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Buddhism and Ecology: How Religion Influences Human-Nature Relationships in
Contemporary Thailand

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Foreword

Having jet-set across the globe to the land of wild tigers, monkeys, elephants, and jungles galore, I expected to arrive in a lush, biodiversity paradise when I first came to Thailand. What I expected was a Thailand that existed fifty years ago, but what I found when I got here was a drastically different and deteriorated landscape. Fragments of the beautiful rainforests that once covered the country still remain and they have given me blissful moments of sanctity on my trip, but the jungle has been so deforested and fragmented that species decline and environmental ramifications have been extensive. Since my arrival in Southeast Asia, the cultural, economic, and political effects of globalization on the country have struck a chord deep within my being. Nowhere have these changes been more obvious and shocking to me than in the natural environment.

The environment provides us with the air we breathe, the food we eat, and even the materials that make up our houses and the fuel that powers our vehicles. It supplies economies, provides jobs, and supports livelihoods. Without it, we could not live. However, many of us humans have come to think of ourselves as independent from our environment. We forget that our lives, livelihoods, and happiness depend on it. Nature, in the eyes of many, has become a commodity meant solely for our use and exploitation. We feel we have the right to use it as if it were only put there for our benefit. As Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac lamented in his *États et empires de la lune* in 1656, “The insufferable arrogance of human beings to think that Nature was made solely for

their benefit, as if it was conceivable that the sun had been set afire merely to ripen men's apples and head their cabbages." This is a dangerous mentality; nature cannot continue to support us if we continue to abuse her to no end. Human greed is limitless; but the earth's resources are not.

I witnessed this grueling mentality in relentless action growing up in the West. Having grown up playing in forests, backpacking in the mountains, and perhaps inheriting a little passed-down wisdom from a Native American ancestor, a part of me always knew that the mentality governing our "development" was misguided. As I entered college, I read some Eastern literature that encompassed a different ideology, one similar to that of the natives of my own country. I found a common thread between Buddhist and Native American spirituality; both promote respect for nature and her laws along with balance and reciprocity in one's interactions with the earth. Unfortunately, Native American spirituality has virtually been swept away and replaced with the mentality of "conquering" nature rather than thanking her for her gifts. However, Buddhism, still being widely practiced in Thailand, intrigued me to go and find out how it affects people's relationships with nature in the country today. When I arrived in Bangkok, I was amazed by the amounts of smog and trash that smothered the city. Granted, I probably chose the worst place in all of Thailand on which to evaluate the environment. However, I soon learned that the environmental blights of Thailand extended way beyond Bangkok.

My sadness and shock at the deforestation and general abuse of the environment in Thailand led me to deeper questions about human nature: How could people abuse the land in this way, especially in a country whose religion, Buddhism, stresses peace, cooperation, respect, and the interconnection of all biotic and abiotic phenomena? What forces have driven such terrible exploitation and abuse of the land so much so that the most respected animal, the elephant, no longer even exists in the wild¹? So, naturally, I began searching for answers to these questions. My questions led me into temples, libraries, farms, and villages throughout the country. I wanted to learn about how Buddhism has shaped people's relationships with nature throughout history in Thailand. I wanted to explore the changes of the environment in Thailand and see if they had any ties to changes in the religious practices of the people. Four months of experiences, observations, and searching while living in Thailand has led me to some answers.

In this paper, I will explore my findings through socio-religious methodology, examining Buddhism and its application to environmental problems in contemporary Thailand. First, I will provide background context about the religion of Thailand, Theravada Buddhism. Next, I will explore the doctrines and teachings of Buddhism, specifically of which apply to human interactions with nature, and how these have changed over time. Then I will discuss the works of Buddhist teachers who have applied these ancient teachings to the modern

¹ 100 years ago, there were 100,000 elephants in Thailand. Today, there are estimated to be less than 2000 remaining (Thai Elephant Conservation Center).

environmental crisis in Thailand. Finally, I will discuss the effects these teachers and other Buddhist teachings have had on Thai society and what that means for the environment of Thailand today.

A Thai Worldview: Theravada Buddhism

Theravada, or Hinayana, Buddhism is the official religion of Thailand and is practiced by 95% of the population. It originated in India, and from there, it spread to Southeast Asia in the 3rd Century B.C. It is now widely practiced in Thailand, Laos, Burma, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. Its name literally means “the teaching of the elders,” and its followers believe that this school of Buddhism remains truest to the original teachings of the Buddha. Its teachings follow the Pali Canon dating from the 3rd Century BCE. It is known as the *Tipitaka*, or “the three baskets,” because it is divided into three parts; one deals with rules that the *Sangha* must follow, one contains the philosophical and ethical teachings of the Buddha, and the final “basket” contains supplemental philosophy (Hutchison, 114).

The main beliefs of Theravada Buddhism revolve around ideas about suffering, impermanence, and individual responsibility. The teachings of the Buddha can be well described through his four Noble Truths, in which he taught that life is full of suffering, which is brought about by attachment to the illusions of permanence and the false idea of a self that exists as separate from others and the universe. He provided a path to freedom from this suffering through the

Eightfold Path culminating in the attainment of Nirvana, or “Ultimate Truth,” but maintained that followers “must tread the Path [themselves]” by purifying the mind (Rahula, 2)

Theravada Buddhism, in particular, places emphasis on renouncing craving, or thirst, which is the root of attachment and thus the root of suffering. It stresses the importance of “cultivating an aversion to passions” in order to obtain freedom and the “coolness” of Nirvana and the ability to see things as they are. This is done through meditation, through resisting the urge to identify oneself with one’s consciousness, feelings, and perceptions, and to instead identify oneself with the greater, unchanging reality of the universe (Burt, 96). Monks are expected to keep 227 precepts, but laypeople are only expected to keep five: to abstain from killing, stealing, adultery, lying, and drinking alcohol. The precepts serve as a basic morality code that contributes to the accumulation of good karma and well being in the world, and without which further spiritual growth is not possible.

