

# THE QUEST FOR A JUST SOCIETY



The Legacy and Challenge of  
Buddhadassa Bhikkhu

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## **FOR A JUST SOCIETY**

### **The Legacy and Challenge of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu**

edited by  
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Bangkok 2537 (1994)

# BUDDHADASA'S CONTRIBUTIONS AS A HUMAN BEING, AS A THAI, AS A BUDDHIST

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I want to thank Sulak Sivaraksa for inviting me to join this honorable gathering on the first anniversary of the death of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. As everybody knows, Sulak is a taker of risks and he has taken one, albeit a small one, in this invitation. Even though I may present in this paper some of Buddhadasa's contributions to the world, it should be obvious to all that it would be too presumptuous of me to make a suggestion for or give an advice on the ways to carry on Buddhadasa's work.

In the first place, I came to study Buddhadasa not as a devotee but as an historian of contemporary Thai religious thought and, notwithstanding my appreciation of his creative mind, I made no secret of some of the problems I had with his teachings.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, this did not alarm Sulak. In the second place, being neither a Thai nor a Buddhist, I could be seen as just another blind Westerner trying to discover the nature of an elephant by touching

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<sup>1</sup> See. a) Louis GABAUDE. *Une herméneutique bouddhique contemporaine de Thaïlande: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu*. Paris, Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1988, 690 p. b) "Thai Society and Buddhadasa : Structural Difficulties". In : *Radical Conservatism : Buddhism in the Contemporary World: Articles in Honour of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa's 84th Birthday Anniversary*. Bangkok, International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 1990, pp. 211-229.

here and there on Thai life or on the still more elusive Buddhist life. So, not only will I not blame you if you think I should keep quiet today, but I beg your pardon in advance for my unworthy thoughts which are either simple or self-evident.

Moreover, to suggest ways of carrying on the work of Buddhadasa implies that his work is worth continuing, yet how can a "non-Buddhist" like myself judge what is worthy or unworthy in the writings of a Buddhist monk? I cannot legitimately make such a claim. However, I have accepted Sulak's invitation because I felt that, at least, I could focus on the basic elements in Buddhadasa's life and teachings which deserve appreciation even from an ordinary man like me, especially in the context of the present situation of the world of which I am a part, of Thailand as my host country, and of Buddhism as my field of research and sympathy.

So, what can I say about Buddhadasa's contributions to the world? Usually, a "contribution", is thought of as something given to someone, thus it belongs in the domain of "having", on the grounds that one cannot give what one does not possess or "have". In the case of Buddhadasa's contributions, that leads naturally to focus on the "works", or the "books", or the "sayings". It is my contention that whatever Buddhadasa "had" or "gave" or "contributed" came mainly from what he actually "was", which is for me a contribution not only not to be overlooked, but a primary and seminal contribution of which we must be conscious in the first place.

This explains why I would like to draw your attention to the roots of Buddhadasa's contributions as the human being he was, as the Thai he was and, finally, as the Buddhist he was. I acknowledge that this is more the subject of a book than of a short talk, so please consider this as a limited suggestion of what should be expanded and developed further on.

## **1. BUDDHADASA AS A HUMAN BEING**

Even if, as a non-Buddhist and a non-Thai, I am unqualified to speak of Buddhadasa, I hope you will agree that I might at least render some kind of a judgment on Buddhadasa as a human being, because I happen to be a human being, too, albeit from a different continent, culture and spiritual level. Of course, you may say that just being a human being should not be taken into account in the case of Buddhadasa because, even if you are not among those who place him among the "gods" or the "angels" ("thepts" or deva), you could argue that what shines most in him is "higher" than the merely common, mortal and finally contemptible character of ordinary humanity. I presume that his "Thai" and most of all his "Buddhist" virtues appeal to you much more than his "human" qualities. But to a non-Buddhist foreigner, these very human qualities were probably the first common platform on which many of us could relate to and eventually come to appreciate Buddhadasa. Moreover, I am reasonably sure that, to him too, this human platform was a preeminent one. We have several clues, from the way he produced his biographies to his concern for the world at large, through his repeated teachings about the way to achieve one's humanity.

### **HUMAN BIOGRAPHY versus SUPERHUMAN HAGIOGRAPHY**

Every human being has a problem with "image" or "face" because, accurately or not, the face is supposed to express something from the heart. In other words, the appearance reveals something of the hidden within. Someone has said that up to 45 years of age, we are responsible for the face we show, but after that we are also held responsible for the face we have because our way of looking at life is revealed in the set of our face. So, the face may be revealing in one way or another; lovers know this. We may be afraid

of what our face might disclose about our true feelings. That makes it a very sensitive area and even an "erroneous zone" on which we may consciously construct a deceptive world for ourselves and others, a world of appearances and illusions we wish others to take as our deepest feelings. To accomplish this task, our "face" extends out to all our "havings" or belongings which are supposed to reveal our innermost "being": jewels or gold, preferably in large amounts; cars, preferably an expensive highly regarded one; houses, preferably an exclusive neighborhood; diplomas, preferably from an excellent university; a wife or a husband, preferably from a good or rich family. Even monks may have an extended face as well: honorific titles, preferably at the provincial or national level; temples, preferably wealthy or famous ones; bronze images, preferably of large size; flattering publicity stories, preferably in a well-known magazine, etc.

People keen on generalizing may even go so far as to assert the commonplace that, for Thais, their "image" is more important than the truth of their actual life, or that their "face" is more important than their heart. For many, face-gaining and face-saving could well serve as categories to analyze Thai behaviour, specially among the elite in the so-called "high" society. I will give two examples.

Until recently, prostitution was never considered a "problem" in elite circles except when some malicious foreign newspaper or TV network began to spread the word about it and the "image" was broadcast around the world that "tourists" were spoiling Thai "innocence" by preying on Thai poverty. Even if one sympathizes with that nationalist frustration because there was and is more to Thailand than prostitution, still one was surprised by the fuss about the revelation of a visible yet tiny minority while the hidden, silent yet large majority of prostitutes never raised an eyebrow here. Not a thought or consideration was expressed for



the tens (or hundreds?) of thousands of prostitutes working diligently for the "native" market all over the country, while those working for foreigners in three or four areas in Bangkok were exposed as unbearable.

