

CHAPTER III

SOCIOECONOMIC ROLE OF BUDDHIST WATS

Wats have always had a significantly greater role beyond their economic contributions. The economic benefits of these other services are seemingly innumerable and cannot be accurately measured. Over the years these services have changed to meet the needs of the society. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn many of the traditional interactions and relationships had to adjust to the religious reforms introduced. While the services wats provided went through considerable change during this period, wats continuously adjust the services they provide.

3.1 Chakri Dynasty until the Religious Reforms of King Chulalongkorn

The wat has been described as the thing that unites a monastery and a shrine. This was where the veneration of Buddha took place for centuries. Wats were the places where people came to pray for solace and guidance. Buddhism in the early days had no wats, as the monks were supposed to be wandering ascetics who had no permanent home and would rely only on the graces provided by the community in order to survive.

Early in Thai Buddhism, monks lived in settled monastic communities that were not usually called wats. Then, the religion was like its Burmese variation where the monasteries and the shrines are separate and distinct bodies. It was also during this time that the word wat appeared, but it was not consistent with the meaning used and merely stood for an assembly of sacred relics (O'Connor, 1985).

As time passed by, society gave way to the wat being the most basic unit of the *Sangha*, and it has become the center of Buddhism where practical Buddhist religion is observed. Once the monastery and the shrine were joined, they created a social whole that was like a community in itself. The wat became the center of the community where all activities were carried out.

Since early in recorded Thai history, Buddhism has been considered the very foundation of society. The wats played different functions in the society ("The reigns of three kings", 2000). These buildings became schools where the religion was propagated. The monks were also educated about Buddhism and Pali Sanskrit in these temples. The wats became patrons of the arts and museums as they supported and housed statues of Gautama Buddha. The monks brought the sick into the wats so they became hospitals in times of medical crises. Wats were also intellectual centers where the monks met with other monks and lay people to discuss their religion. The monks also offered these wats to provide shelter for the homeless until they were able to provide for themselves.

Monks were also granted the highest social status because they were seen as societal, spiritual and intellectual leaders ("The reigns of three kings", 2000). The wats were supported by the royal family or the entire community, as monks were not supposed to be involved with anything material in nature. In turn, they bestowed merit to the people who gave them goods or services. This perpetuated the so-called economy of merit, a system of ritual exchange of gifts for merit that encompasses all members of the society.

Locketts and votive tablets, smaller versions of Buddha images, were made at some wats. Meant to be reminded of the virtues of Buddha, his followers were comforted with the idea of carrying a small remembrance of the venerated idol.

Before the Chakri dynasty, wat education served as a benchmark for young men in achieving maturity; much regard was given to Buddhist monks as educators of the Royal family. The large towns had wats that offered accommodation for students from the far flung villages. Some wats housed orphans and children from poor families, for whom free basic education was provided. Social outcasts were also sent to wats to be reformed under the benevolent influence of the pious monks. There they were taught the virtues of Buddhism.

Many of the first Thai scholars were part of the monkhood. They taught the skills of reading and writing to others using Buddhists and Pali scriptures. Behind the walls of the wats, boys lived the monastic life, and learned to read and write Thai and Pali, do

simple arithmetic, and learn the Buddhist teachings. Thai education was, in part, concerned with imparting ethical and religious instruction. Because of this emphasis, most early Thai literature concerned religion, and literacy allowed greater participation in religious life.

This role of the wat was attractive to parents. Monkhood acted as insurance that their children would learn to read and write while learning the teachings of the Gautama Buddha. Families honored the tradition of wat education by sending their sons to the temple for a short period of time wherein they were taught the principles of the religion and gained the virtues of an upstanding Buddhist. The monkhood was always open to those who were considered to be coming of age and served as confirmation that they were old enough to start learning how to improve their own lives through education.

The coming of the Chakri dynasty heralded the coming of age of Thailand as a nation. Its monarchy wanted to stay abreast with the development of all the other Western countries but didn't want to succumb to western influence. The role of the wats remained the same all throughout the years as the monarchs stayed true to Buddhism. Rama I restored discipline and order to the monkhood and reappointed those learned and pious monks who had been dismissed.