In Theravada tradition, monks and laypeople have a special reciprocal relationship; laypeople provide robes and food to monks and pay a great deal of respect and honor to them; monks provide laypeople with spiritual guidance. However, neither group makes demands of the other. It is simply understood as a mutually respectful and compassionate relationship that reflects the greater nature of Theravada beliefs, such as *samsara*, or karma. A number of other rituals and festivals play a role in Theravada Buddhism. Wesak, for instance, is

the most important Theravada Buddhist festival and occurs during the full moon of May to celebrate the enlightenment of the Buddha (Hutchison, 116).

From a Theravadin worldview, Theravadists are simply staying true to Buddhism in its purest form. However, many scholars argue that contemporary Theravada Buddhism takes a more ascetic or extreme approach to living than originally intended by the Buddha, who very much stressed the importance of the “middle path” (Burt, 83).

The main goal of Theravada Buddhism is to become *arahant*; this means that one is free from all passions and aversions and capable of seeing things as they are. He or she will break the cycle of *samsara* and reach Nirvana upon death, never to reenter the cycle of suffering (Rahula, 32). Not all Thais aspire to be *arahants*; however, this is not to say that Buddhism has not had a profound effect on the laypeople of Thailand.

On the contrary, Buddhism has influenced not only those who diligently practice it, but many aspects of the culture of Thailand, such as traditions and societal values. Societal values lay the foundation for how people interact with and treat not only one another, but the environment as well.

Buddhist Teachings, Monks, and the Environment

Religions serve many purposes, but all share a common thread- they greatly influence how an individual interprets, relates to, and treats the world around him. This unavoidably includes nature, labeled externally by many

Westerners as the 'environment.' Buddhism, in particular, presents its followers with a specific view of nature; however, it must be acknowledged that Buddhism alone cannot account for the relationships Thais have with their environment. It is simply one prominent factor within a web of other intertwining components. In looking at Buddhism in Thailand, we must also remember that interpretations, practices, and beliefs will vary both among communities and among individuals within those communities throughout the country. One simplistic and pigeonholed evaluation will not suffice to explain the intricacies of Buddhism's function in society and in nature in Thailand. Nonetheless, a few notions that are central to Buddhism can help illuminate the implications the teachings have for nature across the board: namely, a spirit of reciprocity, cause and effect, individual responsibility, gratefulness, and simple living.

Buddhism in Thailand is anything but clear-cut and concrete. Like any religion or belief system, it is an evolving phenomena continually influenced and shaped by a plethora of cultural, social, and historical factors. The influences of Brahmanism and animism color the rituals of Buddhism in Thailand, resulting in seemingly ambiguous or contradictory practices, rituals, festivals, and beliefs. However, there are some core beliefs, traditions, and themes that have woven the paths of Theravada Buddhism together into more or less of a coherent whole since its introduction into Thailand. Many of these aspects directly and visibly link people back to nature and promote environmental stewardship: namely, the basis around natural and agricultural rhythms that its stories, the beliefs in merit

from good deeds, rituals, festivals, practices and teachings have, and the core teachings of the Buddha.

The spirit of reciprocity is a value and a practice in Buddhism that is particularly prominent and visible throughout all of Thailand. Devoted laypeople customarily make daily offerings of food to the monks of their communities, and in return receive spiritual merit, or “good” karma. Many rituals and festivals center on this practice of merit making. For example, *kathina*, a ritual that occurs at the end of the rainy season, is one in which laypeople give robes and other offerings to the members of a *Sangha* in exchange for a spiritual blessing (Swearer, 19). The *kathina* ritual is simply one of many that serve to illuminate this deep-rooted belief in the power of reciprocal giving to bestow good karma on an individual.

The spirit behind these merit-making activities is meant to be altruistic in nature; however, the motives of individuals partaking in these rituals inevitably vary, and some people may choose to participate out of social obligation or desire for good merit than out of loving kindness and compassion. However, regardless of the motive, the exchange of reciprocity takes place and serves to physically support the monks and spiritually support the people, so even when arising out of questionable of motivation, it arguably still serves a beneficial purpose in society.

When this spirit of reciprocity is properly understood, a true Buddhist will treat all actions he or she performs with it in mind. A person’s treatment of nature

in everyday life will reflect his gratefulness for its support of his own life, and he will thus live in a sustainable way that is mutually nurturing for both the environment and for him. His reciprocal relationship with the environment will mirror his reciprocal relationship with the monks and that with all others that he encounters and interacts with. However, the average layperson does not always fully understand or practice this deeper meaning of this spirit of reciprocity. Many people practice this only superficially through ceremonies as a way to accumulate good merit or make up for bad karma. For this reason, many monks devote a great deal of their time to educating the public about how to truly live in a reciprocal, grateful, peaceful, and Buddhist way.

Many, if not all of these Buddhist teachings, show people how to live in balance with nature. The teachings of action and reaction, personal responsibility, gratefulness, interdependence, and simple living all contribute to this end (Johlee²). Ecology monks³, in particular, acknowledge the great extent to which environmental degradation is a major source of suffering, and so they devote their time to showing people specific ways in which they can lead environmentally responsible and ethically sound lives (Darlington, 1).

One of the main teachings Buddhist monks spread is the idea of action and reaction (*karma*), or cause and effect. Buddha taught his disciples not to cut

² Johlee is a Hmong monk from a village about fifty kilometers outside of the city of Chiang Mai who teaches foreigners about Buddhism at a weekly “Monk Chat” at the temple of Wat Suan Dok in the city of Chiang Mai.

³ Ecology monks, or *phra nak anuraksa* in Thai, are Buddhist monks that take part in environmental conservation and have played an active role in protecting forests in Thailand since the 1990s (Darlington, 1).

down trees and not to spit on plants (Johlee). We can interpret these teachings as an early attempt to avoid pollution and harm to life, and to instead show respect towards nature (Batchelor, 25). When Buddha lived, the environmental problems were miniscule compared to what they are today. However, his teachings were rooted in the ideas of non-harm and karma, which can be limitlessly expanded and applied to the much more serious crises we face today.

