the need for social criticism and of the international dimensions of his work.

Santi Asok scored lowest (40 percent) and many comments were negative.

It's famous among commercial people and also political.	(22, Udon Thani)
It helps the monk to examine himself.	(22, Nakhon Sri Thammarat)
It misrepresents scripture.	(29, Loei)
It encourages modesty and decreases self-centeredness.	(novice, 19, Surin)
It's wrong and against Buddhism.	(21, Surin)
No comment because this one is against scripture.	(22, Nong Khai)
It's confusing and differs from scripture; it lacks sincerity in relation to people and society.	(novice, 18, Uttaradit)

It confuses society, misleads the faith of monks, is against
 Buddhism and changes the meaning of scripture. (21, *Udon Thani*)
 It looks like a new religion—confusing! (22, *Ubon Ratchathani*)
 It creates unity in one special group but divides society
 as a whole. (25, *Roi Et*)
 It looks down on Buddha, is misleading and full of sin. (25, *Si Sa Ket*)
 They teach people to be good. (36, *Nakhon Ratchasima*)
 It's political and there is something behind the screen. (22, *Khon Kaen*)
 They're mad! (39, *Suphanburi*)

Different, divisive, confusing and misrepresentative of scripture were some of the criticisms levelled against Phra Phothisak and the Santi Asok movement. The high proportion of no responses (17 percent) should probably be interpreted as negative (some were accompanied by negative comments); however 40 percent were favorably disposed.

It had been rumored that the Mahachulalongkorn monks did not publicly protest at the bloodshed in May 1992 because it might have implied approval for Chamlong Srimuang, who led the popular movement against the military. According to Phra Maha Tuan Pim-Aksorn, dean of graduate studies, this was not the reason ("I'm glad you asked that"). He maintained that they felt that public demonstrations by monks would not help the cause of democracy; however he and some other monks went privately to see the prime minister.

Women in Thai Buddhism

In general Buddhists may be bhikkhus (monks), bhikkhunis (nuns or alms-women), *upasakas* (laymen) and *upasikas* (laywomen). In Thailand the order of nuns has died out, but there is provision for women who wear a white garment, shave their heads and live a life of renunciation, who are called *mae chii*.

Mae is Thai for mother, and *chii* is a term of respect, possibly related to the Sanskrit/Hindi token of admiration (e.g. *Gandhiji*), and carrying also the connotations of life (*jiv* or *jiva*).

But whatever the meaning and origin of the term, *mae chii* have been accorded very low status in Thai society. According to Kittivuddho, this is because "some *mae chii* behave themselves like beggars." Charles Keyes (1984, 223–41) analyzed the reasons why women in Thailand are regarded as inferior. He concluded that this is not a necessary corollary of Buddhist belief. Rather, he argued, both men and women who understand the world in Buddhist terms face the same problem of attachment to the world, but the characteristic tension between worldly attachment and orientation towards Buddhist salvation is expressed for women in gender images that are different from those for men.

Mae chii observe eight precepts and live in communal houses, sometimes attached to wats, sometimes separate. They study, teach children, undertake routine administration in wats, meditate and in some cases visit the women's

prisons. Several have achieved a high level of proficiency as meditation teachers and may even teach the monks.

At the time of the survey, Voramai Kabilsingh, in her mid-eighties, was Thailand's only bhikkhuni. She was ordained in Taiwan and was based at the Dharmajinaree Witya nunnery in Ratchaburi where she lived with about three dozen more mae chii and two dozen novice mae chii (Chatsumarn 1991).

When the monks at Mahachulalongkorn University were asked whether or not women should be ordained bhikkhuni, 12 percent said yes, 79 percent said no, and 9 percent gave no answer. As in the case of the previous responses, the "no response" category was more likely to be negative than affirmative.

The overall percentages indicate that the majority of monks were opposed to the ordination of women. However, although some of the reasons given were very emotive and clumsy, others were more pragmatic and provisional.

- Men and women should be equal. (20, Nakhon Ratchasima)
 It would be very helpful to Buddhism. (24, Surin)
 They can be ordained if they can practice and pass the examinations. (23, Kanchanaburi)
 Women can help spreading religion because they have the same ability to teach as monks. (22, Khon Kaen)
 Women have equal rights to men. (36, Phetchabun)
 It will help Buddhism. (21, Chainat)
 A women has the same rights as a man, but must obey the same *thammawinai*. (24, Buriram)
- Women should be supporters, not themselves monks. (22, Udon Thani)
 Women have so many silly habits! (30, Surin)
 It's not suitable at this time. It's difficult for women to practice. (26, province not stated)
- Thai society is not ready for this, but women can practice the *thamma* anyway. (22, Nakhon Sri Thammarat)
 Mae chii already have many precepts to keep; it would be impossible for them to keep all 227 required of a monk. (23, province not stated)
 It will create confusion, but being a mae chii is no problem. (20, Buriram)
 It's difficult for monks and female monks to live with each other under the same roof. This can bring sexual problems. (novice, 19, Sukhothai)
 It's bad enough already! (20, Kampaeng Phet)
 It will bring confusion to the monks' society. Women are difficult to control. (32, Nakhon Ratchasima)
 The line of continuity has disappeared. (26, Chiang Mai)
 Dangerous to religion! (24, Uttaradit)
 There are many obstacles for women to become monks, for example places for them to live, their weak minds, and contact with other monks. These will degrade the value of religion. Therefore becoming a mae chii is enough for the achievement of *thamma*. (25, Phangnga)

