

BUDDHADĀSA BHIKKHU AND THE THEORY OF DHAMMIC SOCIALISM

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In the midst of Thailand's rapid social changes, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (BE 2449-2536), Thailand's leading Buddhist reformist, interpreted Buddhism not only from a religious viewpoint, but also from social and political viewpoints. After spending most of his life reforming Buddhism in Thailand, Buddhadāsa believed that it was necessary to discuss political issues from a Buddhist viewpoint. As a result, during the decade of 2510–2520 BE [1967–1977] he presented his first political thought in the form of “*dhammā dhipateyya*,” an idea that social and political structures should be in accordance with Buddhist doctrine. Later, amid the revolutionary atmosphere led by Thai student activists between the incidents of 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976, he presented the intriguing political concept of “dhammic socialism.”

“Dhammic socialism” theory begins with the concept that nature is a state of balance for the existence of mankind, creatures, plants and world ecology. In the natural state, all living beings produce at their capacity and consume only what they need, without collecting “surplus” for themselves. Buddhadāsa calls this natural state of balance “socialism.” However, once human beings began to secure surplus resources in a way that forced others into scarcity, troubles began. According to Buddhadāsa, human beings should return to the state of balance of natural socialism, producing some surplus, but distributing it thoroughly for the benefit of all. Buddhism would be the ethical tool for apportioning those resources righteously.

“Dhammic socialism” is based on the philosophy that people should not take more than they really need and should share surpluses to the needy. Social problems basically stem from greed. In other words, greed is the cause of hunger and scarcity. The explanation of economic and social problems in such an individual approach—the idea that social problems can be solved by teaching individuals to adhere to moral conduct and practice generosity—reflects Buddhadāsa’s Theravāda view. It may be questioned, however, whether Buddhadāsa’s idea could be applied in solving poverty and scarcity under the present world-market economic structure. This article offers a structural and comparative analysis and criticism of Buddhadāsa’s dhammic socialism theory.

Buddhadāsa in the context of Thai society

Buddhadāsa was one of the most important Buddhist reformists in Thai history. His interpretation of Buddhism is considered to be part of an ongoing attempt to reform Buddhism in Thailand begun earlier by King Rāma IV. Buddhadāsa interpreted Theravāda Buddhist teachings and the tradition of Thai Buddhist practice with wisdom and rationality which is a result of present-day scientific advancement and the expansion of the middle-class in Thai society, which includes professionals and scholars. The result is that Buddhadāsa created a framework of alternative social and political theories. From a religious point of view, his emphasis on studying the Tipiṭaka and interpreting Buddhism with intelligence and rationality made his teachings the representative of “wisdom” in Thai Buddhism.

His series “Dhammaghosa,” which compiled his lectures into more than fifty volumes, may be considered the largest corpus of thought ever published by a single Theravāda thinker in the entire history of the tradition.¹ After the compilation and publishing

¹ Donald K. Swearer, Introduction in Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, *Me and Mine*, edited

process is completed, this series could be even longer than the Tipitaka itself. Donald K. Swearer, an American expert on Thai Buddhism, has evaluated the role and status of Buddhadāsa in the history of Theravāda Buddhism as follows:

History may well judge him as the most seminal Theravāda thinker since Buddhaghosa, and may evaluate Buddhadāsa's role within the Buddhist tradition to be on a par with such great Indian Buddhist thinkers as Nagārjuna with whom he has been compared.²

Some of Buddhadāsa's lectures are related to political, economic and social problems from a Buddhist point of view, and this ultimately led to his "dhammic socialism" theory.

Dhammic Socialism

The Thai term "*sungkomniyom*" (socialism) is a Thai word with a Buddhist meaning. The word "*sungkom*" (society) is rooted in the Sanskrit word "*saṅgha*" (community), while the word "*niyom*" is derived from another Sanskrit word, "*niyama*" (restraint and patience). Therefore, according to the root terms, "*sungkomniyom*" means restraint and patience of community members for the benefit and well-being of that community, and "dhammic socialism" refers to socialism which contains Dhamma. In Buddhadāsa's view, "*saṅgha*"— the community of "*buddhatarisa*" (the four assemblies of Buddhists) consisting of monks (*bhikkhu*), nuns (*bhikkhuni*), male lay followers (*upāsaka*), and female lay followers (*upāsikā*)—is the Buddhist paradigm of the socialist life and community. In this community, "*sīla*" (normalcy) is an important basic teaching, dealing with self control. Buddhadāsa presented the theory of "dhammic socialism" on the basis of his understanding of nature,

with Introduction by Donald K. Swearer, State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 2.

² Donald K. Swearer, "The Vision of Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa" in Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Dhammic Socialism*, translated and edited by Donald K. Swearer, Thai Interreligious Commission for Development, 1986, p. 14.

the Buddha's teachings, and the tradition of Buddhist practice.

a) *Dhammic socialism and nature*

According to Buddhadāsa, socialism is rooted in nature. The pure natural state is an example of pure socialism. He states:

The entire universe (*cakravāla*) is a socialist system. The countless stars in the sky exist together in a socialist system; they are all correct according to the socialist system, and that is how the universe can survive. Our solar system has the sun as its chief, and the planets, including the earth, as its retinue. They exist within a socialist system, but they are not so crazy as to collide.³

Buddhadāsa developed his thoughts on the "state of nature" by combining the Western evolution theory with Buddhist doctrine, particularly "*idappaccayatā*" (the principle of conditionality) and "*paticcasamuppāda*" (the principle of Dependent Origination). He believed that after the earth was separated from the sun and gradually cooled down and hardened, soil and minerals took shape on the surface of the earth with the passage of time. Within this process nothing existed independently of its own accord.

The primordial waters gave rise to the first single-celled organisms, and this was the beginning of life. Over time these single-celled life forms evolved into multi-celled forms and then into plants and animals.⁴ This entire process of nature was interrelated and interdependent. Buddhadāsa says:

Even a single atom exists in a socialistic relationship between interdependent parts. Within a molecule there is the socialist idea: many atoms make up a molecule; many molecules make up the tissues that combine to form flesh and skin, or leaves or whatever. It is all a socialist system.⁵

3 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, "The Socialism that can Save the World," in Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Dhammic Socialism*, p. 117.

4 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, "Socialism according to Buddhism," in *Ibid.*, p. 65.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Buddhadāsa makes the observation that there was not one kind of being in that natural world that took more than its share. Among living things of all the various levels, there was not one that consumed more than it needed. Single-celled beings take in only what their simple cell structures require to survive. Groups of cells consume only enough to nourish the group. When plants evolved, each plant consumed only what it needed to maintain itself. When animals evolved—be they fishes, birds, or whatever—all consumed only as much as their systems required. A bird will eat only as much food as its own belly and its nestlings require, taking nothing more than survival demands.