Turning to another very sensitive spot for Thailand's erroneous zones, Buddhism, we cannot help but notice that its "face" is sometimes more concerned for appearance than for deep commitment. Actually, the monks's rules or Vinaya and Thai customs lend support to this tendency by attaching a great importance to the robes and to the status of the monk and, more generally, to the external and formal marks of appreciation and respect. Such respect should uphold the virtues and well-being of the monks and the "good" order of society in general. However, this attention to "forms" often produces an adverse effect when relatively young monks create their own image through sentimental or outspoken teachings, books and magazines, through extreme asceticism, through amulets or bronze images before they have actually emulated the purity their image purports to show. Only one newspaper headline is often enough to send this false and artificial image to the dustbin.

The young Buddhadasa was also concerned with his image. He wrote a booklet on the first ten years of Suan Mokkh and contributed to his first published biography.<sup>2</sup> When you compare these image-building materials with those dealing with other contemporary famous monks, you cannot but be struck by the difference. Normally, monks achieved and still achieve promotion and fame through two channels. The first is the ascension to higher and higher responsibilities through the religious administrative network set up to control and preserve the purity (as well as the political

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<sup>2</sup> See : a) พุทธศาสนิกฯ 10 ปีในสวนโมกข์ เล่าเรื่องชีวิตในวัยหนุ่ม กรุงเทพฯ, กองทุนวัฒนธรรม, ม.ป.ป. 63 หน้า  
b) ชิต ภินาลแทน ชีวิตและงานของพุทธศาสนิกฯ, กรุงเทพฯ ศิลปาบรรณาคาร, 2520, 329 หน้า

innocuousness) of the sangha. The second is the ascension towards sainthood through genuine asceticism often spiced with stories of struggle with ferocious spirits or with miracles produced by amulets during other types of wars, be they military, or business or sexual ones. This has created two religious hierarchies in Thailand: one is the official, state-sanctioned, Bangkok centered one, and the other is the popular, lay-sponsored, multi-centered one. Most of the time, the two co-exist in peace but along parallel lines. Sometimes they meet when a fairly popular monk is given administrative responsibilities; sometimes they clash, as in the case of Phra Srivijay in Chiang Mai or Phra Phimolatham in Bangkok.

From the very beginning, Buddhadasa was atypical because he did not fit into either of the two hierarchies. First, he criticized the granting of honorific titles by the State to the monks because it not only induced a desire for honors, but also it revealed the desire of the State to exercise control over the sangha. Moreover, he was convinced that there were already enough temples in this country. So, there was more than enough evidence for the official hierarchy to be cautious about this "leftist" character. Buddhadasa did not fit into the second popular scale for achievement either. He acknowledged that in Suan Mokkh he was not favored with encounters of the third type. No malevolent spirits, no boon granting deity ever appeared to prove that he was some kind of a special being, he was just an ordinary human being, just an ordinary monk, just an ordinary man. There was no miracle to look for, save the "miracle of being awake".

His tendency towards focusing upon the importance of the merely human as the basis for religious life was further underlined in his oral autobiography which was skillfully extracted from interviews with the Master by Pracha Hutuanuwatra, then a monk

in Suan Mokkh.<sup>3</sup> Through these oral memoirs, we see a living man emerge in his search, his commitment, his courage, his creativity, his openness as well as his errors and limits.

## A LESSON ON AUTHENTICITY

In these times of national recognition and legitimation of Buddhadasa and after all those Honoris Causa Doctorates granted by most Thai universities, one should be reminded that the late "doctor" often acknowledged that he had been in error or that he had failed. He had been wrong as a young monk to preach "like a parrot" "democratic" sermons after the 1932 "revolution" while ignoring everything about democracy, society and politics. He had been wrong to attack "God" from a traditional Theravada point of view. Later on, he admitted failure to explain some of his main teachings so that all would understand. Buddhadasa's confession of errors and failures (from one many consider a genius) should give ordinary followers pause vis-à-vis their own opinions and theories.

It is often difficult for a committed preacher to distinguish the moment when he serves the "truth" or the "Dhamma" from the moment when he uses this "truth" or this "Dhamma" to serve his own image, his own ego, not to speak of serving his passions. This is difficult because, if he does not want to simply repeat the religious textbooks or read over and over the Anisong sermons, on the "advertages" of meritorious acts, he must internalize the Dhamma in order to be able to present it to others; he has to personalize it without "ego-izing" it; he has to serve it while remaining free. When this is achieved, and that should take years, when the time comes for a creative preacher to expound his views, when

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<sup>3</sup> See: พุทธทาสภิกขุ. *เล่าไว้เมื่อวันสนทนา : อัตชีวประวัติของท่านพุทธทาส*. (พระประชา ปสนุนตฺโม สัมภาษณ์). กรุงเทพฯ มุลนิธิโกมลคีมทอง 2535, (26), 707 หน้า.

he is alone in his "kuthi" pondering the Kalama Sutta principles,<sup>4</sup> he should think it over carefully for a while before assuming that he has attained the "truth" or before believing that people might consider him to be almost a Buddha.

I have indeed met such monks who were so overly confident of their spiritual attainment or took pride in their followers' praises that it escapes their lips. They are very interesting for a researcher such as myself, but at the same time less convincing to the person within myself. These proud monks seem to believe that their achievements would be incomplete without proclaiming it themselves. Apparently, they do not trust the people to recognize their "remarkable" achievement. Because of their urgent need for public recognition of their "special qualities" one is moved to investigate exactly what it is they pretend to know. In the end, one is led to doubt that they are what they appear to be. Was I deceived or not? I never had this feeling with Buddhadasa. He was just what I thought we should expect from anyone; he was not playing easy ego games; he was just being himself; he said nothing beyond his own actual experience. Apparently, he was just what he said he was. He admitted errors; he admitted failures. When he taught, he did not pretend to put himself above others. And even when his approach toward this Dhamma was so "personal" as to border upon heresy in the eyes of many, you did not feel it to be an ego enhancing exercise for him. He talked and acted as if it concerned only the Dhamma which through time and authenticity had become wholly natural and universally human.

