

# THE APPLICATION OF BUDDHIST ETHICS TO THAI SOCIETY

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In this approach to applying Buddhist ethics to Thai society, I would like to divide social problems into four main kinds: problems of the social system; problems of the political system; problems of the economic system; and problems of the educational system. The discussion will center on approaches to be taken. As for the actual logistics of whether it can be done, how it can be done, and how far it can be done, these are matters that sociologists, political scientists, economists and educationists would be far better equipped to see than the author, and in actually putting these ideas into practice more detailed data and more earnest study will be required. The author does not guarantee that this approach is truly right and good, but he does assert that these are indeed his beliefs, and that they seem to be good at this time.

The four problems under discussion will stress different areas of conflict that have arisen in society: the discussion of problems of the social system will deal with the conflict between materialism and spiritualism; the discussion of problems of the political system will deal with the conflict between democracy and communism; the discussion of problems of the economic system will deal with the conflict between solving economic problems at the system and solving them at the individual; the discussion of problems of the education system will deal with whether or not the use of the philosophy of pragmatism in Thailand conflicts with Buddhism. In all four problems, I will show what course of action would be appropriate for Thailand in the light of Buddhist ethics.

## 1. Problems of the social system

Almost all problems in Thai society have arisen from the growth of science, because that has led to the use of technology. Because they feel more comfortable initially, people give value to material things and the knowledge

that enables them to build or use more material things, and they readily adopt western branches of learning which exclusively aid material development. These branches of learning are science and social science, both of which arose at a time when the West had no interest in values and had an inflated idea of the worth of science. Thailand's total acceptance of this culture caused it to experience a number of harmful results. The idea that happiness results from having many material objects to serve the desires of the senses has caused us to hold that wealth is good because it allows one to get the things one wants. Since wealth is a good thing, we must try to get rich any way we can. Good and evil are of no interest to materialists. Thus, no matter how wrong the method may be, as long as the country's laws cannot punish it, and it leads to wealth, it is good. Rich people are honored and afforded status, and honest but poor people, or people who have the chance to get rich through certain means but do not do so because those means are dishonest, are labeled "stupid" and not praised. Dishonest practices in various circles and the creation of partisan groups has arisen. Those who do not have the chance [to get rich] because they do not have a group of their own struggle along any way they can, and eventually those who lack any other kind of knowledge or ability become criminals—not because of any threat of starvation, but because of a desire to live like the rich and have material wealth. So criminals do not commit crimes in order to stay alive, but to obtain material pleasures. Sensual temptations, such as night spots, have opened in profusion. Advertising calls on people to lose themselves in these things, all with the government's blessing and approval. The government's campaign to encourage the people to be thrifty has no chances of success, because we know that even in ancient times, without the lure of advertising and without such overt worldly pleasures, people in every country struggled just the same for this kind of happiness and poured their money into such things, causing family and social problems. These days we have advertising to urge people on, fanning their defilements. Moreover, there is no support of dedicated research into ethical teachings. Research is all focused on material things. How can we blame the people for not being thrifty when the state allows an environment so unsupportive to

thrift to continue? This article does not intend to discuss the matter in detail, but simply to point out in brief what major social problems have arisen and what Buddhism has to say about them.

I see that there are two main problems in society: the problem of people and resources, and the problem of people and people. In sociology these problems are further analyzed into, for example, problems with the environment, places of decline, urban societies, rural societies, the family system, classes, health, education, social change, law, language and subsidiary problems such as suicide, minority groups, and homeless children. These problems arise because of an inability to address the two major problems, as I will now analyze and show in brief.

### **1.1. People and resources**

All people throughout the ages who desire worldly happiness will need two things: wealth and power. When they are poor or deprived they seek enough to live on. Once they have enough to live on they store up for the future. Once they have stored up enough for themselves they store up for their children, grandchildren and relatives, and they must store up a great deal. In order to store up a great deal and protect what they have stored they need power, so they must also store up power. To have power they must have the support of other people, which means they must store up more wealth for their servants and retinues. Those with great wealth have large retinues and much honor because these things are what are extolled in their own societies, but they also incur a lot of expenditure, which means they have to continue amassing endlessly. Power gained can be preserved by riches, it is true, but then there may be others who have also amassed riches and power. This leads to status-grabbing and power-displays. In times when the human population was still small, and the territories of the various countries did not yet extend over the whole of the earth, these two problems were not particularly difficult: those who were troubled by lack of resources could go and look for them, constantly shifting their places of subsistence; those who were troubled by their lack of power could move to other places. Nowadays, however, all countries have

large populations, and all the land is titled. Countries no longer want people from other countries. People within these countries have limited areas for subsistence and cannot move so easily, so they must solve their problems within the limitations of those situations. Thus the problem of people and resources has become more important and now affects all people in society in three main ways: population size, population quality, and availability and use of resources.

#### *1.1.1. The problem of population size*

People have desires for all kinds of necessities and other things. When the number of people increases by one, those things must also increase at least enough for the livelihood of that one person. And since people do not live simply for one or two days but for many decades, the things required to support the life of a person increase to a staggering amount. People are born every minute. 20–30 years ago there were little more than 10 million people in Thailand. Surrounding our houses were gardens and fields. Rice and fish were in plentiful supply and prices were cheap. While people's incomes were not as high as they are today, people lived better than they do now. The people born 20–30 years ago are mostly still alive, and will still be alive for perhaps another 20–30 years. By that time deprivation will be much greater than it is now because the population will have increased more than it did in the last 20–30 years. If the population continues to increase at this rate, science is powerless to help.