- It is against scripture and there are no more female monks to
preside over the ceremony. (21, *Songkhla*)
- According to the scripture a female monk should be ordained by two
groups of monks, both male and female. There are now no more
female monks. The ones who create a female monk will be called
rebels against religion. I will not forgive or agree with them. (22, *Songkhla*)
- Women are the enemy of celibacy. (24, *Mahasarakham*)
- We don't want to have a new religion! (23, *Phetchabun*)
- The succession has finished, but there should be women monks of
a different type, as in China, Taiwan and Japan. (38, *Nakhon Ratchasima*)

Ordination of women as full bhikkhuni presented a major problem, whereas their ordination as mae chii did not. Monks at Mahachulalongkorn were used to seeing mae chii because there was a small mae chii institute inside the campus grounds and they also met them at or near the wats where they resided. But the full ordination of women was seen as unscriptural, impracticable and contrary to the well-being and wishes of both the Sangha and Thai society as a whole.

Kittivuddho's belittling attitude to mae chii has been noted. His Cittabhavana training college did not provide for mae chii or laywomen generally to learn any practical skills. The Wat Phra Thammakaay movement included many lay female members—possibly the majority—but it showed no indication of wishing to challenge the monkhood as a male preserve.

Neither Phutthathat nor Payom had openly championed the cause of women's ordination, though the former welcomed women meditation teachers at his forest monastery. Payom encouraged mae chii in their work and supported women's rights; his street-level slang was often crude, but never sexist.

Santi Asok allowed women to become full members. Sulak Sivaraksa and the network of engaged Buddhists supported the full ordination of women and encouraged women to exercise positions of leadership and responsibility in their programs.

But what did Buddhist women themselves think of these movements and their leaders, and how effective did they consider their activities to be? Early in 1993 mae chii at the Wat Bowornives mae chii institute and also at Wat Paak-naam in Thonburi were interviewed in order to ascertain their level of interest in some of the development issues which formed the focus of the questionnaire investigation at Mahachulalongkorn University. Some of them were also asked for their opinions about the monks and the movements which have been described.

Mae chii Yupin was 24 years old and was born in Chainat. She came from a farming family and had been a mae chii for four years. She had no comment to make about any of the Buddhist movements or the leaders that have been mentioned, other than Phutthathat, whom she described as "very good."

By contrast Janthip and Boonma from Tak and Phetchaburi, aged 26 and 44 respectively, commented: on Phutthathat, "very good," "good;" on Wat Phra Thammakaay, "some members are more respected than others," "never been

there;" on Kittivuddho, "he is a help when you are studying," "he's alright, not very good;" on Sulak Sivaraksa, "I've just finished reading a book by him," "don't know;" on Santi Asok, "its practice is different from ordinary Buddhism," "I'm indifferent."

Payom had clearly made the greatest impact. Janthip commented: "Payom is good and straightforward. Sometimes his speech is too much and very direct, but he can teach well;" and Boonma said "He's clever, a genius, *keng!*"

The majority of mae chii who were asked about these monks had little to say, but those who did tended to echo Janthip and Boonma.

Attitudes to Development

The monks whose views were solicited were reckoned to be among the most socially progressive in the country. As will have been apparent from the data appended to their comments, they were young (mostly in the range 21–35 years) and started life in the poorer provinces of Thailand, especially the northeast.

The training of monks at Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University included substantial programs based in rural areas where they learned practical skills, such as constructing roads, wells, water pumps, schools and wats. Increasingly they had also been taught primary health care, and some of them had benefited from the *mo phra* (doctor-monk) programs set up by Dr. Prawase Wasi, Director of the Siriraj Hospital and Magsaysay Award winner (Gosling 1985).

The urban movements which have been described do not constitute an exhaustive list. Before his death Anan Senakhan was the leader of a conservative Buddhist movement opposed to the national reformism of many leading Buddhist scholars, including Phutthathat. Another conservative, Bunmii Meethaangkuun, accused Phutthathat of wanting to destroy Buddhism. Phra Thep Silpwisuth, abbot of Wat Arun Ratchawaram, appeared to see himself as chaplain to rightist supporters of General Suchinda Kraprayoon, deposed in the May 1992 events. There have also been sects like Hooppha Sawan, which lost its prominence following the prosecution and subsequent disappearance of its leader, Suchart Kosolkitiwong.

But whatever their merits and demerits, such groups had paid little regard to Thailand's social problems, whereas the movements with which we have been concerned had attempted in their various ways to address them.

