

Renewal and Engagement: The Thai Roots of Sulak Sivaraksa's Buddhist Thought¹

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Abstract

Author and public intellectual Sulak Sivaraksa has, among other things, been a leader in the domain of socially engaged Buddhism. Sulak's re-thinking of Buddhism is a continuation and expansion of the work that earlier Buddhist modernists and other Buddhist intellectuals, such as Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto, began decades ago. These three share the common goal of interpreting the teachings of Buddhism so as to be relevant to the contemporary period and capable of dealing with critical issues facing the world. Drawing from texts and interviews, this article examines Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto's writings on Buddhism and social change and the impact they have had on Sulak's thought.

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“Our goal is to develop human beings with enough inner strength and moral courage to begin restructuring the collective consciousness of society.”³

— Sulak Sivaraksa

Introduction

In Thailand, public intellectual, activist, publisher and engaged Buddhist writer, Sulak Sivaraksa, has achieved prominence through his many books and articles, coupled with frequent television appearances. Donald Swearer has called him “the country’s best known lay Buddhist intellectual and social critic.”⁴ In a number of his writings, Sulak interprets Euro-American style modernity that has overtaken much of Thailand as a failure, negatively impacting nearly every layer of society. In its place, he offers an alternative vision of development and society grounded in Buddhist precepts and practice built through a Buddhist path that stands in contrast to the establishment Thai *sangha* and other more popular forms of Thai Buddhist expression. This alternative, independent Buddhist school of thought that he represents, consists of the fusing of progressive political and cultural ideas and precepts – both religious and non-religious – from voices and places locally, as well as throughout the globe, paired with local, sometimes conservative, cultural ideals. His vision details ways Buddhism can analyze and address problematic issues of local and global significance in the modern world. Furthermore, he has demonstrated how his ideas can be put into action through a lifetime of engagement, activism, organizing and NGO-related work. His reinterpretation of Buddhism is a continuation and expansion of the work that earlier Buddhist intellectuals, such as Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto, began decades ago.

In contrast to older Thai formulations of Buddhist theory and practice, Sulak has turned his focus largely toward the external and societal causes of suffering (*dukkha*), and on an active approach to dealing with and alleviating those causes primarily through education,

³ Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 70.

⁴ Swearer, “Sulak Sivaraksa’s,” 196.

activism, organizing, ethics, meditation and social engagement. At the same time, he devotes some of his intellectual effort toward more conventional Buddhist foci on internal causes of suffering and their alleviation. Sulak offers a vision of a re-invented Buddhism that actively addresses (in his view) the most pressing problems facing Thailand and the world: inequality, environmental destruction, exploitation, consumerism and warfare.

Buddhist Sources

In order to ascertain a deeper understanding of the roots of Sulak's theories and work, it is important to explore two of his most important and identifiable influences in the Thai Buddhist world: Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto. In *Loyalty Demands Dissent*, Sulak's English language autobiography, he describes the influence both men have had on him and says that he received most of his ideas from them.⁵ Both Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and P.A. Payutto fall into the category of modern monks within the Thai monastic world whose focus is on "the doctrine and intellectual or scholarly aspects of the [Buddha's] teachings."⁶ Venerable Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's vision of Dhammic socialism, pristine Buddhism and other theories of modern Buddhist thought are present in Sulak's societal vision, including his critique of capitalism and consumerism. P.A. Payutto's influence on Sulak is apparent in more subtle ways, primarily through his interpretation of Buddhism grounded in the Pāli suttas and his attempts to modernize the teachings and engage with contemporary society. Many others have shaped Sulak's repertoire as well, yet I propose here that these two represent individuals whose work – particularly their focus on the Buddha's teachings, compassion for others and social engagement – is most readily identifiable in the writings of Sulak.

Both Buddhadāsa and P.A. Payutto offer visions for societal uplift and renewal that incorporate individual meditative, moral and educational effort coupled with organization, activism, outreach and work toward changing institutional and structural elements

⁵ Sulak, *Loyalty Demands Dissent*, 91.

⁶ Olson, *A Person-Centered*, 19.

of society. Their models for a Buddhist society draw on elements of previous Buddhist ideals, namely the *sangha* as a micro model for a macro, society-wide vision. Their teachings on mindfulness and interconnectedness designed to alleviate the external causes of suffering, coupled with an interest in science and human and environmental rights, have been incorporated into Sulak's thought.⁷ With compassion and awareness of the interconnected nature of the world as part of their ontological basis, Sulak's two primary teachers promote a Buddhist path of meditation and work to alleviate the suffering of others – ideals Sulak has also regularly adopted in his writings.⁸ To cite one example of these values present in Sulak's thought, he comments: "suffering can be mitigated by right understanding. Buddhist practices, beginning with Mindful breathing, permeate my activism. Mindful breathing helps build up awareness, and with awareness we realize we cannot solve problems alone."⁹

Although he rarely uses the term *bodhisattva* in his writings, Payutto devotes significant effort toward outlining a vision for a modern, compassion-centered way of living that includes meditation and social engagement. This approach relies on mindfulness and empathy as motivation for alleviating suffering, themes Sulak has built on and expanded in his own work.¹⁰ This *bodhisattva* ethos is embodied throughout Payutto's writings on social engagement and is summarized in his comment: "Love or goodwill must be spread everywhere, regardless of boundaries, towards all lives that exist within the domain of the natural universe."¹¹ Sulak has also echoed Payutto's position that "a truly harmonious and peaceful society

⁷ Yet, on the subject of science and Buddhism, Sulak offers qualified support and believes that Mongkut's ushering in of a new modernist worldview "asserted that Buddhism must strive to be equal to Western science. In other words, Buddhism must be able to be proven scientifically. This constituted a major blow to Buddhism" because Buddhism "transcends logical reasoning and also focuses on supramundane states, which Western science does not have access to." Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 43.