At the onset of the Chakri Dynasty, Thailand saw developmental changes in leadership as well as economic advancement. The kings contributed to development in different aspects of Thai society. When western influences started to reach Siam, King Rama IV (King Mongkut) made some changes in the national budget and planted further seeds of change, but it wasn't until his son Rama V was crowned, that most of the proposed changes were implemented. Perhaps the most notable development was King Mongkut's initiation of Thai society into the Western world. He opened the Thai Kingdom to Western influences, but avoided being colonized. In the guise of friendship and through forming agreements with western powers, Thailand managed to secure a favorable position among them so that they recognized Thailand as an ally, and Thailand remained unconquerable in their eyes.

This time also heralded the period when most government income came from taxes imposed on imports, and exports brought profits earned by the monarch's own fleet of merchant ships. Rice, teak, palm oil, sugar, salt, pepper, tin, iron, leather and ivory were the major export products sent to close neighbors via the king's ships. Import products included fabric, ceramics, alcoholic drinks (rum and gin), paper, tools, clocks and perfume.

The abolition of indentured service had a great impact on the Buddhist wats, since indentured servants were used for a number of purposes, such as building renovation or farming. A contemporary chronicle estimated that revenue from this source amounted to an average of 1.2 million baht a year. Without free labor, the temples had to pay for the services needed.

The wat plays the role Buddhism wants it to play, as the religion deals with issues of human suffering and is called upon to eliminate those sufferings without being attached to material gain. Wats in the old social strata work like any other Thai institution. It is a part of a whole where everybody competes to care for their own. Wats are dependent on the resources sent or given to them by the community, royal family or other important individual.

The giving of these resources is a requirement for the survival of the *Sangha*. The *Sangha* cannot function without resources, much like any other institution. There are no endowments for the *Sangha* (Reynolds, 1979), nor has it any treasury. The government provides stipends, but the monks' belief prohibits them from taking earning jobs. The laity has the role of supporting the wat for it to be able to play the role that it is intended to play. If the monks are driven away by hunger, buildings will rot due to lack of use and thieves will take all that is left.

Wats located in the same area compete with one another for the patronage and manpower that comes from a community. The rise and fall of a particular wat shows how competition can be a part of the temple dynamic. As young men join wats for only a few months, the population of the wats has to be replenished from time to time. If there is more than one wat in the area, informal competition for new students could result.

Economic considerations were decided by the King, such as tax exemptions, monastic endowments of land holdings for temple buildings, or revenues earned by the temple. The 19th century brought forth significant changes in wats. The monks' responsibilities were ultimately limited.

A wat is usually found in a small compound that acts as a temple and community center. Previously mentioned is the *bot*, usually found in each compound. The *bot* is a small chapel used only by the monks and is especially important when new monks are ordained. The *vihan*, a community temple and assembly hall, is for community worship, where the village people venerate Buddha. The temples are most busy during holy seasons. Usually, people bring food for everybody to share after worship. To a westerner it might seem like a picnic, but it is one of the ways the people gain merit as deemed by the religion. Sometimes the wats provide housing for individuals or families who are temporarily homeless. They are invited to stay in the temple housing, known as *sanghawat*. Visiting the wats is free, but donations are encouraged.

Every monk must give way to the *Sangha*. Temple abbots must also nurture social contacts, royal family down to commoners, in order to support their wat. However, if an abbot's loyalty to the social structure were ever to cease, their particular wat would face difficulties. In some cases the wat could become partially separated from the social hierarchy when patronage became an individual or family pursuit. Becoming a patron of a wat was important to the lay people as their affiliation and connection to a wat added prestige and honor to the individual or the family. In Buddhism, being connected to a wat brings one closer to Buddha.

As the wats were centralized under government reform and regulation, the villages built individual wats that work at their own capacity. They are still localized and their functions stayed that way. Reform and regulation meant moving the wat away from the society.

The religious authority was respected and was commonly used to validate the king's reign. Normally, Wats were connected to their kingdom. Kings were the major patrons of a particular wat. Their royal support was what protected the wats from abuses

and kept the monks from dying of hunger. In return, the wats provided education, enlightenment and guidance for the villagers and the sons of kings.

It was partly due to modernization that the local community surrounding each wat had to come up with resources to support the wat for it to remain in the community. Each community was increasingly given the responsibility to support the wat by its own means instead of waiting for patronage from the Royal Sangha (“The Reigns of Three Kings”, 2000).

Once approved by the King, the construction of wats was dependent on the communities ability mobilize local labor and indentured servitude. As monks were unable to pay for labor, they needed someone who was skillful to work and build the temples. Locals worked in exchange for merit accumulation, since they could not give any money or other resources. Meanwhile, monks devoted themselves to improving themselves through living the unencumbered life through meditation and spiritual enlightenment, free from corruption.

3.2 King Chulalongkorn’s Religious Reforms to the Present Day

As King Mongkut was still somewhat traditional, he did not completely westernize Thai society. It was not until his son Rama V (Chulalongkorn) was enthroned that the country overtook its Asian neighbors in terms of building relationships with the West. Incorporating Western culture through education was the key to breaking down the barriers between Thai and Western cultures. By sending members of the royal family to be educated in the west, the kingdom was forever changed. As these students were schooled, they brought back what they had learned to the kingdom and made changes. In bringing concepts of democracy, freedom and free market economies from the west, the Thai kingdom under King Chulalongkorn changed politically as well as economically. The changes also filtered into other parts of the society, including religion. The concepts of democracy and freedom invaded Thailand, eventually affecting the core of most Thai communities: the wat.

King Chulalongkorn was responsible for the drastic changes in the wats' economic situation. By giving the temples greater roles in educating the people, a need for more temple revenue to pay the expense of providing education for so many was created. When the financial responsibilities of the temples increased (since they had to be responsible for educating not only those from the royal family but the other members of the community as well), temples began to acquire patrons. Patronage became a standard means of sustainability for many wats. The wats were the places where the men received spiritual guidance, training and education, all of which gave the wats identity and fame along with greater social function.

King Chulalongkorn's bureaucratic reform resulted in the establishment of ministries, i.e. Ministry of Education. The monks in the wats served as teachers to most members of the society. Over time, secular education replaced the role of the wat while Thais from higher socioeconomic status' went to western universities without being sanctioned by Thai society. Temple based education became a second choice the the secular Universities and institutes of education. A further decline in patronage of the wats resulted, as the members of the Thai community followed what their royal leaders adhered to as much as possible. Finally, the importance of the temple's role as a place for education lessened due to the desire of society to follow the lead of the King and the royal family. In present day Thailand, wealthy Thais no longer consider it necessary to send their children to be educated by monks. They instead consider wat education as a necessity for their children to learn the main precepts of Buddhism, which should not take longer than a single summer break given by the secular schools. The bulk of the responsibility for their education has fallen on western universities or the secular Thai universities modeled after western educational systems.

The Ministry of Education was established in 1887, but monasteries remained centers of basic education even for poor families in all of the communities. In some remote areas today, monks provide and conduct daily classes to teach village children.

In 1902 King Chulalongkorn enacted the Sangha Act. This Act gave the Sangha Council the power and duty to govern the Holy Order and to enact, issue and prescribe

enforceable decrees, regulations, rules and orders not in conflict or inconsistent with laws or Buddhist discipline. The Sangha Act works in the following way. First the King of Thailand is responsible for appointing the Supreme Patriarch. The Supreme Patriarch, leading the Supreme Sangha Council, has the duty and the authority to command the Sangha, to issue rules and regulations, and to appoint Sangha administrators. The National Bureau of Buddhism works closely with the Sangha administration, functioning as the secretariat for the Supreme Sangha Council. Its aims are "to achieve harmonious cooperation between the Sangha and the State" and its responsibilities include budgeting financial support given by the government. Various other government offices are represented including the Ministry of Culture and the Office of National Buddhism (ONAB). The Somdeths are the top monks, and there are always nine of them in line to become Supreme Patriarchs of Thailand. The main three Somdeths are the current abbots of Wat Saket, and Wat Paknam.

Ultimately, the Sangha Act works as a political tool which brings together the national religion and the State. This control allows centralization within the religion and gives the opportunity for the government to push political agendas through the national religion. This act was revised and amended in 1941, 1962 and 1992. (Na-Rangsi, n.d.) Before the Sangha Act, Buddhism was more localized, fitting the needs and desires of the local community.

An important village 'monastic service' is counseling. Abbots and senior monks are often requested to arbitrate local disputes whether it is about land or something else. Their social status guarantees sufficient and equitable resolutions which will be forwarded and accepted. Prior to ordination, many senior monks have led active secular common lives raising their own families and farming their own small land. This experience makes them familiar with common problems, and better able to empathize with the people whom they mediate for. They are reputed to be highly qualified to induce social harmony, employing their considerable moral authority as religious representatives, and if necessary, to gently admonish miscreants before minor disputes worsen.

The most common mode of merit making that Thai Buddhists practice more than anything else is *tham bun*. This takes many forms including the offering of food to monks, supporting the *Sangha* with material needs, contributing to or participating in monastic construction projects, and supporting charitable services accredited by the government or the *Sangha* itself. Most people do this because this is the simplest way to fulfill their obligation to their Buddhist religion.

