

## DHAMMA AND DEMOCRACY. BUDDHADASA BHIKKHU AND THE SITUATION IN “COUP D’ETAT COUNTRY” THAILAND

Draft (not to be quoted):

By Hans-Bernd Zöllner

### 1. Introduction

Among the information released before this conference, some questions were asked as inputs for the speakers on each of this meeting's six panels as well as for all of us. As a true and, therefore, obedient German scholar, I feel obliged to follow these guidelines. Therefore, I would like to enframe my deliberations on the connection between the re-interpretation of Buddhist doctrine by a famous Thai monk and last year's coup d'etat in Thailand with some general considerations.

The title of our panel characterises 'religion' as a "reservoir of public and private meaning". I want to modify this metaphor to bestow a special Thai flavour on it. After that, I will use the metaphor to open the door to the room which may contend the secrets of the "ideological power" of religion in Thailand which makes it - perhaps - superior over factors like language and ethnicity and a tool suited to justify political action and, possibly, even violence.

In the Thai context, the fundamental role of religion is expressed in the often quoted Ramkhamhaeng inscription which depicts an ideal Thai life in a holistic way. The country is thriving both materially and spiritually. Materially, "there are fish in the water and rice in the fields". The people can enjoy this abundance because the ruler is just and "teaches all the Thai to understand merit and the Dhamma rightly". And because of his "knowledge and wisdom, ... bravery and courage, ... strength and energy" he "is able to subdue a throng of enemies and possesses broad kingdoms and many elephants."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, religion can be compared to a big pool which promises to serve the material and spiritual needs of everybody. It is conceived as a universal, ubiquitous reservoir which provides everything essential for man's well-being. This comprehensive well-being extends in principle over the whole world. In Ramkhamhaeng's inscription not only the Thais receive the benefits described on the stele but the people of the "broad kingdoms" under its auspices as well enjoy what the *dhammaraja*, the righteous ruler whose actions are based on the teaching of the Buddha, has achieved.

The problem is that the role of religion claimed by Ramkhamhaeng, his role models like Asoka, and his successors until today can be assessed to the contrary as well, not as a beneficial but as a dangerous and deadly force. The Siamese and Burmese kings who went to war against one another from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century shared the same concept of the *cakkravartin*, the universal Buddhist ruler in the footsteps of the Buddhist model monarchs.<sup>2</sup> Later, after the advent of nationalism in Southeast Asia, the special quality of religion was one base of the ideological use and misuse of religion, as "an opium for the people". Thailand's expansionist politics before and in World War II are one example out of many to illustrate this function.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/Thai/inscription/Side1.4.jpg>. (05.04.2007)

<sup>2</sup> Sunait Chutintaranond (1990) *Cakravartin, the ideology of traditional warfare in Siam and Burma, 1548-1605*. Ph.D. Thesis Cornell University.

<sup>3</sup> For examples see Bruce Reynolds (1993) (ed.), *National Identity and Its Defender. Thailand, 1939-1989*. Chiang Mai, Silkorm Books and the recent biography of the present King of Thailand: Paul. M. Handley (2006) *The King Never Smiles. A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*. New Haven, Yale University Press.

These considerations lead to an unsatisfactory result. Looked upon as an entity, 'religion' denotes paradoxical or tautological matters, is deeply ambiguous and seems to be just a double edged sword. Religion is religion. To overcome this tautology, we have to make discriminations. It is not sufficient to contrast "religion" with "secularity" as suggested in the task description for this panel. As the Ramkhamhaeng example shows, "secular" and "religious" elements are indistinguishably intertwined and any attempt to separate both spheres might be labelled arbitrary without communicating the methods for any distinctions made.

The following deliberations are centred round a particular understanding of 'communication' borrowed from Niklas Luhmann's System Theory. According to this theory, communication forms the central mode of operations of social systems as well as of society as a whole. Communication is defined as a combination of information, utterance and understanding and performed through symbolically generalised media such as spoken or written language, music etc. Language as the main medium of communication holds a binary (yes/no) code for every single statement which can be formulated as affirmation or rejection. Communication generates bifurcating communication and, therefore, has a temporal dimension within a self-referential, autopoietic and closed system which cannot be directly observed but only inferred by an observer outside of the system.<sup>4</sup>

The code used in the language of religion, according to Luhmann, consists of the binary immanence/transcendence, a coding which may occur in many variations in particular religious systems and in different times.<sup>5</sup> Like any other code, this one is asymmetric and has paradoxical consequences if the coding is employed on itself. Transcendence is preferred, but because this category is beyond the world it can only be realised immanently.<sup>6</sup> Ramkhamhaeng's inscription exemplifies this immanent social consequence of a transcendently orientated communication as do the inscriptions of Asoka. But: different observers may identify very different contradictions within these exemplifications of the systems of religion and society.

Thus, communicating transcendent Buddhist *dhamma* has immanent consequences. This applied to Ramkhamhaeng at it applies to the teachings of one of the so called "modernist" Theravada monks, to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. . The following deliberations draw a connection between the Thai coup d'etat of September 2006 and the monk's teachings whose 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was widely commemorated in Thailand some months before the coup. The present successor of Rankhamhaeng whose 60<sup>th</sup> throne jubilee was extensively celebrated in Thailand in this same year plays a role in the case to be presented here.

## **2. The case: The coup d'etat in Thailand in September 2006**

On September 19, 2006, the Thai military under the command of General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the first Muslim in Thailand's history to hold this post, toppled the government of Premier Thaksin Shinawatra who was out of the country at this time to attend the UN General assembly in New York. The coup was a bloodless one. In a short appearance on TV, Sonthi explained the reasons for the takeover of power. He stood in front of giant portraits of Thailand's king and queen and was flanked by the chiefs of the three armed services and the head of the national police. He said the coup was necessary to end intense conflicts in Thailand's society that Thaksin had created. The constitution of 1997 formerly dubbed the most

---

<sup>4</sup> For details, see Niklas Luhmann (1995) *Social Systems*. Translated by John Bednarz, Jr. with Dirk Becker. Stanford, Stanford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Niklas Luhmann (2002) *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*. Herausgegeben von André Kieserling. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Fuchs (1989) "Die Weltflucht der Mönche. Anmerkungen zur Funktion des monastisch-asketischen Schweigens", in: Niklas Luhmann, Peter Fuchs (1989) *Reden und Schweigen*. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp: 23-24.

progressive in Thai history was abrogated. A new charter, the country's 16<sup>th</sup> or so since 1932, is going to be set into practice.

Thaksin and his party, Thai Rak That (TRT) - "Thais love Thais" - had won the elections of January 2001 and January 2005. In 2001 TRT won a sweeping victory three seats short of the absolute majority, the first election held under the People's Constitution of 1997. It was called the most open, corruption-free election in Thai history. In the elections of February 2005 which had the highest voter turnout in Thai history the party won a two-third majority in Parliament.

Some months later, public protests against Thaksin started in Bangkok. They increased after one of the premier's enterprises was sold to a Singaporean company. Thaksin was, among other things, accused of corruption, lèse majesté and adultery. The anti-Thaksin rallies organised by a "People's Alliance for Democracy" (PAD) which provoked counter-rallies by Thaksin-supporters caused Thaksin to call snap elections for April 2006. The elections were boycotted by the opposition both inside and outside parliament leaving most constituencies uncontested. This caused constitutional problems and the decision of Thaksin to only head a caretaker-government despite his victory in the elections. After the Supreme Court had nullified the April elections, the Cabinet decided on 30 May 2006 to hold new elections on 15 October 2006.

The coup was said to be sanctioned by King Bhumibol in advance through the mediation of the head of the Privy Council and former chief of the military and Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond. In short: A politician who was elected according to democratic and constitutional rules, was brought down through the intervention of an extra-parliamentary group claiming to advocate democracy. Their demand that Thaksin should step down were finally executed by the military and, least subsequently, authorized by the King.

This complicated and somehow confusing sequel of events has provoked and still provokes a lot of questions. One of them pertains the meaning of "democracy" in the Thai context. The teachings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu who was celebrated as "a true sage who has revived Buddhism to become once again rich, deep and meaningful to Thai society"<sup>7</sup> may provide an answer to this question. Buddhadasa taught a new understanding of *dhamma*, the central Buddhist category which influences politics since the times of the Buddha. Linguistically, this connection becomes visible in the Thai name for "constitution", รัฐธรรมนูญ; (*ratha thama noon*) literally to be translated as "rule of the state with *dhamma*".

### 3. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu – A Short Appraisal<sup>8</sup>

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was, to say it with a famous phrase coined by Stanley Tambiah, a radical world renouncer who at the same time tried to conquer the world through his teachings and his practice.<sup>9</sup>

He was born as Ngüam Panit on May 27, 1906, in Phumrieng, a small coastal town in Chaiya district (Surat Thani province), Southern Thailand, as the eldest son of a Chinese father and a Thai mother. After the death of his father, he took over the family business, a retail shop, and duties of a head of family at the age of 17. At the age of 20, he was ordained as a monk according to the Thai tradition after spending three months in a monastery of the popular Mahanikaya order in which he should stay during his whole monastic life. The young monk displayed a talent of teaching and preaching Buddhism lively and attractively. As a consequence of his successful performances he was requested by his family to continue

---

<sup>7</sup> Bangkok Post May 28, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> For more details see Peter A. Jackson (1988) *Buddhadasa. A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*. Bangkok, The Siam Society; Hans-Bernd Zöllner (2006) *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993). Buddhismus im Garten der Befreiung*. Frankfurt, Peter Lang.

<sup>9</sup> The "historical analysis" of the Thai society presented here is heavily influenced by Tambiah's seminal book. Stanley J. Tambiah (1976) *World Conqueror and World Renouncer. A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

his education in Siam's capital Bangkok. He went twice and returned twice disgusted by the materialism, superstitious practices and religious misconduct noticed there. In May 1932, he went into seclusion near his birth place naming his new place of practice *Suan Mokkhabalarama* (short form: Suan Mokkh), the "Garden of Liberation". At the same time, the monk chose a new name for himself: Buddhadasa, "Slave (or servant) of the Buddha" and explained this choice thus:

I commit this life and body as a dedication to the Lord Buddha. I am a servant of the Buddha, the Buddha is my lord. For this reason I am named "Buddhadasa".<sup>10</sup>

Six weeks after this new beginning, on June 1932, a coup d'état toppled the absolute monarchy and revolutionised the political system of Siam.

Over the next years, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu attracted the interest of other monks as well as of lay people who were looking for religious reform. The most prominent of them was Pridi Banomyong (1900-1983), the ideological leader of the coup of 1932 and regarded as the outstanding beacon of Thai democracy until today. Both met at least once on the invitation of the politician and had an intense exchange of thoughts. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu remembered in his speech at the obsequies of Pridi in Thailand<sup>11</sup> that they planned the establishment of a "second Suan Mokkh" in Pridi's home province of Ayutthaya and that the statesman asked him to write "Buddhist hymns". Both plans were not to be carried out, partly because Pridi had to go into exile in 1946 after the mysterious death of King Ananda.

But these ideas, the monk's appraisal of the politician's life and a short note in his booklet on the first ten years of Suan Mokkh<sup>12</sup> justify the conclusion that both men shared the same ideas and visions about Thailand's political and spiritual needs.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, they can be considered as "Siamese twins", one representing the spiritual world renouncing Buddhist, the other the worldly world conquering foundations of a new Thai society and nation. The shared vision of an ideal society based on the laws of *dhamma*, however, did not materialise until today. In the high days of anti-communism in Thailand during the 60s and 70s, he was accused to be "Un-Thai" and even a communist because he refused to justify the killing of enemies and incorporated elements of other than Theravada Buddhist traditions into his teachings.

When Buddhadasa Bhikkhu died in 1993, he was regarded as the leading reformist monk in the country by members of the country's middle class. His teachings were widely publicised and many of his friends set some of his ideas into action like a well known and controversial monk who engaged himself in environmental issues.

Besides, the monk's "Garden of Liberation" was extended into an international meditation centre. Until today, the place offers 10 days meditation courses at the beginning of each month. Through the internet and other media and through various Buddhist associations, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's teachings spread around the world.

---

<sup>10</sup> Entry in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's notebook on August 28, 1932. Quoted in Jackson 1988: 26.

<sup>11</sup> Pridi died in exile in France. His ashes were brought to Thailand some years later. The text of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's speech is reprinted in French translation in Gabaude 1987: 485-488.

<sup>12</sup> After mentioning his move to the 'garden' on May 12th „or so“, he writes: „Later in June, there was a change of the Thai government system from absolute monarchy to monarchical democracy. Therefore, the starting point in the calendar of Suan Mokkh can be best remembered with a rather short phrase: 'In the same year as was the change of the government system,.' We considered this coincidence a good omen for our new change, whereby we hoped to correct and improve many things as best as we could." (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu 1990: 2)

<sup>13</sup> For details see Hans-Bernd Zöllner (2006) *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993). Buddhismus im Garten der Befreiung*. Frankfurt, Peter Lang: 39-44.

In terms of the immanence/transcendence-code, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's life can be summarized thus: The monastery founded by him served as a place where transcendental Dhamma was cultivated. His teaching influenced society.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Two Kinds of Language

The key to the re-interpretation of Buddhism is Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's discrimination of two kinds of language which is in line with Luhmann's binary code of religious language. Transcendence is here represented by "Dhamma language", immanence by "everyday language". While the latter is spoken by unknowing people, the former is the language spoken by people who have gained a deep insight into the Truth, the Dhamma. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu does not elaborate on epistemology and hermeneutics, the theories of knowledge and understanding, he just sets his distinction into practice. That means that he tries to talk Dhamma language by using everyday language. In a way, he is bilingual.

The revolutionary way of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's reinterpretation of Buddhist teachings compared with the "ordinary" understanding in the mainstream Thai Buddhism becomes clearly visible in his "dhammic" interpretation of *kamma*. According to him, the "real *kamma*" is neither good nor bad, but the avoidance of all *kamma* and, consequently, the whole idea of *samsara* in the sense of a cycle of rebirths becomes marginal because *nibbhana* can be attained here and now through just practicing the Noble Eightfold Path.

A clear hierarchy becomes visible here. *Dhamma* language is superior to everyday language as the wise dhamma-expert is superior to the imprudent man on the street. We find the same structure as in the inscriptions of the great Buddhist kings. It remains to be seen what that means for the

#### 5. Dhammic Democracy in theory .....

A collection of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's utterances on societal questions were given the English title "Dhammic Socialism".<sup>15</sup> As with any other term, 'socialism' has a special and universal meaning in Dhamma language. Here, it is not a political ideology as an alternative to communism, democracy or dictatorship, but a basic principle which governs the whole of nature through the factors of interdependence and balance. The early Buddhist order of monks serves as a social model for "true socialism" which has almost disappeared because the people have deserted religion all over the world. In Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's understanding, all religions share the same concept and, therefore, should cooperate.

Referring to liberal democracy, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu calls it "ambiguous" because it allows individuals to act out their individual defilements like greed. Therefore, he advocated "dictatorial democracy".<sup>16</sup> The term "dictatorial" is understood as a method of speedy solutions to urgent questions instead of endless debating the issues and allowing fatal developments to continue. What is needed, are political leaders who follow the tradition of the Ten Royal Virtues.

The paradoxical implications of this teachings are illustrated by the recent developments in Thailand. The present king who is widely recognized and praised as a *dhammaraja* like Ramkhamhaeng and other great

---

<sup>14</sup> This applies not only to Thailand but to the world as well. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was - together with the Dalai Lama - the patron of the "International Network of Engaged Buddhists" (INEB).

<sup>15</sup> Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1986) *Dhammic Socialism*. Chief editor and translator Donald K. Swearer. Bangkok, Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development.

<sup>16</sup> Buddhadasa Bhikkhu 1986: 82-83.

and virtuous rulers of the country was contrasted with Thaksin who was depicted as a person who wanted to take over the king's role.<sup>17</sup>

Some twenty years back, in 1988, there was a discussion in Thailand about democracy including the question if a Prime Minister must be an elected Member of Parliament. At that time, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu said in a talk on the famous Kalama Sutta:

To say that democracy is always and absolutely good is to speak with one's head in the sand. Those who insist on it haven't considered that a democracy of selfish people is worse than a dictatorship under an unselfish person who rules for the sake of Dhamma and justice. A democracy of selfish people means freedom to use their selfishness in a most frightening and awful manner. Consequently, problems drag on endlessly among those people who have a democracy of selfishness. Stop saying that democracy is absolutely good or that dictatorship is absolutely good. Instead, stick to the principle that both will be good if they are based on Dhamma. Each population should choose whichever system suits the particular circumstances it faces.

To say that the Prime Minister exclusively must be an elected member of parliament, and never someone who the people haven't chosen directly, is to babble as if deaf and blind. Really, we must look to see how the situation ought be and what the causes and conditions are, then act correctly according to the law of conditionality. This is the true Buddhist way, befitting the fact that Buddhism embodies democracy in the form of dhammic socialism. Therefore, the election of members of parliament, the establishment of a government, the structuring of the political system, and even the course of social and economic development should be carried out using the principle of the *Kalama Sutta*.<sup>18</sup>

### ... and practice

This communication can be understood as a justification for the coup of September 2006 and other events like this – but it may be used as well as an argument against it, if it turns out that the coup plotters do not act according to *dhamma*. The present king, however, and some of his advisers are regarded as persons whose actions are guided by *dhamma*. Therefore, the king is regarded as a person standing beyond the constitution because he as a man of supreme virtue embodies all-encompassing *dhamma* of which any constitution of the world can only be a part. On the other hand, any democratic systems must invite politicians to be virtuous as well. The constitution of 1997 strengthened this trend by establishing a lot of rules and regulations which aimed at preventing “bad people” to become members of parliament. Thus, a “dhammic democracy” may be labelled an institutionalised contradiction.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout the centuries, Buddhist religion was communicated as a holistic, all encompassing entity with *dhamma* as its central category. To understand and to apply *dhamma* properly, superior knowledge combined with superior virtue was and is necessary. This leads to the idea of an ideal state and society with a top-down structure. Because this model cannot be implemented holistically but only by way of differentiation, paradoxical consequences occur.

One of these paradoxical consequences may be that religion as a social system cannot be separated from conflict. Social systems only exist as communication systems and thus as systems in which contradictions

---

<sup>17</sup> For this allegation see the “Temple of the Emerald Buddha incident” in April 2005 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005-2006\\_Thai\\_political\\_crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005-2006_Thai_political_crisis)).

<sup>18</sup> Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1988a), „Kalama Sutta, Help Us!“ in: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1988) *Key to Natural Truth*. Bangkok, The Dhamma Study & Practce Group: 11.

are communicated. According to system theory, a conflict occurs when a contradiction is communicated. This communication, however, must contain some precise and empirical matter. If that is the case, conflicts can be regarded as social systems in their own right. "Democracy" in the Western sense of the word is a case in point. It tries to institutionalize contradictory communication. A democracy based on a religion which is centred on *dhamma* cannot lead to similar results because *dhamma* transcends every communication. And since men cannot not communicate, the communication of holistic *dhamma* must lead to contradictory results like those exemplified by the coup. As the results are good and bad at the same time, in other words: undistinguishable.

Sulak Sivaraksa, one leading and outspoken lay follower of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and critic of Thaksin Shinawatra, said in a talk on "How to Achieve Our Democracy" two months after the coup:

I will not offer any view on the recent coup d'etat. I will not criticize those who are in power now and will not discuss about the government of the present prime minister and his 'parliament'.

I think many individuals in power now are good. At least, they have good intentions and want to make changes to benefit the people as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

Like in the times of Ramkhamhaeng, the great aim is still a perfect society guided by *dhamma*. And because this aim only can be visualised as a future one, people have continuously to strive for it. A society based on holistic *dhamma* can only be achieved through a kind of permanent revolution which may take shape a permanent sequel of coup d'états followed by a permanent re-drafting of constitutions, the rules of the state with *dhamma*.

To come back to the questions put before us by the convenors of this conference. Buddhist "religion" as understood by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, his predecessors and his followers must be characterised as a force which is beyond religion in the sense that an opposition between the transcendental and the imminent, between religion and society etc. can be communicated.<sup>20</sup> In the terms of system theory: There is no system which can observe this kind of Buddhism scientifically, individually or societally. It can only be communicated through holistic action – by a sage like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a king like Ramkhamhaeng - or a Muslim general like Sonthi.

---

<sup>19</sup> *Seeds of Peace* 23, 1: 47 (Jan.-April. 2007). – The whole volume is dedicated to the question of Thai democracy. The cover puts this theme thus: "75<sup>th</sup> Year of Thai Democracy! Is Buddhist Democracy Possible?"

<sup>20</sup> One of the talks of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu which received wide attention is entitled „No Religion“ and claims that "religion" is a word that belongs to everyday language.