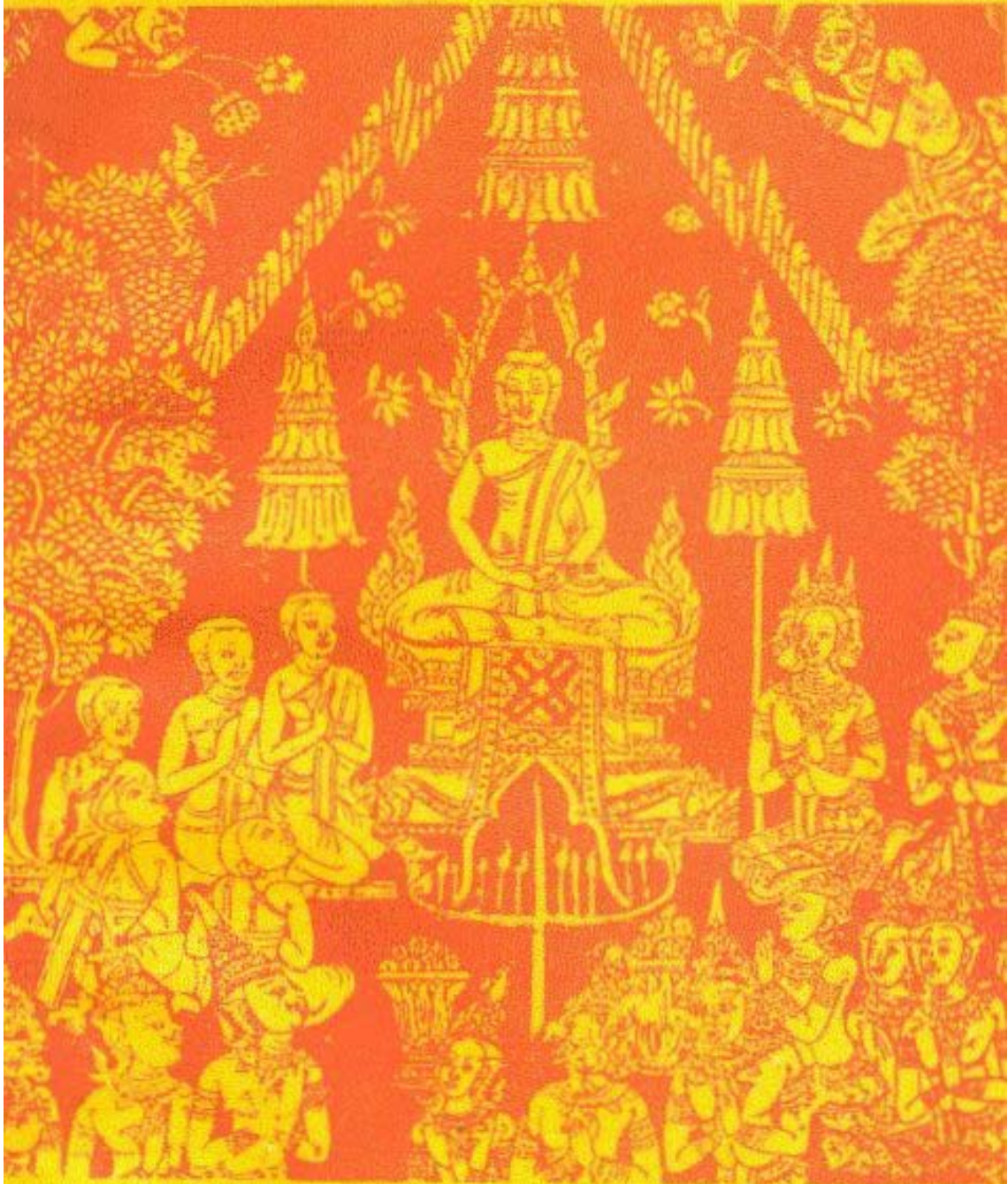


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BUDDHISM IN THAILAND

Its Past and Its Present

Karuna Kusalasaya

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– Its Past and its Present –

by Karuna Kusalasaya

BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

KANDY, SRI LANKA

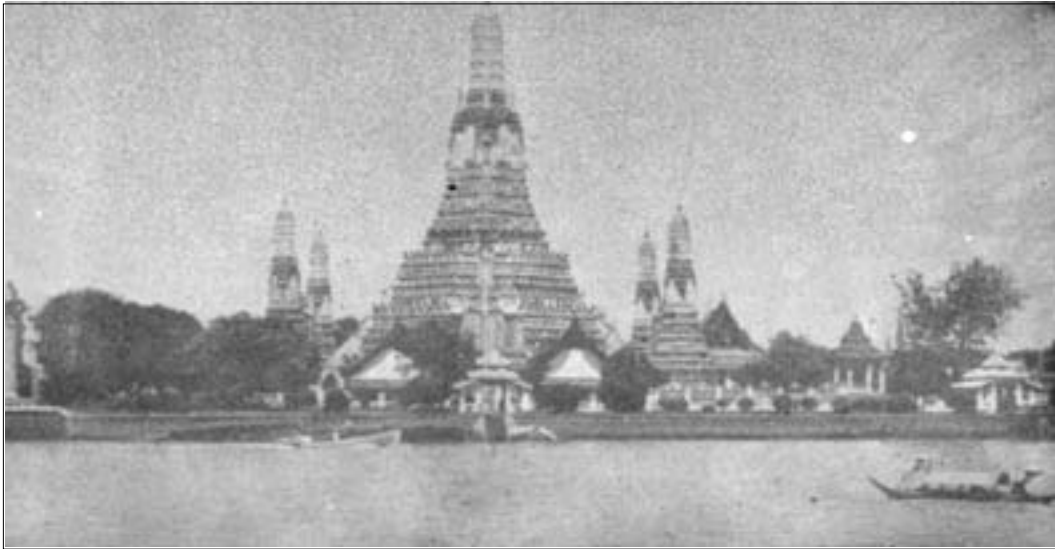
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Buddhism...

“Over great areas of the world it still survives: it is possible that in contact with western science, and inspired by the spirit of history, the original teaching of Gautama, revived and purified, may yet play a large part in the direction of human destiny.”

H. G. Wells – *The Outline of History*



▲ Wat Arun (Temple of the Dawn) Bangkok, Thailand



▲ Wat Benchama Bopitr (Marble Temple) Bangkok, Thailand



▲ Nakorn Pathom, near Bangkok, Thailand

BUDDHISM IN THAILAND

Its Past and its Present

People all over the world who are interested in Buddhism and keep in touch with its news and activities must have heard of the Buddha Jayanti celebrations held a few years ago in all Buddhist countries, including India and Japan. It was in 1957 or, according to the reckoning of some Buddhist countries, in 1956, that Buddhism, as founded by Gotama the Buddha, had completed its 2,500th year of existence. The Buddhist tradition, especially of the Theravāda or Southern School such as now prevails in Burma, Ceylon, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, has it that on the completion of 2,500 years from its foundation, Buddhism would undergo a great revival, resulting in its all-round progress, in both the fields of study and practice. Buddhists throughout the world, therefore, commemorated the occasion in 1956-57 by various kinds of activities such as meetings, symposiums, exhibitions and the publication of Buddhist texts and literature.

As to whether or not the tradition mentioned above has any truth behind it, the future alone will testify. However, judging from news received from all corners of the globe, it is no exaggeration to say that

mankind is taking an ever-increasing interest in Buddhism. As a matter of fact, since the end of the Second World War interest in Buddhism as evinced by people in Europe, America and Australia has reached a scale unheard of before. Any casual perusal of journals on Buddhism in any of these continents will convince the readers of this statement. It is a matter worth noticing that after the end of the First World War also, Buddhism made great headway in Europe and elsewhere. This phenomenon can perhaps be best explained by the fact that mankind's spiritual thirst is more sharpened by calamities like war, and that in times of distress mankind realises Truth better.

The Land of Yellow Robes

Thailand is perhaps the only country in the world where the king is constitutionally stipulated to be a Buddhist and the upholder of the Faith. For centuries Buddhism has established itself in Thailand and has enriched the lives of the Thais in all their aspects. Indeed, without Buddhism, Thailand would not be what it is today. Owing to the tremendous influence Buddhism exerts on the lives of its people, Thailand is called by many foreigners "The Land of Yellow Robes", for yellow robes are the garments of Buddhist monks. In view of the increasing interest the

world is taking in Buddhism and in view of the fact that Thailand is one of the countries where Buddhism still exists as a living force it will not, perhaps, be out of place to know something of the story of how this great faith reached that country.

Buddhism in Thailand: Its Past

Different opinions exist about when, exactly, Buddhism reached that part of the world now officially known as Thailand. Some scholars say that Buddhism was introduced to Thailand during the reign of Asoka, the great Indian emperor who sent Buddhist missionaries to various parts of the then known world. Others are of the view that Thailand received Buddhism much later. Judging from archaeological finds and other historical evidence, however, it is safe to say that Buddhism first reached Thailand when the country was inhabited by a racial stock of people known as the Mon-Khmer who then had their capital, Dvārāvati, at a city now known as Nakhon Pathom (Sanskrit: Nagara Prathama), about 50 kilometres to the west of Bangkok. The great pagoda at Nakhon Pathom, Phra Pathom Chedi (Prathama cetiya), and other historical findings in other parts of the country testify to this fact as well as to the fact that Buddhism, in its varied forms, reached Thailand at

four different periods, namely:

- I. Theravāda or Southern Buddhism
- II. Mahāyāna or Northern Buddhism
- III. Burma (Pagan) Buddhism
- IV. Ceylon (Lankavaṃsa) Buddhism

We shall now proceed to study each of these periods in detail.

I. Theravāda or Southern Buddhism

That the first form of Buddhism introduced to Thailand was that of Theravāda (The Doctrine of the Elders) School is proved by various archaeological remains unearthed in the excavations at Nakhon Pathom, such as the Dharmā Chakra (Wheel of Law), the Buddha footprints and seats, and the inscriptions in the Pali language, all of which are in rocks. Such objects of Buddhistic veneration existed in India before the introduction of the Buddha image, which appeared later as a result of Greek influence. Buddhism, therefore, must have reached Thailand during the 3rd century B.C., and it must have been more or less the same form of Buddhism as was propagated by the great Buddhist Emperor Asoka. This form of Buddhism was known as Theravāda or Hīnayāna

(The Lower Vehicle) in contradistinction to the term Mahāyāna (The Higher Vehicle); the two schools having sprung up soon after the passing away of the Buddha. When worship of the Buddha image became popular in India, it also spread to other countries where Buddhism had already been introduced. This is borne out by the fact that many Buddha images, especially those of the Gupta style, had been found in the ruins of Nakhon Pathom and the neighbouring cities. Judging from the style of the Buddha images found, it can also be assumed that the early Buddhist missionaries to Thailand went from Magadha (in Bihar State, India).

To support the view that the first form of Buddhism introduced to Thailand was that of the Theravāda School as propagated by Emperor Asoka, we have evidence from the Mahāvamsa, the ancient chronicle of Ceylon. In one of its passages dealing with the propagation of the Dhamma, the Mahāvamsa records that Asoka sent missionaries headed by Buddhist elders to as many as nine territories. One of these territories was known as Suvarṇabhūmi where two Theras (elder monks), Soṇa and Uttara, were said to have proceeded.

Now opinions differ as to where exactly this land of Suvarṇabhūmi is. Thai scholars express the opinion that it is in Thailand and that its capital

was at Nakon Pathom, while scholars of Burma say that Suvarṇabhūmi is in Burma, the capital being at Thaton, a Mon (Peguan) town in Eastern Burma near the Gulf of Martaban. Still other scholars of Laos and Cambodia claim that the territory of Suvarṇabhūmi is in their lands. Historical records in this connection being meagre as they are, it would perhaps be of no avail to argue as to the exact demarcation of Suvarṇabhūmi. Taking all points into consideration, one thing, however, seems clear beyond dispute. That is Suvarṇabhūmi was a term broadly used in ancient times to denote that part of Southeast Asia which now includes Southern Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Malaya. The term Suvarṇabhūmi is a combination of the words “Suvarṇa” and “Bhūmi”. Both are Sanskrit words; the former means gold and the latter stands for land. Suvarṇabhūmi therefore literally means Golden Land or Land of Gold. Keeping in view the abundance of nature in that part of Asia just referred to, the term seems but appropriate.