With wats dependent on *tham bun*, a large portion of their support is provided by the royal house or by the members of the community. Thai Buddhists generally don't expect monks to be connected to the real society or work to earn money. They are to be separated from anything that promises material gain. The monks' sustenance is provided by the members of the community where the monks live. Besides their religious and ceremonial functions, the community monks play a contributory role to the community life, a role that is primarily educational (Tuchrello, 1991).

In the advent of the late 1960s, the government urged monks to engage in missionary activity in the remote, less developed provinces, particularly among the hill peoples, as part of the effort to integrate these groups into the polity.

History illustrates that competition ensured that temples pleased their supporters. Some wats made sure that their elite patrons were satisfied so that they would provide continuous support; however, this was often accomplished at the cost of the wants and needs of the masses, which were ignored. Most wats accommodated the local interests to encourage further support. This is how Buddhism began to work in Thailand. The Thai people continually adapted religious practices to changes in society. The wats learned to accommodate these small changes in a society that made their survival possible. This is why the religion has undergone a series of superficial changes through the ages. Despite the power and influence of Thai Buddhism and the *Sangha*, Thai society embrace of the capitalist economic system has forced Thai Buddhism to adapt once again. Wats in the major cities, under the patronage of the royal family or other prominent members of the society, became a marker of social prestige that pulled Buddhism towards prominent rituals of display of power and control.

At the onset of the 21st century, the Buddhist wat took on a different role. From providers of recreation, dispensary, school, community center, elderly care, news and information, the wat has evolved into a more consumer-based institution. The increasing awareness of incurable diseases and maladies has given many wats a different function. Some wats now play a healthcare role in the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Thailand (Engstrom & Kuhotani, 2005). The Buddhist temples are the place of last resort of the victims, who go there to seek comfort and support. Many monks prefer to educate community members on AIDS rather than provide care for these patients.

Many Thai people who are suffering from AIDS come from marginalized families and cannot afford the cost of care. The Thai hospitals generally provide only short term, basic care, which doesn't address the needs of AIDS victims. Furthermore, the government hasn't provided any place for the victims to seek care nor has there been a hospice program established to address this particular medical problem (World Bank, 2000). If a temple assumes the task of caring for those afflicted with AIDS, the temple has to be heavily supported by the community or one or more individual donors. As the care for those patients costs more than a normal community can offer, it is important for the wat to have another source of income to augment the cost of care.

Although many wats do teach the rudiments of herbal medicine and do give those medicines they make to the community, it is still necessary for those wats caring for the very sick to be supported so they can provide ample nutrition as well as medication. Wat *Pho* in Bangkok serves as the headquarters for the Association for Traditional Thai Medicine (Ishii, 1986). The temples can supply necessary medicines for common illnesses; however, cases like AIDS need both medicines and special care.

The new century also welcomed the ecological awareness of the Buddhist monks. The monks remained staunch teachers to the community but with the changes in their environment they began to develop and to teach ecological awareness. Attention to global warming is an example of how this value for ecological concerns has manifested itself in the proactive work of many Buddhist monks working to address this issue. Some monks

develop sound practices in the care of the environment and they blame its destruction on those people who are motivated by greed and are seeking economic and material gains.

As one of the precepts of Buddhism is to relieve suffering and evil, and the Buddhist monks believe that the environmental degradation is caused by the evils of greed, ignorance and hatred, they consider it their task to relieve that suffering and evil. They believe that since the people causing the pollution and the destruction of the forests are motivated by these evils (economic and material gain), it therefore becomes their inherent duty to act against them (Darlington, 1998).

These monks, often referred to as the ecology monks, raised their movement to a new level in the late eighties. It was not simply viewed as an economic or political debate between environmentalists and industrial developers. The moral issue of the suffering of life forms has been a large part of their position as well. Buddhists are concerned with the suffering of both humans and wildlife which is caused and increased by the destruction of the forests and watersheds. It is therefore important that the monks concern themselves with this destruction as well. The ecology monks are balancing on a fine line between their Buddhist responsibilities as spiritual leaders and their new practice as social watchers or activists. Buddhist precepts are used to support their goals as environmentalists and to counter the criticisms that their environmental activities are inappropriate for monks.

