

Worldly compromise in Thai Buddhist modernism

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Buddhist modernist movements transformed the religious practice and social engagement of one of the world's principal faiths in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These movements produced diverse effects on Asian societies which, despite generic similarities, are best understood in particular socio-historical contexts. This article examines the work of a group of young Thai monks and laymen who had an ambitious aim to morally improve and empower people; and the practical adaptation of this impulse in a society in transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional democracy in the 1930s. Like many modernist movements, their work was innovative. But it also was an inheritance of religious and political history, and the Thai modernist case thus shows a contradiction between novelty and custom that was resolved in a way that blunted the movement's reformist energy.

This article describes the thought and action of a prominent group of Thai Buddhist reformers whose attempt to change society accompanied a crucial turning point in Thai political history, the 1932 Revolution that introduced constitutionalism. The Buddhist movement promised not only spiritual salvation, but also a wider moral renovation of society. The men who embodied the new progressive spirit, cosmopolitan moderns representing a new generation, grew to maturity in a society with a long tradition of religious reform directed both by the state and by an intellectual elite in wider society. Their work was thus both innovative and an inheritance of Buddhist history, and this contradiction between novelty and custom was resolved in a way that blunted the movement's reformist energy.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–93), one of the main protagonists in the story, is undoubtedly familiar to many readers. In 1932, the twenty-six-year-old Buddhist monk from Siam's mid-south established a new monastery, and the following year a journal, with his lay brother Dhammadasa. His temple Suan Mokkhabalaram — the Grove of Liberation — was dedicated to the 'Revival and promotion of Patipattidhamma': the revival and promotion of the practice of the *Dhamma*. *Dhamma*, a central concept in Buddhism, has many meanings. For Buddhadasa, the practice of *Dhamma* meant the righteous and emancipatory practice of meditation and self-control in speech, body and mind first taught by the historical Buddha in the

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sixth century before Christ. The brothers strove for fidelity to the original religion, as evidenced by their religious names: Buddhadasa, slave of the Buddha and Dhammadasa, slave to the Dhamma. *Buddhasasana*, the journal associated with Suan Mokkhabalaram (hereafter Suan Mokh), was written for monks and a growing class of intellectual laity who were interested in meditation and Buddhism's scholarly traditions. Most of the journal's discussions were inspired by those sections of the Buddhist scriptures (the *suttas*) that contained the greatest number of direct quotes from the Buddha. The journal also included original Thai articles and translated material from the international Buddhist community, and within the frame of the original teachings debated both personal spiritual development and Buddhism's role in social welfare. A young provincial monk of a commercial family, Buddhadasa became known. His energetic propagation of *patipattidhamma* brought him new friends in Siam's small but growing intellectual class, the best and brightest of whom usually entered public service.

The loosely aligned movement that gathered around Buddhadasa embodied in the Thai context several dimensions of what is generically termed 'Buddhist modernism', a phrase coined by the scholar Heinz Bechert in the 1960s that encapsulates the common characteristics of Buddhist reform movements in Asia between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. From Japan through Southeast Asia to Ceylon and India, self-reflective, educated Buddhists argued that Buddhism was a scientific and psychologically sophisticated philosophy of mind. Against mythology, superstition and magic, modernists claimed the true religion was found solely in the original teachings of the historical Buddha. In making claims about what the Buddha originally intended, Buddhist reformers stressed that only through discipline and meditation would the self be gradually freed from false notions of the ego. Buddhist modernists claimed that this vigorous self-examination produced an ethics of social engagement and were optimistic that insights into how the mind worked were directly relevant to the problems of the modern individual and modern society. Further, Buddhist modernists often argued for equality between professional religious practitioners and laypeople in the effort to morally and intellectually improve society.¹

All of these features of modernism shaped Thai Buddhism. The reform initiative everywhere in Asia, Siam included, stemmed in the nineteenth century from a reaction to Western political power and criticism of Asian culture. Contrary to how so much of Thai history is presented, Thai Buddhist history from the time is not exceptional.² But better understanding of the histories of Buddhist modernism requires

1 See Heinz Bechert, 'Buddhistic modernism: Present situation and current trends', in *Buddhism into the year 2000* (Bangkok: Dhammakaya Foundation, 1994), pp. 251–60. Also see David L. McMahan, *The making of Buddhist modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Stephen B. Berkwitz, 'The history of Buddhism in retrospect', in *Buddhism in world cultures: Comparative perspectives*, ed. S.B. Berkwitz (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO 2006), pp. 1–44.

2 Important national histories that discuss Buddhist modernism are: Anne M. Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Alicia M. Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The impermanence of religion in colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014); Anne R. Hansen, *How to behave: Buddhism and modernity in colonial Cambodia 1860–1930* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2008); Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The cultivation of a nation, 1860–1945* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2008); Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Columbian exposition* (Chapel Hill: University of North

examining the specific composition and resulting tensions within what David McMahan terms a 'variegated continuum'³ of elements of Buddhist modernism. We need to examine the activity of small groups of people in particular circumstances. What was the particular composition of Buddhist modernism in 1930s Siam and how did it produce antagonism, and ultimately a political docility?

As discussed in this article, modernist Buddhism in Siam comprised five main elements that shaped its sociopolitical character: the legacy of palace-directed religious reforms; a romantic, world-saving ethos among a young intellectual elite that was inspired by cosmopolitan Buddhist movements; the primacy of meditation as the route to moral renovation and salvation; a two-tiered hierarchy of those aspiring to spiritual improvement; and the strong connection of the reform movement to state service. On the first point, there was a long tradition of kingly reform that 1930s Thai Buddhists inherited and much of which they admired. The rationalism, scholarship and commitment to textual authenticity were all central to period modernism and all came from the palace-led tradition of reform. The second section discusses the wider social forces that also shaped twentieth-century Thai Buddhist modernism: an emerging intellectual laity within the civil service who had been educated overseas and who compared Thai Buddhism to international movements. Their reflections on Thai Buddhism were both critical and supportive of established religion. The third section discusses the 1930s group's stress on the importance of meditation for direct spiritual experience and as a method of general social improvement. The primacy of meditation is commensurate with Buddhist modernism throughout Asia at the time, but it also shows the difference of the Thai case. While the stress on meditation opened the door to a more 'democratic' understanding of Buddhism as an equitable monk-lay partnership, in Siam the lay position remained secondary given the strong institutional position of the Sangha. Unlike neighbouring Burma or Ceylon, for example, the established Sangha did not lose its power or prestige since Siam remained independent, and its rulers patronised the order. Hence, unlike these places where Buddhist modernism involved robust lay meditative movements, lay participation in Thai Buddhism remained more 'traditional': i.e., focused primarily on material support for the Sangha as a way to make merit. The fourth section furthers the discussion of the 1930s movement by explaining a different register of the same two-tiered view of spiritual capability. The lay movement held to an inherited bifurcation of knowledge that not only privileged religious professionals over the laity, but also the educated elite over common people.

Finally, the fifth section outlines the close connection between intellectual Buddhism and loyal state service, and ambiguity over the sociopolitical impact of intellectual Buddhism at a pivotal political turning point in Thai history. In 1932 when Siam's absolute monarchy was toppled in a constitutional revolution, young enthusiasts for a new Buddhism aligned religious and social emancipation in an uneasy and inchoate relationship. The main audience for Buddhadasa's modernist

Carolina Press, 2003); Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism transformed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). For a critique of the generic characteristics of Buddhist modernism see Thomas Borchert, 'Worry for the Dai nation: Sipsongpanna, Chinese modernity, and the problems of Buddhist modernism', *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, 1 (2008): 107–42.

3 McMahan, *Buddhist modernism*, p. 57.

teaching were civil servants, to whom state loyalty trumped criticism, and who regarded their own moral and intellectual development as being far in advance of the masses. This last point I argue built upon the tensions described in the prior sections, and ultimately restrained the emancipatory potential of the 1932 Revolution.

Thai modernist Buddhism: Inheriting a tradition of reform

Modernist Buddhism in Siam was pioneered by the independent Bangkok monarchy and its state administrators. The long-term elite transformation of Buddhism began with the establishment of the Bangkok dynasty at the turn of the nineteenth century. It gained momentum with the mid-nineteenth-century founding of the austere and scripturally faithful Thammayut ('yoked to the Dhamma') order by Prince Mongkut, who later became king (r. 1851–68). The transformation reached its apogee in the centralisation of political and religious power in Bangkok in the latter half of the century under Mongkut's son, the absolutist king Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910).⁴ The process — in a country that did not experience the decapitation of traditional authority as had neighbouring countries that fell to Western colonialism — was both conservative and radical.

