

CHAPTER THREE

BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN THAI SOCIETY

Thai society, just like most societies around the world, is made up of a number of philosophies which shape the thinking of her citizens. These systematic viewpoints, whether they spring from religious, social or traditional backgrounds, play a big part in determining day-to-day activities in the nation and provide the motivation which sparks the activity. This chapter will examine the Buddhist concepts of *kamma*, merit, alms and especially Alms of Knowledge.

3.1 *KAMMA* AND MERIT

The theory of *kamma*, or karma, is defined as “moral action with moral consequences”. (Keyes, 1983:261) This doctrine maintains an important place in Thailand where most of the population holds to Theravada Buddhism. This hypothesis is predicated on a simple formula taken from the *Samyutta Nikaya*, which most Thais learn from an early age:

According to the seed that's sown
So is the fruit ye reap therefrom
Doer of good will gather good,
Doer of evil, evil reaps.
Sown is the seed, and thou shalt taste
The fruit thereof.

In Thai, the above verse is abbreviated to *tham di dai di; tham chua dai chua*, which is translated “do good, get good; do evil, get evil”. This concept provides a framework for interpreting the differences in people around the world. For example, in *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha explains to Mallika the Queen, that ugliness is a result of anger and that a lack of anger, despite provocation, is the cause of beauty. Greed is the cause of poverty, while generosity is the cause of wealth and high status.

There are a number of texts popular in Buddhist Southeast Asia, which contain lengthy discussions on the characteristics which differentiate humans and their quality of life. The relative degree of current suffering is said to be traced to moral acts performed in prior lives which have impacted the here and now. The most systematic of these texts is the *Trai Phum* or “Three Worlds”, which was written in Thai during the fourteenth century. Therein, social inequalities are explained:

There are three kinds of children: the children of superior birth, the children of similar birth, and the children of inferior birth. The children of superior birth are the kind of children who are wiser than their parents. They have more of the knowledge of the wise men than their parents have. They have a better appearance, are richer, attain a higher status, and are stronger than their parents. The children who are better than their parents in such ways are called children of superior birth. The children who are born equal to their parents in knowledge, strength and appearance are called children of similar birth. Those who are less gifted than their parents in every way are called children of inferior birth.

(Translated by Frank E. and Mani B. Reynolds)



This passage provides an interpretation of social inequality and social mobility. Whereas the Indian doctrine of karma places every person in a caste from which he can not move during his lifetime, the Thai text allows for children to rise higher and sink lower than their parents. It is the individual's legacy of *kamma* from a previous existence which is said to determine his current situation. Thus, those born with physical deformities may be understood to be suffering the consequences of having killed work animals in previous lives, and those who are exceedingly poor, lacking both food and clothing, are assumed to have committed no positive acts in previous existence. Conversely, the wealthy man who enjoys life today, is said to be benefiting from acts of generosity in his former life. (Keyes, 1983:263)

In addition to physical and social differences which are apparent at birth, kammic theory also explains conditions which might change over the course of a lifetime. A young woman who proves to be barren or a person who dies an early, violent death, could both be explained as having received the consequence of their *kamma*. Thus, a person's current condition is based upon the quality of his actions in the past, but from a different perspective, a person can control his future state of being by the standard by which he chooses to live the current life.

The positive mores which determine a person's *kamma*, are commonly known as merit, or in Thai, *bun*. The quest for merit and the attempt to avoid actions that produce demerit is a never ending journey which motivates people at every level of society. Although the matter of

demerit does not receive the same emphasis as merit-making, it is assumed that the avoidance of demerit produces merit, so the kammic theory centers on merit making. Although most Buddhists do conceive of other principles of life which were taught by their leader, the search for wisdom, morality and mental discipline are often disregarded as being too complex to be pursued in any significant degree. The making of merit is thus central to the practice of Theravada Buddhism and that which motivates most religious activity in Thailand. (Keyes, 1983:267)

Since the vast majority of the people in Bangkok are Buddhist, it would only be natural for most teachers to have an awareness of *kamma* and the making of merit. Traditionally, teachers have been people with very high levels of social consciousness and were driven by the most lofty motives. Their high standards were passed on to students, who learned discipline and morals in addition to more predictable scholastic pursuits. In modern times, there has been a deterioration of this standard as more physical motivations have come into the forefront. Since society in general has become more materialistic, it should be no surprise if some of the people who staff the schools and work in the classrooms have followed suit. There remains, however, a large collection of teachers who endure difficult working conditions and limited financial benefits to faithfully serve the students of Thailand. It would seem logical to assume that some in this group view their work as meritorious in nature and continue as teachers to improve their karma.

It must be noted however, that in the context of popular Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, there are two separate uses of the term *bun*. First, *taam bun*, is translated as an action which produces merit. It is used as a verb with meritorious results. Secondly, *bun* is also understood as a result of the action mentioned above. Receiving merit (*dai bun*) follows the action of making merit (*taam bun*). The lack of appreciation for this delicate distinction provided some confusion in this project, as the term was used without distinction between the Thai and English languages.

3.2 DANA: ALMS

Alms, or *dana*, refers to the practice of giving, which is seen as the most basic of Buddhist virtues and the best way to make merit and off-set the human tendency to self-centeredness. (Ling, 1972:89) Like most other religious terms, *dana* can possess several different shades of meaning which are all related. Whether the nibbanic nature of selflessness and non-attachment are being discussed, or the kammic expectation that generous deeds will be rewarded, the concept of *dana* can apply. In the Pali suttas, the discussions on giving (*danakatha*) were always the first to be discussed by the Buddha in his graduated exposition of the *dhamma*. When talking to unbelievers, he usually started his teaching by emphasizing the value of giving, while other aspects of his philosophy such as morality, karma, and renunciation were not introduced until this basic virtue had come to be appreciated. The act of giving serves as a necessary basis and preparation for anyone who endeavors to free the mind from defilement. (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1990:1)

While the stated purpose of Buddhist giving is to rid the mind of greed and selfishness, there is a more practical value underlying the action, because giving forms the basis for making merit. Although in the Pali text schedules of Meritorious Action (*punnakiriyavatthu*), merit made by giving (*danamaya*) is prominently listed at the top, there is a great deal of variation in the amount of benefit which comes by said giving. (compiled by Somdet Phra Maha Samana Chao Krom Phraya Vajirananavarorasa, 1990:68)

In the *Vimanavatthu* and *Petavatthu* anthologies, an interesting discussion was held following several days of exemplary donations from King Pasenadi of Kosala, Anathapindika the banker and Visakha the lay-woman. The people asked the Buddha “Does almsgiving become productive of great fruit only when it is liberality of such a magnificent sort as this, or is it rather when it is liberality in accordance with one’s means?” His response was “Not merely by efficiency of the gift does giving become especially productive of great fruit, but rather through the efficiency of the thought and efficiency of the field of those to whom the alms are given.” (Nancy Auer Falk, 1990:140) Thus, the measure of merit gained is said to vary with three factors, all of which would be of major interest to teachers who hold Buddhist values.

First, the motive of the donor (“efficiency of thought”) appears as the most important factor which affects the collection of merit. If an act of generosity is accompanied by wisdom and the proper desire to be of

assistance to others, then the resulting merit would be of the highest quality. The thoughtless offering of a flower at a family shrine or the callous presentation of money to a beggar in order to get rid of him, would not qualify as being true *dana*. In the case of teachers, one who approached his students with the lofty and pure motive of imparting knowledge would likely be moving towards the proper concept of Buddhist almsgiving and merit making.

A second factor which affects the fruitfulness of merit making involves the purity of the one who receives the gift, or as stated, the "efficiency of the field of those to whom the alms are given". Unfortunately for the teacher, most students do not fully appreciate the information which is being offered by their teachers, and thus limit the value of the gift. The most successful teachers, however, may be able to change the attitudes of their students and mold them into disciples who treasure the knowledge being imparted and consequently increase the merit being gained by their teacher. The special ability to change the heart of the rebellious student is not easily found among educators, but where it is present, lives can be benefited in a wonderful way. (Jootla, 1990:8-9)

The third factor involved in the giving of alms, is the efficiency gift itself, which involves the relinquishing of one's happiness, belongings, body and life so that others might have their fears dispelled. Most contributions take the form of physical offerings (*amisadana*), which the Brahmajala sutta identifies as being tenfold: food, drink, clothing, vehicles, garlands, scents, unguents, bedding, housing, and lighting.

(Acariya Dhammapala, 1990:59) On a less tangible level, there are a number of immaterial gifts, such as education, which are likewise given for the benefit of the recipient.

Although the two terms *bun* and *dana* can both indicate action which produces merit, they have their own field of usage in the Thai context. *Bun* is commonly used to refer to gifts offered to the Sangha as represented by monks, temples and other religious entities. *Dana*, however, applies to gifts offered to those in need across a wide range of human activities. Many Thai people understand *dana* to refer to gifts only if they are made to the poor, sick or handicapped, where the donor is seen to be helping those who dwell on a lower scale of human existence. (see also Section 5.3.3)

3.3 DHAMMADANA: ALMS OF DOCTRINE

According to the Buddha, *dhammadana*, the gift of the Noble Teaching is the most excellent of all gifts.* When the Buddha sent his disciples out, his challenge was for them to spread his teaching, the *dhamma*, to all those who would listen. This teaching, whether in the form of public sermons, private teaching or the recitation of sections from the *Tipitika*, was considered to be a most prized gift by the recipient. When

* It should be noted that *dhammadana* does not always consist of sermons or teaching by monks. When King Asoka progressed from ordinary gifts of food and robes to the giving of himself and his son, it was specifically identified as a special gift of *dhammadana*. (Strong, 1990)

monks provided this gift of religious instruction, they were said to be giving alms or making merit by their teaching.