⁸ See for example, Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 62-72.

⁹ Sulak, *The Wisdom*, 90-91.

¹⁰ See Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 301-306.

¹¹ Payutto, *Buddhist Solutions*, 72.

should be based on the five precepts.”¹² Sulak has embraced Payutto’s interpretation of Dhamma and his rejection of certain non-scriptural practices, and has heavily lauded his work on the earliest teachings of the Buddha and on Buddhism’s role in society.

Venerable Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

The late Venerable Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu is one of the most well-known teachers and interpreters of Thai Buddhism in the 20th century. As a student and teacher of Buddhism, he was open to and influenced by non-Thai traditions, including Zen, other aspects of East Asian Buddhism and Christianity. This aspect of Buddhādāsa has had a profound influence on Sulak’s approach to societal change; Sulak has, for decades, sought friendship and solidarity with a range of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. In the process, he established a number of organizations devoted to interreligious dialogue and social change including the Coordinating Group for Religion and Society, The Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. Moreover, he has credited Buddhādāsa’s pivotal role in influencing him to respect and learn from other Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions, a trait Sulak claims is rare amongst Thai monks.¹³

A sizable portion of Buddhādāsa’s vast corpus of teachings focus on the social side of Buddhism that he saw as inseparable from other aspects of life.¹⁴ He preached that many people lacked the proper understanding of the ability of the Dhamma to alleviate suffering and, therefore, were in need of a better understanding of the teachings. Sulak asserts, “Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu was the first or only contemporary monk who applied the study of Buddhism to politics.”¹⁵ In the second volume of his Thai autobiography, Sulak discusses the

¹² Payutto, *Buddhist Solutions*, 36.

¹³ Sulak Sivaraksa, interview with the author, May 2016, transcript.

¹⁴ Tomomi Ito writes that there are a purported “3,500 pages of Buddhādāsa’s lectures on society, originally delivered between 1973 and 1976, in the seven volumes of *Thammakhot (Dhamma Propagation)*, the 63-volume collection of Buddhādāsa’s works.” Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, 192.

¹⁵ Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 257.

effects Buddhadāsa has had on his life and says “as for my teacher Buddhadasa, who is a monk, I respect him greatly too. He has guided me as I proceeded down the path of my life. The teachings of Buddhadāsa help enable my own wisdom all of the time.”¹⁶

Significant for socially engaged Buddhists, Buddhadāsa formulated a vision of societal renewal along Buddhist lines that he called “Dhammic socialism.” The Dhammic socialism of Buddhadāsa laid a foundational basis for Sulak’s later middle-way approach to a Buddhist vision for renewing society that was neither capitalist nor Communist. In later years, Sulak has continued to develop and promote Dhammic socialism as an important aspect of societal change and renewal and remains on the foundational elements of his socially engaged Buddhist philosophy.¹⁷ Central to Dhammic socialism for both Buddhadāsa and Sulak is returning to and practicing “pristine Buddhism.” For Buddhadāsa, pristine Buddhism signifies a form of Buddhism that is free from cultural accretions and non-Buddhist practices, and is the “pure, original, and authoritative form of the religion.”¹⁸ Sulak has incorporated pristine Buddhism into his own writings and thought, but has refashioned the term as “Buddhism with a small ‘b’.”¹⁹ Closely echoing Buddhadāsa’s message, Sulak writes:

Buddhism with a small “b” means concentrating on the message of the Buddha and paying less attention to myth, culture and ceremony. We must refrain from focusing on the limiting, egocentric elements of our tradition. Instead, we should follow the original teachings of the Buddha in ways that promote tolerance and real wisdom. It is not a Buddhist approach to say that if everyone practiced Buddhism, the world would be a better place. Wars and oppression begin with this kind of thinking.²⁰

¹⁶ Sulak, *The Latter Part*, 569.

¹⁷ To cite one example, in his 2009 book, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, Sulak writes that “a good starting point for a new society is Buddhadasa’s Dhammic socialism. A proper political form must be cultivated to accommodate its vision. For instance, our education system must provide courses or lessons on Dhammic socialism.” Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 63.

¹⁸ Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 37.

¹⁹ Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 62-72.

²⁰ Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 68.

This passage reflects a number of the hallmarks of Buddhādāsa's modern Buddhist thought including emphasis on the earliest recorded teachings of the Buddha, a shedding of unnecessary cultural practices coupled with attention to issues in society.