Over the years, the Buddhist temples have been criticized for a number of things. Among them, Wats have been criticized for dealing with money matters, which is a conflict with attachment to material gain. Previously support coming from the laity was mostly in the form of goods and services for subsistence. Since the community now moves at a fast pace, people started giving cash gifts or offerings. As Buddhist monks are traditionally forbidden from handling currency, they are encouraged to handle it as little as possible. It is believed that they might develop a love for money if they keep handling currency, which will lead to a desire for material gains. To this end, wats have a committee of lay people to handle the financial affairs of the temple.

The existence of wats is welcomed in every community, as they are considered to be the pillar of guidance and good merit will be in abundance. However, due to economic reasons, Thai authorities seek to curb the increase in the number of wats in a particular area. A regulation states that temples must be at least two kilometers away from each other. Many families, who already have so little, give more than they can afford in order to gain merit. The communities are very poor and if they contribute more than they should to the wats to earn merit, a second wat would be defeating the purpose of Buddhism to eliminate suffering. Giving merit has sometimes caused an increase in the suffering of people who are already poverty stricken (“Thai Government seeks to stem oversupply of Buddhist temples”, 2003).

Reformers insist that central control should be exercised and would prevent corrupt practices. But under this system, whoever has the title, the honor and the position often has the control. The royal family was no longer consulted about this practice. This was due to the idea of democracy and freedom that was injected by the education of the royal and the new elite in the west.

Formal royal recognition became an incentive, beyond the naturally improved social standing, for elite families to continue to support temples they previously supported. Temple prosperity cannot be achieved without appropriate resources. The main catch is that since the Chakri dynasty, the communities were held responsible for their own wats. When government support for the wats was cut off, the financial burden fell on the people of the community.

These changes prompted the growth and frequency of Buddhist fairs held at the temple grounds. In these fairs, various products such as herbs, Buddhist trinkets and other wares like amulets were sold to bring income to the temple. This practice has encouraged camaraderie between the members of the community and the monks, but it is also in a way considered frivolous, as other staunch Buddhists believe that it is unbecoming of Buddhists.

As response to this criticism, the temples held ecclesiastical ceremonies instead of fairs, holding events that require approval from the central *Sangha*. They had monks

deliver entertaining sermons and offerings would flood the wat. Reformers still believe that undignified sermons and undisciplined preachers have no place in the *Sangha*. It should not be fun and frivolous activity that would draw a Buddhist into the temple; it should be purity and the desire to attain the blessedness of Gautama Buddha.

Reforms forbidding curing and the magical arts made the people lose interest in coming to wats. They sought benevolent protective powers brought about by amulets, and when they were denied that, they stopped coming to the wats. The rules and the law around which the wats once revolved drastically changed from previous practices.

Ordinations used to be in generations uniting the community into one locality. The law limited ordination sites that were accepted by local wats, and who could be an ordainer or be ordained were also sanctioned by stricter laws (O'Connor, 1993). Restrictions such as levels of educational attainment hinder mass ordination as monks must qualify to perform ordinations and the ordainee must be educationally qualified to be ordained. Rules and the law improved the *Sangha* as a whole, but diminished community patronage because people seem to think that patronage of a wat carries with it too much responsibility and too much trouble.

It was western influence and economic systems that transformed Buddhism into what it is today. Modern knowledge and education were put into the forefront. Monks had to submit to the power of knowledge, and those who have it are placed in the position of honor. As honor and prestige are accorded to those monks who have achieved greatness either by deed or by word, they seek individual greatness. This creates conflict due to the fact that to seek individual greatness, it is necessary to want material gains. This is against Buddhist beliefs.

Regulations were meant to protect the wats from private interests, but if the wats themselves cater to what their supporter wants, it defeats the purpose and it becomes self-serving to its supporters. This leads the supporters to believe that the wats are there for their own convenience, transforming the real purpose of the temple into something that is materialistically connected.

The wats have accounting books that are continually scrutinized by lay officials to keep them clean and free from self-serving purposes. It is not a guarantee, however, that the books will not be misused. The moment that wats collect rents and hold them in trust, it starts a cycle of increased interest in material and worldly possession.

The wats were meant to distribute what they collect from the community. Whatever they gained in support was to be used in support of the entire community as well as the wat itself, but if the wats start to hold the support in trust, then there is nothing to distribute. The community provided for the wats, and as institutions that endeavored to ease the suffering of the members of the community, the wats distributed what they collected. This cycle of give and take is the root of Buddhist charity. The poor generously gave what they had, and so did the monks.

With the emergence of the new elite, a new kind of people educated by the west spread the idea that democracy is a give and take system, in which equality is for all those who demand and deserve service according to what they give in support. This takes away what is supposed to be given to the poor, who had given all they had. Yet they gain nothing, and expect only to receive spiritual merit in return.

Changes in Thailand's economy, culture and politics have greatly influenced and changed the way people practice Buddhism. Now the wats are subjected to massive social changes dictated by the way people picture, understand and imagine how it should be. Buddhist wats are now much closer to institutions of commerce, self-supporting and also providing service to their communities.

Buddhism demands that Buddhists use goods and services in the society only to sustain the well being of the individual and not to serve the pleasure of the flesh or the senses indiscriminately. Spiritual enlightenment is the ultimate aim of a Buddhist society, whereas in capitalism, the ever increasing standards of living, material possessions or more wealth is the final goal (Buddhist economics: adhering to ethical standards, 1998).

As the stranglehold of capitalism increases as the years go by, it is important for Buddhist values to be reawakened in each individual, so that rural people can retain a modicum of self-sufficiency and independence. Buddhism under the umbrella of

capitalism has changed the wat's function. The wats used to serve as the center of the village with the *Sangha* providing teaching, culture, and ritual along with education, medical care and occupational advice. There was an existing bond of cooperation and sharing; the villagers had something in common with one another: their culture. The culture that is currently prevailing in the community is changing as well.

The Thai social structure has collapsed under the extreme pressure and the impact of economic dependence, social dislocation, and the transformation of the culture that once pervaded the country and greatly changed the society. There are certain things that are limited to village wats due to lack of funds or correct leadership. The increase of the Buddhist laity increased the power of the middle class, but at the same time took away some of the monks' powers as well.

There is a need for a recall of the enduring Thai values and promotion of them as valid Thai culture. This is where social ethics and Buddhism should come into play and work with each other, rather than against each other. The new Buddhists have challenged the existing values and injected some new ones as well, which address the economic functioning of wats.

Although the aim of the Buddhist principle is for the betterment of the individual and the self, the new Buddhist laity has now introduced the idea of becoming even more self-sufficient, which leads to self-respect and self-confidence in the society as based on the teachings of Buddha. All in all, this was geared to reduce the impact of consumerism, which was further exaggerated by the influx advertisements in radio, television and popular magazines. This idea of self-sufficiency also applies to the wats themselves, as so many struggle to remain financially solvent.

Amidst the hardship that the country has experienced and is still experiencing, it has become acceptable to fulfill one's needs on the grounds that people who live in a society come equipped with minds and bodies that are mutually dependent. Without one or the other, the self-being is not the same. New Buddhists determine that with all these concepts, people who have lives affected by their needs should fulfill those needs as well. It is hard to determine, however, to what extent fulfillment of needs should be tolerated,

according to Buddhism. Buddhists believe that they can overcome societal problems by liberating the self from psychological suffering. How this is possible with the precept of detaching oneself from material possessions, it is hard to tell. These concepts of Buddhism lack the exact structure or guidelines that may determine how to address the social, economic and political situations of the modern world.

Such actions of self-denial will only hold true for hermits, who can denounce worldly attachments. The majority of Buddhists are not hermits; the fact that they are living in a complex, modern society creates a collision of values. This has brought about uncertainty and upheaval and a constant state of flux since the onset of the 20th century. Monks all over Thailand were, and still are, supported by the people. Some of these people are poorly paid laborers, and some have supported the wats using money earned through prostitution. The social responsibility of the Buddhists glares back at them as modern secular values clash with traditional Buddhist values, and societal problems increase.

3.3 Contemporary Buddhist Communities and their Issues

Today, the Department of Religious Affairs of Thailand recognizes over 40,000 Buddhist wats within the nation. The majority follow the Theravada branch of Buddhism. The wats are classified into two types: the royal wats patronized by monarchs and the royal family, and the community wats receiving patronage by the general population. Royal wats are designated as first class, second class, or third class, in relation to their status, which is determined by the status of their patron. All community wats have the same status. (Sakchai, personal interview at the Office of National Buddhism, 2006)

In Bangkok alone, there are more than 400 wats. Wat Suthat Thepwararam, in the heart of Rattanakosin Island, was founded in 1807. It is one of four first class standard Royal wats in Bangkok (the others being Wat Mahathat, Wat Pho and Wat Arun). These are referred to as Rajaworamahaviharn. A temple of this class was built on the instructions of a king, in this case King Rama I, and was directly patronized by the ruling monarch.

