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# The Relocalization of Buddhism in Thailand

Michael Parnwell and Martin Seeger\*

## Abstract

This paper probes beneath the surface of the revitalized religiosity and thriving “civic Buddhism” that is identifiable in parts of Thailand’s rural periphery today as a result of grassroots processes of change. It exemplifies Phra Phaisan Visalo’s assertion (1999:10) that Thai Buddhism is “returning to diversity” and “returning again to the hands of the people.” Using in-depth case studies of three influential local monks in the northeastern province of Yasothon, it develops three cross-cutting themes that are of significance not only as evidence of a process we term “relocalization” but also as issues that lie at the heart of contemporary Thai Theravāda Buddhism. The paper explores how the teachings and specific hermeneutics of influential Buddhist thinkers like Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, Phra Payutto and Samana Phothirak have been communicated, interpreted, adjusted and implemented by local monks in order to suit specific local realities and needs. Added to this localization of ideas is the localization of practice, wherein the three case studies reveal the quite different approaches and stances adopted by a “folk monk” (Phra Khruu Suphajarawat), a “forest monk” (Phra Mahathongsuk) and what might loosely be termed a “fundamentalist monk” (Phra Phomma Suphattho) at the interface of monastery and village, or the spiritual (supramun-

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dane) and social (mundane) worlds. This articulation of Buddhism and localism in turn feeds the debate concerning the appropriateness or otherwise of social engagement and activism in connection with a monk's individual spiritual development and the normative function of the monk in modern Thai society.

### **Introduction**

The last two decades have been a period of significant change in Thai Buddhism. Observers have described ongoing processes of fragmentation (Keyes 1999), commercialization (Jackson 1997), diversification (Pattana 2005), decentralization (Taylor 2003), purification and hybridization (Pattana 2005), often involving the declining centrality of officially sanctioned and regulated institutional Theravāda Buddhism. A series of public scandals involving Buddhist monks (see, e.g., Jackson 1997; McCargo 2004; Keyes 1995) and perceived shortcomings of the institutionalized *Saṅgha* (monastic community)<sup>1</sup> as a moral and authoritative force (Pattana 2005) have created a growing popular disenchantment with mainstream Buddhism and stimulated a search for alternative forms of religiosity which cater more effectively or convincingly to society's spiritual, ritual and practical needs. Thai society is changing in response to processes of development, modernization and globalization, and the social position of Buddhism is being adjusted and overhauled (Phaisan 1999). This is in part to accommodate and respond to the process of change itself, and the growing diversity of social niches that must be catered for, but it is also partly because mainstream Buddhism has not apparently kept pace with its changing social, economic and political context. Peter Jackson describes (1997:79) the "disintegration of an organized, overarching religious system" in Thailand, and suggests there has been an "exodus from institutional Buddhism" and a "decentralization of religiosity" (ibid.:76). There is even talk of a transition to a post-

Buddhist society (Pattana 2005:465), or at the very least a thoroughgoing process of Buddhistic transition.

Running parallel to the weakening authority and influence of institutional Buddhism in Thailand, and set against a back-drop of a democratization process that has liberated religious practice from the diktats of state control, has been the emergence, revival or flourishing of a myriad of alternative practices, movements and cults, especially in urban areas where the process of change has been most intense, and among a growing urban middle class (Suwanna 1990). These have been described by Pattana (2005:462) as emerging forms of “civic religion” which may have little to do with mainstream Buddhism, or “civil religion.” Swearer (1999:224) claims these movements represent efforts to revitalize Buddhism as the foundation for Thai social and cultural identity.

Change has occurred in two quite different directions, reflecting a growing divergence of elite and folk Buddhism. On the one hand we have transactions in what Jackson (1997:79) has referred to as the “spiritual market place,” where Buddhism, and religious practice more generally, has accommodated itself to the world of modern capitalist development, giving rise to the individualization (Jackson 1997:82) and commodification of religion (Pattana 2005:487; 2007) and a “commercialized Buddhism” (*phutthaphanit*)<sup>2</sup> (see also McCargo 2004; Rigg 2003; Pattana 2006; Jackson 1999a; 1999b). This path of change is manifest at its most extreme in the pro-capitalist Thammakai movement that is based in Pathum Thani (described, inter alia, by Zehner 1990; Swearer 1991; Aphinya Fueangfusakul 1993a; 1993b; McCargo 2004; Aphinya Fueangfusakul 2541 B.E.),<sup>3</sup> monks’ increasing material greed (Jackson 1997:83), the rising commercial acquisitiveness and grandiosity of popular Buddhist monasteries in and beyond Bangkok, and what Rigg (2003) has described as “credit card carrying and amulet-selling monks” and Jackson (1997:83) the “commodification of clerical personalities.”

On the other hand, and partly in reaction to the first set of changes—a moral riposte to the pernicious social effects of globalization and capitalism—there have occurred a variety of “purifications” (Pattana 2005:464) and diversifications (O’Connor 1993), and a revitalized religiosity. The disenchanting have sought either to return to core fundamentals or to seek and develop religious niches that move away from what they see as Buddhism’s contaminated core. These include the heterodox, utopian Santi Asok Buddhist reform movement (Phataraphon 2540 B.E.; Aphinya 1993a; Essen 2005), the diverse moral paths mapped out by local charismatic clerics bestowed with sacral and spiritual power, and the “chaotic reemergence of various forms of animism and supernaturalism” (Pattana 2005:466), all of which draw to a greater or lesser degree upon the visions, practices and ideologies of a traditional and fundamentalist past before they were “tainted” by the process of modern capitalist development.

Another significant phenomenon in this process of transformation and diversification in contemporary Thai Buddhism is the changing roles of women. Recently, attempts have been made to establish a Theravāda *bhikkhuni* (nun) order that is believed to have vanished some 1000 years ago. These attempts are taking place despite severe criticism from senior monks who, basing their arguments on Pāli canonical texts, perceive the ordination of women to be impossible for technical reasons. Although it seems that the number of proponents for introducing a nun order is still rather small, the number of feminists, academics, and also the support of Buddhist lay in this regard is growing. This, together with the observed approximation of roles between monks and *maechis* (white-clad women who have shaved their heads and eyebrows and practice the eight or ten precepts), the growing number of highly revered female Buddhist teachers and practitioners, the increasing number of women who have decided to become ordained in non-Theravāda Buddhist traditions and the growing efforts to provide more opportunities for religious

women to practice Buddhism in a manner similar to men, show that the actual or potential religious space that is available for Thai Buddhist women is growing (Seeger 2006; 2007b).

According to Phra Phaisan Visalo,<sup>4</sup>

[u]niform or standardized Buddhism is a thing of the past. Thai Buddhism is returning to diversity again . . . . In the past uniform Buddhism was possible because of state and central sangha control. The recent trends suggest that Buddhism is becoming independent of the state and the Sangha hierarchy, returning again to the hands of the people. (Phaisan 1999:10)

It is with this process of “returning again to the hands of the people” that the present paper is concerned. Hitherto, most attention in the recent literature on the “crisis” in Thai Buddhism has focused on the urban and modern context of change. It is here that the underlying processes of modernization, development and globalization are most immediate and apparent, and from which influences such as commercialism, materialism, anomie, atomization, acquisitiveness, and disillusionment have mapped the nature and direction of change in Thai religiosity. Rather less attention has been paid to the context and manifestations of change away from the metropolitan core of Thailand. Notwithstanding the fact that modernization and development have been universally, if highly variably, experienced across Thailand, and that rural areas have both been drawn inexorably into the realm of influence of the metropolitan core and have contributed a myriad of pieces to the mosaic of urban religious diversification and fragmentation, our research suggests that a different but no less important series of changes has taken place in the rural periphery in recent years which tell a contrasting story to that of the modern urban sector. With the use of case studies of three locally influential village monks in the northeastern Thai province of Yasothon, we describe the conflation of localism and

Buddhism which have contributed to ongoing processes of religious purification, revitalization, and diversification. The case studies might be seen to be broadly representative of a progressive series of changes that are taking place within and around mainstream Theravāda Buddhism—a blending of civic and civil religion.

Another major objective of this paper is to investigate the localization of ideas of nationally influential Buddhist leaders and thinkers. This involves exploring how the teachings and specific hermeneutics of influential Buddhist thinkers like Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993), Phra Payutto (1939- ), and Samana Phothirak (1934- ) are communicated, implemented, interpreted, and adjusted by local monks in order to suit specific local realities and needs. This aspect of our paper is quite unique as there has been hardly any academic work in Western languages that looks at the localization of ideas taught by leading Thai Buddhist thinkers and opinion leaders (although see Suchira Payulpitak 1991; 1992; also Darlington 1990). There is a plethora of anthropological and historical studies of Thai Buddhism: the former examining either how Buddhism is understood and practiced in a rural context or exploring specific movements in Thai Buddhism; the latter focusing on urban Buddhism and its articulation with the state, or on individual influential figures within Thai Buddhism. In contrast, we approach Thai Buddhism by looking at how ideas that have been discussed and formulated on a national level are implemented and accommodated to local contexts. We also investigate this comparatively, showing how these different ideas are used to fit local communities within a similar economic and geographical setting.

The localization of the ideas of influential Buddhist thinkers forms part of a wider process that we describe in this article as “relocalization,” which in turn is set within the framework of localism discourse. Localism emerged in Thailand in the 1970s on the coat-tails of the gras-

roots development movement (Pasuk and Baker 2000; Connors 2001). The material benefits of the orthodox top-down, growth-driven approach to development had started to percolate down to the rural periphery, but were accompanied by increasing problems in the form of social dislocation, economic dependency, environmental degradation and constrained local potential. Grassroots development encouraged specific and targeted development interventions which were in tune with local resources and needs, and which drew on local knowledge. In the 1980s through to the early 1990s localism was given a strong cultural flavor through the work of Chatthip (1991), Saneh (1993), and Prawet (2530 B.E.; 1995), and its subsequent association with *watthanatham chumchon*, or the “community culture” perspective on development (Hewison 1993; 2000). This privileges locally rooted, locally controlled, and locally relevant forms of development which have the moral market society and traditional culture at their core. Thai culture, identity, and self-reliance were felt to be under threat from the forces of modernization, capitalist development, globalization, and westernization, and this was to be countered by the privileging of the village community, which was seen as the bedrock and final repository of traditional Thai cultural values and social practices.

It is important at this juncture to problematize localism discourse and the “back to the future” ideologies that it tends to reify as counterrintuitive to the general tenor of the present paper—that relocalization is helping to place both religion and society on a more harmonious, relevant and sustainable footing. Several writers (for example Kevin Hewison [2000], Duncan McCargo [2001] and Jonathan Rigg [1991]) have variously criticized the localism movement for its romanticism, populism, reactionism, and nationalism, for the way it misrepresents the reality of “traditional rural life,” for its lack of realism in the face of the continuing certainty of global capitalism, for its use as a cathartic sop for people in denial after the economic crisis, and for its lack of appeal to a



majority of Thai people still intent on the path toward modern development. In other words, localism is not a process that involves and appeals to more than a segment of modern Thai society, and thus relocalization is only one of several trends occurring in Thailand today. It is nonetheless important as a sign of the changes that are occurring, and it has particular significance for Thai Buddhism.

Localism has in part centered on a project of “Thai-ification” which has sought to reassert Thai cultural values and identity (Reynolds 2001) and has in part also centered on a movement to return control of the development process to the hands of the people, specifically local rural communities. The latter objective was given strong momentum and legitimacy by King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s New Theory on the Sufficiency Economy (*setthakit phophiang*, 1998) which, pronounced in the immediate aftermath of the economic crisis, called for a redoubling of efforts to foster self-reliance and economic and social resilience. The New Theory was informed, if not directly influenced by, a localist ideology which envisioned an anti-acquisitive, post-materialist “Buddhist economy” or “Buddhist agriculture” (for studies that propound and discuss these concepts, see for example Payutto 1994; Connors 2001:3; Prawet 2530 B.E.: 1999; Aphichai 2541 B.E.; Suwida 2004). Buddhism is central to localist discourse, which in no small measure is also a culturalist discourse. In part this is because the civil religion is presented, or at least imagined, as a cornerstone of Thai culture, and Buddhism is also a key referent in the distillation of a sense of “community culture” and its operationalization within the alternative development movement. Buddhism is the embodiment of the Thai cultural capital that localists envision will provide the heartbeat of future development in reaction to the forces of globalization and capitalist modernization.

Thus, whilst mainstream Thai Buddhism and Buddhist institutions have increasingly shown signs of strain from the pressures asso-

ciated with globalization, modernization, centralization, and development, Thai Buddhist institutions have also become an important source of localist comfort for Thai citizens in reaction to the very same pressures and processes. This paper aims to shed some light on this seemingly contradictory situation.

An important subtext to this process of local change concerns the “appropriate” function of the monastery and the role of the monk within the local community. As local Buddhist institutions have engaged in the “clawing back” of roles and functions that had systematically been crowded out by state encroachment and displacement (Parnwell 2005), monks are increasingly ministering to communities’ social and livelihood concerns, as well as their spiritual needs. Relocalization has reopened the debate as to whether a monk’s primary preoccupation should be as a “world renouncer” (Tambiah 1976) seeking detachment from mundane life in order to promote and deepen his spiritual enlightenment, or a “world reformer” who is actively, even proactively, engaged with confronting the issues and challenges of modern everyday life, with and on behalf of their local communities. We will return to this debate shortly.

### **Relocalization and Revitalization**

As in the case already described for the urban sector in Thailand, relocalization is a reaction to several of the delocalization tendencies that characterized Buddhism in Thailand from the time of the modernizing reforms at the turn of the twentieth century. Historically and traditionally, the monastery (*wat*) has been the social, functional, and symbolic center of the rural Thai community (a theme that is developed by such authors as Swearer 1999; O’Connor 1993; Phya Anuman Rajadhon 1961; 1986; Tambiah 1976; Hayashi 2003; Kamala 1997; 2003; Mulder 1969; Ishii 1968; 1986; Bunnag 1973; Moerman 1968; Ingersoll 1966; Payutto 2513 B.E.). Monks played the role of teachers, healers, mentors, and counse-

lors, and provided the moral and social heartbeat of the local community (O'Connor 1993; Payutto 2513 B.E.). The *wat* wove Buddhism into local life, and local monks accommodated local needs and interests. The popularization or cultural syncretism of Theravāda Buddhism (O'Connor 1993) gave it a distinct local interpretational and implementational zest. Multiple permutations of local culture and custom, combined with the personality and predilections of local abbots, formed the diverse arrays and complex flavors of what Swearer (1999:201) called "*wat* Buddhism," especially in the country's rural periphery. This, perhaps, is the Buddhism that stands prominent in the post-modern imaginary of localists, and which they seek both to engage and revitalize, fostering Thai Buddhism's "return to diversity" (Phaisan 1999:10) or a reflowering of complexity (Kirsch 1977).

The diverse local manifestations of popularized Thai Buddhism, which included an almost seamless, syncretic incorporation of animistic practices, was arguably hardly an issue until the turn of the twentieth century, when state-initiated reforms to Thai Buddhism, integral to projects of modernization and nation-building, started to assert a strong centralizing and homogenizing influence on the religious institutions and practices of the rural periphery. Schools and hospitals were built, taking traditional roles away from local monks and monasteries; secular authorities superseded monks and the social roles they formerly played. King Mongkut (1851-1868) set about trying to promote a Buddhism that was demythologized to a certain degree, purging religious practice of animistic tendencies (Swearer 1999:196). King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) sought to progress the standardization of monastic practice, and attempted to incorporate the provincial areas—and their diverse religious practices—into a unified Thai nation-state with a homogenized national religion and a standardized system of clerical education (Swearer 1999:201). These reforms, codified in the *Saṅgha* Administration Act of 1902, fostered the centralization (and Bangkok-centrism), purification,

standardization, formalization, and bureaucratization of Thai Buddhism, and structured it in a hierarchical system of authority. Following the further reforms of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925), monks increasingly specialized as ritualists rather than teachers, in the process undermining the place of the Buddhist *Saṅgha* and the village *wat* in Thai society (Swearer 1999:208), and diluting the role of the monk at the heart of the lay community. These centralizing reforms “. . . took the *wat* away from locals and, by driving folk practices out of the temple, fostered today’s religious ‘free market’” (O’Connor 1993:330). The temple became an agent of the nation state—less local and more national: “Bangkok overwhelmed localism” (ibid.:336).

Such a process took on an even greater speed and profundity with the promotion of modern development from the 1960s, which was associated with the intense “crowding out” of local institutions by the political organs and bureaucratic tentacles of the state (Parnwell 2005). The autocratic prime minister Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963), seizing on the conflict between the two congregations in Thai Buddhism, Dhammayuttika-nikāya and Mahānikāya,<sup>5</sup> to sweep away the democratic reforms to the *Saṅgha* introduced in the 1940s, promulgated the *Saṅgha* Act of 1962/63, which reestablished a highly centralized and hierarchically organized *Saṅgha* with power concentrated in the hands of the Supreme Patriarch (*Saṅgharāja*). The state subsequently co-opted and manipulated this authority as a device for the promotion of its program of nation-building, especially through state-sponsored development programs (Swearer 1999:209): “as local monks wielded great influence in the villages, the military government co-opted them into promoting government programmes—mobilizing villagers to contribute their labour.” Two platforms provided the basis for monks’ involvement in the state’s development and national-integration programs (both of which had strong anti-communist underpinnings): the *thammathut* (“*dhammic/Dhamma* ambassadors”) program, which was linked to the communi-

ty development program of Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University in Bangkok, sent monks to rural areas during the dry season to assist people with their livelihood needs and encouraging their participation in local public works schemes (which the monks described as merit-making activities), whilst strengthening their attachment to the civil religion (Keyes 1971). The *thammathut* program was described by Mulder (1969) as a “moral rearmament mission” in the face of communist subversion, whilst Keyes (1971:561) concluded that “. . . the main impact of the program has been to provide villagers . . . with clear evidence that the Sangha approves and supports the economic development efforts of the government.” The *thammacarik* (“wandering *Dhamma*-preachers”) scheme focused on the conversion of the montagnard peoples of the northern region to Buddhism (Keyes 1971; Swearer 1999:214). In addition, the *phaendin tham, phaendin thong* (“land of *Dhamma*, land of gold”) program aimed to incorporate monks working independently of government sponsored development initiatives into the nation-building project and in so doing promote the government’s image as a patron of Buddhist social activism (Swearer 1999:215).

The co-optation of the *Sangha* by the state, and the “crowding out” of its traditional local institutional functions by the bureaucratic and political structures of the government, worked to the severe detriment of the public regard for the monastic order (Swearer 1999:214). It also elicited a reaction from within the *Sangha*. Although some monks went along with it, in part induced or enticed by the promotions and rewards offered by the government-imposed ecclesiastical system, others started to question and react against it. Jackson (1989:60) identified a difference between monks who perceived their primary responsibility to be toward the state (or the state’s agenda) and those who dedicated themselves to working for the common good. The latter saw “statist Buddhism” as irrelevant to contemporary Thai life (Phaisan 1999; cited in

Lynch 2004), and ushered in a period of reform in doctrinal theory and praxis.

Nithi Aesurivongse (1993: cited in McCargo 2004) has argued that Buddhism in Thailand can only be revitalized by severing the intimate bonds between the *Saṅgha* and the state that developed since the reign of King Chulalongkorn. According to Swearer (1999:203) there was some opposition to the centralizing tendencies during the modernization phase, such as by a northern monk, Khruba Sriwichai, and from the forest monk tradition exemplified by Ajan Man in northeastern Thailand, who adopted a stance of non-cooperation with the *Saṅgha* Administration Act of 1902. More recently the impetus for religious revitalization and reform as a counter to the centralized agenda of the state has come from monks who are critical of the establishment and the Buddhist civil religion that it has fashioned (Swearer 1999:216). For instance, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu adopted a critical stance toward the mainstream religious, social and political structures of institutional Buddhism, and offered a fresh range of hermeneutics of Pāli canonical teachings which confronted established Buddhist practice in Thailand.

Since the 1970s, an increasing number of Buddhist groups on the periphery both of the country and of civic Buddhism have emerged to challenge the increasingly secular, materialist ethos of Thai society (Swearer 1999:218). These include a growing corpus of “development monks” and “ecology monks” (Darlington 2000) who see it as their social duty to confront the social, economic, and environmental, and occasionally or unavoidably political, challenges that are increasingly associated with modern capitalist development. A further intensification of reactionism and the flourishing of new Buddhist movements has occurred during the democratization period since the early 1990s, with its associated press and political freedoms, which has, as we have seen earlier, coincided with the growing momentum of localism (O’Connor 1993:18).

## Reengagement

Another core focus of this article is the tension (and its proposed resolution) between a monk's striving for spiritual perfection (*arahantship/nibbāna*) or for his "own [spiritual] benefit" (*attahitāya*), and the need or expectation for a monk to engage with his host community and confront various social and developmental ills; that is, work for the "benefit of others" (*parahitāya*). This issue is explored through case studies of three monks who live in close proximity to one another in rural North-East Thailand, but who adhere to very different ideologies of social engagement. One is a "folk monk" (*phra chau ban/phra ban nok*) who believes that a monk has a responsibility to serve his local community directly and proactively and who, as a "development monk" has provided the inspiration and leadership for a number of community-centered, localized alternative development initiatives. Another is also a Mahānikāya monk who nonetheless is a strong admirer of the founder of the controversial Santi Asok movement, Samana Phothirak, (who has been expelled from the institutionalized Thai *Saṅgha*)<sup>6</sup> and who is helping to craft a local Buddhist community which follows some of the movement's core principles and practices, eschewing many of the trappings of modern development. This monk is thus representative of a more fundamentalist or puritanical tendency in some quarters of Thai Buddhism (Swearer 1995; Olsen 1991). The third monk is a follower both of Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu and Phra Payutto, and is, at the same time, broadly representative of the "forest monk" tradition which places a paramount emphasis on detachment from society and thus only limited engagement with the issues of daily life. These three monks, each representative of a wider movement, thought system or tradition within Thai Buddhism, provide interesting insight into the question of the "right" position of the monk/*saṅgha* in relation to society, economy and politics, set against a back-drop of relocalization.

There is a strong divergence of opinion as to the rightful or “appropriate” role that a monk, or more generally the *saṅgha*, should play within society, and what might be considered a suitable degree of social engagement. When argued from the standpoint of Buddhism as outlined in the Pāli canonical scriptures, we come across widely differing views on this question. Authors such as Maithrimurthi (2003:30) claim that Buddha was concerned neither with political nor social matters, but purely with the salvation of individuals: “It was to them that the Buddha directed his message without being much concerned about society as a whole” (Maithrimurthi 2003:35). The late Bhikkhu Paññāvaḍḍho ([www.geocities.com/RainForest/7813/sul\\_turn.htm](http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/7813/sul_turn.htm)) seemed to challenge the possibility that a socially engaged person can live a fully spiritual life (Rothberg 1994), and King (1964:177) writes “[t]o tell the truth the Buddha had little, either of concern for society as such or firm conviction of its possible improvability.” Max Weber (1963) saw Buddhism as otherworldly, asocial, world-denying monasticism which largely failed even to address the religious needs of the mass of the population, giving rise to a distinction between official doctrine and the “religion of the masses,” or “pure” and “everyday” or “peasant” Buddhism—a distinction that this paper further develops. Ortner (1978:157; cited in Darlington 1990:111) views orthodox, canonical Buddhism as “a religion of anti-social individualism.”

Meanwhile, Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro suggests that the Buddha did not overly emphasize altruism per se, and ascribed greater importance to an individual’s pursuit of spiritual welfare than to cases where spiritual welfare is given up in the interests of the welfare of others. Here, he is referring to the *Chavālātasutta*<sup>7</sup>. For Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro, “the true path of practice pursues happiness through social withdrawal . . . Thus individual attainment, rather than social function, is the true measure of a person’s worth” (Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro 1995).



At the same time, however, Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro does not mention in this context that in the very same *Chavālātasutta* it is also said that the one who is working both for his own welfare and for the welfare of others (*attahitāya ceva paṭipanno parahitāya*) is amongst all these four different individuals (*imesaṃ catunnaṃ puggalānaṃ*): — (1) one who works neither for his nor for the welfare of others; (2) one who works for the welfare of others but not for his; (3) one who works for his welfare but not for the welfare of others; and (4) one who works both for his own and the welfare of others — regarded as the highest (*aggo*), the best (*seṭṭho*), the foremost (*pāmokkho*), the greatest (*uttamo*), and noblest (*pa-varo*). (For a discussion of the relevant canonical passages, see Schmithausen 2004.) Darlington (2000:46) reports the widely-held view from Thailand that monks make a contribution to the welfare of society through following the Holy Life, seeking to escape from the cycle of rebirth and suffering, and through striving for *nibbāna*: this is their ascribed role.

In quite stark contrast, a rather different body of opinion, influenced by and reflective of a growing movement of socially-engaged Buddhist activism, finds plenty of evidence to refute this description of detachment and disinterest in social problems/reality. One of the most influential Buddhist thinkers in twentieth century Thailand has been Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, whose interpretations (Gabaude 1988; Jackson 2003) of canonical teachings have laid the foundation for the reform of Buddhism and social activism in the country. He challenged the widespread view in Thailand that the highest principles of Buddhism, and the pursuit of *nibbāna*, require a withdrawal from the mundane world (Swearer 1999:217), claiming that *nibbāna* can be a goal for everyone, not just the world-renouncing monk. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu was very influential in bringing core Buddhist concepts to bear on the problems of development and modern life, and helping to nurture a corps of social activist monks (Swearer 1999).

The relationship between the pursuit of strictly individual perfection (*arahant-ship/nibbāna*) and the social good has very frequently been a central point not only within Western Buddhist studies but also within the tradition itself. Buddhism is often characterized as having a weak social ethic, and a soteriology based on a highly individualized path to awakening (Poethig 2002:20). Phinit Lapthananon (2529 B.E.:31) writes that the Thai *Saṅgha* has been criticized for failing to address the increasing gap between monks and society, and the monk's lost role as the spiritual leader of the community. In this context, he reports that monks have been described as the "cuckoo eggs" of society (*phra pen ka fak sangkhom*) (ibid.). In order to reverse the growing irrelevance of institutional Buddhism to modern life, and integral to relocalization, the false dichotomy that is created between spiritual and worldly life, and between materiality and spirituality (Keefe 1997:62), has to be removed. Keefe (ibid.) calls for a "this-worldly spirituality"—a socially engaged Buddhism working to promote the interests of society at large, and confronting problems of inequality, injustice and suffering—based on the interdependence of the social and spiritual realms:

For socially engaged Buddhists, *pratitya-samutpada* [dependent co-origination] means that personal transformation is always interdependent with social transformation, inner peace with world peace . . . we cannot awaken to things as they are by retreating into a sea of personal tranquility. (Keefe 1997:63).

Nonetheless, Elizabeth Harris sees a significant tension between the spiritual imperative for detachment and the social imperative for Buddhists to engage with the challenges of modern living:

If compassion means to relieve suffering in a positive way, and detachment to remain aloof from the world, how can the two be practiced together? Does detachment in Buddhism imply lack of concern for humanity? Is the concept of compassion in Buddhism

too passive, connected only with the inward-looking eye of meditation, or can it create real change in society? (Harris 1997:1)

How spiritual and social imperatives can be addressed simultaneously by the Thai *Saṅgha* is far from straightforward. Thailand's foremost current Buddhist thinker, Phra Payutto is, according to Phra Phaisan (Phaisan 2542 B.E.:29), arguably the Thai monk who in his interpretation of canonical Buddhism "has more than any other Thai monk tried to enlarge the sphere of Buddhism so that it not only comprises the level of the [individual] mind but also the social sphere." Phra Payutto states that viewing Buddhism as "avoiding the world" or exclusively concerned with "personal ethics" or "mind ethics [of the individual]" or that monks have "no responsibility toward society" reflects a mistaken understanding of Buddhism (Payutto 2540a B.E.:13; 2538a B.E.:807-837). For him (2540 B.E.:15) "Buddhism regards both the person and the system, both the individual and society, both the external environment and the internal mind as important. [Both sides] have to work with and complement each other." He writes that "Buddhism teaches the solution of problems, both of the external and internal, both on the social level and the individual mind-level." (2538a B.E.:917; see also: Rājavaramuni 1990). Phra Phaisan (1990) identifies variations in the degree of compliance with strict rules or interpretations concerning monks' engagement with lay society. For instance, he argues that

Values and functions of the forest monastery are aimed at fulfilling the ideal of the *saṅgha* as created by the Buddha . . . . However, town monasteries, intending to serve people in various ways, have developed some new roles and forms of involvement with the lay community. Some of these roles were at times developed at the expense of the original function of practicing Dharma and of enabling people to reach and embody the highest good (*paramattha* [that is, *nibbāna*]). That is, these roles were typically con-

fined to the level of temporal welfare . . . such as improving the living conditions of poor people, providing education to those who had no access to state-run schooling, and giving counsel to the worried and the depressed. (Phaisan 1990:292)

There is thus a clear tension between these two roles and requirements for detachment and engagement. Thai social critic and Buddhist social activist, Sulak Sivaraksa, concurs:

In making Buddhism more relevant for the contemporary world, it is important not to compromise on the essentials, such as the ethical precepts (*sila*) . . . . The Buddha's intention was . . . to help liberate not only individuals but the whole society . . . . Of course, it is a great danger that those who are socially engaged lack spiritual depth, inner calm, and peace; some activist Buddhist monks (for instance in Sri Lanka and Burma) have sometimes even become violent . . . . Monks should act somewhere between the minimum (following the basic ethical precepts) and the maximum (practicing for liberation); most are in between . . . . Without the spiritual dimension, however, those working socially will burn out . . . . If we are to connect ethical norms and social justice, we must have time for spiritual development, time to meditate, time to integrate head and heart, and then time for renewal and retreat. (Rothberg 1993:n.p.)

Nevertheless, Harris (1997) draws attention to the way that “detachment” is often misinterpreted in modern Buddhism. She explores the Pāli terminology for detachment. *Viveka* can be read as separation, aloofness, seclusion, but a distinction can be drawn between physical withdrawal (*kāya-viveka*) which can reduce the mind's ability to discern, mental withdrawal (*citta-viveka*) and withdrawal from the roots of suffering (*upadhi-viveka*). She claims that “detachment” in Buddhism should not constitute an extreme withdrawal from the things that nurture hu-

man life, and argues that the Buddha rejected a form of self-distancing that refused to take sides or to speak out against what should be denounced. The Buddha condemned attempts to keep the truth inviolate and unspoken through a wish not to become involved in society.

When they get actively involved in local development or function as the catalyst or initiator of local development activities or programs, a growing corpus of socially-engaged Buddhist monks today understand themselves as following Buddha's instruction to his monks: "Go, monks, for the good and happiness of the many and out of compassion for the world, for the benefit and happiness of gods and men." (referring to Vin.I.21: "*Caratha, bhikkhave, cārikaṃ bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ*"). A growing number of socially-engaged Buddhist monks today are "going forth for the good of the many," faced with an escalating crisis of environmental degradation, economic struggle and social conflict (Isager and Ivarsson 2002:5).

. . . for Buddhism to be an effective moral force in Thai society, it needs to do more than preach about morality. It also needs to help *create the social conditions* required to sustain and support the morality it preaches. . . . monks must learn to develop networks among themselves on local and more distant levels, and then expand the networks to include villagers, NGOs, progressive business people, and others. Thai society needs a Buddhist perspective to replace consumerism. (Phaisan 1999:250, emphasis added)

Translating this principle into practice is a difficult task, as Darlington has noted:

Within the Sangha elements are pushing for and against participation in the development process. The dialogue between the

factions within the Sangha further forces the members to examine the relationship between doctrine and development activities . . . . Many recognize the need to participate but are unclear as to the manner in which they should do this. The need arises for people in a position of authority to outline the forms such activities can take within the guidelines of Buddhist orthodoxy. (Darlington 2000:47)

Activist Buddhist monks appear to have resolved this dilemma, and share a vision of a fair and just, non-violent and compassionate society. The call for social engagement is legitimated by referring to core Buddhist principles of *mettā* (loving kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion), equanimity, non-duality and non-attachment (see Poethig 2002). So-called “development monks” (*phra nak phatthana*) represent an important and high-profile manifestation of monks’ social engagement in the face of development challenges, especially those facing Thailand’s peripheral rural areas. Phra Phaisan (2546 B.E.:460) explains that a large number of monks still perceive the monastery as the center of the (rural) community, but a change has occurred from a situation in the past when monks would wait for lay people to come to the monastery for help with the challenges of everyday life, to one where monks increasingly and proactively go out into the community to engage directly with the development and welfare challenges of their fellow villagers. Since the early 1970s a growing number of development monks, and more recently “ecology monks” (*phra nak anurak*) have initiated local development projects based on their interpretations of Buddhist teachings (Darlington 2000). Their initiatives have also sought to reverse a growing decline in traditional Buddhist values within their communities:

Actively seeking out the causes of suffering [resulting from environmental degradation] has led [monks] to redefine the underlying concepts of development and progress. Their awareness has

led them to re-examine Buddhist teachings to support their work rather than follow any inherent ecological principles within the scriptures. As Buddhists have done since the Buddha's time, they adapt their interpretations and practices of the religion to fit the changing sociopolitical—and natural—environment . . . (Darlington 2000:n.p.)

Phra Phaisan (2546 B.E.:460) claims that the growing engagement of monks with the problems and challenges of modern living, far from representing a sea change in the way that monks interact with their home communities, in fact constitutes little more than “ . . . monks revitalizing the traditional social roles of monks” in the fields of education, healthcare, welfare, community work and leadership. This forms an important part of our hypothesis of “relocalization.”

Isager and Ivarsson (2002) argue that monks' direct involvement in development activities is consistent with the *saṅgha*'s responsibility to serve society, but also as a riposte to processes of secularization which are turning people away from religion, and most particularly from institutional Buddhism: the future prosperity of the *saṅgha* depends on the longer-term spiritual prosperity of society. But the official Thai *Saṅgha* seems to be unwilling to address the problems of local communities (Phaisan 2546 B.E.:462). In promoting a Buddhist social ethic in modern development, and a Buddhist moral economy, monks have increasingly drawn on local culture, knowledge, values and co-operation (Tannenbaum 2000:118; Darlington 2000). In other words, localism has become an important focus of socially engaged Buddhism, and it is at this point that the relocalization and reengagement trends converge. This paper shows how the liberating tendencies of relocalization and democratization have given rise to a wide variety of interpretations as to the appropriate path forward and beyond the historical constraints of a homogenized and centralized civic Buddhism.

### Case Studies

The following case studies were collected during the course of a research investigation entitled “The Buddhistic Underpinnings of Neolocalism in North-East Thailand”<sup>8</sup> which attempted to explore how and to what extent Buddhist monks and local Buddhist institutions have been involved in fostering alternative visions of economic and social development which are culturally constructed and centered on local communities. The study area is one of the poorest parts of the impoverished northeastern region of Thailand, with low-quality soils supporting an insecure agricultural economy that is regularly beset by problems of flooding and drought, a situation that has not been helped by extensive deforestation over the last thirty years or so. During the 1960s and 1970s the study area was part of a so-called “pink zone” (sympathetic but not engaged in direct conflict with the state, as in the “red zones”) during the period of communist insurgency and regional separatist movements (see Parnwell 2007 for more details, including an interesting local account of the study communities’ interpretation of “socialism”), since when, and as a consequence, the state has intensified its development and integration efforts. Localism has been a response to associated processes of marketization and increased state intervention.

The main initial focus of our research was on Phra Khru Suphajarawat (1944- ), who has become quite well-known nationally for his efforts to rekindle *sammakhi* (community harmony) and to foster economic self-reliance and sustainable local development. During the course of our interviews with several abbots and locally influential monks in and nearby Kutchum District,<sup>9</sup> we became aware of the hermeneutical diversity in these monks’ interpretation and implementation of Buddhist doctrine, and, in very close connection and consequence of this, in both the manner and extent of their interaction with their local lay communities. Also, it was remarkable that these monks had a very comprehensive and



deep knowledge of the Pāli canonical texts: all three monks in our case studies frequently referred to the canon in order to legitimate and substantiate their teachings, practice, and relationship to lay people. It is clearly not possible in a relatively short academic paper to convey the full extent of this diversity, nor can we even start to claim that a trio of case studies is representative of the situation across rural Thailand today. Nonetheless, the diversity that is evident in just three case studies, derived mere kilometers from each other, and set against the topical theme of localism, is indicative of a trend toward a “return to diversity” which is associated with the process of “relocalization.” The case studies also allow us to show how the ideas of important Buddhist thinkers in Thailand (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, Phra Payutto and Samana Phothirak, as well as a more generic movement of activist “development monks”) have been implemented at the local level, and localized.

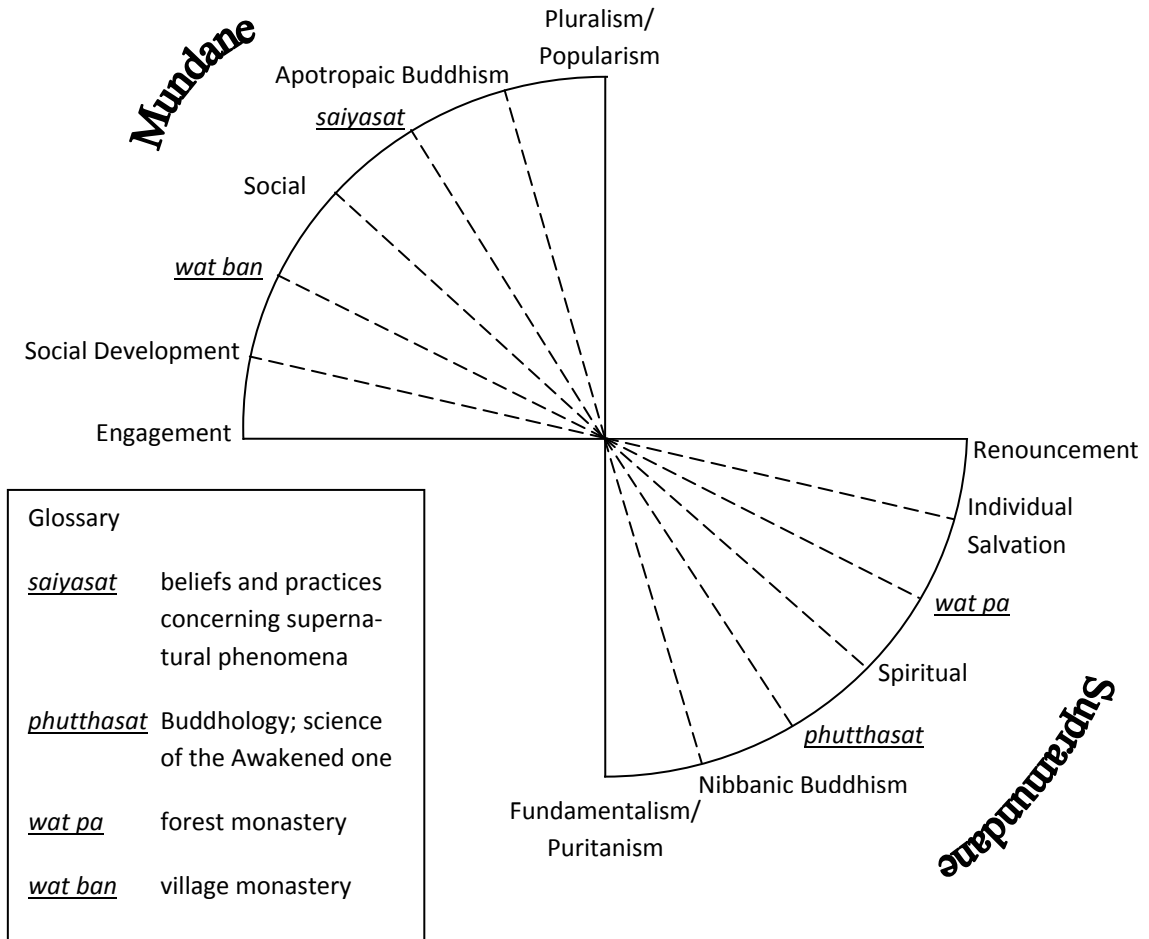


Fig. 1: Research Framework: Oppositional Fields and Continua

Figure one depicts in a simplified form the framework within which the case studies were investigated and around which they are elaborated below. It posits a series of seamlessly-connected continua which take the form of broadly oppositional “fields” between two competing sets of countervailing forces, the mundane and the supra-mundane. We take Buddhism as comparatively investigated in our three case studies broadly and heuristically from its “normative” soteriological principles or “nibbanic Buddhism” (Spiro 1970) as outlined in the Pāli canonical texts,<sup>10</sup> to what we call “folk Buddhism,” which we understand in our context here to comprise what Spiro calls “kammatic” and “apotropaic” Buddhism, where it becomes profoundly mixed with local “flavors.” Whilst using Spiro’s terminology, we nonetheless depart significantly from his depiction of nibbanic and kammatic/apotropaic Buddhism as parallel, distinct and discontinuous phenomena (see also King 1964): in this context we are closer to Keown (2001) in seeing them as complementary and compatible points along a continuum, as depicted in figure one. Within the same framework we have depicted what we have characterized as an oppositional tension between a monk’s functional need for detachment from the cravings of the mundane world, as a “world renouncer,” and either the practical or the political need to engage with the society and community within which he is placed, as a “world reformer.”

Our earlier discussion has suggested that the leading Buddhist thinkers with which this paper is concerned, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, Phra Payutto and Samana Phothirak, interpret these countervailing forces in different ways (for a comparison of the views of these three thinkers on Buddha images and magic beliefs, see Swearer 2004:238-248). By using his hermeneutical dichotomy of everyday language and *Dhamma* language, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu demythologizes canonical teachings and accounts of supernatural phenomena, like physical rebirth, into different realms of being, gods, heavens, and hells. According to Buddhadāsa

Bhikkhu these things in their literal meaning play no role in “authentic” Buddhism but have to be understood in a metaphorical sense, that is, as psychological states, in order to be in conformity with Buddha’s “genuine” teaching. This vehemently goes against and undermines a great number of traditionally held beliefs and practices in Thai Buddhism where these concepts in their literal meaning play a vital role (Gabaude 1990; Jackson 2003:123-127; Seeger 2005a:233-291; 2005b). Although not directly denying the actual existence of these supernatural phenomena, in Buddhādāsa’s understanding of Buddhism these things are not regarded as really Buddhistic. Buddhādāsa’s radical teachings in this regard and his strong criticism of supernatural practices have therefore been described as asking too much from “normal” Thai Buddhists (Mulder 2000:104; Gabaude 1990).<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to this, Phra Payutto’s hermeneutical approach to the Pāli canonical texts accepts these supernatural things both in their literal and metaphorical meaning as being authentic Buddhism (for a detailed account of Phra Payutto’s interpretational approach that recognizes various semantic levels of the relevant canonical teachings, see Seeger 2005a:109-119;233-291; Seeger 2005b). For him it is even possible that the belief in spirits, demons, and deities and the incorporation of amulets can be justified from a Buddhological point of view. According to Phra Payutto, Buddhism must not isolate itself from the beliefs in spirits (*phisang*), magic (*saiyasat*), and other supernatural phenomena. As long as “we have a clear understanding in our objectives and are grounded in our practice [*paṭipadā*], that which we call impure is just like a staircase . . . toward purity. If, however, we do not understand our objectives and are not grounded in them, even those things that are “pure” (*borisut*) might become transformed into “impure” things” (cited in: Phaisan 2542 B.E.:49). In this way, and while being very critical of “wrong practice” (see: Payutto 2538b B.E.; Payutto 2540b B.E.), Phra Payutto’s approach allows a more flexible and inclusive dealing with traditional

beliefs and practices that are connected to supernatural phenomena. For Phra Payutto it is possible to integrate these beliefs and practices into the “very flexible” structure of Buddhism, as long as the fundamental soteriological principles of Buddhism are not sacrificed or distorted by them (Payutto 2538a B.E.:455-479; Phaisan 2542 B.E.:47-50; Seeger 2005a:233-291; Seeger 2005b; Seeger 2007a).

Phra Payutto has been criticized for this flexible stance by Aporn Phukaman, a follower of Samana Phothirak, who pursues a more “purist” approach (Olson 1989:345-347; Olson 1991). Phothirak’s movement, Santi Asok, excels by its outspokenness and critical stance toward not only the social, religious and cultural sector of Thai society but also toward politics, and by its strong emphasis on moral behavior and vegetarianism. Also, Santi Asok is quite critical of the many magical and supernatural elements in Thai Buddhism: “Santi Asok . . . denies the supernatural elements of Buddhism and considers the magic of Buddhist statues or belief in *phii* (spirits) as ridiculous things” (Fukushima 1993:139). In stark contrast to traditional Thai Buddhist practices, Buddha images are completely absent from Santi Asok assembly halls (Swearer 1991:667),<sup>12</sup> and rituals are performed without Buddha images and other elements that are perceived to be un-Buddhist (Apinya 1993). Traditional magical practices in Thai Buddhism, like the consecration of amulets, are interpreted in a way that criticizes Thai traditional practices: the “Buddha within ourselves” is sacralized rather than external paraphernalia that are believed by many rural folk to be chargeable with magically efficacious energy by chanting the appropriate stanzas in Pāli (Apinya 1993:174).

Similarly, the three case study monks appear to respond to the oppositional fields in quite divergent ways and manifest in diverse forms. Phra Khru Suphajarawat is a so-called “development monk” who has dedicated the last twenty-five years to the developmental emancipa-

tion of his community, based on his interpretation of the Buddhist canon. He comes quite close to Phra Payutto's pragmatic position on the need to work with and through local cultural beliefs and practices in order to integrate Buddhist principles into people's daily lives and livelihoods. Phra Mahathongsuk is a follower of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and Phra Payutto and follows the "forest monk" tradition, giving greatest priority to his own spiritual emancipation, whilst recognizing the need to couch his preachings and actions in lay cultural terms and forms. Nonetheless, in his biography a shift in attitude is observable: he seems to be moving away from Buddhādāsa's radical approach toward a more flexible, inclusive dealing with local beliefs and practices. This, however, does not mean that, for him, one is being replaced by the other (that is, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu by Phra Payutto): in certain aspects, it represents a shift of emphasis and an integration of the teachings and hermeneutics of both. This shift has occurred as a consequence of his understanding of local religious needs and realities.

Like the other two monks in our case studies, Phra Phomma Suphattho is a Mahānikāya monk. This, however, does not prevent him from being a strong admirer of the founder and spiritual leader of Santi Asok, Samana Phothirak, and, although his monastery does not actually officially belong to Santi Asok, it nonetheless adheres to many of the fundamentalist or puritanical principles that are espoused by this movement. In our study, the three monks are "juxtaposed for comparison" (Olson 1991:77). Seen together, these monks' differential responses to the countervailing forces depicted in figure one suggest not only a considerable diversity of local experience but also an interesting insight into local rural Buddhism in Thailand today.

*Phra Khru Suphajarawat, Wat Thalot, Tambon Naso, Amphoe Kutthum, Yasothon*<sup>13</sup>

In our triumvirate, Phra Khru Suphajarawat (PKS) represents the “folk monk” (*phra ban nok/phra chau ban*)<sup>14</sup> who has been working against the erosion of the centrality of the monastery in the daily lives of the community, and where Buddhist principles, intricately interwoven with Isan (Thai-Lao, associated with the northeastern region of Thailand) traditional culture, provided the fabric of a vibrant moral community. He has undertaken this primarily through his work as a “development monk” (*phra nak phatthana*) who has been striving to integrate (or in his view reintegrate) *Dhamma* into the practice of development. In the process he has sought to “claw back” community control of the development process through a series of neo-localist initiatives which have aimed to ease the influence of three decades of state control of development, to challenge the seemingly inexorable advancement of consumerism and associated materialistic values, and to make the monastery more accountable to and influential on the local community. PKS views as inseparable the institution of the monkhood and the local community of which it is part, and he believes that monks hold a responsibility to engage directly with life and livelihood issues of the community—even if this involves confronting the powerful and influential—and to provide spiritual and moral guidance to the people who support and sponsor the local temple.

Since the early 1980s, PKS has taken an increasingly critical stance against the deleterious effects of modern development, manifest as extensive deforestation, soil degradation and water quality decline through intensive application of chemicals, the erosion of social modes of environmental regulation, dependence on the external economy, indebtedness, social divisiveness and disharmony, gambling, drinking and drug abuse. He sees a strong social causality to all of these problems, notably the spread of individualism, consumerism, materialism, social

atomization, competitiveness, the weakening of parental authority, acquisitiveness and greed, and a parallel unraveling of the local moral economy. PKS has led a movement to confront the pernicious effects of social change, drawing extensively from the *Dhamma* and imbued with social manifestations of traditional Isan culture in his efforts to rebuild a community and reconstruct its institutions and social practices. Core moral Buddhist principles (*sīla*) and values upon which his future vision is built include moderation, self-reliance and respect for nature, *sāmaggī* (community harmony; “*sammakkhi*” in Thai), *paññā* (wisdom), *dāna* (beneficence, righteous sharing), *mettā* (loving kindness, good will), *karuṇā* (compassion), *upekkhā* (equanimity), *sucarita* (right conduct) and *santo-sa/santutṭhi* (contentment with what one has). These are seen by PKS to represent an integral part of a local Isan culture with remnant elements of animistic beliefs and practices, into which has been woven a Theravāda Buddhist worldview (see for example, Keyes 1983). This traditional culture informs everyday social practice and codifies the social institutions which provide the core structure of the community.

PKS was born in Ban Thalat in 1940 into a poor rice farming family with many children, and in 1961 was ordained as a monk (*bhikkhu*) in the village monastery of Ban Sokkhumphun, a community just one and a half kilometers away from his current temple. During the late 1960s he extended his monastic education in the Central Region of Thailand, and during this time he became acutely aware of the relative economic backwardness of his home area. Having returned home in 1967 he developed charisma within the local community based on his skills in teaching Buddhist doctrine and meditation, and finally became abbot of Wat Ban Thalat in 1972 (Prida 2535 B.E.:6-7). He committed himself to helping ameliorate the community’s problems. Initially he supported the government’s own development program by joining an emerging corpus of “modern monks” (*phra than samai*) who “felt that the Sangha should refine and adapt its traditional role in order to keep pace with and accom-



moderate changing socio-political conditions” (Somboon 1988:31-32), and who became directly involved in national development programs and considered themselves, or were considered by society, as “modern.” But he sensed that external support was crowding out people’s ability to take care of themselves, and that the competitive approach that was promoted by the government (for example, inter-village beautification and public health contests) was not conducive to collective action. He was also very concerned that many villagers were facing enormous problems of indebtedness as they had to borrow money for chemical fertilizers and pesticides to increase productivity as they increasingly became involved in mass production of agricultural products for the market, and subject to a more consumerist and materialistic ethos. It was also evident that the *Saṅgha* had been co-opted by the state to legitimize its modern development and anti-communist agendas (ibid.:30; Prida 2535 B.E.:8-11). PKS became increasingly skeptical of the achievements of modern development.

PKS sees himself as following the example of the Buddha when he is involved in rural development:

The Buddha was concerned about educable people [*veneyyasatta*] . . . He sent out his followers [*buddhasāvaka*] . . . [with the purpose] “to be of benefit for and bring happiness to a large number of people . . .” Why do I not pursue *nibbāna*, carrying my alms-bowl [*patta*] into the jungle, in order to sit in meditation with closed eyes, so that I can attain happiness or *nibbāna*, only for myself? I think it is not appropriate if I go solely for my own happiness or attainment of *nibbāna* . . . . I have to open up a big, broad path along which many people can proceed at the same time and attain the same happiness.” (Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:8)

In addition to this, for PKS it follows, given Thai monks' central religious and cultural role in community life, the high respect they receive and their awareness and deep understanding of local communities, that they cannot be indifferent (*du dai mai dai*) to the problems of the villagers, and must therefore help in rural development (Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:8-9).

PKS has sought to nurture an alternative development agenda which is driven by the local community and built upon local conditions and capabilities. He felt that the community should be proactive in relation to its own development, rather than passive recipients of external development largesse and unquestioning absorbers of an external development ideology. PKS was an early advocate of "grassroots development" and a promoter of *watthanatham chumchon* (community culture), which during the 1980s emerged as a nation-wide alternative development movement with strong localist undertones. From 1983 PKS emerged as a local champion of localized development. In 1991 he formed a network of some thirty to forty development monks (*sangkha asa phatthana*)<sup>15</sup> following an initiative by Phra Maha Narong Cittasobhano, the then-Deputy Director-General of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Buddhist University in Bangkok, who was looking for local monks to participate in the committees of various development projects (Prida 2535 B.E.:39). PKS was already fully involved in his local community's development by that stage, and so was an obvious person to recruit into this wider initiative. "Development monks" operated largely independently of, and actually received a great deal of criticism from the Thai *Sangha*.

In his development work, PKS looked to the locality, to traditional culture, and to the past, to seek out solutions to the problems of the present and the future. His idea was that development ideology, rather than being universal and absorbed from outside, should instead be par-

ticular to the community concerned and should build from the bottom-upwards. It should focus on building people's self-confidence (Yano 1999:188) in order to challenge the characterization of rural Isan folk as poor, backward and unsophisticated, and it should center first and foremost on (re)building community relationships and social capital. "We were trying to form a community, trying to identify who could play a role in the community projects—who were the good people, who were honest and not corrupt. I didn't want anyone to take advantage of the villagers." His vision is modeled on the traditional moral community of the past, and is encapsulated in the Thai aphorism *liau lang lae na* (literally "turn to look behind as you head forward" or in this context "learn from the past as you build your future"). Far from being a conservative reversion to a state before the progress of recent development, and advocating a freezing of traditional culture, PKS is seeking to chart a middle path between *samai kau* (the way of "the past") and *samai mai* (modernity) (see also Yano 1999:165;169; Ratana 2003:283). In this undertaking the role of the *saṅgha* is vital as monks are, due to their charisma, the motivators, mediators, conciliators and scrutinizers (of moral and righteous behavior) and give direction in development projects (see Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:14-15:18; see also Prida 2535 B.E.:45-46).<sup>16</sup> PKS reminds people of the actual goal of development: "[when] we do development [activities] we have to take the villagers, the community as our goal." This community focus becomes especially important as economic development progresses and people start to become selfish and forget about the original objectives and the process of development. He believes that local cultural and spiritual values such as integrity, morality, compassion, and community harmony can help people deal with the challenges of modern life. Accordingly he has championed the revival of community spirit, communal institutions and community self-reliance, using traditional culture, Buddhist doctrines and moral leadership as his principal tools.

Kutchum District has become renowned in Thailand for a series of local development initiatives that PKS helped to inspire through his moral community approach. These started with a project to revive traditional herbal medicines and the role of local monks as “bare-headed doctors” (Gosling 1985). From an early age PKS had studied herbal medicines (*ya chum chiaw* or *samun phrai*) with local traditional healers (*mo boran*), and after taking the robes had dispensed herbal medicines from the temple. In the early 1980s a national campaign was started to reverse the provision in the 1962/63 *Saṅgha* Act, which had prohibited monks from acting as traditional healers (Yano 1999:174; Prida 2535 B.E.:12), and to find “healing monks” (*mo phra*) who still held knowledge of traditional medicines. In 1984 PKS formed a Natural Medicine and Herb Interest Group (*chom rom samun phrai*) in the local village, Ban Thalat. Through this initiative traditional knowledge has been preserved and liberalized (by knowledge dissemination and exchange, as formerly this kind of knowledge was traditionally transmitted secretly and exclusively) and has become a source of pride and confidence in the villagers’ local wisdom (*phum panya thongthin*) (Prida 2535 B.E.:24-25). It also led to the formation of a number of co-operative networks with various local and translocal private and state organizations. The herbal medicines project also led to a program of forest rehabilitation, and then to the introduction of organic farming, and later the establishment of a community mill, the realization of which (for example, financing and building) relied decisively on Phra Khru Suphajarawat’s involvement (Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:14), community markets and a community currency system (for more details of these developments, see Parnwell 2005; 2006; 2007; Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.; Prida 2542b B.E.; for the community mill, see Kanoksak 2544 B.E.:111-159; Prida 2535 B.E.:37-39) and a whole series of local development initiatives which were created by the community (sometimes with external assistance) and for the community with the aim of becoming more self-reliant. These initiatives required the direct involvement and intervention of monks in local development.

Through his work with the *sangkha asa phatthana* PKS set up a “Dhamma tour” (*thammayatra/thammasancon*) where the monks visited local villages, preaching to the communities about the importance of Buddhist values in their livelihoods and everyday lives. PKS explains: “The *sangkha asa phatthana* was initiated because we saw that the community had become distanced from the *wat*. For this reason we were looking for a method by which we could draw the community [back] into the *wat*.” (Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:12-13). The *sangkha asa phatthana* disseminates knowledge in various fields: herbal medicine (by demonstration), organic farming, culture and ritual, consumerism, environmental issues, and so forth. The *sangkha asa phatthana* go out on their *Dhamma* tours one to two times a month. Apart from teaching and training, other objectives are the formation/consolidation of community and the study of local problems by interviewing villagers (Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:13; see also Prida 2535 B.E.:39-42:44).

The organic farming project is an example of local livelihood being consistent with *Dhamma* principles:

The practice of organic farming was compatible with the *Dhamma* teachings. I helped to encourage farmers not to use chemicals, using lessons from the *Dhamma* for this purpose. Linking organic farming with the monkhood is quite easy—the two things go together quite well. Organic farming means nothing harmful takes place (in theory). Creatures, plants, all living things will be saved. This is the key. People, soil, living creatures and plants are all mutually dependent, all connected. So, I tried to bring some *Dhamma* virtues into my discussions with some people—to try to convince them that this is an opportune time to stop degrading the soil.<sup>17</sup>

Kutchum District has subsequently become one of the most important centers for a growing movement of organic and pesticide-free farming in Thailand.

Direct engagement with local development issues was argued by PKS to reflect local cultural practices:

Monks doing everything with the villagers is because of Isan culture—where people pay a lot of respect to monks. Respect and obedience is traditional, more than other regions. Even though there have been scandals, the Isan people still pay respect to the monks. So, if a monk initiates something it is quite easy to get people to follow. The role of monks in the region is one of leadership—it is established and accepted that monks should be the leaders . . . . Monks take the offerings from the villagers, so therefore we should participate in the villagers’ activities. The villagers do not have the time to listen to the *Dhamma*, because they are busy with their work in the rice-fields. [So] we will go their houses.<sup>18</sup>

PKS, and the other monks who make up the *sangkha asa phatthana*, teaches the villagers about self-sufficient agriculture in line with the Thai King’s “New Theory,” and consistent with the concept of “Buddhist agriculture” (*phutthakaset*: see Prawet 2530 B.E.; 1999). He calls the development scheme that he is trying to promote “*phutthaphatthana*,” that is, “Buddhist Development” (the Thai *phatthana* [development] is derived from the Pāli “*vaḍḍhana*” which means increase), and he sees his actions in this regard as being consistent with the *dhammavinaya*. He tries to follow the example of the Buddha who not only aimed at *nibbāna* but was also concerned about others and their communities. Santikaro claims that PKS has also been following “the footsteps of Buddhadasa . . . combining theory with practice, and providing wisdom with a context” (cited in Yano 1999:189) and Prida explains that PKS’s community can ac-

tually be called “a Dhammic community” (*thammika chum chon*), a term he derives from Buddhādāsa’s concept of “Dhammic Socialism” (*thammika sangkhom niyom*) (Prida 2542 B.E.:53). PKS argues that a monk’s personal development is enhanced by engaging with the local community, and he criticizes monks who “develop the inside of the monasteries only, and not the surroundings of the monastery, and are not interested in the welfare of the villagers.” (Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:11) At the same time, however, he says he is criticized by elder monks who say that his teaching and development are not in conformity with the *dhammavinaya*. PKS recounts that state officials have also criticized monks who are involved in rural development:

They say: “Why does the *saṅgha* get involved in this? this is not appropriate [for the monks]. They have to be passive [*tong yu choei choei*] . . . . [Monks] have to practice meditation [*samādhi*], walking meditation [*doen congkrom*], they have to give the precepts, to give preachings [*desanā*] to the laypeople . . . . Monks should not do manual work.<sup>19</sup>

The *Dhamma* values he is trying to espouse are locally rooted. He understands local people. This he attributes to the role of his local mentor, Phra Khru Wijityasothon (PKW). PKW emphasized the need for local monks to lead by example by displaying exemplary moral behavior:

If monks are trusted, honest, decent and respected, they will be able to provide moral leadership. PKW set a very good example. I followed him in every respect. His conduct set a model for spiritual development, and I have tried to follow the same approach. This extends to other forms of development as well.<sup>20</sup>

PKW was also a “folk philosopher” who was able to use his knowledge of the Isan folk way of life to contextualize his efforts to sustain the moral backbone of the community. He understood the psychology of local

people. He also held the view, which clearly influenced PKS's own work, that the monastery should serve the community. All resources donated to the monastery (for example, through the *pha pa* ["forest robe," that is, *paṃsukūla-cīvara*] ceremony) should be available for the community's benefit, not just retained for the monastery's use. PKS is critical of the way that monks have come to covet the resources that flow into monasteries today.

The *pha pa* ceremony, which traditionally had been used to provide cloth for monks' robes but in more recent times has become adapted to provide the resources for monasteries' physical maintenance and development, had been further modified by PKS to support his alternative development agenda (see also Seri 1988). In 1989 he organized a *pha pa* donation ceremony (*pha pa phan mai su chau isan*) to increase the stock of medicinal plants to support the development of the herbal medicine program. Also, with the money that was donated (nearly 275,000 Thai Baht) a Fund for Trees was established and a "rotating credit fund" was created for villagers who wanted to implement PKS's principles of "balanced and integrated farming" but lacked the financial means to do so (Prida 2535 B.E.:32). The use of *pha pa* in this way was also intended as a statement against the way that the ceremony had come to serve increasingly materialistic purposes.

PKS's views on the interface of Buddhism and animism were quite informative on the role played by beliefs in regulating the impact of the community on the natural environment. In the past people's fear of hell, ghosts and spirits, and their belief in heaven, *bun* (*puñña*, merit) and the afterlife, had a strong influence on their adherence both to community social norms (the fear that deviance would be noticed by supernatural forces) and the social regulation of natural resource use. For instance, the forests were believed to belong to the ancestral spirits (*phi pu ta*), and the inappropriate exploitation of forest resources would bring misfor-



tune to the perpetrators and to the community as a whole. Permission to exploit forest resources had to be granted by the “grandpa spirit” via a local spirit medium. Today, according to PKS, people are far less inclined to adhere to these traditional beliefs and superstitions.<sup>21</sup> PKS claims that deforestation and environmental degradation have increased exponentially as a result. The ghosts and spirits are not as fearful as in the past: “The ancestral spirit *phi pu ta* just disappeared—only a handful of people still believe in it.” In connection with the declining role of *saiyasat* in forest conservation, PKS explains: “Nowadays, there are three kinds of motivations [for villagers to preserve the forest and the environment]: (1) fear of holy things [*singsaksit*]; (2) fear of other villagers [as the forest is communal property]; and (3) fear of the state.” PKS attributes such changes to a shift in beliefs and in villagers’ perspectives, with a greater focus on the world outside the village. More youths are migrating to work in other provinces, especially Bangkok, leading independent, atomized lives outside the sphere of parental influence. Parents no longer have the power to discipline their children. According to PKS, the authority of leaders, parents, village elders and monks is also not as strong as it was in the past.

The solution to such problems lies in the revitalization of culture and the reintegration of holy values in people’s beliefs and practices:

In places where the community spirit is strong or belief in sacred things is still alive, forest still remains. If you want to restore beliefs in holy spirits or guardians of forests, you need to revive the culture . . . folk philosophy may be able to mobilize others to follow the lead and beliefs [of one who has charisma, namely a local monk].<sup>22</sup>

PKS has been one such charismatic folk philosopher, and his efforts have led, *inter alia*, to the restoration of the community forest in the vicinity of his village, and to the rehabilitation of soils and water courses through the organic farming project.

PKS's development work frequently brings him up against the powerful and influential, and also people who disagree with his vision of development or whose interests are confronted by his alternative development agenda. This is an aspect of social engagement by Buddhist activists that has drawn criticism from the more conservative members of the Thai *Saṅgha*, who insist that monks should desist from politically-sensitive or -engaged activities. PKS is quite relaxed about this. He is meticulous in his politics of impartiality. His high profile, both locally and nationally, draws people who wish to use his standing and charisma to endorse or promote particular political agendas, but PKS refuses all overtures and inducements. Such people:

. . . have to come to the temple first to win the hearts of the villagers. If I say no, it is likely that the villagers will say no as well. But I declare publicly that I am neutral. I'm happy to give advice, but I'm not going to take any side. If a Governor or a General comes to the temple, such as for the *pha pa* ceremony, I get them to sit on a mat on the floor with the rest of the villagers, not a chair. If I am invited to a village I'm more interested in talking to the villagers than the headman or the *kamnan* or the [representatives of the Tambon Administrative Organization] TAO. Some monks are not like me—they hang out with the influential people in a community. The villagers are there but they don't pay attention to them. This is not my style, not my type. Some parts of my sermons may shake people's positions a bit, and they disagree, say this is not nice. People also try to buy my silence with money,

so I won't comment on certain practices or situations. I can't go along with this. It would cause distrust among the people.<sup>23</sup>

In spite of all his constructive community development work, PKS is rather pessimistic about the future. He is in declining health and he has yet to find someone who can carry on his life's work, particularly within the monastery. The abbot is very critical of the way that the monastic institution has changed in recent years, and of the attitudes and behavior of many monks:

I would say that monks today nurture people's desires because of consumerism and materialism. Some monks go along with it; they think that they are doing something for society by endorsing desire, craving and wealth accumulation. But I emphasize that desire is there and operates at all levels, and within all social strata. At the same time, our sponsors [the villagers] give a lot of material things to us (for example, TVs, cars). They think the temple needs to be in better condition and better equipped, so they give us these things. The monks inevitably get dragged into this circle of desire. Sometimes it can escalate, so that the monks come under the control of influential people and politicians in the province, and are used and manipulated by them. The predominant social function of Buddhism nowadays is in ritual service, while its moral and spiritual influence has been drastically reduced. The influence of Buddhism is actually much weaker than in the past. In reality, we have worldly materials set as an object, so it's very difficult to restore a mind-set based on Buddhist virtues, the spiritual orientation of people.<sup>24</sup>

PKS reveals his attitude toward certain rituals that local villagers expect him to perform:

[I don't like] putting sacred marks on cars or other things [*coem rot coem arai*] [in order to charge them with positive energies], [performing rituals in which gods are invoked] in order to end one's addiction to drugs or alcohol, or other rituals like warding off bad luck by using incantations [*suat sadokhro*], . . . [producing] *nam mon* [holy water]. I know that deep down they are clinging to desires. Although I am open-minded [*mai titcai*], I ask not to do [these kinds of things]. But I will do these things finally, despite feeling "tired" inside of chanting these incantations, as [I see] that people take us [monks] as their refuge and that these things can help them mentally. They believe these rituals that we perform are efficacious. While not agreeing with these things, I also do not look down upon them [*mai loplu*].<sup>25</sup>

PKS is also very critical of what he calls *phra sakdina* (administration monks; literally "monks of power and rank"), who are so wrapped up in the protocols and formal, routine duties that have been imposed by a centralized Thai *Saṅgha*, and whose focus and aspirations lie further up the monastic hierarchy and away from their localities (see also Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:11). He is also highly critical of monks who leave their village temples to further their monastic education, and who rarely return to their home communities or bring back knowledge that is of local relevance. He also feels that, locally, a monastic education does not have the standing and status that it held in the past, vis à vis a secular education, and thus it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit local men to ordain into the monkhood. He is also very skeptical of the quality of village youth today, their suitability for ordination, and their capability and commitment to continue the work that he has started. "Society has become softer. Some monks are only interested in enter-

tainment, smoking, *pai thiau* (travelling around, having fun), folk dances, *bun bang fai* (the rocket festival); or they may play the lottery, or eat things they're not supposed to. Monks these days are different from the old days." There are few "public disciples" to carry this work forward. Not enough people today are interested in learning about the folk way of life. The villagers' attitudes toward the monastery have also changed:

In the past, what belonged to the monks was sacrosanct—people respected that. Nowadays, people come to the monastery and take things away. The temple is losing its sacredness. They eat what belongs to the monks; they just come along and help themselves. Holiness disappeared from the world. We need to bring the virtues back; raise awareness of their importance and decline. Sacredness had an important function: it brought about ethical behavior. Ethical behavior toward other humans and toward nature. How can we restore this sanctity? . . . The combination of laws and virtues [*sīla*] has to compensate for the loss of belief in the sacred that in the past helped to sustain ethical behavior. But here [regarding the law] we now have the problem of corruption. If we restore belief in Buddhist virtues—*sinlatham* [*sīla*—we can restore the community and the environment. We need spiritual development . . . I work toward the restoration of the mind, the virtues, ethics. But in reality we have worldly materials set as an object, so it is very difficult to restore the mind-set, the spiritual orientation of the people. People ordain now to get money from people's donations, or for other benefits. Also, some of the strict Buddhist disciplines scare some people away from ordination. It becomes increasingly difficult to recruit people to ordain; or the people who ordain are rarely of an appropriate caliber, some have problems with the law, or are debt/tax fugitives. Some monks—especially the senior admin monks—are quite materialistic. They have the power to put out orders, and they order com-

puters or IT facilities, cell phones, and so forth. In fact, if high-ranking monks are not so-equipped they actually get criticized for this! Material possessions have become almost the norm. It is difficult to refuse inappropriate people's ordination. Sometimes influential people like *kamnan* or *phu yai ban* will put pressure to have their sons ordained. Some of their kids are actually drunk when they ordain. So, recruitment and ordination are totally up to society.<sup>26</sup>

*Phra Mahathongsuk (Santacitto),<sup>27</sup> Samnak Buddhadhamma, Tambon Huai-jaeng, Amphoe Kutchum, Yasothon*

Phra Mahathongsuk (PMTS) is an admirer of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and Phra Payutto, and, at the same time, follows the forest tradition by having strong reverence for a number of representatives of this tradition in Thailand, such as Ajan Man, Ajan Cha, Luang Pu La. As such, his case contrasts quite strongly with that of PKS in some important respects. He believes that too much involvement in community development inevitably constrains his personal spiritual development, and thus he seeks to maintain a certain distance between himself and routine community life. He adopts a quite singular approach to the articulation of *phutthasat*, “the science of the Awakened one/Buddha,” and *saiyasat*, that is, the belief and practices that are concerned with magic and supernatural phenomena. He incorporates mundane folk elements only as a pragmatic local device in the pursuit of core spiritual objectives. Local beliefs are interpreted dhammically. As we will see in the following discussion, he has developed a quite sophisticated approach to folk rituals, and places particular emphasis on meditation practice and the notion of “temporary *nibbāna*” and “*nibbāna* here and now.”

PMTS has been in charge of the *samnak* (monastic residence, that is, it is not officially registered as a monastery) Buddhaddhammārāma since the mid 1990s. The name of this *samnak* is derived from the title of Phra Payutto's magnum opus "Buddhadhamma" (Payutto 2538a B.E.), which clearly indicates PMTS's intellectual orientation and inspiration. It also expresses his intention to implement the ideas propounded in Buddhaddhamma within the local rural context, and as such fits centrally with the localization theme with which this paper is concerned. The *samnak* was founded in the mid 1980s, and is built on a former community graveyard (*pa cha*) where corpses have been, and continue to be, cremated and buried. At the time of the research (April 2006), the *samnak* covered an area of fifty-four *rai*, and housed eight monks and three *mae chis*. PMTS is a native of the area, and has been a monk for twenty rains (*vassa*), having been ordained at the age of twenty. He has achieved *prayok sam* (third grade) in the Thai traditional system of Pāli studies that comprises nine grades altogether (see Ishii 1986:84-85;91-92;95-96). His large collection of books by Buddhaddāsa Bhikkhu and Phra Payutto gives evidence of his erudition and scholarly knowledge. He does not want this *samnak* to become an official monastery (*wat*: the villagers nevertheless call it "*wat*" and perceive it as such) because he "fears" this will lead to his becoming drawn inexorably into *Saṅgha* administrative work. Furthermore, all the local villages already have monasteries, so adding a further one might imply competition and may become a cause of disharmony.

He describes his "*wat*" as a "forest monastery" (*wat pa*) as distinct from the local "village monasteries" (*wat ban*). He explains that "village monasteries" take on folk rituals and ceremonies (for example, *bun bang-fai*, *bun phawet*, *bun khau*, the abbot acts as an exorcist (*mo phi*), ordination ceremonies are accompanied by music produced by "long drums"), whereas instead his *samnak* organizes meditation teachings or *Dhamma* talks. According to PMTS, "village monasteries" have to comply with vil-

lagers' needs for such activities. Forest monasteries, however, can refuse to perform those kinds of festivals.

He approaches spiritual development holistically, integrating well-being of mind with well-being of body. Once a year, his "monastery" holds a seven day meditation course which is attended by about 300 people (of whom 100 stay in the temple overnight) and in which breathing meditation (*ānāpānasati*) according to the instructions of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu is taught. The meditation instruction and *Dhamma* teaching covering Buddhist doctrine are organized jointly with long-standing monks from other monasteries. In this way, the different kind of local monasteries complement each other and work together.

Motivated by his faith in the teachings of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, he spent two rains of intensive *Dhamma* study at Buddhādāsa's monastery, Suan Mok in Surat Thani province. He also spent some time as a "wandering monk" (*phra thudong*). Coinciding with the death of the former abbot, PMTS visited his relatives and friends and was asked by the villagers to take over the position of the late abbot. In his teachings he extensively uses Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's interpretation of *suññatā* (emptiness/voidness) and *tathatā* (suchness [of things]). If villagers practice according to these concepts they can temporarily experience *nibbāna* (*dai rotchat nipphan*; literally "get the taste of *nibbāna*"). These concepts, however, are rather difficult for the ordinary villagers to grasp. For this reason, PMTS has to translate them from a sacred, aloof language into a "concrete" language that takes into account villagers' basic economic needs. He says that canonical terms are for "veneration" (*bucha/pūjā*). Therefore, his approach is one of linguistic de-sacredization. He is thus a translator and localizer of canonical language. At the same time, however, when he is invited to perform exorcisms he uses this "aloof" language, the Pāli language, which the villagers do not understand. He chants canonical texts with doctrinal meaning, and the villagers believe



in their efficacy in warding off evil spirits, believing these texts to be magic spells:

I make use of both *saiyasat* and *phutthasat*. That means I try to bring people from *saiyasat* to *phutthasat* . . . . [For example] when I am invited to exorcise evil spirits [from the building site] before a new house is built . . . I chant [Pāli texts that] praise the Buddha: “there is no one greater than the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *saṅgha*.” I also sprinkle [the villagers] with Holy Water [*nam mon*] and they appreciate this [they say: “*sādhu*”] . . . I go there as their friend [*pen mit kap khau*] . . . . When a child is crying they want me to come to chase away the spirit by which the child is possessed and I chant Pāli texts praising the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *saṅgha*. I also bind a sacred thread [that is, a *saisin*<sup>28</sup>] around the wrist [of the possessed] and [the villagers] say that I am successful in warding off the spirits. So it works . . . . This is [my] inclusive approach . . . . I don’t use principles [and rituals] of exorcists [*mo phi*] but the principles of the Buddha . . . . This is a flexible and inclusive approach . . . .<sup>29</sup>

Although Phra Mahathongsuk is like the other two monks in this study in that his routine life brings him into regular contact with villagers and their life and livelihood challenges, he opines that his spiritual practice to attain permanent *nibbāna* is constrained by his activities in community development (*man cha long*). Therefore, he tries to stay within his monastery as much as he can in order to “develop himself rigorously” (*rau phatthana tua eng yang khem nguat*). This, however, does not mean that he tries to escape from society or won’t try to help people who come to visit him: the challenge is to find a suitable distance between him and society. In this connection, he compares his strategy with that of “a hospital doctor” (*tham tua khlai khlai kap mo yu rongphayaban kon*): if “seriously sick” people need treatment they will come to see him,

but “I do not carry my medicine bag around [in the world outside his *samnak*] to inject medicine.” In contrast to Phra Phromma Suphattho (the final case study), Phra Mahathongsuk has removed from the monastery all technical devices that he once used for his teaching. In another context, he repeatedly expresses the opinion that in Thailand there are more than enough *Dhamma*-teachers whereas the number of *Dhamma*-practitioners seems to be “very worryingly” quite small.

According to PMTS the villagers have a narrow understanding of the authentic meaning of merit (*puñña*), namely they understand it as the giving of material things (*hai than; dāna*) or the ordination of a son. This distorted or narrowed understanding of *puñña* goes as far as the belief that killing a buffalo or a cow and organizing artistic performances or film shows as a part of an ordination ceremony, or the giving of relatively large sums of money, are generating merit. In his teachings he tries to return this term “*puñña*” to its original meaning: that is the ten *puñnakiriyavatthu*.

According to PMTS, a lot of local Isan wisdom (*phaya*) is coherent with Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu’s teachings and hermeneutics. There are ample examples of how PMTS localizes Buddhist concepts that stem either directly from the Pāli canon or from Buddhadāsa. For example, Phra Mahathongsuk connects the teachings of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu with local sayings and gives them a Buddhist meaning in this way, for example, the saying “despite stating an aspiration, one’s outstretched hands can’t reach it” (ปากว่าแล้ว มือยื่นไม่ถึง) which he explains to villagers as follows: as long as people are attached to worldly things like rank, praise and material possessions, they won’t reach *nibbāna* as they do not wholeheartedly strive for it. Also, local beliefs are interpreted in a way that connects them to canonical Buddhism. As we will see in the following, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu’s aforementioned hermeneutical dichotomy of *Dhamma* language (*phasa tham*) and common language (*phasa khon*) seems to have been very influential for him in this respect.

Phra Mahathongsuk's *samnak* is laid out according to the principles of what we call here "spatial symbolism." This practice, together with his use of local sayings, seem also to have been strongly influenced by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's approach: probably Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's most famous motif in this respect is that of the coconut tree on an island as a symbol for *nibbāna* standing in the "sea" of rebirth:<sup>30</sup> the tree symbolizes the uniqueness of *nibbāna* which is transcendent (*lokuttara*) and the only thing that is firm in the middle of constant change (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*) (Buddhādāsa 2542 B.E.:173-175; Buddhādāsa 2549a B.E.:205-218). This interpretation spatially and symbolically demonstrates Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's understanding that *nibbāna* can be found in the middle of the world and not outside of it, in the same way as the coconut palm stands in the middle of the pond and not outside of it. This spatially and symbolically expresses Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's "*nibbāna* here and now" teaching. For Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu this "spatial symbolism" is intended to provoke and motivate people in order to gain deeper insights into *Dhamma*.<sup>31</sup>

PMTS makes use of "spatial symbolism" in a similar manner, but interpreted in his own way so as to make it congruent with the locality through "discursive localization." Some of the devices he uses in his *samnak* are as follows:

- (1) A *bodhi* tree (it was a *bodhi* tree under which the Buddha-to-be became the Awakened One): villagers symbolically support the tree with wood in the belief that this will prolong their lives. PMTS interprets this practice as supporting Buddhism, securing the longevity of Buddhism, as this tree is a symbol of Buddhism;
- (2) A toilet that is called the "toilet of voidness" or "toilet of *suññatā*" (*hongnam sunyata*), meaning that this toilet expresses the idea of mental voidness (compare with Buddhādāsa

Bhikkhu's central teaching of "*citwang*" / "void-mind": Jackson 2003:129-200): when we go to the toilet in order to defecate or urinate we give (up) and "feel good" (*sabai*) while doing this; and we give without expectations: the giving in this way allows the realization of *nibbāna* in this very life. This interpretation by PMTS links Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu with the very popular (and contentious) Luang Pho Khun, a local Isan monk who had taught this method of reflection on "right" giving, and who became well known for "his skills in combining the principles of the Buddha's *Dhamma* with "Thai local wisdom" (*phumpanya Thai*) in order to communicate the customs and dialect of the people of Khorat [a northeastern Thai province]." (Jackson 1999a:12);

- (3) A bathroom that is called the "four *iddhipāda*<sup>32</sup> bathroom", again in order to teach people that meditation practice should be undertaken anytime and anywhere, even while on the toilet or taking a shower. Also, PMTS is using a word-play here: in the Isan dialect "to go to the toilet" is "*pai than*" (ไปห้องน้ำ)—this is a homonym to *than* that is used in the compound *kam-mathan* which literally is "work of business" and is the Thai form of the Pāli technical term "*kammaṭṭhāna*", that is, meditation exercises. In this way, PMTS teaches that going to toilet should involve insight meditation practice (*vipassanā*);
- (4) The kitchen is called the "*suññatādāna* kitchen," meaning that everyone is invited to eat for free and the food is given out with an empty mind, so that while giving nothing is expected in return;
- (5) There is a "Four-Noble-Truths pavilion" (*cattāri ariyasaccāni-sālā*), having four pillars, where PMTS invites people to contemplate and analyze their problems in accordance with the

structure of the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*); if the person is not able to solve their problems on their own, then people are invited to use the next building . . .

- (6) The so-called “*dhammasabhā*” (the *Dhamma* parliament/council), where problems can be discussed with monks who try to help to solve individual problems.

Another example of PMTS’s vivid use of religious terminology which he translates in a way that communicates a message to his local community is the so-called “*paṃsakula*” cloth that normally refers to discarded cloth that is used by monks to manufacture their robes or designates the funeral robes that are dedicated to deceased persons. These robes are also traditionally used to contemplate on the Buddhist concept of impermanence (*aniccatā*). In addition to its canonical meaning, however, PMTS uses this word when he refers to a recycling scheme where people give things that no longer have any use or value, like building materials (wood or bricks), to the monastery. These discarded things are then used as building materials in his monastery.

There are further examples of PMTS’s engagement in a process of “doctrinal localization,” or interpreting local practices according to the *Dhamma*: concerning the use of various kinds of trees, a lay exorcist (*mophi*) uses bamboo and other wood to prevent the spirit of a person who died an unnatural/sudden/abnormal death (*taihong*), such as in an accident, from escaping from the grave so that the spirit is not able to disturb the villagers. Unlike dead bodies from people who died a “normal/natural death,” the corpses of sudden death are buried in a secluded place in the forest. Only after a certain period of time, namely three years, has passed will the body be cremated (see Tambiah 1970:179;189-190; Formoso 1998:7-16; Ladwig 2003:81-83). PMTS interprets these local or folk mechanisms of exorcism in a dhammic way, that is, the bamboo symbolizes not-self (*anattā*) or emptiness (*suññatā*), as

bamboo, despite having a solid form and appearance, has no nucleus; the wooden pole that is used to indicate the location of the grave together with the name of the deceased and the day of death is interpreted as the “pillar of *Dhamma*” that demonstrates that death is inevitable for all people, whether poor or rich. The wood that is used to keep away animals that might dig for the corpse is called *maikhomheng* (literally: “the wood that suppresses”)<sup>33</sup> and symbolizes that humans suppress one another in the struggle for economic resources, commit adultery, usurp power from each other, and so on. This should serve as a reminder that the actual goal of/in life should be *nibbāna*. Most of these interpretations are actually based on widespread sayings and aphorisms of Isan culture and have not been developed specifically by PMTS. But he uses them in a Buddhadāsa-like manner as “provocative food for thought.” This is a further example of how a national discourse on Buddhist practice has been localized, or made understandable and identifiable for lay folk, hence doctrinal localization.

The flexibility and inclusiveness of this approach is very nicely demonstrated in the next example of PMTS’s approach to dealing with local beliefs and practices that seemingly have nothing to do with Buddhist soteriology. In the graveyard of this “monastery” the villagers have carved the shape of a vagina into the tree opposite the grave of a local man. The local belief is that the man buried in this spot had neither a wife nor a girlfriend in his life, and villagers wished him to find one in his afterlife. In connection with this it is also believed that the spirit of the deceased is not reborn immediately but inhabits a “state between” (*antarābhava*), before being born in another life. This is actually, from a traditional Theravāda doctrinal point of view, a heretical belief, as Theravāda believes that rebirth takes place immediately after death (see Kv.364-366). Despite the fact that this traditionally held belief of locals contradicts Theravāda doctrine, PMTS does not go against this belief of rebirth but bases his teaching on it in order to show to villagers that

*kamma* performed in this life has consequences in the afterlife, however this might appear. The pedagogical aim here is to prevent the beliefs of eternalism (*sassata-dit̄ṭhi*) or annihilationism (*uccheda-dit̄ṭhi*) which from a Theravāda point of view are mistaken views (see: S.III.97). That is, he tries to integrate the Buddhist teaching of impermanence, not-self, and suffering, and the law of *kamma* (together with its moral implications) into local beliefs without undermining locally held beliefs and practices, even if they are in stark contradiction to some fundamental Theravāda doctrines, as here concerning the process of rebirth. