

POLITICAL BELIEFS OF THE THAI SANGHA*

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Within a political system there will be smaller parts or political institutions with their own structural and functional features.¹ When these various lesser parts are brought together in a political system, they enable that system to perform three important functions: firstly, to respond to the needs of the people both on the individual and group levels; secondly, to preserve the system by choosing individuals to perform political duties and providing political education for members of the political system; thirdly, to adjust to changes rapidly.² The performance of these three duties is the transforming process of political institutions to introduce inputs (needs and supports) into the process of decision

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1. 96 monasteries (*wat*), consisting of:
 - 1.1 Mahānikāya 74 monasteries
 - 1.2 Dhammayuttika 22 monasteries
2. 439 monks, consisting of:
 - 2.1 Mahānikāya 278 monks
 - 2.2 Dhammayuttika 161 monks
- 3 Status of monks asked:
 - 3.1 Monks with ecclesiastically administrative position (*saṅghādhikāra*) 32
 - 3.2 Ordinary monks (*luk wat*) 407

The text presented here is taken from Chapter 8 of the thesis. In reproducing it here the editor has modified the text only slightly for editorial purposes. The content remains the same as the original.—*editor*.

¹ David Easton, "An Approach to the Analysis of Political System," *World Politics*, 9 (April, 1975), pp. 383-400.

² Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell, Jr., *Comparative Politics: System, Process and Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), pp. 9-12.

making which then emerge as output in the environment. If this transforming process is efficient the political system will be able to maintain itself. In other words the system will have equilibrium. There is one kind of input that is very important for maintaining this political equilibrium, and that is symbolic inputs, such as stress on the importance of social values and standards and the presence of democratic values. The social institution responsible for responding to these needs as symbolic outputs is religion. Since the religious institution is part of the political system, political activities will not be complete if the influence and output from religious teachings are not taken into consideration when responding to the demands of mental development and cultural preservation to bring order to the political system in the form of systematization, stability and ability to adjust to environmental changes.³

In Thai politics Buddhism is an important institution for creating social order and a medium through which that order can be controlled. In the Thai political system, for instance, it is necessary to constrain the members of society within standards and procedures for peace, happiness and security. To this end, the Thai political mechanism has issued acts, decrees, regulations and procedures to be enforced throughout the kingdom. These regulations are merely physical constraints applying to external behavior. It is to be expected that Buddhism will have an important role to play in helping to train and induce its followers to conform to those social and political procedures, and also have an influence on mentality and create a moral awareness conducive to following the political order.

In Buddhism the Sangha is the essential body of persons for training and teaching the people to be good citizens. It does this through disseminating worldly teachings (*lokiyadhamma*), such as the teachings on *dhammādhipateyya* (sovereignty of the Dhamma),

³ Adapted from the ideas in Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils (eds.), *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), part 2.

dasabidharājadhamma (the ten qualities for a king), *cakkavattivatta* (the duties for an emperor), *sangahavatthu* (the bases for sympathetic action), *brahmavihāra* (the holy abidings), *sāmaggi-dhamma* (teachings on harmony), *aparihāniyadhamma* (the conditions for durability), *santidhamma* (teachings on peacefulness), human equality, the worldly dhammas and the qualities of a good person (*sappurisadhamma*). If they receive Buddhist teachings that support democracy more than authoritarianism, those who adhere to these Buddhist teachings will incline to democratic political beliefs. This would help reduce contention in terms of political ideals within the Thai political system. Thus the Sangha is one population group worthy of study to ascertain:

1. What kind of Buddhist beliefs the Sangha has.
2. What kind of political beliefs the Sangha has.
3. Whether the Sangha holds any Buddhist beliefs that are related to political beliefs.
4. Whether the status of Sangha members has any effect on their political beliefs.
5. Whether the status of Sangha members has any effect on the relationship between their political beliefs and Buddhist beliefs.

Our study of political beliefs, degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs and status within the Sangha institution emphasized factors within the Sangha institution: i.e., emphasis on Buddhist teachings and status of the Sangha. This does not mean, however, that factors within the Sangha institution have any more importance than factors outside of it, only that studies of the social and political structure of the Sangha have already been conducted.⁴ The reason I give importance to Buddhist teachings and the status of Sangha members is that, from observations of the lives of monks in wats, I have found that they perform many duties. One of the important duties is long-term study of the Buddhist teachings (*pariyattidhamma*), in which belief in the teachings of Buddhism is added to that already obtained

⁴ As for example, Somboon Suksamran, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

in the school and the family. This belief can also be a foundation for other beliefs, such as political beliefs. Also, within the Sangha institution monks do not all hold the same status. Differences in monks' status arise from the different duties they do, their study, their age, their abilities and the observances they undertake, all of which lead to differences in lifestyle and opportunities in life. These differences should have some bearing on the monks' Buddhist and political beliefs.

The summary has been divided into three parts. In the first part I will summarize the results of the study according to the five objectives established above, and also give an overall summary, in order to submit new overall findings. In the second part I will submit new findings as a proposed role for the Sangha in the future. In the last part I will submit proposals and recommendations for further research.

the Sangha's Buddhist beliefs

These can be summarized as follows:

1. The Thai Sangha gives a good deal of importance to almost all of the Buddhist teachings. There are only a few teachings that are given less importance, as follows:

1.1 The majority of the monks gave only moderate importance to belief in the noble truths and the five *khandhas*. There was a high level of belief in the Middle Way (*majjhimāpaṭipadā*), the impermanence of the five *khandhas* and non-attachment. Low priority was given to suffering and happiness as arisen in the mind.

1.2 The majority of the Sangha gave relatively little importance to the Three Characteristics and *kamma*, stressing more the principle of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). The hopes of those who have morality and the impermanence of sensuality were all given low priority.

1.3 The majority of the monks gave fairly high importance to the *principles* for governing by Dhamma, emphasizing the importance of the *kalyāṇavatta* (good behavior), adherence to the supremacy of the Dhamma, the ten principles for kingship (*dasabidharāja-*

dhamma), the duties of an emperor (*cakkavattivatta*) and the divine abidings. Moderate emphasis was given to the importance of revering the Dhamma and the bases for sympathetic action (*sangahavatthu*).

1.4 The majority of the monks gave moderate importance to the *methods* for government by Dhamma: high priority was given to harmony (*sāmaggīdhamma*), adherence to good conduct, adherence to wisdom, peace (*santidhamma*) and adherence to virtue. Moderate priority was given to using the voice of the majority, no-seniority according to rains retreats, the *aparihāniyadhamma*, congenital equality and social parity. Fairly low priority was given to universal friendship.

1.5 The majority of the monks gave high priority to a Dhammic life-style, giving high emphasis to beneficial social action, social responsibility, not trading in arms, the absence of ecclesiastical rank among enlightened (*ariya*) monks, helping others, shame (*hiri*) and moral dread (*ottappa*), and the qualities of a good person (*sappurisadhamma*). Moderate priority was given to social welfare, virtue being independent of rank and praise, not being deluded by the worldly dhammas, penetrating the truth (*saddhamma*), and being a good citizen. Fairly low priority was given to broad mindedness, the teachings for a lay person and diligent effort.

2. The kinds of status that had most influence in determining differences in the Buddhist beliefs of the Sangha were learning (*pariyattidhamma*) and seniority in rains retreats, as follows:

2.1 Those monks with higher learning had a tendency to stress the importance of the Buddha's teachings more than those with a lower level of learning.

2.2 Those monks with greater seniority in rains retreats had a tendency to stress the importance of the Buddha's teachings more than those with fewer rains retreats.

3. The kinds of status that were tested and found to have no bearing on the degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs were ecclesiastical duties, order and ecclesiastical rank. This leads us to conclude that there is no effect on the monks' Buddhist beliefs due

to ecclesiastical position, ecclesiastical rank or sect, be it Dhammayuttika or Mahānikāya.

Political beliefs of the Sangha

These can be summarized as follows:

1. The monks had more democratic than authoritarian beliefs, as follows:

1.1 The monks gave more priority to democratic principles than authoritarian principles: they had a high degree of belief in righteous authority obtained from the agreement of the people and the people's right to oppose government. They had a moderate level of belief in the ability, intelligence and rationality of the human being, that human beings have rights, liberties and freedoms, and that human beings have equality with the highest administrative power, which has come from the people.

1.2 The monks gave more emphasis to belief in democratic methods rather than authoritarian methods. They had a high level of belief in meeting to consult and exchange views, in determining the powers of the government, in providing legal and political protection, in providing the right to vote, in decentralizing power and in free expression of the people's will.