Population growth has led to a great number of subsequent problems. If people are immersed in sensual pleasure, the population is going to continue to increase. If one man married ten women, he could have ten children in the first year. If every man had a great number of wives like this, in one year ten men could father a hundred children; i.e., the population would increase ten-fold. The Buddha taught that people should not get lost in sensual desires. If one is incapable of cutting them off completely then one should at least abide by the third precept, which allows only one wife. Thus at most a person would normally be capable of having only one child or less a year. This precept can thus be used to effectively decrease the rate of population growth. In the

Buddha's time such efficient means of contraception as are used these days were not available. If contraception is used in conjunction with the third precept the rate of population growth will decrease even further, thus reducing the troubles arising from over-population. Large populations are of no use whatsoever in the present situation other than to provide the manpower for increased killing and bloodshed. As for making a living, greater numbers of people do not mean more hands to help with the work as it did in the past, because places or positions of work no longer increase with the population. Population growth will only increase the amount and intensity of contention over the means of making a living. Apart from food, people must also use the rest of the four supports (*paccaya*), which are (1) health—they must produce medicine, medical equipment, doctors, nurses, and other medical staff, and hospitals and other medical materials; (2) they must find places to live, leading to the problems of urban expansion as a result of greater demands for habitations. With the expansion of the towns there comes traffic, waste disposal, and communications systems, requiring great expenditure in their building and design and in the training of personnel to build and design them. A complex system of education must be established, greater numbers of texts, and more schools and universities built. Then there are problems of education, such as curricula, teaching methods and equipment, and standards of education. When the economy is weak disparities arise between the urban centers and rural areas, leading to migration to the cities, which in turn leads to the problems of slums, crime, homeless children, juvenile delinquents, the unemployed, and beggars, for example. Urban expansion, both in dwellings and for livelihood, leads to the problem of polluted and poisoned environments. Cramped living creates the need for places of relaxation, and then there are other problems too numerous to mention. The most important problem for society thus lies in the size of the population, and the objective of Buddhism is to have the population increase as little as possible. When population growth is small problems are few, can be easily corrected and corrected in time. Buddhism does not forbid birth prevention. It does not, for example, forbid masturbation/autonomous satisfaction of desires, except for

monks, but Buddhism does forbid the taking of life once conceived, as in abortion. The merits and demerits of this could be discussed at length, but here I only wish to point out that Buddhism does not forbid contraception, because the third precept virtually supports it. That Buddhism does not forbid [sexual activity] outright is not because it takes sexual activity to be a good thing, but because it recognizes that unenlightened beings cannot desist from it. Buddhism supports contraception, but not killing.

### 1.1.2 *The problem of population quality*

Thailand is now similar to other countries: it recognizes that the large population has become an almost insurmountable problem that will cause people to live in such difficulty and distress that they will find no happiness but have to devote their whole lives to working all day for a wage that is scarcely enough to live on. People tend to think that people of good quality will help solve the problem, and will be better able to make the country prosperous than a great number of people of inferior quality. Nowadays in Thailand the word "good quality" tends to mean proficiency in pure science, social science, and technology. Proficiency in the humanities is not widely accepted as a kind of good quality because it is felt that such knowledge cannot be used to solve society's problems of material shortages. While there is talk of "character training" it is merely a training for people to express themselves as society wants them to, not a true training of the mind in virtue. Thus we have a great deal of people who are good at talking, whose mouths and minds are not in agreement. As for education, which seeks to train people to be clever at attaching to the physical as scientists do and studies ethics only in name, the objective is not really to earnestly train people as does Buddhism or a training of mindfulness and wisdom. In tertiary education, in particular, it can be said that there is no teaching of conduct at all. Tertiary education aims specifically at vocational learning and tries as much as possible to dispense with subjects that do not conform with its branches of learning. Thus we produce engineers, architects, lawyers, accountants, economists, administrators, scientists, doctors and chemists who are mere professionals, who make a living solely through the subject they have studied, and who have very

limited knowledge of, and are incapable of understanding, the importance of other branches of learning. They see only the importance of their own field of knowledge, and so become narrow-minded. Once they become narrow minded, they exalt themselves and disparage others, looking down on other branches of learning even though they do not know them, or know them only as much as a student of primary school. These are the people we call "quality persons" in present day Thai society.

When these persons of good quality, according to the state's view, exalt themselves, disparage others and look down on each other—even those who also have tertiary education—one can rest assured that they will look down on people with less education than themselves. Thus these "persons of good quality" are not capable of solving the problems of the people because, firstly, solving those problems requires knowledge from many different fields. With narrow knowledge they cannot perceive what field of knowledge is required to solve the problems, and inter-disciplinary cooperation is unlikely. Secondly, their disparaging view of the people blinds them to the importance of their problems. Thus the people have no one to turn to and easily fall prey to other parties.

Buddhism does not oppose building one's vocational abilities because it is necessary for people living in society, but it also does not hold it to be the most important thing in life. That which is of real value is the quality of being a good human being. Regardless of one's profession, all branches of learning can be used in good or evil ways. How knowledge is used depends on what kind of person is using it. A good person will use it in good ways, while a bad person will use it in bad ways. Thus if there is no training to make people good, we will have engineers, architects, scientists, lawyers who are out for their own interests. Most human beings are naturally inclined to favor sensual happiness. If they are not sufficiently trained they will commit dishonest actions to get the money to find it, but if they hold goodness to be a thing of value and are trained well before going out to make a living, there will be good personnel of true benefit to society.

### 1.1.3 *The amount of resources and their use*

The amount of resources in the world is limited, and most resources take a long time and very complex processes to form. Thus resources arise slower than they are used. The faster the population grows the faster resources are depleted. Apart from the factor of population growth, resources are also depleted through wasteful consumption, by using resources for things that are not necessary. People in urban societies use more resources than those who live in rural communities; industrial societies use more resources than agricultural societies. Some resources, such as oil, are used and only replenished with great difficulty or at too great expense. Some, such as agricultural products, can be replenished quickly. The number of people is now increasing rapidly and these people do not know how to make economical use of resources. Thus in the space of a few centuries we have used up a great deal of the world's resources, and are now beginning to realize that certain resources, such as oil, which was once in plentiful supply, will soon be used up—not only on necessities, but largely on wasteful goods. Resources have been used to wage wars and produce weapons of destruction. So scientific advancement has not helped to increase the amount of resources for human beings as fast as human beings have used them. If human beings led their lives according to Buddhist teachings, scientific advancement would help them without leading to the threat of resource depletion or future deprivation.