Wats have had many functions since their emergence in Thai society. Ishii describes the Thai wat as traditionally a school, a welfare provider, a hospital, a lodge, a social center, an art museum, a storage place, a branch of the administrative system, and a ceremonial hall (Ishii, 1986). In addition to education, Buddhist temples in Thailand offer different kinds of medical care. The headquarters or the main office of the Association for Traditional Thai Medicine is located in the temple of Wat Pho in Bangkok (Grady, 1995; Ishii, 1986).

Many Buddhist temples teach both monks and laymen the techniques of making traditional herbal medicines, and they give those medicines to the community. Most of the temples in Thailand can supply herbal medicines compounded by a monk. Buddhist temples in Thailand provide not only treatment of physical illnesses and ailments, but also psychological and emotional support for those who have mental or emotional problems (Ishii, 1986). Many Buddhist monks work as counselors providing spiritual and psychological guidance to those who come to the temple seeking assistance.

Today, many elderly persons use Buddhist temples as a place to live when they are unable to find family members or relatives to take care of them. Wat Tungsammakeedhamm, a Buddhist temple in Suphanburi province, provides 40 spaces for elderly persons, whether couples or singles. In addition to the elderly, Buddhist temples in Thailand provide living space for children whose parents are unable to take care of them, persons with mental or physical disabilities, and those who are unable to live comfortably in lay society for any reason.

Breaking away from traditions and the past hold of Buddhism in the history of Thailand, the Buddhist wats have been transformed into more independent entities or institutions that provide a variety of services to their communities as allowed and ordained by Buddhism and sanctioned by the current law. Although traditionally, each wat has had to rely on its patron or its community for food and sustenance, currently there are many poor communities that do not have the means to support their wat, and struggle for their own survival.

Over the years, Buddhism has undergone a facelift as a response to the changing socio-political situation in Thailand. Globalization has brought western influence in the manner of thinking of the Thai people, including their comprehension and interpretation of the principles of Buddhism. Buddhist practitioners, highly influenced by western education, now view the particulars of the religion in terms of a transnational, universal and ecumenical discourse. Buddhist ideologies are transformed according to how they are interpreted and viewed by the new elite.

The Thammakai movement sees a community of individuals as consumers. It was a movement most successful in gaining followers among the current social classes most disenchanted with modern Thai society, but not exactly willing to forego the fruits of modern technology. Its followers are mostly those from the middle class who are in favor of capitalism, like university students, technocrats, members of the military and small business people (Schober, 1995).

This new kind of Buddhism differs dramatically from the traditional view of Buddhist principles. Use of media and other modern devices like marketing, advertising and fund raisers generate mass appeal of religious consumerism. Spiritual enlightenment is offered but with concrete and tangible evidences. Membership promises to restore the national moral life, individual peace and material success. The Thammakai monks are educated in a university prior to training, which has had the effect of diminishing the value of monastic education. Lay ordinations for masses are one of the greatest appeals of this type of Buddhism. The followers of Thammakai caution their members against conventional religious practices like merit-making rituals, traditional curing (herbology) and use of amulets. Instead of all these, their followers are encouraged to live a life of moral discipline, devotion, cleanliness, and order in a modern nation. In doctrine and meditation, it is said that Thammakai resembles the Mahayana perception of the *dharmakaya*. Although it has undergone criticism in the early years due to the acquisition of land and donations believed to have been coerced, Thammakai has prospered.

In contrast to this, Santi Asoke is another movement of Buddhism that advocates the rejection of modernity and consumerism. The group religiously criticizes amorality, indulgence in sensual pleasures and materialism that are prevalent in modern Thai society. Santi Asoke expected his followers to lead a modest way of life that was agriculturally reliant. His followers are vegetarian and devoutly reject consumerism and materialism. They believe that any views that oppose these are opposed to Buddha.

There are also those who openly apply the principles of the *dhamma* to concrete issues like overpopulation, such as Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, who also criticizes capitalism, democracy and communism as moral alternatives to Buddhist socialism. This view holds that equal distribution of wealth among the members of a community is the ideal, and that each member of society is morally accountable for acting in a way that is socially responsible (Schober, 1995).

Buddhist ethics promotes the idea of living simply. To achieve this goal it is important to change the economic structure into one of a more local self-sufficiency. In order to achieve this, members of a community must depend on themselves and those in their community to survive. The wats in every community seek to abide by the precepts of Buddhism. Generally speaking, Buddhism recognizes that greed, hatred, and delusion are the root of evil and that they currently prevail in a capitalist, consumer-based society.

