Buddhism as the Basis of Thai Wisdom

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Buddhism is a great treasure, not only of Asia, its homeland, but also of the world. Thailand takes much pride in Buddhism which over the centuries has become the basis of Thai wisdom. Thai wisdom, wisely refined through its amalgamation with Buddhism, provides three social benefits: the propagation of Buddhist teachings, the maintenance of these in ways of Thai life and the intellectual development of Thai society, joining the ranks of civil societies in the world.

The Monarchy in Thailand also plays a key role of supporting Buddhism which can be witnessed through royal ceremonies, thus the application of Buddhist teachings in royal activities and everyday life is a sign of good relation between the two institutions that have been steadfast with the Thai nation for over 700 years.

Introduction
Just like Cambodia, the land now called Thailand, before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, had for a long time been a stronghold of Brahmanism and Buddhism, which were handed down to the Thai tribe from tribes alternately occupying the land. Thais, who first became familiar with Brahmanism, yet later did not hesitate to embrace Buddhism as their state religion, while respectfully keeping the former by its side.

While it is known that in their homeland – (Jambudipa or modern India) – Brahmanism and Buddhism posed a serious conflict, in oversea lands, especially in Suwannabhumi, where Thailand and Cambodia are located, the two religions coexisted peacefully. Noting this difference, Prince Damrong reasoned that “...as both religions were alien, their missionaries needed to be aware of a peaceful coexistence, they were, along with propagating their own religions, required to bow to native rulers and to teach natives to respect laws and kings ...” (Prince Damrong. 2517: 127)
Brahmanism is believed to have been introduced by Brahmins with the Indian traders’ supports, thus Brahmins and traders played a key role in making their religion known outside India. Around 500-600 B.E., the Brahmin Kondanna is known to have travelled to Cambodia and married a native princess named Soma. Then he ascended the throne there and established his own royal dynasty. (Sphearin. 2541 : 1)

However, trade between Jambudipa and Suwannabhumi not only introduced Brahmanism, but also Buddhism, in particular along the Jambudipa-Suwannabhumi route wherever trade was flourishing. Thus, approximately in 239 B.E., after the Third Buddhist Council, King Asoka with the Venerable Moggaliputta as an adviser dispatched a team of Buddhist missionaries led by the Venerables Sona and Uttara to Thailand. Along with the introduction of Brahmanism and Buddhism, their respective cultures, traditions, ways of life as well as languages were introduced. Brahmins represented Brahmanism and Sanskrit while Buddhist monks introduced Buddhism and Pali. In fact, the preceding culture of Brahmanism was very useful to Buddhism; as native tribes accustomed to Brahmanism easily opened their minds to Buddhism, because both beliefs, even different in principles, were alike in contexts in terms of homeland and circumstances. As a result, Suwannabhumi (in particular Thailand and Cambodia) with Buddhism as the state religion, still embrace Brahmanism as their way of life.

The coexistence of both religions in Suwannabhumi has been analyzed by a late French historian scholar besides Prince Damrong. The French historian reasoned that “as Indian religions, Buddhism and Brahmanism shared their roles in society; Buddhism taught practical doctrines useful to people of all walks of life and even of the low class, so it resulted in the popularity among common people of all classes, while Brahmanism taught the art of living useful to government, thus attracting people of the ruling class and resulted in the popularity among them. That this difference created no conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism must also be attributed to the wisdom of their missionaries, who sought a peaceful coexistence and bowed to natives’ decision.” Likewise, Prince
Damrong ascertained that “... no conflicts related to Buddhist or Hindu faiths took place here. Upholding either for suppressing another was not found, it was found only to place either more or less emphasis or equal [weight] on both. The evidence was seen in a late Khom kings’ edict showing the different venerations by different kings over different sacred images; someone venerated the Buddha, someone Isvara or Narayana, and someone both. This practice resulted in the construction of stone palaces or temples for Buddhist or Hindu veneration still being discovered even today. In Siam (modern Thailand), the stronghold of Buddhism, the royal consecration and ploughing ceremonies and others rites are still being performed according to the Brahmin tradition. Embracing both religions in everyday life of the Thais can be traced back to the era of the Khom domination. (Prince Damrong. 2517: 2)