1.3 The monks gave more emphasis to belief in a democratic way of life rather than an authoritarian way of life: they had a high degree of belief regarding interest in political participation, in adhering to the regulations of democracy and awareness of one's duties as a citizen. They give a moderate degree of emphasis to confidence in abilities, intelligence and rationality, belief in equality, looking at the world in a positive light, adhering to the importance, value and honor of the individual, the desire for democracy, respecting the rights and freedoms of others, and rational and constructive criticism, and they had a tendency to liberalism.

2. The kinds of status that had an influence on political beliefs of the Sangha were order and scriptural learning, as follows:

2.1 Mahānikāya monks had a higher tendency to stress democratic political beliefs than Dhammayuttika monks.

2.2. Monks with a higher level of scriptural learning had a higher tendency to stress democratic political beliefs than monks with a lower level of learning.

3. The kinds of status that were tested and found to have no influence on differences in political beliefs were ecclesiastical position, ecclesiastical rank and seniority in rains retreats: the monks had similar degree of emphasis on democratic political beliefs regardless of their level of ecclesiastical position, level of ecclesiastical rank or seniority in rains retreats.

*Relationship between political beliefs
and Buddhist beliefs of the Sangha*

This can be summarized thus:

1. On the average, the political beliefs of the monks had a fairly high relationship to the degree of emphasis in their Buddhist beliefs, as follows:

1.1 The more the monks stressed belief in the Buddha's teaching, the more likely they were to have democratic beliefs and less likely to have authoritarian beliefs.

1.2 The higher the degree of the monks' emphasis on the Buddha's teaching, the more they believed in democratic principles and the less in authoritarian principles.

2. The group of Buddhist teachings that had a fairly high relationship to the monks' political beliefs included the principles for governance by Dhamma, methods for governance by Dhamma and the Dhammic way of life, as follows:

2.1 The more the monks emphasized belief in the principles for governance by Dhamma, the more they believed in democratic principles, methods, and way of life and the less they believed in authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life.

2.2 The more highly the monks emphasized belief in the methods of governance by Dhamma, the more they believed in democratic principles, methods, and way of life and the less will believed in authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life of.

2.3 The more highly the monks emphasized belief in the Dhammic way of life, the more they believed in democratic principles, methods, and way of life and the less they believed in authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life.

3. The Buddhist teachings which had a fairly low level of influence on political beliefs of the Sangha and had no relational value were belief in the noble truths and the five *khandhas*, followed by the Three Characteristics and the teaching of *kamma* in that order: i.e., regardless of the degree of emphasis on belief in the noble truths, the five *khandhas*, the Three Characteristics and the teaching of *kamma*, it could not be said for certain whether and how highly a monk would believe in democratic or authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life.

Relationship between political beliefs and the status of the monks

This can be summarized thus:

1. The status of the monks in terms of scriptural learning had a part in causing the monks to hold different political beliefs in terms of principles, methods and way of life, as follows:

1.1 Monks who had a higher level of scriptural learning had a greater tendency to hold beliefs in democratic principles, methods and ways of life than monks with a lower level of scriptural learning.

1.2 Monks who had a higher level of scriptural learning had a lower tendency to hold beliefs in authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life than monks with a lower level of scriptural learning.

2. The status of the monks in terms of sect and ecclesiastical duties had a bearing on the different political beliefs monks had in terms of methods and way of life (principles excepted), as follows:

2.1 Mahānikāya monks had a greater tendency to hold democratic beliefs regarding methods and ways of life than Dhammayuttika monks.

2.2 Mahānikāya monks had a lower tendency to hold authoritarian beliefs regarding methods and ways of life than Dhammayuttika monks.

2.3 Monks with high ecclesiastical positions had a greater tendency to believe in democratic methods and ways of life than monks with low ecclesiastical positions.

2.4 Monks with high ecclesiastical positions had a lower tendency to believe in authoritarian methods and lifestyles than monks with lower ecclesiastical positions.

3. The status of the monks in terms of ecclesiastical rank and seniority in rains retreats played no part in determining differences in their political beliefs regarding principles, methods and way of life.

Relationship between political beliefs and Buddhist beliefs of monks of different status

This can be summarized as follows:

1. When the relationship between political beliefs and Buddhist beliefs was arranged according to the monks' status, it was found that the relational value in every kind of status differed from the value obtained before the classification in terms of status was made. That is to say:

1.1 The relationship between political beliefs and degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs of the *Mahānikāya* monks was lower than that for *Dhammayuttika* monks.