Today, ecology monks take these teachings and re-apply them by teaching farmers how the results of their actions ultimately affect them; how using harsh pesticides and farming techniques that aim at maximizing production rather than sustaining health and well-being will lead to problems for their crops and their health down the road. They encourage the use of organic farming methods instead of environmentally destructive ones and teach people how to implement these more sustainable methods that do not harm the crops, the earth, or human health, such as the use of mosquito nets and a spray that discourages pests by its bitter taste (Johlee).

These teachings promote individual responsibility. Because Buddhism denies the dependence on or savior by external gods, the belief that people must accept the consequences of what they do rings true. Buddha encouraged his followers to take full responsibility for the outcome of their actions and accept the results. When the monks go to villages and farmer's homes, they do not force these teachings on the farmers, but simply educate them and show them how an action rooted in greed or lack of respect for nature will lead to a similar result.

According to Johlee, a Hmong monk from a village about fifty kilometers outside of the city of Chiang Mai, this method has proved much more effective (and understandably so) than previous governmental attempts to simply order the people to employ sustainable practices without explaining the reason or the result. Governmental officials, such as forest guards, are now employing similar techniques—ones that are based on education rather than simple orders—in many village and agricultural communities throughout Thailand.

Gratefulness is another quality greatly emphasized by monks and Buddhists today. Gratefulness means acknowledging the suffering that went into whatever it is that is supporting your benefit, your sustenance, and your ability to live. Although Buddhist monks oppose the killing of animals, they accept meat when given it so as not to waste it. However, the importance of remembering that an animal lost its life for the one eating it is stressed greatly. “When you eat meat, do not think of the deliciousness of the meat,” Johlee told me. Instead, when you eat meat, use the energy you get from eating the meat to generate good for others.” This attitude of gratefulness fosters a greatly positive relationship with nature because it ensures that one does not take more than he needs. It supports the ideas of reciprocity and interdependence of all life on Earth. It is the opposite of greed, from which all suffering arises.

Finally, the ecology monks stress value of simple living. This is based on being satisfied with what one has, being grateful instead of greedy, and taking only enough to sustain one’s health. This idea is based on the first component of

the Noble Eightfold Path, the idea of “right understanding.” In finding value in the simple things and being grateful for what one has, one cannot fall victim to the forces of greed, jealousy, hate, thirst, and thus disrespect or disregard for nature.

Monks and ecology monks alike are spreading teachings to laypeople throughout Thailand in efforts to help people live at peace with one another and with nature as well. However, the problems they face are numerous. One of these is that monks are not permitted to become involved in politics, and many argue that their efforts in environmental advocacy overstep that line (Darlington, 11). Another obstacle they face is getting people to listen or take their teachings to heart. In villages where the leader of the village is Buddhist, monks’ efforts to decrease deforestation have often been successful. However, when the leader of the village is not Buddhist, often he will not respect the teachings of the monks simply on the grounds of religious affiliation. Similarly when it comes to the practice of ordaining trees, most devout Buddhists will respect a tree that has been ordained with an orange robe by not cutting it down, but others who do not understand or respect the meaning will remove the robe and cut the tree anyway (Johlee).

Environmental problems in Thailand are extensive. However, the monk community in Thailand seems to be well-educated on the matter, insightful about how to apply Buddhist teachings to fix these problems, and eager to help by spreading the teachings of Buddha and their practical applications to communities all throughout the country. A few monks and Buddhist scholars in

particular have been particularly keen on addressing ecological issues. A few have dedicated their lives to addressing the way in which people relate to nature through applying Buddhist teachings to these modern ecological predicaments. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa are two such monks. They promote personal responsibility, environmental awareness, and social action to ameliorate the ecological injustices of today's world.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's Teachings and Their Influence in Thai Society

The drastic environmental crises facing humanity in recent times have spurred numerous people to search for answers amidst their own religions, cultures, and ways of thought. Buddhism lends itself, in particular, to practices that involve understanding nature and the ways in which we as humans are inherently part of nature, in contrast to practices that involve the pursuit of technological, and often temporary, fixes that serve to maintain our illusion of separation from nature. In Thailand, one Buddhist monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, has been a particularly influential voice in the ecology movement through spreading these notions of interconnectedness, impermanence, compassion, non-attachment, emptiness, and selflessness and stressing how these ideas can help us build a more symbiotic relationship between one another and the environment. In this chapter, I will explore the ideas and doctrines this regarded teacher emphasized and explore their implications and influences on people's views of and roles in their ecosystems throughout Thailand.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, sometimes referred to in Thailand as the “monk of wisdom,” is one of the great voices in the country connecting ecology and Buddhism. His profound regard for nature inspired him to build Wat Suan Mokkhalarama, a forest temple in the southern province of Surat Thani, where he has spent most of his life teaching. Buddhadasa regarded the natural world as an incredibly valuable teacher of Buddhism, of meditation, and for understanding doctrines that are central to ecological wisdom such as non-attachment, interdependent co-arising, and emptiness. He equated nature very closely with the *Dhamma*, the truth taught by the Buddha, and often uses the two terms interchangeably throughout his teachings. Critics of Buddhadasa’s approach argue that it is anthropocentric because it uses nature itself as a tool for human’s spiritual development. Others argue that Buddhadasa’s retreat to a forest temple was a means of escaping rather than facing the environmental problems of the world (Hermeneutics, 25). However, a closer exploration of Buddhadasa’s teachings, I believe, will illuminate the incomplete understanding of the deeper meaning of his message that these criticisms are based on.

The first doctrine that Buddhadasa emphasizes in his teachings is that of non-attachment. Non-attachment, in its deepest sense, connotes an ethic of detached compassion towards all sentient things. It means extending love and kindness towards all things in the world for their own benefit rather than one’s own with the understanding that all things in nature, including oneself, are in a state of continual flux. Non-attachment, therefore, is closely linked with

selflessness and empathy. The idea of empathy is at the heart of Buddhadasa's idea of environmental stewardship; if we look into the language of the Buddhist teachings, we can see this connection. The root of the Pali word for conservation, or *anurak*, more precisely means "caring for," or acting out of empathy. Since empathy is linked to non-attachment, its meaning implies caring for the forest out of more than just self-interest (Two Perspectives, 244). If we study the linguistics of the Buddha's and Buddhadasa's teachings, we find that certain meanings are lost in translation, and that despite critics' concerns, Buddhadasa stressed a highly ecocentric view rather than an anthropocentric view of the universe.

Truly acting out of selfless empathy, Buddhadasa explained, depends on one's realization of the interdependence of all things. This includes the realization of one's own influence and dependence on nature and its constituent parts. In order to explain this concept, Buddhadasa drew on the doctrine of interdependent co-arising. His explanation of this doctrine goes as such:

The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. Our bodily parts function as a cooperative. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise, that human beings are all mutual friends in the process of birth, old age, suffering, and death, then we can build a noble, even a heavenly

environment. If our lives are not based on this truth then we'll all perish
(Bhikkhu, 34).

Cooperation then, according to Buddhadasa, not only stems from the realization of the doctrine of interdependent co-arising, but is also connected to the practices of non-attachment, empathy, and environmental stewardship as a whole. Taking a look again at the Pali language, we find that the word for “nature,” or *thamachat*, greatly explains and supports these ideas of cooperation and interconnectedness. Its meaning connotes something much more encompassing than its English counterpart; *thamachat* extends to not only the “natural” world, but to virtually everything in the universe as an interdependent, cooperative whole. Buddhadasa went as far as to equate *thamachat* with the *dhamma*, explaining, “the destruction of nature implies destruction of the *dhamma*” (Hermeneutics, 25). A true Buddhist, then, according to Buddhadasa, is also a conscious environmental steward. To act morally is in large part to act in cooperation with the earth and respect its processes and limits, recognizing that one’s own well being is inherently intertwined with the well being of others, including nature. Viewing nature in this way, according to Buddhadasa, is integral to living sustainably and peacefully.

A third doctrine taught by Buddhadasa, the doctrine of emptiness, serves to reinforce the ideas of impermanence, non-attachment, and interconnectedness through a selfless mindset. This notion of emptiness basically means that, because everything is in a state of flux and interdependent on everything else,

reality is devoid of any substantial “self.” Therefore, one’s actions should not be self-motivated but rather done for the sake of the actions themselves and for the sake of *dhamma*. Buddhadasa referred to this notion of non-self-centered action as *cit-wang* (Jackson, 200). It requires one to detach from one’s personal investment in the results of one’s actions, therefore acting out of emptiness and pure heart. Although Buddhadasa practiced Buddhism, he very much stressed the ideas of unity and interconnectedness to the extent to which he argued that there, in truth, is no religion; that we are all simply part of the same greater existence.

Buddhadasa’s ideas were incredibly progressive in that they reinterpreted Buddhism to be applicable to the problems of today’s world, namely the disharmony between humans and the environment. However, although his ideas are theoretically beneficial, they have not been extremely influential in Thai society for a number of reasons. Because Buddhadasa reinterpreted many traditional views of Theravada and Thai Buddhism, and because many of his views go against the wishes of the political leaders of Thailand (in a country where Buddhism is supposed to support the government, not oppose it), they have yet to become popular among many Thai people (Jackson, 299).

Buddhadasa’s teachings are no doubt relevant to the environmental problems we face today. His ideas of interdependence and cooperation lend us excellent tools to help each one of us realize our universal responsibility towards nature, and thus our duty to live in an environmentally respectful, responsible,

and sustainable way. However useful these teachings are, unfortunately there seems to be a disconnect between the theory and the practice of these doctrines and ideas in Buddhadasa's work and throughout the whole of Thailand.

Cooperation is a great idea in theory, but in practice, as soon as there is a serious conflict of interest, it often goes out the window as people revert to their selfish ways. Buddhadasa, like many spiritual teachers, was trying to elevate people's consciousness so that they can act in cooperation rather than competition. This idea is central to ecological sustainability because at the end of the day, how we treat our environment comes down to how we compete for resources and whether we act out of selfishly fueling our desires or simply satisfying our needs. However, separating oneself from one's ego is no easy task, and therefore, the influences of many of Buddhadasa's teachings did not reach much further than the theoretical realm.

Further societal and cultural factors also pose barriers to Buddhadasa's ethic becoming widespread in Thailand. The lack of education in throughout the country is one of these. Because Buddhadasa's material is quite intellectual, it is not necessarily easily accessible to the common man or woman in Thai society (Jackson, 300). The farmer, for example, has environmental ramifications that are huge. However, in most village communities (and urban communities alike), a tendency towards animistic and traditional Thai Buddhist practices, which often revolve around simply gaining merit through rituals rather than ecologically and socially engaged practices, are still the most popular way of participating in the

religion. Loy Kratong, for example, is one of the biggest annual festivals held in Thailand each November, during which people light thousands upon thousands of candles in rafts and float them down the river as an apology to the spirits of the river for all of the pollution they dumped into it throughout the course of the year (Lertsukon). So in essence, this ritual entails apologizing for polluting the river by further polluting the river and gaining merit for it. Therefore, if one aspect of Buddhadasa's teachings could be put into practice, perhaps his focus on the here and the now (rather than the present focus on actions for gaining merit for some future life) would be most beneficial. Translating his teachings into simpler terms and making them accessible to the common man would also be important for them to be more widely put into practice in society.

From Buddhadasa's standpoint, this lack of education amongst the public isn't simply a lack of schooling. Buddhadasa believed that nature was the most important teacher. To Buddhadasa, education meant spending time in the wilderness. Nature's way of teaching impermanence, the insubstantiality of the self, and of the interconnectedness of all things, he would argue, was after all, a key component of what led Buddha himself to reach enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Spending a great deal of time in nature is imperative to understanding the ramifications one's actions have on nature (and ultimately everything, including oneself), as many are unobvious to the casual observer. It is therefore not surprising that in this age of rapid globalization, urbanization, and development, people have become uneducated simply through their separation

and lack of interaction with the environment in its natural state. Critics of Buddhadasa argue that in his retreat to the forest temple, he was running away from the problems of society; however, in his mind it was the only way to fix them. Buddhadasa's teachings, therefore, are theoretically significant beyond belief. However, their adoption into the practice of Thai society has been minimal due to societal and political obstacles. Hope of spreading his ideas perhaps could lie in a form of environmental education. The main obstacle, perhaps, is getting nature to the masses. Sulak Sivaraksa has carried on the legacy of Buddhadasa, but taken a slightly different approach, vehemently stressing an engaged Buddhist approach, attempting to link Buddhist teachings with social action.

Sulak Sivaraksa: Engaging Buddhism for a More Sustainable World

Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai social critic and well-rounded academic, has devoted his life to addressing the environmental problems we face along with the social problems inseparably tied to them. Sivaraksa is among the founders of a number of movements and non-governmental organizations that work towards social and environmental peace, such as the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and the Spirit in Education movement. He served as Chair of the Asian Cultural Forum on Development, has written a number of books, lectured at colleges and universities throughout Thailand, Europe, and the United States, and in 1995, he was awarded the Right Livelihood Award (also known as the

Alternative Nobel Prize). Sivaraksa approaches conflict resolution through an approach deemed “Engaged Buddhism,” a renewed view of the Buddhist faith that stresses the marriage of spirituality with *action* (Sulak-Sivaraksa.org). In his book entitled *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*, Sivaraksa examines the deterioration of traditional Buddhist values and their connection to the simultaneous degradation of both people and nature. He then explores the possibility of addressing these problems through a renewal of Buddhist values along with appropriate application in a modern setting.

Sulak Sivaraksa points to a web of factors responsible for the degradation of the environment and its subsequent consequences for people and their livelihoods in Thailand. The main source of these factors, explains Sivaraksa, was the shift in fundamental values from a balanced, Buddhist spirituality to what he calls a “religion of consumerism,” in which Western ideologies based on economic growth and greed infiltrated Asian society, compromising the traditional, wholesome values that fostered self-sustenance, moderation, and generosity for centuries, in their wake (Sivaraksa, 3). The traditional Asian values Sivaraksa refers to have been rapidly deteriorating since the British’s imposition of an open-door trading policy and since World War II when the West’s influence really began to take hold in Thailand. These traditional Buddhist values include disdain for competition and individual success at the expense of others along with reverence for qualities that foster peace, unity, generosity, and cooperation. Animistic and Buddhist spirituality alike very much nurtured a respect for the

spirits of the forest and of the ocean. One tradition in Thailand involved giving gratitude to the Rice Goddess, serving as a reminder to eat responsibly and frugally with balance and respect towards nature (Sivaraksa, 6).

Much of the environmental injustices cast on Thailand are the result of changing ideologies among locals; however, powerful foreign companies and multinational corporations have caused a vast number of the environmental injustices in Thailand as well. Agribusiness, for example, is one of the most economically profitable industries in the world, including in Thailand. It profits by taking advantage of rural locals, acquiring their land, clear-cutting the very forests that have sustained them for centuries, and setting up industrial-scale, ecologically destructive farms with harsh chemicals and heavy water usage, causing erosion, contamination of the water table, species extinction, and many more atrocities. The tangerine orchards throughout Northern Thailand are one example of this kind of intensive agriculture (Severson). These companies thereby destroy the livelihood of the local people, disabling their self-sustaining way of life, and leaving many of them with no choice but to work in exploitative conditions, whether for in sweatshops, in prostitution, or for the corporation itself. Whether in cases of direct exploitation or simply more consumerist lifestyles, there is a strong argument that the ideologies driving these destructive mechanisms were Western-initiated.

The change of the environmental and social spheres in Thailand over the past century is exemplified by the following excerpt from Sivaraksa's book, *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*:

In Surin province in the impoverished northeast, an abbot recalled that when he was young, the people seemed happier. The people got along with each other and there was that sanuk feeling among them. The villages were surrounded by jungles, and elephants roamed freely. The people were poor, but they managed to produce enough food for their families, as well as for the monks. They had the four essentials of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Over the last thirty years, the abbot witnessed constant development and construction. Today, the jungle and the elephants have disappeared, and the people are suffering. (Sivaraksa, 48)

Sivaraksa correlates these cultural and economic changes directly with changes in spiritual values of the Thai people. Although foreign powers may have initially imposed a new consumerist value system, many Thais have accepted it willingly. The materialist values of capitalist countries have changed the practice of Buddhism so much that Sulak "question[s] whether or not our societies are still Buddhist, regardless of what we call ourselves" (Sivaraksa, 41). Sivaraksa does not advocate for a complete reversion to an ancient Buddhist practice and way of life exactly like it was before such global changes occurred. Instead, he suggests a "middle path" between Westernization and the traditional way of life, applying

ancient values to the modern era, adapting religious practices to suit the newly transformed culture where fit (Sivaraksa, 8).

Sulak insightfully points out how the shift from traditional to consumerist values in Thailand was accompanied by an elemental shift in popular perception of the meaning of the term “development.” From a Buddhist standpoint, development fosters qualities such as compassion, loving-kindness, generosity, and reverence for life in individuals and in society as a whole. Contrary to this definition, today’s “development” fosters greed, hatred, and delusion, whereas a Buddhist concept of development would minimize these (Sivaraksa, 44). Therefore, according to this Buddhist ethic, true development is the opposite of what is being considered development today. This confusion of terminology, and on a deeper level, of values, has thrown people out of balance with nature all around the world; in Thailand, rapid urbanization, massive deforestation and flooding, cultural materialism, and poverty are just some of the signs and consequences of such damaging ideology.