Anyone who tries to emulate Buddhadasa, whichever life one has decided to lead, should first remember the authenticity in

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<sup>4</sup>The "Kalama principles" are the following : 1. Be not led by report; 2. Be not led by tradition; 3. Be not led by hearsay; 4. Be not led by the authority of texts; 5. Be not led by mere logic; 6. Be not led by interference; 7. Be not led by considering appearances; 8. Be not led by the agreement with a considered and approved theory; 9. Be not led by seeming possibilities; 10. Be not led by the idea 'This is our teacher'.

his life. Authenticity engenders humility because aspiring to any ideal can never be perfectly achieved. In the long run, authenticity is probably the best way to achieve public recognition although it should not aim for public recognition in the first place. It took several scores of years to produce the Buddhadasa we now know. As a young monk, he was neither an abuser nor the victim of the media which now prey upon the young and not so young monks. These are monk "stars" featured in the newspapers, religious magazines, television, and shown in shops or riding in fancy cars. Why would they not believe they are famous since they appear in the press or the TV, or because they are ubiquitous and can travel around the world to show off the Dhamma – or themselves. If an authentic nature does not act as a guide to spiritual progress, then there is a risk that an inflated public image will grow to the bursting point.

So we are back to square one, the question of image. I hope I have suggested that Buddhadasa's image building has been based on that ordinary human quality of authenticity which guarantees a proportionate growth for both the real authentic personality and the artificially forged image or, better yet, that which guarantees there is no artificially forged image other than the real authentic personality. That authenticity is one of the many features I read in Buddhadasa's life and should be the foundation for anyone who carries on his work.

## **FOR A HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM**

In addition to looking at his life, there is another way to stress the human side of Buddhadasa, and that is his teachings.

In nineteenth century Europe, Buddhism created a shock among the first intellectuals to discover and study it because, for them, it had no God, no concept of the immortal soul and no humanism. A "religion" without an eternal God and without a

transcendental soul was, of course, beyond the understanding of western minds, be they theists or atheists. But a religion without any concern for history, a religion so "monkish" as to be removed from ordinary life was, nonetheless, intriguing. Since then, Buddhists have attempted to show that their religion is indeed "humanistic" too. Here, in Thailand, Buddhadasa and the groups founded by Sulak Sivaraksa have striven to prove just that.

The many titles of talks and books by Buddhadasa bear witness to his concern for the basic needs of mankind and the answers Buddhism could give such as "Manual for Mankind", "Why were you born". With these titles, Buddhadasa did not want to address only the Thai "Buddhists", whom he thought were just Buddhists in name only; he aimed to address the most common denominator in every Thai, to be sure, but within every person everywhere in the world as well.

In Thailand which is facing the deculturization and debudhization of the urban and educated elite, Buddhadasa's approach aims to plant the questions Buddhism pretends to answer into a deeper soil than the quickly disappearing "traditional" one. Rural and magical Buddhism may mean very little to the "modern" and "scientific" person. That did not really matter for Buddhadasa because his "true" Buddhism is not supposed to speak to only rural and magic-oriented populations. "True" Buddhism has an answer for everyone and, indeed, for all modern students, for all modern persons. Based on wisdom or *paññā*, Buddhism should appeal to all concerned persons who reflect deeply upon the human condition. As a moral force both for the individual as well as society, Buddhism offers guidelines not only to monks but also to the laity who are concerned with political and social justice. These discourses answered questions from students and intellectuals. But, if one considers the practical results in Thai life, one is unsure, to say the least, if Buddhadasa's teaching about "Dhammic socialism", for

example, had anything to do with the end of the communist guerilla movement or had any impact on the MP's personal behavior or public law-making.

Up to the very end of his life, Buddhadasa continued to lash out at the westernized and ego-centered system of education; he continually made an appeal for a public morality; and he called for the creation of a comprehensive Buddhist humanism that could not be achieved quickly or by one monk only. He was conscious of the cultural "globalization" before the word was created and become fashionable.

Beyond Thailand, Buddhadasa felt that the "materialism" of western civilization and the crisis facing all established religions were actually responsible for creating a spiritual void in the religious life, just like in Thailand. And just like here, the question "Why were we born" could be applied to people from all over the world in order to question their way of life. The similarity of the crisis facing all religions called for a parallel re-planting of questions they had failed to answer properly. By understanding the heart or essence of every religion, which was the first of Buddhadasa's "resolutions", everyone would be able to dialogue among themselves and that was the second resolution. Paradoxically, for the whole of humankind, the "materialistic" and spiritually bankrupt culture created a common battleground for reflection and reaction and this struggle against materialism was his third "resolution".

Buddhadasa's analysis expresses a deep concern for the fate of human individuals and societies all over the world, first in the context of the cold war, then of the communist guerilla movement and, lately, of a stammering Thai democracy. In his attempt to find a deeper and a common ground for individual and social morality, Buddhadasa exploited the richness of the concept of

Dhamma from which the "nature of things" (or "thammachat") emerges. His analyses of this "nature of things" indicates that he drew upon a general concept of what this "nature of things" was for all human beings all over the world: politics, sexuality, education, female behavior, work, etc., everything could be articulated to the "nature of things". This amounts to an innocence or even a naïveté in the eyes of a Westerner who has been raised to believe that, actually, there is no perception of any "nature of things" outside the framework or the conditioning of a specific "culture". One often has the impression that Buddhadasa was not always conscious that his so-called "universal" view of the "nature of things" was actually a modernist "Thai" view of this nature. If this is true, we have some homework to do to analyze the relationship between nature, culture and the religion(s) of a specific culture, namely the Thai culture.

Now that the western and communist "humanisms" have shown their limitations, people of goodwill are challenged to show that they can articulate an authentic and practical humanism with their spiritual convictions. If you do not want to allow Buddhism to continue to live on with its nineteenth century understanding which made it a narrow humanism just for small communities of monks striving for extinction, and if you feel that Buddhadasa's work should be incarnated into new forms, then this is perhaps one of the fields you should consider worthwhile of study.

Due to the time limits of this gathering, I must omit many aspects of Buddhadasa's contribution as a human being. I have pointed first to one personal aspect of Buddhadasa that I think is the fundamental condition for anyone who would follow not only Buddhadasa but any exemplary person. By this I mean the primacy of the authentic life and of the equation of the real ego with the apparent image. Then, I touched on one doctrinal foundation of humanism which could be explored more fully: the notion of the



nature of things which might not be as simple as Buddhadasa has suggested.