According to Buddhadāsa, during the entire process of evolution, from single-cell creatures to the birth of the first human being, the natural world essentially maintained a socialist core. Nature gave no tools of any form to store any more resources than were needed for survival and development. Buddhadāsa says:

Look at birds: they consume only as much as their stomachs can hold. They cannot take in more than that. They have no granaries for hoarding. Look at the ants and insects: that is all they can do. Look at the trees: they can take in only as much as their trunks will allow. Thus, this system, in which no being was able to trespass upon another's rights or hoard what belonged to others, is natural and automatic, and that is how it has been a society and continued to be one, until trees became abundant, animals became abundant, and human beings became abundant in the world. The freedom to hoard was controlled by nature in the form of natural socialism.⁶

Buddhadāsa points out that stones, pebbles, sand, as well as trees and insects, can exist in a condition of normalcy, without any need for a theory or social system to direct their interrelationships. They exist in a pure natural state of balance, or pure socialism. He gives an example of the body's physiology in support of his explanation:

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

Within one person there is the socialist intention. That is, there must be many, many parts functioning interrelatedly and inseparably. Those who study anatomy or medicine are able to understand this well. The eyes are connected to the ears, the ears to the nose, the nose to the mouth. There is not one part that can exist autonomously.... All organs, big and small, must work together, performing their functions properly according to the truth (*dhammasacca*) of bodily components, in order to survive. Thus, the spirit of socialism exists within everyone : it is the necessity of living together in a proper relationship.⁷

Buddhadāsa believes that when the first generations of human beings lived on earth in jungles and caves, they did not have barns to hoard food. They ate only to survive, going out to gather food for their daily needs. Buddhadāsa claims that in this first period no one person or group hoarded surpluses, so there were none of the social problems that we face nowadays. The first people lived in a natural socialism for hundreds of thousands or millions of years. Mankind has survived until now because nature has maintained a socialist balance throughout the long process of evolution. In Buddhadāsa's view, the natural balance was threatened when some human beings, who were "unnatural," began hoarding for themselves more than what they really needed. This hoarding caused trouble and scarcity for other people and consequently led to contention and competition instead of cooperation. Human beings have employed their intelligence to find ways to hoard resources such as rice, foods, and other things, and to hoard wealth and power to gain the advantage over others. Buddhadāsa says:

Nature would have us use no more than we actually need. But people have failed to heed nature, competing with one another to take as much as they can, causing the problems that we live with to this day. Everything is in excess. If we were to take only what is

⁷ *Ibid.*

enough, none of these problems would arise, contention would not arise, and exploitation would not arise.⁸

The question here is how much is enough? Buddhadāsa suggests that there is no fixed rule. It varies depending on the factors of time, place, and situation. A constant theme is that nowadays there is no moderation. There is a Buddhist saying: "Even an entire mountain or two of gold would not be enough to satisfy the desires of a single person." Human desire increase day by day. The more our desire increases, the more we persecute others. When there is hoarding, the problem of injustice follows. With the passage of time these problems develop. The leaders of the various groups try to hoard for the benefit of their own groups, and so fighting between them is unavoidable. To control society and limit human defilements (*kilesa*), laws and moral standards were developed.

According to Buddhadāsa, it will be possible for justice to arise in society if human beings "return" to the balanced state of natural socialism. For him, socialism is based on principles that follow the natural way, which states that we should take no more than what we really need and share our surplus to those who have less. All of us have the natural right to possess as much as we need, but no more. All people in the world should learn to share with others, even what they see as necessary for themselves. Such sacrifice is a moral principle in which everybody benefits. This does not mean we do not produce surplus: human beings have the right to produce more than their own needs, and this is a good thing if it is done for the benefit of others.

From his religious viewpoint, Buddhadāsa is trying to argue that morality exists within the state of nature, and that is balance and normalcy, which are the heart of natural socialism and the "intention" of nature. People existed in this condition for ages until

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

they lost the balance of natural socialism as a consequence of ignorance (*avijjā*). Nature therefore imposed a punishment on humanity, and this was the beginning of sin (*pāpa*). For Buddhadāsa, socialism is not a human invention, but a primordial natural condition which encompassed both the human and animal worlds. Social problems arose when humans opposed Nature's original intention until eventually there arose class distinctions and it got to a point where it was necessary to construct a socialist system because people had so separated themselves from Nature.

According to Buddhism, the core of nature is “*sacca*” (*dhamma*). All things in nature exist together under the principles of socialism. Everything exists interdependently, and there is nothing that can exist independently. Buddhist socialism does not refer only to human beings, but also includes other beings and the entire ecological system. Buddhadāsa claims that if all human beings exercise their rights within the limits defined by Nature, the world would be as prosperous as if it were in the era of Ariya Metteyya Buddha. Nature is therefore the root of his dhammic socialism theory.

Buddhadāsa's view that the natural state of human beings, animals, and plants is socialism is a profound intellectual interpretation. However, it may be argued that it is not possible to interpret the systems of the universe and of atoms as socialism because the movements of stars in the universe and of atoms in molecules are controlled by mechanics, and do not reflect any social or moral values. Neither does the functioning of the cells and organs of a living body. Buddhadāsa probably uses the term “socialism” in a broad sense, covering many things on many different levels. His perception of nature, however, is somewhat similar to the Theory of Evolution of Charles Darwin, who states in his work “*The Origin of Species*”:

It might be a comparison to say that within the natural selection process there is a most minute process of choice and discrimination going on every minute all around the world, rejecting bad specimens and protecting good specimens. It works silently and invisibly whenever and wherever the opportunity presents itself, to improve all forms of life, in cooperation with the conditions of life, both organic and inorganic. We cannot perceive the gradual progress of these changes until the hands of time mark a change in eras, and with our limited vision we look back into the geological past, and can see only that present forms of life differ from those of the past.⁹

However, what is behind Buddhadāsa's state of nature is different from Darwin's Natural Selection Theory. Darwin believed that human beings not only evolve, but evolve through natural selection. The principle of natural selection states that the world is always changing, but these changes are headed toward no specific destination or goal. In other words, Darwin's Theory of Evolution does not have what Buddhadāsa called a "plan" or "intention" of nature. According to Darwin's Natural Selection Theory, all living beings are in a state of "struggle for survival" in which only the fittest specimens can survive. Some Darwinian scientists, however, have found that certain plants and animals "help and support one another" for survival, for conservation of species, and for evolution to higher stages. Elaborations on survival of the fittest made Darwinism compatible on one level with Buddhadāsa's view of nature as a co-operation based on "socialism."

