

Religious Movement of Buddhādāsa: Reformation and Development of Thai Buddhism



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ABSTRACT

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1909-1993) both nationally and internationally is the most famous Thai monk. His movement is one of the most prominent religious movements in contemporary Thailand. This movement played a prominent role in the development of Thai Buddhism throughout the mid part of the 19th and the end part of the 20th century. The central feature of the movement lies in the reinterpretation of Pāli Canon by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu. Buddhādāsa interprets the Theravada doctrine intellectually and critically. His interpretation of Buddhism reflects not only the potential of traditional religious culture to accommodate to modern life but also impels Buddhism toward modernization.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu is considered one of the prominent reformist figures in modern Thai society. He has established “Suan Mokkhabalārām (Garden of Liberation)”¹ as a center of the real Dhamma practice. This religious movement played an important role to understand the original doctrines of the Buddha and to reform

¹ Vivekananda, A Glimpse of the Life and Teaching of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, p.35.

Thai Buddhism through his theory “Dhammic Socialism” which reflects a Buddhist perspective on socialism. Through his Dhammic Socialism, Buddhādāsa pointed out political, economic and social problems from a Buddhist of view and the religious problem such as the crisis and confusion between Buddhism and popular belief. Through his lifespan, he sincerely contributed to the reformation and development of Buddhism in Thailand through his religious movement. Therefore, Donald K. Swear compared him with Nāgārjuna.²

Keywords: Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, Nāgārjuna, Theravada doctrine

²Swear, The vision of Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, pg.14 “History may well judge him as the most seminal Theravāda thinker since Buddhaghosa and may evaluate Buddhādāsa’s role within the Buddhist tradition to be on a par with such great Indian Buddhist thinkers as Nāgārjuna with whom he has been compared.”

Buddhadāsa's Biography

It is said that Buddhadāsa was born into Chinese trader family and on May 27, 1906 (2449 B.E) at Phumriang in Chaiya, the province of Surat Thani, Southern Thailand. He was the eldest son in his family and had a younger brother who was monk name as Dharmadāsa and a sister name as Kimsoy. Since childhood, he was a monastic boy and studied at a temple school. From 1914 to 1917 received a basic education at Wat Mai, The temple in which was boarding school providing a new independence and pleasant environment for Thai boys. In traditional Thai society, temples were the core of the Thai educational system for many centuries. After finishing junior secondary education, he stopped his education in the school and helped the family business.

At the age of 20, he was ordained into monkhood on July 29, 1926, into the Mahanikaya Order at Wat Nok. His name became Buddhadāsa and also known as Indapañña Thera. Buddhadāsa went to Bangkok for Buddhist studies. He graduated tertiary level of Dhamma studies, and level three of Pāli studies. Afterward, he went back to his hometown in 1932. He was appointed to a special assignment as the Thai Saṅgha representative to the Sixth Buddhist Council in Burma in 1957. He delivered a speech on the subject of "Certain Wonderful Characteristics of Theravada Buddhism".³ He worked for Thai Buddhism during his 57 years in Monkhood lifespan. Then he died in 1993. With the respect of his great contribution to reformation and development of Thai Buddhism, the General Conference of UNESCO has honored Buddhadāsa as one of the great personalities in the world on Oct. 20, 2005, for his great beneficial works to Buddhism & society and a great significant effect on the circle of Buddhist studies and practice.⁴

Buddhadāsa: The Reformation Movement of Thai Buddhism

Buddhadāsa was recognized as a famous re-interpreter into Thai of many important and influential Theravāda Buddhist doctrines and considered as a reformist figure of Thai Buddhism. He was mostly influenced by the reformist Rama Mongkut and Vajirayana. The

³Hans-Dieter Evers, Buddhadāsa's Movement: An Analysis of Its Origins, Development, and Social Impact", Pg.99