The reason why scholars of Thailand express the view that the capital of Suvarṇabhūmi was at Nakon Pathom was because of the archaeological finds unearthed in the area surrounding that town. Nowhere in any of the countries mentioned above, not even at Thaton in Burma, could one find such a large and varied number of ancient relics

as were found at Nakon Pathom. By age and style these archaeological objects belong to the times of Emperor Asoka and the later Guptas. Even the Great Stupa (Phra Pathom Chedi) at Nakon Pathom itself is basically identical with the famous Sanchi Stupa in India, built by Asoka, especially if one were to remove the Shikhara or upper portion. Many Thai archaeologists are of the opinion that the Shikhara was a later addition to the pagoda, a result, so to say, of the blending of the Thai æsthetic sense with the Indian architectural art. Moreover, the name Pathom Chedi (Pali: Pathama Cetiya) means “First Pagoda” which, in all probability, signifies that it was the first pagoda built in Suvarṇabhūmi. This would easily fit in with the record of the Mahāvamsa – that Theras Soṇa and Uttara went and established Buddhism in the territory of Suvarṇabhūmi at the injunction of Emperor Asoka. Taking cognizance of the fact that Asoka reigned from 269 to 237 B.C., we can reasonably conclude that Buddhism first spread to Thailand during the 3rd century B.C. It is interesting to note in this connection that the history of the penetration of Indian culture to Southeast Asia also started more or less during the same period.²

II. Mahāyāna or Northern Buddhism

With the growth of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, especially during the reign of King Kanishka who ruled over Northern India during the second half of the first century A.D., the sect also spread to the neighbouring countries, such as Sumatra, Java and Kambuja (Cambodia). It is probable that Mahāyāna Buddhism was introduced to Burma, Pegu (Lower Burma) and Dvārāvati (now Nakhon Pathom in Western Thailand) from Magadha (in Bihar, India) at the same time as it went to the Malay Archipelago. But probably it did not have any stronghold there at that time; hence no spectacular trace was left of it.

Starting from the beginning of the fifth century A.D. Mahāyāna Buddhist missionaries from Kashmir in Northern India began to go to Sumatra in succession. From Sumatra the faith spread to Java and Cambodia. By about 757 A.D. (Buddhist Era: 1300) the Srivijaya king with his capital in Sumatra rose in power and his empire spread throughout the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago. Part of South Thailand (from Surāsthāni downwards) came under the rule of the Srivijaya king. Being Mahāyānists, the rulers of Srivijaya gave much encouragement and support to the propagation of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In South Thailand today we have much evidence to substantiate

that Mahāyāna Buddhism was once prevalent there. This evidence is in the form of stupas or chetiyas and images, including votive tablets of the Buddhas and Bodhisattas (Phra Phim), which were found in large number, all of the same type as those discovered in Java and Sumatra. The chetiyas in Chaiya (Jaya) and Nakon Sri Thammarāth (Nagara Sri Dharmarāja), both in South Thailand, clearly indicate Mahāyāna influence.

From 1002 to 1182 A.D. kings belonging to the Suryavarman dynasty ruled supreme in Cambodia. Their empire extended over the whole of present-day Thailand. Being adherents of Mahāyāna Buddhism with a strong mixture of Brahminism, the Suryavarman rulers did much to propagate and establish the tenets of the Northern School. There is an interesting stone inscription, now preserved in the National Museum at Bangkok, which tells us that in about 1017 A.D. (B.E. 1550) there ruled in Lopburi, in central Thailand and once a capital city, a king who went from Nakon Sri Thammarāth who traced his ancestry to Srivijaya rulers. The king had a son who later became the ruler of Kambuja (Cambodia) and who, more or less, kept Thailand under the suzerainty of Cambodia for a long time. During this period there was much amalgamation of the two countries' religions and cultures. The stone inscription under consideration probably refers

to one of the Suryavarman kings who had blood relationship with the Srivijaya rulers.

From the inscription just referred to we also learn that at that period the form of Buddhism prevalent in Lopburi was that of Theravāda, and that Mahāyāna Buddhism, already established in Cambodia, became popularized in Thailand only after Thailand had come under the sway of Cambodia. There are no indications, however, that the Mahāyāna School superseded the Theravāda in any way. This was due to the fact that Theravāda Buddhism was already on a firm basis in Thailand when the Mahāyāna School was introduced there. That there were monks of both schools, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, in Lopburi during those days, is indicated in a stone inscription in the Cambodian language, found in a Brahmanic Temple within the vicinity of Lopburi city itself.

Much of the Brahmanic culture which survives in Thailand till today could be traced to its origin from Cambodia during this period. Many of the Cambodian kings themselves were zealous adherents of Brahminism and its ways of life. This period, therefore, can be termed Mahāyāna Period. Sanskrit, the sacred language of the Hindus, took its root deep in Thailand during these times.

III. Burma (Pagan) Buddhism

In 1057 A.D. King Anuruddha (Anawratha) became powerful in the whole of Burma, having his capital at Pagan (Central Burma). Anuruddha extended his kingdom right up to Thailand, especially the Northern and Central parts, covering areas now known as Chiangmai, Lopburi and Nakon Pathom. Being a Theravāda Buddhist, Anuruddha ardently supported the cause of Theravāda which Burma, like Thailand, at first received directly from India through missionaries sent by Emperor Asoka. However, at the time under consideration, Buddhism in India was already in a state of decline, and as contact between Burma and India was then faint, Theravāda Buddhism, as prevalent in Burma at that time, underwent some changes and assumed a form somewhat different from the original doctrine. This, at a later stage, became what is known in Thailand as Burma (Pagan) Buddhism. During the period of King Anuruddha's suzerainty over Thailand, Burmese Buddhism exercised great influence over the country, especially in the North where, owing to proximity, the impact from Burma was more felt.

It is significant that Buddhist relics found in North Thailand bear a striking Theravāda influence, whereas those found in the South clearly show their Mahāyā-

na connections dating back from Srivijaya days. To a great extent this is due to the fact that, in their heyday of suzerainty over Thailand, the Burmese under Anuruddha were content with Upper Thailand only, while leaving the South practically to be ruled by their Khmer (Cambodian) vassals whose capital was at Lopburi.

From the beginning of the 2nd century B.C. the Thai people, whose original homeland was in the valleys between the Huang Ho and the Yangtze Kiang in China, began to migrate southwards as a result of constant friction with the neighbouring tribes. In the course of their migration which lasted for several centuries, they became separated into two main groups. One group went and settled in the plains of the Salween River, Shan States, and other areas and spread on as far as Assam. This group of Thais is called Thai Yai (Big Thai). The other main group moved further South and finally settled in what is today termed Thailand. The latter group of Thais is called Thai Noi (Small Thai). The Thais in present-day Thailand are actually the descendants of these migrant Thais. Of course, in the course of their migration which, as said above, continued off and on for a long time, there had been a great deal of mixture of blood through intermarriage which was only natural. We should always bear in mind that there are several ethnic groups

scattered through the length and breadth of South-east Asia from times immemorial. But even today we can trace the language affinity of the Thais living in widely scattered areas such as Assam, Upper Burma, Southern China, Shan States, Laos, North Vietnam and Thailand.