If the Mahachulalongkorn monks ranked Kittivuddho surprisingly high in their estimate of benefit to Thai society, then it is probably because he took seriously the need to train both monks *and novices* in useful practical skills. Training facilities at Cittabhavana College were of a much higher quality than anything available to Mahachulalongkorn monks in the course of their rural development programs. Kittivuddho himself was a capable and experienced broadcaster who often referred to the need to remove social injustices, though, as has been pointed out, his "kammic" explanation of their origin and his refusal

to espouse full democracy as the main means for removing them, left much to be desired.

By contrast, Sulak Sivaraksa and the engaged Buddhists had regarded democracy as integral to Buddhism and essential in order to achieve any worthwhile social improvement. But as Chai-anan Samudavanija (1990, 187) pointed out, "'democracy' which allows for mass participation in politics is regarded as desirable but also dangerous."

Phutthathat's "here and now" reinterpretations of Buddhist doctrines gave meaning and urgency to social action and the removal of injustice, and his understanding of egocentricity ("I" or ego-ness) as the opposite of *anatta*, or no-self, as a goal to be attained gave a social dimension to collective human relationships. Phra Phaisaan Wisalai criticized Phutthathat's dhammic-socialism on the grounds that it was not fully democratic and leant too far in the direction of a kind of paternalistic and even authoritarian collectivity (Jackson 1989, 134). But the individualism with which Phaisaan would have replaced Phutthathat's socialism also has its dangers.

Individualism appeared to be characteristic of the commercial and middle-class supporters of the Wat Phra Thammakaay movement. According to an article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (4 July 1991, 22):

[This] highly organised, high technology sect provides its followers with a quick escape from everyday life into religion without sacrificing comfort, or that most valued commodity of the commercial class, time.

It is perhaps surprising that such a large proportion of socially-committed monks (88 percent) regarded the Wat Phra Thammakaay movement as beneficial to Thai society. But they probably felt it had not been involved in any major scandals and did not seem to do any harm to anybody.

By contrast with the comfort-loving Thammakaay adherents, Santi Asok was severely ascetic. According to Phra Phothisak,

I was not ordained in order to relax and enjoy a life of ease and convenience that undermines the national economy and which leads to the decay of religious values through seeking personal benefit from people's ignorance. (Anan 1982, 53)

Peter Jackson (1989, 188) credited Chamlong Srimuang with having gone even further than Phothisak by integrating the role of the monk with active lay involvement in social welfare programs.

Peter Jackson's analysis of Phutthathat's exegesis of Buddhist scripture and his claim that the resulting nibbanic Buddhism represented "a potent expression of contemporary social and political aspirations" is questionable. Jackson's view (1989, 40) that Thai Buddhism consists of three forms—establishment metaphysical, middle-class rationalism, and "the magical and supernatural

form of the religion adhered to by many peasants and urban workers"—is too simplistic.

To give just two examples which are not consistent with Jackson's thesis: first, the spirit exorcism movement, Samnak Pau Sawan, which was started by Professor Kloom Vajaroban in the 1970s, was almost entirely middle-class; and second, the inability of the Wat Phra Thammakaay movement to attract devotees at Mahidol University may be accounted for by one or more of several possible reasons: its members study medicine, their training is longer, they therefore need more money, and a large proportion of them are Sino-Thai. Jackson does not appear to be aware of these factors.

More such examples could be given, but basically Jackson's view (1989, 225) that "urban Thai Buddhism functions as a system of political legitimation" is too narrow and incomplete. He failed to recognize that Phutthathat's exegesis of scripture was informed by historical knowledge of pre-Mahayana Madhyamika philosophy and that his Mahayanist leanings had probably been shaped by his own Sino-Thai family background.

Jackson does not appear to appreciate the need to consider religious phenomena in terms of their social, ethical, ritual, experiential and doctrinal dimensions, or the importance of having an interdisciplinary methodology and framework such as Tambiah's highly structuralist interplay between anthropology and history. A cursory inspection of Jackson's *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict* reveals only three references to women anywhere in the book (one is about the mae chii who flies up to deflect an atomic bomb!).

For whatever reasons, urban Buddhist movements rise and fall, and a rising star at the time of this research was Phra Payom Kallayano. Payom's unconventional communication skills; his commitment to cardinal Buddhist doctrines as interpreted by Phutthathat, until very recently Thailand's leading Buddhist scholar; his wit, affinity and support for women and young people; and above all his passion for participatory justice for the socially disadvantaged, rendered him a suitable candidate for the admiration of almost all the young scholar monks who took part in the investigation.

Acknowledgments

I should like to thank Dr. Chai-anan Samudavanija and the Chaiyong Limthongkul Foundation for the grant which enabled this research to take place and for office facilities at the Thailand Institute for Public and International Affairs; also Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Phra Maha Tuan Pim-Aksorn, Jaruwan Dejprasert and Mae Chii Arun Petchurai for their assistance.

The diligence with which the deans at Mahachulalongkorn distributed the questionnaires and the care with which the monks completed them (during class periods) would have been in part at least a response to a covering letter by Dr. Prawase Wasi.

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