⁴Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu Named One of the World's Great Personalities, <<https://www.gotoknow.org/posts/560310>>

reform of Thai Buddhism started with the King Mongkut in the 19th century and it has been completed through the works of Buddhādāsa in the 20th century.⁵ Thai Buddhism reformed with two orders against the western methodology of rationalism; Doctrinal reform and institutional reform. The king Mongkut has doctrinally reformed Thai Buddhism. Then Buddhādāsa was accomplished through the work of Rama Mongkut.⁶

The main feature of the movement is the reinterpretation of Pāli Canon by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu. His interpretation of Buddhism reflects not only the potential of traditional religious culture to accommodate to modern life but also impels Buddhism toward modernization. Buddhādāsa maintains that Buddhism must be interpreted in order to be beneficial for modern people. It should be appropriate and relevant to contemporary concerns to ordinary man's life as a way of life rather than teaching. He explained his demythologized interpretation of Nibbāna. It clearly shows that his interpretation approach to the teaching focused on practice, which rejects both the supernatural forms of Buddhism and the metaphysical forms of the religion. It emphasizes on the rejection of supernatural Powers as Animistic. He deeply criticized the misinterpretation of Buddhism because this misinterpretation brings Buddhism to Animistic beliefs.

Buddhādāsa's Theory of Dhammic Socialism

Buddhādāsa did so primarily in terms of democracy in which was not related to the Thai system of government. Buddhādāsa believes that Socialism is a natural state where all things exist together in one system.⁷ He explained "Dhammic Socialism (Dhammika sangkhom niyom)"⁸ with the social problems such as religion, social ethics, capitalism, democracy "Dhammocracy (Dhamma-thipatai)", the role of leadership etc. He was the only major Buddhist teacher who seriously thought, spoke out social issues and had not feared to discuss political issues in the society from Buddhist point of view. According to his interpretations, Thai Buddhism is not only from a viewpoint but also from a socio-political

⁵Tavivat, Puntarigvivat, Thai Buddhist Social Theory, Institute of Research and Development The world Buddhist University, Bangkok, 2013, pg.60.

⁶Tavivat Puntarigvivat, pg.37

⁷Preecha Changkhwanyuen, Dhammic Socialism Political Thought of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies 2 (1), (2003), pg. 118.

⁸Tavivat Puntarigvivat, pg.93

perspective. Therefore, Buddhādāsa says, “The socialist characteristics of Dhamma manifest themselves in the harmonious balance of everything.”⁹ He made difference between socialism and individualism with social and ethical aspects. We must embrace the socialism with the work or service to society. Otherwise, the work is belonged “individualism”. According to Buddhādāsa, Socialism focuses on the welfare of people without any division. He criticized individualism, which cannot provide a basis for the welfare of all people in the society because it promotes individual benefits rather than social benefits.

The Notion on Dhammic Socialism and Nature

Buddhādāsa openly and directly began to declare during the sixties that Buddhism is socialist in nature and his notion of Dhammic Socialism bases on nature. “Dhamma is Nature and Nature is Dhamma”¹⁰. Here Buddhādāsa maintains the Buddhist notions of Conditionality (*idappacayata*) and Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Nature represents the state of balance for the survival and well-being of human beings, animals, plants and ecology of the world. He tried to explain in the state of nature that every being produces in accordance with its capability and consumes in accordance with its needs. It refers to in order not to use for the sake of own profit and distribute for the well-being with the Buddhist ethical tools.

Dhammic Socialism is philosophically based on principle (*sīla*). In the state of nature, the condition of harmonious balance depends on the pure essence of Morality (*sīla-dhamma*). According to Buddhādāsa, this balance is called the plan or intention of nature.¹¹ It refers not to be greedy and take more than we really need and should share with those who have less whatever extra we have. His interpretation shows that our individualistic practice of self-restraint can be solved social and economic, political problems such as reduce of poverty, conflict and establish peace in society with different aspects.

⁹Swearer, Donald K, *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, Edited and with an Introduction. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pg.203.