Buddhadāsa's Life

Buddhadāsa was born in 1906 in the southern Thai province of Chaiya, now the province of Surat Thani. After some years of formal monastic study in Bangkok, he returned to the southern Thai province of his youth where he established Suan Mokkh or “The Garden of Liberation” monastery. Buddhādāsa's vision for the monastery was to integrate the traditional paths of both urban monasticism, the primary focus of which is on scholarship and ritual, with the forest monk tradition and its emphasis on meditation and asceticism. From early on, Buddhādāsa promoted a liberating core at the heart of the Buddha's teachings found in the Pāli suttas. Sulak comments that Buddhādāsa's central “purpose was to revive Buddhism and return to the original teachings of the Buddha”²¹ – an approach common throughout the various modern Buddhist movements.²²

Buddhadāsa died on July 8, 1993, at the age of eighty-seven. He left behind a thriving monastic community in southern Thailand and a vast library of recorded teachings. Regarding the unprecedented size of the teachings Buddhādāsa gave, Donald Swearer writes that his works comprise “the largest corpus of thought ever published by a single Theravāda thinker in the entire history of the tradition” and that

²¹ Sulak, *Loyalty Demands Dissent*, 201.

²² Sulak, Buddhādāsa, and P.A. Payutto all stem in part from the traditions of Buddhist reform and modernization that gained prominence during the colonial period (and possibly earlier) as a response to, but also in conjunction with colonial encounters and rule. These reform movements had early roots in mid-19th century, colonial-era Sri Lanka but also arose in China, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Burma. Hallmarks of these various modern movements include “a strong appeal to the Buddhist scriptures for authority; the rationalization of all or part of the Buddhist symbol system; an emphasis on the role of the laity and on universalism; a world-affirming or at least world-accommodating bent; and an emphasis on pragmatic achievement.” Bond, *The Buddhist Revival*, 6.

“for years to come, students of Thai Buddhism will be summarizing, distilling, and interpreting Buddhadāsa’s contribution to Buddhist thought.”²³

When Sulak first encountered Buddhadāsa’s writings, he found them to be too radical. At the time, he wrote, “a lot of people were attacking Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and I [Sulak] didn’t like him either.”²⁴ Following his university years in England, Sulak revisited the works of Buddhadāsa, this time finding them “sensible” and capable of teaching him “a great deal.”²⁵ In the early 1960s, Sulak visited Buddhadāsa for the first time at Suan Mokkh. He had an interview with the senior monk and was invited on a pilgrimage tour to a few southern islands with him. Years after their first meeting, Sulak has described Buddhadāsa as “my spiritual teacher,”²⁶ and “a very important person for Thai society and for the world in the contemporary context.”²⁷

The following section will provide an overview of some of Buddhadāsa’s teachings most relevant to the work of Sulak with particular emphasis on Dhammic socialism. In addition to internalizing and utilizing aspects of Dhammic socialism in his writing, Sulak’s thought can be seen as a continuation, elaboration and effort at refining and living out Buddhadāsa’s engaged Buddhist vision. Buddhadāsa was an innovator in certain ways, living a traditional forest-based life in a monastery, yet he proposed a vision of Buddhism that opened the highest soteriological goal, *nibbāna*, to all.²⁸ Tomomi Ito saliently notes that “Buddhadāsa has often been regarded as one of the most prominent Buddhist thinkers who led contemporary Buddhists to engage in social works, largely because of his emphasis on *nibbāna* as being accessible in one’s present psychological state in worldly circumstances.”²⁹ As a monk operating within the official *sangha*, Buddhadāsa did not follow the path of a lay Buddhist engaged with

²³ Buddhadāsa, *Me and Mine*, 2.

²⁴ Sulak, *Loyalty Demands Dissent*, 89.

²⁵ Sulak, *Loyalty Demands Dissent*, 89.

²⁶ Sulak, *The Wisdom*, 11.

²⁷ Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 255.

²⁸ Gabaude, *Thai Society*, 212.

²⁹ Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, 217.

society as did Sulak, but instead theorized and encouraged it. Further, Sulak has spent a portion of his life working out the details and refining Buddhādāsa's theories while attempting to live his life as an example of a non-monastic, modern, engaged Buddhist. Seen through the earlier pan-Asian Buddhist reform movements that emphasized laicization, Sulak's focus on lay Buddhist engagement can be viewed as a legacy of those earlier trends.³⁰

Buddhādāsa's Understanding of Dhamma

Throughout his career, Buddhādāsa made a “continuous effort to interpret the Dhamma and make it relevant to particular times, places, persons, and events.”³¹ He saw the heart of the Buddha's teachings as the Dhamma – or the way things actually are. He also felt that the doctrine of *paṭ iccasamupā da*, or dependent origination, is a crucial aspect of comprehending the truth of nature and the Dhamma. Understanding the natural order in all of its layers and complexity reveals a fundamental interdependently originated web of causes, conditions and relationships that make up the whole of nature and the universe. According to Buddhādāsa, the idea of a separate, individual self, independent from others, is an illusion. In reality, there is no personal, independent “I” that holds any lasting, true existence. Sentient beings are, instead, an impersonal part of the larger fabric of life. Furthermore, the natural world that encompasses all living beings is part of a vast web of interdependence that ultimately is dependent on everything else for its existence. Buddhādāsa asserts that all conditioned things in the universe, including the existence of sentient beings arise from “other constituents and is accompanied by gradual change. Things which are made of components have no substance or independent self-existence.”³² That is, nothing comes into existence

³⁰ For more on earlier Buddhist reform movements, see for example: Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-century Lankan Monastic Culture*; Hansen, *How to Behave*; Charney, *Powerful Learning*; Van Der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*.

³¹ Buddhādāsa, *Me and Mine*, 5.

³² Buddhādāsa, *Me and Mine*, 17.

independently and nothing has any permanent essence or lasting “I” – rather, any “thing” is actually a selfless part of the great impermanent process and flux of the universe or Dhamma.

Buddhadāsa suggests that the aim of Buddhism is to eliminate ego-born suffering and, thereby, reduce personal and societal misery in its entirety by first waking up to the reality of interconnectedness and lack of a self. Donald Swearer summarizes the understanding of interconnectedness as when an individual realizes that one’s “own personal well-being is inextricably dependent on the well-being of everything and everyone else, and vice versa.”³³ When one realizes the truth of interconnectedness, compassion naturally arises. Others are no longer seen as entirely separate from oneself. Therefore, to harm others is to harm oneself and to help and alleviate the suffering of others is, in reality, benefiting oneself. This is one significant component of the path leading to the ultimate goal of *nibbāna*, which is described as a state of total and lasting freedom from suffering (*dukkha*).

Awakening, or the attainment of *nibbāna*, is seen by Buddhadāsa as the focal point of all Buddhist activity. The Buddha – the awakened one who has attained liberation from suffering – was one who “simply knew the true nature of all things.”³⁴ In contrast, Sulak, in his English language writings, seldom stresses the achievement of *nibbāna*. Instead, he focuses on societal awakening and renewal for the benefit of this world. One of the ideas Buddhadāsa proposed was that the attainment of *nibbāna* was not just a goal for members of the monastic community, but is, in fact, open to all, lay and monk alike. Moreover, total liberation from suffering is an attainable goal here, in this life, not something achieved after countless lifetimes as more conventional interpretations suggest. Incorporating modern reformist emphases on laicization, his teachings on the accessibility of liberation upend previous understandings of *nibbāna* as being a goal only for monks somewhere in the distant (or not so distant) future and, thereby, open the Dhamma, its teachings, practices and liberation potential to all beings in their current life.

³³ Sulak, *The Quest*, 17.

³⁴ Buddhadāsa, *Me and Mine*, 24.

Dhammic Socialism

Buddhadāsa began publicly focusing on the social side of Buddhism during the 1940s with a series of public lectures he gave at the Buddha-Dhamma Association. Two decades later, in the 1960s, he began preaching the importance of a Buddhist-inspired socialism. This societal-spiritual model is, in a number of ways, different from classical “worldly” socialism that he saw as too focused on politics, economics, violence and revenge. Buddhadāsa’s vision of socialism is based on the model of the early Buddhist *sangha*, and Buddhist-based kingships that placed the needs of the community over the needs of individuals. Sulak comments that Buddhadāsa’s socialism is “not the socialism of the Soviet Union or China but a real socialism of democracy, fraternity, equality and liberty, like the Sangha the Buddha had founded.”³⁵

Buddhadāsa proposes a set of guidelines for a Dhammic socialist structure that he emphasizes is not new, but one inherent in Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions. On this point, he argues that “in Buddhism there is already a profound concept of socialism”³⁶ and that “all aspects of the Buddha’s teachings have the spirit of socialism.”³⁷ He calls this vision of a Dhammic social order embedded in the teachings of the Buddha Dhammic socialism. He writes, “the socialistic ideal of Buddhism finds expression in the concept of the *bodhisattva*. The bodhisattva is one who not only helps others, but sacrifices himself, even his own life, for others. Buddhism upholds this ideal because of the socialist intention which prevails throughout all aspects of the tradition.”³⁸ Dhammic socialism is not just a vision for re-ordering society, but is also a theory of how humans should live in harmony

³⁵ Sulak, *Loyalty Demands Dissent*, 201. Buddhadāsa proposes Dhammic socialism as a political and social system that is neither capitalist nor Communist yet maintains elements of both. He deliberately did not take either of the two sides as he felt that to “love one side and hate the other...will destroy the state of normalcy or balance (*pakati*), and we will have an *a-pakati* or out-of-equilibrium mind” which “will disturb both ourselves and others.” Buddhadāsa, *Me and Mine* 163.

³⁶ Buddhadāsa, *Me and Mine*, 194.

³⁷ Buddhadāsa, *Me and Mine*, 195.

³⁸ Buddhadāsa, *Me and Mine*, 197.

with the natural order. Buddhadāsa presents this model in fairly broad terms that appear to be general guidelines for a Dhammic society, rather than concrete policy proposals.

From Buddhadāsa's standpoint, communities in previous eras, such as the time of King Ashoka of India and King Ramkhamhaeng of the Sukhothai period, are models for societies living in harmonious, Dhammic ways. He claims the citizens of those kingdoms were content with what they had and lived with compassion by not taking or consuming more than they needed. Any excess food or goods are given back to the community rather than hoarded by the few and, therefore, the natural world and other humans were not exploited. Since those times, benevolent rulers have ceased to lead and compassion and other virtues have been replaced by human defilements (*kilesa*) that have grown out of control, leading to the institutionalization of greed in the form of capitalism and materialism. In turn, humans are overly focused on satiating selfish desires at the expense of others and the natural world. This leads to destruction of the biosphere, vast inequality, poverty, crime and other social and environmental ills. Sharing these concerns, Sulak regularly addresses their causes and possible solutions in his own writings, particularly his books and essays in English.³⁹

For Buddhadāsa, the goals of Dhammic socialism are an attempt to return society to equilibrium with the natural order (Dhamma) and conform to the highest law of nature, meaning “to take for ourselves only what we need, but not more.”⁴⁰ According to his reasoning, to do so would lead to the elimination of the myriad problems stemming from the current discordant system and would allow for human flourishing and the cessation of collective, systemic and institutionally based suffering. Finally, it will (in theory) lead to conditions most conducive for individuals to achieve *nibbāna* and, therefore, to lasting cessation of suffering. This Buddhological reasoning is evident in

³⁹ Although he also addresses them in Thai as well – yet, many of his hundreds of Thai language publications cover many other topics including history, philosophy, culture etc. See for example: Sulak, *A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*; Sulak, *A Socially Engaged Buddhism*; Sulak, *Alternative Development from a Buddhist Perspective*; Sulak, *Buddhism and Human Rights in Siam*.

⁴⁰ Buddhadāsa, *Me and Mine*, 175.

many of Sulak's written works and forms the foundation for his Buddhist-based vision of societal change.⁴¹

In order for this vision to be successfully implemented, it is critical that a morally upright, *bodhisattvic*, Dhamma inspired ruler must lead. Buddhādāsa asserts that the moral and ethical criteria that a proper Dhammic socialist leader must follow are known as the Ten Royal Precepts (*dasarājadhamma*): 1. *Dāna* (generosity); 2. *Sīla* (morality); 3. *Pariccāga* (liberality); 4. *Ajjava* (uprightness); 5. *Maddava* (gentleness); 6. *Tapa* (self-restraint); 7. *Akkodha* (non-anger); 8. *Avihimsa* (non-hurtfulness); 9. *Khanti* (forbearance); and 10. *Avirodhana* (non-opposition).⁴² Buddhādāsa suggests that “the character of the ruler is the crucial factor in the nature of Buddhist dictatorial socialism. If a good person is the ruler the dictatorial socialism will be good, but a bad person will produce an unacceptable type of socialism.” He goes on to assure his followers that “it must be kept in mind that this [dictatorial dhammic socialist ruler] is not an absolute monarchy.”⁴³ Although somewhat reassuring, he fails to explain what democratic elements of accountability would be in place to prevent such a leader from abuse of power, corruption and the like. Later on in his essay, he adds, “the *dasarajadhammic* system is absolute in that it depends essentially on one person.”⁴⁴

The benevolent king-like ruler would be responsible for ruling in a way that is concordant with the Ten Royal Precepts and would prevent members of the society from doing whatever they felt like. Buddhādāsa calls this highly regulated ruling style “dictatorial Dhammic socialism.” This model is dictatorial in the sense that part of the ruler's work is to dictate how far collective greed, hatred and delusion can go. This entails the prevention of hoarding wealth or the exploitation of others for personal gain. Buddhādāsa explains:

⁴¹ See for example, Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 62-72; Sulak, *Global Healing*, 10-5; Sulak, *The Wisdom*, 28-39.

⁴² Buddhādāsa, *Me and Mine*, 191.

⁴³ Buddhādāsa, *Me and Mine*, 192.

⁴⁴ Buddhādāsa, *Me and Mine*, 192.

A truly socialistic government would embody the characteristics of Dhamma. It would not allow for class distinctions based on wealth. Nor would it permit anyone to accumulate private wealth at the expense of others. Because it would set limits on “freedom” as such, it could be called “dictatorial”; but, it also maintains a harmonious balance that brings about well-being in the community and so extends the socialism of nature to the basis of a political system.⁴⁵

Despite the earlier promotion of a Dhammic dictator, Buddhādāsa would later qualify his stance and write “Buddhism has in it the spirit of democracy.”⁴⁶

Throughout his writings on Buddhism, it is clear that Sulak has internalized a number of Buddhādāsa’s Dhammic socialist ideals, particularly the importance of working towards environmental and interreligious harmony, as well as engagement with society. That is not to say he is an uncritical supporter of Buddhādāsa’s ideas. He disagrees with some components of Buddhādāsa’s theories, including the role of a Dhammic dictator in society. On this point, Sulak writes, “I think a weak point of Buddhādāsa lies in this matter of ‘dictator’, because dictators never possess Dhamma, and it’s like this everywhere because we abandon ourselves to having dictators.”⁴⁷ In Sulak’s view, a proper Dhammic leader has to be benevolent; otherwise, “it could also become tyranny. The best could become the worst.”⁴⁸

When writing about a new Buddhist model for society, Sulak implicitly invokes a number of Buddhādāsa inspired ideas to make his case. For example, he speaks of “the co-arising of mind and matter” (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and of the Ten Royal Precepts as standards for good governance.⁴⁹ He also holds up the Buddhist sangha as exemplar for society to emulate as it (ideally) embodies characteristics such as cooperation and egalitarianism – ideals that were previously valued in Buddhādāsa’s theory of Dhammic socialism.