After struggling hard for a long time the Thais were able to establish their independent state at Sukhothai (Sukhodaya) in North Thailand. This was probably about 1257 A.D. (B.E. 1800). It was during the period of their movement southwards that the Thais came into contact with the form of Buddhism as practised in Burma and propagated under the royal patronage of King Anuruddha. Some scholars are of the opinion that as Mahāyāna Buddhism had spread to China as early as the beginning of the Christian Era, the Thais, while still in their original home in China, must have already been acquainted with some general features of Buddhism. As the Thai migrants grew in strength their territory extended and finally they became the masters of the land in succession to Anuruddha, whose kingdom declined after his death. During the succeeding period, the Thais were able to exert themselves even more prominently in their southward drive. Thus they came into close contact with the Khmers, the erstwhile power, and became acquainted with both Mahāyāna Buddhism and Brahmanism as

adopted and practised in Kambuja (Cambodia). Much of the Brahmanic influence, such as religious and cultural rites, especially in the court circles, passed on from Cambodia to the Thais during this period, for Hinduism was already firmly established in Cambodia at that time. Even the Thai scripts, based on Cambodian scripts which, in turn, derived their origin from India, were invented by King Rām Kamhaeng of Sukhothai during the period under consideration.

Of the period under discussion it may be observed in passing that Northern Thailand, from Sukhothai District upwards, came much under the influence of Burma (Pagan) Buddhism, while in the central and southern parts of the country many Mahāyāna beliefs and practices, inherited from the days of the Suryavarmans and the Srivijayas, still persisted.

IV. Ceylon (Lankavaṃsa) Buddhism

This is the most important period in the history of the spread of Buddhism to Thailand for it witnessed the introduction to that country of that form of Buddhism which remains dominant there until today.

About 1153 A.D. (B.E. 1696) Parakramabahu the Great (1153-1186 A.D.) became king of Ceylon, known in ancient days as Lanka. A powerful monarch and a great supporter of Theravāda Buddhism, Parakrama-

bahu did much to spread and consolidate the Dhamma of the Lord in his island kingdom. He it was who caused (according to some scholars of Southern Buddhism) the Seventh Buddhist Council³ to be held under the chairmanship of Kassapa Thera, of Dimbulagala in order to revise and strengthen the Doctrine and the Discipline (Dhamma and Vinaya).

As a result of the efforts of King Parakramabahu the Great, Buddhism was much consolidated in Ceylon and the news spread to neighbouring lands. Buddhist monks from various countries, such as Burma, Pegu (Lower Burma), Kambuja, Lanna (North Thailand) and Lanchang (Laos) flocked to Ceylon in order to acquaint themselves with the pure form of the Dhamma. Thailand also sent her Bhikkhus to Ceylon and thereby obtained the Upasampadā Vidhi (Ordination Rite) from Ceylon, which later became known in Thailand as Lankavaṃsa. This was about 1257 A.D. (B.E. 1800). Apparently the early batches of Bhikkhus, who returned from Ceylon after studies, often accompanied by Ceylonese monks, established themselves first in Nakon Sri Thammarath (South Thailand), for many of the Buddhist relics bearing definitely Ceylonese influence, such as Stupas and Buddha images, were found there. Some of these relics are still in existence today. News of the meritorious activities of these monks soon spread to Sukhothai, then the capital of

Thailand, and King Rām Kamhaeng who was ruling at the time, invited those monks to his capital and gave them his royal support in propagating the Doctrine. This fact is recorded in one of the King's rock inscriptions, dated about 1277 A.D. Since then Ceylon (Sinhala) Buddhism became very popular and was widely practised in Thailand. Some of the Thai kings, such as King Maha Dharmaraja Lithai of Sukhothai dynasty and King Borom Trai Lokanath of the early Ayudhya Period, even entered the Holy Order or Bhikkhu Sangha according to the Ordination Rite of Lankavaṃsa Buddhism by inviting a patriarch from Ceylon, Maha Sami Sangharaja Sumana by name, to be the presiding monk over his Upasampada (Ordination) ceremony. Many monasteries, stupas, Buddha images and even Buddha footprints, such as the well-known one at Sraburi in central Thailand, were built in accordance with the usage popular in Ceylon. The study of Pali, the language of Theravāda or Southern Buddhism, also made great progress, and in all matters dealing with the Dhamma the impact of Ceylon was perceptibly felt.

However, there had been no antagonism between the different forms of Buddhism already in existence in Thailand and the Lankāvaṃsa which had been introduced later from Ceylon. On the contrary they seemed to have amalgamated peacefully, and all had

adjusted themselves to one another's benefit. This is evident in all religious rites and ceremonies of Thailand. Indeed, somewhat characteristic of the Buddhists, there had been a spirit of forbearance in all matters. For instance, even today Brahmanic rites thrive side by side with Buddhistic ceremonies in Thailand and Cambodia, especially in the royal courts.

History repeats itself. Years after, when in Ceylon under King Kirtisri (1747-1781 A.D.) the Upasampada Ordination was lost due to a decline of Buddhism and upheavals in the country, Thailand (during the reign of King Boromkot, 1733-1758 A.D.) was able to repay the debt by sending a batch of Buddhist monks, under the leadership of Upali and Ariyamuni Theras, who in the course of time established in Ceylon what is known as the "Siyāmapali Vaṃsa" or "Siyam Nikaya", or Siamese Sect, which still is a major sect in that country. Upali worked and died in Sri Lanka, the country he loved no less than his own.

Today, for all purposes, Thailand can be termed a Theravāda Buddhist country. There are, of course, a few Mahāyanā monks and monasteries, but they are mostly confined to foreign communities, chiefly the Chinese. All, however, live at peace and co-operate with one another.

So much for the past of Buddhism in Thailand.

Buddhism in Thailand: Its Present

According to the census taken in 1960 the population of Thailand numbers 25,519,965. Of this number 94 per cent are Buddhists (the rest are mostly Muslims and Christians). This fact itself demonstrates more than anything else how influential Buddhism is in Thailand. In their long history of existence the Thais seem to have been predominantly Buddhists, at least ever since they came into contact with the tenets of Buddhism. All the Thai kings in the recorded history of present-day Thailand have been adherents of Buddhism. The country's constitution specifies that the King of Thailand must be a Buddhist and the Upholder of Buddhism.

The term "The Land of Yellow Robes" has not been inappropriately applied to Thailand, for two things strike most foreigners as soon as they set foot in that country. One is the Buddhist temple with its characteristic architecture, and the other is the sight of yellow-clad Buddhist monks and novices who are to be seen everywhere, especially in the early hours of dawn when they go out in great numbers for alms. The two sights inevitably remind the foreigners that here is a country where Buddhism is a dominant force in the people's life. Indeed, to the Thai nation as a whole, Buddhism has been the main spring from

which flow its culture and philosophy, its art and literature, its ethics and morality and many of its folkways and festivals.

For clarity and convenience we shall divide the study of the present state of Buddhism in Thailand into two parts, namely the Bhikkhu Sangha or the Holy Order, and the Laity.

I. The Bhikkhu Sangha or the Holy Order

The Bhikkhu Sangha or the Holy Order of Buddhist monks has been in existence in Thailand ever since Buddhism was introduced there. According to the 1958 census there were in the whole kingdom of Thailand 159,648 monks, 73,311 novices and 20,944 monasteries or temples. These are scattered throughout the country, particularly more numerous in the thickly populated areas. The Bhikkhu Sangha of Thailand, being of Theravāda or Southern School, observes the same set of discipline (Vinaya) as the Bhikkhu Sanghas in other Theravāda countries such as Ceylon, Burma, Laos and Cambodia. In spite of the fact that the government allots a yearly budget for the maintenance and repair of important temples and as stipends for high ranking monks, almost the entire burden for the support of the Sangha and the upkeep of the temples rests with the public. A survey entitled "Thailand

Economic Farm Survey” made in 1953 by the Ministry of Agriculture of the Government of Thailand gives the religious cash expenses of the average Thai rural family per year as ranging from 5 to 10 per cent of its total annual cash income. It may be added here that the report concerns the average Thai rural family, and not the urban dwellers, the majority of whom, in Thailand as elsewhere, are less inclined to religion than the country folks.

Two Sects or Nikayas

There are two sects or Nikayas of the Buddhist Order in Thailand. One is the Mahanikaya, and the other is the Dhammayuttika Nikaya. The Mahanikaya is the older and by far the more numerous one, the ratio in the number of monks of the two sects being 35 to 1. The Dhammayuttika Nikaya was founded in 1833 A.D. by King Mongkut, the fourth ruler of the present Chakri Dynasty who ruled Thailand from 1851 to 1868 A.D. Having himself spent 27 years as a Bhikkhu, the King was well versed in the Dhamma, besides many other branches of knowledge, including Pali, the canonical language of Theravāda Buddhism. The express desire of the King in founding the Dhammayuttika Sect was to enable monks to lead a more disciplined and scholarly life in accordance with the pristine teach-

ings of the Buddha. The differences between the two Nikayas are, however, not great; at most they concern only matters of discipline, and never of the Doctrine. Monks of both sects follow the same 227 Vinaya rules as laid down in the Paṭimokkha of the Vinaya Piṭaka (the Basket of the Discipline), and both receive the same esteem from the public. In their general appearance and daily routine of life too, except for the slight difference in the manners of putting on the yellow robes, monks of the two Nikayas differ very little from one another.

Organisation of the Sangha

Formerly, and in accordance with the Administration of the Bhikkhu Sangha Act (B.E. 2484, A.D. 1943), the organisation of the Sangha in Thailand was on a line similar to that of the State. The Sangharaja or the Supreme Patriarch is the highest Buddhist dignitary of the Kingdom. He is chosen by the King, in consultation with the Government, from among the most senior and qualified members of the Sangha. The Sangharaja appoints a council of Ecclesiastical Ministers headed by the Sangha Nayaka, whose position is analogous to that of the Prime Minister of the State. Under the Sangha Nayaka there function four ecclesiastical boards, namely the Board of Ecclesiasti-

cal Administration, the Board of Education, the Board of Propagation and the Board of Public works.

Each of the boards has a Sangha Mantri (equivalent to a minister in the secular administration) with his assistants. The four boards or ministries are supposed to look after the affairs of the entire Sangha. The Ecclesiastical Ministerial Council which, by the way, corresponds to the Cabinet, consists of ten members, all senior monks of the Sangha. In addition to this, there is a Consultative Assembly (Sangha Sabhā), equivalent to the National Assembly, the members of which number 45, selected from various important monasteries. The Sangha Sabhā acts as an Advisory Body to the Ecclesiastical Ministerial Council. Below the Sangha Sabhā the administration of the Sangha continues to correspond to the secular administration of the country. All monks and novices (Sāmaneras) have to live in monasteries which are scattered throughout the country. Each monastery has its abbot appointed by the Ecclesiastical Ministerial Council in consultation with local people. It may be pointed out here that all religious appointments in Thailand are based on scholarly achievements, seniority, personal conduct and popularity, and contacts with monks further up in the Sangha.

There is a Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Education which acts as a liaison office

between the Government and Sangha. In general the Department of Religious Affairs works in co-operation with the Ecclesiastical Ministerial Council on all matters affecting the Sangha. For instance, it issues all legal directives concerning the entire community of monks; it keeps record of the Sangha's property, such as lands etc.; it maintains facts and figures with respect to monks and monasteries. The Religious Affairs Department also prepares the annual budget for the upkeep of the Sangha functionaries and the maintenance and repair of temples etc. It may be added here that all temples and monasteries are State property.

In 1962, the Administration of the Bhikkhu Sangha Act of 1943 was abolished; a new one was enacted instead. By virtue of the new act, the posts of Sangha Nayaka, Sangha Mantris and Sangha Sabhā were abolished. In place of these there is a Mahathera Samagama (Council of the Elders) headed by the Sangharaja himself and consisting of not less than four and not more than eight senior monks (Mahātheras) of the two sects (Nikayas). The Mahathera Samagama, in collaboration with the Department of Religious Affairs, directly governs the entire Sangha.