¹⁰ *Tavivat Puntarigvivat* p.60

¹¹ *Tavivat Puntarigvivat* p.100

Buddhadāsa's Theory of Dhammic Socialism and Religion

Buddhadāsa's Dhammic socialism and religion ideal may be relevant for society if it operates naturally and spontaneously. He believes that Buddhism and all religions are essentially socialistic in nature. Buddhism in its principles and its spirits is a socialistic religion. From Buddhadāsa's interpretation, the founders of all religions have come into existence to the world for the benefits of all beings. He also claims that Buddhism focuses on the ideal of love, compassion, equality, freedom and interrelatedness of all beings. The concept of bodhisattva in Buddhism is the socialistic ideology.¹² Buddha's compassionate behavior toward all living beings, Buddhadāsa considered the highest form of socialism.

According to Buddhadāsa, if the Buddhist Community of Sangha and laity both voluntarily cultivate the Buddhist principles of self-control with the *sīla* (morality), *vinaya* (Precept), loving-kindness (*metta-karunā*) and giving (*dāna*), it will be potential for the society.¹³ These kinds of people will highly be acceptable to everyone in the society but according to modern socio-perspective, to impose the religious rules and regulations of the Buddhist Sangha onto a secular society would violate people's freedom of religion. Therefore, Buddhadāsa said that imposing the norms a religious community in a society is both unrealistic and problematic. It would turn a dynamic modern society like Thailand.

The Notion on Dhammic Socialistic and Leadership

According to notion of socialist leadership of Buddhadāsa, the ruler of leadership should have ten virtues such as *Dāna*, *Sīla*, *Pariccāga*, *Ajjava*, *Maddava*, *Tapa*, *Akkodha*, *Avihimsa*, *Khanti* and *Avirodha* because one who has ten virtues, he can be recognized as great leader (*dharmaraja*). Donald Swearer argues that Notion of Buddhadāsa on Dhammic socialism has three basic principles.¹⁴ Firstly, the principle of the good of the whole deals with political, economic and social structures. Secondly, the principle of restrain and generosity governs individual behavior. Thirdly, the principle of respect and loving-kindness prescribes the right attitude to all beings of life, which provides the principle for

¹² Tavivat Puntarigvivat, pg.107

¹³ Tavivat Puntarigvivat, pg.51

¹⁴ Swearer, Donald K, "Dhammic Socialism" translated and edited by Swearer, Donald K, Thai Interreligious Commission for Development, Bangkok, 1986

a political philosophy with the potential to help Thai Buddhist.¹⁵ Louis Gabaude takes a very different view: The only different is that liberal democracy and communism are real, actual regimes, while dictatorial Dhammic socialism is the projection or mental construction.¹⁶ Therefore, Louis Gabaude pointed out Buddhādāsa's notion is problematic because the model rulership of Buddhādāsa is unrealistic in the modern world.¹⁷ But it is definitely sure that the theory of dhammic socialistic ideology of Buddhādāsa is able to bring peace and justice to Thai Society.

“Suan Mukkh” Movement of Buddhādāsa

Buddhādāsa has established “Suan Mokkhabalārām (Garden of Liberation)”¹⁸ as a center of the real Dhamma practice. The center initially located at Wat Traphangchik and later having moved to Wat Than Nam Lai up to now. He tried to return to the original form of Saṅgha same as the time of the Buddha through his social and practical activities. This is the most essential attempt to reform Thai Buddhism in recent Siamese history. He went beyond the official and politically controlled religious institution without breaking with it. There were no harsh words and judgments in his movement. His project was to establish an International Dhamma Hermitage. In addition to Suan Mokkh is intended to provide facilities for:

His Great Three missions

1. To enable followers of religions to understand their religions: Introduce foreigners to the correct understanding of Buddhist principles and practice.
2. To improve relations between religions: Meetings among Buddhists from around the world to establish and agree upon the “Heart of Buddhism”;
3. To prevent people from materialism: Meetings of leaders from all religions for the sake of making mutual good understanding and cooperating to drag the world out from under the tyranny of materialism.