⁴⁵ Buddhādāsa, *Me and Mine*, 189.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 248.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Jackson, *Buddhadāsa*, 244.

⁴⁸ Sulak Sivaraksa, interview with the author, June 2016, transcript.

⁴⁹ Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 102-104.

Phra Rajavaramuni (Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto)

The second most central Thai influence on Sulak's Buddhist thought is the monk-scholar P.A. Payutto. Payutto has been described as "one of the most well-recognized monks by both secular and monastic institutions of higher learning for his scholarly contributions to the study of Buddhism."⁵⁰ A renowned scholar of Pāli and author of numerous books and publications on Buddhism, including his well-known *Buddhadhamma*, Payutto's thought has impacted Sulak's understanding and presentation of Dhammic concepts, including the Four Noble Truths.⁵¹

Payutto categorizes his work as revolving around three major themes: the Buddha's teachings (the Buddha-Dhamma), monastic education and Buddhism and society.⁵² His work has been influential for Sulak and others in part because of its clear, scholarly explication of the teachings of the Buddha, often focusing on their application in society. Grant Olson comments that Payutto's writings "are pioneering in that they have pushed beyond a more parochial orientation to probing ways of linking Buddhism to social concerns."⁵³ Payutto's work is also well known for its modern presentation of Buddhism that eschews popular practices, such as amulet collecting and spirit cults, in favor of meditation, social work and other forms of service to others that have been emulated in Sulak's writings.⁵⁴ Payutto's interpretations also mark a continuation and expansion of earlier modern Buddhist attempts at doctrinal and exegetical reform. These include a focus on giving primacy to teachings of the Buddha, as well as attention to Buddhism and social engagement

In the following section, I present a synopsis of Payutto's life, his achievements, and theories in an attempt at coming to a better understanding of another influential figure whose intellectual

⁵⁰ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 20.

⁵¹ On his explanation of the Four Noble Truths, see, for example, Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 284-287.

⁵² Olson, *A Person Centered*, 57.

⁵³ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 466.

⁵⁴ For an example of Sulak's modern interpretation of the Buddha's message see, Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 70-72; Sulak, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 57-62.

achievements have affected Sulak's modern, socially engaged thought. Payutto's clear synthesis and exegesis of Pāli texts has been central to Sulak's understanding and own explanation of central Buddhist doctrines and practices, including meditation.⁵⁵

Background

Payutto was born in 1939 in Suphanburi, Thailand; he entered the monkhood at age twelve where he quickly excelled as a student. Payutto completed a B.A. in Buddhism from Mahachulalongkorn University, excelled in Pāli studies and completed the highest (and notoriously difficult) *parian 9 prayok* Pāli level examination.⁵⁶ Furthermore, as a novice monk at the age of twenty-two he attained the prestigious and rare honorary royal ordination status of *nak luang* – one of only a handful of monks to do so.⁵⁷

Payutto has published a voluminous amount of material on Buddhist matters; in particular, a fair portion of his writing career has been dedicated to attempts at rendering Buddhism relevant to the modern world. He explains that despite a plethora of past Thai authors writing authoritatively and insightfully on Buddhism, the authors fell short because they “were not born in this situation and they did not respond to the situation proper – the modern situation.”⁵⁸ His declaration of a need for more modernized Buddhist exegetical and interpretive work is at the heart of his intellectual efforts.

⁵⁵ For an explanation of the importance of the Buddha's message that is similar in style to Payutto's see Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 62-72.

⁵⁶ King Rama II of Thailand classified the monastic Pāli examination system into nine increasingly difficult levels, known in Thai as *prayok*. Olson, *A Person Centered*, 209. According to a colleague of Payutto, in the past, the intensity of the examination process – including large-scale rote memorization in the tradition of the earliest Buddhist councils of accomplishing *prayok 9* – led to insanity among some monks. According to this source, Payutto has calculated the average length of time to complete the process at “14 years and 7 months.” He goes on to assert that, “those who try to accomplish this faster may go mad.” Olson, *A Person Centered*, 186.

⁵⁷ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 220. According to Grant Olson, there are four categories of the prestigious royally ordained *nak luang*: royal family members, government officials of high rank, government officials of lower rank and novice monks who pass the highest Pāli examination level (such as Payutto). Olson, *A Person Centered*, 215.

⁵⁸ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 57.

Some of Sulak's earliest known interaction with Payutto came when he was editor of *The Social Science Review*. In 1966, Sulak dedicated an issue to the topic of Buddhism's role in Thai society. In that issue, Payutto published an article called "The problems of status and activities of the Monkhood," which brought Payutto public recognition from "students and scholars interested in the role of Buddhism in Thai society" and others in the lay intellectual sphere.⁵⁹ Sulak asserts this article "is when his [Payutto's] major work started."⁶⁰ Because Payutto was largely involved with administrative work up to that point, he had not written much, nor did he hold the reputation as the public intellectual he carries presently. One Thai commentator stresses that Payutto's stance is groundbreaking in Thai society because (in contrast to Buddhadāsa's views) "he is the first monk in 'contemporary' times who has said that monks *must* have a role in society."⁶¹

Payutto's interest in Buddhism and society has been characterized as having two primary bases. The first is grounded in monastic self-protection – for monks to preserve the institution, they must be engaged with society and adapt to change and to modern societal needs rather than clinging to outdated roles, a view Sulak has adopted as well.⁶² Second, according to Payutto's interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, social engagement and meaningful contribution to society is a moral obligation.⁶³ Payutto has produced a prodigious amount of written work, including his most well-known book, *Buddhadhamma*, which Grant Olson claims "is widely viewed as the most significant Thai contribution to Buddhist scholarship in the last two hundred years."⁶⁴ Sulak has been greatly influenced by this text, describing it as "the best exposé of the whole corpus of essential teaching of Theravāda Buddhism in Thai ever written."⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 226.

⁶⁰ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 229.

⁶¹ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 238.

⁶² See Sulak, *Loyalty Demands Dissent*, 87-92.

⁶³ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 228.

⁶⁴ Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, 12.

⁶⁵ Sulak, *Siamese Resurgence*, 125.

Payutto's *magnum opus* began as an article commissioned by Sulak for an honorary volume dedicated to the eightieth birthday of Prince Waithayakon. Beginning as a paper of a few dozen pages, *Buddhadhamma* grew to be a publication of 1,145 pages and has been the recipient of awards not just for content, but also for its literary accomplishment.⁶⁶ The book is a scholarly, systematized, modern overview and explanation of central Buddhist teachings stemming from Pāli sources.

Payutto is also known for being a critical, yet relatively non-controversial and non-confrontational, ordained scholar working within the Thai monastic system. On this point, a fellow monk asserts, "if you compare him [Payutto] with Buddhādāsa or Achan Sulak, these two go further than Phra Raj [Payutto]. In other words, they are brave enough to propose something that may go against the general beliefs that others hold. Phra Raj will not come out like that; he is rarely the target of criticism."⁶⁷ Despite not facing much public criticism, Payutto has been openly critical (in a measured way) of the monastic establishment. Some of these criticisms include: the disconnect between Buddhism and the ways it can be applied socially; the monastic educational system; the focus on sacred objects over critical thinking and more rational approaches to Buddhist doctrines and practice; and the use of lay offerings by monasteries to build ornate statues or temples instead of building structures beneficial to social welfare.⁶⁸ In most of these areas, Sulak has been influenced by Payutto's work and continues to be a proponent of these critiques.⁶⁹

Whereas Buddhādāsa sometimes draws from other religious traditions, Payutto makes a point of largely centering his scholarship in Pāli sources. One monk describes Payutto's work as "more characteristic of theology than philosophy, of being true to the [Pāli] canon."⁷⁰ Payutto's thought has impacted Sulak's more canonically

⁶⁶ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 233-234.

⁶⁷ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 335.

⁶⁸ Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, 8-9.

⁶⁹ For Sulak's views on some of these issues, see for example, Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 40-67.

⁷⁰ Olson, *A Person Centered*, 387.

grounded aspects of writing and theorizing, as well as in his rationalized approach to Buddhism.⁷¹

Payutto on Buddhism and Society

To begin a brief exploration of P.A. Payutto's views on the role of Buddhism in society and its power and potential for both analysis and social change, it is necessary to start with an examination of his beliefs on the importance of the role of the mind in the world. For Payutto, like Buddhādāsa and Sulak, the root cause of human action and its results in the world stems fundamentally from the mind. The condition of one's consciousness manifests itself as negative, neutral or positive actions of body, speech and mind. Both individual and collective manifestations of mind shape our society and world. Violence, war, environmental destruction and social decay are all results of imbalanced minds overcome by greed, hatred and delusion. He reasons that a lack of "internal peace and happiness has forced people to search for insatiable external pleasures and thus come into conflict with one another and exploit nature."⁷² Payutto believes that in order to turn society away from its current trajectory, "before all else, it must be realized that internal peace of mind is the foundation of external world peace. At the same time, we must admit that external organization and arrangements are necessary for, or at least, favorable to, the cultivation and the maintenance of an inner peace of mind."⁷³

Payutto views mind as the cause of most (including the deepest, fundamental) forms of happiness and suffering. The mind, therefore, must be cultivated, pacified and fundamentally awoken (*nibbāna*) through the tripartite Buddhological path of ethics, compassion and meditation. Yet these components alone are not enough to produce a civilized, enlightened society because certain human-made conditions,

⁷¹ In his writings on Buddhism, Sulak, frequently relies on Pāli sources and classical Buddhist tenets such as The Three Poisons, Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path to critique the state of the world, but also to offer solutions. See for example: Sulak, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 3-7; Sulak, *Global Healing*, 13-14; Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 102-116.

⁷² Payutto, *Beyond Tolerance*, 1.

⁷³ Payutto, *Beyond Tolerance*, 2.

institutions and systems produce unnecessary, preventable suffering on a global scale. In order for favorable circumstances to be present in the world for widespread mental training and collective awakening, just social conditions must be put in place so that individuals are not compelled to simply struggle in order to achieve only the necessities for survival. The logic follows that without such favorable societal circumstances, the Buddhist path of awakening becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible. Payutto argues that the ingredients for the creation of a just, sustainable, Buddhist-based society are twofold:

The foundation of lasting peace must be made firm by the strengthening of the two layers. The outer one consists of freedom from poverty and the absence of all the vices that threaten basic human security such as drug abuse, trafficking in humans, international unfair trades, and the exploitation of natural resources. Supported by favorable external conditions, the inner layer of inner peace and freedom, on which the outer one rests, must be reinforced.⁷⁴

In order to eliminate suffering on all levels, much of the collective, societal forms, such as poverty, hunger, war and exploitation, must be dealt with both on the individual, internal level and in the domain of the physical and public realms. Payutto offers a plan to transform society that mirrors Sulak's approach: ethics and mental cultivation through meditation coupled with social engagement and activism. Because the world cannot wait for individuals to work for social change until after achieving meditative realization and enlightenment, both internal and external issues must be addressed simultaneously. Furthermore, in order to achieve effective social engagement through the path of ethics, mental cultivation and activism, a critical Buddhist-based education grounded in reason and in the development of compassion and empathy is a prerequisite. Payutto argues, "right education or right development is the long-term and sole solution to the problems of humanity. It entails a fundamental change in the pattern of human thinking and behavior."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Payutto, *Beyond Tolerance*, 6.

⁷⁵ Payutto, *Buddhist Solutions*, 56.

In such a Buddhist-based system of education, the teaching of interconnectedness (*paṭ iccasamupā da*) is indispensable for the preservation of the environment and for a society-wide, environmental ethos. Echoing Buddhadhāsa, Payutto stresses the importance of a deep understanding of humanity's relationship to the natural world, without which people often act selfishly, lacking compassion and care for other life and the rest of the biosphere. Payutto stresses that in order to have:

a correct relationship with nature, we must see our situation in a more profound way. We must see ourselves as part of the whole interrelated natural world, not as separate entities or owners or controllers of nature. If we have the insight that we are part of nature, and we see that changes in nature must also have an effect on us, our actions will be constrained, clearly defined and balanced.⁷⁶

Similarly, Sulak promotes the importance of recognizing interconnectedness as a means of overcoming selfishness and restructuring society in more humane, sustainable ways. Mirroring Payutto's approach to Buddhism and society, Sulak argues that "the basis of our shared humanity is interdependence"⁷⁷ and "Buddhism is not concerned just with private destiny, but with the lives and consciousness of all beings. This inevitably entails a concern with social and political matters, and these receive a large share of attention in the *Pali Canon*."⁷⁸ In order to promote these ideas of interdependence and a compassion focused, Buddhist education, Sulak established the Spirit in Education Movement in 1995. Moreover, he recently founded the International Network of Engaged Buddhists Institute that is designed to be a socially engaged Buddhist university with aims to "nourish the moral imagination while cultivating peace and reconciliation, environmental healing, alternative education, sustainable economics, and the capacity for spiritual growth and leadership."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Payutto, *Buddhist Solutions*, 77.

⁷⁷ Sulak, *The Wisdom*, 71.

⁷⁸ Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 66

⁷⁹ "INEB Institute".

Conclusion

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and P.A. Payutto's influence on Sulak's thought regarding the teachings of the Buddha, social change and on the importance of achieving inner and outer transformation in order to alleviate suffering have been sizable. Buddhadāsa's contribution of Dhammic socialism added a new dimension to theorizing lay Buddhist social engagement and a modern vision for creating a sustainable, equitable society along Buddhist lines that is in harmony with the natural world. The philosophy of Dhammic socialism is central to Sulak's own vision of societal change and renewal and is important for understanding the basis of his social philosophy. At present, he continues to promote Dhammic socialism in his writing while refining it along the lines of his own values including promotion of democratic participation in society.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Buddhadāsa ultimately aimed to reform "all areas of life and society"⁸¹ – a task that Sulak, through his many organizations and career as an outspoken writer and activist has worked towards as well.

P.A. Payutto has also championed a modern interpretation of the Buddha's teachings that Sulak has credited as being highly influential in his own work. Payutto's influence surfaces in Sulak's attempts at synthesizing and explicating Buddhist doctrine, such as in his interpretation of the Four Noble Truths.⁸² Moreover, Payutto has, along with Buddhadāsa, advocated for a compassion-based vision of Buddhist social change – values Sulak unequivocally embraces. Both of these teachers represent important strains of influence on Sulak that constitute the foundational elements of his understanding of Buddhism and vision for societal change.

These three individuals typify embodiments of modern Buddhist thought and expression in the contemporary world. Although they have been studied in their own right, more scholarly work on Buddhadāsa,

⁸⁰ For a look at Sulak's views on democracy, see Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 124-132.

⁸¹ Gabuade, *Buddhadasa's Contribution*, 53.

⁸² For example see, Sulak, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 57-62; Sulak, *Rediscovering Spiritual Value*, 284-287; Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, 70-72.

Payutto and Sulak's impact throughout Thai society is needed. Their influence on Sulak and his socially engaged Buddhist work represents an important, yet understudied aspect of their own legacy and contribution to the development of modern Buddhism. Sulak, as an engaged Buddhist leader, has, along with others, founded a series of organizations dedicated to social change. The effect these groups have had beyond certain circles remains to be more thoroughly studied and understood.

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