

Ordaining Trees in Thailand

Engaged Buddhists Come Together to Save the Forest

BY CAROLINE KORNFIELD

As an Asian economic powerhouse Bangkok has become a fast-paced sophisticated city. But factories have grown across central Thailand, and heroin and amphetamine epidemics have ruined thousands of Thai families. Almost every lower class family has been affected by prostitution and the sex-trade. The environmental devastation of logging, cash crops, and slash-and-burn agriculture has been some of the worst in Southeast Asia. In response, out in the small villages of rural Thailand, monks conduct the seemingly peculiar ritual of ordaining trees by tying orange monks' robes around them. Using their knowledge of the communities along with deeply rooted religious traditions, these monks are slowly working to save the ever-shrinking Thai forests.

Traditionally, the Buddhist religious community has been detached or oblivious to these great social transformations and problems. After a century of this separation, sectors of the Sangha, or Buddhist community, have recently begun to question the legitimacy of many of the government's policies and societal norms. These individuals have used traditional Buddhist teachings and principles as foundations for their critique. Many of them have then taken these values and attempted to change the problems they see. This trend has come to be called by many 'engaged Buddhism.'

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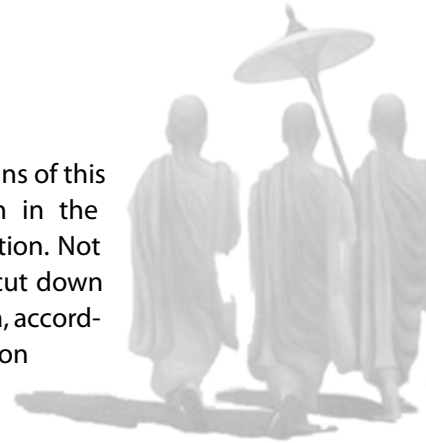
One of the ongoing campaigns of this engaged Buddhism has been in the area of environmental devastation. Not only has the Thai forest been cut down at one of the fastest rates in Asia, according to professor Susan Darlington at Hampshire College, but the statistics are staggering. In 1938, forest covered 72 percent of land, and by 1985 it covered only 29 percent.¹ Over

the last few decades, both forest monks and many lay people have attempted to address this problem. The monks see the forest as one of their closest connections to the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha was enlightened under the Bodhi tree and for centuries monastics have used the forests as a way to truly understanding the Buddhist path.

Seeing that the forests are key to both the tangible and spiritual well-being of the population, the monks began to organize and act. One of their most concrete actions has been to go into areas of the forest where illegal logging is being done, and ordain trees. Often they will tie the orange robes of a forest monk around the trunk of the largest or oldest tree. The ceremonies are large and well publicized in a hope to discourage loggers who might not want

to make the bad karma of cutting down the forest around an ordained tree. In provinces from Korat to Changmai the movement has been very successful.

These monks have sought not only to preserve the land for religious reasons, but also out of concerns about local people's spiritual well-being and for the quality of life of the individuals in their communities. Because the monks are part of the community, they and the movement they lead can choose their actions and build projects informed by local



histories. Unlike the government environmental and agricultural policies, which are concerned with boosting the economic development of the nation as a whole, the monks are concerned with prosperity and well-being at the local level. In utilizing sustainable practices in the villages, the engaged Buddhists teach that the whole country will thrive when all of the individual parts are healthy.

The monastic environmental movement has also given birth to the Independent Development Monks' Movement. Since the 1980s, the Independent Development Movement has worked to counter the negative effects of increasing consumerism and the government-sponsored shift from subsistence to market farming, which has left farmers dependent on outside markets.

To address the decline in the rural population's quality of life, monks began organizing to promote healthy development. Movements like the Foundation for Education and Development of Rural Areas have sprung up across Thailand. These Buddhist movements work closely with other non-governmental organizations to promote alternative forms of development. One monk, Phrakhrū Pitak, writes that by 1999 over 39 community forests and 100 fish sanctuaries were established in Thailand. These monks and the environmental groups that have followed them are clearly applying their Buddhist principles in everyday social politics.

The religious and intellectual support for engaged Buddhism in Thailand has come from the highly influential activist Sulak Sivaraksa and his teacher Ajahn Buddhadasa. A professor and grassroots activist since the 1960s, Sivaraksa has challenged the Buddhist establishment to move from rhetoric and complacency to real engagement and service using Buddhist principles. In the introduction to his book, *A Socially Engaged Buddhism*, Sivaraksa is described as standing "against everything modern Thailand stands for — industrialization, technological advancement, arms buildup and the exploitation of the agricultural population."² He not only uses Buddhism to question cultural norms and development, but also goes further in identifying the duty of a Buddhist to confront the reality of these problems.

Engaged Buddhism teaches that if one exploits the land, or other human beings to gain wealth, one is not acting in accordance with the Buddhist principles of 'right action,' 'right intention,' or 'right livelihood.' While poverty is not seen as a blessing, Buddhist teachings point out that suffering is caused by unwise grasping at material things. If humans exploit nature for material gain, other humans will suffer. This is both spiritual and practical. Without 'right understanding,'



the environment — and the humans who populate it — will suffer. Sivaraksa states that, "the simpler our livelihood is, the less natural resources will be exploited." He reminds people of the values of their religion and their traditional and more integrated way of living.

In this way, the leaders of engaged Buddhism, both monks and lay people, are drawing on Buddhist teachings of non-harming, virtue and community to empower the Thai people. These projects have been successful largely because the Thai people have faith in the monks. As monastics who have renounced worldly possessions, there is a known selflessness in their acts, and their commitment to service is undoubted. Conversely, government and businesses are often seen as having ulterior motives. Instead of following a course of development that produces corruption, the growing income gap, the drug epidemic and growing environmental devastation, engaged Buddhists are both questioning societal structures and developing alternative paths. These leaders' actions are solely motivated by their genuine concern for the Thai people and local Thai communities. They are using the rich spiritual heritage of Buddhist teaching, treasured by the Thai people, to confront the problems of modernization and environmental destruction. They are using the resources of the culture to show that there is a healthier way to grow.

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References:

- 1) Darlington, Susan M. "Buddhism and Development: The Ecology Monks of Thailand." From Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish and Damien Keown (eds.) *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.
- 2) Sivaraksa, Sulak. *A Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1988.