Sulak Sivaraksa works to raise awareness and consciousness in hopes to redefine development in the minds of citizens both in Thailand and worldwide. Embracing his Buddhist definition of development requires the realization of inner selfish hindrances and their external impact on one’s community and the earth (Sivaraksa, 47). Such a realization, based off of the Buddha’s teachings of Right Understanding, involves a deep insight into the notion of *karma* (that every action has a result similar in nature to the motive which caused it) and the doctrine of

interdependent co-arising (that the universe functions as a cooperative). These ideas serve as the basis of Engaged Buddhism. Buddhism without engagement or action, Sivaraksa argues, is a form of escapism and is based off of an incomplete understanding (Severson). A cultivation of collective mindfulness and the creation of a more peaceful, balanced, and loving world requires action beyond the walls of one's own mind.

Sulak Sivaraksa practices what he preaches, and has therefore has been anything but inactive in politics and social movements throughout his life. As Donald Swearer puts it, "he prizes peace and solitude but he has probably founded more periodicals, written more books, given more lectures, traveled to more conferences, and established more NGOs than anyone in modern Thai history" (Swearer, 138). Sulak has therefore met a good deal of opposition and criticism, including imprisonment for defaming the king in one of his books (Sivaraksa, 135).

Due to close ties between the Sangha and the state, monks are expected to remain politically quiet and keep their work strictly in the spiritual realm. Because of his insistence that spirituality is incomplete without action, whether political, social, or otherwise, Sulak Sivaraksa has become known as quite the troublemaker in Thailand. His approach, while a controversial and rather dangerous one, is necessary, I believe, to any true prospect of change.

The environmental crises Thailand faces have been brought about by a development theory that measures progress solely in terms of quantity,

neglecting qualitative measures, such as people's well being, entirely. True progress is based on a holistic account of not only quantity in terms of economic profit, but also on quality of life itself. Many cultures have touched on this truth. Sivaraksa reminds us of a Buddhist ideology in Thailand before the impact of capitalism that understood this truth, thereby fostering a self-sustaining, non-exploitative way of life that was in balance with nature and within communities. In Italy, as I observed during a year of living in Florence, the ethic of quality over quantity is a deep-rooted cultural value that has fostered sustainable farming, healthy eating habits, and strong family relationships for centuries, although forces of globalization are too challenging Italian society in recent times.

The problem comes in when balance goes out the window, and one mindset drives all actions and decisions in a society. In today's case, the governing mindset is economic profit. Although individuals surely adopt this mindset as well, large corporations serve as the driving and reinforcing influence behind it, propagating a monoculture of one-minded economics. Unfortunately this monoculture is sweeping across the globe and annihilating local cultures, including the very cultures that have nurtured ideas that cherish and preserve the wellbeing of people and communities, in its path. Wealthier nations such as Italy have been more resilient at preserving their cultures, although even they cannot keep out McDonalds or even agribusiness. Sadly, poorer countries like Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries have been majorly affected by bully corporations due to gross disparities of wealth. They have been incredibly

exploited because of it, and their cultures, along with the health of their environments, are quickly washing down the drain as a result. Poverty, therefore, is a major factor contributing to the deterioration of the Buddhism and traditional values that maintained a peaceful society in tune with the earth.

The environmental injustices throughout the world are severe and manifold. The systems that create and reinforce these injustices writhe with complexity. Clearly no one formula will suffice to heal these vast and far-reaching problems. Any proposed solution must be holistic in order to be at all viable. The intricate and widespread nature of our environmental crisis has led philosophers, scientists, politicians, artists, and religious persons alike to search for answers. No confrontation of our environmental crisis would be complete without a Buddhist spiritual leader, and a politically active one at that.

Sivaraksa's work with the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD) epitomizes his approach, as it "seeks to provide linkages and solidarity for individuals and organizations," working towards "integral human development" (Sivaraksa, 141). Sivaraksa fills an important role in the environmental movement. He approaches this movement through a Buddhist lens drawing on not only activism but also the interdependence of humans, organizations, companies, and the environment.

Beyond the Doctrines: Buddhism and Nature in the Everyday Lives of Thais

A strong and extensive environmental ethic weaves through the mores of Buddhism. Great thinkers and practitioners, such as Bhikkhu Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa, have examined the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings and applied it to modern Thailand in hopes to better the environmental crises people now face. There are a great number of books and literature written about engaged Buddhism and deep ecology, topics which explore the connections between a Buddhist worldview and a more peaceful and sustainable world. However, I wanted to get beyond the semantics and uncover the truth about how Buddhism pertains to people's views of nature and their dealings with the environment in their everyday lives. With this in mind, I set off across the Thai countryside, tip toed into temples, and talked to Thais who had deep personal connections with these topics and meaningful stories because of them. Although I met people from very different walks of life, including a village chief, a farmer, multiple monks, and a professor at a Buddhist university, a few themes united their experiences: the existence of suffering in the world and the need to alleviate that suffering, the recognition that greed and mistreatment of the earth contribute greatly to the causes of that suffering, and finally, the necessity to acknowledge the infinite importance of trees and our universal interconnectedness in order for that suffering to dwindle.

A great deal of environmental awareness has emerged in recent years, and particularly during the past couple of months, here in Thailand. This is greatly due to the catastrophic floods that have swept through Bangkok and many other

parts of the country, driving thousands of people from their homes, destroying many farmers' crops (and thereby their livelihoods), and even taking the lives of some. As is becoming more and more common knowledge, vast amounts of erosion due to deforestation in the north of the country have caused the floods to be exceptionally severe this year (Seng). Globalization and the emerging presence of Western companies in Thailand have sparked an exponential expansion of industry, particularly in agriculture and logging, two very environmentally destructive activities when done on such a large scale and when driven with a mindset based extensively on economic growth.

So what is driving this madness? "In Thailand," explained Ajan Seng, a scholar and professor of a Buddhist University, "you will see that many people do not follow the teachings of the Buddha." He talked about how their greed for money drove them to cut down trees until only a small fraction of the forest was left. "A basic principle of Buddhism is to control greed. Greed is considered one of the most destructive defilements- for money, for wealth, for anything," explained Seng one dusty afternoon from behind his paper-piled desk at Wat Chedi Luang, a famous temple in the heart of Chiang Mai.

Likewise, Jo Jondai, a self-made farmer in the countryside of Chiang Mai, explained this problem in similar terms: "The more you consume, the more you suffer. We need to consume less, to want less." But how do we consume less? Buddhism, interestingly enough, does not teach us to bridle our desire to pursue our insatiable thirst for consumption, tightly gripping its reins for fear that we cave

into our temptation. Instead, Buddhism teaches us how to actually want less in the first place. It's an interesting paradox: to consume less, want less; while the recent dominant mentality has been: to want less, consume more (and thus fulfill our desires and quench our thirsts). Perhaps this confusion is one reason why the current Western system has thus far failed in taming greed, as it focuses on feeding desires rather than forgetting them. Jo Jondai, who started a self-sufficient, organic farm outside of Thailand after being significantly influenced by the ideas of Buddhism, calmly yet eagerly described, "When you are very rich you have fear. You're afraid of losing what you have. It's just another burden. The less you have, you feel very light, very free. It's about learning to be satisfied with less, happy with less." Likewise, "Buddhism," explained Ajan Seng, "teaches contentedness and simple life." This, he said, is central to living peacefully and in harmony with nature.

Jo Jondai is a living, breathing example of someone doing just that, as can be seen by his flourishing garden, twenty-year-old gifted clothes, community of friends, and perpetual smile saturated with gratitude. The mission behind his farm, named Pun-Pun, meaning "a thousand varieties," is simply to preserve diversity of indigenous seeds, share them with others, and provide a loving community and beautiful refuge where people can come to learn sustainable farming and building techniques, a self-sufficient way of life, and a way to live with ease by treating nature with respect, with humility, and gratitude.

Many others as well have followed a path of Buddhism to lead to the cessation of suffering. This path is inherently in balance with the natural world. With the new reality of globalization, tempting values of consumerism are challenging and even replacing many people's traditional values of moderation. However, many monks and laypeople alike still live in the spirit of Buddhism. Monks, for instance, are supposed to live by a number of rules. For instance, they are asked to refrain from cutting plants, eating raw seeds, taking life of even small insects, urinating or leaving human waste in or near water, or even spitting into water. They are also advised to spend a great deal of their time around and under the shade of trees (Seng).

In my experience through discussing environmentalism with locals, Thais put an enormous emphasis on the importance of trees. Part of the reason for this is undoubtedly the undeniable effects the country is experiencing from deforestation, which many perceive as the country's most pressing environmental crisis at present. However, another reason for this close attention to trees likely stems from the Buddhist tradition. Ajan Seng reflected on the life of the Buddha himself and how much of it was spent under the shelter of trees. "The Buddha was born under a Sal tree in a park. He obtained enlightenment under a Bodhi tree in a forest. Most of his life he spent in the forest. He even died under the trees," mentioned Seng. Nowadays, many monks prefer to live in monasteries, but there are some that still remain true to the original teaching of the Buddha, and spend their existence living under trees as forest monks. Although many

perceive these monks to be quite idle, engaging in little more than meditation, monks also plant trees and protect existing trees through ceremonies such as tree ordination. This serves an important purpose because, as Ajan Seng elucidated, “people could not dare to cut down trees in forests where monks stay. So in a way, Buddhist monks who stay in the forest help to preserve the environment.” Not only, then, do forest monks live in a peaceful and sustainable way and possibly inspire and teach others to do so as well, but their mere presence safeguards the forests in which they abide.

The Buddha encouraged forest dwelling because trees serve as important spiritual teachers. He thus put a great deal of importance on their protection. As Seng explained,

The tree is a natural phenomenon that preserves the soil. The tree preserves water because roots absorb water and make the soil rich. The soil purifies the air, and the trees absorb the light of the sun and lessen the heat of the environment, so the tree is a very important part of the environment and many natural phenomena.

Buddhist teachings contain a deep awareness of ecology. Both Buddhists and ecologists alike seek to understand the intricate connections between biotic and abiotic elements of nature. It is these threads that have sparked conversation between the two groups, creating new forums of discussion surrounding environmental philosophy, such as the topic of deep ecology.

It came as no surprise, then, when I met Buddhist farmers that farm organically, sustainably, and most of all, successfully. Jo Jondai, for example, reflected on how his realization of Right Understanding has shaped his approach toward farming, seed saving, and life itself:

[Buddhism] has helped me to understand myself, understand life; that we are all connected. I am not just myself alone, but the plants I eat that nourish me, the soil they're grown in, and so on. Therefore, what I do to the soil, I do to myself. I am one with everything around me, and we all depend on each other. Buddhism has helped me realize that oneness.

That oneness is central to sustainability. The soil, like any resource, has limits to what one can extract from it. Farming with greed will lead to similarly negative consequences for oneself, such as pollution, erosion, water-shortage, illness from toxic chemicals, nutritionally exhausted soil that fails to yield crops in following years, and so on. On the other hand, farming with respect and understanding will lead to fruitful crops that nourish us wholesomely year after year. Understanding that our own well being and that of the earth are one in the same is an important lesson for farmers and for people all around the world. I learned this from studying ecology. Jo Jondai learned this from practicing Buddhism. This lesson has been taught in many forms and cultures throughout history. Preserving traditions, such as Buddhism, that teach lessons about life-sustaining and peace-creating values, could serve societies and the world well.

Ajan Seng equates this disappearance of traditions and lessons with lack of respect for nature throughout Thailand. “Formerly,” he told me, “Thai people believed in *rukha devata*, the spirits of the forest and in the trees.” Although he said this was no longer the case, I managed to find people who still believe in these tree spirits. I visited the eco-village of Baan Mae Ta, a traditional community in Northern Thailand that suffered crippling loss of food and resources due to extensive environmental degradation. Under one of the King’s Projects, they have renewed their way of life by working together sustainably. During my stay, I asked Prasert, the village chief, whether there was a higher spiritual reason, aside from the King’s policy, why people abstain from cutting trees. He responded, “People don’t cut the trees because of their respect of Buddhism, or maybe they are scared of getting in trouble... but yes, there is a spiritual reason as well. I believe there are spirits that live in the trees. The more spirits in the tree, the bigger it is. If you cut down an ordained tree, something bad will happen” (Prasert).

