

Searching for Love: Junction Between Thai Buddhism, Consumerism and Contemporary Thai Film

Pram Sounsamut¹



When the Buddha taught his monks for the first time, he said:

... Suffering, as a noble truth, is this: ... sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering — in short, suffering is the five categories of clinging objects.

...
Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is remainder less fading and ceasing, giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting, of the same craving. ... (Nanamoli Thera, 1981).

But, today Thai youth listen to things such as:

‘...Although I understand that I am still reckless. I fall in love with you, not scared of being hurt. The more I let my heart get deeper, the more I hurt my heart. How much it hurts...How hurt it is...how much it is in pain...I will love you. *It is just*

¹ Ph.D candidate (Thai Studies), Chulalongkorn University. Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University. This paper is a part of Ph.D dissertation of the author. The author receives a scholarship from The Royal Golden Jubilee Ph.D program by Thai Research Fund. Some part of this research was done at University of California Berkeley.





because of love, I will accept it and endure it for you, only you. How much it hurts...How hurt it is...how it is suffering...I can bear it. Even finally I will suffer all day and night. I will not change my mind....' (Techatanawat, 2007)²

When we compare the word from the sutta with contemporary pop-song lyrics, we can see that the 'ideology of love' of Thai people, especially of the youth, is changing. The Buddha gives us the advice that 'love' is suffering, therefore 'love' ought to be ceased because '...the basic wish of any living being is to avoid suffering....' (Goleman, 2004:77) Thai youth understand that 'love is suffering', they have learned this from school, but they are not encouraged or eager to relinquish it. Love becomes a 'must' for their life; love is a goal of their life. For them, to love someone and to have someone to love is the most important element of their life.

It is the aim of this paper to give the reader a broad picture of the changing ideology of love of Thai people. I will explain this by using two popular tragic romances, in the form of films, as examples. Before continuing, there are some limitations to this paper that I must explain. First, this paper is written on the assumption that the majority of Thai people are Buddhist, Theravādin. To be a good Buddhist, they have to follow Buddhist teachings and practice Dharma. The most important of the teachings of Buddhism is the four noble truths, which is the core teaching of Buddhism. Additionally, when we talk about love, or the ideology of love in this paper, I only refer to romantic love, or love as an attachment to someone.

The paper will begin with the discussion about the significance of death and funeral rites. Then, it will give a general idea of how tragic romance is related to 'ideology'. After that, I will discuss some difference between ideology of love in relation to consumerism. Later on, I will give an example of the ideology of love in Thai tragic romance films between 1997 and 2007. I sum up this paper by posting a recent problem of Buddhist Teaching in Thailand and some interesting issues that seem to offer solutions to this problem.

² The original lyrics: ... แม้รู้ดีแกใจยังเผลอ หลงรักเธอไม่กลัวซ้ำใจ ยิ่งปล่อยใจลงลึกเท่าไร ก็ยิ่งซ้ำหัวใจเท่านั้น
ซ้ำเท่าไร เจ็บซ้ำเท่าไร ปวดร้าวเพียงใด ก็จจะรักเธอ แคเพราะรัก ก็ยอม ก็ทนได้เพื่อเธอ เธอคนเดียวเท่านั้น ซ้ำเท่าไร เจ็บซ้ำเท่าไร
ปวดร้าวเพียงใด จะยอมรับมัน (ทนได้ทั้งนั้น) หากสุดท้าย แม้ยังปวดร้าวทุกคืนวัน ก็ไม่ยอมเปลี่ยนใจ



The Significance of Death

We are not certain about our life. Therefore, when we have a big change in our lives, we perform a ritual to ensure our future. The four rituals of life are birth, transition from childhood to adulthood, marriage and funeral. A funeral is the most uncertain transition of life. In other rituals, if something goes wrong, we have a chance to fix it. But, a funeral is totally different. We do not have a chance to re-perform a funeral. Technically, people can not die twice in one life.

We are all scared of death. We are not sure where we are going after we die. Even in the 21st century, life after death is still a mystery. The more we understand what we call ‘science’, especially ‘biology’, the more we do not understand life after death. Nevertheless, religion and local beliefs (also primitive beliefs) always have an explanation of the place where one will be after passing away. ‘Myth’ tells us; where humans come from and where they go after dying. The funeral is often associated with those myths. Thus, a funeral, as a practice, is usually performed to reflect a particular person’s idea of ‘life after death.’”

In general, on each night of Thai Buddhist funerals, the host of the funeral will invite a monk to recite the *Abhidhamma*³ On the last day of ceremony, the dead body will be cremated to show the impermanence of life. People will create a cremation site that mirrors the ‘Sumeru Mountain’. This is a symbol that the spirit of the dead will be transformed to heaven where Sumeru Mountain is its core.

If we look closely at the Thai Buddhist funeral, we will understand that Thai people believe in the cycle of life or rebirth. The *Abhidhamma* chanting teaches the dead and their relatives to give up the body and to understand that the body is impermanent. As a result, the dead can pass to another life wisely while the relatives are willing to do good deeds. Thus, funeral rite is not just a funeral; it is a ceremony that reflects the ideology of life of people, in our case Thai Buddhist people.

Death in a tragic romance does the same thing as a funeral. Whenever someone dies in a movie, the ideology of life will be reflected in the funeral scene and/or a few scenes later. The dialogue

³ This *Abhidhamma* chanting is unique in Thai Buddhism. The venerable monks from the early times shorten it from *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*.



between the characters will be about life. What is life? What do we live for? What we are doing next? How to live after we have learned from the death? These are some question of life which usually arise and are answered in the movie after someone dies. That is to say, death in a tragic romance is used in one way to intensify the audience's emotion and let them get to the climax of the movie. In another way, it is used to give answers about life and the ideology of life.

Tragic Romance and Lessons from Death

I use 'tragic romance' here to refer to a romance in which the climax of that romance presents a great loss or the death of the protagonist. It is not necessary for the leading role, either the actress and/or actor, to die, but it could be the death of someone in the romance that impacts the protagonist. The main character will learn something from that loss and will hopefully gain some insight into the meaning of life.

What do we learn from the tragic romance? There are two steps to answering this question. First has to do with the science of emotion; 'Love' is a 'higher cognitive emotion'. Even though love is universal but "Higher cognitive emotion (like love) ... are more capable of being influenced by conscious thoughts, and This in turn is probably what allows higher cognitive emotions to be more culturally variable than the basic emotions." (Evans, 2003:20) Thus, love is a cultivating process. That is why love is involved with 'ideology'. That is why different cultures and societies have different meanings of love; and, that is why different religions define love differently.

Second, negative emotion lives longer in the human mind. Keith Oatley, Dacher Keltner and Jennifer M. Jenkins' (2006:172) book *Understanding Emotion* divided emotion into two categories, which are positive emotions like happiness, excitement, gratitude, etc. and negative emotions like sadness, distress, anger, fear, etc. Among these two types of emotions, in relation to the cognitive process, negative emotions have a stronger affect on the mind. It lives longer in the memory and gives the subject more attention to the stimuli rather than positive emotions.



So, what does tragic romance, as another kind of literature, have to do with ‘ideology’? David Hawkes (2003:125) writes;

It seems that ‘art’ (which term remains suspiciously undefined) occupies an area midway between ‘science’ and ‘ideology’. It also seems as though art provides a conduit by which one may pass from ideology to ‘knowledge’ which is science. It does this by unmasking the contradictions within ideology, making them visible by imposing upon it a predetermined aesthetics form. This argument pursued by Althusser’s friend Pierre Macherey, in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966). ‘...Literature takes up a position in between truth and falsehood; its twists and distorts ‘the every day language which is the language of ideology’ (59), thus distancing the reader from this language, drawing attention to its ideological nature, and so making possible a later transition to a scientific ‘knowledge’ of ideology.

From Hawkes’ views, literature, or narrative in a new language, is another kind of ‘Ideological Apparatus’ because it given peoples an education. That is to say, literature is another kind of ‘education institution’. Greek tragedy has served this ‘Ideological Apparatus’ function. In a famous book of Aristotle, he gives a most quote meaning of tragedy;

Tragedy is a representation of an action that is serious, complete, and of some magnitude; in the language that is pleasurably embellished, the different forms of embellishment occurring in separate parts; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the catharsis of such emotion. ... (Murrey, 2004:64)

The word ‘catharsis’ has been translated in many ways but one of the most acceptable definitions is a ‘moral education’ (see Lear, 1992: 318-326). New ideology scholars and Greek masters agree that in someway narrative, in general, has an effect on human ideology. It is another kind of ideological apparatus. Louis Althusser (2001:105), who defines ideology as a “ ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” He gives a very strong statement that; “I believe that



the ideological state apparatus which has been installed in the dominant position in mature capitalist social formations ... is the educational ideological apparatus”.

Tragic romance answers or at least gives an idea regarding love. What is love? What is the goal of love? How to practice it with the one we love? After the audience absorbs the story, together with the idea presented, and if they agree with that message, it can become the audience's ideology. Moreover, if such ideology is accepted by the masses and becomes the ideology of the majority, the producer will add or reproduce that ideology again and again. The more it is presented, the deeper it will dig down in the mind of the audience. Therefore, tragic romance is another mode of an ideological apparatus.

Before moving to another section, I would like to conclude my thesis in this section. A Tragic romance and narrative play an important role in cultivating and reestablishing the ideology of its audience. Tragic romance is a medium of teaching and giving a meaning of 'love', ideologically.

Romantic Love in Buddhism

After the Buddha became enlightened, he taught his first group of monks 'the four noble truths'. That is, to understand what is suffering, what is the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way leading to cessation of suffering. Although, there are many other teachings, it is well accepted that the four noble truths are the supreme teaching.

The objective of the four noble truths, which is the ultimate goal of all Buddhists, is to ascend or acquire '*nibbāna*'.⁴ The first thing mentioned in the four noble truths is 'Birth is suffering'. To end the suffering is to not be born again. Therefore, the most well-known explanation or translation of '*nibbāna*' is 'not born again'. *Mahānagara Nibbāna* in the Buddhist cosmology is, thus, the highest level of heaven. The person who enters *Nibbāna* will not be reborn. Not being born again means not suffering again. According to the ideology of Buddhism, we are to believe that as long as we have '*karma*', we will

⁴ The idea of 'Nibbāna' is a very complicate idea and it has many argument of its. In this paper, my intention is only giving an idea about 'Nibbāna' of popular Thai Buddhism, or what common Thai people believe. It is not a complete definition of Thai Buddhism and the in depth meaning of 'Nibbāna' in Theravāda Buddhism.



be born again and again until we can get rid of *karma* which mean going to *nibbāna*. Teachings on the ‘life cycle’ or rebirth informs us that *nibbāna* is the best place to go and, in order to go to *nibbāna*, we have to understand the four noble truths and practice them, which will lead us to *nibbāna*. The Buddha suggested:

...The way leading to cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is simply the noble eight fold path, that is to say, right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. ... (Ñānamolī Thera, 1981)

In the beginning of the paper, we learned that ‘association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering’. That is to say, love is suffering. Love here means ‘attachment’ and/or ‘clinging’ to someone or something. However, there are many kinds and levels of love in Buddhism. Here, in this paper we will focus only on romantic love.

Therefore, in the ideology of Buddhism, generally romantic love is suffering. According to the teachings, this kind of suffering is caused by the ‘craving for sensual desires’ or *Kāmatanāhā*. The Buddha said:

...The origin of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is the craving that produces renewal of being accompanied by enjoyment and lust, and enjoying this and that; in other words, craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being. ... (Ñānamolī Thera, 1981)

That is to say, if we want to stop suffering, we have to understand and prevent ourselves from the origin of suffering. The craving for sensual desire is cause by or starts from ‘romantic love’. Again, in the end for Buddhists, romantic love, no matter if it is successful or not, will cause suffering. Finally, if we do not want to be reborn, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, we have to have cessation of the cause of suffering.

Apart from the ideology ‘love is suffering’, another core belief in Buddhism that relates to romantic love is ‘*Pubbesannivāsa*’,





meaning ‘previous association’ or cohabitation in a previous life. Buddhist believes in the consequences of *karma*; that *karma* from our previous lives and this life will be reflected in this life. Therefore, if someone is married to someone in this life, it means that they have cohabitated as a couple in a previous life and/or they prayed or wished to meet again in this life.

‘*Pubbesannivāsa*’ explicitly appears in all major *jātakas*, or tales of the past lives of the Buddha. In *jātaka* narrative structure, before ending every *jātaka* there will be ‘*Prachumchādok*’, or *Samodhāna* which is the summary of the *jātaka*. The main purpose of this part is to inform the listener who is reborn as whom in the last life of Gautama Buddha. For example; in the very famous Vessantara Jātaka, Vessantara was reborn as Gautama Buddha, Maddī was reborn as Yasodarābimbā, Jūjaka Brahmin was reborn as Phra Devadata. That is to say, all of the persons who are involved with the Buddha have a previous association with him at least one time in a previous life before he becomes enlightened.

Additionally, the fantasy version of ‘the Life of Buddha’, *Pat\$hamsambodhi* on the *Abhisambodhiparivatta* episode 10, also refers to the important idea of previous lives. On the night the Buddha became enlightened, early in that night the book says:

When it was the beginning of the night, the Buddha, who had won over Māra, developed concentration until he gained eight meditative attainments. He spoke of the **recollection of former lives** with this higher knowledge. Then, with constant mindfulness, he recollected the events backward from his final throne ...⁵

After he recalled all his past lives, reaching hundred thousand *mahākalpa*⁶, he becomes enlightened. The bold indicates the idea of past lives which affects this life. The reason for enlightenment in this last life is a result of his prayer and good deeds from his past

⁵ The original text: ครั้นล่วงเข้าราตรีปฐมยาม สมเด็จพระพิชิตมารพุทธองค์ทรงเจริญพระสมาธิภาวนา ยังอัญญสมาบัติให้บังเกิดแล้ว ทรงพระปรารภเพื่อจะระลึกบุญเพนิวาสนาสลตติญาณ ด้วยกำลังพระอภิปัญญา และ ทรงพระอนุสรจินดาจับเดิมแต่ปัจฉิมบัลลังก์อาสน์ โดยปฏิโลมถอยหลังลงไป

⁶ ‘Mahākalp’ is a simile of time, it can not be counted. One mahākalp is equal to the action which every one hundred years an angel, using a very light fabric, thin like a smoke from incense, wipes a mountain, which is both in height and width about 20 kilometres, until the mountain collapses and becomes flat, that is one Mahākalp long.



lives. That is to say, our previous lives are strongly associated and influence this life.

In conclusion, there are two ideas about romantic love in Thai Buddhism. Firstly, ‘romantic love is suffering’. To be attached to someone or something will finally cause suffering no matter how long it is, especially a romantic love which leads to sensual craving. While the supreme happiness is not suffering, it is an ideal that a Buddhist has to cease sensual craving. Secondly, ‘previous association’ or ‘cohabitation in a previous life’ affects this life. When we find someone we love or we association with someone in this life, it does not happen just because of this life. It is a consequence of a past life. We may do both bad and good deeds from a past life, thus we find each other again to pay for that deed in this life.

Thai Films Before and After the Past Century

The Thai film industry can be traced back to 1897 when films from India, Japan and Australia were first shown in Thai theaters. The first film that was produced by a Thai person was launched in 1927. (Tanawangnoi, 1997:13) Over the past century of the Thai film industry, there have been many turning points, with rising and falling periods in accordance with politics, economics and war. However, the Thai film industry began its second golden age in 1998. A new history of the Thai film industry began with the film ‘Bangkok Gangster’. Before that time, Thai films faced competition from Hollywood films. Normally, the production and screenplay of Thai films were not of much concern. The plot was very similar and the production was also poor. Some films were shot in only three days.

Thus, Thai film producers and directors had to change their style in order to compete with Hollywood productions. This big change can be witnessed by the better quality of screenplay, putting musical scores into the films, more shooting angles and putting more capital into the productions. That is to say, at that time Thai films became more of a piece of art rather than just a moving picture. After 1998, the increase of young directors who were educated in Western methods of producing films transformed the Thai film industry,



The coming of Hollywood films not only impacted the way films were produced, it also affected the message and the ideology within the films as well. As mentioned above, the films in this new age were concerned greatly with the message or moral.. The film has to say something to the audience. At least, it has to give some lesson for life to the audience. Thus, the film is not just another form of entertainment; it is a new institution of education and entertainment for presenting ideas to the people.

In the past Thai people judged a movie by the actors/performers, but nowadays they judge it by content and emotion. The audience looks more closely at the message of the story and tries to get ‘something’ from the film.

There have been many Thai romances film and tragic romances during the past ten years. However in this paper, I will review only the message about ‘love’ in Thai tragic romance films by using two films as an example: ‘Dear Dakanda’ and ‘*The Letter*’.

These two films have one thing in common; both films use a letter as a medium to communicate between the main protagonists. One line from ‘Dear Dakanda’ comes from a letter that the actor writes to his former friend. He says: ‘the best part of writing a letter is not thinking whether or not they will read the letter, but it is the moment that we think of writing them’.⁷

The climax of these two stories is the scene when the protagonist is reading (or viewing) a letter and realizes that there is another person thinking of her and loving her. The advantage of using a letter in the film is that the audience does not have to interpret the mind, the symbol or the acting to understand the character’s thought. The audience just has to listen to the words in the letter and they will understand the feelings and thoughts of the character. Additionally, it makes the movie more romantic, especially in the digital age when people very rarely write love letters.

⁷ The original text: ส่วนที่ดีที่สุดของการเขียนจดหมายไม่ได้อยู่ที่ตอนมานั่งนึกว่าเขาจะอ่านจดหมายของเราหรือไม่ แต่เป็นตอนที่เราคิดจะเขียนถึงเขาเสียมากกว่า.



Ideology of Love in Thai Films

In comparing the ideology of love in Thai Buddhism with the ideology of love in contemporary Thai films, some differences between them are apparent. First, as mentioned earlier, although love is suffering, it is considered a must for life to search for and to have romantic love. Second, people lack belief in previous association. The following are examples extracted from the two films mentioned above.

Love is a must of life

Beginning with ‘*Dear Dakanda*’, this film presents ‘love is a hope for life’. Love makes life go on and makes your life worth living. You are alive because of love. Even if love makes you hurt, you still have to find a new one to love. At the end of the last letter, Mu writes to Dakanda:

...Dakanda, now I have already taken off my cast, even though it is not really quite healed. But yesterday I packed my backpack and I am ready to journey again. Where will I go? It may be some place where the time is not turning backward. and A new day for me will begin. This is the last letter for you. Tomorrow, when the sun rises, I may stand on the roof of some boat and think of nothing. Nui prohibits me from getting on the roof again. But, that’s it! How often can we fall off the roof of a boat? ... Even if I fall again, I am already used to the pain.⁸

The letter consists of many similes. First, the film uses the act of packing a bag and going on a journey, along with ‘the place where time does not turn backward’, to refer to leaving and forgetting the past and beginning a new life. Then the ‘sunrise; is a symbol of a new life and for new hope to begin. Finally, standing on the roof of the boat, and risk falling off again, means he is willing to start loving and have a relationship again. This time he is not afraid of being hurt by love. From the letter we can clearly see the message of the film. Mu leaves Chiang Mai because he is heartbroken. He journeys to

⁸ The original text: ดากานดาตอนนี้ฉันถอดเฝือกออกแล้วนะ ถึงจะยังไม่ค่อยหายดีเท่าไร แต่เมื่อวานนี้ฉันก็เก็บของลงเป้แล้วพร้อมที่จะออกเดินทางอีกครั้ง จะไปไหนนะเธอ คงเป็นสักที่ที่เวลาเลิกเดินถอยหลัง แล้ววันใหม่ของฉันจะเริ่ม จดหมายถึงแกฉบับนี้เป็นฉบับสุดท้ายแล้ว พรุ่งนี้พอพระอาทิตย์ขึ้น ฉันก็คงยืนอยู่ชมดาดฟ้าเรือสักลำ แล้วไม่เขียนอะไรอีก นุ้ยเคยห้ามฉันเด็ดขาดไม่ให้ขึ้นไปบนนั้น แต่ทีนี้ดากานดา จะมีกี่ครั้งกันเชื่อว่าคนเราจะตกจากดาดฟ้าเรือ และถึงจะตกลงมาอีกฉันก็เจ็บจนชินแล้วแหละ



Pa-ngan to cure himself. At sometime he finds a new lover and decides to start a new love without being afraid of getting hurt again. From the letter, Mu, who has been suffering from the unsuccessful love in Chiang Mai, is ready to start a new love, even if in the end it may cause him hurt again; he is not scared of that.

This also describes how love is a must for humans. You can not live alone without romantic love. You will be worth nothing if you do not have someone to love. Love becomes an indication of success for one's life as a human being. Before Dakanda accepts Koh as her boyfriend, she says to Mu:

Dakanda: I am in my 4th year now. I have yet to have a boyfriend. If I pass to the 5th year and still have no boyfriend, I must go on sale like Fhuyern said.

Mu: So what! It is not necessary. Since I was born, I have never had a girlfriend. I still live, not die.

Dakanda: A person like you! If you open yourself and let other people truly know you, I guarantee someone will be interested in you for sure.⁹

From the dialogue, we can see that love becomes a factor for measuring the value of a person. Your value will drop if you reach a certain age and you can not find a boy/girlfriend. If we look at Mu's answer, we will find the very same ideology, even though he says that having a lover is not important. It is because he does not want Dakanda to be Koh's girlfriend, although he does not say this specifically. In the last scene of the movie, when his proposal has been refused by Dakanda, he walks soullessly to the train station and goes back to Bangkok. His journey in this story also begins with his inner confusion of being useless and unvalued because of that refusal from Dakanda. Finally at Pa-ngan, he thinks he is useful again because he find Nui, who gives him love.

⁹ The text: ดากานดา: ฉันก็อยู่ปี ๔ แล้วนะโว้ย ยังไม่มีแฟนเลย แล้วถ้าเกิดขึ้นปี ๕ แล้วยังไม่ มีแฟนอีกนะโว้ย ต้องโดนลดราคาเหมือนที่ไอ้ฟูเหียนว่าเลยอะ
หมู: แล้วโงะวะ มันไม่เห็นจำเป็นเลย ตั้งแต่เกิดมาฉันก็ยังไม่ มีแฟน ก็อยู่ได้ไม่ตาย
ดากานดา: อย่างแกนะ ถ้าแกได้เปิดตัวเองนะโว้ย ให้คนอื่นเขาได้รู้จักแกจริงๆ นะ รับรองเขาต้องชอบตัวแกแน่ๆ



The film was inspired by one of the most important message from *La Petit Prince*. In that book, the little prince meets a fox who teaches him how to be ‘tamed’. That is to say, how to love and react to the ones you love. The fox teaches the little prince that you can not become someone if you do not make a relationship with someone:

“People” says the fox “have guns and they hunt. It’s quite troublesome. And they also raise chickens. That the only interesting thing about them. Are you looking for chicken?”

“No,” said the little prince, “I’m looking for friends. What does tamed mean?”

“It’s something that’s been too often neglected. It means, ‘to create ties’?”

“To create ties’?”

“That’s right,” the fox said. “For me you’re only a little boy just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you have no need of me, either. For you, I’m only a fox like hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tamed me, we will need each other. You will be the only boy in the world for me. I’ll be the only fox in the world for you...” (Saint-Exupéry, 2000:59)

The book encourages its reader to be ‘tamed’ with someone or something spiritually. In the beginning, the fox mentions the man with the gun who raises chickens. The fox likes him because he raises chickens which are food for the fox. The fox is not ‘tied’ with him. Therefore, even if he provides the fox with food, he is still not his friend. This is a satire. Everyone knows the meaning of ‘friend’, but does not understand what a ‘friend’ is. For the fox, a friend is more than knowing each other, but that we have a ‘tie’ with that person also. That is to say, ‘attachment’ or ‘love’. We cannot be ‘someone’ or we cannot be recognized, if we have not been tamed or loved.



Thus, the film has denominated love as a ‘must’ for life. It is a thing that makes your live worthy. Additionally, no matter how often you suffer from love, you still have to find a new one to love. Finally one day you will find love and your life will be complete.

‘*The Letter*’ also presents the same message. It begins with the ideology that love is to make the one you love happy. That is to say, love is to give. Even though this is a cliché for tragic romances, it is interesting that ‘to give’ in this film means to take care of each other, both mentally and physically. During the period before Ton and Dew get married, Ton helps Dew recover from her serious mental situation. After Kate dies, Ton brings Dew to see his tree ¹⁰ and says:

I don’t know why on spur of moment I want to find new relatives in addition to my old tree. When I see it spread out, I feel good. It reminds me that there are always new things in life, no matter what happens. I want you to start a new life too. Promise me, Dew! You will never cry again.¹¹

Again, when Dew refuses to go to correct her work at Bangkok, she feels desperate. On the one side is her work and another side is the one she loves. Ton tells her to go to work in Bangkok:

Dew, you have to live further. Take it as my plea. I want Dew to have happiness. I don’t want to see you suffer. Do you know? Every night I do not dare close my eyes because I am afraid I won’t wake up and be able to see you again. I am not sure, when I will die. If I could settle it, it would be great. Then, I will not be tortured like this. But as I cannot choose, I want everyday remaining to see Dew full of life; being the same Dew, whom I have loved. I promise that I will not die before you come back.¹²

¹⁰ This tree his parent planted on the day he was born. Since his parent died when he was a child, he treats this tree as a relative; it is the only relative left for him.

¹¹ The original text: ผมไม่รู้เป็นอย่างไร อยู่ๆ ผมก็อยากหาญาติเพิ่มให้กับต้นไม้ต้นเก่าของผม เวลาที่ผมเห็นมันแตกหน่อ งอกงามที่ไรเห็นแล้วมันสบายใจดี เหมือนมันทำให้ผมรู้สึก ว่าไม่ว่าจะอย่างไร ชีวิตก็จะมีสิ่งใหม่เกิดขึ้นเสมอ ผมอยากให้คุณ เริ่มต้นชีวิตใหม่เหมือนกัน สัญญากับผมนะดี คุณจะไม่ร้องไห้อีก

¹² The original text: ดิวยังต้องมีชีวิตต่อไปนะ ถือว่าผมขอรับรองแล้วกัน ผมอยากให้คุณมีความสุข ผมไม่อยากเห็นคุณนั่ง อมทุกข์อยู่อย่างนี้ ดิวยังใหม่ ทุกวันนี้ผมไม่กล้าแม้กระทั่งจะหลับตาด้วยซ้ำ เพราะผมกลัวว่าจะไม่ได้ตื่นขึ้นมาเจอตัวอีก ผมเอง ก็ไม่รู้ตัวหรอกนะว่าจะตายวันไหน ถ้ากำหนดได้คงจะดีนะ จะได้ไม่ทรมานแบบนี้ แต่เมื่อมันเลือกไม่ได้ ผมก็อยากให้คุณวันที่ เหลืออยู่ ผมจะได้เห็นตัวที่มีชีวิตชีวา เป็นตัวคนเดิมที่ผมรัก ผมสัญญาว่าผมจะไม่ยอมตายจนกว่าตัวจะกลับมา.



Apart from taking care of her psychologically, all the time that Dew stays in Chiang Mai Ton takes care of her doing everything he can. He does laundry, cooks food, cleans the house and nurses Dew when she is sick. On the other end, when Ton suffers from a disease, Dew takes care of him and nurses him all the time. Even though she is a city girl who has never ironed or done any housework, she does it all. It is the simple matter of taking care of each other. It is not just physical action, but it has a value in feeling and heart. Foods may not be delicious like in the finest restaurant, cloths may not be clean like sending them to a professional cleaner or hot rice soup may not help as much for a cold as an injection, but these things are the fuel for life because they come from the heart. The recipient can feel the warmth of the giver.

Many couples in the busy world of Bangkok, or other major metropolitan cities, barely look after each other. It seems as if they just stay together in one house, which causes the problem of a large number of divorces and unhappy family lives. People may blame economic factors or the rush of city life, but, most importantly it is that they do not 'see' each other anymore. They forget to take care of each other. They forget to give love to each other. This movie draws a picture of what it means to be 'born for each other'. They both give their hearts to each other. Although at the end of the story Ton dies, his unconditional love for Dew still remains in Dew's heart. Dew also continues her life with love from Ton and lives with her past memories.

Unlike '*Dear Dakanda*', '*The Letter*' does not tell us to search for new love, but it tells us 'to use love as a fuel for life'. Even though it seems different, it is the same message: life without romantic love is lifeless. We must have romantic love in our lives. Dew does not seek a new love because she remembers Ton's love which is enough for her to live. Moreover, Ton and Dew make a promise to see each other again. Therefore, she continues her life with some hope in the future that she will find him and love him again.



The idea of Pubbesannivāsa

In *Dear Dakanda*, the film presents the ideology ‘You have to find love, love will not find you.’ That is to say, the film quite (or not) believes in *Pubbesannivāsa* or previous association. In the last part of the film¹³, the events reflect this ideology:

[Nui scatters Jiew’s ashes on the beach where Mu, Nui and Jiew used to play together]

Mu: From now on, Jiew will not wander anymore.

Nui: Mu, do you believe in rebirth and the process of becoming? As someone say; we will go to heaven, to hell or go to some star.

Mu: I don’t know.

Nui: Nonetheless, I try to believe. It would be sad if we only had this one life. Mu, do you remember the Little Prince?

Mu: I can remember.

Nui: Jiew made me think of the Little Prince. Mu, will you think Jiew is going to live on a star as such?

Nui: Mu, do you believe in a ‘soul mate’ from a previous life.

Mu: The same as in a song?

Nui: That say, the one we loved from a previous life is searching for us in this life in order that we can see each other and love each other again. I do not believe it. Unless it is real, one life is enough for one guy.

Nui: I have given a chance to every guy who has loved me. Mu, know what! There is no one who has really loved me.

¹³ The film transposes the situation between Pa-ngan and Chiang Mai. However, I will quote only from the event that happen in Pa-ngan



Nui: Mu!

Nui: Can you love me?¹⁴

We can see two things from the above. First, it is more evidence for the ideology ‘Love is a must for life’. Nui says: ‘I have given a chance to everyone who has loved me’. This means she has had more than one boyfriend before she met Mu. Surely, she has gotten hurt from those guys. However, she is still searching for love and hopes that one day she will find true romantic love.

Another matter is the idea of ‘previous association’. It is clear from Nui’s dialogue that she is hesitating to believe in previous association. She may face many failures. She begins hopelessly. Finally, she denies believing in previous association. Furthermore, if the ultimate goal of all Buddhist, as the Buddha suggested, is going to ‘*Nibbāna*’ or *nirvana*, Nui also denies this idea and hopes to be reborn as she says: ‘It would be sad, if we only had this one life.’ She does not see that life is suffering. She loves to have life and wants to be reborn.

However, ‘*The Letter*’ is totally different. In the trailer to the film, the promotion team selected the following speech to advertise the film:

¹⁴ The original text: (นุ้ยไปรยอึ้งคารของจีวิตนหาดทรายที่หมูกับจีวิตเคยไปวิ่งเล่นด้วยกัน)

หมู: ต่อไปนี่จีวิตคงไม่ต้องเร่ร่อนอีกแล้วนะ

นุ้ย: หมูเชื่อเรื่องชาติภพหรือไม่ ที่เขาบอกว่าตายแล้วไปสวรรค์ ไปนรก ไปอยู่บนดวงดาวนะ

หมู: ไม่รู้เหมือนกัน

นุ้ย: แต่เราพยายามจะเชื่อนะ มันคงเศร้าถ้าเวลาของเรามีแค่ชาตินี้

(นุ้ยสะอื้น) หมูจำเจ้ายานน้อยได้ไหม

หมู: จำได้

นุ้ย: จีวิตทำให้คิดถึงเจ้ายานน้อยนะ... หมูว่า จีวิตจะไปอยู่บนดวงดาวเหมือนกันไหม

นุ้ย: หมูว่าเรื่องคู่แท้ในชาติก่อนมีจริงไหม

หมู: เหมือนในเพลงอะเธอ

นุ้ย: ที่เขาบอกว่าคู่รักของเราในชาติก่อนตามหาเราในชาตินี้ เพื่อที่จะได้พบกันแล้วก็รักกัน

แต่เราไม่เชื่อหรอกนะ แต่ถ้ามันจะจริง ชาติเดียวก็พอแล้วสำหรับผู้ชายคนนึง

นุ้ย: เราให้อีกาสทุกคนที่รักเรา แต่หมูรู้อะไรไหมยังไม่เคยมีใครรักเราจริงสักคน

นุ้ย: หมู นุ้ย: เธอจะรักเราได้ไหม



‘If two people are born for each other, even though they come from different places, no matter how far it is, they will meet. The belief of *‘pubbesannivāsa’* (previous association) is real.’¹⁵

It is the speech that Ton’s boss gives at Ton and Dew’s wedding. We can see the idea of previous association has a strongly influence on this film. Additionally, on Valentine’s night, Ton comes to visit Dew before Ton goes back to Chiang Mai and he asks:

Ton: Will we meet again?

Dew: I don’t know! It up to destiny.¹⁶

Later, after the wedding, Ton says to Dew; ‘Thank you Dew that you were born for me (ขอบคุณนะดิ้ว ที่คุณเกิดมาเพื่อผม)’. Again, one day after Dew comes back from Bangkok, Ton brings warm water and soaks Dew’s feet to make her feel relaxed. Dew touches Ton’s head and says; ‘where have you been Ton? Why have we just met? (คุณไปอยู่ไหนมาต้น ทำไมเราเพิ่งมาเจอกัน)’.

In the most tragic scene in the film, Dew plays the last letter that come in the form of a video tape. Ton says to Dew:

‘I never thought that I was handsome or special. Since the first day I met Dew, I told myself all the time that I will do everything to make Dew the happiest woman. I will not make you cry again. I have one thing to beg of you. Do not forget me. One day in the future, perhaps it may be very long, we will see each other again. We must see each other again. I promise. I love you.’¹⁷

¹⁵ The original text: คนสองคนเนี่ยนะ ถ้าเกิดมาเพื่อนกันและกันแล้วละก็ ถึงจะมาจากต่างที่ต่างทาง ห่างกันแคไหนก็มาเจอกันจนได้ เรื่องของบุพเพสันนิวาสนี่มันมีจริง ๆ นะ

¹⁶ The original text: ต้น: แล้วเราจะได้เจอกันอีกไหม ดิ้ว: ไม่รู้สิ แล้วแต่โชคชะตา

¹⁷ The original text: ผมไม่เคยคิดว่าตัวเองเป็นคนหล่อเหลาหรือดีพิเศษอะไรเลย ตั้งแต่วันแรกที่ผมได้ เจอดิ้ว ผมก็บอกกับตัวเองว่าผมจะทำทุกอย่างให้คุณ ผมจะทำให้ดิ้วเป็นผู้หญิงที่มีความสุขที่สุด ผมจะไม่ทำให้ดิ้วต้องเสียน้ำตาอีก มีอย่างหนึ่งที่ผมอยากจะขอเรื่องดิ้ว อย่าลืมผมนะ วันหนึ่งข้างหน้า มันอาจจะนานมาก แต่ไม่ว่ามันจะนานแค่ไหน เราต้องได้กลับมาพบกันอีก เราได้กลับมาพบกันอีกผมสัญญา ดิ้วผมรักคุณ



From the above, you can see the influence of the idea of previous association. I think there are two reasons why they present the ideology of previous association in this film. First, the screenplay writer and director, themselves, believe in the idea of *pubbesannivāsa*. Therefore, such an ideology is present in their work. Most of all, the film is dedicated to the dear friend of the producer, the director and all of the movie team who began the project. Unfortunately, she died of cancer before the film started producing. All of the crew believed that making the film was sign of gratitude and they will meet her again in their next life.

Second, which I think is the more important reason, is that at this time the idea of *pubbesannivāsa* is quite an old concept. Most of the members of the new generation have quit believing in the idea of previous association. In a brief survey, I gave a questionnaire to 314 freshmen students of the faculty of education in the first semester of the 2006 academic year. One of the questions I asked was ‘Do you believe that your lover from the past life is searching for you in this life. On a scale of 1 to 10, over 60 percent rated this question below 5 and surprisingly the students who rated it over 8 were less than 10 percent. This indicates that teenagers today hardly believe in *pubbesannivāsa*. This may be another reason why the film’s promoter decided to use ‘If you still believe in love’ in the tagline. Love for this movie is the love that is conducted or led by some divine power.

One consequence of the advance in science and technology is that people believe less in divine power. They believe in themselves. Thus, they are searching for love. They think they can choose their love. Nevertheless, this film tries to say that ‘love will find you’. Sometimes we have to wait for someone to be born for us. If we are born for each other, someday and sometime we will find each other. If, on that day, Dew did not stop to buy a cactus and forget her wallet; if that day Ton stayed at the office, they would not meet each other. So, it is destiny that makes them find each other. While, Kate, who tries to find love on her own, has to pay with her life. I can say that this film want to promote its audience to believe in *pubbesannivāsa* again.



Consumerism versus Buddhism

These two films use death as the beginning of questioning life. In 'Dear Dakanda', Nui explains how she thought about life when Jiew died. She also dares to ask for Mu's love because she sees the uncertainty of life. While in 'The Letter', the death of Ton teaches Dew to continue her life with love from him, even though he has passed away. Consequently, they both present the ideology that love is the most important part of life. We cannot live happily without love. Therefore, we have to search for love, especially 'true love'. Once we find true love, love will make our lives worthy and, therefore, it is worth living for.

When I compare consumerism with Buddhism, I see consumerism as an ideology. I use consumerism here not as an economic term as it is normally used. Consumerism as an ideology is the way in which people 'consume for pleasure'. They do not consume because they truly 'NEED' to; they consume because they 'WANT' to. Consuming makes them feel happier. While I am writing this paper (January, 2009), I am watching the Oprah Winfrey show Oprah has invited Suze Orman to her show. Before the show started, Suze asked 215 people at the show how much they owed on their credit cards. 215 people in studio had over \$US 2,295,000 total in debt for their credit cards only. Suze suggest: The issue of being in debt with credit cards is because: the more you are in debt the more you have will using them. The debt is not a matter of consuming for need, but it is involved with emotion of wanting; because, when you spend more you feel good.

Most of all, consuming for pleasure is a 'capitalistic' way to reach self-actualization, that is to say, to be proud of yourself. People want to be 'someone'. They want to be recognized by others. They want the others to be interested in them. Therefore, a life of consumerism is a life for other people rather than for oneself.

This is quite complicated; formerly I said consumerism is for self-actualization, why later do I say that it is for others rather than oneself? Normally, the idea of self-actualization refers to the idea that you pay respect to yourself. It is a result of achieve something that you wish for from your own ability. It happens when



you fulfill your ultimate goal of life. I would say self-actualization is an ‘independent’ process. The teaching in Buddhism is a very good example of this. In the teaching of the four noble truths, the Buddha says that Buddhist need to ‘understand’ suffering as it is. You have to think and understand it by yourself. When you understand suffering, you use the noble eight fold path to cope with it; then, you can get rid of suffering by yourself. Finally, you can respect yourself and understand your life again.

Unlike consumerism, self-actualization in consumerism is a ‘dependent’ process. You need help! It may be from both things and people. When you are sad, you need someone to help you, to share your emotion or to have sympathy with you. That is why love is a must and you have to find love. By consuming love or going to a nightclub or getting drunk, you get rid of sadness, although is not because you understand it but you are just ‘ignoring’ it. You do not cease the suffering, you just suppress it. It is not permanently gone. If we still believe in Freud, the suppressed suffering will emerge someday.

In ‘*The Letter*’, Dew is able to continue her life, not because she understands that Ton died, but she lives with the hope that someday she will find him again. She still lives because she depends on Ton’s love. As in one letter, which arrives after he has died, he writes:

“...Do you feel better right now? I want Dew to be the same Dew as soon as possible. When I look back from above, I want to see the lively Dew as before, not the sad Dew who is still crying right now. There is no need to worry about me! I have not left you. Look around yourself. Can you feel that I am still around you, hugging you like before? I will not let you be lonely in a lonesome town like this. ...”¹⁸

Thus, she feels like he has not yet died and she can continue her life. This means her self-actualization is not from her understanding about life, but it come from Ton’s love which never leaves her. Again,

¹⁸ The original text: ตอนนี้ดิ๋วค่อยยังชั่วขึ้นหรือยัง ผมอยากให้ดิ๋วกลับไปเป็นดิ๋วคนเดิมให้เร็วที่สุด เพราะเวลาที่ผมมอง กลับลงมา ผมจะได้เห็นดิ๋วที่มีชีวิตชีวาคงเก่า ไม่ใช่ดิ๋วที่เอาแต่นั่งร้องไห้อย่างนี้ ไม่ต้องห่วงผมนะจ๊ะ ผมไม่ได้จากคุณไปไหนหรอก ดิ๋วลองมองดูรอบๆ ตัวของดิ๋วให้ดี รู้สึกหรือเปล่าว่าผมยังวนเวียนอยู่ข้างๆ ดิ๋วเสมอ คอยกอดดิ๋วเหมือนวันเก่าๆ ผมไม่มีวันทิ้งคุณไว้คนเดียวในเมืองเหงาๆ แบบนี้หรอก



she uses love as the fuel of life; that is to say, she consumes love for pleasure, but she does not really understand love. This is also the same explanation of the last letter Mu wrote to Dakanda.

Today, in this new age, many Thai people, both teens and those of middle age, are addicted to life. Youth are fetish life. They want to have romantic love. 'Love' and 'Life' are not for understanding anymore. They are living only for pleasure. As people seek love as a goal of life, love then becomes a product for buying. Thai male teenagers dress in Korean style, not for clothing, but to attract females who are crazy for Korean stars. Even if the weather in Bangkok is 35 degree Celsius, they wear a sweater like it is 15 degree in Korea. Teenagers enroll in Korean language courses, not for their future career, but just because they want to know what their pop-idols say. At the extreme end, they learn it so that if someday they meet their idol, they can talk with them. This is a result of (crazy and addict to) 'love'.

Love also becomes the strategy for selling things. From deodorant to life insurance plans, they all use 'love' to advertise their products. Love has nothing to do deodorant, but they say the smell will attract women and they will fall in love with you. Life insurance plans question, what will you do if you die? Who will look after your family? Thus, you have to buy a life insurance plan in order to be sure that the ones you love will not suffer or have a hard time to live. Even in seasoning sauce advertisements they say, let's use this sauce and it will cause our family to be happier.

As people consume love for pleasure, love becomes a root of 'popular culture'. The world of consumerism, thus, encourages people to search for love. Life is not suffering anymore as long as you have love. You may ask, what is the problem with love? Love is good; I can not deny that. However, happiness from love is an attachment or a clinging to an object that is not permanent. According to Buddhist ideology, love which is led by sensual craving ought to be ceased. Even if you experience happiness today, one day, when you "lost your loved one", you will suffer; or one day, when 'you do not get what you want', you will suffer.



The difference between Consumerism and Buddhism is that the former tells you to love and love and love more, while the later wants you to ‘cease’ attachment. Nevertheless, in this battle of ideology, it seems that consumerism will win finally and definitely.

The challenge to Buddhism

What is the challenge to Thai Buddhism? Why do people in the ‘land of Buddhism’ seem to not understand how the Buddha became enlightened? Or as I said at the beginning of this paper, they do understand what the Buddha has been taught, but they ignore it. I think the problem is not in the teachings. The teachings are not out of date. The four noble truths still are noble truths. It is the way of teaching that is the problem. Although education is one the most important institutions in creating and sustaining ideology, there are many problems in the teaching of Buddhism in Thailand today.

First, there is the use of difficult Pāli words in teaching Buddhism. Normally, when a monk or a school teacher teaches Buddhism, they will start with Pāli words and then explain them in Thai language, which sometimes needs to explain again in normal Thai language, like *tripitāka* has *tāikā* and *atāhākathā*. These make the Dharma hard to understand, especially for young students. Once they do not understand, they do not care. They just keep the Pāli word in their short term memory for examination, but not for their life. That is why many young Thai Buddhists can answer what the four noble truths are, but they do not understand them. When they reach the stage of realize those difficult word truly meaning (when they are getting old and really understand ‘life is suffering’), their ideology has already changed and it is hard to bring it back.

In these past few years, these problems seem to have been much thought about. Therefore, many of the new generation of Thai monks try to speak the *Dhamma* in language that can be understood by the youth. It is working! *Dhamma* books, in this less serious style, have become best sellers. The monks are also invited on TV programs and to give lectures in many schools and collages.

The second problem is the unreachable teachings. All Buddhist teachings are practicable in theory. Thai Theravada Buddhism focuses on ‘wisdom’, which needs a lot of practice and a deep understanding





of the ideas. However, in the world of capitalism and consumerism, where people struggle for life, it is hard to be contentment (*Santosa* or *Santuttho*). People have to get involve with the others. People have to work for a living and for their children. People have to find their own food. So, it is hard to practice and reach '*nibbāna*', which may cause people to give up and ignore the *Dhamma*. Additionally, we cannot deny that living your life with pleasure is preferable and easier than living it with wisdom. The challenge is how we can adapt or choose the appropriate teachings and practices for them?

It is quite interesting that in the past few years, especially last year, 2008, the Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, became very popular in Thailand. The number of people who queue to learn his teaching grows rapidly. I have interviewed some of the people who enter the Plum Village program and I also have followed a few of the TV programs which scoop Plum Village activities. I found that the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh are easy to practice in everyday life. Most of all, the language he uses is very easy to understand. His general teaching about basic meditation and love may seem too basic in comparison with the canonical teaching in Thai Theravada Buddhism, but it is the teaching that people in a rush age can practice. Hopefully, some day ahead they will love to learn more and practice more.

However, the way in which this Vietnamese monk teaches is not really that new in Thailand. Some Thai meditation schools, such as Sathira-dhammasathan, have also taught in this style for a decade, but it has not been supported.

Therefore, this is a time for all Buddhist experts in Thailand to wake up and do something to make Buddhist teaching, especially of Theravada school, an 'ideology of life' for Thai people, before the ideologies of consumerism will take its place and totally conquer the next generation.

In this paper, I have tried to draw a picture of what has happened with the ideology of love in contemporary Thai mass media by using Thai tragic romance in the form of film as an example. I come up with the thesis that Thai romance, presented in the form of tragic narratives, plays a significant role in both sustaining and cultivating



the ideology of love in Thai society. In popular Thai tragic romances, from 1997 to 2007, the ideology of love, largely assembled through mass media, is a synthesis of Buddhist belief and consumerism. I also post a question to all Thai Buddhist scholars, and those who are interested in Thai Buddhism: In what way can we reinstate and retain Buddhism in the ideology of Thai people? This question is a challenge. I have only reviewed some of problems and some of hopes. However, the future of Thai Buddhism is in the hands all Thai Buddhist.



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