

200 Years After King Mongkut's Birth: A Review of Reform Movements in Thai Buddhism

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The 18th of October 2004 marked the bicentennial of King Mongkut's birth. King Mongkut, also known as Rama IV, lived in Bangkok during the Ratanakosin Period, and fathered a reform of Thai Buddhism in modern history. Now, I take this auspicious occasion to commemorate and review 200 years of reform of Buddhism in Thai society.

The era of King Mongkut is regarded as an important transitional period for Siam. Since Europe passed through the Renaissance Period and the first Industrial Revolution, the West was empowered and went out to colonize the rest of the world, including Asia, with unsurpassed military technology. King Mongkut thus faced at least three Western threats: Colonialism, Christianity, and Western Science. Together with Colonialism, the West sent Christian missionaries and brought science to Siam.

Facing these threats, King Mongkut investigated Siamese society to find some basis of strength and wisdom in order to cope with these threats. He eventually could find nothing except Buddhism. But Buddhism at that time was full of legends, miracles, supernatural beliefs, and superstitions. These had weakened Buddhism. Buddhism at the time could not offer a basis of wisdom for coping with Western threats.

Thus, King Mongkut initiated a reform of Thai Buddhism for the first time in modern Thai history. His reformation of Buddhism went in two directions: doctrinal reform and institutional reform, which were implemented simultaneously.

Doctrinal Reform of Thai Buddhism

To reform Buddhism doctrinally, King Mongkut adopted a Western ideology, namely "Rationalism," to reinterpret Thai Buddhism so that the religion became more logical. He reduced the miraculous, supernatural, superstitious and fortune telling elements—especially in remote and rural areas.

Prince Vajirayana-varorasa, who was ordained as a bhikkhu (monk) and later became a Supreme Patriarch of Siam, played an important role in helping King Mongkut's religious reformation. Besides writing the book *Navakovada*—a handbook for newly ordained monks, Prince Vajirayana also wrote a biography of the Buddha. This was the first biography of the Buddha in Siamese society that described the Buddha as an ordinary human being who sought truth and eventually found the Dhamma—the law of Nature—without any miracles.

The doctrinal reform of Thai Buddhism was initially carried on by monks of the newly established Dhammayutika Nikaya. After founding this order (nikaya), King Mongkut persuaded sons of the noble class to ordain as bhikkhus in order to carry on the religious reforms that he started. Dhammayut monks during the initial stage were highly educated and able to help the King with his reform programs.

In the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), a modern educational system was first introduced in Siamese society. In order to educate people throughout the country, King Chulalongkorn announced that all Buddhist monasteries were to become schools and all monks were to become teachers for children. At first monks taught children the language—basically Thai and in some cases Pali, as well as, Buddhist morality. The education combined language, local knowledge and Buddhist ethics, and it spread widely among common people throughout the country.

When the educational system developed further, there arose more specialized subjects, such as Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, History, Foreign Languages and so on, which required professional teachers. This led to a gradual separation between schools and monasteries, and between worldly knowledge and Buddhist ethics. This modern educational system, however, empowered common people with higher knowledge. Consequently, monks of the Mahanikaya order—the vast majority of whom came from a common background—received a better education and were prepared to continue the responsibility of religious reform initiated by King Mongkut.

When Siamese society became more modernized, sons of the noble class were rarely willing to ordain as monks for life. It seems that the last well-known monk who came from a noble background was Phraya Norarat Rajamanitaya or Chao Khun Nor. Thus, the shortage of noble-class monks prompted the Dhammayut Nikaya to ordain common men into their order of privilege. As the Dhammayut monks were close to the power centers, their ideas were more conservative. Thus, the reform of Buddhism in the later period continued for the most part because of the Mahanikaya monks who had received a higher education. These monks from a common background were far away from the authority of the central power structures, so their ideas were more liberal.

The doctrinal reform of Buddhism initiated by King Mongkut was carried on by monks of both orders and was notably accomplished through the work of the reformist monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993).

Institutional Reform of Thai Buddhism

Hearing of the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church and Christianity in the Vatican in Rome, King Mongkut thought of the Sangha's structure in Siamese society. He therefore initiated a second program of reform, namely, institutional reform of Thai Buddhism, within a Thai socio-cultural context. King Mongkut used his own political structure as a model.

Kingdom Religious Realm

1. King 1. Supreme Patriarch
2. Nobility 2. Dhammayutika Nikaya
3. People 3. Monks

The head of the Kingdom was the King, correspondingly the head of the Religious Realm was the Supreme Patriarch. The King had the nobility to help govern people all over the country; however, the Supreme Patriarch lacked noble-class monks to help his governance. For this very reason, King Mongkut established the Dhammayutika Nikaya by persuading sons of nobility to be ordained as monks in this new order, so that they were a noble-class of monks who would help the Supreme Patriarch to govern the common monks in Siamese society. This Sangha hierarchical structure followed the political structure of the Monarchy in Siam and was promulgated by King Chulalongkorn as the First Sangha Act in 1902.

Then the 1932 Revolution brought a radical change to Siamese politics by replacing the Absolute Monarchy with a so-called Democracy. In 1941 the Piboon Songkhram government thus promulgated the Second Sangha Act according to a political structure of Democracy:

Kingdom Religious Realm

1. Parliament 1. Sangha Parliament
2. Prime Minister & 2. Sangha Prime Minister & Cabinet Sangha Cabinet
3. Court 3. Sangha Court

The Kingdom had a Parliament to create laws, and the Religious Realm had a Sangha Parliament (Sangha-sabha) to establish Sangha laws. The Kingdom had a Prime Minister and a Cabinet for governing the country, while the Religious Realm had a Sangha Prime Minister (Sangha-nayaka) and a Sangha Cabinet (Sangha-montri) to administrate over the Sangha. There were four Sangha Ministries (Ongkan): Governance, Education, Dissemination, and Public Welfare. While the Kingdom had a Court to ensure justice for people, the Religious Realm had a Sangha Court (Khana Vinaya-dhara or Vinaithorn) to end disputes in the Sangha. In 1958, Sarit Thanarat's Coup d'état brought Thailand into the Dark Ages of a Military Dictatorship. After setting up the country to his dictatorial rule, Sarit turned to the Sangha and abolished the Democratic Sangha Act. In 1962, Sarit promulgated the Third Sangha Act by following the political structure of his Military Dictatorship as follows:

Kingdom Religious Realm

1. Military Leader 1. Supreme Patriarch
2. Cabinet 2. Maha-thera-samakhama
3. People 3. Monks

The kingdom had a military dictator as the leader, thus the Religious Realm had the Supreme Patriarch as the leader. The military dictator appointed his own Cabinet to control people all over the country, whereas the Maha-thera-samakhama, which literally means "Society of Great Senior Monks," were appointed to help the Supreme Patriarch to control monks in the Thai Sangha.

In 1992, Thailand was in a brief period of military dictatorship under Suchinda Khraprayoon. This short-lived military government amended the Third Sangha Act. It tried to settle the power struggle amongst members within the Maha-thera-samakhama for deciding who would be the next Supreme Patriarch. Thus in 1992, the Sangha Act was amended to rule that the next Supreme Patriarch would be a high ranking (Somdej) monk of longest standing rather than the most "senior" monk of that rank. Thus, the Third Sangha Act of 1962 amended in 1992 became dictatorial in-nature. It did not encourage change or respect seniority through meritorious accomplishments. Thus, the Sangha Act as an institutional structure could not solve problems in the Sangha as it was not open, only emphasizing longevity of position. Unfortunately, this dictatorial Sangha Act has been in effect until today in 2004.

At present the Ministry of Education has drafted a new Sangha Act by basically using the Third Sangha Act of 1962 amended in 1992 as the model. In the draft, the Maha-thera-samakhama becomes an advisory committee and a new group of younger monks called Maha-khanitsorn, which literally means Great Independent Group, would be promoted as a new administrative body. It is claimed that because the Maha-khanitsorn is comprised of younger monks, it would be more active and efficient. Thai people however question the structure itself, which is dictatorial. Some ask, "What is the difference between dictatorship by the younger generation or dictatorship by the older generation?" Now, the draft is under review and revision by the government's Law Department.

King Mongkut's doctrinal reform of Buddhism was and has been successful. Thai Buddhist teachings are profound, modern, and have widely captured the interest of well-educated people in Thai society.

However, the institutional reform has seen less success. The Sangha Act entered the Dark Ages through the influence of a Military Dictatorship. Thus, it became a retrogressive structure for four decades now. Likewise, it has kept the Thai Sangha in the Dark Ages of a Military Dictatorship, despite Thai society's populace-based revolutions of 14 October 1973, 6 October 1976, and May 1992.

We in Thailand now have one of the best democratic constitutions in the world. Why don't we write a new Sangha Act by following the structure of checks and balances to power as in our national Constitution? Or why don't we return the power to monastics and laity and abolish the present dictatorial Sangha Act? Then monastics and laity would be able to reach their full potential, and isn't that what Buddhism is all about? We would then simply live under our Thai Constitution, without any hierarchical obstacles. Then and only then do I believe that we will see Thai Buddhism sprout a fresh shoot. And a shoot may grow into a great tree.