1.2 The relationship between political beliefs and degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs of monks with ecclesiastical position on the level of abbot was higher than for monks with ecclesiastical positions on level of *chao gana* (section head).

1.3 The relationship between political beliefs and degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs of monks with ecclesiastical rank had a value descending in order from the *rāchāgana* monks down to the *phra khru saññābat* and *phra khru thānānugrom*.*

* Words in italic refer to the Thai Sangha ecclesiastical ranks which are divided into three main groups. The first is the highest, the second and the third are lower respectively—*editor*.

1.4 The relationship between political beliefs and degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs of *parian* (Pāli studies) monks and *nak tham* (Dhamma studies) monks was of equally moderate value.

1.5 The relationship between political beliefs and degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs of the elders (*thera*), the mid-level monks (*majjhima*) and the new monks (*navaka*) was of equally moderate value.

2. When the monks' status was considered in detail it was found that only the level of scriptural learning and seniority in rains retreats had a value on the relationship between political beliefs and degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs, as follows:

2.1 The more emphasis was placed on Buddhist beliefs by *nak tham* monks and *parian* monks the higher was their belief in democratic principles, methods and ways of life and the lower was their belief in the authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life.

2.2 The more emphasis was placed on Buddhist beliefs by new (*navaka*) monks, mid-level (*majjhima*) monks and elder (*thera*) monks the higher was their belief in democratic principles, methods and ways of life and the lower was their belief in authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life.

2.3 Other kinds of status within the monkhood had no value on the relationship between political beliefs and emphasis in Buddhist beliefs.

2.4 When the relational value between political beliefs and degree of emphasis in Buddhist beliefs was compared with that between political beliefs and status of the monks, the relation of the first pair was greater than the latter pair. Thus it can be concluded that emphasis in Buddhist beliefs has a greater influence on political beliefs of the Sangha than status within the Sangha institution.

Conclusion

The study of political beliefs, Buddhist beliefs and status within the Sangha institution may be generally concluded thus: the Thai Sangha holds political beliefs that are more democratic than authoritarian in terms of principles, methods and ways of life, and

these political beliefs are related to a high degree of emphasis on the mundane group of Buddhist teachings which contain the principles for governance by Dhamma, methods for governance by Dhamma and the Dhammic way of life. This is in keeping with the Thai Sangha's fairly high level of belief in this group of mundane Buddhist teachings. The kinds of status within the Sangha which had an influence on the relationship between democratic political beliefs and stress on mundane-level Buddhist teachings in the Sangha were the level of scriptural learning and seniority in rains retreats. The status of the monks in terms of order, ecclesiastical position and ecclesiastical rank had only a little influence on that relationship. From these findings, the general conclusion can be made that:

If monks have a high awareness of beliefs concerning governance by Dhamma, methods of government by Dhamma and a Dhammic way of life (the group of mundane-level teachings) they will have a tendency to believe more in democratic principles, methods and ways of life than authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life, with the added condition that this relationship will be higher in monks with more scriptural learning and seniority in rains retreats. This means that if monks have higher degrees of scriptural learning and seniority in rains retreats and have a greater awareness of beliefs concerning the mundane teachings, they will have a tendency more to democratic than authoritarian political beliefs. The status of the monks in terms of order (*nikāya*), ecclesiastical duties and ecclesiastical rank will have only little effect on the above relationship.

From this general conclusion we can see that not all groups of Buddhist teachings have the same relationship on political beliefs of the Sangha. The group of teachings that has a real effect on the Sangha's political beliefs is that which deals with principles, methods and ways of life in politics and administration, both in the worldly sphere and the Buddhist sphere, which are altogether called the "mundane teachings." The reason political beliefs are related more to mundane teachings than transcendent teachings may be that the teachings of Buddhism are divided into two levels which are

based upon different truths. The transcendent teachings (*lokuttaradhamma*) are based on the ultimate truth (*paramatthasacca*)⁵ and can be considered rationally. The mundane teachings (*lokiyadhamma*) are based on conventional truth (*sammatisacca*), truths that are generally accepted everywhere, as in good actions bring good result, bad actions bring bad results; on this level a person has a self and must relate to other people as fellow members of the family, society or nation. Since politics is more of the nature of conventional truth than ultimate truth, political beliefs are more related to the principles of conventional truth than the principles of ultimate truth, as M.R.V. Kukrit Pramoj explains:

“...When we are still living in society we must accept the way things are, be it conventional truth (*sammatisacca*) or whatever. We must accept that living in society involves duties toward society and service to other people. If we practice according to the mundane teachings (*lokiyadhamma*) this will present no problem. The transcendent teachings (*lokuttaradhamma*) deal with isolating oneself from the group or separating oneself from society for one's own salvation, but the mundane teachings deal with living in society, teaching us to create goodness for ourselves and for others, to establish ourselves in the *brahmavihāra*—goodwill (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*)—toward the people who associate with us. Apart from this there are many other teachings on the mundane level impossible to recount in full which teach people not to harm each other, to live together harmoniously and to help each other.”⁶

Where it was stated that the degree of scriptural learning and seniority in rains retreats are important contingencies in the relationship between political beliefs and the group of mundane teachings, this means that the level of scriptural learning and seniority in rains retreats are statuses which have an effect on the relationship between political beliefs and the degree of emphasis

⁵ Such as the noble truths, five khandhas and three characteristics.

⁶ M.R.V. Kukrit Pramoj, *Buddhism and the World in Buddhism* (Bangkok, Syamrath Press, 2520), pp. 111-112.

placed on belief in the mundane teachings by the Thai Sangha. That scriptural learning and seniority in rains retreats have such importance is due to many reasons.

Firstly, the curriculum for the Dhamma (*nak tham*) examinations is geared to monks who are determined to devote themselves to Buddhism. The study thus stresses solving Dhamma problems, the monks' discipline (*Vinaya*), and religious ceremonies. The curriculum for the Pāli course (*parian*), on the other hand, aims for an academic foundation for monks who, likewise, are devoted to studying Buddhism, as the curriculum stresses translation and composing verse. Translation requires an understanding of the Dhamma-Vinaya. Monks who have higher levels of scriptural learning will have a more profound level of understanding of the Buddhadhamma, and the more rains retreats a monk has the more opportunity he has for scriptural learning, and thus more opportunity for implanting in himself belief in the Buddhadhamma.

Secondly, in BE 2507 the Council of Elders announced a revised curriculum for the learning of Pāli⁷ in which many secular topics, such as Thai, English, mathematics, science, geography and history, were included into the Pāli curriculum, and this had a beneficial effect on the Sangha: monks were able to learn a broader range of topics and broaden their world outlook. The addition of secular topics to the curriculum had an important effect on the monks' political learning in that they developed an awareness of political information and had a greater appreciation of the role of political institutions. These things were instrumental in guiding the monks toward democratic political beliefs.

Thirdly, observation reveals that the scriptural learning of the Sangha employs a non-compulsory method of teaching the Buddhadhamma. All study is voluntary, since any monk who does not like it may freely take leave of the robes at any time. The content of the Buddhadhamma also leans heavily toward democratic principles, as can be seen from the *Navakovāda* text or the text for

⁷ Sangha Announcement, Vol. 52 (BE 2507), pp. 196-197.

studying the “groups of Dhamma-Vinaya” produced by the Ministry of Education.

Finally, monks with higher levels of scriptural learning and more seniority in rains retreats will give greater emphasis to belief in the Buddhadhamma and have greater opportunities to believe in democratic principles, methods and ways of life than those that are authoritarian. Thus we find that the level of scriptural learning and seniority in rains retreats are important connections in the relationship between degree of emphasis on belief in the mundane teachings and political beliefs.

The next salient consideration is that, since the curriculum, time, content and teaching method for scriptural learning tend to be important factors for the extent that scriptural learning affects the monks' political and Buddhist beliefs in a way that benefits Thai society, both in the respect that Thai people are Buddhists and should believe in the Buddhadhamma, and in the respect that the government has an aim to develop a more democratic government, it is possible that the system of scriptural learning used up till now will continue to be of help in realizing all of these objectives. The study of Pāli in the present moment includes modern subjects and practical training. It does this by dividing the curriculum into three subjects: Pāli studies, secular studies and research studies. Pāli studies are spread over ten years, consisting of third-class parian lasting three years, second-class parian lasting three years, and first-class parian lasting four years, culminating in ninth-grade parian. In the tenth year research of the Tipiṭaka is increased. Secular studies are equivalent to primary, secondary and tertiary education (faculty of literature, Thai language, English language and history) and the research studies provide practical training and research in religion, ancient history, psychology and philosophy.⁸

⁸ Venerable Maha Prayudh, Payutto, “Role of the Sangha in Modern Thai Society” in *Buddhism and Modern Thai Society* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 2513), p. 41-42.

