History of Buddhism in Thailand

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Buddhism was not originated in Thailand. It entered Thailand from different directions. Before the advent of Buddhism, the inhabitants of the place now called Thailand were animists as known by the discovery of tombs and clay pottery called “Phimai-Dam” popularly used in the District of Phimai in Nakhon Ratchasima Province. The pottery was probably made 2,500 years ago. Besides, in Udon Thani Province, many pieces of clay pottery were found in tombs dated 3,000 – 2,400 years ago. One can thus assume that the animistic belief which asserts the existence of souls after death and spirits in natural things and in places was the earliest form of religious beliefs.

The advent of Buddhism in Thailand can be put in historical sequence as follows:-

1. The Dvāravati Period
   The Dvāravati Period had lasted from the establishment to the fall of the Dvāravati Kingdom (from the first century C.E. to the tenth century C.E.). The world “Dvāra” means “door”. “Dvāravati” is thus “the city of Beautiful Door.” The discovery of the Mon Inscriptions in Nakhon Pathom Province indicates that the ancient Mon people probably took part of the establishment of the Dvāravati Kingdom.

   Buddhism in Dvāravati belongs to Theravāda denomination. The word “Theravāda” means “the teachings of the Elders.” It denotes Buddhist interpretation of the Buddhist Monks who led the First Buddhist Council in the third month after the passing away (Pari-nibbāna) of the Buddha. The Theravāda denomination holds to conservative beliefs and practices as in the time of the Buddha. The word “Theravāda” was selected to use instead of the former word “Hinayāna,” meaning low and narrow vehicle, by Buddhist members during the First General Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Sri Lanka in B.E. 2493/1950.

   The establishment of Buddhism in Dvāravati was probably the outcome of the Buddhist mission of Sona and Uutta, the two missionary monks in the time of King Asoka (who lived approximately in the third century B.C.E.) who came to the Golden Peninsula (Suvanna – bhūmi) of which Nakhon Pathom was believed to be the center. There, one could find the evidence such as the Wheel of the Law (Dhamma –cakkha) and the Buddha’s Foot-Prints.

   The Fall of Dvāravati Kingdom took place in the tenth century C.E. The Kingdom was conquered by the troop of the Khmer King who expanded his power to Central Thailand.

2. The Sri Vijaya Period
   The Sri Vijaya period had lasted from the eight century C.E. to the thirteenth century C.E. “Sri Vijaya” means “the glorious victory”. In the seventh century C.E., the King of Sri Vijaya who ruled Sumatra (in Indonesia) and worshipped Mahāyāna Buddhism expanded his power to dominate Southern Thailand, Mahāyāna Buddhism then became a religious tradition of Thai people. The evidence can be seen in southern cities such as bronze statues of Bodhisattvas and Buddha images in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. Besides, an inscription in Khmer
language recorded that Siam or Thailand was under Khmer’s domination in the tenth century C.E. and adopted Mahāyāna Buddhism popularly practised in the Khmer kingdom.

The Kingdom of Sri Vijaya was under the influence of Theravāda Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, and Hinduism in different periods. Some Thai monks in Southern Thailand went to Sri Lanka in the twelve century C.E. in order to form their order. Nevertheless, before the advent of Mahāyāna Buddhism, since the first century C.E., the people of Nakhon Si Thammarat had followed the Hindu tradition.

Sri Vijaya Kingdom began to lose its power in the eleventh century C.E. because merchants who used to trade with the Kingdom decided to change their route owing to frequent attacks of pirates. In the thirteenth century C.E., the Kingdom fell under the domination of Java.6

3. The Lavo Period

The Lavo period or Lobpuri period signifies the domination of the Khmers and the Center of the Khmer Kingdom. It started in the tenth century C.E. when the Dvāravati Kingdom declined and was under the Khmers’ power. Many roads were constructed to connect many cities of the Lavo Kingdom with Angkor, the capital of the Khmer Kingdom. Today, one can find many temples, sanctuaries, and shrines built by the Khmer rulers in Thailand.

Thai people adopt the beliefs and practices of divine kingship (deva – rājā) from the Khmers. King Jayavarman II (802 C.E. – 852 C.E.) established the divine kingship in the Khmer Kingdom following religious tradition of the Sri Vijaya Kingdom. The tradition holded that the king was a reincarnated god of the God Shiva who presided over Mount Kailasa. The Khmer kings thus usually built their palaces on a hill outside a city. When a Thai ruler had adopted the doctrine of divine kingship from the Khmers, he then became a god-king for his people. In the Kingdom of Ayutthaya (the thirteenth century C.E. to the eighteenth century C.E.), the rite of divine kingship prevailed the Thai royal court, e.g., the use of royal words and utensils, the tradition of prostration in front of a royal family and so on.7

Nevertheless, some of the Khmer kings held to Mahāyāna Buddhism, e.g., King Suriya – varman I (1002 C.E. - 1050 C.E.) and King Jayavarman VII (1181 C.E. - 1219 C.E.). King Suriya –varman I established the Triple Sanctuary in Lopburi, a Thai city, in order to house Buddha images and Buddhist objects. In addition, King Jaya-Varaman VII recorded in his inscription that he had sent Buddha images to many Thai cities.

The Lavo period ended when the Kingdom was conquered by a ruler of the Sukhothai Kingdom by the end of the thirteenth century C.E.

4. The Lanna Period.

Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the Father of Thai History, gave his opinion that Buddhism had entered the Lanna Kingdom in different ways as follows:

1) Buddhism directly came from India to Lanna according to the architectural evidence of Wat Chedi Ched Yod (The Temple of Seven Spires) in Chiang Mai, a big city in Northern Thailand, which imitated the Bodhagaya Temple in India.

2) Buddhism entered Lanna through the introduction of Queen Camadevi of the Lavo Kingdom who brought along with her some Buddha images now placed in Wat Maha Thatu in Lamphun Province.

3) The Sukhothai Kingdom conquered Lanna in the thirteenth century C.E. and brought Sinhalese Buddhism to Lanna.8
“Lanna” means “a vast land or innumerable fields” (“na” in Thai means “a field”). It covers the whole part of Northern Thailand of which Chiang mai is the center. It declined after being conquered by Burengnong, a famous Burmese king, in the sixteenth century C.E. Later in the reign of King Rama V in the nineteenth century, the entire Lanna became a part of the Thai Kingdom in which Bangkok is the capital.

5. The Sukhothai Period

In the twelfth century C.E., King Sri Indratit had freed himself from the Khmer domination and became the first king of Sukhothai. He worshipped Theravāda Buddhism and continued to support this denomination which had been followed by Thai people since the Dvaravati period. He, however, still supported Mahāyāna Buddhism and Brahmanism in his land.

Later, in the reign of King Ram Khamhaeng (1277 C.E. – 1317 C.E.), a group of Thai monks who had reordained in Sri Lanka and lived in Southern Thailand were invited by the King to the Sukhothai Kingdom. The monks were forest dwellers and strict in their Buddhist practices. After having been well supported in Sukhothai, Theravāda Buddhism set its firm root. Mahāyāna Buddhism then completely declined and disappeared.

King Ram Khamhaeng was an exemplar of a Buddhist king. He encouraged his people to listen to Buddhist sermons every Buddhist holy days. Many Thai males ordained and became Buddhist monks. The king was venerated as a righteous king (dhamma – rājā). The Kingdom was in peaceful happiness.

In the reign of King Lithai (1347 C.E. – 1368 C.E.), Buddhism expanded through the Sukhothai Kingdom. The King had an extensive knowledge of Pali and Tipitaka. His famous writing which became a Thai Buddhist literature called Trai Phum Phra Ruang (Three Worlds of King Ruang) illustrated the three realms of beings: 1) The World of the Desired (kāma – bhūmi) 2) The World of Form Beings (rupa – bhūmi) 3) The World of Formless Beings (arūpa – bhūmi). These three worlds /realms were places where we experienced things in our cycle of birth and death until we attained Nibbāna. Besides, the Three Worlds of King Ruang was aimed to promote the Buddhist ethics through the teaching of the Law of Kamma, i.e., good yields good in return and vice versa.

The Sukhothai Kingdom declined and fell under the domination of the Ayutthaya Kingdom in the fourteenth century C.E.

The History of Buddhism in Thailand can be summarized as follows:

Buddhism first entered Thailand in Nakhon Pathom Province in Central Thailand before the Fifth Century B.E. (the First Century C.E.) from India. Some archaeological evidence is seen in the Wheel of the Law (the Dhammacakka) with Pali inscription and the Stupa.9

In the 13th Century B.E. (the 7th Century C.E.), the King of Sri Vijaya Kingdom who ruled Sumatra (an Island in Indonesia at present) spread Mahayana Buddhism to Southern Thailand. The evidence is the Bronze Statue of a Bodhisattva found in Surat Thani Province in Southern Thailand and now shown at the National Museum, Bangkok.10

In the 14th Century B.E. (the 8th Century C.E.), Queen Camadevi who had formerly lived in Lopburi moved to Northern Thailand to rule the City of Haripunjaya (Lamphun) and established Theravada Buddhism in Haripunjaya.11

In the 16th Century B.E. (the 10th Century C.E.), King Surya –Varaman I of Cambodia expanded his power to Central Thailand and established the City of Lopburi (Lavo) as the Center of his Kingdom. He had a Mahayana temple built in Lopburi called Prang Sam Yod (Triple Sanctuary Tower).12
In the 19th Century B.E. (the 13th Century C.E.), King Ramkhamhaeng the Great of the Sukhothai Kingdom invited monks from Nakhon Si Thammarat who had been ordained in Sri Lanka to preach the Buddha – dhamma (the Buddha’s Doctrine) in Sukhothai.

The Sri Lankan monks belonged to Theravada Buddhism. They were forest dwellers. When they came to Sukhothai, they stayed in a temple not so far from the city. They used the Buddhist Scriptures and Commentaries in Pali. Thai Buddhism was thus influenced by Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. After the establishment of Theravada Buddhism in Sukhothai, other Buddhist denominations began to fade away from Thailand.

In the Period of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya (the 20th Century B.E. or the 14th Century C.E.), Brahmanism and Animism flourished and co-existed with Buddhism. There were beliefs in the Divine King and his supernatural power, the making of Buddha Images in Royal Attire, the construction of Buddhist monasteries and so on.

In the 22nd century B.E. (the 16th Century C.E.), Northern Thailand was under the domination of Burengnong the famous Burmese king. Theravada Buddhist art and architecture thus followed the Burmese style.

In the Bangkok Period, Prince Mongkut who had been ordained as a monk established the Dhammayutika denomination in B.E. 2379 (C.E. 1836) in order to be the model of Normative Buddhism. Monks outside the Dhammayutika denomination belonged to Mahanikaya denomination. In the reign of King Rama V, many Chinese people came to live in Thailand and established Mahayana Chinese Buddhism.

Before the advent of Buddhism in Thailand, Thai people had believed in Hinduism and Animism. When they turned to follow Buddhism, they assimilated other beliefs in it. Thai Buddhism is thus a unified religion of the Buddhists in Thailand who make about 90% of the entire population. Besides, sociologically and phenomenologically, it can be differentiated into Normative Buddhism, Popular Buddhism, (Socially) Engaged Buddhism, and Intellectual Buddhism.

The general characteristics of Normative Buddhism can be described as follows:-

1) The monastic institution is under a hierarchic system headed by the Supreme Patriarch who is appointed by the King. The Supreme Patriarch has the Sangha Supreme Council as his Advisory Board. He exercises his ruling power consecutively over the Ecclesiastical Governor General, Ecclesiastical Regional Governor, Ecclesiastical Provincial Governor, Ecclesiastical District Officer, Ecclesiastical Sub-District Head, Abbot, monks and novices. For example, King Rama V (B.E. 2411 – B.E. 2453 or C.E. 1868 – C.E. 1910) established the two Buddhist universities: Mahamakuta and Mahachulalongkorn. In addition, King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great is the Patron of the Buddhist Association of Thailand and the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

The Sangha supports the sovereignty and charismatic leadership the King. In return, the King presents and ecclesiastical rank to a member of the Sangha. There is no conflict between the Monarch and the Sangha throughout the Thai history.

All Theravada monks are under rules and orders of the Sangha. Monks of other denominations, i.e. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism are under the monastic law of the Office of Religious Affairs.

2) The Pali language is considered the sacred language of Buddhism. Pali is used for recording the Buddhist Scriptures and for chanting. In all Buddhist ceremonies in Thailand, Pali is used for reciting and chanting. Pali first appeared in Thailand in the Inscription at the wheel of
the Law, the symbol of Buddhist propagation, found in Nakhon Pathom around the 5th Century B.E. (the 1st Century C.E.).

3) The Tipitaka and Buddhist Commentaries are taken strictly and literally, e.g. the Law of Kamma is the Law of Reward and Punishment for a person who volitionally does good or evil rather than for a whole community. The study of the Buddhist Scriptures was strongly recommended in the Reign of King Rama V. Monks who had passed a certain level of Pali Knowledge were eligible to gain certain monastic ranks. If they quitted the monastery, they could find a good job, e.g. being a civil servant, which is considered by all Thais good earnings and highly respected. Since Normative Buddhism highly recommends knowledge of the Buddhist Scriptures, it is also called Doctrinal Buddhism.

4) Nibbana is the final goal of all Buddhists, especially of monks. Nibbana is freedom from suffering and can be obtained through the elimination of all defilements, i.e. greed, hatred and delusion, which are causes of all sufferings on earth. Nibbana is not easy to attain. It needs a proper knowledge and a hard work in order to overcome one’s own self. The attainment of Nibbana is a monk’s highest duty. The Buddhist Training toward Nibbana is through morality (sīla), meditation (samadhi) and wisdom (paññā). The knowledge toward Nibbana is through the understanding of the Fourfold Noble Truth (ariya – sacca) consisting of the true understanding of Suffering (dukkha), of Causes of Suffering (samudaya), of the Cessation of Suffering (nirodha) and of the Path toward the Cessation of Suffering (magga).

5) Monks and novices are in superior status to laypeople. Parents thus encourage their son to be ordained when he reaches 20 years of age. Having a son ordained is considered a way to gain a great merit.

6) Buddhist tradition and culture based on the Buddhist teachings in the Tipitaka and the Commentaries and closely followed by Normative Buddhists, e.g. the respect to elderly people and the use of the lotus flower in Buddhist ceremonies.

Generally, Popular Buddhism can be clarified as follows:

1) It is a combination of Buddhism, Brahmanism/Hinduism and Animism. Though Buddhists believe that the Buddha is the founder of Buddhism, they also faithfully believe in Hindu deities, spirits in nature, amulets, phallic stones and consecrated Buddha images.

2) It gives more support to the belief in Divine Predestination of God Brahma than to that in the Law of Kamma. Popular Buddhists do not deny the dominant power of God Brahma and all deities. Though they accept the Buddha’s teaching of the Law of Kamma, they are faithful to gods. They believe that their lives are subject to the Signs revealed through Stars by the Absolute God Brahma. Some Popular Buddhist monks thus work as astrologers for the people.

3) Popular Buddhism encourages beliefs and practices of supernatural power. Even the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha are endowed with supernatural power. The Buddha is believed as being a super – human being. When he was alive, he had extra-ordinary markings and qualities. After his death, his relics and his consecrated images have a magical power.

The Buddha’s Dhamma in Pali, for Popular Buddhists, consists, of sacred words with magical power in healing, blessing and protecting all participants when uttered during a Buddhist ceremony. For example, an amulet or water in a bowl becomes sacred and has a protective power after sacred words of the Pali Dhamma have been transferred into it during an invocation ceremony.
The Sangha or monks are not only the followers of the Buddha and the propagators of Buddhism but also sacred persons with magical power. There are legends of Thai Buddhist monks who had gained magical power after their long years of meditation retreat.

4) Popular beliefs and practices are based on folk tales and local tradition rather than on the Buddhist Scriptures. For example, the Tale of Khun Borom which depicts the story of the creation asserts that Than, the creator god, made the human world and ruled things on earth. Than has serpents as his servants. If he orders other serpents to play with water in the sky, the rain will fall on earth. If drought prevails, Northeastern people will perform a sacrificial ceremony for Than who, being satisfied with it, will let the rain fall. This ceremony is traditionally performed in February before the ploughing season so that villagers can have enough rain in their rice fields. If Than does not hear their asking, they would shoot ceremonial rockets to the sky in order to call for his attention.

5) Popular Buddhists prefer the attainment of the World of Metteyya Buddha, the future Buddha, to the attainment of Nibbana. They consider Nibbana too far to reach. Apart from the World of Metteyya Buddha, they want to be reborn in either a rich family or in heaven. They believe that Nibbana is exclusively the ideal for monks. In the Tipitaka, the story of Metteyya is mentioned briefly that he would come to purify the Buddhist doctrine and bring it back to its original form. During the time of the Buddha Metteyya, the whole world will be filled with happiness and prosperity. Popular Buddhists consider Nibbana inaccessible and undesirable because it is beyond reach and is irrelevant to the present life.

The belief in the realm of Metteyya is similar to that of Christian Millennialism (or Millenarianism) which is the Kingdom of God on earth. According to Revelation 20, in the New Testament, Christ will return to this world within 1,000 years before the Judgment Day. After the Judgment of God, the Kingdom of God on earth will be established and all beings will live together in happiness.

As Popular Buddhism can solve immediate problems of Buddhists and render hope and consolation to them, the majority of Thai Buddhists willingly follow this type of Buddhism.

In summary, the characteristics of Socially Engaged Buddhism can be presented as follows:

1) It puts more emphasis on the solution of immediate problems than on the preservation of the Buddhist discipline and tradition. For example, a monk can touch a woman if he intends to save her life or to cure her from her illness.

2) Pali language and Pali Scriptures are not considered crucial for a Buddhist life. Buddhist teachings and practices which serve immediate needs of the community are particularly emphasized, e.g. Buddhist teachings of herbal medicine, environmental protection and the Present Benefits of Life which consist of the fulfillment of hard-working, the protection of one’s own property, the association of good people and the economical living.

3) It supports a civil society and encourages a cultivation of a public mind. It values the ideology of altruism and social responsibility. Monks live in a village or near a lay community. They work for the sake of others rather than for their own final liberation.

4) It supports all movements for the social development. For example, unlike Normative Buddhism, it approves the ordination of female monks (bhikkhunis). In Socially Engaged
Buddhism, monks and laypeople work together to promote human right, freedom and the benefits of all beings.

The general characteristics of Intellectual Buddhism can be summed up as follows:

1) It emphasizes the role of wisdom in all Buddhist beliefs and practices and asserts that wisdom is essential for being a good Buddhist. In the light of Buddhadasa, wisdom brings about insight which reveals the truth of all phenomena. Those who penetrate the truth of all phenomena understand that all is subject to transience (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) and nonselfhood (anattā) and thus is not worth clinging to.

2) It rejects all supernatural beliefs and practices. Intellectual Buddhism accepts the Law of Nature or the law of Cause and Effect.

3) It considers selfishness, consumerism and materialism as the causes of human defilements and suffering. Selfishness is the root of all evils. For Buddhadasa, those who work for money, food, desire, fame and honor are selfish, consumerists and materialists, but those who do their duty for duty’s sake are followers of dhamma.

4) It rejects literal meanings of the Buddhist scriptures. It accepts the meaning of the Buddha’s teachings in dhamma language. Besides, it disregards Buddhaghosa’s Commentaries and the Abhidhamma. According to Buddhadasa, the essential teachings of the Buddha are dhamma and vinaya (the monastic discipline). Abhidhamma and dhamma are not essentially different from each other. The Abhidhamma, however, is an excessive and unnecessary teaching of the Buddha of which the content has already been presented in the dhamma.

5) It asserts “Nibbana here and now.” This assertion encourages Buddhists to seek Nibbana in their present lives. In Buddhadasa’s exposition, Nibbana which most Thai Buddhists believe to exist beyond the Cycle of Birth and Death is only in our worldly experiences and can be understood as the state achieved through the eradication of desire and attachment.22

Though Buddhism in Thailand can be classified sociologically and phenomenologically into Normative Buddhism, Popular Buddhism, Socially Engaged Buddhism and Intellectual Buddhism, Thai Buddhists do not clearly belong to any particular type of Buddhism. For example, a Thai Buddhist who claims that s/he is Buddhadasa’s follower may devote him/herself working to help poor people in a community instead of trying to attain Nibbana through wisdom. Besides, Buddhadasa himself can be taken as both an Intellectual Buddhist monk and a Socially Engaged Buddhist monk because of his teaching of the crucial role of wisdom and his establishment of the Spiritual Theatre and the International Hermitage for Foreigners in Suan Mokkha.

The characteristics of Thai people tend to be flexible and compromising. They avoid contradiction in order to preserve their own interest as well as the others’. Throughout the Thai history, it is obvious that they never reject a new religion but rather assimilate it in their beliefs and practices. One can thus find a Thai Buddhist who worships gods and practices supernaturalism as well.
NOTES

2 Ibid., P. 31.
3 Ibid., P. 88.
6 Arthorn Chandawimol, Prawat Khong Pandin Thai, p. 120.
9 Ibid., pp. 9 - 11.
10 Ibid., P. 11.
11 Ibid., P. 14.
13 Ibid., pp. 17 - 23.
14 Ibid., pp. 23 - 27.
15 Ibid., pp. 14 - 17.
16 Ibid., pp. 30 - 31.