

Bad Buddhist Kings: An Examination of the Ideal Social Order¹

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Abstract

Sacral kingship in Thai Buddhism has been a topic of many scholarly tomes that draw mainly upon the scriptural myth of the world conqueror king and the history of central Thai (Tai) kingdoms. Because of a bias in the sources, an elitist monarchical view of Buddhist kingship emerges from these works. It is presumed that the religious were nothing but devoted loyal subjects of historical kings. However, there have been historical periods and places in which Buddhists expressed discontent over kings. In the northern Thai (Tai) principalities from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, we find prophetic literature a vision of a dystopic world, not ordered, but thrown into social and political chaos and profoundly immoral. Traditionally, the righteous ruler maintained the social and moral order. Order depended upon the king to live up to the moral paradigm of Buddhist kingship. However, Buddhist prophetic writings speak about the chaotic world that emerges under the leadership of failed evil kings. In my approach to prophetic

¹ I would like to thank Charles Hallisey and Peter Skilling for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. The research for this article was partially funded by the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). This article was originally presented at the 2011 International Conference on Thai Studies in Bangkok, Thailand.

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literature, I examine the concept of the bad king and the consequences of such a sovereign as conveyed in some of the writings from this literary genre. Through an examination of chaos and un-ideal kings, I seek to refine our notion of what the ideal king meant to Buddhists.

Introduction

Dark images of the human world are common in texts from northern Thailand regarding Buddha prophecies. These dark landscapes are of a human world filled with natural and human disasters afflicted by the evil done by humans, and especially by kings. Dystopian in themselves, these dark images are in stark contrast to fantastic visions of the future golden age of Maitreya or of human communities ruled by righteous kings (*dhammikarāja*). This contrast, while vivid, is also misleading, because it turns out that these dystopian images are useful for a better understanding of the nature of the world displayed in utopian visions of future golden ages, and, thus, they are useful when contemplating what the ideal community could be in the present. In other words, thinking about what makes a bad king, teaches us about how much can be placed, how much has to be placed on the shoulders of the precarious individuals who are kings when one is imagining how to actualize the ideals of “the beloved community,” to use Martin Luther King’s expression, “in the world.”

In the ideal social world depicted in Buddhist texts, the social order necessary and conducive to the religious life of both laypeople and monastics was maintained by righteous kings. A Buddhist ideal king was indispensable to people’s happiness and faith. Bardwell Smith explained almost forty years ago that such an excellent king maintains the ideal social order and that has consequences for “what it

means to be a Buddhist community.”³ In order for the Buddha’s teachings to become manifested as a successful ethical socio-political reality, it would seem the king must live up to a certain moral standard of kingship.

Given that the Theravāda imagination of social order is undergirded by a righteous king, how did Buddhists imagine and explain the failure of an un-ideal Buddhist king and its consequences upon the fate of people? In my discussion, I engage this line of inquiry by drawing upon northern Thai palm leaf writings which date either from the sixteenth century or from the latter half of the nineteenth to first quarter of the twentieth century.⁴ I utilize a selective body of works known locally as *phuttha-thamnai* (Buddha prophecies).⁵ In

³ Bardwell L. Smith, “The Ideal Social Order as Portrayed in the Chronicles of Ceylon,” *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (1972; repr., Chambersburg, PA: ANIMA Books, 1978) 57.

⁴ I use only copies of original manuscripts provided by the Social Research Institute of Chiang Mai University. In my citations, I give the copy date of the original manuscript, since, with the exception of the *Tamnan Phra Chao Liap Lok*, we have only a copy date available for the manuscript. Scholars generally believe that the writing of the *Tamnan Phra Chao Liap Lok* dates from the fifteenth century; however Prakong Nimmanahaeminda has recently argued for a date of composition that falls between the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. See Prakong Nimmanahaiminda, “Tamnan Phra Chao Liap Loke [The Legend of the Lord Buddha’s Travels Around the World]: Lan Na Monastic Wisdom,” (paper presented at the International Conference: Buddhist Narratives in Asia and Beyond, Bangkok, Thailand, August 9-11, 2010). Manuscript passages quoted in this essay are my own translations.

⁵ *Phuttha-thamnai* is a central Thai word. The northern Thai wording is *phuttha-tamnui*. *Phuttha-thamnai* writings are attested in Thai, Lao, and Khmer Theravāda traditions. Although scholars have largely overlooked these Buddhist narratives, there are a handful of scholars who have produced a study focused on them. For a study on the Lao phenomenon, see Peter Koret, “Past, Present and Future in Buddhist Prophetic Literature of the Lao,” *Buddhism, Power, and Political Order*, ed. Ian Harris (New York: Routledge, 2007) 143-167. For Khmer studies on this genre see Olivier de Bernon, “Le Buddh Dāṃṇāy: Note sur un texte apocalyptique khmer,” *BEFEO* 81(1994): 83-96; and Olivier de Bernon, “La Prédiction du Bouddha,” *Aséanie* 1 (1998): 43-66. For Lānnā Thai, see François Lagirarde, “Temps et lieux d’histoires bouddhiques: À propos de quelques “chroniques” inédites du Lanna,” *BEFEO* 94 (2007): 59-94. With respect to the Burmese tradition, prophecies about the arrival of a *cakkavatti* circulated in the form of songs and folktales during the late nineteenth and

particular, I focus on *phuttha-thamnai* texts whose theme is a narrative of progressive degeneration in Gotama Buddha's *sāsana* that begins at his death and lasts for five thousand years, at which point the *sāsana* undergoes an apocalyptic ending.

My paper will be divided into two sections. First, I describe the category of bad kings and its consequences. Next, I discuss how Buddhists explained the repercussions wicked rulers had upon the world.

The Concept of the Bad King

The king enacted his role through the exertion of political power in ways found throughout the world, as well as forms particular to mainland Southeast Asia. Universally, kings held the exclusive rights to punishment, which in Buddhist terms is called *daṇḍa*,⁶ the arbitration of legal cases, the decision to wage war for the sake of empire expansion, and the delegation of administrative rule in the hands of local lords and ministers in the environs beyond his immediate reach (i.e., the areas outside of the central ruling city-state).

early twentieth century. I am not aware of any scholarship focused solely on a Burmese literary genre of Buddha prophecy. Oftentimes, one only finds brief mention of *phuttha-thamnai* in studies on millennial movements that occurred in mainland Theravāda Southeast Asia. For e.g., see Manuel Sarkisyanz, "Messianic Folk-Buddhism as Ideology of Peasant Revolts in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Burma," *Review of Religious Research* 10: 1 (1968): 32-38; Charles Keyes, "Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society," *JAS* 36:2 (Feb 1977): 283-302; John Murdoch, "The 1901-1902 'Holy Man's Rebellion,'" *JSS* 62:1 (Jan 1974): 47-66; Yoneo Ishii, "A Note of Buddhistic Millenarian Revolts in Northeastern Siam," *Southeast Asia: Nature, Society, and Development*, ed. Shinichi Ichimura (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976) 67-75. For a discussion of *phuttha-thamnai* in the context of Buddhist modernism in Cambodia, see Anne Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and modernity in colonial Cambodia* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 2007).

⁶ The concept of *daṇḍa* originated in the ancient Indian legal tradition and was a complex notion that signified the basis of the king's absolute power. In its most basic meaning, *daṇḍa* refers to a ruler's right to punish, literally meaning 'stick, club'. See Robert Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, trans. J. Duncan and M. Derrett (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, [1973] 2004) 214-215.

In pre-modern mainland Southeast Asia, a king's territory and his power over it were conceived of as his sole ownership of the land, its resources, and people which was aptly captured in the royal epithet, *chao chiwit* (lord of life). As such, he had the right to extract taxes and commission corvée labor. Finally, he had the duty to maintain customs, which in Buddhist terms were known as a set of *rājadhammas*, ten moral principles by which a ruler had to abide in order to be deemed a righteous Buddhist king. In sum, the following seven activities exclusive to kings determined sovereign power: 1) the role as punisher; 2) the role as judge; 3) empire expansion via war; 4) the devolution of power into other hands; 5) extracting taxes; 6) levying corvée labor; and 7) upholding the customs (i.e., the ten *rājadhammas*).

All of the above acts were forms of control exercised by the king over nobles, ministers, freeman (*phrai thai*), and slaves. However, the last one, the ten *rājadhammas*, was a form of control imposed upon the king through the paradigm of the Buddhist king. Thus, on the one hand, the king exercised a kind of domination over the ruled, and on the other hand, the king submitted to a type of self-imposed control defined ethically. The first type, the king's control over others, can be divided into two modes of actions that rulers exercised over the ruled: 1) "giving/handing out," and 2) "taking/extracting." In the first category of "giving/handing out" are *daṇḍa*, ruling cases, and wars. The second category, "taking/extracting", includes taxes, fines, and corvée labor. I also place the delegation of power in the latter category because the king uses the nobles and officials to execute actions of "taking." With respect to arbitrating legal cases, there is an overlap in typology depending on whether the punishment entails "giving/handing out" execution, imprisonment, whipping, etc., versus "taking/extracting" fines. Let us now examine how the texts speak of the king's "giving" and "taking" modalities of control. I begin with "giving."

Buddha prophecies relate a history of the slow degeneration of Gotama's *sāsana*. This history is envisioned as a series of calamities that occur in a process that entails the gradual breakdown of the social and moral orders. Some texts give a list of ten events that characterize this downfall of Buddhist social order. These ten events are variously

called “*khro*” (bad fate), “*dukkha*” (suffering) or “*phay*” (danger).⁷ In two lists, the king who hands down severe punishment is listed as one type of calamity.⁸ Here are the two which are found in the *Tamnan Ho*.

Now, here are the teachings of the two Lord Buddhas who gave them in the form of prophecies namely, they spoke of ten types of suffering that will arise in the future.

1. *Dukkha*;
2. A great *Kali Yuga* for humans and animals;
3. Starvation;
4. Kings, local lords, nobles and ministers will hand down severe punishments (*daṇḍa*);
5. Roads traveled on will be shut in the future;
6. Fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, and children will become separated from one another in the future;
7. For a long time, homes will be abandoned in the future;
8. The old and the young will be inclined towards doing evil things to one another, back and forth. They will all die from one of ten types of dangers;
9. Men and women having evil hearts do not follow the *dhamma* teachings of the Buddha. As a result, they will vomit blood and die; and

⁷ For other lists, see 79.027.01N.004-004, *Tamnan Phra Phuttha Chao 2 Phra Ong*, Wat Rong Wua Daeng, Sankamphaeng, Chiang Mai, 1894 AD; 79.029.11.012-012, *Tamnan Bhikkhuni Thon*, Wat Sao Hin, Muang, Chiang Mai, 1902 AD.

⁸ In Pāli canonical and paracanonical texts, one also finds the king listed as a type of danger. The Pāli term is ‘*rājabhaya*’. Inserting this term into the search engine of online Pāli canon and commentarial texts found at websites, such as that of the Journal of Buddhist Ethics or <www.bodhgayanews.net>, will pull up a few citations of such instances.

10. Those who are wicked do not accept the *dhamma*. Thus, they do not know how to respect their father, mother, elders, *khruba* (preceptor), or *achan* (teacher). In such a manner, they will be wicked. Upon dying, they will surely go the *avici narok* (a land of hell).⁹

Now I will speak about the bad fates:

1. Lightning will fatally strike dead many cows and water buffalo;
2. Many people will die by water or fire;
3. Many people will die from sudden stomach and stabbing chest pains;
4. People will no longer tend to un-husked or husked rice which nourishes the senses. Instead, they will grow rice to be sold and made into liquor which inclines the senses towards evil. Out of enmity, they will commit sinful deeds;
5. Many people will be struck by stabbing pains everywhere, vomit blood, and then die;
6. Many people will have painful boils that uncontrollably emit pus until they die;
7. Many people will argue. [Thus], kings, local lords, nobles, and ministers will hand down severe punishments or imprisonment;
8. There will arise in many people an outbreak of pimples both large and small, and a distended belly having stabbing pains. It will cause them to die; and
9. People will get dizzy, anxious, and die.¹⁰

According to the above lists, kings can be a danger to people when they abuse *danḍa*. Such a king is feared in a manner similar to

⁹ “*Tamnan Ho*,” in *Nangsue Pariwat Caak Khamphi Chut Tamnan Muang le Kotmay* [Transliterated Manuscripts: the series of city chronicles and legal codes], ed. Prasert Na Nakhon and Arunrat Wichienkeaw (Chiang Mai: Chiang Mai University Social Sciences, 2531 BE [1988 AD]) 2-3.

¹⁰ The text is missing for the tenth item. “*Tamnan Ho*” 5-6.

the other nine items. Similar to them, a cruel king can be taken as a type of inexplicable evil unleashed in the world. The list format itself equates merciless kings with the other items listed, such as starvation, disease, and war, all of which provide the circumstances for the collapse of social world seen in the list as the dispersion of family members, the disruption of travel and agriculture, and the dissolution of social/familial hierarchical relations. The second form of “giving/handing out” – wars – is another event that destabilizes communities by preventing the pursuit of everyday activities and one’s livelihood. Thus, this reckoning implies that ominous moments of collective disaster occur under tyrannical rulers.

Kings who “give” severe *danḍa* and start wars are the exact opposite of the model Buddhist king who rules by compassion. Aśoka, the archetypal sovereign based on a third century BCE South Asian king, was, according to legend, at first a cruel warring king, but then converted to Buddhism and ruled in a peaceful compassion manner.¹¹ These texts similarly depict bad kings as the opposite of a compassionate being. Moreover, their appearance in the world having been predicted by two Buddhas was to be expected.

Next, the second modality of royal control – “taking/ extracting” – has an opposite directional character. In the first, the ruler’s “giving” is an act that the rulers place upon, hand down, or give to the ruled. In “taking,” the ruled gives up things for the ruler to receive and have. “Taking” is done by the king himself or his local representatives – provincial lords and ministers. They extract taxes, fines, and labor, as well as other things, such as women, children, families, and property, in lieu of monetary fines. Generally the latter case occurs when freeman have no other means to payoff exorbitant fees. Here are a few passages that depict these actions of “taking” as blending into the synonymous meanings of “to extort, steal, confiscate, pauperize,” or figuratively, “to bleed”:

¹¹ For an exemplary study of this legend, see John Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka: a study and translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Kings, local lords, nobles, and ministers extract fines from villagers and city men. Each year the fines increase. When kings and officials fine the freemen, it is similar to constantly pouring water into a jar that is already full. That water is emptied as it slowly drips out of the jar. Listen, king, at that time, in the same city light rain falls on one half; in the other half, rain does not fall at all.¹²

Leaders will re-calculate the punishments of the freemen causing them lose their silver and gold. On top of that, they will drag their daughters and sons into slavery in their house. Then they will force the country's freemen into corvée labor. While the freemen are working, the leaders will collect and take the things of the freemen. Some make very little money, but the leaders will take a lot from them. That will cause them to be ruined. Those [leaders] who have not yet received their share will come to take things from the freemen. Having received and "eaten" [the goods], they will come back and collect even more according to their desires. Thus, they will oppress the freemen. When the freemen win, they are called back and made to lose. When they get the freemen's things they will share and "eat" them amongst themselves. That violates the traditions of the country. When it rains, it is not according to the ancient seasonal pattern. In the fifth and sixth month, it rains a lot. In the twelfth month when the rice fields are plowed, the rice shoots die from the sunshine or caterpillars nibble at the clusters and bite the stalks. Rice becomes expensive. Many people will die of starvation. It is because the king and local lords do not follow the ten *rājadhammas*.¹³

¹² 78.013.01A 004-015, *Tamnan Phra Chao Liap Lok*, Wat Ku Kham, Muang, Chiang Mai, 1917 AD, 22.

¹³ 81.076.01N 043-043, *Tamnan Phraya In*, Wat Pong Ho Sala, Mae Tha, Lampang, 1869 AD, 5.

I chose these two passages because of the allusions to water made in connection with “taking/ extracting” from the freeman. In the first citation, “taking” is likened to “drawing water”, which I previously stated can figuratively be understood as bleeding someone. “Taking” or “draining” the freemen of his resources, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Thus, the jar that runneth over represents the royal “takers.” Similarly, rain that falls in one part of the city stands for the royal “takers” who seize and share the spoils. There is wealth/rain for them, but not for the freemen. A disturbance in the rain patterns results. That prohibits the growth of agriculture. In other words, (as one passage states) “When kings and local lords do not abide by the ten *rājadharmas*, the country will not grow or progress.”¹⁴ Excessively “taking” from the people depletes them, metaphorically bleeding them and the country dry.

In sum, both “taking” and “giving” causes suffering for the freemen. Although the texts do not employ this dichotomy, I use them to distinguish two modes of power/control abused by bad kings. The “giving” modality captures the form of control exercised through the king’s monopoly over violence and his license to kill. In this sense, *chiwit* in the epithet, *chao chiwit*, refers to human life. “Taking” also articulates a kind of coercion, but through the rhetoric of ownership. Rulers subject the freemen to his “taking” because he owns them. *Chiwit* here means ‘*rasa*’ (life force).

How Buddhists Explain the Consequences of Bad Kings

To understand the effects bad kings have on people, we must examine his relationship to the freemen, nobles, and ministers, as well as the kings of neighboring principalities. First, we must attempt to discern the texts’ conceptualization of the social body as it relates to the king’s own people, and then its relation to the rulers of neighboring kingdoms. Afterwards, we must analyze this social body in connection to the three realms of the cosmos: the hells, world of humans, and the levels of heavens. I begin with the social hierarchy

¹⁴ 78.020.01N 110-112, *Tamnan Phraya In*, Wat Khuang Singha, Muang, Chiang Mai, 1920 AD, 10.

that informs the king's relationship to his nobles, ministers, and freemen.

A common symptom of the lack of social hierarchy found in the texts is that those who rise to power are not of a royal lineage; and those of royal parentage have become subservient to plebian usurpers. The *Hmaak Nam Tao Jadok* allegorically describes this case as "wolves eat rice off of golden platters." The golden platter refers to the exquisite dinnerware that was used exclusively by nobles, and thus symbolized their high status. The passage continues, "Those kings and lords who are majestic ('big') like the *singha* lion become the attendants of wolves."¹⁵ The same passage implies that wolves rise to power through "being bold and aggressive."¹⁶ Savage power has replaced civilized Buddhist power, which is grounded in moral goodness.¹⁷ The categories of wild and civilized not only draw the boundaries between order and disorder,¹⁸ but this application of the dichotomy demonstrates that hierarchical roles are rigid and bounded. When wolves eat from golden trays, this signifies that a line of division has been crossed and violated. Status circumscribes each individual giving one a specific relation in respect to other classes of social beings. Once social ranking *at the very top* disappears, all other social relations cease to be ordered in respect to one another. The following passage illustrates this situation.

All over *Jambudvīpa*, kings and local lords will harm freemen. They will enact fines, tie up, imprison, beat, or lock them to the pillory, or seize their property. The children of kings and local lords will compete to "eat" (i.e.,

¹⁵ 79.023.01 116-116, *Hmaak Nam Tao Jadok*, Wat San Khong, Sankampaeng, Chiang Mai, 1870 AD, 12.

¹⁶ *Hmaak Nam Tao Jadok* 14.

¹⁷ Niels Mulder, "The Concepts of Power and Moral Goodness in the Contemporary Thai Worldview," *JSS* 67:1 (Jan 1979): 111-131. For the concept of Buddhist power, I rely on Mulder's theory found in this article.

¹⁸ David Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," *Moral Order and the Question of Change: essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David Wyatt, Alexander Woodside, and Michael Aung-Thwin (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1982) 53-77.

rule) the *muang* (city-state). Thus, great wars will arise in which many freemen will be killed and utterly destroyed. Among the people, wives will try to lord over husbands as well as younger ones with elder ones, guests with hosts, younger *bhikkhu* with senior *bhikkhu*, and students with teachers.¹⁹

The loss of social hierarchical order meant that the ways in which people are classified, mother, father, husband, elder/younger sibling, teacher/student, etc., have become ambiguous and ambivalent. The category exists, but it no longer structures human relations. It is empty and void of meaning. Rank is ordered according to difference. The children of nobles who fight to seize the *muang* claim to be rulers like their parents causing difference via rank to dissolve. One text states, “Just anybody will say, “I have merit. I have *tejas* (fiery splendor), *yaśas* (high status), and a retinue of brave warriors.”²⁰ When categories ranked according to power no longer exist, that signifies a social body that can no longer be contained within rigidly bound, distinct, and separate roles of identity. Having discussed social hierarchy to delineate the king’s relationship to those under him, I now turn to discuss his inter-relationship with other kings.

In terms of the inter-relationship between kings of principalities, the absence of the ideal king results in a “one has become many” problem. In the primordial period of *Jambudvīpa*, there was only one overlord (*phu yai*).²¹ Later, during the period of decline, we are told:

Beginning in the year *rway* and lasting through the year *peuk*, there is an Asian elephant (*chang sang*) that has so much power that there will be no one who can ride it, not a single person. There is a *muang* with so many kings and local lords that one cannot find an elephant to ride, not

¹⁹ 78.013.01A 004-015, *Tamnan Phra Chao Liap Lok* 7-8.

²⁰ 78.013.01A 004-015, *Tamnan Phra Chao Liap Lok* 26.

²¹ 80.045.01N 032-032, *Tamnan Phraya In*, Wat Nantharam, Sarabhi, Chiang Mai, 1860 AD, 10.

a single one. Even if there is one, it has to be shared.
People having *sīla* or *dhamma* cannot be found.²²

Without a single master that can subject others, power is like a mighty elephant that no one can tame and, therefore, use, so it runs amok causing rampant destruction. This situation of the “one has become many” crisis is best pictured through a story about four kings. Each king rules one of the four directions. One day, the four of them decide to fight one another in a rivalry to win dominance over all the directions (i.e., the world). Incessant death and destruction ensue as the result of their interminable wars. After continuous fighting and no clear victor, the kings give up the fight for world domination and pick the most righteous one among them to be the overlord.²³

Now moving from the structure of the social body, I consider its significance in terms of the three realms of the cosmos: the heavens, world of humans (i.e., social body), and the hells. To do so, I need to examine moral hierarchy since these three levels are ranked according to merit. The *thewadas* of heaven have more merit than humans living in the world of people, and humans more than the *pretas* (hungry ghosts) of the hells. Here there is not a complete collapse as in social order, but only a steady decline into moral corruption.

When the *sāsana* enters the epoch of pronounced degeneration, beginning around two thousand years after the death of the (historical) Gotama Buddha, the king is just one immoral wicked person among many in the world of sentient beings. The following passage describes the loss of a righteous king as the absence of a moral example meant for others – men and women – to follow as well as the cosmic and natural consequences of that loss.²⁴

²² 78.011.01N 039-040, *Tamnan Phraya In*, Wat Say Mun Muang, Muang, Chiang Mai, 1921 AD, 4.

²³ For a good version of this story see 78.020.01N 101-103, *Tamnan Phraya Dhamma*, Wat Ku Kham, Muang, Chiang Mai, 1927 AD, 19-27.

²⁴ A similar socio-cosmic domino effect of collapse that begins with the king and descends through the people and nature can be found in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* II, 74-76.

The group of *thewadas* who guard the whole world will become angry and upset at [people's bad] *kamma* which prohibits [their] growth and progress. Everyone – women and men – will act immorally following the ways of the kings, local lords, nobles, and ministers. At that time when it should rain, the *thewadas* will make the sun shine. When the sun should shine, they will make it rain. The (decline) in the ground's *rasa* makes it so that the seeds, rice sprouts, soy bean, and sesame, as well as things planted and buried will not sprout or bloom. They will shrivel up. Mealy bugs will bite at the roots. As soon as seeds sprout and develop stalks ants will eat them. Other times the crops will die due to the seasons being irregular.²⁵

The hierarchy of Buddhas, Indra, the four world gods, and *thewadas* who sit at the highest realm is followed by the middle realm of human beings whose hearts and minds can be led by both good and evil tendencies. Next, at the bottommost realm are the *pretas* of hell. In this hierarchical structure each layer is linked and embedded in one another. For instance, when everyone – king, *sangha*, and householders – becomes morally debased, a shortage of *thewadas* in heaven occurs.²⁶ That is, hell becomes over populated and heaven under-populated. These layers are porous and take shape in relation to one another. Thus, nature too becomes implicated. Yet, the middle realm of humans seems to have a greater capacity to affect the other two realms. People appear to be at the center of this moral cosmology.²⁷ Amplifying the importance of humans is the king who, as political leader and moral exemplar, can potentially disrupt both the social and moral orders.

²⁵ 78.013.01A 004-015, *Tamnan Phra Chao Liap Lok* 21-22.

²⁶ 80.045.01N 032-032, *Tamnan Phraya In*, Wat Nantharam, Sarabhi, Chiang Mai, 1860 AD, 2.

²⁷ Similarly, S.J. Tambiah states that “the whole cosmological system focuses on man as the moral agent” which affords humans a major role in Buddhist cosmology. See S.J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 41.

Conclusion

Following the premise that only a righteous king had the ability to maintain the ideal social and moral orders, Buddha prophecy writings imagine the world under an un-ideal king as one immersed in chaos and disorder. Through their portrayal of a world led by an evil king as existing in a state of disarray, we can perceive the threat of disorder that lay at the heart of the Buddhist imagination of social order.²⁸ That is, the perfect order (a world ordered according to the *dhmma*) was not an entity that could be permanently sustainable. Moreover, the absence of the ideal social world and king (from the real world) meant the manifestation of its opposite, the presence of a dystopic reality. Yet, even though wicked rulers are portrayed as fated and inevitable in terms of cosmic history, we still find in these writings an explicit blame laid upon bad kings more than anyone else. One passage condemns the Burmese king Bayinnaung (r. 1516-1581 AD), who was the first to conquer Lānnā thereby ushering a period of Burmese domination that would last for about two hundred years. The text states:

Phraya Kalakini, also known as Phraya Mangthra [Bayinnaung], will reap such awful retribution (*vipāk*) after his death. He will go to *mahāvicī narok* for innumerable

²⁸ Cf. Bardwell L. Smith, "Kingship, The Sangha, and the Process of Legitimation in Anurādhapura Ceylon: An Interpretive Essay," *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (1972; repr., Chambersburg, PA: ANIMA Books, 1978) 73-95. Bardwell describes the process of royal legitimation as one in which people's perception of reality as sacredly, cosmically, and socially ordered has to be continually renewed through the usage of symbols and rituals, as well the actual experience of social harmony and economic prosperity. Legitimation is that task of maintaining this static view of the world against a shifting socio-historical context made it vulnerable to failure, especially during dynamic periods of history. Smith argues, "To conclude, the process of legitimation involves linking of mundane existence to a perceived sacred reality, indeed the perception of this reality *within* mundane existence. The more we discover about the dynamics of the process in detail, the more we see its fragile nature, its powers of renewal, its potential for accommodating new ingredients, the constant possibility of its collapsing, and the enduring importance of it for all communities." Smith, "Kingship" 92.

eons until he is freed from his karmic retribution (*vipāk*) (which he earned when) he started wars out of a desire to defeat other leaders and take their villages and *muang*. Doing so, he damaged the religion (*phutthasāsanā*), the site of the three jewels. He destroyed Buddha images, *kuṭīs*, and *vihāras* thus causing *bhikkhus* to suffer through hardships and violence.²⁹

In finding fault with bad kings, that un-ideal king is implicitly measured against the paradigm of the exemplary king as if to say: we know you are an immoral ruler, but it is *still* your responsibility to be the model of leadership so that order *can be* maintained in the social world. Despite the depiction of a social and moral order sabotaged by un-righteous kings, these texts still seem to assert the belief in the righteousness and unfailing power of Buddhist morality, especially its ability to bring about goodness in the world. Ideals still inscribe meaning upon one's view of reality even for those living a world that is far from ideal. In conclusion, these Buddha prophecy writings suggest that in the back of the mind of these Buddhists, a disordered world was suspended in tension with their imagination of the ideal ordered world.

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²⁹ 78.020.01N 095-097, *Tamnan Phraya Dhamma*, Wat San Pa Khoi, Sansai, Chiang Mai, 1885 AD, 21-22.

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