I will now concentrate my focus on the contributions of Buddhadasa as a Thai.

## **2. BUDDHADASA AS A THAI**

To begin one could ask a controversial question: is there really such a person as a "Thai"? If one takes "Thai" to refer to some pure ethnic group, then I am afraid it would be difficult to find a scholar to certify that such and such villages are pure "Thai". You would find people telling you that this is or that was a "Lao" village, that a "Mon" one, or a "Lawa", a "Thai Lü", a "Phu Tai", and so on. There is a great chance that the "Thais" left would be those who have simply forgotten their particular ethnic identity. This is a very narrow base indeed, if "Thai-ness" is to rest on Thai ethnicity.

If one takes "Thai" not as referring to one particular ethnic group, but to a social image sketched from the middle of the last century onward, roughed out by Rama VI, sculpted by Luang Vijit Watthakarn and adorned by subsequent governments, then there are indeed nearly sixty million Thais in this country with the last ones appearing on the scene being the "Chao thai phu khao", or in other words, the hill tribes.

For better or worse, all countries in the world not only need this kind of social image of themselves, they consciously create it. In France, for example, we have assembled an arsenal of imaged or conceptualized tools which, since the last century, have contributed to a finished product – modern French identity. More than one hundred years ago, the Republicans needed to blend together the different provincial or "native" peoples into one, national and republican mold so that, in particular, nostalgia for the former

Kingdom of France or for the former Napoleonic Empire would be entirely forgotten. The national anthem, republican symbols, architectural styles, history textbooks, national festivals, all was refurbished, recreated or just created from nothing into a new, one Nation from as many descendants of mixed natives and immigrants as Thailand may have. These tools were used in the national education system and the schools to put an end to "native" cultures and thus achieve national cultural unification.

What was accomplished in France in the last century is realized in Thailand in this century. At school, the future Buddhadasa learned from the same textbooks as all children throughout the country, at least as far as the education system reached. He was ordained and studied the religious textbooks printed in Bangkok for the whole country. Here again, he imbibed a standardized Buddhism which had been brought into the Buddhist community or sangha by the Thammayut Prince Vajirañanavarorasa. As he was a curious young monk, Buddhadasa absorbed not only the official ideology, he read secular books, reviews and newspapers, enough to be aware of dissenting spirits such as Thienwan, for example. He was impressed by the interest Westerners showed in Japanese Buddhism and was thus motivated to search for something in Theravada Buddhism that would appeal to Europeans. At that time, Western culture was more an ideal to imitate than a stain to wash out. Eagerness to learn and know, criticism of traditional beliefs, scientific discoveries, electric appliances, whatever came from the West was stimulating. Intellectually, Buddhadasa used Western critical tools to question Thai cultural beliefs as "superstitions" before he applied a critical methodology to the Buddhist scriptures themselves. In brief, Western values were used to criticize Thai values and even Thai Buddhist practice.

In the sixties, Buddhadasa began to talk of a new era where-in Western culture was seen to be more of a trend to contain or even

to repudiate than a trend to emulate as before. By then, Western clothing had been forced upon the Thai, Western educational subject matter had been expanded both in content as well as geographically, Western anti-communist stand inspired the political apparatus and games, Western economic values shaped the first Thai development plans, American military bases in the Northeast were freely used to bomb Indochina, and Japanese logos and trademarks began to appear on the streets of even remote districts, etc. No longer did the West shine with the charms of innovation and subversion that had seduced Buddhadasa in the thirties. Now, for Buddhadasa, the West meant rampant "materialism", an estrangement from one's own roots and culture, an alienation from one's own political and academic judgement and a rejection of one's own traditional values.

This coincided with a time of religious maturity whereby Buddhadasa had defined his own unique way of interpreting the Scriptures using the distinction, "Human language and Dhammic language". He re-interpreted a series of Buddhist "capsule phrases" such as "free mind" (jit wang) and Conditioned Origination. After Donald Swearer suggested to him that he be more systematic in his teachings, he began to give seasonal and thematic cycles of talks in Suan Mokkh, many of which have been printed in the "Thaammakhos" series. We were now in the seventies in Bangkok where Sulak Sivaraksa had for several years stirred the students' spirits through his "Sewana groups" and the *Sangkhomsat Parithat Review*. This flourished until 1973 when the students called for an end to the military government, and three "democratic" years followed. In the jungles, the Communist Party of Thailand guerillas, already struggling for years, were spurred on by the rise of new communist regimes in Saigon, Phom Penh and Vientiane in 1975. The political and social pressure mounted and in 1976 a coup threw many "concerned" and "radical" students and intellectuals into the arms of the communist guerilla movement

where most of them lost their political innocence within three years, unable to cope with the special type of "centralized democracy" that ruled the Communist Party of Thailand or with the "brotherhood at war" in nearby Cambodia and Vietnam.

For the Thai students and intellectuals, the years 1960-1980 were an era of questions. What was in doubt was not only the economic rules or which political system to choose but also the cultural identity of the students, many of whom were destined to become the future leaders of the middle-class. Many, from pure or mixed Chinese families, just happened to be born in Thailand. Others, from so-called "Thai" stems, had been uprooted from their rural soil. Through education all were opened to Western free, albeit limited, thinking and exposed to a communist utopia. With westernized heads atop an often crossbred body walking on Thai soil, they needed some channel to express their alienation and, hopefully, some system to articulate their confused egos. The channel through which to express themselves was Sulak Sivaraksa's *Sangkhomsat Parithat Review* and, sometimes the streets, to oppose the "dictators" or Japanese products. As for a system which would heal their broken egos into a new harmonious being, marxism was very seductive for many of them until the love affair turned sour. Other searching souls found themselves better off in the modernist Buddhist identity that Buddhadasa was blending together out of three culturally mixed sets of traditions, a Thai-Chinese one, a Thai-Western one and a Thevarada-Zen one.