Modern Thailand as part of Suwannabhumi, has continuously been visited by waves of Buddhist missionaries. After King Asoka’s missionaries first introduced Buddhism at Nakhon Pathom in 239 B.E., there have been among the arrivals three distinctly different groups. Of those, the second (960-1300 B.E.), known as Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism penetrated into the kingdom of Sri Vijaya, believed to be the location of modern Surat Thani in the southern part of Thailand. The third (1600 B.E.), known as the Pukam Theravada Buddhism, occupied the area of the northern part like Chiang Mai and Lamphoon. It was introduced by King Anoratha Mangcho (or Anuruddha Maharaja), who was thirsty for his own political power expansion. The fourth (1800 B.E.), known as the Lankan Theravada Buddhism, was introduced first into Nakhon Si Thammarat and spread onwards into the kingdom of Sukhothai by King Ramkhamhaeng, who had a deep faith in Lankan Theravada monks and invited them to establish Theravada Buddhism in his kingdom. Theravada Buddhism, sponsored by the king, became popular not only in his kingdom but also in the kingdoms of Lanna and Atthaya, where it was studied and practiced well, and has since then been maintained as the invaluable national treasure and state religion.
The Basis of Thai Wisdom

Buddhism, even though not recorded in the Thai constitution, is practically and in spirit accepted as the state religion of Thailand, because most Thai citizens are Buddhists. Their lives and culture are based on Buddhist teachings. Consequently, Buddhism is regarded as the basis of Thai wisdom. Thai wisdom is here a key word worth an analytical study. In a western theory, wisdom is said to be a result of knowledge plus experience. If the meaning is proper, I conclude that Thais have gained much from the experience of seeking knowledge from Buddhist teachings that they wholeheartedly uphold. What then is Thai wisdom? It is difficult to clear this question within a short time limit, but I will attempt an answer by studying some aspects of Thai wisdom here as follows:

1. The Knowledge of Life. It is a central idea. According to Buddhism, a man who knows life knows the value of life. What is life? Different answers are given by different people of all walks of life. For example, life is dew by a poet, a journey by an author, or strife by a hard man. Buddhism accepts these definitions and proposes yet another meaningful definition of life, namely the knowledge of composition and origin.

1.1 Composition - Buddhism points out that life of man and animal comprises the five aggregates of corporeality, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. And it gives the following details of the aggregates.

The aggregate of corporeality is divided into two main groups: the group of the four primary elements and the group of derivative materiality. The first group is earth, water, fire and wind, the characteristics of which are respectively described as extension or solid element, cohesion or fluid element, heat or radiation element, and vibration or motion element. The second group is the quality of the first, taking origin from it.

The characteristics of the first group are found in parts of the body: earth - head hair, body hair, teeth, nails, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidney, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lights, bowels, entrails, gorge, dung, water – bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease,
spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine, fire – warming fire, aging fire, and burning up fire, and wind- up-going winds, down-going winds, winds in the belly, winds in the bowels, winds that course through all, in – breath, and out – breath. (Buddhaghosa. 2001: 380)

The characteristics of the second group are found in a) the five sensitive material qualities of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, b) the four material qualities of sense fields – form, sound, smell, taste, excluding tangible objects, c) the two material qualities of sex – femininity and masculinity, d) the physical basis of mind, e) the material quality of life, f ) the edible food, g) the material quality of delimitation, h) the space element, i) the two material qualities of communication – gesture and speech, j) the three material qualities of plasticity or alterability – lightness, elasticity, and adaptability, k) the four material qualities of integration, continuity, decay, and impermanence.

*The aggregate of sensation* is divided into a pleasant sensation, a painful sensation, and a neither pleasant – nor painful sensation.

*The aggregate of perception* is divided into the perceptions of form, sound, smell, taste, and tangible objects.

*The aggregate of mental formations* totals 50 in number, excluding sensation and perception, (usually included in mental formation).

*The aggregate of consciousness* is divided into eye-consciousness, ear- consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness and body-consciousness. (S.3)

All these are naturally incorporated into life of man and animal (including divine beings). Thai Buddhists learn about life through the knowledge in the beginning. It leads to search for the origin of life.

1.2 *Origin of Life.* Buddhism, just as Theism and Sciences, takes an interest in it, too. While Theism refers to God as the supreme creator and sciences reveals the co-working of sperm and egg, Buddhism mentions the three factors of life thus: “a) There is the union of the mother and father, b) It is the mother’s season, c ) The being to be reborn is present. And it concludes that through the union of these three factors the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place” (
M.1). After that, Buddhism gives the details of the embryo’s development: “First there is the kalala, from the kalala comes the abbuda, from the abbuda the pesi is produced, from the pesi the ghana arises, from the ghana emerges the limbs, the head-hair, body-hair and nails, and whatever food the mother eats, the meals and drink that she consumes. By this, the being there, the person inside the mother’s womb, is maintained.” (S.1).

This kind of the knowledge of life is believed not to have been found anywhere else, except in Buddhism that is the basis of Thai wisdom. It contributes to the knowledge of how the mind-body relates and how it functions. One of the observations that Thais get accustomed to is that life always changes under the three conditions of impermanence, suffering and selflessness.

2. The Practice of Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem and Asking for Precepts. The knowledge of life also provides an idea of life after death. According to the Buddhist tradition, rebirth is believed to be determined by mind; a good rebirth is be led by a wholesome mind and a bad rebirth by an unwholesome mind. What can keep mind in a wholesome condition? The answer is the Triple Gem and Precepts. For Buddhists, the three jewels, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha are the supreme refuge as the objects of veneration. The Buddha is remembered that as the Great Teacher, He is ornamented with the three great virtues of purity, loving-kindness and wisdom, contributing to His great missions to the world. The Dhamma is praised as a good guide for life covered by clouds of sufferings, that the Buddhist teachings are true and practical, and maintain a practitioner’s true happiness. The Sangha is the assembly of Buddhist disciples (initially only monks, but later enlightened laymen were included) and remembered as the witnesses of Buddha’s enlightenment. They follow the way pointed out by the Buddha and win success as the Buddha did, after which they devote themselves to serve the Buddha roaming from place to place and giving sermons.

As for precepts, they refer to morality and aim at keeping bodily and verbal manners calm and proper. As we know, there are several kinds of precepts. Among those, the five precepts are regarded as a basic moral rule of human society and so much preached in Thai society that
the ceremony of asking for the five precepts is performed on all merit making occasions.

Created to preserve the basic Buddhist teachings from generation to generation, the ceremony of taking refuge in the triple gem and asking for the five precepts has come into being and has successively been practiced until now. So if you go to join a Buddhist ceremony in Thailand, where Buddhism is practiced in everyday life, you will see the form performed first in which a head layman utters the praising words to the triple gem and afterwards starts the above said ceremony. Then, a head monk supplies his demand, granting him going to the triple gem for a refuge and five precepts. The concluding words at the end of five precepts are a Pali verse, very meaningful and worthy of writing down here:

Silena sugatin yanti      Silena bhogasampada
Silena nibbuting yanti    Tasma silan visodhaye.

By morality heaven is reachable,
By morality wealth is reachable,
By morality nibbana (nirvana) is also reachable,
Because of that, morality should be purified. (Mahachula. 2540 :10)

The few words are wonderful to help Buddhists understand a true and complete value of morality within a short time. The source of the verse cannot be found anywhere but in a Thai Buddhist culture. Therefore, it is believed to be a product of Thai wisdom.

3. The Practice of Tying a Dead Body.

Samsara means the Circle of Life or literally translated as a non-stop journey. Thai Buddhists like to add to its end the term vatta, which denotes a circle or a round, thus “samsaravatta” means a round of non-stop journey to the planes of heaven and hell. In fact, the term can be used for rebirth after rebirth. Through Buddhist teachings, Thai Buddhists fundamentally accept the knowledge of rebirth directly caused by defilement (kilesa), action (karma), and result (vipaka). The three factors support each other; that is; defilement forces a man to do either good
or evil karma and karma is immediately followed by its own result, and then result itself supports defilement and karma to continue. Of those, defilement is viewed as the main cause of an endless round of rebirths. It is divided into three key groups of lobha (greed) dosa (anger) and moha (delusion). Thai Buddhists have known them in the name of Akusalamula or the root of unwholesomeness and it is also known that delusion is supporting greed and anger, the former of which is more difficult to destroy than the latter. This knowledge is expressed in a Thai verse:

A child represents a noose tied to around the neck,
Wealth, to around feet,
Wife (and husband), to around hands,
These three nooses removed by anyone,
He is freed from rebirths. (Silpabarnagar. 2505 : 20)

The verse reflects greed in everyday life, found relevant to lovely things – child, wealth and wife and husband. Removing the greed is the beginning of following removals leading to the cessation of the cause of suffering, one of those endless rebirths.

The ceremony of tying a dead body takes place before laying it down in a coffin, whereby an undertaker must tie the body with three nooses of holy threads in line with a magical method, which is differently interpreted by different persons: by a magician, the spirit is controlled, by a medical doctor, the body is kept in a good manner, and by a Buddhist teacher (monk), three nooses represent three rounds of defilement (kilesa), action (karma), and result (vipaka) tying beings to rebirth after rebirth. The practice is performed even nowadays.

4. Wall Paintings. This knowledge relates to the afore-said knowledge. In Buddhism, heaven and hell are the abodes of the departed, called by westerners “the world after death” or “the unseen world.” Buddhism, by the Buddha, ascertains the existence of the abodes and points out the practices leading to those in sutras. Even there is somewhat of a doubt about such abodes among Thai Buddhists, most of them practically do not defy the Buddhist teachings. On the walls of the sacred halls in great ancient temples, such as the Emerald Buddha Temple
and the Suthat Temple, paintings of heaven and hell can be seen. In fact, wall paintings had for a long time been drawn since the Sukhothai period and express a strong belief in Buddhism, and the purpose of the art has been explained in different ways, as follows:

4.1 It is seen as a concerted effort by the artists and writers of each age who tried to visualize the teachings by the Buddha through words and pictures. Thus, painters preserved the authors’ imagination for the sake of transfer of knowledge through the ages when moral instruction was the only known form of education. Thai societies of old were truly agrarian, where agriculture was the main occupation which for each family generated work and income, and where social problems were not complicated. So, the system of moral education was not needed for this life but for the next and as a result, heaven and hell, the worlds of the next life were of greater interest.

4.2 In ancient Thai societies, Buddhist temples played the role of schools managed by the teachers who were monks. Monks were held in high esteem by people of all classes and regarded as educated persons. When monks gave sermons, the wall paintings were a kind of teaching instrument that held the listeners attention, both by ears and eyes.

4.3 Buddhist temples throughout the ages were used as recreation centres of villagers. Important festivals and recreations were popularly held at temples where the villagers gathered to witness these. Wall paintings were recreation instruments, too. At this point, I remember, when I was a child I liked to go to the temple to see the paintings of heaven and hell. On one occasion, when I returned home, I started to feed birds, because I had seen a painting bearing a man who gave food to crows and was reborn in heaven after his death. I wanted such a rebirth.

On the other hand, heaven and hell may be viewed differently by some Thai Buddhists made known by a Thai proverb which says, “Heaven and hell hide in the heart.” It signifies that a heaven represents happiness and a hell suffering, they both are found in daily life in the human mind. The proverb is believed to have been derived from a Buddhist teaching known as hell through the six bases of contact, a translation of the Pali word “Chaphassayatanikaniraya”. (Khu. Su. 25).
According to the Buddha’s explanation, whenever there arises a mental suffering caused by either contact through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, the suffering is hell, and whenever there arises a mental happiness by either opposite way, the happiness is heaven. Thai Buddhists acknowledge Indra, who was all his life associated with the Buddha and approached him on occasions, as the guardian of heaven, Tavatinsa. The name Indra is very often found in Thai literature and also in royal ranks. It indicates dignity and appreciation for the deity by Thai Buddhists.

5. Thai Proverbs. Karma is a main idea related to the knowledge of life, circle of life and heaven and hell. Karma has been defined as: a) action supported by volition (cetana), b) action immediately followed by its result (vipaka), c) action influencing a doer’s way of life. Of those, the first signifies that all actions are supported by volition, a mental formation, constituting a mental action (mano karma) known as the foundation of bodily and verbal actions. The second shows that immediately after any action is done, a result comes into being, thus lies in a doer’s unconscious mind as a mental quality, and accompanies him like a shadow. To ascertain this, the Buddha said: beings have karma (and result) as a personal property, as a birth giver, as a relative, as a refuge… (M.3). The third reveals that beings inevitably receive a result of either good or bad action done by themselves, resulting in either a good or bad way of life. (ibid ). In this regard, karma (and result) is viewed as a manager of life, too. The knowledge of karma helps a man attain freedom and self confidence to express his potentiality based on morality.

However, some Thai Buddhists, although they believe in karma, misunderstand that karma is only for a bad situation. Thus, when a bad situation falls upon someone, they call him or her khon khoh rai (a person with bad luck or an unlucky person). Kho is derived from grah (to hold) in Sanskrit and is used for a cluster of stars in astrology. Kho is divided into good and bad characteristics that influence the earth and life on earth. When someone has bad luck, a fortuneteller predicted that this is because of a bad star’s orbit and guides the person to perform a magical
ceremony to reduce the star’s influence in exchange of some payment. On the hand, when anyone wins a good thing, he is called khon mee boon (a man with merit). According to their view, boon (from Punna in Pali and Punya in Sanskrit) is not karma, only kho is.

Despite the unclear understanding of the meaning of karma, Thai Buddhists open their minds to the matter of karma-related previous births and express their belief in following words: Boon tam kam taeng (บุญกรรมกรรม), khao tamkanma (ฆ่าตายคนมา), khao sang boon ruam kanma (ฆ่าตายคนมากรรม), khoo khai khoo khao (สู่ใครก็เขา), khoo laew mai khlaew kan (สู่แล้วไม่เกิดสังกัด), buppe sannivas (บุพเพสัมภเวะ), khoowen khookam (สู้การกรรม).

In this way, “boon tam kam taeng” is used for expressing a sense of yielding to inborn things, especially physical appearances, either attractive or unattractive. “khao tamkanma”, a sense of a mutual violence between two person. The violence is believed to be inherited from any previous birth, in which the two met and took revenge against each other. “khao sang boon ruam kanma”, a sense of rejoice at support and success. There are many apparent supports and successes of husband and wife, friend and friend, boss and labourer. Their good cooperation is believed to be repeated in this birth from a previous one. “khoon khai khoo khao”, a sense of a proper love or marriage of a couple. “khoon laew mai khlaew kan”, a sense of successful marriage through difficulties. “buppe sannivas”, a sense of an accidental love only by seeing face or hearing name. The three kinds of loves are said to come from previous births, through which their love has been maintained for a long time. “khoowen khookam”, a sense of revenge marriage. The marriage always brings about a conflict leading to unhappiness or perhaps to destruction.

Through strong faith, men and women are often motivated to make merit and take vows to meet with luck in love, both in the present and in later births.

6. The Bodhisattva Ideal and the Accumulation of Perfections. The term Perfection is a translation of Parami in Pali, literally meaning the virtues contributing to success – the attainment of nibbana (nirvana).
The accumulation of perfections is an ideal made known to Thai Buddhists in the Sukhothai period and is a word mainly used for a Bodhisattva or a Buddha-to-be. In Theravada Buddhism, there are three kinds of Buddhas: Sammasambuddha – the Buddha who attains supreme enlightenment by himself and establishes Buddhism, Pacekabuddha – the Buddha who attains enlightenment by himself and establishes no Buddhism, and Anubuddha or Savakabuddha – the Buddha who attains enlightenment under a Buddha’s guidance. The word Perfection used for all the Buddhas described here. However, we speak of the Bodhisattva Ideal in with different emphasis. The reason why a different term is used here is not clear. However, in my thought, it is possible that the stories of the Buddha, especially the birth stories, were so often quoted in sermons by monks that listeners paid no attention to the accumulation of perfections by lay followers.

Bodhisattva can be defined as a being to be a Buddha in the future. He accumulates the perfections through sacrifice of the self to grant services to others, without any condition for repayment. In the Buddha’s birth stories, the Bodhisattva kindly served and saved others from suffering, despite his own difficulties. In the Thai society of the Ayutthaya period, a king has been believed to be a Bodhisattva. So he was given a special name, the Buddhhangkura – the Sprout of the Buddha, which means the Buddha-to-be.

The main reason for such a name of Thai kings is that they are devout Buddhists and govern the country in line with the ten royal virtues on the ground of wishing people happiness. Also in the Ratanakosin period, King Phutthayotfa, the founder of the Chakri Dynasty, was referred to by an elder monk as Bodhisattva. This was due to his bringing the country back to normalcy andreviving Buddhism after a political uprising (Bimaladharma. 2526 : 102 ). The same honour has been granted to all later kings, including the present king, His Majesty King Bhumibol who is regarded as the Great Father of The Nation. During his long reign, he has devoted himself wholeheartedly to the rural developments under the royally initiated projects and as a result, Thailand has risen in status among the developing countries. This success is ascertained in the opening words of his speech given on the occasion of His Royal Consecration, reading: “I will govern the land by virtue.” All time, he has followed the words in accordance with the Ten
Royal Virtues (dasavidhara "ja" dhamma), through which he is believed to follow the Bodhisattva way.

7. The Custom of the Three-Month Ordination. The custom is not found anywhere else but in Thailand. According to a Thai tradition, Buddhist laymen, aged 20, before getting married, are required to enter the Order and stay in the monkhood for three months of the rainy season, or lent which was a tradition allowed by the Buddha for his disciples. The concept of keeping lent was first practiced by general ascetics in the pre-Buddhist Indian society with the aim to stop roaming and stay in a certain place for three months in the rainy season when it was naturally inconvenient to travel because the earth was wet and muddy and perhaps the fields of rice and vegetables would be damaged by the mass roaming. The Buddha accepted and applied the concept for his disciples after his Sangha (the Order) grew in numbers. Ancient Thais after their conversion to Buddhism, created the custom of a three-month ordination based on the Vinaya rule of keeping lent. The objective of the ordination was to gather young men of twenty years under a Buddhist training course before getting married in order that they become sought-after householders. This practice has been accepted widely and has continued until now. Most Thai kings, in particular of the Chakri Dynasty, entered the Order at one time and stayed in the monkhood for a while.

Conclusion

Buddhism has taken deep root in Thai society. It is regarded as one of the main institutions of “Chaat, Satsana, Phra Maha Krasat”, which is translated into English as “Nation, Religion, Monarchy.”. They are represented as the three colours in the national flag and support each other like a threefold stick does. Red represents the Nation, Dark Blue the Monarchy, and White the Religion. I would like to quote here the interpretation by King Vajiravudh, the sixth king of the Chakri Dynasty, who said, “…White represents Buddhism as the state religion”. (Tantaya. 2542: 9 – 10)
This interpretation was reiterated by the present king on occasion of
the state visit of Pope John Paul II with the words: “...Thailand is the land of
Buddhism....and has Buddhism as the state religion.”

Over the long passage of time, when Buddhism first arrived in
Thailand, Buddhism has been transferred as the Thai way of life which
so profoundly Buddhism, and absorbed the Buddhist teachings as the
basis of Thai wisdom until today..

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