Prince Wachirayan (1860–1921) — King Chulalongkorn's half-brother and abbot of Wat Bowoniwet, the Bangkok Thammayut temple most closely associated with the royal family — was the intellectual and administrative leader of the Thammayut at the turn of the twentieth century. He dominates the history of establishment Buddhism in the Bangkok state. Buddhadasa, central to our story of 1930s Buddhist modernism, credited Wachirayan as 'a real innovator in interpreting the Dhamma in a modern way' and as a profound philosopher.⁵ Wachirayan established *naktham* (Dhamma study) exams as the basis of a national curricula for young monks. Buddhadasa, like all others aspiring to the formal religious profession at the time, studied this curriculum. Wachirayan wrote the *Navakovada* as the core of the Dhamma study for monks in the 1890s and it became the main text for the exam system and the educational standard around 1911–1913. It was subsequently elaborated and regularised. The *Navakovada* is comprised of three sections covering discipline within the order

4 On the intellectual transformation: Patrick Jory, *Thailand's theory of monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the idea of the perfect man* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016); Thongchai Winichakul, 'Buddhist apologetics and a genealogy of comparative religion in Siam', *Numen* 62, 1 (2015): 76–99; Craig J. Reynolds, 'Buddhist cosmography in Thai intellectual history', in *Seditious histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian pasts*, ed. C. J. Reynolds (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 161–84; and N. Eeosiwong, 'The life of the Buddha and the religious movement of the early Bangkok period', in Nidhi Eosewong, *Pen and sail: Literature and history in early Bangkok*, ed. Chris Baker, Benedict Anderson and Craig Reynolds (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2005), pp. 255–86. For the administrative transformation: Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, state and society: Thai Buddhism in history* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986); Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Somboon Suksamran, *Buddhism and political legitimacy* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1993); Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1983); and Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest recollections: Wandering monks in twentieth-century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

5 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Lao wai meua wai sonthaya, attachiwaprawat khong Than Phutthathat* [Recalling life at twilight: The autobiography of Buddhadasa], interviewer Phra Pracha Phasanuthammano (Bangkok: Komol Thong Foundation, 1985), p. 113.

of monks (the *Vinaya*), explanation of the Buddha's teaching (the Dhamma) and the Layperson's Practice (*Gihī Patipatti*). Wachirayan thus defined the professional orthodoxy, orthodoxy and proper role of the lay community. His examination system also quantified and tested spirituality, thus demoting those whose claims of spiritual powers stemming from advanced psychic states or skilful magic could not be validated. The *Navakovada* formed the basis of the nine-tiered *parian* exam system, in which students concentrate on Pali language studies. The ranks that the exams created governed much of the internal hierarchy of, and social respect for, Thai monks. Wachirayan also wrote a biography of the Buddha that hews closely to the historical evidence of the Buddha's life. His sources are both the *suttas* and the investigations of foreign scholars, and he explains the supernatural stories and trans-historical references that appear in the *suttas* as metaphors or literary techniques.⁶ To this day Wachirayan's texts have defined orthodox doctrine and practice for Thai Buddhism.⁷

Wachirayan's administrative and pedagogic authority is incontrovertible, and as Craig Reynolds, who translated his autobiography into English wrote, he did not suffer fools lightly.⁸ A cornerstone of Wachirayan's legacy was his ability to express forcefully in understandable language the moral heart of the Buddha's Dhamma — its lessons on how to behave, its spiritual depth, and its progressive understanding of how the mind works. In *Sasana doi prasong* (Religion as you like it),⁹ a masterful explanation of the principles of Buddhism published in a question-and-answer format in 1920, Wachirayan explains that Buddha's teaching was divided into three tiers: for immediate use, for the future, and for most exalted use, depending on the level of the audience. The Buddha taught the least on the first two categories that cover worldly morality, addressing the five main moral observances, general lay responsibilities like keeping good company and looking after one's family. The bulk of his teaching, though, Wachirayan explained, was supra-mundane and out of reach excepting the keenly spiritually adept and diligent.¹⁰ Wachirayan downplays his own spiritual advancement: he states that it is beyond his ability to answer whether he understands reality correctly. He compares himself to someone who has only looked at a map to find something, in contrast to someone who has actually been somewhere. He reiterates the centrality of the Buddha's words as relayed in the *suttas* to encourage understanding.¹¹ And while, like all modernists convinced that the Buddha's original intentions are found in the scriptures, he encourages constant reflection: 'Buddhism

6 Wachirayan Warorot, *Phutthaprawat* (Life of the Buddha) (Bangkok: Makamakut Rajavidyalaya, 1980). Nidhi explains that Wachirayan's biography stemmed from a rationalist movement in nineteenth-century Thai Buddhism that went back to the founding of the Bangkok dynasty. Nidhi, 'The life of the Buddha'.

7 See Ishii, *Sangha, state and society*, pp. 85–92; Wachirayan, comp., *Navakovada, laksut naktham chan tri, phra nipon Somdet Phra Maha Samanajao Krom Phraya Wachirayan Waroros* [*Navakovada*, instructions for newly-ordained bhikkhus and samaneras] (standard text for Dhamma students, 3rd grade) (Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya, 1999). It has been a bilingual Thai and English text since 1971.

8 Craig J. Reynolds, ed. and trans., *Autobiography: The life of Prince-patriarch Vajiranana* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979), i.

9 Wachirayan, *Sasana doi prasong* [Religion as you like it], royal cremation volume for Prince Thanom, 1920.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

is very deep, the time of its origin is far in the past, in a foreign country, and the teachings are not in our language. Hence, correct understanding is difficult.’¹²

Wachirayan is a towering figure in Thai establishment Buddhism, but all of the senior men in the Council of Elders that governed the Sangha in the early twentieth century were highly educated and similarly persuasive in their explanations of Buddhism. The scholar monk Phra Phutthakosajan (Charoen Yannawaro, 1872–1951) was chair of the Council of Elders and abbot of Wat Thepsirin in Bangkok in the inter-war years. He met Buddhadasa through Phra Dunyaphak Suwaman (hereafter Phra Dun, 1894–1982), a justice ministry official and lay practitioner who had ordained earlier in life under the Thepsirin abbot. Phra Phutthakosajan visited Suan Mokh in 1937 as part of an inspection tour of southern temples and became a good friend and mentor to Buddhadasa.¹³ Buddhadasa later recalled that ‘[Phra Phutthakosajan’s] greatest gift was encouragement to think about the profundity of the Dhamma and to spread it’.¹⁴ Phra Phutthakosajan’s method encouraged Buddhadasa to discuss the finer points of the doctrine with him, but also to caution against attempting to discuss with the laity topics that were too advanced or abstract.¹⁵

Phra Phutthakosajan’s own writings were akin to Wachirayan’s and other senior scholarly monks in their high scriptural erudition yet accessibility to an educated audience. Like Wachirayan he too reiterated that the Buddha’s pedagogy aimed at a spectrum of understanding. In *Thammajaksu* journal, for example, he explained the Digha Nikaya Sutta’s four-fold categorisation of *sampachanya*, meaning awareness or clarity of consciousness. The activities of both monks and laypeople should be framed by: awareness of purpose; appropriateness; the domain (i.e., the situation in which one acts); and whether one has gone astray or is deluding oneself. For laypeople, the four-fold division of clear consciousness has immediate social benefits, ensuring solidarity, harmony and household stability. It also, however, is a stage on the ascending ladder of higher Dhammic action and greater insight into the basis for proper behaviour.¹⁶

In an explanation of the higher reaches of Dhamma, the Wat Thepsirin abbot gives the compelling metaphor of the Dhamma as the mind’s dwelling place. This is a multi-building residence, and the mind’s cultivation advances through its space. The first house is governed by basic morality, found in every Buddhist’s five precepts, that overcome the coarsest faults. The second, larger abode has many chambers dedicated to overcoming medium-grade defilements through meditation focused on the breath — ‘the sentry at the gate’ — and concentration on physical and mental phenomena. Finally, the largest abode is that of wisdom and has only two rooms: one dedicated to full understanding of the four noble truths and the law of co-dependent

12 Ibid., p. 42.

13 Tomomi Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: A social history* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), pp. 53–4.

14 Somdet Phra Phutthakosajan (Yannawaro Thera), Phutthathat Indapannyo and Phra Dunyaphak Suwaman, *Sansomdet kap Phutthathat lae Phra Dunyaphak Suwaman* [Letters with Buddhadasa and Phra Dunyaphak] (Bangkok: Thammasapha, 2010), p. 4.

15 Ibid., pp. 4–5.

16 Phra Phutthakosajan, ‘Sampachanya Katha’, *Thammajaksu* 19, 2 (1933): 90–98. This article was originally a radio broadcast that Phra Phutthakosajan delivered on 5 Oct. 1933.

origination and the other to complete grasp of impermanence, suffering and not-self, the three basic characteristics of all life.¹⁷

Practice in a new key: Spiritual enthusiasm in the public sphere

In addition to the commitment to understanding the teachings sourced in the original *suttas*, we see in these writings the assertion of tiered levels of understanding in emulating the Buddha, and humility in the task. How did 1930s modernists innovate upon what was in this time the established interpretation and practice? Primarily because capitalist market expansion enabled greater access to foreign print media, more domestic publishing and a larger reading public, laymen of commoner origins and outsider monks in the 1930s advanced the humanist discourse and rigorous, textually informed practice that had begun in nineteenth-century reforms. This was a quantitative expansion of Buddhist education, but there also was a new quality. Meditation and its link to social welfare and improvement was assiduously pursued by the Buddhadasa group in the 1930s, and their meditative zeal had a romantic aspect that existed in tension with the rational tenets and hierarchic view of spiritual insight.

The elite Thammayut scholars came from Bangkok palace-connected backgrounds; Nguam Panich (Buddhadasa's birth name) grew up in a provincial Thai-Chinese commercial family. The Panich family ran a village store that sold books and Nguam and Yikei, his younger brother who would play a key role in their movement as Dhammadaśa, eagerly availed themselves of the chance to learn about the wider world. Buddhadasa recalled that as a young man he discovered that most monks did not study the Dhamma and opted instead to spend their time developing a name for themselves and delivering sermons on merit-making.¹⁸

The brothers were fortunate to have a ready-made library at hand. In addition to what they found in the family store, the brothers benefited from reading the religious works, philosophy and literature sent by Siang, their uncle who had ordained as a monk in Bangkok and whose knowledge of Pali encouraged Buddhadasa's own study of the ancient language.¹⁹ In Siam, palace elites fundamentally shaped the print culture of the early twentieth century. As mentioned above, Buddhadasa remembered the powerful effect of Prince Wachirayan and his writings on Buddhadasa's own views of Buddhism. Commoners were also contributing to the growth of public discourse and bringing different perspectives that challenged the evolving palace orthodoxy on politics, society and religion.²⁰ Buddhadasa recalled the effect of Thianwan (T.W.S. Wannapho, 1842–1915), a commoner intellectual who wrote widely on religion and politics.²¹ Buddhadasa remembered that

17 Phra Phutthakosajan, 'Thammarakhana', in *ibid.*, pp. 45–55.

18 Buddhadasa, *Lao wai*, pp. 26–7, 42–3.

19 Suchira Payulpitack, 'Buddhadasa's movement: An analysis of its origins, direction and social impact' (PhD diss., Universität Bielefeld, 1991), pp. 74–5.

20 Sumali Viravong, *Roi kaeo naeo mai khong Thai, pho. so. 2417–2453* [New directions in Thai prose, 1874–1910] (Bangkok: PEN International Thailand Centre, 1987).

21 The latter brought him to grief; from the age of 41 Thianwan spent nearly 17 years in jail for allegedly criticising the king. He was publicly caned 50 times before being sent to gaol. Thongchai Likitpornasawan, 'Introduction', in *Ruam ngankhian khong Thianwan* [Collected works of Thianwan] (Bangkok: Tonchabap, 2001), iv.

‘Thianwan’s wisdom permeated monk’s circles ... Monks were old fashioned, by comparison he was much more modern. He studied the Dhamma and explained things much more clearly than monks could.’²² Palace insiders and a growing middle-class intelligentsia together shaped Siam’s nascent intellectual life in the early twentieth century, and opened the door to a brand-new world for young minds. Buddhadasa recalled that he ‘read everything I could at that time, because I wanted to be modern’.²³ Yikei was crucial to his elder brother’s reception of foreign ideas in part because of his much better command of English.²⁴ When Yikei returned home from studying in Bangkok in 1927 he brought boxes of books and magazines with him that further expanded the brothers’ mental horizons.

When in May 1933, the two brothers began publishing *Buddhasasana* (Buddhism), a monthly journal with a print run of 1,000 copies, their literary endeavour was the first non-royal Buddhist journal in the kingdom. While popular inter-war magazines carried Buddhist articles periodically (especially around the *Visakha Puja* holidays in May), the only Buddhist journal was the above-mentioned *Thammajaksu* from the Makamakut Academy, an elite Buddhist college founded by Chulalongkorn and Wachirayan in 1893. In contrast to *Thammajaksu*’s elite monks focused on scholarship, the brothers’ *Buddhasasana* was written by and for young monks and lay intellectuals interested in meditation and also in foreign currents in Buddhism.

Indeed, overseas Buddhism and Buddhism practised by Westerners featured prominently in the Khana Dhammadhana’s journal. Buddhadasa’s quest to be modern was enabled and fulfilled by the range of new knowledge and viewpoints transmitted in the foreign Buddhist publications that became available. The main writings in the Buddhist public sphere came from India, Ceylon, Britain and Japan. The Maha Bodhi Society’s *Maha Bodhi* journal, published in India from 1892, the *Buddhist Annual of Ceylon* (commencing publication in 1920), the *British Buddhist* (published by the British Maha Bodhi Society from 1926) and *The Young East* (issued by the International Buddhist Society in Japan from 1925) were all exploited for the new journal’s content. While space here does not allow a full explanation of the foreign influence in Thai Buddhism, the examples of the Sinhalese layman Anagarika Dharmapala (‘Homeless strength of the Dhamma’, David Hewaviratne, 1864–1933) and the Italian-American monk Lokanatha Bhikkhu (Salvatore Cioffi, 1889–1964) are central. Both advanced the activist, rational and romantic spirit in period Buddhism; the former campaigned in Siam and around Asia for his Buddhist mission in India and the latter was a resident monk at Wat Bowoniwet (Wachirayan’s temple) who undertook a failed ‘crusade’ to spread Buddhism in India and then the West.²⁵ The Anagarika died in 1933, while Lokanatha remained a high profile Thai-resident

22 Ibid.

23 Buddhadasa, *Lao wai*, p. 114.

24 Buddhadasa recalled years later: ‘I couldn’t understand most of [what I read]. I didn’t have the patience to read [English books] because I had to open the dictionary so often.’ Ibid., p. 127.

25 On the Anagarika see: Alan Trevithick, *The revival of Buddhist pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya (1811–1949): Anagarika Dharmapala and the Mahabodhi temple* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2006); Kahawatte Siri Sumedha, *Anagarika Dharmapala, a glorious life dedicated to the cause of Buddhism* (Sarnath: Maha Bodhi Society of India, 1999). On Lokanatha: National Archives (NA) of Thailand, SR.0201.10/24, Lokanatha’s letter to King Prajadhipok, 26 Dec. 1933, and to Prime Minister Phahon, 27 Dec. 1933; and ‘Phra Thai and Phra Phama pranam Phra Lokanath, Phra Thai dern thang klap’

monk throughout the 1930s. Lokanatha asked Buddhadasa to join the journey to the West, but the latter claimed that he had more important religious work to do in Siam.²⁶ Dhammadasa, Buddhadasa's brother, was apparently keener on Lokanatha's mission. So too were others who became close to Buddhadasa and the Suan Mokh group such as Phra Panyanatha (1911–2007) and Bunchuan Khemaphirat (1907–88), two southern monks who travelled with Lokanatha into Burma.²⁷

The Anagarika and Lokanatha's enthusiasms regularly feature in the pages of *Buddhasasana*, and fuelled a high-minded sense among Buddhadasa's group that Buddhism had a central role in changing the world. The magazine also tapped into a growing middle class lay movement seeking spiritual guidance. Wachirayan's religious exams (*naktham*), the most rigorous option for those seeking detailed knowledge of textual Buddhism, were introduced for laypeople in 1929. Their popularity thereafter — with examinees reaching nearly 55,000 by 1933 — points to the growing popular demand for spiritual education, and that the young generation demanded more diverse avenues for knowledge.²⁸

In the journal's first issue, Dhammadasa waxes eloquently about the spirit in Buddhism that has brought a new generation of Westerners and laypeople to the faith and produced a global religious movement that would work for social rejuvenation and world peace.²⁹ The inaugural issue calls for people to dedicate their lives to the revitalisation of the faith, and the language describing this effort is straight from the Pali Canon. 'There are animals here with but little dust in their eyes, they will fall away from happiness because they haven't heard the Dhamma.' Bhikkhus thus 'should demonstrate the pure Dhamma, in its beginning, middle and end'. These passages, taken from the *Mahavagga Vinaya Pitaka* — a *sutta*-like section of the disciplinary code — where the newly enlightened Buddha explained his insights to the first followers, form a fitting opening to the brothers' mission. The faithful should act 'like men' as sons of the Buddha, and are exhorted to practice *vipassana* meditation as a public example of 'arahantship'.

Buddhadasa frequently explained arahantship in the journal in entirely scripturalist and hence orthodox, Thai modernist cultural language. But his writings on the topic of the transcendent spiritual adept also point to his lifelong belief that the Dhamma was the opposite of the world, 'in that it helps get rid of (social) problems'. Its pursuit was a revolutionary force, and the spiritually superior should 'sacrifice ourselves to play a leading role in the affairs of the world as the Buddha intended us to

[Thai and Burmese monks censure Lokanatha, Thai monks return to Siam], *Buddhasasana* 2, 2 (1934): 290–94; 'The pilgrimage to Rome', *Bangkok Times*, 26 June 1934.

26 Buddhadasa, *Lao wai*, p. 130; Buddhadasa, 'Thammai mai pai kap Phra Lokanatha' [Why I did not go with Lokanatha], *Buddhasasana* 2, 1 (May 1934): 210–12.

27 Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, pp. 35, 56–7.

28 The figure of 55,000 is in Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, p. 19, referencing Phra Maha Thongsup in *Thammajaksu* 20, 3 (1934): 259–74. Maha Thongsup was a *parian* nine scholar, director of Mahamakut Academy's textbook division, and a committed rationalist. He became a good friend to Buddhadasa and in 1937 adopted one of Buddhadasa's writings for use in the curriculum. Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, p. 54.

29 Dhammadasa, 'Phutthasasana charoen rung ruang ying nai samai keung Phutthasasana Kalani' [Buddhism has progressed greatly in the mid-point of the faith], *Buddhasasana* 1, 1 (1933): 2–6; 'Thaleangkan khong Khana Thammathan' [Announcement of the Khana Dhammadana], *Buddhasasana* 1, 1 (1933): 6–11.

do'.³⁰ These quotes are from the 1970s at a time when Thailand saw considerable civil unrest and violence. But 40 years earlier, Buddhadasa had already formulated the main idea of Buddhism's relation to worldly affairs: the example of the arahant could end civil strife. In the first issue of *Buddhasasana* in 1933 he wrote that conventional thinkers are taught to adjust themselves to worldly impulses, to 'turn as the world desires' (*tam khwam yak wisai lok*). We cause the world to revolve, and ourselves to turn ceaselessly within it in the samsaric wheel. One arahant, however, could cease his returning; if there were many, people could stop the world from re-turning, which stasis Buddhadasa claims as peace. Arahants are the only hope for a world consumed with desire: 'what a great boon for the world when a Buddha or arahant is born into it!'.³¹

Buddhasasana blew like a fresh wind into the Buddhist public sphere. Its high-minded idealism and energy, however, is tempered by the ambiguity of Buddhism's emancipatory potential. How could the wisdom of the enlightened few — or the singular arahant — translate into concrete social change among the ignorant multitude? This ambiguity stems from the tempering effect of the Sangha's centrality in Siamese Buddhism, and of Thammayut-derived orthodoxy and orthopraxy on the impassioned idealism of a young generation.

Meditation's challenge and influence

As we saw above Phra Phutthakosajan's discussion of the gradual refinement and purification of mentalities relied fundamentally on meditation. And as explained by a contemporary collegial elder of Phra Phutthakosajan's on the Sangha's elite council, the Buddha's original experience was revolutionary because he was taught by no one. His insights and self-realisation were entirely the results of direct personal, meditative experience.³² But in the establishment Buddhism of Wachirayan and the Sangha elite, it was *primarily* through discipline and study that one penetrated the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Despite the nineteenth-century Bangkok reformers' claims to be returning to original practice, the establishment had an ambivalent relationship with meditation-oriented monks. Meditation monasteries occupied an important role in urban religion from the beginning of Bangkok's history and Mongkut, the Thammayut founder, was greatly inspired in his quest to purify the religion by Mon meditation masters living in the capital.³³ Half a century later, many north-eastern meditation masters impressed the Thammayut with their discipline and commitment to Buddhist practice, and they assisted the order's expansion of power around the turn of the twentieth century.³⁴

30 Buddhadasa, quoted in Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and modernist reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2003), pp. 213, 212.

31 Buddhadasa, 'Ruang kantamroi Phra Arahant' [Following the steps of the Arahant], *Buddhasasana* 1, 1 (1933): 4; Dhamma practice section.

32 Phra Sasanasophon (Jem Jittasalo), 'Namokan thesana', in Phra Sasanasophon, *Samothan thesana* (Cremation volume for Luang Songkhla Nakharin, 1937), p. 23.

33 Tambiah, *World conqueror*, p. 209.

34 Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 'The traditions of the noble ones: An essay on the Thai forest tradition and its relationship with the Dhammayut hierarchy', Apr. 2005; <https://www.dhammadata.org/Archive/Writings/CrossIndexed/Uncollected/MiscEssays/The%20Traditions%20of%20the%20Noble%20Ones.pdf> (accessed 21 Dec. 2018); Tiyavanich, *Forest recollections*, pp. 172–97; Taylor, *Forest monks*, pp. 40–74.

Simultaneously, however, two problems existed for the reformers. After his experience with some meditation monks who could not explain the canonical or textual bases of their practices, Mongkut decided that meditation without sound scholarly knowledge was a waste of time.³⁵ Mongkut's son King Chulalongkorn in the late nineteenth century echoed his father's opinions when he decided to establish the Mahamakut Academy to improve scholarship. Chulalongkorn at the time lamented not only monks preoccupied with magic and attainment of advanced psychic states — frequent targets of modernist reforms throughout Buddhist Asia — but also meditation monks generally as ignorant of the textual bases of Buddhism.³⁶

A second problem was political rather than scholarly. Spiritual masters often commanded strong popular followings, and sometimes this combined with resistance to the power of the expanding Bangkok state. The problem was most acute in the north where the Sangha had long been independent. Khruba Srivichai (1878–1935) from Lamphun province and widely popular all over the north, posed the gravest threat to Bangkok's power over religious administration in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁷ Khruba Srivichai early in his life studied occult practices, but later abandoned them for orthodox vipassana meditation, and adopted an austere way of life that brought him fame and followers. Khruba Srivichai's zeal for temple rebuilding, independent ordinations and public works — what one scholar terms his pursuit of 'active utopianism'³⁸ — led to conflict with the Bangkok state not because of his meditative commitment, but rather his stubborn flouting of Bangkok's rules and his large popular backing.³⁹

Buddhadasa's commitment to meditation, then, was not brand new, or even 'modern'. The romantic idealism expressed in *Buddhadhasana* — especially the revolutionary figure of the arahant — also resembles Srivichai's active utopianism. But Buddhadasa's social milieu differed appreciably from that of other regional meditation masters. While a provincial monk, he came from a modern commercial family. His cosmopolitan education — in central Thai and English — mirrored that of the Bangkok elite, much unlike his northern and northeastern colleagues. And he did not come from a region with long-standing independent religious and political

35 Tambiah, *World conqueror*, p. 209.

36 *Mahamakut Rajawithayalai 100 pi* [100 years of Mahamakut College], p. 83. Chulalongkorn commissioned a survey of practitioners at important meditation temples that tested claims to higher spiritual powers. The surveyed population could prove none, and the Bangkok religious reformers remained noncommittal about such powers' attainability. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 'The traditions of the noble ones', p. 11.

37 A Bangkok administrator wrote to the government in 1932 that Srivichai was 'more powerful than any northern lord'. Phra Suriyanuwat, July 1932 letter to Bangkok, in NA, SR0201.8/20. On Srivichai's career and tangle with the authorities, see: NA, SR0201.8/20; SR0201.10/61 (prime minister's office files); Charas Khosanand, *Phra Khruba Jao Srivichai, Ariyasongh haeng Lanna* [Khruba Srivichai, noble monk of Lanna] (Bangkok: Fueangfa, 2006); Katherine A. Bowie, 'Of Buddhism and militarism in northern Thailand: Solving the puzzle of the saint Khruba Srivichai', *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, 3 (2014): 711–32.

38 Paul T. Cohen, 'Charismatic monks of Lanna and Isan', in *Charismatic monks of Lanna Buddhism*, ed. P.T. Cohen (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017), p. 59.

39 Indeed, Wachirayan was sympathetic to the northern monk and impressed with his zeal, and thought he only needed to be educated in the ways of Bangkok power. Letter from Wachirayan to Krommeun Chinaworasriwat, head of central Sangha, 15 June 1920, in Charas, *Phra Khruba Jao Sivichai*, pp. 74–6.

traditions. Buddhadasa did not have a politically suspect relation to the centre, quite the contrary, as we will see. All of this made an important difference to his acceptance into elite intellectual society.

For Buddhadasa and those around him *patipattidhamma*, Dhammic practice, focused on meditation that was of immediate moral and mental betterment and thus perhaps akin to a spiritually charged bourgeois ethics. Buddhadasa in 1935 wrote that many people criticised meditative practitioners for wasting their time in a selfish pursuit that did not help anyone, when in fact they were conducting a deep mental revolution that was a boon to the world. Phra Phutthakosajan, in the example of his work given earlier, discussed the progression of spiritual development from the rough to the smooth, from the coarse to the fine. These metaphors are common tropes in Buddhism historically that Buddhadasa also used. In his additional phrasing, meditation was the master tool to the transformation and cleansing of minds.⁴⁰

Without strong practice the world, Buddhadasa wrote, had sunk into a limitless quest for satisfaction of material desires, fighting, and vengeance. Again in passionate language he wrote that the Buddha's time was an age of sacks filled with gold; today, an age of sacks of hot air. Even worse, possibly, an age of sacks filled with snake poison or thorns. 'Examine ourselves and those around us; isn't it true that we are afflicted with greed, hatred and delusion every day? As the individual is, so will society be.'⁴¹

The valorisation of meditation as a psychological master key that gave an objective appreciation of the causality of suffering and allowed penetration of the veil of ego illusion were hallmarks of Buddhist modernism everywhere in Asia and in the West. They were part too of the assertion that such practice was a return to the core of the historical Buddha's rationalism. The Thai Sangha elites would not have challenged either of these positions. Buddhadasa's position and appeal to those around him was potentially subversive if (incommunicable and subjective) meditational mastery combined with a large popular following and a distinctive regional tradition hostile to Bangkok's authority. But he and his group's political potential was stunted, partly because of Buddhadasa's background as discussed above. Further, what would emerge clearly in the later part of his career was already apparent in the 1930s: that Buddhadasa's central emphasis on meditative practice would not carry much social weight if he became a rebellious maverick or eccentric.⁴² His lay followers carried his message, and educated him in turn with their dedication, but the tension born of the status of the religious professional persisted.

Engaged laity in a two-tiered world

Buddhadasa's example appealed to laity attracted to the spiritual path. His lay friends included Sanya Dharmasakdi (1907–84) and Phraya Wonglatphli

40 Buddhadasa, 'Kankratham thi riak wa patibat Tham' [The action called Dhammic practice], *Buddhasasana* 3, 1 (May 1935): 469–517.

41 Buddhadasa, 'Ganthadura = pariyatham' [Dhammic study = Dhammic practice], *Buddhasasana* 2, 3 (Nov. 1934): 340.

42 Jackson, *Buddhadasa*, pp. 250–51.

Dhammaphrakan (1894–1968, hereafter Phraya Wonglatphli).⁴³ Both of these men contributed centrally to the Khana Dhammadhana's public education mission and also to Buddhadasa's own spiritual growth.⁴⁴ Sanya and Phraya Wonglatphli were not only lay enthusiasts for intellectual Buddhism, but also justice ministry officials committed to the ethical practice of law founded on Buddhist principles of independent thinking and integrity.

Sanya and Phraya Wonglatphli, like Buddhadasa, were eager students of modern knowledge, but they applied their learning in service of the state. Sanya studied at Middle Temple in London and became an English barrister in 1932, before going to work for Phraya Wonglatphli in the justice ministry. Sanya met Buddhadasa at one of Lokanatha's public lectures in Bangkok, and the two formed a lifelong friendship. In 1934, Sanya established the Samakhom Phutthasasana (Buddhist Association) with some other laymen to propagandise rational Buddhism. Eventually the association would play a key role in public Buddhism, gaining royal patronage and international recognition. In the 1930s, however, it had a hard time attracting good people, at least as Sanya saw the situation. In neighbouring Burma under British rule there were hundreds of lay associations in the early twentieth century, 'local and spontaneously formed'.⁴⁵ By contrast, Siam, the last Buddhist monarchy with a long-standing scholarly influence on its neighbours, had hardly any lay intellectual Buddhist organisations. Writing to Buddhadasa, Sanya complained that the association was mainly viewed as a merit-making (*bamphen kusol*) venue. Well-off Bangkok people agreed in principle with the practice of meditation, but upon realising how difficult and rigorous it was, they lost interest. They also did not appreciate talks that were too intellectual, or that challenged their assumptions.⁴⁶

Sanya wanted to establish new institutions to encourage lay scholarly and meditative Buddhism. In the same letter to Buddhadasa, Sanya described that his plans to create a new Buddhist university hadn't gotten very far. Most monks, he thought, were too poorly educated and idle to be much use. Buddhadasa agreed that Thai Buddhism was not engaged enough with modern learning and especially foreign languages.⁴⁷ He also framed the problem as not only institutional but perhaps a fundamental problem with Thai religion. Buddhadasa argued that Buddhism lacked the rousing examples of public commitment that the kingdom's Christian mission schools offered. Many leading Siamese families were products of Western education, Buddhadasa argued, and Western (i.e., Christian) self-fashioning that focused on discipline, knowledge and energetic work accounted for their success.⁴⁸ Thai Buddhist leaders, by contrast,

43 The larger civil service group in the early years is surveyed in Thiwaporn Apaipat, "Khon di samkhan kwaa thuk sing": Yattham kap kansang yomrap Phutthathat Bhikkhu nai sangkhom Thai, 2475–2529" ['Good people are the most important': Followers and the establishment of acceptance of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu in Thai society, 1932–1986] (PhD diss., Chulalongkorn University, 2017), pp. 81–107.

44 Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, pp. 60–69.

45 Turner, *Saving Buddhism*, p. 76.

46 Sanya to Buddhadasa, 13 Jan. 1938/2481, in Phutthathat Indapannyo and Sanya Thammasak, *100 pi roi chotmai Phutthathat-Sanya* [100 years, 100 letters of Buddhadasa–Sanya] (Bangkok: Plain Readers, 2007), pp. 57–61.

47 Buddhadasa to Sanya, 23 Feb. 1938, in *ibid.*, p. 73.

48 Buddhadasa to Sanya, 29 Jan. 1938, in *ibid.*, p. 63.

had largely failed in his opinion to foster these positive characteristics in young people. Modern Siam had lost touch with the old Buddhist ethics that predated all that Thais admired in (or projected onto) Westerners, including patience and fortitude, punctuality, hard work, a sense of social responsibility and honesty with oneself.⁴⁹ Moreover, lacking a tradition of lay meditative Buddhism, Buddhadasa thought that the Buddhist university would not penetrate far enough into society and suggested that Sanya's association should reach out to young people in the capital to make practice a bigger public issue. Buddhadasa admitted, however, that as a religious professional he had little understanding of lay affairs, and that he was not sure how to reach the masses.⁵⁰

These few selections from the two lifelong friends' correspondence are taken from their youth, and are only a fraction of the letters they exchanged about the worldly application of the Dhamma. But they describe a key attitude standing in the way of Thai modernist Buddhism's assertions of liberation and social relevance at the time: the sense that the laity was ignorant and uninterested. This could arguably be overcome with better spiritual education. More problematic was the sole occupation of the spiritual high ground by a religious elite. Buddhadasa's career consistently showed he and his brother's wish to shrink or abolish the theoretical monk–lay distinction in spiritual attainments. Buddhadasa's approach to Buddhist practice echoed Buddhist modernism everywhere in Asia and among practising Westerners: opening the nibbanic door to all comers in an effort to 'sanctify the social and material world'.⁵¹ This effort however had to contend with the prevalence of a two-tiered theory of knowledge, mundane (*lokiyadhamma*) and transcendental (*lokuttaradhamma*), in the Theravada tradition that further imposed a barrier between common people and the religious elite.⁵²

Lokuttaradhamma — the second, higher truth — eluded and excluded the masses of people sunk in a self-imposed mental servitude; we saw above that both Wachirayan and Phra Phuttakosajan had explained the difficulty of attaining it. Buddhadasa wrote under many pseudonyms for *Buddhasasana*, and in one of his aliased articles he posed as an educated outsider who doubts Buddhism's social potential. Nai Hetphon ('Mr. Logic', Buddhadasa) questions the extent of Thai people's understanding of Buddhist philosophy and its seeming pessimism about human possibilities in overcoming suffering. Bunchuan Khemampirat, one of Buddhadasa's cohort in the Khana Dhammadhana and one of the Thai monks who had travelled with Lokanatha into Burma, responds that 'we can't help people if they are filled with kamma and diverse (erroneous) views', as most people were. A modest everyday kindness, rather than a pursuit to realise *anatta*, should be the immediate pursuit.⁵³

49 Buddhadasa to Sanya, 23 Feb. 1938, in *ibid.*, p. 76.

50 Buddhadasa to Sanya, 29 Jan. 1938, in *ibid.*, pp. 62–9. Sanya later wrote dispiritedly that young people he spoke with were happy to trash the mission schoolmasters' assertions of Christianity's superiority, but were unable to give any counterarguments. When pressed on what made Buddhism better, they were stumped. Sanya concluded that they didn't understand their own faith. Sanya to Buddhadasa, 23 Apr. 1939, in *ibid.*, pp. 87–8.

51 Jackson, *Buddhadasa*, p. 130.

52 Nidhi, 'The lives of the Buddha', pp. 249–53; Christine Grey, 'Thailand: The soteriological state' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1986), pp. 49–50; Jackson, *Buddhadasa*, pp. 17–32.

53 Bunchuan, 'Sonthana kap nai hetphon' [Conversation with Mr. Logic], *Buddhasasana* 4, 3 (Nov. 1936): 310.

Bunchuan argued that everyone could work for the alleviation of suffering within their means based on their occupation and status, in other words within the confines of the socially determined self. Mr. Logic claims that collective *metta-karuna* (loving-kindness) would lead Siam like a lamb to the slaughter in a dangerous geopolitical world. Bunchuan responds that there was no need to worry about a wave of *metta-karuna* overwhelming a violent and prejudiced humanity; absolute love and non-violence, like knowledge of not self, were far beyond most people's capability. Hence, the thorny problem of how personal morality and wisdom can practically reform social injustice is deferred until a critical mass of humanity has transcended their worldly selves. The time of deferral is the subject of the next section.

The Dhamma and the world: Whose justice?

One month after the founding of Suan Mokh temple the People's Party, a small cohort of disaffected civil servants mainly from law and military backgrounds, overthrew the absolute monarchy and introduced constitutional government. Buddhadasa declared the events a fitting coincidence:

The history of Suan Mokh is a thing that is easy to remember, encapsulated as it is in the short sentence: '(Founded) the same year as the change of regime.' We took this as an auspicious omen of the changes happening in a new era, and as a chance to make (the world) better as much as we could.⁵⁴

New regime officials claimed that the modern constitutional subject was also a moral agent shaped and protected by the Dhamma. In 1936, Pridi Banomyong, the civilian leader of the People's Party and a lawyer trained in France, concluded a radio lecture on the constitution by stating that 'The constitution is the highest Dhamma' and that the Dhamma protects those who practice it.⁵⁵

At the same time, the new regime promised more than protection. Duen Bunnag was an apprentice to Pridi who taught at Thammasat University, which was founded by Pridi in 1934 to teach the 'moral and political sciences' to a younger generation in the constitutional era. Duen wrote the new regime's constitutional law textbook used by all university law students. Here he wrote that the constitution brought not only the equitable rule of law, but also an awakening. This awakening he expressed in traditional terms as *sati sampachanya*, and tied it to democracy as a political system that gave everyone the power to exercise independent judgement.⁵⁶

Buddhadasa belonged to the same generation as the leaders of the 1932 Revolution. They all grew up under the modernising absolutist state, its growing public sphere and its growing cosmopolitanism. The high politics of the 1932 Revolution and its background, and especially the commoner-monarchy and civilian-military

54 Chit Phibanthen, *Chiwit lae ngan khong Phutthathat* [Life and works of Buddhadasa] (Bangkok: n. p., 1977), p. 48.

55 Pridi Banomyong, *Pridi by Pridi: Selected writings on life, politics, and economy*, trans. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2000), p. 196.

56 Duen Bunnag, *Kham athibai kotmai rathananun, lem 1* [Explanation of constitutional law, vol. 1] (Bangkok: Nitisat, 1934), p. 157.

conflicts that it created, have been well studied.⁵⁷ But is there more than a temporal coincidence to Buddhist modernism and constitutionalism? The absolutist state's legitimacy depended on modernist Buddhism; how did Buddhism affect the legitimacy of the constitutional regime?

Pridi asserted that the revolutionaries had supporters in temples throughout the kingdom, and explained that the party requested monks at all wats to give lectures explaining the principles of constitutionalism to villagers.⁵⁸ Some monks were considerably excited by the revolution. Building upon prior grievances but inspired by the democratic rhetoric of the People's Party, a cohort of mainly young scholarly Mahanikai monks campaigned for democracy in the Sangha. Alleging that historically they had been treated unfairly by the Thammayut order, these monks demanded parity with the palace fraternity. The Mahanikai movement found supporters in the parliament and in wider society and changed elite Sangha politics.⁵⁹

The Mahanikai monks asserted that Buddhism was 'democratic' originally but had been corrupted by the two-*nikai* arrangement. Buddhadasa reiterated this argument about Buddhist democratic philosophy and practice in a 1947 lecture to Sanya's Buddhist association.⁶⁰ He also became friendly with Pridi, the most ardent champion of democracy in the government. Remarkably, Pridi discussed with Buddhadasa several times in 1943 his wish to establish a Suan Mokh-type meditation monastery in his home province of Ayuthaya and wanted Buddhadasa to become an adviser to the centre. Buddhadasa suggested that Bunchuan Khemaphirat and Pannananda Bhikkhu, the two monks who had travelled with Lokanatha into Burma, teach there.⁶¹ But Buddhadasa's discussions with Pridi, as well as several other contemporary progressive thinkers, remained largely on an intellectual plane as he himself shied away from politics.⁶² Buddhadasa also opposed the entanglement of monks in secular politics. During the period of Mahanikai activism in the 1930s, he wrote to Sanya that the Mahanikai-Thammayut politicking was factionalism — a grave crime in Sangha affairs — and unhelpful to Dhammic practice. Buddhadasa had ordained as a Mahanikai monk because his preceptor was Mahanikai; but there his allegiance ended. He argued that

holding to a *nikai* in Siam was extremely stupid because we all do the same thing: study the same books, take the same exams, admire the same virtues. Personally, I don't feel the need to have any *nikai* and I don't like showing this conflict to the people, which is a loss for all of us. I want only to be a student and to train my mind.⁶³

57 See Charnvit Kasetsiri and Thamrongsak Petchlert-anand, *Patiwat 2475* [1932 Revolution in Siam] (Bangkok: Textbooks Project, 2004); Nakharin Mektrairat, *Kanpatiawat Syam* [The Thai Revolution] (Bangkok: Fadiaokan, 2017); Nattapoll Chaiching, *Khofanfai nai fan an leua cheua* [May we dream a dream beyond belief] (Bangkok: Fadiaokan, 2014).

58 Pridi Banomyong, 'The People's Party and the democratic revolution of 24 June (1982)', in Banomyong, *Pridi by Pridi*, pp. 153–4.

59 Arjun Subrahmanyam, 'Buddhism, democracy and power in the 1932 Thai revolution', *Asian Studies Review* 41, 1 (2016): 40–57.

60 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Phutthatham kap jetanarom khong prachathipatai* [Buddhism and the spirit of democracy] (Nonthaburi: Wuthitham Foundation, n.d. [1947]).

61 Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, p. 171.

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 166–82.

63 Buddhadasa to Sanya, 14 May 1939, in *100 pi*, p. 92.

Buddhadasa's friend Phra Phutthakosajan too, like all of the Sangha elite in the council of elders, rejected the spirit of the Mahanikai movement and sought to buttress Sangha unity.

The disavowal of involvement in Sangha governance shows that Buddhadasa's reform of Buddhism was meant to proceed on a different track. And despite the conflict exposed by the Mahanikai movement, much of the practice of constitutionalism matched his socially and politically cautious approach. Here I will offer the idea that the rationalist theory and hierarchic practice, the ideal tending towards equality but the concrete displaying of inherited difference found in Thai modernist Buddhism, was similar to constitutionalism and both came from a Theravada theory of knowledge.

Duen's conception of constitutional emancipation is strikingly close to the language of religious emancipation in *Buddhasasana*. But Duen's use of *sati sampachanya* suggests an equality of consciousness that, as we discussed above in the case of Phra Phutthakosajan's explanation of the different dimensions of this Pali term, is problematic. At Thammasat University constitutionalism first had to be taught to an educated minority and then passed on to those who in a traditional, hierarchic society were unaccustomed to thinking for themselves. Paternalist new regime democracy was a paradox, and in practical terms functioned after 1932 as a largely depoliticised system that relied upon exemplars of moral authority.

Hence, most people were at a double remove from liberation, be it democracy or spiritual perfection. First, the monk–lay distinction existed, and second, the small group of laity striving for awareness and perfection governed the ignorant and flawed masses. Moreover, the state officials who formed modernist Buddhism's main audience exhibited a refined compartmentalisation of virtue: privately searching but publicly obedient. As a universal theme of the compromises imposed on religious ethics by worldly engagement, this bureaucratic morality may seem like a commonplace. But it is more telling about the politics of an auto-reforming state with a modernist Theravada elite culture. Intellectual society at the time was very small, and the growth of the religious public sphere accompanied secular innovations in education, law and politics overseen by many of the same people inspired by the new Buddhism. Siam under the absolutist kings and then under constitutional leaders relied upon educated men to manage the state, but not to criticise secular or religious authority. In this milieu, a young cohort acted as stewards managing a society in transition from an ethics of obedience to inherited authority to a belief in personal and political independence.

A transnational elite class created modern Thai law from 1892 to 1935 to meet the commercial and political demands of Western powers and to show the world that Siam was a civilised nation.⁶⁴ These universalising impulses, however, did not jettison traditional political culture, or older views of power and justice, both of which were strongly influenced by Theravada Buddhism. Western-style liberalism as a political ideology — as opposed to a formal component of jurisprudence — does not have deep roots in Siam.⁶⁵ Patriotism was the motivation for legal reforms. The

64 Tamara L. Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, law and colonial modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

65 Tomas Larsson, 'In search of liberalism: Ideological traditions, translations and troubles in Thailand', *Sojourn* 32, 3 (2017): 531–61.

modernising elite who managed the government formed a lasting conception of the strong independent Thai state — an ideal that became the meta-personal agent of Siamese modernity. Conceptually abstract, the patrimonial state commanded the loyalty of real people. Young men from good families, and the talented few from more modest backgrounds, sought higher education and civil service careers because of the respect and material security that government work brought them, but also out of patriotic loyalty.⁶⁶ The growth of this abstract allegiance spanned the decades in which autocracy was challenged and finally superseded by constitutional democracy. And, as had been true since Chulalongkorn's reforms in the late nineteenth century, politics as part of law was avoided and bureaucrats generally were reluctant to criticise authority.⁶⁷ Despite different claims to legitimacy, the old and new regimes both relied for their practical power upon the loyalty of, and high esteem accorded to, male public servants who were meant to possess moral and intellectual superiority. The attempt to make a smooth transition between the old and new regimes, to provide continuity amid the rupture brought by constitutional democracy, depended on the authority of the legal professionals. At the turning point of the June 1932 Revolution, the first prime minister chosen was the British-trained barrister Phraya Mano Manopakon Nithithada, who was respected by both the old regime for his service to the monarchy and also by the young cohort in the People's Party because of his commitment to constitutionalism and his rectitude.⁶⁸

In Siam the key state loyalists — networks of experts in jurisprudence — governed civil administration throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As part of their work these officials after 1932 regularly gave lectures to young justice ministry bureaucrats that combined Dhammic and constitutional language — descriptions of universal, eternal law and secular, modern law — in a metaphysical explanation of the basis for self-cultivation and as a way to be a good, dutiful citizen.⁶⁹ In addition to the ennobled titles enjoyed by many of them, the state employing these men assigned them particular names that affixed Buddhist virtue to their official characters. Sanya Dharmasakdi for example means 'Guarantor of energy of the Dhamma'. Pridi, the People's Party's intellectual driver, was given the name Pradit Manudham, 'Fashioner of righteous (Dhammic) men'. Their work and characters would guide people in the new politics, fulfilling a 'Platonic guardianship with Theravada

66 Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead, *The rise and decline of Thai absolutism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

67 Nakharin Mektrairat, *Khvamkhit, khwamru lae amnat thang kanmuang nai kanpatiwat Syam 2475* [Thought, knowledge and political power in the Siamese Revolution of 1932] (Bangkok: Fadiokan, 2017), p. 130.

68 The pattern of legal professionals being appointed to executive leadership after abrupt depositions of an existing order has recurred in Thai history. In the 1970s after acute crises, three lawyers — Sanya (Oct. 1973–Jan. 1975), Seni Pramoj (Feb.–Mar. 1975) and Thanin Kraivixien (Oct. 1976–Oct. 1977) acted as prime ministers. Kaset Siri and Petchlert-anand, *Patiwat 2475*, p. 19; and Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A history of Thailand* (New York: Cambridge, 2005), p. 27.

69 Munithi Nitisat, Thammasat University, *7 rop Achan Sanya* [Seven cycles of Achan Sanya] (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1991); Nitisat Paisal, 'Fuekfon Tua Eng' [Training the self], in *Anuson nai praratchathanplernsop Nitisat Paisal* [Royal cremation volume for Nitisat Paisal] (Bangkok, 1967).

characteristics', as Federico Ferrara styled the entire trajectory of Thailand's paternal experiments with democracy.⁷⁰

Sanya introduced Phraya Wonglatphli to Buddhadasa. Wonglatphli Dhammaphrakhan, the core of his civil service name, translates as 'Lineage of religious flourishing, redolent of the Dhamma'. Wonglatphli attended City of London College and Gray's Inn, and became an English barrister in 1916. Among his peers at Gray's Inn were the leading figures of the time in Thai law, many of whom served both the old regime and later the constitutional government.⁷¹ Like Buddhadasa's other lay friends, Phraya Wonglatphli contributed to the young monk's intellectual growth by introducing him to foreign ideas and writings. Phraya Wonglatphli and Sanya visited Suan Mokh together in 1938. Wonglatphli arrived laden with new books for Buddhadasa, including works by the Vedanta philosophers J. Krishnamurti and Swami Vivekananda. The senior justice official was an earnest student of philosophy as well as meditation.⁷² After the Second World War, Phraya Wonglatphli enhanced Buddhadasa's growing interest in Zen Buddhism, and their discussions would assist Buddhadasa's incorporation of Zen into Thai Theravada.

The administration of constitutionalism, meanwhile, was exercised by an oligarchy of the enlightened. These were people who, as Buddhadasa described Wonglatphli in a 1939 letter to Sanya, 'reasoned things for themselves and didn't defer to others' opinions'⁷³ — and would plant the seeds of Duen Bunnag's awakening of the popular mind. The benevolent authoritarianism of what we might term Dhammic constitutionalists was not the only political impulse. The People's Party that took power in 1932 comprised two main factions, legal civil servants and military officers. Siam's new formal constitutional democracy fared badly under the pressure of military force. In the end, the military cohort around the army officer Phibun Songkhram and their political pressure in the 1930s contradicted the Dhammic and constitutional rhetoric of the new regime's moral exemplars. The rule of law and the spirit of constitutionalism were repeatedly undercut in the People's Party era by political manoeuvring that enhanced military power, and wrecked by a lack of trust between the government and its critics.⁷⁴ When the constitution opposed or hindered the military-led executive after 1933, different laws were enacted that subordinated the judiciary and short-circuited the normal judicial process.

The growth of authoritarianism in the People's Party was an understandable reaction to the existential threat posed by embittered royalists who had lost power to the commoners.⁷⁵ Still the closeness to political power, and meekness, of state servants inspired by the emancipatory secular and religious rhetoric of the times raises questions.

70 Federico Ferrara, 'Unfinished business', in *'Good coup' gone bad: Thailand's political developments since Thaksin's downfall*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Singapore: ISEAS, 2014), p. 27.

71 Sorasak Ngamcathonkulkid, 'The Seri Thai movement, the first movement against military dictatorship in modern Thai history' (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2005), p. 167.

72 Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, p. 63.

73 Buddhadasa to Sanya, in *100 pi*, p. 93.

74 Saneh Chamarik, *Kanmuang Thai kap pathanakan rathamanun* [Thai politics and constitutional development] (Bangkok: Textbooks Project, 2006), pp. 115–34.

75 Nattapoll Chaiching, *Kabot Bowondet: Buangrek patiraks patiwat Syam 2475* [The Bowondet rebellion: First phase of the enemies of the 1932 revolution] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2016).

The intimacy between the civil service and the political elite garnered public criticism. After the 1932 Revolution, the People's Party occupied a murky area between a formal political party and a more loosely defined association. In August 1932, two months after the revolution, a People's Party Association registered as a juristic entity and the People's Party was ostensibly dissolved. But the new association was dominated by the original People's Party group, and moreover it was very difficult to tell where government civil service work ended and that of the association began. In the provinces, the association enrolled the leading members of local society, including judges, education officers and police chiefs. Ostensibly management of these provincial branches were chosen by elections, but to critics choices seemed to be predetermined by insiders. Phra Dun — in 1932 the chief judge in Nakhon Sri Thammarat province in the far south — was one such beneficiary and became chair of the provincial subcommittee of the association. Critics of the People's Party used his case and that of others to allege that the new democracy was an oligarchy.⁷⁶

Additionally, the application of law by the elite seemed entirely obedient to political authority. The special courts set up to try political prisoners in 1933, 1935 and 1938 are the most egregious examples of the hand-in-glove nature of constitutional legalism and authoritarianism.⁷⁷ Wonglatphli was a director of the special courts that tried prisoners taken after the failed royalist rebellion of Prince Boworadet in late 1933,⁷⁸ and was director of the criminal and appeals courts. He also upheld the legitimacy of the defence of the Constitution Act passed in 1933 after the crushing of the royalist rebellion that made it a crime to speak against the government. In 1941 during the Phibun Songkhram dictatorship he became chief justice of the Supreme Court.⁷⁹ Committed to judicial independence on the grounds of moral rightness, Phraya Wonglatphli nonetheless adhered to executive wishes and upheld the constitutional travesty that condemned prisoners to death or long prison sentences outside of the freedom-giving legal framework that ostensibly separated the People's Party from the old regime. No Thammasat lecturers or justice ministry officials publicly argued against the new legal mechanisms of control and suppression, and the erosion of judicial integrity cannot be attributed to coercion alone.

The constitutional scholarly stamp of approval was not limited to the crisis years of the 1930s either. The constitutional regime endured from 1932 to 1947 despite old regime opposition and the impact of the Second World War. After a November 1947 military coup ended a civilian democratic government led by Pridi's cohort, a new generation of military officers fought for power. In the early 1950s, Pridi's supporters, communists, and other diverse groups including students, monks and intellectuals loosely coalesced in a movement campaigning for peace and against the military-

76 Puli Fuwongcharoen. *'Khana kanmuang' lang kanpatiwat syam: Pholawat, patthanakan lae chathakam khong rabop rai phak* [Political parties after the Siamese revolution: Dynamics, development and fate of the no party system] (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 2017), pp. 81–6.

77 Phuthorn Phumadhon, 'Kansekksa san piset (pho. so. 2476, 2478, 2481)' [A study of the special courts of 1933, 1935 and 1938] (Masters' thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1987).

78 Luen Saraphaiwanich, *Fanrai khong khappajao* [My nightmare] (Bangkok: Saraphai, 1969), p. 110.

79 *Anuson nai ngan sadet phraratchadamnern phraratchathan plerngsop Phraya Latphli Dhammaphrakhan (Wong Latphli)* [Royal cremation volume for Wong Latphli] (Bangkok, 1968).

dominated government.⁸⁰ Because of his stature and connection to Pridi, some among the group asked Buddhadasa to join; he declined, stating that his idea of peace differed from theirs.⁸¹ In 1951 Thammasat students, inheritors of Pridi's democratic idealism, marched in protest against the military's takeover of the campus in the wake of a failed naval rebellion at the end of June that killed nearly 200 people, mainly civilians, and led to the arrest of about 1,000 others.⁸² The military's conversion by fiat of the democratic university to a military garrison was a stark example of the fragility of modern constitutionalism. While the government declared the seizure of the campus a military necessity, Thammasat students had been active in the ongoing peace movement and were viewed suspiciously by the state. The police Special Branch and senior government officials, including Phra Dun (then deputy minister of justice), conducted non-transparent inquiries in June, July and August of the student peace committee and determined that students were illegally involved in politics. Several students were expelled, but the protests continued. Students charged that the committee of inquiry's decisions were immoral and illegitimate.⁸³

To many observers since the 1940s, the 1932 revolutionaries' rhetoric and administrative innovations were only a mask for a bureaucratic swindle of political power and/or a misconceived official attempt to impose democracy on a country without preparation.⁸⁴ The new regime was thus neither morally nor constitutionally legitimate. This is especially true if constitutionalism is meant to produce a 'thick' rule of law system that substantially reflects fundamental notions of fairness, protection of individual rights, institutional transparency, and judicial independence from political pressure. Political development towards a democratic rule of law failed, then, because its makers never really believed in it to begin with or romanticised its possibilities.

On a more compelling level of analysis, influential scholarship — devising its argument from Thai government language first used in 1958 but originating in a longer history — explains the erosion of legal integrity in Thailand as stemming from Thai political culture. Periods like the post-Boworadet years, and the political turmoil of the late 1940s and early 1950s, demonstrate state actors' discursive recourse to 'abnormal times', periods when the state is allegedly gravely threatened, and have used this allegation to avoid judicial process and assert their moral and political authority over society. Importantly, justice ministry officials have played a key role

80 Wiwat Catithammanit, *Kabot santiphap* [Peace rebellion] (Bangkok: Khopfai, 1996).

81 Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, p. 182. The peace movement attracted several Buddhist monks, and a Sangha division was organised within the broader movement by the communists in May 1951 to build the network. Somsak Jeamteerasakul, 'Phak communit haeng Prathet Thai kap kabot santiphap' [The Communist Party of Thailand and the peace revolt] in *Keung sattawat khabuankan santiphap* [Half-century of the peace movement], ed. Chonthira Sattawattana (Bangkok: Mekh khao, 2002), p. 163.

82 Suthachai Yimprasert, *Phen ching chat Thai* [The struggle over the nation] (Bangkok: 6 Tula ram-leuk, 2010), pp. 214–22.

83 Saman Suwannachot, *Prawat kantsu khong nakseuksa thammasat lae kanmuang* [The history of struggle by Thammasat students] (Bangkok: Thammasat Political Science Association and Political Science Group, 1974), pp. 23–30; Catithammanit, *Kabot santiphap*, pp. 251–3.

84 Early examples are: Seni Pramoj (Malaengwi, pseud), *Buanglang prawatisat* [Behind History] (Bangkok: Publishing Cooperative, 1947); and Luy Girivat, *Prachathipatai 17 pi* [17 years of democracy] (Bangkok: Odeon Store, 1949). More recently, Thamsook Numnonda, *Lakhon kanmuang 24 Mithunayon 2475* [Political theatre, 24 June 1932] (Bangkok: Samakhom prawatisat, 1992); Chamarik, *Kanmuang Thai*.

in the erection of abnormal times.⁸⁵ These actors have helped channel this extraordinary influence on politics and administration by quickly drafting and giving the judicial stamp of approval to new laws that paradoxically delegitimise the formal rule of law.⁸⁶ The cultural argument posits, instead of self-serving charlatans, self-declared protective, selfless and virtuous men who implement the de-legitimising laws; men who can see immediately the social danger of a perceived threat. This ability eludes the common people, because the guardians' insight stems from their virtue. They act with moral rightness, taking protective steps that only bear fruit later — or prevent poisoned fruit from flourishing — and are hidden entirely sometimes from society.⁸⁷

This can help explain the moralised professionalism of the judiciary in the first years of constitutionalism, and how the new Buddhism advanced by the *Buddhasasana* group appealed to and was used by these men. Perhaps the legal professionals really believed that the metaphysical Dhammic-ness of the charter was the fulfilment of the moral life and especially of their duty as selfless social guardians. Hence, however often the charter was undermined, the ultimate ideal rational-moral order advanced by both Buddhism and constitutionalists endured. *Buddhadasa* wrote in *Buddhasasana* that the ideal was more important than the concrete.⁸⁸ Thus, the power of the ideal could not be weakened, however messy the reality of politics that pressed its upholders into service.

Conclusion

One can honour the spiritual commitment and practical intentions of the Buddhist modernists while also pointing out flaws in their movement and the difficulties they faced in challenging the tenets of an institutionalised religion. The intellectual Buddhism of 1930s Siam sought to create a new moral subject that could refashion society. *Buddhadasa* taught that people thought religion irrelevant to social improvement because they held to a wrong interpretation of religion. Social ills, he believed, stemmed from moral failings, and the Dhamma was the masterful corrective to immorality. The Dhamma thus was a political ideology,⁸⁹ a way that as discussed above in an early article for *Buddhasasana* the spiritually adept lived counter to the world, and against the ignorance that bred misery.

Later in his life, *Buddhadasa* built upon his earlier ideas to form the notion of a 'Dhammocracy' — a state ruled by the Dhamma.⁹⁰ But modernist Buddhism made an ambiguous platform for social change. While *Buddhadasa* was an innovator, he also held closely to the tradition of reform in modern Thai Buddhism that elevated monks over laity and that looked askance at religious innovation or political involvement. The main problem for any innovation was Thai Buddhist modernism's strongly conservative Sangha. Throughout his long career of teaching and writing, *Buddhadasa*

85 David Streckfuss, *Truth on trial in Thailand: Defamation, treason, and lèse majesté* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 113–36.

86 Nidhi Eosriwong, 'Rathamanun Chabap Watanatham Thai' [The Thai Cultural Constitution], in Nidhi Eosriwong, *Chat Thai, muang Thai, baeprian lae anusawari* [Thai nation, Thai state, school primers and monuments] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2004), pp. 125–55.

87 Grey, 'Thailand', pp. 58–60.

88 *Buddhadasa*, 'Ruang kantamroi Phra Arahant', p. 14.

89 Jackson, *Buddhadasa*, pp. 210–13.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

never reconciled the contradictions of Dhamma and the world because he was a life-long religious professional in an established institution. We saw above that Buddhadasa admired the socially active, independently minded character-building offered by the Christian mission schools in the kingdom. While as noted he lamented projection onto foreigners of traits Thais supposedly once possessed, it is hard to envision either a social gospel or civic activism akin to that in Christian modernist movements within the strictures of Thai establishment Buddhism; nor, because of the continuity of traditional notions of authority despite the revolution in 1932, a widespread lay and religious professional activism for sociopolitical change as in Burma, Vietnam or Ceylon.

As with the servants of the constitutional government, personal rectitude was politically plastic. The public servants of the state as we saw found that ignorance necessitated hierarchy. And this dimension of modernism can be attributed to the Buddha's own attitude to graded personal and social improvement, and to that of any monk in a conservative hierarchy like the Thai Sangha. Buddhist modernism in Siam as discussed in this article thus was politically utilitarian, a position forced upon it by the Sangha's importance and the Buddha's original social status. Dictatorship, democracy, socialism: any of these could serve the Dhamma if the governors themselves acted righteously. Most often, when Buddhadasa discussed righteous rule he referred to the Buddha and the Mauryan king Asoka who spread Buddhism in India, and the ten qualities of kingship whereby an autocrat governed righteously. As Sulak Sivaraksa pointed out though in criticising Buddhadasa, modern dictators never govern righteously because they are not righteous.⁹¹

Moreover, a similar question is raised regarding the role of the lay spiritual seekers like Phraya Wonglatphli and Phra Dun. How the least ego-focused and most morally excellent could positively influence others in an imperfect world rested on a leap of faith concerning leadership's good intentions, rather than testing individual virtue by consistent adherence to a rule-based system that honoured institutional integrity and pursued substantive justice. The praxis of Dhammic constitutionalism then stemmed not only from the frequently referenced belief that most people at the time were not well enough educated to think independently about politics and act with according responsibility. Further, the strong loyalty that the Siamese state commanded in public life hindered the independent potential of the intellectual class and obstructed fulfilment of the democratic promise of 1932, especially if that fulfilment entailed not only institutional integrity but also new social values of broad public participation in and legitimate criticism of state affairs. In an adaptation of the classic adage, the makers of Buddhist modernism in the 1930s made history but in mental and social circumstances they did not choose.

91 Sulak, quoted in Jackson, *Buddhadasa*, p. 244.