The Thai Sangha, benefiting from this revised system of scriptural studies, should not lower the standards of their Pāli studies, because the high standard of Pāli studies may help the monks to understand the Buddha's teaching more profoundly. As for the study of more modern subjects, these are useful to the Sangha for gaining an understanding of life and the world which then reflects back on their study of the Dhamma and improves their understanding of it. Thus it is important to preserve the program of Pāli studies, and maintaining the standards therein would seem to be more beneficial than relaxing the standard in order to allow more monks to pass the tests or to hearten the monks in their studies—whether a greater or smaller number of monks succeeds in their studies is probably not so much due to the difficulty of the Pāli studies curriculum, but to the monks not applying themselves earnestly enough to the study and the reduction of the status of monks who have completed the program. It is now evident that even monks who have completed the highest grade of scriptural study have less standing than those who have completed a bachelor's degree. If they remain in the robes they are not given much recognition; if they disrobe they gain even less recognition and may even be the objects of disapproving glances. Some even hide their past out of fear that others will find out that they have come from a Sangha institution. Thus, since modern academic knowledge grows rapidly, it is the secular side of scriptural learning that needs to be revised. Revising the curriculum of secular studies will enable the monks to understand new advances in knowledge, which will provide the state with monks who can eventually add to the work force, and not be a burden on the society in the form of educationally backward citizens or an addition to the ranks of unemployed. Importantly, they will benefit Buddhism as Sangha members with abilities worthy of respect.

Future social and political role of the Sangha

Monks at the present time live in wats, leading a principled life and following the Buddha's teaching and discipline (Dhamma-Vinaya). In the Dhamma-Vinaya it is stipulated that the monks'

lives are to be bound to both the Sangha community and the householder community. As to the Sangha community, this bond can be seen in the various injunctions of the Buddha dealing, for example, with living together in wats, determining boundaries for the *uposatha* observance, invitation and other Sangha acts, and with the giving of respect according to seniority in rains retreats. As to householder society, the Dhamma-Vinaya stipulates that the monks depend on householders for the four supports (food, clothing, shelter and medicine), warns the monks to bear in mind their duties and to have a sense of responsibility to live for the benefit and happiness of the many, enjoins the monks to have a proper relationship with the society, maintaining their honor and position befitting the respect and trust afforded them by society, and to assist the society virtuously, for the real benefit of society, not with hidden motives for material rewards.⁹

The name for a Buddhist monk is “*bhikkhu*,” which means “almsman.” The monks lead a life dependent on alms and the alms round. Being almsmen, the monks are not only reminded of their bond and their responsibility to society, but also trained to reduce attachment: regardless of the monk’s former status or origin, he must take on a life of an almsman, more or less. The Buddha himself referred to the life of an almsman as *paradattūpajīvī*: a life made possible through the generosity of others. In return the monks must imbue their minds with goodwill (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*) and other qualities, in keeping with the traditional term used for a monk going on alms round—“helping sentient beings.” The monks are one of the mediums through which Buddhists can approach the Dhamma-Vinaya.¹⁰

Modern development in Thailand has caused changes in the traditional society, both in the cities and in the countryside. It has led to social and economic changes in which success and wealth are the

⁹ Ibid., pp. 7-14.

¹⁰ Phra Maha Somsong, *The Future Role of Monasteries and the Thai Sangha* (Bangkok, Committee for Religious Development, 2525), p. 20.

objectives. These changes have created confusion in ethics and the meaning of good and evil. As the emphasis in society inclines more towards money and power, Sangha members who lack understanding of these complex social issues have allowed the liberal-capitalist system to dominate their views so that they see good people as people with money and power. Monks who feel this way draw themselves and their monasteries closer to those who have money and power. In so doing they become economic and political tools of society's elite. Some of them get caught up in material gains (*lābha*), rank, praise and other worldly conditions. Such attachment to worldly gains presents no problem from the point of view of a lay person, but for one gone to homelessness (*pabbajita*) it can be a point of censure. Even so, from the perspective of the Buddhist principles on the social level, it should represent no adverse effect on the Sangha, because attachment to these things has very little effect on the Sangha's beliefs both regarding Buddhism and political doctrines.