Darwin's concept of the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest reminds one of the social and political theory of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) on the "state of nature." Hobbes believed that nature created all human beings equal in body and mind. In terms of body, even the weakest has the strength to kill the strongest by various means. As for the mind, all human beings, given the opportunity and time to train, can be equal in terms of intelligence.

⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, W. W. Norton and Company, 1975, p. 47.

Hobbes claimed that equality of ability and similarity of wants, in the end, bring human beings into conflict. If any two people desire the same thing which cannot be possessed by both of them, they become enemies. In "*Leviathan*" Hobbes says:

If one person plows, sows, builds, or possesses a comfortable place, it can be expected that other people may try to take it from him and force him away from there, not only for the fruit of his labor, but also for his life, or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another.¹⁰

Hobbes finds three principal causes of contention among human beings: competition, insecurity, and glory. The first makes men invade for gain, the second for safety, and the third for reputation. He also notes that:

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man.¹¹

And also:

To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent ; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no justice.¹²

Hobbes is of the opinion that the motivations that incline human beings to peace are fear of death, desire for a good life, and a hope to attain that good life through industry. As a result, human beings drew up agreements and laws to achieve the goal of peace. Hobbes' theory is therefore diametrically opposed to Buddhadāsa's. While Hobbes believes that the natural state is one in which human beings war on each other, and that laws, tranquility, and peace were

10 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Basil Blackwell, 1960, p. 81.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

human creations, Buddhadāsa sees that human beings are naturally socialistic, united in action and spirit, and lived in peace, while war is what human beings have created from unnatural desires for "surplus." While Hobbes discusses the natural human state from social and political viewpoints, Buddhadāsa's theory gives a more general view that encompasses the entire natural world, be it the universe, trees, animals, or human beings.

Buddhadāsa's theory provided a useful foundation for solving today's global ecology crisis. Thomas Berry, an American theologian, writes:

We are starting to move from democracy to biocracy, to a participation of a greater community of lives. In our decision making process ... we need to understand, now, that our well being can be achieved only if the entire world of nature around us is in a healthy condition.¹³

As the world is facing a number of environmental crises such as destruction of tropical rain forests, pollution damaging the ozone layer, and the extinction of a great many animal and plant species, Buddhadāsa's dhammic socialism theory has become one of the most progressive visions on ecology.

b) *Dhammic Socialism and Religion*

Buddhadāsa believes that the essence of the world's religions is socialism. Buddhism is especially socialist, both in principle and in practice. Lord Buddha was born in this world to help all beings, not for any specific being, or even for the Lord Buddha himself. If we examine the Buddha's kindness and compassion to all beings, we will see it is the highest form of socialism. The socialistic ideal of Buddhism finds expression in the concept of the *bodhisatta*. The *bodhisatta* is one who not only helps others, but sacrifices himself, even his own life, for their sakes.

13 Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, 1988, pp xii-xv.

According to Buddhadāsa, all religious founders unanimously maintain that they were born into this world for the happiness and welfare of all beings, and all of them proscribed consumption beyond necessity. Buddhadāsa claims that every religious founder wanted people to live by socialist principles for the benefit of society as a whole. Every religion is founded on the basis of love and compassion to all beings. This attitude leads to equality, liberty, and a feeling of the unity of all lives. In this sense, all religions are socialist.

By Buddhist doctrine, the fourfold assembly of Buddhists—composed of monks (*bhikkhu*) female monks (*bhikkhuni*), male lay followers (*upāsaka*), and female lay followers (*upāsikā*)—must consume no more than its share. Overconsumption is a wrong and also a defilement. Buddhadāsa claims that true Buddhists unknowingly have a socialist spirit. The socialist ideal exists both in Buddhist doctrine and in the practice of Buddhists from the Buddha's time down to the present. He cites the past:

If we were to go back about 2000 years we would meet the finest socialist system, and it has existed in the very flesh and blood of the Buddhist community down to the present day—so much so that if we hold ourselves to be Buddhist we will have a socialist disposition in our very being, that is why we see our fellow humans as friends in suffering, in birth, in old age, in sickness and in death—friends in every way, so we cannot abandon them.

When I say this everyone should be able to understand. The older people, in particular, may remember how our forefathers taught us, to consider the feelings of others, to be altruistic, to see others as friends in birth, aging, sickness and death. This is a pure socialist ideal, and it was really put into practice, not just talked about or done in a political way: lying and deceiving to protect one's own interests, citing this and that and lacking all sincerity. Thus it is fitting that Buddhists become familiar with the socialism inherent in the Buddhist community, using it as a weapon against the bloody forms of socialism of the dogmatists

(*saccābhinivesa*), who themselves commit wrongs and then put the blame on others.¹⁴

The meaning of socialism in Buddhadāsa's perception is to take no more than one's own rightful share and to consume only what is necessary so that the remainder can be used to benefit others. Teachings in both the Suttas and the Vinaya specify that Buddhist monks must subsist on only the four supports. The Doctrine teaches us to be satisfied with what we have. True Buddhists must be satisfied with the four supports which are the necessities of life. Anything that is not a necessity should be left for the benefit of the community. Buddhadāsa talks about Thai society in the past:

In the past morality (*siladhamma*) was in humanity's very flesh and blood. All Buddhists, for example, seemed to have honesty, gratitude, patience, and forgiveness as an integral part of their very being. No one had to be taught these things. Children had only to observe their parents. Since the parents lived in this way, morality was passed on to the children ... This practice was upheld by countless generations of our ancestors and became a central part of their home and national culture.¹⁵

Buddhadāsa observes that when villagers in his neighborhood went out to tend their paddies, gardens or fields, they recited this little verse as they planted the seed: "If birds eat it, it is merit; if people eat it, it is charity." Villagers thought that if birds ate their fruit they would receive merit, and if a hungry person stole the fruits of their plants, that would be their charity. Thus they tended to plant enough, allowing for birds and hungry people.

Buddhadāsa felt that dhammic socialism is the state of balance of all things. When human beings lack this natural balance, they have to experience suffering in the form of social injustice, tension, and anxiety. Therefore, social problems are indications of lack of natural

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

balance. He also believed that "Life is sustained by the Dhamma, not by food." It seems that according to Buddhadāsa good society is society rooted in religion, which is not very different from the monks' society.