Actually, Buddhadasa was well suited to create a new paradigm for those confused personalities. He himself issued from a typical mixed Chinese-Thai family. He could feel as a Thai from within through his mother, while looking at Thai culture from the outside through his father. From the day of his birth to the day of his ordination, he lived in a bifurcated world, one encouraging achievement in business, the other encouraging achievement in

the field of merit. He was to put his spiritual concerns into the shop and the concern for immediate benefit into the temple. In other words, he used his own blood and cultural mix as the basis for a deeper transformation, that of the psychological and spiritual levels. You may say that in Thai society, this situation is so pervasive that it does not even bear mentioning. Yes, mixed race families are common in Thailand. But what is also pervasive is the way in which Chinese-generated money is used to gratify the Thai urge for saving face, even in temples. What is original with Buddhadasa is the Chinese talent for efficiency mixed with the Thai-Buddhist quest for inner peace.

There is a second synthesis Buddhadasa realized of which the Thai public may be unaware even now, namely the Thai-Western synthesis. Buddhadasa never studied in any Western country nor even visited one. Yet, explaining the genesis of his theory of interpretation or his distancing from the Abhidhammapitaka would prove very difficult without recognizing in his thought a rather hidden blending with Western cultural ideas. The present generation could be misled by his warnings and condemnations of Western materialistic values infused into a victimized Thai society by a Westernized Thai educational system. His stand arose clearly as a result of excessive Americanization dating back mainly to the early sixties to which I briefly alluded earlier. However, the condemnation of the so-called "Western materialism" does not imply necessarily the condemnation of all Western ways.

The truth is that the young Buddhadasa felt at home with the intellectual curiosity for which the West is known. He therefore accepted a part, if in a very limited way, of Western critical literary and historical theories which had begun to be applied to the Buddhist Canon by the end of the nineteenth century. In brief, these theories, which had been previously used to study the Christian Bible, did not assume that the Theravada Buddhist Canon

was ever recited, checked, and codified unquestionably by scores of arahants soon after the Buddha's Parinirvana. That was just a pious story for devotees, not a "scientific" fact. Since Buddhadasa was afraid to pose a threat to the Thai Sangha and Thai Buddhists, he did not speak out very often with bold declarations, yet still he incurred their wrath when he implied that the Abhidhamma Pitaka had not been spoken literally by the Buddha himself, or later when he added that this part of the Canon could as well be thrown into the sea with little loss to Buddhists. When he suggested that "actually, the Buddha may not have said a word of what has been recorded in the Tripitaka", he repeated exactly what Western academics and Christian exegetes had previously applied to the sayings of Jesus found in the Gospels, much as the Rhys-Davids had applied to the Buddhist Canon. Most of the time Buddhadasa took a Western de-mythologizing approach to religious texts so as to present the Buddha's life and teachings in a more natural, straightforward and selective way of which the series of books "... from the Buddha's words" bear witness.

This talk would be incomplete if I did not mention his attention to what he termed "essential" or "genuine" core of religion. This understanding compelled Buddhadasa to remain in the forest, refuse to build an uposatha hall, or accept, only reluctantly, Buddha images, replicating the exact stand Protestants took toward Roman Catholic Christianity. Just as they considered the Roman Catholic "religion" to be layered with recent, false, useless and ultimately harmful additions to an earlier and more authentic Christian message, so too Buddhadasa, emulating the founders of the Mahabodhi Society in Sri Lanka, came to consider that most of the "religious" practices held in great respect by the Thai Buddhists were just as recent, just as fake, useless and harmful for the true comprehension and practice of the Buddha's original teaching. Whether expressed in a mild or a strong form, the adoption of this stance was a case of intellectual blending between East and West,

and even between Buddhism and Christianity. The West was used to "read" or interpret the East. While the latter was kept alive, it was actually viewed differently from the local tradition.

The third synthesis, between Theravada and Zen, is more well-known by the contemporary Thai public, and since Dr. Suwantha Satha-anand will probably touch on this, I will only retain what is most relevant to my problematic of the construction of a new Thai Buddhist identity. Buddhadasa knew Zen through Western books – the West again – and found first in Zen a confirmation of what a Chinese son could appreciate: a quick, practical and simple way to achieve something. This "something" being here both the understanding of the Tripitaka and its practice. This Zen discovery was all the more well received as it confirmed in Buddhadasa what the Western blending had already set off, namely an emphasis upon the essential core and a rejection of later accretions to "religion".

Now I return to what happened from the sixties onward and that which I consider to be Buddhadasa's primary contribution as a Thai. Buddhadasa lived in a society where the younger generation no longer felt its real Thai roots and was therefore tempted by foreign fruits, such as a Western consumerist society as well as marxist utopian dreams. Utilizing local proverbs, lullabies, folk-stories and old paintings, Buddhadasa presented his conception of Buddhism as if it came from an apparently typical Thai traditional background. This was an illusion as far as Buddhadasa's teaching was concerned because it actually implied a falling away from many facets of Thai "religion" and an inspiration that was more "foreign" than Thai. However, this was an effective tool in so far as it created an identity model for the urbanized, half Chinese and educated elites who knew very little about rural folk traditions but who also did not want to be alienated neither from Thai society nor from Western values.

If you are tempted to quickly and strongly react negatively to my suggestion of these "blendings" in Buddhadasa's inspiration or to the limited natural "Thai-ness" in his teachings, please remember that there is no such thing in this human world as pure "purity". You may find purity in diamonds, and it is said that women love diamonds, but how many would really like to be a diamond? You may think that arahants are pure, but, according to general beliefs, how many thousands of lives have they experienced before reaching the extinction of their desires? As for the rest of us, who knows where we come from. In our blood, runs saints, killers, heroes, prostitutes, soldiers, poor, rich, even kings perhaps, but since we do not know, we do not think we are monstrous mongrels and believe in our purity. Similarly, Thai-ness is very much a modern and composite feature put forward from above in times of nation-building or from below in times of root-searching. Thai-ness just appears to be pure because we are ignorant or fail to pay attention to its multi-layered origin and formation. From convenience and ignorance, we freeze it into a certain period of history, forgetting that it was continually evolving because it was and is a living process. I might risk saying that the contemporary discourse on a fixed-in-time Thai-ness signals its demise because a goose in a freezer cannot be a live goose! The presence of Thai-ness in the contemporary discourse is like the presence of an artifact in a museum. I mean that it is no more a part of daily life, if indeed it ever was in the way we fancy it. So, showing that Buddhadasa's Thai-ness is composite, multi-layered and even in part foreign-inspired should be considered as a commonplace observation and not as a cause for scandal. What is remarkable, and this is not a pronouncement on the orthodoxy of Buddhadasa, is that he has managed to create a harmonized approach to Buddhism for many who feel themselves not only to be Buddhists but also modern and "truly" Thai. But since his "Thai-ness" or his conception of "Thai Buddhism" frowns upon what many consider to be a living part of their "Thai-ness" or "Thai Buddhism" (I mean



the "religious" or "folk" aspects of "traditional" Buddhism), it remains to be seen how the two conceptions of "Thai-ness" will evolve, which one will dominate and eventually win, if there is to be a winner. I will return to this subject later after discussing Buddhadasa's contribution as a Buddhist.