Buddhists find greed in the systematic way that farmers are uprooted and made tenants by large agricultural businessmen. This causes large-scale dislocation of families, unemployment and extreme poverty. Buddhist wats seek to alleviate the problem by encouraging the King's "Sufficiency Economy" and teaching the people how to be self-reliant. Monks encourage agricultural independence by showing farmers innovative ways of farming and gardening. Some wats are the community's source of education in regard to farming and gardening for its own survival.

Currently, Thailand suffers the same malady of any typical developing country: poverty. Development brought changes like roads being built, radio and television to improve communication and information dissemination. Even popular magazines became instrumental in propagating consumerism and capitalist economic systems. Not everyone

was affected positively by these changes; the elite prospered, but the poor and the powerless grew poorer and more powerless. People changed their existing lifestyle as they grew tired and unhappy with the old one (Sivaraksa, 1992). Old values were replaced by the new, and rural communities were increasingly threatened by desperate poverty, often caused by the forces of agribusiness. Farmers have been continually stripped of their lands and large corporations have converted these lands into buildings in the name of progress and development.

Throughout Thai history, the Buddhist *wats* have been the source of Buddhist teachings, culture and ritual. In most cases, they also provided the community with education, medical care and occupational advice. This has all changed, and the Thai social structure is crumbling under the pressure of economic dependence, social dislocation and values transformation brought about by western cultural and economic influences.

Rural Thailand suffers most amidst the pressure of these phenomena, and some Buddhist *wats* seek to alleviate the pressure by promoting the traditional values of the Thai culture which have always been rooted in the Buddhist religion. Some Buddhist *wats* take on an active role in supporting their local communities.

The community of Khamkhan Suvanno, for example, strives to achieve a self-sustaining local economy while working to ease ecological problems. The *wat* provides support and encouragement to the members of the community. The villagers are taught to raise their own vegetables, make their own fish ponds and plant fruit trees. In this way, they seek to battle poverty and hunger. Phra Khamkhan supports this kind of self-sufficiency that works to reduce poverty. Poverty has been caused by the greed motivating economy, and Phra Khamkhan believes that land should also be preserved and saved, since it provides sustenance and livelihood for the people. Monks who share this belief often help to protect forests by living in them, discouraging intruders who disrespect the sanctified lands (Ekachai, 1991).

Similarly, Phra Khru Sakorn in Yokkrabat sought to alleviate poverty and hunger in his community. Due to the location of the village, sea water always flooded the rice

paddies and made it impossible to cultivate them, leaving the people with no means of subsistence. Faced with this reality, the Buddhist leader suggested planting coconut trees, as observed in a nearby village (Sivaraksa, 1992). The villagers were discouraged from selling coconuts because of the middlemen who tried to keep the prices low. They were instead taught to make coconut sugar and sell it all over the country. The Buddhist monks instructed the villagers to grow their own vegetables and fruits, so that they wouldn't have to buy them from outside the village. The palm trees were also used for building materials, which lessened the cost of building in the community. The people were also taught to plant herbs for medicine. Due to the community's proximity to the sea, fishing was introduced to the villagers. This is a fine example of a community becoming self-sufficient and transforming its economy while upholding Buddhist principles. Community life in Yokkrabat has improved greatly after all the innovations spearheaded by the wat (Phongphit, 1988).

Buddha Kasetra is a community in northern Thailand under one *wat*'s leadership with the goal of establishing a number of schools to care for orphans, juvenile delinquents and economically deprived children in north and northeast Thailand. The monks of this community are occupied with teaching people to grow their own rice and vegetables, produce their own fertilizers with organic materials, and raise cows to produce milk for their children, as well as sell surplus cows at an affordable price in neighboring communities. The Buddhist monks also encourage people to start commercial projects to make prepared foods and desserts, weave fabrics and sew clothing, and make bricks and posts to be used for construction. All members of the community are given occupational and manual training. Becoming self-sufficient increases the community's independence, and helps members to better support their families and the wat's activities.

Aside from the issues of poverty, this Buddhist community is also concerned with issues of exploitation of women and children. Campaigns to protect both women's and children's rights are at the top of the list of priorities. The wats provide young women from marginalized families education and occupational training to prevent them from

turning to prostitution due to poverty. This is the community's way of fighting poverty, consumerism and structural exploitation caused by a centralized bureaucratic government that has increasingly opened its doors to western social, economic and political influences.