Buddhadāsa's dhammic socialism could probably be a good society if it was all voluntary and occurred naturally. However, if monastic regulations were enforced on worldly society as a whole, problems would occur. Louis Gabaude, a French scholar of religion, observes:

A civil society is composed of members who did not choose to get into it, who do not want to get out of it, and who do not have the same ideals. A society of "renouncers", such as the religious disciples of the Buddha, is composed of members who chose to "get out" of civil society and to live according to a given ideal embedded in precise rules. Is it valid to assume that the principles of a community of "renouncers" apply to the society from which they want to leave?

In present-day society, if Buddhist teachings about *sīla* (morality), *vinaya* (discipline), *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *dāna* (giving) were to be willingly observed by Buddhists both within and outside of the monastic institution, that would be good and acceptable for everyone. But if these monastic standards were enforced in lay society, it would be a violation of people's religious rights. People should have freedom in choosing to accept or reject regulations of a religion or tradition. To impose standards observed on a voluntary basis by members of religious community onto a worldly society would cause problems because it would cause a modern society with its rapid changes, such as present-day Thailand, to become static. Moreover, it is simplistic to assume that the monastic lifestyle could be applied to a complex and diverse modern country like Thailand at present.

c) *Dhammic Socialism and Social Ethics*

Buddhadāsa distinguishes between socialism and individualism. He feels that social or community service work must be based on the principle of “social preference,” otherwise it becomes “individual preference,” serving the interests of individuals. In his view, socialism must focus on the welfare of people in every sector of society and on examining and solving social problems on all levels. In a society in which individual interests were given more importance than the public interest, it would be very difficult for social problems to be solved accurately and effectively. Buddhadāsa criticizes “individualism,” which is the basis of democratic society in general, as incapable of providing a foundation of well-being for the majority of people in society because it aims for individual interests more than the public interest. Dhammic socialism, in contrast, focuses more on the public interest, and can save the world from self destruction through individualism and material development, which promote consumerism, selfishness, and destruction of natural resources and the environment.

According to Buddhadāsa, social problems arise with the formation of society. When human beings lived isolatedly or in small groups, as in the Stone Age, social problems did not arise, or only in small number. As the human population increased and assembled into larger groups, social problems began to emerge. As society grew and expanded, human beings began to persecute one another, and problems developed into crises. Buddhadāsa's concept of urban society differs from the theory of Emile Durkheim (1858 -1917), a German sociologist, who, in *The Division of Labor in Society*, states that the ability of human beings, as social animals, to divide labor is what caused civilization to progress. Durkheim's main idea is that population volume and density are causes of labor division, which result in the progress of civilization. He defines “population volume” as the number of people living in a certain

area, and “population density” as intensity and speed of social interaction among people in a society. Durkheim perceives that population volume and density have compelled human beings to develop specialized skills in their work for better survival in new environments. Division of labor was the cause of progress and civilization. Buddhadāsa agrees with Durkheim that volume and density of population in a society are causes of social tension. However, while Durkheim suggests that such tension diversified the division of labor, and consequently led to progress of civilization, Buddhadāsa sees the tension as leading to conflict and social crisis, which must be solved by returning to the dhammic socialism’s values of kindness and sharing. In brief, Buddhadāsa seems to be suggesting that we should return to the kind of society that existed before capitalism.

Buddhadāsa suggests that any system which is to be applied in society must be based on the principle of public interest rather than private interests. He perceives the essence of society as the community, not the individual. Even the necessity of bearing children is a social matter. Survival of mankind therefore relies on mutual cooperation and support. His emphasis on public interests indicates that Buddhadāsa does not agree with capitalism on the matter of personal possession. In this respect Buddhadāsa’s view resembles that of Karl Marx. According to Marx, Adam Smith did to political economics what Martin Luther did to religion. While Luther transformed an external theology into an inner human essence, Adam Smith transformed external assets into personal possessions. Marx calls Adam Smith the founder of “the religion of personal possessions.” Personal possessions have already become a part of human beings, and human beings have become the core of personal possessions. Marx observes:

Just as Luther went beyond external religion by making religion into an inner core of the human being, as in his rejection of the idea

that monks are separate from laymen by placing monks in the heart of laymen, so wealth as something external, free, acquired and kept exterior, has also been canceled. That is, the boundary of lifeless objects has been canceled by allowing them to be part of human beings and by accepting that human beings themselves are the core of personal possessions. But that is leading mankind into the realm of personal possessions, just as Luther led mankind to the realm of religion.¹⁶

It is amusing that while Buddhadāsa did not agree with Adam Smith in turning external assets into personal possessions, he found himself in the same status as Martin Luther in that Luther internalized Christian doctrine and put the monkhood inside the human being. Buddhadāsa has also internalized Buddhist Doctrine and turned Buddhist symbols into psychological entities.

Buddhadāsa looks openly into history and suggests that in order to bring peace to all mankind, we have to *return* to the way of Dhamma, which is the harmony of natural socialism. Any social service must always be on this basis. Buddhadāsa sees that the highest form of social service one could perform in the present time would be to enable people to return to what is right. People nowadays have gone so far off the track that it looks like the world is heading towards disaster. "Nowadays people have gone so far off the track that we are about to fall into an abyss, if we have not already gone over the edge."¹⁷

From Buddhadāsa's point of view, the return to what is right is an admission that all human beings face the same basic problem: overcoming dukkha or suffering. This basic problem is not a materialistic matter, such as the problems of overpopulation or poverty, but more a matter of the mental defilements, craving and ignorance, within human beings themselves. The right approach to

16 Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, Vintage Books, 1975, p. 342.

17 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Socialist Democracy*, p. 4.

solving social problems must therefore be directed to these internal causes of suffering. As a result, real social service for the well-being of mankind is to help one another overcome this suffering. He reflects:

It is almost laughable simply to speak of solving the problems of hunger, illiteracy, and illness. These are not the real problems at all; they are only symptoms. The root of the problem has not been addressed. The root of the problem is that people have no morality (*siṭṭhadhamma*), have no religion (*sāsanā*) and have strayed beyond the bounds of religion.

If we were to solve these problems—illiteracy and hunger—would people be happier? There are many people who have never learned to read and who are happier than the most literate among us.¹⁸

Buddhadāsa criticizes modern attempts to solve social problems as mostly being for personal interests or fame. Thus the solutions have not been effective.

Nowadays, for instance, they try to solve problems but never succeed: how can the same selfish people who created the problem possibly solve it? No matter how many selfish people get together to form how many world organizations, since those organizations are full of selfish people, how can they solve the problems of the world created by selfishness?

As a religious leader, Buddhadāsa condemns killing, war, and preparations for war. The catastrophe of war has threatened all forms of life. Even animals are affected by the brutality of mankind, albeit unintentionally. He advises that we return to the basis of kindness and compassion (*mettā* and *karuṇā*).