In Thailand, some of these traditions are fading as new values of materialism inundate the country almost as rapidly as the floods. However, sometimes new traditions that take their place can be just as powerful. Tree ordination is one example of a new and meaningful tradition, arising from traditional values, that serves to preserve the forest and people’s respect of trees. As I hiked with a medicine man through the *booa bah*, or ordained forest, of the eco-village of Baan Mae Ta, he told me how the forest we were hiking

through was nothing but dirt ten years ago because it had been completely deforested. The villagers could not grow food, the animals were gone, and the river was completely dried up. Since the villagers started following the King's project, the forest recovered to a remarkable extent. Now the trees are growing tall, flora and fauna abound, and the river was flowing again. We came across a spirit house in the forest. He told me that every year the villagers along with nine monks hold a ceremony here to ordain all the trees in the forest. It takes them days to do it. "People respect the Buddhism very much, so don't cut trees. Maybe somebody who doesn't respect or know Buddhism might cut them but they don't come here," Prasert told me. The villagers' livelihoods have been restored along with the forest, in part due to this new tradition of ordaining trees. Because they have a forest again, they can grow food again and have access to water. Without the forest, these things disappeared. This illustrates how central trees really are to the most basic necessities of life.

Whether traditions that help restore nature will continue to spread or whether destructive forces such as materialism will continue to destroy it remains to be seen. Surely it will be a struggle between the two forces. Buddhism offers specific tools to help cultivate attitudes based on those values of gratefulness, generosity, respect, and understanding, and could therefore offer Thais hope for the former. Jo Jondai, for instance, stressed the influence of mindfulness as being one of the most important tools that helped him in his quest for and cultivation of a Right Livelihood. Preserving and creating culturally appropriate

traditions (and learning from those of others) that remind us of these important values can help us live in balance with nature. As Ajan Seng pointed out, “Many people have awakened to the necessity to change [our current method of consumption and destruction],” including many students, Buddhist monks, and even government officials. NGO projects have been launched and many monks are trying to teach villagers to revive their forests. Hopefully these efforts will continue and help bring us towards a more peaceful and sustainable world.

Conclusion

Thailand has a rich, spiritual history filled with traditions and values that connect people to the environment and foster a mutually symbiotic relationship between nature and human. However, many of these traditions are fading as new values of materialism inundate the country almost as rapidly as the floods. The forces of globalization are strong, and it is difficult to keep out aggressive ideologies that both create and prey on people’s desires. It is an increasing challenge to retain traditional values in the face of foreign influences especially in relatively poorer countries, such as Thailand, whose economies depend on tourism and trade.

But are these changes inherently bad? If we consider the Buddhist doctrine of non-attachment, it teaches us not to hold onto any fixed state, including the past; for all is flux. However, at the same time, it is hard to deny that many of these changes are causing a great deal of suffering in the world. Why

has Thailand been experiencing so many harmful environmental effects and how could she turn the tables and start experiencing effects in her favor? Comparing Thailand with Bhutan is likely to give some answers.

Bhutan has reaped many of the positive aspects of the rapidly changing world, such as profits from tourism, while retaining a remarkably pristine environment. Bhutan's development was based on an ethic of quality over quantity, measuring development in terms of happiness and quality of life. Thailand has stressed quantity over quality, measuring development in terms of gross domestic product, and she has depleted her resources as a result (Priesner, 28). What Bhutan has managed to do is retain the spiritual values of her culture, thereby allowing those values to discern which aspects of foreign ideologies she will accept and consequently benefit from. In many ways, Bhutan's development was much more in line with a Buddhist notion of development than Thailand's was. Perhaps Thailand can take a more meditative approach to development and, like Bhutan, treat the influxes of consumerism and materialism as learning experiences. Exposure to other cultures presents the opportunity to learn from new ideas and ideologies; however, it does not necessitate the acceptance of each one. Doing such, of course, is much easier said than done, especially in a country struggling economically and politically.

It is too late for Thailand in many environmental aspects. However, if her citizens can continue to reclaim their Buddhist traditions and values, as many monks, villagers, farmers, and others already have, perhaps much of Thailand's

environment can be reclaimed and salvaged. Baan Mae Ta is an example of a village striving to reclaim those traditional values and live in harmony with nature once again. Jo Jondai is a farmer doing the same, and he is not alone. Bhikkhu Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa stand out as figures of hope, encouraging Thais and foreigners alike to remember the Buddha's original teachings and how they can help us live sustainably with the earth. My hope is that more and more Thais, as well as people from all over the world, will learn from these teachers and awaken to the necessity to practice non-attachment, reciprocity, and gratefulness in their dealings with nature while understanding their own connectedness to all things in it.

When I began my investigation into Buddhism and human-nature relations in Thailand, I sought to explore the changes of the environment in Thailand and learn about their connections to changes in the Buddhist religion as practiced by the people. What I came away with was not only that knowledge and more, but also a love for the Thai people, their environment, and a deep hope that they, as well as people from my home country and countries all over the world, will learn once again to live in balance with nature.

The strengths of my research came from the personal connections I made with the people I met and the stories they told. The theoretical doctrines and ideas are interesting to talk about, but it is when they translate into actual life changes and experiences that they take on true meaning. I was therefore ever-thankful to have conversed and connected with the Prasert (the village chief), Jo

Jondai (the farmer), Johlee (the monk), Ajan Seng (the Buddhist professor), as well as many other people I am blessed to have met during my four-month stay in Thailand, as they added the most depth, richness, and real understanding of Buddhism's influence on people's actual lives to my paper and to my learning experience as a whole. I would have liked to meet with more environmental NGOs, as they would have added another dimension to my research; however, due to the floods in Bangkok, it was not possible. My suggestions for further research, therefore, lie in that realm. Gaining a new perspective of Thai-nature relationships from (not necessarily Buddhist) people who are working for environmental justice would be increasingly informative.

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