Problems in the role of the Sangha in the present time probably come more from Sangha members failing to adapt themselves to modern developments than from falling prey to worldly conditions (*lokadhamma*). Not a few members of the Sangha try to maintain the old status within a changing society, leaving the lay community to associate (more closely) with Western civilization. This has thinned the long-standing relationship between the Sangha and the people. On the educational front, once householders begin to get the idea that monks are old-fashioned and out of date, communication between monks and lay people falls down, since the monks lack the knowledge needed to bring the people to the Buddha's teaching. With the passage of time their understandings drift further and further apart, and eventually they can barely understand each other at all, with the result that lay people feel that the subjects studied by monks are of no use in daily life or to society.¹¹

¹¹ Phra Maha Prayudh Payutto, "Role of the Thai Sangha Today," pp. 19-20.

Adaptation does not mean that monks should try to make themselves acceptable to the ordinary person, or follow the whims of the majority, by gladly accommodating them if they want ceremonies for opening new homes, anointing their new shops, doing ceremonies for good luck, or unthinkingly responding to the foolishness of the people when they ask them for auspicious dates, names for their children, and holy water to treat their illnesses, or even implementing the government's policies when the government wants the monks to help broadcast democracy.¹² The monks should be founded on the Dhamma-Vinaya, not on the whims of the state and the people, so that their conduct does not exceed the bounds of what is clearly prescribed as appropriate to the status of a renunciant (*saṃsāra*).

It is right that the Sangha plays some role in helping the government in various areas, but the monks should guard their actions to see that they accord with their renunciant lifestyle. Monks and politics cannot be separated, but it would not be praiseworthy behavior for a renunciant to openly support or become a member of a certain political group or party, or lead the people in demonstrations to support some political cause. The Sangha should rather help the government in gradually instilling democratic political beliefs into people, through their sermons, local development projects, publications, or Buddhist Sunday schools. This would be a viable way of propagating democracy since the monks are representatives of the *wats*, which are spiritual centers of the community. Thus the monks are spiritual leaders of the people and are a guarantee of national security in that they can help harmonize and unify the people. As Venerable Maha Prayudh states:

“... In a fully developed democratic society, what controls the conduct of the people in the administrative sector is the voice of the people, meaning people who are educated. But if the people are poorly educated and the institutions that have previously helped in

¹² Chamnong Thongprasert, *Buddhism and Society and Politics* (Bangkok, Phraephitaya, 2520) p. 81.

this field lose their relevance, the system of control becomes faulty, and this could be a dangerous situation.”¹³

Thus the Sangha should have a political role and a duty in helping the state. Academically speaking this conforms with the idea of the structure and duty of a political system¹⁴ as a compound of various institutions working and interrelating with each other like a machine to help alleviate the problems that arise from human beings living together. Each of these institutions performs its duty in response to the needs of the members of society and also of other institutions, and the performance of these duties will ultimately be mutually supportive.

As one of the institutions of Thai society, the Sangha, whose members are responsible for the perpetuation of the religion, should have a political role as spiritual leaders of the people. They should lead the people to objectives in life that are right and good. This is to be achieved not only through giving sermons, but also through action and development of the people’s minds and quality of life.

Nowadays monks in and outside of Bangkok are beginning to accept their status as one of the mechanisms in an institution of development. This may raise the effectiveness of local development and help the Sangha perform a service to the community upon which they depend for the four requisites. Thus it is to be hoped that the monks, in their role in the national development process, will be able to respond effectively to the needs of the people in specific localities, and strengthen their relationship with these communities. At the same time, the community service offered by the Sangha will help to create and successfully integrate Buddhist beliefs, practices and motivations for development.

In Thai society the monks have the time, knowledge and ability to benefit the people on a very wide scale. The Sangha and the people

¹³ Phra Maha Prayudh, Payutto, “Role of the Sangha in Modern Thai Society,” p. 18.

¹⁴ David Easton, *A Framework of Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice -Hall, Inc., 1959), p. 112.

can live and work together closely in local communities. The people's faith in Buddhism is increased by the support of the Sangha, which is given without any expectation of reward. The householders will not forsake Buddhism and will apply themselves to helping the Sangha to combat their problems of livelihood and correcting and improving the quality of life and the environment. The Sangha's shouldering of responsibility in community development will be a psychological response arisen from its long-standing close relationship to individuals and the surrounding society,¹⁵ or as Neils Mulder suggests:

"... The religious behavior shown by Thai people in general is based on the motivation of wanting to do good, because the doing of good is what leads to social stability, i.e., to honor and social esteem. When the Sangha invites people to carry out various development activities in which the monks are the leaders, they are more likely to meet with success because those activities will be ones that people in general regard as forms of doing good or making merit."¹⁶

The Sangha's involvement in community development, regardless of the intention behind it, is such that it helps the state develop the nation, and it is a fundamental principle of the democratic system that all people voluntarily join together in developing the country. The Sangha's involvement in rural development helps bring harmony to the group. The organization of rural work groups and providing of political information to the people¹⁷ are important to the democratic political system. Research shows that people who are better informed politically will have a better knowledge and appreciation of the importance of the roles played and duties performed by the state's institutions and organizations, a higher rate

¹⁵ William J. Klausner, "The Thai Sangha and National Development," *Visakha Puja BE 2521* (1978) (Bangkok: The Buddhist Association of Thailand, 2521) pp. 30–35.

¹⁶ J.A. Niels Mulder, *Monks, Merit and Motivation* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1973), p. 44.

¹⁷ Somboon Sukhsamran, *Buddhism and Political and Social Change* (Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University Press, 2527), pp. 134–138.

of political participation and voluntary exercise of voting rights than those less politically informed.¹⁸

Thus, if the government has a plan to train development monks or form an organization or commission for that purpose, it would be fitting to increase the amount of training to enable the monks to lay more foundations for democratic government and administration, both by choosing Buddhist teachings that are commensurate with democracy and choosing methods for laying down such a foundation, as in bringing the people together in groups like cooperatives, and providing regular, accurate and clear political information to the people in sufficient quantities through the various communications media of the wat. The addition of these items into the rural development process will be tantamount to providing political development for the people at the roots level, and will be of benefit to the development of Thai democracy in the future.

Proposals for future research

In letting the Sangha act as a medium for the broadcast of democratic thinking as part of the rural development process, while we may be certain that the Thai Sangha has more democratic than authoritarian political beliefs in terms of principles, methodology and ways of life, it would be advisable to reflect more deeply on what other factors may help to reinforce democratic beliefs in the Sangha. Thus it is necessary to conduct further research in three major areas, viz.:

1. One factor worth researching that is likely to increase the Sangha's beliefs in democratic principles is the access to political information, and the political feelings and the political behavior of the monks in general.

2. One factor worth researching that is likely to increase the Sangha's beliefs in democratic methodology is the method of administration in the wats, both in the urban and rural areas, and the

¹⁸ Phornsak Phongphaew, *Political Informedness of the Thai People* (Bangkok, Chao Phraya press, 2526), p. 140.

method of administration of the Thai Sangha according to the Sangha Act of 2505, because both of these factors are regularly discussed on the front pages of daily newspapers such as *Syamrath* and *Matichon*.

3. One factor worth researching that is likely to increase the Sangha's beliefs in democratic way of life is the life style of the monks within the wats and their secondary work or professions after their lives as bhikkhus.

Research of these points may be helpful in adjusting the outlook of the Sangha towards politics so that it is more sympathetic to democracy. This is not to say that the present state is antithetical to democracy: simply that further research on these issues will provide more data for adjusting whatever of the present state of the Sangha needs to be adjusted. This is because from research conducted so far we have found that some groups of the Sangha still have beliefs in authoritarian principles, methods and ways of life. It may be said that the Sangha in the Bangkok metropolis has mixed beliefs on democracy and authoritarianism, leaning more toward the former.

Another point worthy of research would be another, more comprehensive, review of the Sangha's status, especially in terms of scriptural learning. Our research focused particularly on two branches of monastic study: the *nak tham* tests and the *parian dhamma* tests. However, the Sangha's system of education has grown to include secular subjects, and to see the establishment of different kinds of schools and Sangha universities. Thus it would be advisable to study the Sangha's education system, and compare scriptural learning, secular learning, and tertiary learning, each of which has its own centers.

Apart from reviewing the status of the Sangha in terms of scriptural learning, future research should expand its scope to provincial areas. While most of the monks who live in the area of the Bangkok metropolis are from provincial homes, they are monks who have not lived in the provinces for long periods of time. Studying on the basis of location may provide new angles of thought or politico-sociological perspectives. If the rural area alone is

researched, it could be divided into two study groups—those who are local leaders, and those who are ordinary monks—in order to compare and research the Buddhist and political beliefs of these two groups to determine their supporting and opposing factors, by reviewing the original idea that the influential or important factors on Buddhist and political beliefs of the Sangha are factors that come both from outside and within the Sangha. If it is possible to show other factors as summarized in the three main points, this will help to fill out these ideas.

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