People today are so cruel that they are willing to drop a special bomb which they know can annihilate people by the hundreds of thousands... This is the extent morality (*siṭṭhadhamma*) has deteriorated

18 *Ibid.*, p.14.

... If we want peace we must choose the path of peace. Killing others can only lead to being killed. If we are to be harmoniously united with one another, we should act out of mutual kindness and compassion (*mettā* and *karuṇā*)... We should overcome evil with good, not with evil.¹⁹

For Buddhadāsa, social problems need to be solved by social ethics. We should act for the benefit of the community, avoid excessive consumption, and share what we have with others. If people follow this course, solutions to political, social, and economic problems can be found.

While Buddhadāsa believes that the essence of society is human interrelationship, not just many individuals being together, and he supports 'social preference' rather than 'individual preference,' his methods are quite individualistic in that he sees the greed of the individual as the root of social problems, regardless of the social system. If we do not apply morality to ourselves and to all people in the society, we will fail to solve social problems. Buddhadāsa's individualist method could be effective in societies with simple structures and which stand on tradition, as in societies of the past and rural societies, but it would not be effective with complicated societies like modern Thailand, which is moving and changing according to world market changes and under the influence of capitalism.

d) Dhammic Socialism and Capitalism

Dhammic socialism and capitalism differ fundamentally in their economies, their political ideologies, and the qualities of their leaders. Buddhadāsa has pointed out some important differences between "capitalists" of the present time and "*setthi*" (wealthy persons) in the Buddha's time. In his opinion, capitalists are those who accumulate surplus belongings for their own benefit.

19 Ibid., p. 27.

Conversely, *setthi* according to Buddhism are those who spend their surplus wealth on building alms houses to help others. An alms house is a place where the poor can get items of necessity that they lack. The status of *setthi* in those days was determined by the number of alms houses a person had built. If a person had built no alms houses, he was not considered to be a *setthi*, while the more alms houses a person had built, the more of a *setthi* he was considered to be.

Buddhadāsa claims that even slaves or servants in the Buddha's time had some socialist connotations. He talks about the past ideal when even slaves did not want to leave their generous *setthi* masters, in contrast to laborers in the present time who hate their selfish capitalist bosses. He says:

Buddhist *setthi* treated slaves like their own children. All worked together for a common good. They observed the moral precepts together on Buddhist Sabbath days... Slavery in a socialist state need not be abolished because the slaves themselves would not want to leave such masters... The kind of slaves which should be abolished are the slaves under the capitalist system, who are treated like animals, beaten and whipped. These kind of slaves are always wanting to be free... [slaves] under a socialist system would not be endangered, they would be looked after with love, compassion, and care.²⁰

Buddhadāsa claims that Buddhists, be they kings, *setthi*, or slaves, were socialist since ancient times, and most slaves were content with their lot, even though they were not allowed by the monastic discipline to ordain as monks. However, in the Thai Buddhist tradition, the worst situation that could happen for a Thai man was to be deprived of his right to go forth as a monk. Thus, it is difficult to agree with Buddhadāsa's view in this regard that men would be satisfied with their lot, deprived of the right to ordain as monks. His view of slavery seems too favorable and idealistic. He has

20 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Socialism according to Buddhism*, pp. 79-80.

completely overlooked the negative aspects of slavery: parents selling their children as slaves to redeem their debts, particularly those incurred from gambling; children born to slaves forced to be slaves all their lives; slaves being beaten up and tortured unreasonably, etc.

According to Buddhadāsa, without mutual kindness and compassion and alms giving, the rich are mere capitalists accumulating wealth and power for themselves. They will maltreat laborers for their profit and reinvest these profits for further profits. Buddhadāsa puts great emphasis on personal morality in the rich without questioning how fair existing social structures or systems are. Economists may argue that it is rational for the rich to make profit and reinvest the profit under an economic system where moral responsibilities are replaced by market mechanisms, production criteria and efficiency. For instance, Adam Smith might have argued that the free market would turn personal evil into public benefit and turn greed into production efficiency. He claims in *The Wealth of Nations* that in pursuit of profit, those who have funds and power in making economic decisions will in the end help the poor through economic activities, even though they may not intend to do so. He states:

He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.²¹

Adam Smith is of the opinion that human beings are rational and calculate on matters of their own interests. Therefore, it is fitting to allow consumers under the free market system, who care about

21 Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, The Modern Library, 1973, p. 423.

their own interests, to judge rival producers. In the end, outputs would be of the best quality at the lowest prices possible. This system transforms personal greed into an efficient economic power.

This vision is totally different from that of the economic system in dhammic socialism. Buddhadāsa proposes that *setthi* in a dhammic socialist system would employ people in production for the welfare of the public. The rich should not be capitalists who accumulate their own wealth and at the same time oppress laborers, but should be *setthi* who employ their social and economic status in bringing benefits to workers and the poor. In contrast to Adam Smith, Buddhadāsa paints an image of the desirable economic system that is relatively stable, involving no free market or competition, but focusing on high social security based on the personal morality of the *setthi*. However, he does not address the question of how legitimately those *setthi* obtain their wealth.

Buddhadāsa points out clearly that in present-day capitalism human beings are destroying natural resources and the world's environment. He complains that natural resources are being spent wastefully and uselessly, often in uncreative ways such as manufacture of weapons. He adds:

If we were to use the earth's resources according to what Nature desired or allowed, we would not need to use as much as we do now. There would be plenty for everyone for years to come, even indefinitely. Nowadays, however, we are squandering the earth's minerals so destructively that before long they will be gone. This is contrary to the Dhamma, to religion, to God. If we were to use them as we should, according to the desires of Nature, or of God, there would be plenty.²²

Buddhadāsa sees that to hoard resources more than is necessary will cause scarcity, which consequently leads to poverty. Therefore, taking or consuming no more than is necessary is a solution to the

22 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Socialist Democracy*, p. 11.

problem of poverty. On this point it seems that Buddhadāsa has a contradictory vision. If it is wrong to possess a lot of assets, how can there be generous *setthi* who work for the public benefit in dhammic socialism?

According to Buddhadāsa, human beings have oppressed and destroyed Nature so much that many species of animals and plants have become extinct. Even human tribes have vanished because of selfishness and oppression among human beings. He explains that possessions in themselves are neutral, neither good nor bad. However, selfishness has become a cause of the injustice that causes one person to become richer and another to become poorer. The rich should therefore work hard to help relieve the suffering of the poor, while the poor should improve themselves by working harder and avoiding vices (*apāyamukha*) that lead to poverty. Buddhadāsa's analysis of social classes is based mainly on personal morality and does not address the economic and social structures that create classes.

Buddhadāsa agrees with the use of technology if it is for the benefit of society as a whole. He supports the use of technology for producing surplus, but those surpluses must be partly allocated to the needy, not for the profit of individuals. He believes that if people used technology to produce necessities, and *if there is sharing*, people would easily have enough to live on. If those products were used in the field of dhammic socialism, he believes, peace would arise quickly in our world. In contrast, wasteful technology only encourages defilements and destroys natural resources and the environment. However, he does not go into details as to what is the appropriate use of technology and resources. Moreover, he does not suggest any measures to justly apportion surplus production apart from voluntary alms giving by the rich.

e) *Dhammic Socialism and Democracy*

According to Buddhadāsa, real politics is the struggle with misunderstanding, wrong view, and infatuation with power. World politics is at present only a tool for taking advantage of others. Politicians say only what serves their interests. This has tainted the meaning of politic. Buddhadāsa advises us to look on politics as a matter of morality. When politics becomes a matter of morality, it will be able to help the world. He says:

Upon reflection you will see that the correct application of politics is a moral matter. If it is moral it is natural truth, Dhamma. It is rather dishonest politics that are not morality, that are inconsistent with natural truth and cause people to destroy each other.²³

Buddhadāsa connects “politics” to “religion” by suggesting that “politics” is a moral system based on the united action and spirit of the people to solve the problems incurred by having a lot of people together as a society. In his view “dhammic socialism” is more moral than any other political system, because it is based on the benefit of the common good and because it returns the society to normalcy. As for “religion,” it is the highest condition of morality. Since the core of a political system is morality, politics and religion cannot be separated. He explains:

The social sciences should be seen as basically a moral enterprise. The term *sāstra* originally meant something sharp ... When *sastra* is applied to society as *sangham-sāstra* (social sciences), it means something sharp for cutting through problems. Thus the social sciences are something sharp for cutting through social problems, bringing together all aspects of society as social sciences, such as politics, economics, culture, or even religion. Politics is one social science which can cut through social problems very effectively.²⁴

And:

23 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Socialism that can Save the World*, p. 126.

24 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Socialism according to Buddhism*, pp. 50-51.

Nothing is excluded from morality [*siladhamma*], and all things must be concerned with it. There is nothing that can be separated from morality, and as soon as something is separated from morality it immediately falls away from the true meaning of “social science” (*sastra-sangham*), leading, for example, to dirty politics which is in fact not politics at all.²⁵

Concerning “democratic” government, Buddhadāsa feels that the system can in some cases be a tool for seeking personal interests and destroying others, but it can also be a tool for creating peace. In terms of society, democracy may lead to economic wealth, personal liberty, and human rights, but in spiritual terms, rights and liberty which are dominated by defilements are the rights and liberty of delusion in materialism. In this sense, democracy leads to consumerism, and consumerism will inevitably destroy the Buddhist teaching which emphasizes the common good.

Buddhadāsa divides democracy into two kinds: “liberal democracy” and “dhammic socialist democracy.” Liberal democracy is the kind known in the West. In theory it promotes equality, rights, and freedom of the individuals as well as materialistic wealth. In Buddhadāsa’s view, the latter has never satisfied endless human desires, and also destroys natural resources and the world’s ecologies. He states:

Liberal democracy gives full freedom. But it does not define what this freedom is, so that people’s defilements (*kilesa*) take the opportunity to have some freedom of their own. Once the defilements have power, they control how freedom is used. Though the ideal of freedom is philosophically beautiful, it cannot be put into practice. The philosophy does not have the power to resist the strength of human defilements. ... Thus this kind of democracy is not safe, because people with defilements will give defilements the chance to forge their own ideals.²⁶

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

Buddhadāsa also argues that the western concept of "freedom" or "liberal democracy" has become individualism, with the attention shifting from the public interest to personal interests. Emphasis on individual freedom by unenlightened beings, who still have defilements, contradicts the fundamental meaning of the word "politics," which deals with the collective welfare of society. A political system that does not focus on this is considered immoral.

Conversely, dhammic socialist democracy promotes mutual kindness and compassion. According to Buddhadāsa, materialistic wealth in a dhammic socialist economic system will be apportioned fairly through generosity and sharing. The Buddhist concept of alms giving will bolster the spiritual wealth of the people while reducing the significance of consumerism. He says:

Liberalism emphasizes the person, the individual, each with his own freedom. Socialism cannot do this, because it focuses on social utility ... Liberalism cannot [provide a basis for social utility] because it promotes selfishness: liberalism opens the way for selfishness, with its objective of the individual rather than society... Only a socialism that has Dhamma can help the world.²⁷

Buddhadāsa criticized constitutional democratic government as an institution that encourages people to seek material wealth at the expense of the common good. He claims that dhammic socialist democracy considers the public interest as first priority. By not allowing individuals to possess surplus resources for themselves, dhammic socialist democracy is the principle of natural balance and respect for the rights of all living beings.

Buddhadāsa's perception of democracy is clearly very different from that of the West. While Buddhadāsa encourages distribution of incomes based on the Buddhist ideals of kindness, compassion and alms giving, political scientists may argue that true distribution of

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

income must be done through legal procedures and democratic political institutions. John Locke, a strong supporter of political freedom, gives the view that human beings are born with perfect freedom and full natural rights, and they have equality. By nature, human beings have not only the power to protect their lives, their possessions, and their liberty from others, but also have the right to judge and punish others for their transgressions. When human beings come together to form societies, all members of the society hand over these natural rights to the community under common laws and justice procedures. Locke states:

Human beings by nature possess liberty, equality, and freedom in themselves. No one person can be excluded from these rights and fall under another's political power without his consent. The only way for everyone to voluntarily give up his natural liberty and live under the obligations of civil society is by agreeing to live together with other people as a community in order to have a comfortable, safe, and peaceful life together, to be able to enjoy their wealth safely and free from the threat of others who are not its rightful owners. ... When a group of people agrees to form a community or government, they have come together under one common political institution.²⁸

As with Adam Smith's arguments on economics, John Locke argues on politics that human beings have handed their natural equality, freedom, and administrative power over to society, conceding to legal authority, with the intention of gaining better protection. Locke believes that a legal administrative system and inspection of power will be the guarantees of rights, freedoms, and equality of everyone in society. Conversely, Buddhadāsa does not place his belief in political systems or institutions, but in the moral conduct of the individual, as the means for solving the collective problems of society. He employs an individualistic approach rather than a structural or systematic approach to solving social problems.

28 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Pall Mall Press, 1960, p. 166.

f) *Dhammic Socialism and Political Leaders*

According to Buddhadāsa, a just government arises from a leader who is moral and takes more interest in the public well-being than his own. He cites the theory of the origination of the political leader given in the Tipitaka (*Aggañña Sutta*), where it is stated that in the ancient past people lived together in jungles and did not have cultures we know today. With sufficient resources for their needs, they lived peacefully.

This primordial condition of socialism prevailed until human beings began to hoard, steal, and quarrel on account of greed (*kilesa*). They took advantage of one another, and troubles spread all over the country. King Sammatirāja (the Appointed One), the very first king in the world, appeared to bring about peace and order. He was strong, clever, and just. He brought contentment to all groups of his subjects, ending disputes and instructing the people, satisfying them, punishing wrongdoers, and rewarding good people.

Buddhadāsa explains:

One day people uttered “contented, contented,” which in Pāli is *rājā* [king]. Raja translates as “contented” or “satisfied”... This word was from then on used to refer to that person who was appointed (*sammati*) to be king.²⁹

Political leaders in Buddhadāsa’s view should be “*dhammarājā*,” kings who fulfill the *dasabidharājadhamma*, the Ten Royal Precepts, which are:

1. *Dāna* (sharing). A ruler should not be deluded by his wealth and property, but should share it for the welfare of the people.
2. *Sīla* (morality). A ruler should never destroy life, cheat, steal or exploit others. He should not commit adultery, utter falsehood, or

29 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Socialism according to Buddhism*, pp.69-70.

involve himself with intoxicants. That is, he must at least observe the Five Precepts.

3. *Pariccāga* (sacrifice for the common good). A ruler must be prepared to give up all personal comfort, name and fame, and even his life, for the benefit of the people.

4. *Ājjava* (honesty). A ruler must perform his duties free of fear or bias; he must be sincere and not deceive the public.

5. *Maddava* (benevolence and gentleness). A ruler must possess a humble nature and not be arrogant.

6: *Tapa* (effort to be rid of defilements). A ruler must lead a simple life, and not indulge in a life of luxury. He must have self-control.

7. *Akkodha* (non-anger). A ruler should refrain from resentment, envy and malice.

8. *Avihimsā* (non-violence). A ruler should harm or exploit nobody, should promote peace, and should avoid war, aggression and destruction of life.

9. *Khanti* (patience, forbearance). A ruler must patiently endure hardships, difficulties and insults without losing his temper.

10. *Avirodhana* (non-deviation from righteousness). A ruler should establish himself in righteousness and not oppose the will or measures that are for the welfare of the people.

Leadership qualities are important in Buddhadāsa's dhammic socialism. If a ruler is good, the system will also be good. Conversely, a bad ruler would make the entire system unacceptable. Administration under dhammic socialism therefore depends almost entirely on the virtue, responsibility, and decision-making of the leader. Buddhadāsa gives as examples of moral rulers in legend and history such rulers as King Sammatirāja (the legendary first king in

the world), Emperor Asoka of India, and some Thai kings from the Sukhothai and Ayudhaya kingdoms. He says:

Let us look at an example, such as King Asoka... If we take a look at Asoka's edicts we will see socialism in every word ... Asoka was not a tyrant, because he did everything for the welfare of the society. For example, he constructed wells and assembly halls, and ordered mango and pikul trees planted, and anyone who did not plant them was punished. ... King Asoka was a Buddhist who preserved the ideals of a Buddhist despotic socialism.³⁰

Elsewhere he writes:

For example, look at King Ramkhamhaeng. Was he despotic, was he socialist? Upon careful study we will see that he was surprisingly socialistic, looking after his people the way a father would look after his children. Such a system should be revived today.³¹

The models mentioned by Buddhadāsa may have been effective in ancient realms, but in the complex structures of present-day society we may require efficient systems for examining authority to maintain social justice.

An interesting question here is that of "the public interest." Who is to decide what is and what is not for the public interest? In modern society, there are still many controversial ethical issues relating to public interests on which no final word has been found, such as abortion. In the case of King Asoka, it may be easy to look back and say what he did was for the public interest. Thus his punishing those who disobeyed him seems to be right. It is easy to create idealistic impressions of the past when we do not belong to those times, and it is easier to make generalizations about the public interest by turning back to the past than to make decisions on present-day problems. Buddhadāsa's vision of political leaders lacks the structural perspective of complex modern society. He

³⁰ Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Socialism according to Buddhism*, pp. 76-78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

claims:

If a monarch is a tyrannical despot, an absolute monarch, then of course such governments should be done away with. But why should we abolish a monarch who is endowed with the Ten Royal Precepts, who is a source of socialism?... True or righteous socialism would not create such teachings (as the capitalists and the workers). It would create only systems that are righteous and proper, such as systems that did not allow anyone to amass private wealth.³²

Louis Gabaude makes the observation that Buddhadāsa's choice of vocabulary tends to be a problem, in that he often uses common, widely known words in special meanings of his own. Gabaude claims that Buddhadāsa's political leader cannot exist in the modern world:

"Socialism", "democracy", "dictatorship" have commonly understood meanings connected to the historical implementations of their ideals. These words are not only used to refer to a precise set of ideas, but also to actual experiences. Buddhadāsa's new sets refer only to principles, to ideas and to dreams. As for experiences or facts, a Jātaka King, a 3rd century BC ruler like Asoka, or a 13th century AD Sukhothai ruler like Ramkamhaeng, can hardly be realistic models for ruling our complex societies and our independent citizens.³³

Buddhadāsa is of the view that democratic procedures take time, and communities often lose opportunities. He therefore adds the concept of "despotism", not tyrannical but benevolent and protective of public benefits. According to him, despotism has two meanings. As a political ideal, in military totalitarianism for example, dictatorship is certainly not desirable, but as a means for attaining a desirable objective, it means being able to handle things expeditiously. His concept of dictatorship emerged during the period of political strife between 1973 and 1976. At that time democracy seemed unable to resolve the conflicting political

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

33 Louis Gabaude, *Thai Society and Buddhadāsa: Structural Difficulties*, p. 220.

ideologies of the right and the left. He therefore proposed the approach of “righteous despotism” to end the hatred and strife and restore peace to society. He explains:

In fact, ‘despotic democracy’ is the right and best term, but people hate the sound of ‘dictatorship’ because they are so infatuated with liberalism... If the people are fully socialist or fully democratic, when problems seem to be taking too long to solve, they should hand them over to the dictator. It is a despotic democracy, a despotic population. This would be better... We must rise up to a dhammic socialist democracy, and use the despotic method... Our own country is currently in great turmoil, and we do not know how or where to resolve the crisis. If we had a despot who was righteous, we would be able to solve our problems quickly.³⁴