Education of Monks

As is well known, the original idea of men's entering monkhood during the Buddha's time or shortly later, was to attain liberation from worldly existence in accordance with the teaching of the Master. Such an idea, of course, springs from man's feeling of aversion to things mundane. In other words, in those far-off days, men entered monkhood with the sole intention of ridding themselves of life's miseries and of obtaining spiritual freedom or Nirvana. Instances of such self-renunciation are found in the holy books of the Buddhists. With the passage of time, as is only natural, many of the ideals and practices of the early followers of the Buddha underwent modifications. Today, over 2,500 years after the passing away of the Buddha, though the ideal of becoming a Bhikkhu still remains very lofty among Buddhists of all lands, yet in practice it must be admitted that there have been many deviations from the Master's original admonitions with regard to the whys and wherefores of man's entering monkhood. Generalization of any subject matter is often dangerous but it will not be far from truth to say that today, in Thailand as in other Buddhist countries, the practice of Buddhist males entering monkhood is to a considerable extent prompted rather by the dictation of custom, the wish for education and other

external considerations than by the desire to attain emancipation. Yet there are also many who join the Sangha through genuine love for a religious life and religious studies, or out of the wish to be of service to Buddhism and their country. Finally, in the Thai Sangha also those are not entirely lacking whose life is vigorously devoted to the aim of ultimate emancipation and to the guidance of others towards that goal. There have been, and still are, saintly and able meditation masters in Thailand, with a fair number of devoted disciples in Sangha and laity. There are also still monks – the so-called Thudong bhikkhus – who follow the ancient way of austere living embodied in the “strict observances” or Dhutangas.⁴

In view of the above facts, there are two categories of Buddhist monks in Thailand. One comprises those who become monks for long periods, sometimes for life, and the other those who enter the Order temporarily. To serve in the monkhood even for a short period is considered a great merit-earning attainment by the Thai Buddhists. Even kings follow this age-old custom. For instance, the present ruler, H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, also observed the custom for a period of half a month some time ago. Government officials are allowed leave with full pay for a period of four months in order to serve in monkhood. The idea is to enable young men to gain knowledge of

Buddhism and thereby to become good citizens. Life as a monk gives them practical experience of how an ideal Buddhist life should be. In rural districts the general tendency is still to give more deference to those who have already served in monkhood. Such people are supposed to be more “mature” than those who have not undergone the monk’s life. Moreover, in Thailand wats (monasteries and temples) used to be and are still regarded as seats of learning where all men, irrespective of life’s position, could go and avail themselves of education benefits. This is especially so in the case of economically handicapped males of the country-side. Instances are not lacking in which people have climbed high up on life’s status ladder after obtaining education while in monkhood. There are neither religious restrictions nor social disapproval against monks’ returning to lay life if and when they find themselves unable to discharge their duties as monks.

Cases exist in which, for some reason or the other, men have entered monkhood more than once, although such practice cannot be said to be in the esteem of the public. Looked at from this viewpoint, the institution of entering monkhood in Thailand, apart from being a way of gaining moral and spiritual enlightenment, is a social uplift method by which those not so fortunately placed in life could benefit. Judged from the

ideal of adopting a monk's life as enunciated by the Buddha, whether or not such practice is commendable, is a different story. The fact is that even today when modernism has penetrated deep into Thailand, about one half of the primary schools of the country are still situated in wats. With sex and crimes on the increase in the country, the cry for living a better Buddhist life is being heard more and more distinctly in Thailand today.

The traditional education of monks and novices in Thailand centres mainly on the studies of the Buddhist Doctrine (Dhamma) and Pali, the language in which the Theravāda scriptures are written. Of the former, the study of the Doctrine, there are three grades with examinations open to both monks and laymen. Those passing such examinations are termed "Nak Dhamma", literally meaning one who knows the Dhamma. The latter, i.e. the study of Pali, has seven grades, starting with the third and ending with the ninth grade. Students passing Pali examinations are called "Parian" (Pali: Parinna = penetrative knowledge); in the Thai language the word "Parinna" is used to mean academic degree. For example, monks and novices passing the first Pali examination are entitled to write "P. 3" after their names.

Generally the Dhamma and the Pali studies go hand in hand and take at least seven years to com-

plete. The stiffness of the two courses, especially that of the Pali language, can be guessed from the fact that very few students are able to pass the highest grade, the Parian 9, in any annual examination. In the good old days when living was less competitive than now, passing of even the lower Dhamma and Pali examinations used to be of much value in securing good government posts. But now things are quite different; even those successful in the highest Pali examination, the 9th Grade, find it difficult to get suitable employment.

Of late there has developed a new outlook in the education of monks in Thailand. With the rapid progress of science and with the shrinking of the world, Buddhist leaders of Thailand, monks as well as laymen, are awakened to the necessity of imparting broader education to members of the Sangha, if the Sangha is to serve the cause of Buddhism well, "for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many". As a result of the new outlook there now function in Bangkok two higher institutes of learning exclusively for monks and novices. One is the Mahāchulālongkorn Rājvidyālaya, and the other is the Māhamongkut Rājvidyālaya. Both are organised on a modern university footing and both seem to be making satisfactory progress towards that direction. Inclusion in the curriculum of some secular subjects not incompatible

with monks' discipline (Vinaya) is among the notable features of these two institutes; the aim is to give an all-round education to monks in order to enable them to be of better service to the cause of Buddhism amidst modern conditions.

So much for the education of 'long-term' monks. As for those who enter the Order temporarily, mostly for a period of three rainy months during the Vassa, or Buddhist Lent, the education is brief and devoted to the main tenets and features of Buddhism only. As pointed out above, such people enter monkhood either by their own genuine desire for knowledge of the Dhamma, by the dictum of custom or, as generally is the case, by the two reasons combined. Monks of this category return to lay life again as soon as the Lent is over. This is the reason why accommodations in monasteries (wats) are usually full during the Lenten period. Nowadays, owing to the pressure of modern life, the custom of temporary entering monkhood is not so rigorously observed by people living in urban areas as by those in the country-side. The custom has its parallel in Burma, Cambodia and Laos where Theravāda Buddhism prevails.

Wats and Monks

The word “wat” means monastery and temple combined. It is the residence of monks and novices. There are about 21,000 wats in the whole of Thailand. In Bangkok alone there are nearly two hundred wats. Some big wats in Bangkok have as many as 600 resident monks and novices. Wats are centres of Thai art and architecture. Thai culture, to a considerable extent, flows from wats. Wat-lands and constructions thereon are donated by royalty, wealthy people and the public in general. The wat is the most important institution in Thai rural life. The social life of the rural community revolves around the wat. Besides carrying out the obvious religious activities, a wat serves the community as a recreation centre, dispensary, school, community centre, home for the aged and destitutes, social work and welfare agency, village clock, rest-house, news agency and information centre. A wat is headed by a “Chao Avas” (the abbot) who is responsible for the maintenance of the wat discipline, the proper performance of religious services and rituals, and the general welfare of the inmates. Besides monks and novices, there are also the “temple boys” in wats, who assist monks and novices in various ways, such as bringing and arranging food, cleaning dormitories, washing yellow robes, etc. Usually these boys are

related to resident monks in one way or another, and their stay is free of charge. Most of them are students whose homes are far away and who would, otherwise, find it impracticable to get education. This is especially so in Bangkok where accommodation is difficult to get and where all higher seats of learning of the country are situated. The census taken in 1954 reveals that there are as many as 119,044 temple boys in Thailand, which indeed is not a small figure. The institution of the wat, in itself a gift of Buddhism, therefore contributes in no small measure to the social welfare and progress of the Thai Buddhists. The benefits in this respect, of course, are more apparent among the lower strata of society than in the case of the fortunate few on the top.

Apart from engaging themselves in doctrinal studies and observing disciplinary rules (Vinaya) in general, monks are expected to be “friends, philosophers and guides” of the people. Preaching to masses face to face or over the radio is one of the commonest ways by which monks help the promotion of moral stability among various members of the society. It may not be out of place to reiterate the fact that Buddhism lays great stress on the necessity of leading a morally good life in order to obtain happiness in life here and hereafter. In most of the ceremonies and rituals, whether private or public, monks’ co-operation

and benediction are indispensable. Indeed, in the life of the average Thai Buddhists, from the cradle to the grave, monks are persons to whom they constantly turn for moral support.

The role of monks in rural districts is even more important, for there the local wat is not only the religious but also the social centre of the community. It is at the wat that people come together and experience a sense of comradeship. Religious rituals and ceremonies held at wats are always accompanied by social activities: they are occasions for people, especially the young, to enjoy themselves in feast, fun and festivities. This aspect of the religious service helps the common folks to relax and satisfies their needs for recreation. Not a few matrimonial alliances started from contacts at wat premises. Acting as a moral and ethical example, monks are the most venerated persons in the country-side Thai society, remaining very close to the hearts of the people. In times of crisis, it is to monks that people bring their problems for counsel and encouragement. With few exceptions, the Sangha has well justified this attitude of respect and honour shown to it on the part of the laity and, on the whole, has lived up to the dignity of the Faith.

II. The Laity

Throughout its over 2,500 years of existence Buddhism has been closely connected with the lay community. In Pali the word for a male lay devotee is “Upāsaka” and “Upasikā” is its female equivalent. In the history of Buddhism, right from the time of its founder, there had been numerous “Upāsakas” and “Upasikās” whose faith in the Teachings of the Master had contributed largely to the dissemination of the Doctrine. Names of the Buddha’s munificent followers like Anāthapiṇḍika, Visākhā, Asoka, Kanishka, etc., are on the lips of Buddhists even today. Without the patronage of Emperor Asoka, Buddhism probably could not have spread so far and the course of its history might have been different. In India, the land of its birth, as well as in most of the countries where its Message has been accepted, Buddhism has received unstinted support from people of all classes, especially the ruling class. History of the movements of Buddhism in China, Japan, Burma, Ceylon, Tibet, etc. amply justifies this statement. In the case of Thailand too, ever since its introduction to that country, Buddhism has been warmly received and patronized by kings and commoners alike. It is well-known that many of the Thai rulers, not satisfied with being mere lay-devotees, got themselves ordained into monkhood

and became famous for their erudition in the Dhamma. King Mongkut, Rama IV, probably stands out as most distinguished among this class of royal devotees. The custom of Thai males entering the Sangha also contributes much to the better understanding and co-operation between the lay community and the monkhood. After all, personal experience is better than mere theoretical knowledge.

The Buddha himself, in one of his discourses, exhorted his followers to discharge their duties well so as to enable the Dhamma to endure long in the world. One of the duties of the lay followers, as taught by the Master, is to look after the needs of monks. Hence it is the traditional practice with lay followers in all Buddhist countries, especially those following Theravāda Buddhism, to see that monks do not suffer from lack of the four requisites, namely food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Although in the present age of competitive economy, life in any field is not so easy, nobody can say in fairness that monk-life in Thailand suffers greatly from shortage of the above four requisites. As Bhikkhus are not allowed to follow any occupational activities, it is clear that they entirely depend on the laity for their existence. In return for this spontaneous support offered them by the public, monks are expected to live exemplary lives for the benefit of themselves as well as of those who look to

them as teachers and guides. We have already seen what moral influence monks have upon the people.

Co-operation between the laity and the Bhikkhu Sangha in Thailand is close and spontaneous. To a very great extent this is due to the fact that in an average Thai family some of its members are certain to be found who have for some time served in the Sangha. To the masses yellow robes are symbol of the Master, and Bhikkhus are upholders of the Dhamma, to be deferred to in all circumstances. It is interesting to note that Bhikkhus or Sāmaneras found guilty of committing crimes are formally divested of their yellow robes before legal action is taken against them by the State, and this is done invariably under permission of the chief monk or the abbot.

“To do good” (Kusala Kamma) is a cardinal point in the teachings of Buddhism. Consequently the idea of performing meritorious deeds is very deeply ingrained in the minds of Buddhists. Ways of doing good or making merit (Punna) among the Thai Buddhists are numerous. A man gains merit each time he gives alms to monks or contributes to any religious rituals. To get ordination into monkhood even for a short period, of course, brings much merit. Besides, there are other ways of merit-earning, such as releasing caged birds or freeing caught fishes, plastering gold leaf on Buddha statues or religious monuments,

contributing to the construction of a new temple or the repair of an old one, etc. “The Law of Karma” that each action has its corresponding result and the belief in rebirth are two important factors in moulding such attitude towards life among the Buddhists. Though “Nibbāna” (Sanskrit: Nirvana), the highest bliss in Buddhism, is aspired to by all good Buddhists, the vast majority of them still think it is not so easy to reach and that they will be reborn again in this world, in heaven or some other world, or – at the very worst – in hell. Hence, as long as they live they must try to do good in order to ensure good results in this very life as well as in the life to come. “Be a light unto yourself. Each man must strive for his own salvation” – these were the Master’s words. In view of this, Theravāda Buddhism is often said to have individualistic temper. Nevertheless, it is very tolerant, as the long history of its existence will prove. Indeed, the characteristic tolerance of Buddhism, for instance in Thailand, has always permitted the absorption of many beliefs and practices from other sources which have often served to supplement or expand its concepts or to fill gaps. Animism and Brahmanism may be cited in this connection; the two being important supplements of popular Buddhism in Thailand. A foreign writer has rightly observed that the attitude of the Thai masses towards their religion is of an easy-going

nature. They do not bother to distinguish among the various components of their religion; for them it is all of a piece. Only the sophisticated few are concerned with doctrinal logic and purity. Of course, they too know much about its legends, its festivals, its ideals, and its general message that “good will render good”. On the whole it can be said that the Thais enjoy their religion. Religious observances are to them as social and recreational as sacred occasions. And for the vast majority, Buddhism suffices in that it enables them to feel and believe and enjoy.

Buddhist Organisations and the Revival of Buddhism

Organisations among the lay Buddhists of Thailand are recent establishments. Prominent and oldest among them is perhaps the Buddhist Association of Thailand, under Royal Patronage, which now is about 30 years old, having been established in 1933. Having its head office in Bangkok, it maintains branch organisations in almost all major districts of Thailand. Its membership is open to both sexes, irrespective of class, creed and colour. The aim and object of the Buddhist Association of Thailand is to promote the study and practice of Buddhism and to propagate its message in and outside Thailand. Besides arranging regular lectures

and discussions on topics concerning the Dhamma, the Association also publishes a monthly journal in the Thai language on the teachings of the Buddha.

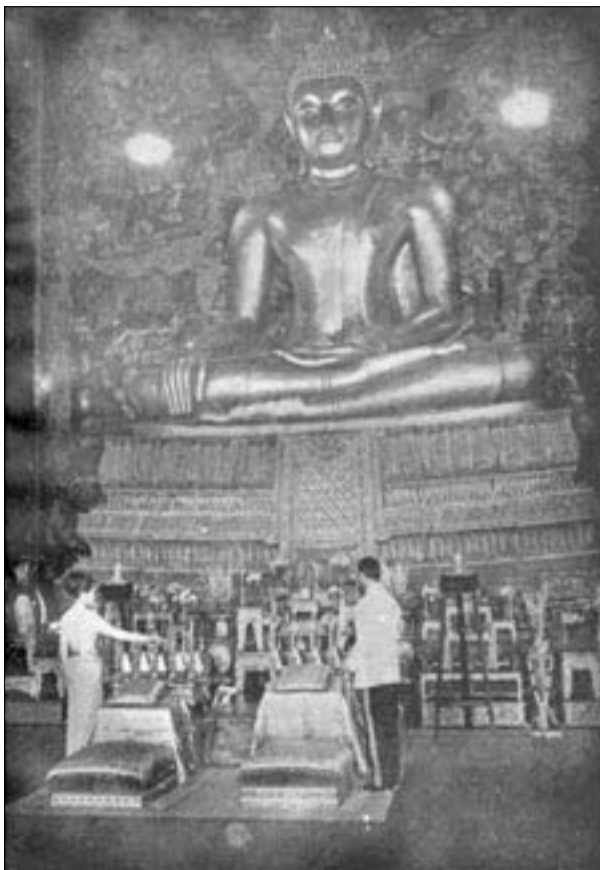
Another organisation is the Young Buddhists Association which came into being at the close of the Second World War. As its name implies, the Young Buddhists Association takes care of the interest of the young in matters concerning Buddhism. Its primary object is to encourage the young to imbibe the tenets of Buddhism and to live a virtuous life. Chief among its activities are arranging regular lectures and discussions on the Dhamma, issuing publications on subjects dealing with Buddhism in general, and sponsoring meetings of the young on the platform of Buddhism. The Young Buddhists Association also has branches in the districts.

As said earlier the end of the Second World War saw a great revival of interest in Buddhism throughout the world. Even in countries like Thailand where the Doctrine of the Awakened One has been traditionally accepted for generations, people seem to be increasingly eager to know more about the Dhamma. Strange as it may seem, this is partly due to the interest the Occidental World has taken in Buddhism. In times past religion has been more or less regarded in Thailand as "solace of the old" But with the impact of the West in most matters and with the general

interest shown towards Buddhism by Western intelligentsia, the Buddhists of Thailand, especially the younger generations who came into contact with the West, began to evince an inquisitive attitude towards their religion – a heritage which they have all along accepted as their own but which they have cared little to know about its true value. This is no attempt to belittle the exceedingly great importance the Thais attach to their religion. But human nature being what it is, the saying “Familiarity breeds contempt” is in most cases not very far wrong. In the Thai language also we have a proverb “Klai Kleua Kin Dang” which may be rendered in English as “to have the folly to resort to alkali when one is in possession of salt”.

Having taken root on the soil of Thailand for centuries Buddhism has naturally attracted many appendages to its fold, some of which are not quite in conformity with the teachings of the Master as contained in the Canon (Tripitaka). Many leaders of Buddhistic thought in Thailand have, therefore, come forward to try to purify the Dhamma of the many impurities that have crept into it. Notable among the reformatory groups are the Dhammadana Association in Jaiya, South Thailand, under the leadership of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and the Buddha Nigama of Chiangmai (North Thailand) started by Pannananda Bhikkhu. The two organisations are showing good

efforts in the field of awakening the Buddhists of Thailand to the pristine teachings of the Buddha as treasured in the Pali Tipitaka. The mission is admittedly a difficult one but already a promising start has been made in this direction. Much will also no doubt depend on how things transpire in other spheres of human activities, chiefly economic, social and political. The present is an age of conflict – conflict between mind and body, between spirit and matter. Man must find harmony between the two if peace be his aim in life. And to this task of finding harmony within man Buddhism could contribute in no small measure.



◀ The King
and Queen
of Thailand

Notes

- 1 *The History of Buddhist Thought*, by E.J. Thomas
- 2 *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru, Chapter V (XVI)
- 3 The counting of the Buddhist Councils (Sangayanā or Sangīti) differs in the several Theravāda countries. In Ceylon, the above-mentioned Council is numbered as the fifth; and in Burma, its place is taken by the Council of Mandalay (1871), while the last Council in Rangoon (1954-1956) is counted as the sixth.
[Editor.]
- 4 See *The Wheel* No. 83/84: *With Robes and Bowl. Glimpses of the Thudong Bhikkhu Life*, by Bhikkku Khantipālo.