### **3. BUDDHADASA AS A BUDDHIST**

Without actually saying so, I have, in fact, spoken all along about "Buddhadasa as a Buddhist": first from a "human" side, and then from a "Thai" side. Now I will consider more explicitly the role of Buddhadasa as a Buddhist who felt he had his part to play for the future of Buddhism in Thailand and perhaps in the world. His Buddhist attitude may be analyzed in two ways: first as a destroyer, second as a builder. Then I will draw some conditions for how these roles may be implemented.

#### **BUDDHADASA AS A DESTROYER**

Everyone recalls one of the pictures which made Suan Mokkh famous and appeared on covers of some of Buddhadasa's books, that of the rapidly turning wheel of the Dhamma destroying all incorrect "views", not only the belief in an eternal self, but also religious rites, religious intoxication, astrology, social classes, oppression, magic and drugs. As if the picture was not clear enough, a caption declared: "*Buddhism is in this world to kill and get rid for good of these things*". Generally, the turning of the wheel evokes the romantic deer park at Isipatana where the Buddha gave his first sermon to the first five disciples. With deer in the background, it seemed an unlikely place for such inquisitorial violence. The Suan Mokkh killing wheel differed from other wheels of the Dhamma we see elsewhere, with smiling monks, lay people and

children walking slowly - "à la Thai" - and gently pushing the wheel - "à la Thai" again – as if they were in a fairy tale or in a recreation park. The young and middle-aged Buddhadasa felt it was his mission to denounce the beliefs people wrongly took for Buddhism. Remember, for example, the scandal when he first said in Bangkok<sup>5</sup> that

the Three Gems, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, were actually preventing people from being true Buddhists. Why? Because the Buddha images were concealing the real Buddha, because the manuscripts were concealing the true Dhamma, because the monks were concealing the authentic monkhood. In other words, as vital as Thai Buddhism might appear, it was only a mask, a mask which prevented the real Buddhism from entering the heart. That is why this mask had to be removed and put aside.

One can very well read all of Buddhadasa's works as destroying "traditional" beliefs he held to be as wrong views, the main one being the belief in an unchanging self which in turn induces, and comes from, the popular belief in rebirth. At one point, that attack made many people believe he was a subversive communist mole disguised as a monk to destroy Buddhism and Thai society from within.

Although he used to refer to a section in the Scriptures where many monks vomited to death after the Buddha had denounced their bad behavior, Buddhadasa characterized himself as a destroyer not of people but of their wrongly held views or passions. This was reinforced when a foreign country sent envoys to ask him to help in the struggle against the communists, and for his assistance, he would receive money for further development of his work. He refused the request, saying that he had been fighting communism all along by fighting human passions.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1948 (B.E. 2491)

In addition to his role as "explicit" destroyer, Buddhadasa was also an "implicit" destroyer not only by his words, but also by his behavior. Due to lack of time again, I cannot mention all the silent messages he gave through his life. One example is that he stubbornly refused to leave Suan Mokkh when he could have been an Abbot in Chiang Mai, in Ayutthaya, in Nonthaburi or perhaps in Bangkok. Even as abbot of the Wat Phra Boromathat in Chaya, he never took residence there. That tells something about his commitment to nature and research but, most of all, about his desire to distance himself from the powers that be, both religious and political.

As he grew older, he acknowledged that being so outspoken had never really paid off except in a negative way. And he advised disciples against being too outspoken because of the backlash it usually produced. Was that a conclusion he applied exclusively to Thai society where traditional education does not encourage or reward direct speech or was it a result of a growing compassion for humans who need time to change? Probably both, but I am not yet in a position to give a definite answer.

## **BUDDHADASA AS A BUILDER**

As a destroyer of passions, Buddhadasa did not want to be remembered only as a builder of buildings but as a builder of a Buddhism for the future. Only time will prove him right or wrong.

The first thing he saw instrumental to that effect was his preaching which, in recorded or printed form, would remain after him "so that he would not die". His conferences and sermons were given in many different public forums ranging from boy-scouts to monks, from students to judges, from Buddhists to Christians. A tremendous amount was produced but what can be said of its

quality? Sometimes, one imagines a Buddhadasa who might have spoken less repetitively and written more systematically. He could have composed manuals of Buddhology for the kind of curriculum he dreamt of, a cycle without or completing the "Parien" (or the Pali studies) system. To him, this present system produced mainly only good Pali speaking parrots or those interested only in honorific positions. It failed to generate real experts in the Tripitaka because the aim was simply to prepare them for reading the Tripitaka. To achieve this aim, the Pali studies cycle uses the Commentaries of the Tripitaka to foster the study of a sophisticated Pali language. The problem is that Buddhadasa considered these Commentaries to be late accretions, useless and even harmful for Buddhism. "Back to the Tripitaka" could have been his motto. If he did not write systematic treatises, then he produced the Dhammakhos Collection which could be used as a sort of unsystematic Buddhology in progress. Apart from many duplicate teachings, these talks are indeed well-structured. One may add that this is probably the first time in the history of Buddhism when one has recorded and published so many sermons and conferences by the same monk. In that sense, through his numerous talks, Buddhadasa has effectively created a corpus of material which has yet to be thoroughly or systematically studied and published.