Since we cannot solve this problem by increasing resources, we must try to solve it by slowing population growth as much as possible in order to balance use of resources and the population. According to Buddhism, apart from not allowing the population to increase quickly, it is also necessary to train people to have simpler lives so that their use of resources is reduced, to be diligent in working to increase production where possible and to use only as much of those resources that are difficult or impossible to replace as is necessary for survival. The Buddhist principle for living thus teaches thrifty use of resources. Two fundamental qualities to be brought to mind when using resources are mindfulness (*sati*) and wisdom (*paññā*). That is, there must be circumspection in the use of resources so that the harmful effects such as

pollution and destructive climactic changes do not arise. Resources must be used with real understanding so that they are used economically, that is, in as little quantities as possible for the desired result. Till now in Thai society we have used resources without either mindfulness or wisdom, aiming only to use them: felling trees, for instance, until the forests are destroyed and the rain does not fall, or when it does fall it floods and turns the soil brackish, as in northeast Thailand. Without forest, the rain washes off the topsoil, eventually leading to saline soil. There is no circumspection because people do not think of the harmful effects, do not consider the long term results, and do not realize that destroying the forest is tantamount to destroying the country and the people of the entire nation. This kind of destruction has arisen because greed completely blocks off wisdom so that people fail to see the value of the forest. This is only one example, but there are countless other examples of the use of resources without circumspection or understanding, the details of which can be obtained from government and private organizations. Thus it is clear that in terms of lifestyle and use of resources, Thailand, while a Buddhist country, has failed to practice according to Buddhist principles.

## 1.2 People and people

Historically speaking, we cannot know why it is that people have come to live together. Historical, anthropological, and philosophical theories have been put forward on this point, but no conclusion has yet been found. While Buddhism does deal with this idea in the *Aggañña Sutta*, it does not set out to deal with the subject as such, but only discusses the reasons people come together to form nations in order to explain how the division of people into castes must be based on the Dhamma, and that the ruler must be endowed with a particularly generous amount of virtues, not just great power or wealth.

The forming of communities has led to various problems. One question that leads to many more is that of how to live together. The different answers to this question have led to different family, economic, and government systems, which in turn are what define the different institutions that arise within those

systems. These institutions can either benefit or harm the individual in terms of income, health, justice, character or learning.

Nowadays a great number of people believe that the various problems that have arisen in society are a result of our inability to answer the question of how to live together: that is, we have not yet found the proper system, and once we have found that system we will be able to live together in peace and harmony. This kind of belief arises from the scientific hypothesis that people are entirely under the influence of the environment. But we can see that in actual fact people are capable of thinking contrary to what other people teach them, even though no one has taught them that contrary idea. Human experience does not entail education alone. Experiences in nature can cause people to interpret things differently from what their teachers taught them. If people were not capable of thinking anything other than what they had cognized and seen and had no creative thinking of their own, then there could be no innovation, because innovation is a kind of creative thinking. The ability to create is not one and the same as experience, even though it does rely on experience. Since this is so, regardless of the system used, there will always be those who agree with it and those who disagree. Those who disagree will think, speak or act in ways that oppose the system as much as they can. Thus there is no way that we can find such a perfect system. Using a system to change people is a kind of enforcement. If forced on the overall level, people will act differently on the minor details. If people were forced to practice the same on the level of particulars, we would have to lay down a rule of practice for every eventuality. But the number of different eventualities is countless, and so the rules to be laid down would have to be countless. If rules were laid down on such a level people would not be happy, because they would have to follow the orders of society from the day they were born till the day they died, and such a complete system of enforcement could not be changed. It would depend on maximum use of force, and in that case a ruler could easily do as he wished against the wishes of his subjects.

In looking for the perfect system, we should hold systems to be simply tools of administration, something that can be changed. We should not allow the

system to have such power over the people. People should be allowed the chance to agree with or oppose the system, because rulers are simply unenlightened beings (*puthujjana*), they have defilements and can be ignorant in certain areas. Allowing rulers to have a lot of power is giving them the chance to follow defilements or ignorance, which is tantamount to allowing bad or ignorant people to rule. We can see that rulers tend to commit wrongdoings and evil deeds regardless, whether they be in democracies, in which the people have a lot of freedom to criticize them, or in communist countries, in which the people can criticize them only within the framework allowed by that system. Thus, the less criticism is allowed, or the more power given to the ruler, the more opportunity there is for a ruler to commit wrongdoings and conceal evil deeds. The harmful results fall on the people.

If systems are a tool, then they are meant to facilitate the achievement of our aims. Tools do not have minds of their own, they follow the orders of whoever uses them. Whether they achieve results or not, and whether their results are good or bad, depends on whoever uses them. If the user is good the system is used in a good way; if the user is bad the system is used in a bad way. The various values that a system helps to produce are defined by people. Thus, if we could create good people without having to use a system, the system would have no meaning. In fact it is possible to create good people in this way, as can be seen from the fact that some people do not break laws and do good actions even without being forced to do so by the law. Laws or regulations should be used merely as tools for preventing people who are not yet good enough from committing bad actions and protecting those who do good from being molested by the bad. As for training people to be good, that should be the duty of education. Education should not only teach people not to break the law, but also train them to be better than what the laws tell them to be. If this is so, social problems must also be solved at the individual, not just on the level of the system: if people are not good, regardless of the system they are in they will find always a way to do bad actions, and if we were to change the system because it still allows evil actions, then we would be changing it forever. We tend to follow the idea of the social scientists, who

mainly study systems, that people exploit each other because the system is not good. True, a bad system can give the opportunity for people to exploit each other, but good people will not do bad, even when there is a chance to do it, as when a man finds money on the road, picks it up and announces its loss so that the owner can come and collect it, even though he could have kept the money for himself and no one would have known the difference. If we look at the matter truthfully we will see that people exploit each other less on account of the system than on account of their own premeditated efforts to do so and to seek ways within the system to do their exploitation. I am not saying that systems are not necessary, but I do believe that we should not overestimate their value or their harm, nor over-evaluate the human factor, either for good or bad. We should not think that only when forced by a system can human beings do good, or that all people can do good entirely without the use of systems. Buddhism accepts both the natural human propensity to do good and to be trained into good people, and also the importance of the system as a necessary tool for people living together. This can be seen from the Vinaya of the monks, which is the form for administering the Saṅgha, even though it does not take the institutionalized or legal form that administration of the Saṅgha in the present time does. Buddhism's analysis of social problems is such that it sticks to the facts. It is a middle way which allows it to take into consideration the ideas of both extremes, unlike the extreme schools, each of which cannot accept the ideas of the other side, or sees only its faults, leading to violent confrontation even before there has been a clear consideration of who is in the wrong.