This offering of education can also be given by those who are not monks and not qualified to teach the *dhamma*. The donation of religious books or paying for the publication of rare or new manuscripts are also considered to be alms and sources of merit for the participants.

Notification of such philanthropy can often be found in the preface of books published by respected institutions. For example, in the introduction to The Long Discourses Group (*Dighanikayasutta*), Phra Sobhonganabhorn says,

“May merits be obtained by the persons re-wrote (sic) and compiled this book in Thai, the translator from Thai into English as well as the ones who paid for the publication costs for this and former books.” (Sujib Punyanubhap, 1986:iv)

Mahamakut Buddhist University also offers that,

“Grateful acknowledgments are also due to the pious donor who helps defray the publishing cost of this booklet to be brought out for the benefit of everyone concerned, including especially that for the sake of Buddhism as a whole.” (Sujib Punyanubhap, 1986:v)

3.4 WITTHAYADANA: ALMS OF KNOWLEDGE

The concept of *witthayadana* is an important ingredient in the life of Bangkok’s teachers and must be grasped before a comprehensive



understanding of teacher motivation can be realized. There are two aspects of this word to be examined in this section, starting with the classical definition which is rooted in Buddhist history.

The use of *witthayadana* as an expression originated with the term *dhammadana*, referring to alms of Buddhist doctrine. These alms or presents (*dana*) were usually gifts of teaching given by monks to Buddhist practitioners who desired to know the Buddhist scriptures (*dhamma*). This definition was based on a very narrow interpretation of the Sangha's religious role in society, and changed during the last century to a more general *witthayadana* or Alms of Knowledge. In A Dictionary of Buddhism: Chinese, Sanskrit, English, Thai, *witthaya* is defined as a broad term which refers to learning, knowledge, philosophy and science. Its definition is reflected in such terms as *mahawitthayalai* (university), *witthayalai khru* (teacher's college) and *witthaya nippon* (thesis), and implies teaching in various forms, not specifically religious in nature. As the teaching role of the monks changed from primarily topics of doctrine (*dhamma*) to a more broad liberal arts curriculum (*witthaya*), the terminology changed as well. (Sunthorn, Personal interview, 8 March 1994)

The idea that the giving of secular knowledge is a source of merit for the Buddhist teacher comes rather naturally, due to the emphasis on selflessness which permeates the religion. The basic idea of Buddhist philosophy is that man should be willing to dedicate himself to the welfare and happiness of those around him, and methodical instruction is

instrumental to that end. The Buddha addressed both sides of this issue as he taught that “Ignorance is the root of all self-affirmation” and “Deliverance is born of knowledge”. (Sumana Samanera, 1978:21, 26) Ignorance includes a unique component of selfishness, as real freedom and deliverance is found in a society where people are educated and able to provide for their own needs. Secular learning and occupational training are thus seen as important gifts which can be passed down from teacher to student within the Buddhist framework. In the *Mahagovinda* sutta, Sakka, king of the gods, described the Blessed One as having “lived a life which was conducive to the benefit and happiness of many people.” (Sujib Punyanubhap, 1986:86) This shows the true purpose of selfless instruction. A Dictionary of Buddhism explains that monks can accrue great merit by “giving time and service to the village community in the form of teaching and counseling.” This service is more clearly defined as being “acts of public benefit, helping people in times of special need or trouble”. (Ling, 1972:13) Thus we can see the far reaching opportunities for meritorious giving when the definition of such giving is not limited to religious ritual and proclamation.

Even though a central theme of Theravada Buddhism calls for practitioners to divest themselves of possessions, there is also a continuing interest in wealth and its proper uses. Traditional stories provide multiple examples of the educated wealth-user who is honored for his liberal donations for the benefit of others. The resulting accrual of merit provides even more blessings and riches which are to be used in a like manner. Therefore, for the Buddhist to achieve real success, education in its

different forms is indispensable. Listed in the Dhammas of a Worthy or Developed Man is the concept of *Mattannuta* which says,

“he knows how to go about seeking to obtain the necessities of living, and only does so in ways that are right and proper. He also knows how much he needs to take for sufficiency and he only takes in moderation.” (*Anguttara Nikaya*: IV; 113)

If a person has to know enough to be able to earn a living in order to be considered Worthy, it follows that those who provided his education and professional training would be respected and worthy as well.

In a collection of poetry written by King Rama VI, a pair of short verses offer explanation on the twin subjects of Alms (*dana*) and Donation (*borijak*). These comments suggest a relationship between giving, education and merit as seen at the turn of the century.

Alms

One foot connected to a giving heart	tries to be a blessing
For the people to be happy	their heart are not poor.

Donation

One effort to support the Bhramin	and build much
Schools, bridges, and houses	where ill people seek shelter.
(from <i>Pra Nol Kham Luang</i>)	

It appears that in this poetry, His Majesty draws some parallels between the construction of schools, bridges and hospitals with the giving which produces blessings and happiness. This conclusion reinforces the claim of a relationship between education and the Buddhist concept of Merit.

The close relationship between Education and Buddhism in Thailand has encouraged a blending or overlapping of activities and motivations. Not only have monks been seen as significant participants who benefit the overall process of education, but educators play a big part in preserving the institution of the Sangha. This interdependency is clearly seen in the context of government, where the Department of Religious Affairs assumes an important role in the Ministry of Education and ex-monks fill many of the positions. (Prapod, Personal interview, 15 February 1994)

In August 1972, the *Bangkok World* newspaper reported on a program which provided for the construction and organization of schools in various provinces. The schools were built with money from the Department of Religious Affairs, while books and furniture were provided from the Wat Phanan Choeng budget. The classrooms were staffed with monks from Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University at Wat Mahathat, who spent a good part of their time traveling from town to town, teaching in the lay schools. Although two hours a day were spent in teaching the Pali language, a total of four hours per day were dedicated to math, science, history, geography, morality and a study of the Thai and English languages.

“Thus despite the fact that education in Thailand is by and large the responsibility of the civil authorities, the monks continue to play an important part...in providing both formal schooling and instruction of a less formal kind.” (*Bangkok World*, 19 August 1972:10-11)

To summarize the classical use of the term, *witthayadana* refers to the act of giving knowledge. This dedicated conferral is associated with



dana and implies merit accrual as a result. Although this dividend may not always be acknowledged or discussed openly, it is widely accepted by cleric and layman alike, as being an inherent result of teaching.

In addition to the classic definition of *witthayadana* as discussed above, there is a second less formal definition which enjoys wide usage. This definition recognizes all forms of teaching, seminars and oral presentation which are done without remuneration as being typical of *witthayadana*. Basically, teachers are asked to share their knowledge without being paid for it. In this context, the purposes of the teaching are understood to be based on a social obligation which those who have been blessed with exposure to advanced learning have towards those who are yet unenlightened. The willingness to provide gratis teaching varies with the individual, but most teachers are able to determine which requests are worthy of their contribution of *witthayadana*. Although this definition has not been documented in standard reference books, it is generally accepted as being a legitimate definition.

It is assumed that this definition had its roots in the traditional forms of education, where the monks provided instruction without charge to the students placed in their charge. Although said monks were not paid for their teaching, they were supported by the regular offerings of food and money provided by the community. Today, volunteers of all kinds are likely to see themselves doing something comparable as they are given a small stipend, which in most cases, is barely enough to cover living expenses. Certain slum workers, military recruits, Peace Corps personnel,

environmental activists, and even some political pollsters are understood to be performing services of far more benefit than the paltry funds which they receive. In a similar sense, it could be reasoned that teachers today are not being paid for their work, but supported in their teaching by the regular contribution of money put in their account by the school's administration. The relatively low salary received by most teachers could in many cases be better identified as "support" than "payment", since it provides little more than the basics necessary for life.

There sometimes exists a certain amount of conflict which arises between teachers and potential students who are merely looking for some free help. Noted Bangkok educator, Dr. Ekavidya Nathalang, recounts the story of an invitation he received to make a presentation to an assembly without remuneration. Although he often accepted such invitations without complaint, he was offended by those coordinating this particular occasion because they had collected thousands of baht from each participant but failed to offer him money enough to cover his expenses. They pocketed a significant sum of cash from his appearance, but wanted only to credit him with performing *witthayadana*.^{*} In spite of the fact that money was not provided, the potential for significant amounts of merit accrual was still present.

Within the context of the Thai socio-religious value system where many people look to teachers with special honor and respect, it will

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be interesting to see what perceptions are held by educators in that elevated position. Are they aware of the special place they maintain in Thai society? Are they motivated by ideals worthy of their profession, or are they merely interlopers taking advantage of a regular salary while performing minimal work? These are some of the questions which need to be considered in this research project.



ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย