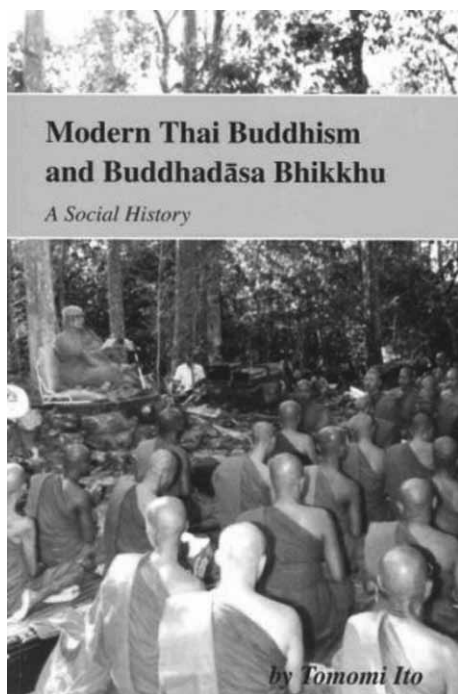


Modern Thai Buddhism and Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu: A Social History by Tomomi Ito (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012). ISBN: 978-9971-69-572-9.



This superb work by Tomomi Ito – Associate Professor in the Graduate School and Faculty of Intercultural Studies at Kobe University, Japan – can undoubtedly be considered one of the best books on Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, after the pioneering and still essential research done by Donald Swearer, Louis Gabaude and Peter Jackson. I believe that this study should be considered a fundamental reference book not only by those who want to know Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu better, but also by scholars of Thai history and people interested in Southeast Asia. The numerous and very accurate references to the primary literature, translated by the author from Thai into English, and the meticulous quotes from studies in European languages as well as works in Japanese, give this work of Tomomi Ito a unique status among the various studies

dealing with the life and work of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu.

The layout of the volume is elegant and precise (I have spotted only one venial typo on page 45), the text is readable and the maps and figures – all printed in black and white – are clear. The final exhaustive bibliography adds a useful tool for further studies and research.

Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu was born Nguam Panitch (เงี้ยว พานิช) in Phumriang (พุมเรียง) in 1906. His monastic name was Phra Nguam Indapanno (พระธรรมโกศาจารย์ เงี้ยว อินทปัญญา), and later he assumed the name “Buddhādāsa” (พุทธทาสภิกขุ), or “slave of the Buddha.” Until the day of his death in 1993, he earned the reputation of being one of the most important figures of Thai Buddhism, not only in his homeland, but also in many Western countries. During his life and after his death, his speeches were translated into English and other languages, and have often been reprinted. Wat Suan Mokkh, the forest hermitage he founded, still hosts many scholars and people devoted to meditation.

The author broaches every facet of the complex personality and thought of Buddhādāsa. His biographical notes appear to be extremely deep and well organized. For example, a particular emphasis is given to the description of his relationship with his younger brother, Dhammādāsa, who was a very important figure for him. Through his brother, Buddhādāsa had his first contact with western Buddhist

scholars and with studies and translations of Buddhist texts in English. The formal preparation of Buddhādāsa in the study of Pali did not reach the highest academic levels, although he later studied Pali on his own. Nevertheless, he was always respected as a *pariyatti* scholar, a monk who excels in the theory of Dharma and Buddhist scriptures, although the emphasis he placed on interpretation of the Buddhist texts was always balanced by his attention to meditative practice (the designation *paṭipatti* is given to a monk who excels in the practice of meditation). An example of this equilibrium has been visible at Wat Suan Mokkh since its establishment in May 1932: there they focused on combining the more theoretical parts of Buddhism with the practice of *vipassanā* meditation.

During the earliest years of his monastic life, from 1933 until the end of the Second World War, Buddhādāsa was also involved in various editorial projects. The magazine *Buddhism*, published by his Dhammadāna Group, joined the already established *Thammachaksu*, published by the Mahamakut Buddhist Academy, and *Phuttha-tham*, published by the Buddhist Association of Thailand. In the magazine *Buddhism*, there were not only many sections containing translations from Pali texts, but also chapters with comments and teachings focused on *vipassanā* meditation. The author provides a very interesting and accurate comparison of these magazines.

One remarkable section of this publication deals with the first lecture that Buddhādāsa gave at the Buddhist Association of Thailand. In this speech, Buddhādāsa analyzed the Dhamma of the Buddha. He began by saying that *pariyatti*, or “the teachings of the Buddha”, and *paṭipatti*, or “the Dhamma that makes us become a Buddha”, could have been considered the prerogative of few selected and learned persons. However, the third aspect, *paṭivedha*, or “the normality of the Buddha”, was in his words “available to everyone, everywhere it exists, and is ready to touch every person in every moment” (p. 68). This is one of the focal points of Buddhādāsa’s thought and in this volume it is rightly emphasized.

The book is very well structured. It begins with an overview of Thai Buddhism in the 20th century when Buddhādāsa was active. This introduction clearly shows that the solid historical approach of the author to the study of Buddhādāsa is far from a hagiographic simplification. The following chapter examines all the Buddhist movements and publishing activities that arose in those years, and the active role played by Buddhādāsa in many of them.

The third chapter deals with the dissemination of his teachings in the north of the country and among the “urban masses” with the help of many disciples, monks and also laymen. It is worth mentioning that one of these laymen, Pun Chongprasoet (1915–1980), was among the first Thai intellectuals to disclose publicly the deterioration of the Buddhist Sangha. He also edited *A Handbook of Humankind*, one of the most famous works of Buddhādāsa. Another important figure among his first disciples was Sawai Kaewsom (born 1928), who enthusiastically devoted himself

to spreading among Buddhist devotees an attitude not blindly linked to superstition, but committed to a serious interpretation of Buddhist principles.

In the fourth chapter, the author examines Buddhādāsa's explanations and exegesis of suttas and passages of Buddhist texts, especially those which concern the difficult concept of *suññatā*, emptiness. Buddhādāsa explained that the human mind should be free from defilements, becoming an "empty mind" (*chit wang* in Thai), as it is naturally pure, even if often tainted by transient defilements. We should empty our mind of all the hindrances and restore it to its original purity. This basic immaculateness is clearly announced in the famous passage from the *Āṅguttaranikāya*: "Luminous, monks, is this mind, and it is freed from adventitious defilements" *pabhassaraṃ idaṃ bhikkhave, tañca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ, Āṅguttaranikāya*, PTS I, 10. (On this complex assertion, an enlightening note by Bhikkhu Bodhi should be read. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, 2012, pp. 1597–1598). These ideas were strongly opposed by members of the Abhidhamma groups. They refused the postulation of an original purity of human mind using the argument that there is a presence of underlying tendencies (Pali: *anusaya*), which contradicts what is said in the sutta. This controversy is not confined to a merely scholastic debate. It also touches the delicate conception of the *Buddha-vacana* (the Buddha's words) in which the sutta flatly states "*this mind* is luminous". Bhikkhu Bodhi masterfully notes that this is an undeniable fact.

The idea of the empty mind was used by Buddhādāsa to indicate the opportunity for a person to have a less self-centred mind. This produces a valuable form of selflessness that makes social commitments for the common good easier to accomplish. Although his approach was much less inclined to play an active role in society compared to, for example, that of Ambedkar, Buddhādāsa was certainly aware that his attempt to emphasize the real *Buddha-vacana* could not fail to have a strong social impact. This position was rejected by Kukrit Pramoj, who could not even imagine any commitment to work not motivated by a form of attachment. Strong desire and lust seemed to him the real dynamic element of any human activity.

This debate was based on the eternal division between *lokuttara Dhamma* (teachings indicating supermundane states) and *lokiya Dhamma* (teachings indicating mundane states). Buddhādāsa and Kukrit interpreted these two aspects of reality differently. In Buddhādāsa's thought, supermundane teachings are useful for society and we should not interpret them as "abandonment of the world". Kukrit thought that the only possible method to teach the Dhamma to lay people was to use the Buddha's worldly teachings. In Kukrit's ideology, these mundane teachings also have the advantage of contradicting Marxist theories and forming a sort of protection against communist principles. In fact, the idea of "empty mind" was even accused of being problematic for National Security during the escalation of the Vietnam War. Pun Chongprasoet defended Buddhādāsa's position, and the discussion between

these great Thai intellectuals during this complicated historical period in Southeast Asia became very lively and interesting.

Another great opponent of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu was Kittivuḍḍho, who had studied Buddhist textual tradition and was well qualified in Abhidhamma. He attacked Buddhādāsa on several occasions, and one of his refutations was based on Buddhādāsa's interpretation of the *Dhammadinnasutta* (*Samyuttanikāya*, PTS V, 406–408). Kittivuḍḍho showed that it was incomplete and misleading. He claimed that Buddhādāsa confined himself to mentioning only selected parts of the text to demonstrate that the Buddha himself had advised lay people to study more complex concepts, such as the idea of emptiness. “From time to time we will enter and dwell upon those discourses spoken by the Tathāgata that are deep, deep in meaning, supramundane, dealing with emptiness”. (translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, 2000).

Kittivuḍḍho argued that Buddhādāsa forgot to mention the section just following the quoted passage, in which Dhammadinna eventually realized that for a householder living as a lay person, it is almost impossible to follow such complex teachings. When the Buddha saw that Dhammadinna preferred a different approach to his Dhamma, he changed his teaching style to a simpler one and told him, “Thus train yourselves: ‘We will possess confirmed confidence in the Buddha (reciting *itipi so* ...), in the Dhamma, in the Sangha [...]’”. Kittivuḍḍho's objection could appear philologically correct, since Buddhādāsa did not quote the entire passage, but the second part of the sutta does not necessarily mean that *upāsakas* and *upāsikās* cannot understand difficult concepts. It may even appear disrespectful towards Thai lay people, implying that they deserve only simple, effortless, and basic teachings. We should also remember that there are different legitimate approaches to the Buddha's teachings, and also different methods of teaching them (*upāya-kosalla*). The attack on Buddhādāsa became even more explicit when Khamhuno (Chamrat Duangthisan) charged that Buddhādāsa was spreading communism in Thailand and that he had to be restrained from teaching the Dhamma. In this chapter, the author offers several interesting details about the discussions that were carried on among Thai intellectuals during those difficult years. This section is particularly interesting to those studying Thai and Southeast Asian history.

The fifth chapter discusses the disputes over Abhidhamma studies in Thailand. A detailed and necessary introduction to the history of the Abhidhamma study groups in Thailand precedes the analysis of Buddhādāsa's involvement in this discussion. A large part of this chapter is devoted to the description of the fruitful arrival of monks from Burma, who had a tradition of profound study of the Abhidhamma and were also well versed in *vipassanā* meditation. Phra Thammatrailokachan (1903–1989), better known as Phra Phimolatham, strongly supported this exchange of competences and knowledge, and requested also a complete *corpus* of Pali Canonical texts, including commentaries and sub-commentaries. In those years, there were three Abhidhamma

groups: one had been founded by Phra Phimolatham, the second was a group of lay teachers belonging to the Buddhist Association, and the third was the group founded by Kittivuddho. The main point upon which these groups and Buddhādāsa disagreed, and maintained different positions, was the authenticity of the Buddha's words. Buddhādāsa stated that the designation "*buddha-vacana*" given to the Abhidhamma could be accepted only if interpreted as pure meaning (*attha*) and not interpreted literally (*vyañjana*) because that might indicate that the Abhidhamma texts were not the words of the Buddha himself. This triggered a vast outcry among supporters of Abhidhamma studies, but also, unfortunately, a decrease of interest in Abhidhamma within the Buddhist Association.

The sixth chapter deals with the encounter between Buddhādāsa and some Marxist thinkers. Marxism was already present in Thailand, imported directly from China and merged in the Communist Party of Siam. But it did not perfectly coincide with Marxist thought introduced by Thai intellectuals, who had had contact with political ideas and movements in Europe prior to the Second World War. The most influential and famous among them was certainly Pridi Phanomyong (1900–1983), but very important positions were also occupied by Prasert Sapsunthon (1913–1994) and Kulap Saipradit (1905–1974). Buddhādāsa had discussions and correspondence with them that allowed him to know the political and philosophical aspects of Marxism. He developed the idea that the negative opinion of "religion" in the theoretical texts of Marxism does not refer to Buddhism. According to Buddhādāsa, Marx did not know Buddhism in depth. The negative opinion is based on religions intended as supernatural beliefs (*saiyasat*). Unfortunately, Buddhādāsa suffered slanderous and defamatory attacks following dissemination of these ideas and was accused, without any evidence, of being a communist. This dimmed the vitality of the philosophical debate in Thailand and turned the natural, sometimes argumentative, but always beneficial exchange of ideas and opinions into an unfair fight. This theme is treated by the author, with constant references to texts and documents, so that even a sensitive argument like this one can be understood without partiality in the political context of those years.

The seventh chapter concludes the examination of this theme and explains in detail the idea of Dhammic Socialism developed by Buddhādāsa. The author places it within the context of the time in which it was elaborated, when various similar movements also appeared. For example, the "Buddhist Socialism" movement was promoted in Burma and Cambodia, and social engagement Buddhism developed in the 1960s. A basic intuition was shared among all of these: a reduction of selfishness can only lead to a more just society.

In the final part, the author writes extensively about Buddhādāsa's efforts to promote a discussion of the presence of a female Buddhist Sangha, and in general the role of women in modern society. Since his early years as a monk, he and other members of the Dhammadāna group always supported the plan to revive the

bhikkhunī order. One of the Pali verses that Buddhādāsa used to recite is particularly meaningful:

*Na hi sabbesu thānesu, puriso hoti paṇḍito
Itthīpi paṇḍitā hoti, tattha tattha vicakkhaṇā*

In the transcription of the Pali text given in the book, there are wrong diacritics and a regrettable lack of reference to the Pali canon. The stanza appears in *Apadāna* (PTS II, 562), in *Manorathapūraṇī* (*Aṅguttaranikāya-aṭṭhakathā*, PTS I, 372), in *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (PTS II, 221), in *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā* (PTS 100, 104), and in *Jātaka* (PTS, III, 438). It is worth mentioning the old translation of the verse by Eugene Watson Burlingame: “Wisdom is not always confined to men. A woman, too, is wise, and shows it now and then”. (*Buddhist Legends*, reprinted Delhi, 2005, vol. II, p. 229). The second verse is also very interesting, and I translate it here to offer a better understanding of what these words meant:

*Na hi sabbesu thānesu, puriso hoti paṇḍito;
Itthīpi paṇḍitā hoti, lahuṃ atthaṃ vicintikā*

“A man is not wise on all occasions. A woman, too, is wise, quickly pondering over motives and utility”.

This book is not only a unique and meticulous description of the thought of Buddhādāsa, but also an extraordinary chance to penetrate the history of Thailand and to understand Southeast Asia and its position in the political events of the 20th century. Nowadays, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu’s message appears more relevant than ever: “We all have a natural right to take as much as we need, but not more. If we were each to exercise this natural right to the extent allowed by Nature, this world would be filled with a contentment such as we attribute to heaven, the realm of God, or the Buddha Maitreya, where there is no *dukkha*, no unsatisfactoriness”. *Dhammic Socialism*, Bangkok, 1986, p. 63.

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