¹⁵ Tavivat Puntarigvivat p.145

¹⁶ Tavivat Puntarigvivat p.145

¹⁷ Gabaude, “Thai Society and Buddhādāsa: Structural Difficulties,” p.220.

¹⁸ Vivekananda, A Glimpse of the Life and Teaching of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, p.35

Unifying with all religions and schools

Buddhadāsa is the one in history of Thai Buddhism who tried to stay together with all religion and school of Buddhism. He studied all schools of Buddhism as well as the other major religious traditions. This interest was practical rather than scholarly but he is famous for scholastic researches. He required unifying all truly religious people in order to work together and to help each other, as he put it, “Drag humanity out from under the power of materialism”¹⁹. He got friends and students from around the world, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs for his broadminded. Buddhadāsa accepted other beliefs; he translated Sutra of Weiling and Huangpo’s teachings into Thai,²⁰ and wrote Buddhadhamma-Christadhamma as compromising studies between Buddhism and Christianity.

The Great Contribution for Education

Buddhadāsa presented Buddhism in ways that inspired those working in the areas of alternative education, the environment, and village development. The organizers and workers were directly inspired and influenced to work with educational activities by his work and inspiration. He left instruction for the building of Dhamma-Mata, a residential facility to support the dedicated study-practice of women. He called it Dhamma-Mata (Dhamma Mothers, those who give birth to others through Dhamma).²¹

Meditation Movement and Technique of Insight Meditation

Buddhadāsa was a famous meditation master in Thailand in that period. He is well known among both Buddhists and non-Buddhists for his lessons in meditation. He followed the technique that people should practice five precepts and eight precepts during

¹⁹ Suan Mokkhabalārām: The Garden of Liberation <<http://www.suanmokkh.org/history/tanaj1.htm>>

²⁰ Phaisan Vesalo, “The Legacy of Thailand’s reformist monk”, The Buddhist Channel, Bangkok, 2006 <<http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=30,2758,0,0,1,0#.VwURGl97IU>>

²¹ Ito, Tomomi, Dhammamata: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s Notion of Motherhood in Buddhist Women practitioners, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.38, NO.3, 2007. <<https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-171295973/dhammamata-buddhadasa-bhikkhu-s-notion-of-motherhood>>

the learning period because it helps to practice and concentrate. Buddhādāsa taught meditation technique for the beginners with breathing in and out (Samatha) to concentrate on breathing at every moment and he does not require to repeating any word. In his Books, “Getting started in mindfulness with breathing, Void Mind, quenching without reminder & the fruit of Meditation”, Buddhādāsa followed Ānāpānasati and Ānāpānasati is the true Satipaṭṭhāna because Ānāpānasati helps to practice Insight Meditation.²² Insight Meditation does not practice without practicing Ānāpānasati.

Conclusion

Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu is one of the most important Buddhist reformists in Thai history. Through above discussion, we can see that Buddhādāsa played an important role to develop and reform Thai Buddhism through his religious movement of reinterpretation of Pāli Canon. We can see in Buddhādāsa’s interpretation two main aspects of his work: his interpretation of Buddhism and of the social development, economic and political implications of Buddhist doctrines. The other main aspect is that Buddhādāsa’s interpretation of social development, education, economics, and politics as representative of and based on central Buddhist doctrines.

Buddhādāsa arrived at a more holistic interpretation of Buddhism from the perspective of everyday life which provides a meaningful identity to the ordinary people. He interpreted Buddhism as way of life rather than a doctrine. His religious thought have developed beyond the fabric of traditional Thai Buddhist teachings and practices. The motivation for his interpretation of Theravāda doctrines seems to making Buddhism not only meaningful but also relevant to the modern world. Buddhādāsa offers a particular response of Thai Buddhism to modernity.

²² Tavivat Puntarigivat p.60

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