Through his teachings, Buddhadasa has tried to "build" a Buddhism for the "atomic era" as he liked to say, and a Buddhism which would permeate modern society in order to transform it. This has been a case for much debate in Thailand especially when another famous monk, Bodhirak, spoke and wrote a book about the complete failure of Buddhadasa's proposal to change society. Put simply, the argument was as follows: 1) Buddhadasa pretends to purify Buddhist practices and society; 2) He has many followers among the upper classes and high profile personalities; 3) The society is still evolving from bad to worse; 4) That shows that the disciples of Buddhadasa are ineffectual; 5) So therefore

Buddhadasa's teaching is both empty, useless and dangerous. This is clearly a debate for you here because it calls into question the usefulness of Buddhadasa's teachings. If we go to the roots of these accusations, we have, in fact, a question about what should come first : Wisdom (paññā) or Morals (sila). For Bodhirak, Buddhadasa has failed because he has placed too much emphasis on "paññā", that is, on theory, on interpretation, on such vague and potentially dangerous ideas as "free mind" (jit wang), without explaining exactly to his disciples how to put these principles into practice in one's life, second after second, which is the role of moral precepts. He has not actually turned the Wheel to really "kill" the wrong views in Thai Society and in Thai Buddhism. He said that but did not do so because these wrong views and practices are more prevalent than ever. The middle class who profess to be his followers only read his books and then talk about them, but, just like the Master, in fact, they are uncommitted to any specific action in society, to any actual "engagement", that is. They should not be considered as responsible except for choosing to follow a non-committed, non-serious, non-truthful teacher.

### **WHAT TO DO?**

Although it is not my role to tell you what should actually be done so that you could be real and committed "engaged" Buddhists, maybe you may allow me to add some reflections on this debate on "destroying" false views and on "building" a new society according to Buddhadasa's thought.

### **DESTROY?**

As I have already mentioned, the view that religion has become like a cluttered attic, full of old and worthless things, or like

a dense forest where thorny plants prevent us from recognizing the beautiful park it once was and from moving forward, is an idea the Protestants have used against the Catholic Church since the sixteenth century. Later on, in the nineteenth century, historians of religion exploited this same criticism and, with new academic tools, studied how successive layers came to be added to the original ideal or message. Previously, Protestant reformers scored a point against the Catholic clerical and intellectual hierarchy which came to realize or believe that, as the Protestants said, their religion, and especially in its popular form, was really full of unworthy beliefs and practices which had little to do with the pristine message of Christ. So the Catholics implemented reforms, too, to get rid of the most visible and "harmful" popular beliefs and practices. To that end, the Catholic bishops set rather strict rules for the calling of, the education of and the examination of the clergy who should be taught to think the right thing, that is, what Rome wanted them to think.

Almost twenty years ago, that sixteenth century Roman Catholic response to the Protestant Reform was the subject of a debate among French historians.<sup>6</sup> Some asserted that this Catholic decision caused what has been called the "de-christianization" of some large parts of France, on the grounds that by cutting the link between popular practices and official religion, the latter had actually lost more power, prestige and followers, than the former. In other words, the clerical, urban, intellectual religion lost followers permanently while what was called "popular superstitions" went blythly on its course untouched. If we compare traditional Buddhism with Christianity, we see that, generally speaking, Buddhist reformers did not pretend to put an end to popular beliefs we now label as "superstitions". Buddhist reformers most of the time were concerned with genuine reforms within the Sangha.

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<sup>6</sup> See : Jean DELUMEAU. *Le Christianisme va-t-il mourir?* Paris, Hachette, 1977.

And who signed the Acts of reform of the Sangha? The Head of the Sangha or the Sangharaja? Rarely or formally. The real implementors were the kings or the Emperors, Asoka being the most famous. And what were the reforms about? About beliefs? About doctrinal questions? Rarely or formally. Primarily the reforms concerned the monks' discipline or the Vinaya. This tells us what was considered to be important by the Buddhist hierarchy and the Buddhist kings until this century. Buddhadasa has probably begun a new kind of Buddhist reform which does not aim at reforming disciplinary or formal practices of the sangha but mainly its education, its beliefs and its practices. Moreover, it intends to reform all areas of Buddhist life and society.

What has allowed the Buddhist authorities to accept these possible unorthodox beliefs and practices was the plentiful evidence in the Buddhist canon and commentaries of what we call now "popular beliefs", that is deities, yakkhas, spirits, mysterious beings, mysterious powers, etc. The intellectual way of integrating these beliefs into a Buddhist world-view has been the Three-World cosmology where there is a place for every being and, on a deeper level of interpretation, the distinction between the "personified" (*pugglathitthan*) and the "doctrinal" (*dhammathitthan*) discourses. This allowed learned monks to read an acceptable doctrinal meaning in otherwise biased assertions. Prince Vajirañanavarorasa took care to include these categories into the religious textbooks because it proved that Buddhists were not "superstitious" as some foreigners claimed. There was something "spiritual" behind the curtain of apparent "superstitions."

Buddhadasa felt that he should further extend the modernization of Buddhism begun with King Mongkut and his sons. For him, that grew out of a theory of interpretation which would allow for the setting of everything, beliefs and practices, in the right place. Although he used the *puggalathitthan-dhammathitthan* catego-

ries as a model and as a basis for his two leveled language, the latter was more radical and broader than the former. It would remove all popular concepts and beliefs from the least suggestion of an eternal self up to the point of refusing to discuss anything about "physical rebirth", not because there could not be such a rebirth but because that missed the only real Buddhist point – how to be free from rebirth here and now?

When Buddhadasa began to make his mature ideas known at the end of the Second World War, he explicitly said that these views were just for a tiny minority of Thai society. A few disciples would follow him without necessarily trying to persuade the entire country. A problem arises now that his teaching has been printed and disseminated all over the country because some people think they have the mission of implementing it. The "minority" aimed at in the forties may have not become a majority yet, but it is quite natural that his followers believe that it should. If it should, we are back to the problem of the destruction of popular beliefs with the dilemma of eventually losing the Buddhists masses for good, just like the Roman Catholic Church in France lost entire parts of the country. Similarly and explicitly, Buddhadasa has been accused not only of destroying popular beliefs but also of destroying Buddhism itself. By removing the motivation of merit from further good rebirths, he in fact eradicated the motivation of keeping established Buddhism alive, because novices, monks, buildings, foundations, cannot survive with simply emptying one's mind and one's stomach.

