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THE ADVENT OF PĀLI LITERATURE IN THAILAND

by

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From times immemorial, peoples in Asia have migrated from their original homelands and sought places where they could live in peace and security, far from strife and enmity of neighbouring tribes and this is also true of the people we know today as the Thais.[1] The word *Thai* means *free* and at the beginning of the second century B.C. their long migration from the valleys between the Huang Ho and the Yangtze Kiang in China began in earnest.[2] They moved ever southwards because of conflicts with neighbouring tribes and one group called *Thai Yai* (literally *Big Thai*) moved to what are now the Shan States, to the plains of the Salween River and other areas and as far afield as modern Assam. The *Thai Noi* (which means *Small Thai*) reached present day Thailand. It is quite easy to trace the language affinity of the Thais who now live in Assam, Upper Burma, Southern China, Laos and North Vietnam, the Shan States and Thailand itself.

Archaeological finds show that Buddhism first reached Thailand when it was inhabited by the Mon-Khmer, whose capital, Dvārāvati, (now called Nakon Pathom, or in Sanskrit, *Nagara Praṭhama*) was about fifty kilometres to the west of Bangkok. There was a vast pagoda there which was called Phra Pathom Chedi, (*Paṭhama Cetiya*) and other archaeological finds have been discovered nearby. Some scholars say that Buddhism was brought to Thailand by missionaries of the Emperor Asoka, two of whom were the Theras Sona and Uttara who went to *Suvaṇṇabhūmi* (the Golden Land or Land of Gold).[3] According to the Pāli Chronicles, this had been decided at the end of the Third Council, held in the seventeenth year of Asoka's coronation, under the presidency of the Arahant Moggaliputta Tissa. The chronicles mention that each of the missions was to consist of five Theras so that it would be possible to perform the *Upasampadā* ceremony.[4] Others identify *Suvaṇṇabhūmi* with Burma.

Others identify *Suvaṇṇabhūmi* with the Hiraṇyavati district along the Sona river. But the many artefacts found in Thailand around Nakon Pathom show that it was almost certainly modern day Thailand.

The conversion of Asoka to Buddhism as now acknowledged by the world of scholarship, was a tremendous help to the *Buddhasāsana*. Some scholars however maintain that Buddhism came to Thailand much later than his missionaries did.

The first form of Buddhism to reach Thailand was that of Theravāda and this is borne out by the many historical remains which were found at Nakon Pathom. Among these were rock inscriptions in Pāli, the Buddha foot prints and seats and the *Dharma-Chakra* or Wheel of Law. All of these had, of course, existed in India before images of the Buddha were introduced as a result of Greek influence.[5] It is highly likely from archaeological evidence that Buddhism reached Thailand in the third century B.C., in more or less the same form as that propagated by Asoka. Many Buddha images were found in Nakom Pathom's ruins and in other cities and on looking at their styles, it can be assumed that early missionaries went there from Magadha in Bihar.[6] The Great Stupa (Phra Pathom Chedi) can be compared with Sanchi.

The name Pathom Chedi, which in Pāli is *Paṭhama Cetiya*, means "First Pagoda" which could mean that it was in fact the first pagoda to be built in *Suvaṇṇabhūmi* and would corroborate the fact that the Theras Soṇa and Uttara established Buddhism in Thailand under Emperor Asoka's direction. The Mauryan Emperor Asoka reigned from *circa* 269 to 237 B.C. and during this period through his emissaries and traders, Indian culture with languages and religious works gradually started to spread to Southeast Asia. The epigraphic records often contain the Emperor's willingness to establish a righteous empire. Evidently the earliest Buddhist scriptures must have reached Asian kingdoms from India in the third century B.C.

Mahāyāna or Northern Buddhism was also spreading and it flourished in Northern India under King Kaṇishka in the second half of the 1st century A.D., notably, and went to-Sumatra, Java and Kambuja (Cambodia). Possibly it went from Magadha in Bihar to Burma and Pegu (Lower Burma) and to West Thailand as well as to Malaya. Many Mahāyāna Buddhist missionaries went to Sumatra from Kashmir and by 757 A.D. the Srīvijaya king spread his large empire throughout the Malay peninsular and islands as well as to Southern Thailand from Surāsthani southwards.

Today, in Southern Thailand, there is much evidence showing that Mahāyāna Buddhism was established there and the cetiyas in Chaiya (Jaya) and Nakon Srī Thammarath (*Nagara Sri Dharmarāja*) indicate this. Many other stupas and chetiyas were found with votive tablets of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (*Phra Phim*) and all are of the same type as those found in Java and Sumatra. Some scholars think that as Mahāyāna Buddhism had spread to China by the beginning of the Christian era, the Thais in their original home (in China) may have already come into contact with it there. From 1002 to 1182 in Cambodia, there ruled the Sūryavarman dynasty of kings who were Mahāyāna Buddhists and they also propagated this with a strong admixture of Brahminism. A rock inscription tells of a king in Nakon Srī Thammarath

in around 1017 who traced his ancestry back to the Srīvijaya rulers and this inscription is now in the National Museum at Bangkok. He ruled at Lopburi in central Thailand and his son became king of Cambodia.

An inscription was found in the Cambodian language in a Brahmanic Temple near Lopburi and this Brahmanic culture survives in Thailand today with evidence that the religions and cultures of Thailand and Cambodia intermingled for a very considerable time. Sanskrit became deeply rooted from about 1020, and Thai scripts, based on Cambodian scripts, which derived their origins from India, were invented by King Ram Kamh-aeng of Sukhothai (Sukhodaya in Northern Thailand), when, after considerable struggles, that independent state was founded in 1257 A.D. (B.E. 1800).

King Anawrata (Anuruddha) of Burma had his capital in central Burma at Pagan in 1057 and he invaded northern Thailand, his kingdom covering Chiengmai, Lopburi and Nakon Pathom.[7] Unfortunately, contact between India and Burma was rather poor and Buddhim in India was in decline, so the doctrine undewent some changes and became what is known in Thailand as Pagan Buddhism. This was strongest in the north and relics found there show strong Theravāda influence, whereas in the south the Burmese were content to leave their Khmer (Cambodian) vassals, who made Lopburi their capital city, as its rulers. As the Thais on their long migration southwards, grew in numbers and strength, they finally became in control of the land after Anawrata's death when his kingdom declined. Le May says, "We have a definite contact between the Burmese in the west and the Thai in the east and north, and, with the growth and spread of Hinayāna Buddhism in Burma it is most probably from the middle of the eleventh century that the Thai of northern Siam and the intervening region began to be influenced by the form of religion introduced at this time into upper Burma.[8]

During King Anawrata's reign, the king of Ceylon, Vijaya Bāhu I (1055-1110) asked for Buddhist monks to come and bring Buddhist scriptures with them, to revive the pure form of Higher Ordination in Ceylon. King Anawrata agreed to the Sinhalese king's request and sent both monks and scriptures to Ceylon in return receiving a duplicate of the Tooth Relic.[9] There were close relations with North and West Thailand and this led to exchanges of art and culture and matters concerned with religion. In Ceylon under King Parākrama-Bāhu (*c.* 1165) there was a great revival of Buddhism and a Council was called. Monks from Thailand went to Ceylon to study Theravāda literature and ceremonies and in the next century, monks like these returned to Srīthammarat, where they built a *cetiya* in the Sinhalese style. Upon this news reaching Sukhothai (Sukhodaya) these monks were asked to come to that northern capital to establish Theravāda Buddhism as the state religion. There is a stone inscription of King Rama Khamheng 1292 A.D. which records the introduc-

tion of Sinhalese Buddhism and the existence of the old school which came by way of Burma and the new school of *Araññavāsī* monks from Ceylon. King Parākrama-Bāhu the Great of Sri Lanka (1164-97) had accomplished the important task of purifying the *Sāsana* and of re-organising the Buddhist Order and as a result of this, Theravāda Buddhism reached the apex of its glory in the island.[10] Le May states, that Ceylon was twice unsuccessfully invaded in 1230 and 1256 during the reign of King Parākrama Bāhu II, by a King called Chandrabhānu who tried to obtain possession of a miraculous statue of the Buddha to take to Thailand. It is recorded that Buddhism from Sri Lanka spread to northern and central Thailand during the reign of King Maha-dharmarāja Lithai, the fifth monarch of the Sukhodaya dynasty (1347-1376) and in the reign of King Kuna (1367-1388) Buddhism from Sri Lanka spread to the northern kingdom too.[11] It is thus quite clear that by the middle of the fourteenth century, the books of Pāli literature with Sinhalese Buddhist traditions and practices were firmly established in the heart of Siam and, it received a number of new impulses direct from Ceylon up to the sixteenth century.

After King Ram Kamhaeng, the political power of Sukhothai (Sukhodaya) declined and it succumbed to the might of Ayudhya.[12] But Sukhodayan monks went to study at Ayudhya and Ayudhyan monks went to Sukhodaya. Finally Sukhodaya was annexed to Ayudhya in the reign of King Boromarāja I (1370-1388). Ayudhya remained the centre of Buddhism in Thailand for over 400 years until 1767.

In 1423 A.D., seven Theras and other monks went from Thailand to Sri Lanka and stayed there for several years, returning to their homeland with some Sinhalese monks to establish a *nikāi* or fraternity which was later held in high regard for its strict rules and observances.[13] In 1750, King Kienti, (Kirthi) Sri Rājasingha of Sri Lanka asked King Baromakot and the Patriarch for some Thai monks to come and correct the rites and ceremonies of the Sinhalese monks and *Saṅgha* and to establish a valid Ordination service. Eighteen monks went to Sri Lanka and ordained seven hundred monks and three thousand novices in a period of under three years, and established the still existing Siamese fraternity or sect.[14]

The Ninth Buddhist Council was held in 1788 in Bangkok and its purpose was to collect and amend the existing Buddhist texts.[15] Ayudhya had been captured by the Burmese in 1767 and the libraries of temples and palaces had been destroyed in the subsequent fire and pillage. Countless thousands of Buddhist texts and manuscripts and historical documents were burnt and destroyed. Phya Tak Sin liberated Thailand from the Burmese, establishing his capital at Thonburi, across the river from Bangkok and in 1769 his army captured Srīthammarat in southern Thailand which the Burmese had not touched. He managed to collect many Buddhist texts and brought them to

his capital as he wanted to restore the Tripitaka to its entirety. Unfortunately, he died long before the work could be completed and his wish fulfilled. Every effort has been made since to obtain a pure text for the Thai version of the Pāli Tripitaka.

King Rama I or Phra Buddha Yot Fa succeeded him and continued the labour of collecting the Tripitaka and he called a Council of two hundred and thirty monks and thirty royal pundits who were to edit the texts which had been assembled. They all met for the first time at Wat Mahadhatu in Bangkok on November 12th, 1788 and it took them five months to complete the task. The work was entitled 'The Council edition of the Tripitaka' or 'The Edition of the First Masters' and it consisted of a total of 3,568 packets of palm leaves which were sorted into 157 books of the *Suttanta*, 40 books of the *Vinaya*, 56 books of the *Abhidhamma*, and 35 books of the *Saddavisesa*. The last was a dictionary of the Pāli terms which were used in studying the three sections of the *Piṭaka*. During the reign of King Rama I, two additional copies were made for examination purposes and so that temples would be able to make copies for their own students and for their libraries as well as for teaching and disseminating the Dhamma.[16] King Rama I was the first king of the present Thai dynasty called the Chakri Dynasty. The present king, Phumipol Adulyadet, has reigned from 1946.

Later on, a further seven copies were made in the reign of Rama III Phra Nang Klao (1824-1851). These editions were made when King Mongkut (King Rama IV—Phra Chom Klao) was then Prince Buddhavajirañāṇa and was in the robe. He was able to undertake supervision of the revision of the texts and he secured forty volumes of sacred writings from Sri Lanka for use in making recensions of existing Thai texts in 1843. In 1844, these were then returned and a further thirty volumes were borrowed for the same reason. The king, Rama III wanted to have a Thai translation of the *Tripiṭaka* made (which was in Pāli) and he started on the task by having all those who preached from the Dhamma, translate into Thai the parts which they used in their sermons when teaching. But it was not until much later on that the *Tripiṭaka* was printed. The Ninth Council had been held in 1788 and about a hundred years later, the king, Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), proposed that the *Tripiṭaka* be put into print for the first time ever [17]

Before this huge commission was started, the higher *Sangha* members made a final version of the *Tripiṭaka* in its entirety.

A full comparison was also made of Sinhalese, Cambodian and Mon scripts in order to make a true text in as pure a form as possible and in 1893, the complete *Tripiṭaka* was printed in Pāli, using Thai characters. This took place during the twenty-fifth year of the king's reign.

One thousand monks took part in a three-day religious festival to celebrate the occasion and the edition was of a thousand copies. Each royal temple in the country received a set and many were sent abroad and the rest sold. Thailand thus printed the very first standard and complete edition of the *Tripiṭaka* in the Pāli language. King Rama VI also wanted a Buddhist book to be distributed as his memorial at his cremation. King Prajadhipok (Phra Pok Klan) 1925-1935, chose the *Tripiṭaka* and entrusted the task of reprinting it to the Prince Patriarch. Subscriptions poured in and it cost 237,449 baht. In fact, 590,514 baht were collected and the balance was set aside for future editions. On 26th November, 1930, a special service was held to commemorate the printing of this forty-five-volume set of the *Tripiṭaka* in an edition of 1,500 copies and, in the Royal Library there are now 15 editions or recensions of the *Tripiṭaka*, thirteen of which are on palm leaves whilst two are on paper. These are the printed editions of 1893 and 1928.

For many centuries, as we have seen, Buddhism has been firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of the vast majority of the people of Thailand and it has deeply enriched their lives. It may indeed be said that without it, life in Thailand would not be as it is today. It is probably the only country where the king is constitutionally a Buddhist and an upholder of Buddhism and it is one of the countries where Buddhism remains a living and dynamic force for the well being and happiness of the world.

References

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3. H. Saddhātissa, *Malalasekera Commemoration Volume*, p. 315.
4. *History of Ceylon*, Vol. I, Part I, Ceylon University Press, Colombo, p. 131 : '*The principal missionary to each country was attended by four others, for the purpose of missionaries was to recruit members to the Sangha.*'
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16. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 321 ff.