In general, Buddhadāsa’s approach to despotic rule is problematic because it gives importance almost solely to the moral qualities of the ruler. Buddhadāsa seems to believe that, with the Ten Royal Precepts, a political leader would never institute a mistaken policy. However, forcing people to do what the leader sees as for the public benefit is like using the end to justify the means: one person has the authority to judge what is for the benefit of all, and to force everyone to follow. This is politically doubtful because it opens the way for fraud and abuse of power resulting from human weakness and caprice. Moreover, the question may arise of whether personal ethics can guarantee administrative effectiveness? Who is to examine the ruler’s morality? Who will judge whether a ruler lacks these moral principles? When should a ruler cease to have power? And what happens if a ruler refuses to step down? Moreover, what should next-in-rank leaders be like? These were questions raised by Louis Gabaude, who also recounted Europe’s experiences with dictators as follows:

34 Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Socialism according to Buddhism*, pp. 59-60.

Buddhadāsa understands that, when society lacks a common ideal, dictatorial power is necessary to rule according to the Dhamma. The problem is to define what actually, precisely, fits with the Dhamma and what does not. He trusts the dictator to decide, in a rather Manichaen way, what and who should be “dhammic” and what and who should not. Europeans still remember that, between the two World Wars, their rejection of both liberal democracy and communism opened the way for the dictatorships of the “Caudillos”, “Il Duces” and “Fürhers” who were even sometimes supported by religious groups in the very name of social order, morals, and efficiency.

Buddhadāsa summarizes his political idea as a religious socialist democracy composed of dhamma and a dictatorial method of operations based on the Ten Royal Precepts(*dasabidharājadhamma*) which Louis Gabaude says would be difficult to implement in the real world because no one can imagine how the three main components of his utopian regime—dictatorship, Dhamma and socialism—could possibly be integrated in present Thai society.

Donald Swearer proposes that Buddhadāsa’s dhammic socialism has three fundamental principles: the first is the principle of public benefit, which encompasses politics, the economy and social structure. The second is the principle of restraint and compassion, which encompasses personal conduct. The third is the principle of respect and goodwill, which defines the correct attitude toward all forms of life. He claims that Buddhadāsa’s vision is a critique of both capitalism and communism and provides the groundwork for a political philosophy that could help guide Thailand to a more just and equitable social, political and economic order. However, Louis Gabaude differs, stating that Buddhadāsa sees only good in his “despotic dhammic socialism” and sees only bad in liberal democracy and communism. Gabaude points out that the difference is that liberal democracy and communism are real, actual, factual

states, while dictatorial “dhammic socialism” is a projection or mental construction.

Buddhadāsa’s political leader is reminiscent of the philosopher king in Plato’s *Republic*. In Plato’s socialist republic, he classified citizens into 3 classes: the philosopher king, warriors, and merchants (which include all kinds of workers). The philosopher king is the ruler of highest morality and wisdom. He is similar to the “*dhammarājā*” who adheres to the Ten Royal Precepts in Buddhadāsa’s dhammic socialism. Even so, Plato’s Republic was criticized by his own outstanding pupil, Aristotle, who preferred democratic government. In the fourth volume of “*Politics*” Aristotle explains four forms of government: monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and aristocracy. He adds, “but there is a fifth form... Government under constitution can broadly been explained as a combination of oligarchy and democracy. However, this term usually refers to a government that inclines to democracy.” Aristotle’s constitutional government clearly differs from the political leaders of Plato and Buddhadāsa.

Modern criticism of hierarchical government powers comes from Michel Foucault, a contemporary French thinker, in his book *Power/Knowledge*. Foucault claims that the universal theory concerning “power” has been causing problems throughout human civilization, and points out:

Where Soviet socialist power was in question, its opponents called it totalitarianism; power in Western capitalism was denounced by the Marxists as class domination; but the mechanics of power in themselves were never questioned.³⁵

Foucault suggests that what we want is not a political philosophy based around questions of sovereignty or around mechanism of laws and prohibitions, but a political theory that supports

35 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 116.

elimination of central power. He analyzes the mechanism of power as a cyclic or a chain-like structure. It has never been anywhere or in anyone's hands. Power is exercised through organizations which act like nets. The power in individuals' hand is only a form: it exists only in practice. Individuals are vehicles of power. They are results of power and are parts of its visible expression. Foucault concludes that we need to go into a historical inquisition, starting from the lowest level of how the mechanism of power works. With this new theory about power, Foucault has challenged not only the structure of hierarchical power but also the structure of power in democratic institutions. The best form of government in Foucault's opinion is probably the one with the most decentralized power, which, like Buddhadāsa's dhammic socialism, has never existed.

In conclusion, Buddhadāsa's "dhammic socialism" is a reaction that reflects a Buddhist point of view on the rapid changes that have taken place in modern Asia. As a thinker in search of an ideal world, Buddhadāsa always refers to "golden ages" of the ancient past, be they the societies of the Buddha's time, Asokan India, or the kings of Sukhothai, Ayudhaya, and early Rattanakosin. He idealizes those past societies as full of generosity and the spirit of "dhammic socialism" in which the leader is endowed with the Ten Royal Precepts and people lived morally, gave alms and observed precepts on regular basis. Any society in which the majority of people attach to traditional and customary practices will be made up of people who have close relationships and are strict in their religious observance. However, Buddhadāsa does not sufficiently deal with the historical facts of those periods, such as slave trading, gambling wives and children into slavery, annual recruitment of forced labor, cruel and inhumane legal punitive systems, and the slaughter of entire clans in quest of the throne.

Buddhadāsa's theory of "dhammic socialism" is a Buddhist ideal world outlook. Without a revision of structural interpretation either

from the political, economic, and social perspectives, it would be difficult to solve Thailand's real problems. The significance of Buddhadāsa's political approach is that "dhammic socialism" is a critique of modern western economic and political thinking by a Thai scholar within a Thai way of thinking and intelligence. Another of Buddhadāsa's benefactions is his concept of the balance and harmony of all things in nature as real "socialism," which may be an important philosophical foundation for solving the environmental and ecological crises that humanity is faced with at present. As an important Thai thinker, he also lays the moral foundation for other Thai thinkers to use in creating new political philosophies, in order to find approaches that may be truly used to solve Thailand's problems which are based on a Thai intellectual and cultural foundation.

[Translated from the Thai version by *Bruce Evans*]