Notwithstanding these opponents' arguments, the problem is still more acute because "Thai" culture is changing at a tremendous rate. No one knows what will remain of the "Thai" traditional world view in thirty years. Will the westernized educational system have eradicated deities and spirits from this land, accomplishing what Max Weber called the "disenchantment of the world"?



Or, on the contrary, will the current desire for wealth cause an even greater creation of the cults of deities, spirits and will Buddhist ascetical monks be able to provide lottery winnings, love victories and political premierships such as we now witness? And will not Buddhadasa's teaching be found barren because now his intellectuality has recently been criticized? Or will his work be really useful only for a small minority as he predicted in the forties? No one yet has the answer. But whatever you do, you should not forget the socio-historical context of the "destroying" aspect of Buddhadasa's teaching.

## **BUILD?**

Speaking of "building", and here I mean "building a future Buddhism", we turn to a more positive aspect of cultural reform, that of setting rules and deciding upon actions to implement an ideal.

From what I know of Buddhadasa, I am unprepared to tell you exactly what you should do to actually "build" upon his teaching, or how you should act. But there is one thing I may develop from his way of doing, and that is what you should **not** do.

You should **not** make him into an amulet. I know that most of you do not have the intention of moulding small images of your Master. But there are many ways of making an amulet of someone. An amulet embodies some magical power which can cause certain effects on certain occasions. An amulet does not think, an amulet acts, and acts automatically, without feelings. But the most interesting feature is that, once you possess it, the amulet is at your service, providing that you observe some taboos. Whenever you put Buddhadasa's teaching at your service, for whatever reason, you make an amulet of him, and that will be very, very interesting to me

as a researcher. And I would appreciate very, very much your sending data on this use of Buddhadasa's memory for your own sake!

Whenever you are going to think and tell people: "I think this and this", "I do that and that", "You should think this and this", "You should do that and that" just because you are one of Buddhadasa's disciples or because you know that Buddhadasa would have said or done this and that, on such an occasion, you should think for a second: "Well, am I making an amulet of him or not? Am I using him or not?"

It will be difficult to pretend that you know for sure what Buddhadasa would have done unless you have lived with him or read his books thoroughly. And then, you will know that, "once upon a time", Buddhadasa was alive, which means that he hesitated, he changed, he was mistaken.

When he was right, he never gave fast-food recipes to be used anywhere at any time, except when he recalled the Vinaya rules. For the rest, he was an inspirer more than a director. The inspirer points to an ideal but does not trace a line or make a map to reach this ideal exactly. In other words, an inspirer has neither predetermined nor detailed solutions to any problem, no plane to fly to the ideal. That makes him difficult to emulate because one cannot never be sure that the best way to the ideal was chosen.

I will give some examples to illustrate my point.

On December 8, 1968, Buddhadasa said: "Yesterday evening, I was listening to the radio. They talked about the Vice President of the United States who had said: *"The destruction of North-Vietnam such as it is done, it's moral. Should the United States stop bombing North Vietnam, they would fail to mora-*

*lity."* And Buddhadasa added: *"They create wrong and right according to what they get or lose. What they want is right, good, meritorious."*

At first sight, one could conclude from this declaration that Buddhadasa was against the bombing of North Vietnam or perhaps against the Vietnam war, or against any war. That would amount to considering Buddhadasa as a fast-food chef. In fact, Buddhadasa spoke here against the link established by the Vice President of the United States between morality on one side and the bombings on the other. There can be no deal with morality. That was the locus of Buddhadasa reaction and not the bombings or the Vietnam war per se.

Another example is his stand concerning vegetarianism. He asserted that the problem was not "eating or not eating" meat. The real problem was "not eating for nourishing the self". In other words, the rule of morality (sila) was not a justification by itself but by an objective which could only be defined by Wisdom (paññā).

The fact that Buddhadasa liked to inspire more than dictate rules has been considered as a flaw. And actually it is a flaw, in so far as many people need crutches to stand up and walk. It is probable that Buddhadasa's freedom towards tradition, toward institutions, toward the Tripitaka is not for everybody. It will be tempting perhaps to set up such rules to implement his uncompleted teaching, or to add your own contribution to future Buddhism.

When you propose to argue from Buddhadasa's words to justify your own stand on a precise rule or action for the sake of Buddhism, please do so as carefully as if you were touching fire, otherwise it could quite well blow you up or, on the contrary, you could just blow it out. Buddhadasa was probably a man of great

spiritual principles, very "Indian" at that, but, at the same time, he was very pragmatic, very "Chinese", I would say. That is why I see the difficulty in fixing any precise rules of interpretation for his teachings besides the broad guidelines which are rather clear.

There is no reason why you would avoid what all disciples of great men have done, that is, first freeze the living message into a dead body and then break it into separate pieces. But, at least, if you are as cautious with it as you would be with fire, perhaps there is a chance that you will respect it enough so as not to fossilize him too prematurely into an amulet which will serve only your immediate concerns and perhaps passions.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I would like to conclude my participation in this meeting by stressing the diversity of Buddhadasa's contributions to the world as a human being, as a Thai and as a Buddhist. None of you intends to replay his entire role, and you have already divided responsibilities and duties among yourselves.

Some are playing his young role as destroyer of false views. They are the "biters", eager to scorn the "bad" wherever they are in this country or the world. Perhaps they should remember that Buddhadasa took this role during his youth. Later on, he used it more and more cautiously and never against specific individuals.

Others of you will play his role as keeper of the Dhamma when you edit, print, or publish his works. May I insist in passing that the editions be as accurate, complete and precise as possible, and that the dates of Buddhadasa's talks and conferences always be mentioned so that the reader may situate a text within the history

of Buddhadasa's thought?

Still others may play his role of "forest monk", even though they live in towns. They are laborers. They do not talk on national networks but work deep in villages or suburbs to show how Buddhadasa's teaching may successfully inspire village life, and support forest conservation and social action. Once the work of keeping Buddhadasa's teaching is complete, these "laborers" will probably be the most important of all of you. They will prove whether or not Buddhadasa's teaching can survive successfully without disintegrating, to be implemented in ordinary communities all over the country and not only in well educated urban elites.

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