Living together in society means people have to work in areas which relate to society in different ways. These differences are an important cause of contention because people tend to believe they are always fair to others but receive only injustice in exchange. This is clinging to the self, taking the self as all important, and so seeing only one's own goodness. When differences arise, there follows a jostling for the position one believes one should obtain—as can be seen from the people in the present time disliking the word "class" and favoring the word "equality" so much that they scarcely consider the sense

in which the words are being used. They do not consider, for instance, whether the equality spoken of is really equality, or whether the oppression spoken of is really oppression. Suppose we were not to use the word "class" at all: there are other words that could be used instead, and these words are not felt to have such a negative flavor as "class," and are sometimes even felt to be very normal—words such as "employer," "employee," "head," "staff," "officer," "subordinate," "leader," "follower," "mental work," "physical work." Thus it can be said that the words "class" and "equality" are "colored words" in that they incite us to see in positive or negative ways without considering according to reason and the facts. We are conditioned to see the word "class" as an evil, and when the word is used to qualify something we tend to see it negatively. The communists look on the capitalist economic system as oppression of the working classes by capitalist classes. The liberals look on the communists as placing power in the hands of the government, which means the leaders and members of the communist party, to compel the ordinary people into working like slaves and deceiving them into thinking that they are doing it for the country and their own happiness.

If we consider this point according to the Buddhist teachings we will see that differences between people are a fact of nature that must be accepted. Be it in terms of physical appearance, intelligence, personality, character—people are different. Since this is so, people will have different abilities and talents, so they must be apportioned duties in accordance with those talents and abilities. However, regardless of the duties they perform there must be the moral principle of not looking down on others or using power unrighteously. All duties, regardless of how broad an area of responsibility they cover, have equal dignity because they all rely on each other, like a machine: in order to do its job properly, every single nut is important. What needs to be considered and corrected in the systems is how to allow people the opportunity to do the job that fits their talents and abilities.

The Buddhist social theory is functionalist in nature: the relationship between people is through their duties. Status and roles are defined by duty. Good people in the social sense are people who perform their duties properly

and successfully; bad people are people who do not do their duties. But the Buddhist social objective is to be good both as a human being and through having performed one's duty, not either one or the other. The social duties described in the Buddhist teachings are duties suitable for the society of India in the Buddha's time. In modern society these may need some adaptation. For example, the "duty of a wife" in the present time, in which women work just the same as men, cannot be defined as doing all the housework as it was in the Buddha's time, as this would be unfair to women. The Buddha was teaching Indian people, so he based his teachings on Indian society. In a different society the teachings need to be adapted, but this must be done on the basis of reason and fairness. The social system is something that we have created ourselves. If anything in it is not appropriate we can change it. The Buddha held individual people to be changeable entities; how much more changeable is society, which is made up of different groups of people. The Buddha did not believe that all people in the world should mold their societies to how he taught, but he wanted to give examples of what different duties and principles people of different status in society should have. When the positions of people in society increase, or society changes, the people in that society must know how to select the teachings and adapt them to fit those positions and that society.

## **2. Problems of the political system**

In the past Thailand was governed by absolute monarchies, but since the monarchs abided for the most part by the ten kingly qualities and by laws which were fair to the people, the people had much freedom. This I have deduced from a study of the laws used during the Sukhothai and Ayudhaya kingdoms. In this article I will not present the arguments concerned, because this is not my objective, but merely state my hypothesis. Later, even though Thailand had democratic governments, the majority of the people were still loyal to the king. Thus Thailand has both a monarchy and an elected democratic government, as in England. Thai people understand and accept wholeheartedly the institution of the monarchy. They do not have any

suspicions or reservations about it. The elected democratic government, on the other hand, is new for Thais, and the people in general still do not understand it or see its value. The government has to try to create this understanding through education. We have obtained the democratic system together with a scientific education system, but we teach about democracy less than other subjects. Thus most of the Thai people do not really understand democracy, but we do see the virtues of the scientific education system, of the technological advancement, industry, and economy of liberalism, and so have become increasingly infatuated with material development. We tend to invest, sell and seek profits more and have tried to make our society more Western and live like Westerners. We have even tried to make our mannerisms and culture more Western, taking this to be a sign of progress. We think that this progress is a result of democracy. In fact we do not yet understand democracy in the sense of giving intellectual freedom and freedom in the exchange of ideas. Thus the liberal democracy that has taken root and developed in Thailand is one in which only liberalism has grown, but not the democratic aspect. That is to say, we demand to do what we wish, be it beneficial or harmful, but of rational thinking and the exchange of ideas there is very little. Thus it can be said that we have brought in democracy only in form or basic structure, but we have not trained people to have the real democratic spirit. Moreover, we train people to fall for material progress and allow the freedom to destroy even the comfort of the majority and the economy of the whole country by, for example, allowing people to extravagantly import a great deal of overseas goods and allowing the proliferation of night spots—instilling in the people the habit of frequenting such places—and putting activities that indirectly create trouble for the people, such as banking, pawn shops, and insurance, into the hands of private enterprise. The government gives these freedoms, it is true, but there is only a small sector of the people that really benefits from them, and if that benefit is to be maximized there must be exploitation of various forms. The result is that one group of people is given the freedom to deceive or cause trouble for another. While it is not the government's objective, such a policy opens the opportunity for it, and this is a

weakness, creating a material disparity that the communists can attack and volunteer to correct. The communists call it a class problem, and propose a democratic socialism to correct the rich having more freedom than the poor. Extravagance may be reduced, but so are freedoms in other areas, and the power of the state is so great that the people have very little freedom to express their own views. The people's standard of living does not improve because the state uses the fruits of their labor to produce weapons and support communists in other countries. Thailand is a liberal democracy, with the faults already stated, so there are some who want to change it to a communist democracy. If they succeed, they will have to take on the burden of invading other countries as do other communist nations.

Allowing one group of people to have more freedom than others, to exploit them and have better opportunities in areas such as livelihood, medical care, education and security, is not good government. As for allowing so little freedom that the state decides for the people on almost every matter is not the people's well-being.

All democracies, be they liberal or communist, are materialist democracies which aim to use science to maximize production. But increasing production is one kind of destruction of resources, so it should not be taken as the objective but rather simply a method for providing people with enough to live on. In this regard all people should adhere to the principle of thrift so that all can obtain a sufficiency. Production requires the use of natural resources, which are common property. Thus the majority of the fruits of production should fall to the common lot. Liberalism allows certain people to take these resources, which are common property, and sell them for their own profit. The state obtains taxes, but that does not compensate for the loss of the country's resources. In the communist system, even though the state itself organizes most of the production, the fruits of production do not fall to the people who produced them, but partly to the members of the communist party and partly to the cause of invading other countries, so once again the people do not receive the fruits of production in proportion to their labor.

Buddhism is a democracy, but not a materialist democracy. It is a spiritual democracy, the objective of which is peace of mind and a simple life without the need to work so hard. This kind of life entails a different point of view on freedom, equality, law, the use of resources and technology, as I will now explain.

## 2.1 Freedom

In terms of the transcendent (*lokuttara*) dhamma, freedom is a state in which the mind has completely transcended all mental defilements. This is real freedom in which there is no attachment to or enslavement by anything. Freedom in mundane terms, which is the freedom under discussion here, is a feeling of freedom, freedom that still contains defilements. Freedom as it is generally understood—freedom to do as one wants and freedom to escape from doing what one does not want to do or being treated in a way one does not want to be treated—is in fact craving (*tañhā*) or wanting. We want to have what we like and do not want to have what we do not like. The Buddhist view is that the answering of desires is how people find their happiness, but [the search for] this happiness knows no end, thus we must always be struggling. The more we want the more we feel ourselves lacking. Once we have obtained what we want, we want more of it, and better, and all the better if we can get all of it. Once we have obtained one thing in great quantity, we want something else. We always feel ourselves to be lacking something or other. This is being enslaved by one's own desires, working to serve our desires. Desire becomes our boss and we are unable to think or do anything freely. The ability to say or do what we want to say or do is merely a temporary kind of happiness. Having constant desires for this and that, we demand the freedom to do this and that, so we constantly seem to be without freedom because we are constantly feeling ourselves to be lacking something. Thus, if we have only few wants and wishes, there will be little distress of seeking what we lack. It is like being in a room: if we do not feel like leaving it, even if the door is locked we don't feel like struggling to get out, and we do not feel ourselves

to be imprisoned. In this sense, those who have few wishes will have greater freedom than those who have many.

Freedom must have limitations. In most societies people do not have the freedom to break the law. That is, laws are taken to be the standard of goodness. Breaking the law is taken to be evil and people do not have the freedom to do evil. Most evils in society arise from sensual craving, the desire for sights, tastes, smells, sounds, and physical sensations. Buddhism teaches having only few desires for these things, thereby cutting off a cause of evil actions. The state should greatly reduce freedom in regard to sights, tastes, smells, sounds and physical sensations, and not allow such a proliferation of those things as there is nowadays, because people should not have the freedom to involve themselves with what is a cause for evil actions.

## 2.2 Law

Laws are in the form of proscriptions: forbidding speech or action that the state deems to be evils. It is held that when a person refrains from the things prohibited by the government he will be good, but in fact the laws do not teach us what to do in order to be good people. People who have never been seen to break the law may not be good people, but simply people who have never been found to be legally wrong. Laws use force to keep people within a desired boundary. Thus people who follow the law are not necessarily good people, but simply people who act good out of fear: if they had the chance to get around the law they might do it. Thus laws merely cause people to be afraid to do evil too openly or in too extreme forms. The law tends to take no interest in evils that are not extreme or do not manifest immediate results, such as drinking alcohol, philandering, and lying.

That people in the present time infringe on the law only a little is not because they know the laws or agree with them. The tenet of lawyers that ignorance of the law is no excuse is tantamount to postulating that everyone knows the law. This postulation is merely an assumption, it is not a given, and it is assumed this way so that the laws can be effective, otherwise there would be many people maintaining they "didn't know." But the fact is that the only

people who know the laws in Thailand at present are those who study law and those whose duty involves using the law. Most people do not know the laws. While the postulation has a practical use it is false. That most people do not break the law even though they do not know the laws is because they have been trained to do good through moral principles handed down from generation to generation in our society. Thus the duty of the laws is to fortify morality, because morality does not have much power to inflict punishments, and people can easily transgress it. But if people accepted morality they would be good without having to be forced. Laws, on the other hand, have the power to punish, but not to encourage people to do good of their own accord. Thus the state should not abandon morality because law cannot replace it. If the state encourages people to be moral, then it would not be necessary to resort the law so much because the proscriptions and prescriptions of morality are stricter than laws. People who can already follow moral teachings would find no difficulty abiding by the laws.

### 2.3 Equality

According to the Buddhist view we must accept the fact that people cannot be equal, no matter what perspective we consider. In terms of government, for example, the rulers and the ruled must hold different status, and government is a social necessity. Thus there must be inequality in terms of government. In economic terms, since different people have different levels of intelligence and industriousness, it would be unfair to force them all to have the same level of income. On the other hand, it would not be fair to have those with small incomes pay as much taxes as those with large incomes. In terms of virtues, if criminals were honored as much as honest people, heroes or religious people, good and evil would have the same value. There can be equality among people on two fronts: they are equal in the sense that they are equally protected by the law, and they are equal in that they are creatures of the same kind. In regard to this latter kind of equality, when considered according to the principles of biology, we find that while people may come within the same biological group, they are not physically equal. Thus in this sense it means basically that

they are the same in that they are equally human beings. The Buddha did not see the value of human beings lying in their physical body or appearance, but in their conduct. Thus we come back to the original idea that people who behave as criminals should not be treated the same as honest people, even though they are people just the same. If we were to interpret the value of human beings in a looser sense we would have to say that as people they should be treated the same on the basic level: i.e., there should at least be a standard by which people are not treated as animals or inanimate objects. People should not be sold as commodities, for example. However, such an interpretation shows that people are equal on the most basic level, but not on higher levels.

The same applies in terms of legal equality: it is only a theoretical equality because not all people know the law. Those who know the laws better are better protected by them, and the rich have a better chance of benefiting from the law. But these practical flaws can be more easily corrected than [the flaws of] other kinds of equality, because the state can help to maintain justice by offering free legal representation for the poor, or by providing basic legal education to the people. While it is difficult to put into practice it is still a possibility. However, equality on this level is not sufficient reason to state that only when people are equal in all respects will there be justice.

The Buddha held that people were definitely different—not different in terms of birth, status or education, but in terms of conduct. Thus, respect for a person should be based on that person's conduct. This status in terms of conduct is more valuable than knowledge, ability or wealth, so we should not evaluate people in terms of their wealth. In fact Buddhism holds conduct to be more valuable than wealth, position, and praise, but in society these are the symbols of status. For people who are not attached to these things they are simply symbols given to them by others. The Buddhist method is to honor via "*anumodanā*:" appreciating the goodness of a person's conduct. Considered in this light, we see that Buddhist society seeks to honor good people, to show that good and bad actions are of different value, and to honor people in terms of the good actions they do. But it does not honor them with things of

economic value, such as wealth and money, or of social value, such as power and position. Things of economic value should be awarded people who are industrious in making a living, while things of social value should be awarded those who govern peacefully. But regardless of whether we consider in terms of conduct, economy or society, people should not be equal, because such an equality would be unjust. Likewise, judging people solely on the basis of one of these considerations, such as on economic or social terms, and rewarding all kinds of actions with wealth or with social position, are also unjust. We should consider what kind of goodness the action is and reward it appropriately. For example, a soldier who fights bravely should be rewarded with a medal for bravery, not a raise in salary. A teacher's academic position should not be used to evaluate a salary. Wages should be such that they are a provision for making a living, and increased according to the number of years a person fills a position and works honestly: i.e., considering how honestly one has fulfilled his/her duty, taking number of years in the position as the general standard. Social position will be controlled and not allowed to differ greatly via wages determined by the state, while talents and abilities are taken as points of honor. Those with other professions must pay taxes at a rate at which they have not so much left over that they lead extravagant lives, so that the door is not opened to the appearance of too many extravagant commodities. If we consider in this light we see that inequality will not lead to so much disparity that exploitation arises. But if people cannot live in such a way because they have become accustomed to sensual extravagance, then at least we should gradually reduce the extravagances one by one and so eventually live as Buddhists. Such a life would be one in which we could be happy, but so far we have not had the chance to experience it.

#### **2.4 Science and technology**

Scientific and technological advancements have enabled people to live much more comfortably. Scientific and technological knowledge is natural truth, not good or evil in itself. Whether it gives good or bad results depends on the people who use it. These kinds of knowledge have been used to provide

benefit to human beings and to destroy them. Knowledge has sometimes been used in destructive ways as a result of ignorance, as in using pesticides or taking medicine without full knowledge of its qualities, but more dangerous is the use of science to make weapons capable of destroying people and the environment in great numbers. Moreover, scientific knowledge is a knowledge of material things. It can be used to transform natural resources into forms that satisfy human desires, but human desires have no end. Thus the more capable we are of transforming natural resources the more we greedily consume those resources, with the result that they will soon be gone.

Scientific and technological knowledge bring happiness, but there is no way human beings will be satisfied with the happiness they receive. Thus the search for happiness through scientific knowledge alone cannot make human beings happy. For people to be happy they must know "enough," how to be contented with a simple life. If human beings had such simple desires, then the scientific knowledge already available to human beings would be enough to provide them with almost perfect happiness. Thus the state should implement policies by which the people live simply, and use scientific and technological knowledge as a means of providing the people with physical comforts so that they do not have to endure unduly heavy labor and have sufficient leisure time to reflect on religion and find peace of mind. If the state does not constrain the people to simple lifestyles, they will be forced to work hard for extravagant lives and will stray further from religion.

In summary, a society governed by a Buddhist spiritual democracy would be one that has a very simple way of life. People would perform their duties with an understanding of the importance of living together, not hoping for excessive material rewards. They would be materially comfortable as a result of scientific and technological know-how and would adhere firmly to the principles of Buddhism and always strive to conduct themselves well. The state would have the duty of seeing to internal concord and defense so that the country could proceed according to those policies. The state's laws would have to support such a way of life. Activities or dealings that leaned toward the bad according to Buddhist principles should, where possible, be controlled,

and where it is not possible to control them then ways must be sought to reduce them and encourage the people to see their fault. The state would have the duty not just to govern, but to govern people to be good, because only goodness can make people really happy.

### **3. Problems of the economic system**

When the people in a society are poor the economic system is of utmost importance, because that is what will help relieve poverty. Nowadays the population has increased, resources have dwindled, the cost of living has risen and people feel poorer. They have to work hard but their income is barely enough to live on. This is a situation that people do not desire, and they hope for an economic system that will solve the problem. When there were less people and more resources the capitalist system was compatible with people's characters because it gave everyone the opportunity to get rich if they had the intelligence and industry. The people of the Western world, who adopted this system first, having reduced their own resources, went out seeking colonies from which they could extract resources. But nowadays the situation has changed. No matter how industrious or intelligent people may be it is difficult to become rich. The ones who can get rich are those who have already built up their capital from the past. There are only few rich families and most people are poor and have to use their labor in exchange for their day to day subsistence. As the number of people increases it is even becoming difficult to find work, so we have unemployment. Some people have to make a living dishonestly. Since the capitalist system has these problems, there have been attempts to introduce different systems, such as the social democrats and communists, in order to solve economic problems, seeking ways to distribute income so that the disparity between the rich and the poor is not too extreme.

If we accept the truth that the population of the world is large and resources are getting less all the time, we cannot increase production without destroying these resources. The various systems we use to solve the problem can only do so temporarily, and their use of resources is not only for consumption. For example, in communist countries, the state itself is the capitalist, but instead of

distributing production to all of the population, so that the people can live in comfort, the state engages in war, and war, be it in the cause of justice or whatever, always requires the use of massive amounts of capital. Thus the communist method is not a solution of problems in order to bring about the well-being of the people, but more a reorganization of the economy so that the state has enough money to go to war. When the population becomes large and resources dwindle we cannot increase resources to cater for the population. Thus the solution lies not only in the economic system. No economic system can solve this problem if we do not reduce the population and encourage the people to live less extravagantly, thereby reducing the rate of consumption of resources two degrees. If the state implements such a policy it is possible to resolve economic problems, but we must not measure richness or poverty in terms of the amount of material possessions people have.

Buddhism solves economic problems by reducing the rate of population growth by using, for instance, the third precept reducing extravagance by not allowing people to become deluded by sights, tastes, smells, sounds, and physical sensations and leading a simple life, understanding the necessities of life to be the four supports of food, shelter, clothing and medicines. Apart from a simple way of life, Buddhism also teaches people to be industrious, patient, and frugal. There is no way that people who led their lives in this way could be poor, because richness or poverty is a feeling. If we are always wanting something or other then we always feel that we lack something: if we do not want anything we feel that we have enough. Thus if we want only a little, our feeling of lack will be small; i.e., we do not feel poor. The greedier people are the poorer they feel, but people who are not greedy, even though they do not have much money, do not feel troubled, they do not feel themselves to be poor.

The economic duty of the state is not to increase the national income. If the rich are very rich and the poor are very poor, the national average income may be high. [The state] must rather find ways to ensure that all people have enough, and give praise to those who are industrious and honest, not those who are wealthy. The economic system is a method for controlling economic

activity so that exploitation of labor does not arise. Industrious people must have the chance to work, and the more work they do the higher is their wage. The state must ensure economic fairness and not use an economic system that looks after the interests of the rich while the people suffer, concerning themselves, for example, more with the interests of merchants than with the interests of producers, or more with insurance companies or pawn shops than with how the people are suffering as a result of the activities of these businesses. However, the state should not take for themselves so much of the sweat and labor of industrious people who strive to establish themselves that those people become poor. Industrious people should have a better position than those who are lazy, but they should not be so rich that there is too much disparity. Economic fairness must not be economic sameness, but must adjust in proportion to ability and industry. The state has the responsibility of giving all people the chance to use their intelligence and industry. In this sense the system will act as a way for reaching the objective, which is economic reward in accordance with one's abilities.

#### **4. Problems with the education system**

Education in Thailand has been heavily influenced by the philosophy of pragmatism. This may be because Thai educationists have received their educations in the United States, a country that by and large favors that philosophy. Thus we have adopted the educational principle that education is life. This principle aims to have the student solve his or her own problems by giving students real life problems to solve so that they develop an ability to solve problems for themselves in the future. Thus education and life cannot be separated. For this reason, in the practical implementation of this principle things that cannot be used to solve problems in everyday life should not be studied. The curriculum must be constantly modernized, and since society is always changing and problems are also changing, the solution of problems cannot be achieved through ideas or values from another society or time. The implementation of these broad principles has led to a progressive interpretation, a radical kind of interpretation which is not in line with the

philosophy of pragmatism. The progressives interpret the educational principles of pragmatism as meaning that all the old values or solutions must be thrown out and students must search for new values on their own. True, this approach encourages people to search for new and innovative ways of thinking, but not studying the old means they have to waste time thinking up for themselves what has already been thought of by others, and to not see the defects and attributes of the old ideas. Moreover, in order to choose only those parts of the original [curriculum] that can be used to solve problems in the present, whoever does the choosing must have a good knowledge of that original curriculum in order to know what parts are to be chosen. [They say to] throw out the old or choose only those parts of it that can be used to solve problems in the present, but in practice it is not possible to choose from the old. Thus we see many cases of people nowadays who are said to have new ideas when in fact they are repeating the old ideas, unbeknownst to both the thinkers themselves and those receiving their ideas. If these thinkers really do have good ideas, it is a shame to see them wasting their time reformulating the old ones.

It is not necessary to interpret pragmatism in education in the progressive way, which is unreasonably radical, and overall the philosophy of pragmatism does not hold to such ideas, since pragmatism is only a philosophical method. That is to say, it can accept any system of philosophy that can be put into practice. Even religions, if they can be used to solve problems, are acceptable to pragmatism and recognized as valid ways to solve problems. The ideas of the progressives which interpret pragmatism in a completely uncompromising way, together with scientific education, have caused the progressives to go on to the radical interpretation that pragmatism only accepts scientific truths, and thus it is necessary to give up all spiritual ideas as they are old, outdated and unscientific. This kind of idea is not real pragmatism. Pragmatists are compromisers and they are broadminded in accepting ideas. Regardless of the system, cooperation can take place if both sides open up to each other's ideas and criticisms. This kind of openness has caused pragmatism to be sympathetic to and encourage democracy, and being democratic is considered

to be one of the important objectives of education. That pragmatism accepts all philosophies that can be used to solve problems shows that pragmatism has no objection to the study of religion or the "old knowledge," but encourages study on a broad basis, except that it emphasizes that education will be most useful to life when it studies the problems that concern life; that is, to study the old things in a practical way. Whatever is only a little connected to problems, while it may be in the texts, need not be given emphasis. This does not mean that we should not preserve such knowledge, because we can never be sure that we will not need it some time in the future. Pragmatism is a philosophy that loves learning, loves learned action, loves cooperation and understanding. It does not have the characteristic of radicalism the progressives try to give to it, with their extreme interpretation, and in fact seems to venture on eclecticism, which chooses and collects the best parts of other philosophies.

Looking at these two interpretations of pragmatism we see that the progressive interpretation does not encourage people to have true knowledge, but instead causes them to be narrow minded, which is not the characteristic of a scholar and a democrat. The latter kind of interpretation would seem to be more in keeping with the objectives of pragmatism and more useful to education. If pragmatism is interpreted in this way, it would not conflict at all with the philosophy of Buddhism, because the Buddhist philosophy also accepts the application of knowledge for solving life's problems, with the difference that Buddhism teaches about human happiness and suffering rather than material things. However, when knowledge of material things helps people in society to have happiness, Buddhism does not say that such knowledge is not worth studying, only that it should not be taken as the only important thing, because if people become deluded by material things it will be suffering they receive rather than happiness.

The search for knowledge through the use of one's own rational reflection is the important principle clearly outlined in the *Kesaputta* or *Kālāma Sutta*. Listening to the ideas of others, seeking conclusions through reason, which are characteristics of democracy, were things that the Buddha taught in his time. The difference between his teaching and pragmatism is that pragmatism

proposes methods for using knowledge, but does not propose knowledge itself, because the pragmatists held knowledge to be obtained from other sources, such as the sciences. Buddhism also teaches the knowledge that is to be put into practice. Thus, if we were to propose a Buddhist principle of education instead of a pragmatist one, we would obtain people who could be said to be real scholars or sages—not just people with professional knowledge, but good people. Being a good person has an important bearing on the use of knowledge. We can see that nowadays many learned people use their knowledge to further their own personal interests, use their cleverness to destroy others in order to obtain wealth, rank, and honor, and use their intelligence to get around laws that are harmful to their interests and seek ways to use them for their own benefit. If this is the case the more clever people are the more danger they represent to the country if there is not goodness to constrain them. When people are clever, it doesn't matter what laws there are, if they want to get around them they will. It is not possible to create a law that no one can break, but we can create people who do not intend to get around the laws and use suitable laws for the justice and benefit of the country. In creating such people goodness is an important factor for deciding whether a person has learning or not. If people have only knowledge but not good conduct they should not be called learned. However the state must define clearly what this good conduct is. In Thai society there are no better standards than the teachings of Buddhism for defining which teachings are to be included in the curriculum among the teachings dealing with worldly conduct and the teachings which learned members of the society should practice. If [a student] is faulty in these his grades for conduct should be reduced. These grades must be taken to be important factors in deciding whether a student completes his studies or not. If grades for conduct are heavily cut he should not be allowed to graduate, because people who will use their knowledge for the benefit of the country must be good people, not bad people.

The next problem is that at present many of the teachers we have are bad people: there are teachers who are dishonest, who sexually molest their students, who get drunk and go on rampages, and who have many other kinds

of bad conduct. The reason for this is that nowadays we accept teachers without considering their conduct. This causes the students to see the teachers as no better than themselves, and so be emboldened to do all kinds of evil with the teacher unable to say anything, or if he does the students pay no attention. Teachers are powerless to punish students. The state for its part is not interested in really controlling the conduct of teachers and students. If teachers are this way, giving them the power to cut students' grades on grounds of conduct will be an opening for evil-minded teachers to commit even more wrongs, like putting a weapon in the hands of a bandit. Thus the teachers must be of good, flawless conduct. Teachers who have flaws in their conduct must be heavily punished and removed from their positions. But in doing this, the state must clearly stipulate guidelines for the teachers' conduct.

Buddhism believes that teachers must be examples, they must have kind and compassionate hearts and have a true wish for the students' welfare. When teachers are like this they will be like second parents to the students, people worthy of reverence (*pūjanīyapuggala*). Teachers nowadays who commit misdeeds want their students to keep treating them like *pūjanīyapuggala* even though they have not abandoned their evil ways. But the students cannot revere them. Therefore the state must be strict in finding good teachers from the outset, not afraid to lose teachers who commit misconduct and becoming short of teachers. The state should take it that no teachers at all is better than having bad teachers, so that the children will not be ruined by bad teaching or examples. The chances of children becoming bad on their own accounts is still less than becoming bad because of bad teachers. In supporting bad teachers, the state is intentionally creating bad people within the state.

It can be seen that the principles of education stated here are compatible, both in terms of the objective of creating good people with learning in society, and the curriculum which emphasizes both academic knowledge and goodness together. The important person is the teacher, who is the example of a person who is good, learned, and of good conduct. These principles can be realized when the members of government have an understanding of the matter and earnestly support them, seeing the future of the country as more important than

their own self [interests]. If people receive an education in which they obtain both knowledge and goodness, society will not be confused.

The encouragement of not only formal education, i.e., the official education of the state, but also informal education, is important. The state must control the environment so as not to oppose the virtues taught in formal education, not just teaching students to see the fault of the vices (*apāyamukha*) but encouraging the proliferation of night spots all over the place. The mass media must also play a role in education, not just in entertainment. Media personnel must accept some responsibility in imparting knowledge correctly by, for example, not presenting news that is not unconfirmed, or at least knowing the Thai language well enough that they do not use it wrongly as we so often see today, otherwise they will be contradicting the education policy. The mass media reach great numbers of people. Spreading something that is wrong to the majority of people is tantamount to obstructing education. If the government sees the mistakes appearing in the mass media as trifling this is tantamount to allowing [the media] to destroy the quality of the people and damage the country. If we cannot use the mass media for education, at least we should not allow the it to be used in a way that obstructs the development of education. These thoughts on education based on Buddhist ideas may seem stricter than what is practiced at present, but that is because the current practice is too lax and negligent. Education according to the ideas proposed here is not an education that is too strict, but it is an education that is earnest, because the education of the country is not just a game.

The application of Buddhist philosophy in Thai society as described here is the personal views of the writer, who wishes to point out an approach for how the application of Buddhist philosophy to Thai society might actually take place. Whether it can be applied in other ways or not, and how it can be implemented, are matters that interested persons may take up for further study and research. The writer has only suggested an approach, but hopes that it will be of use to the study of those attempting to apply Buddhist philosophy to Thai society in the future.

[Translated from the Thai version by Bruce Evans]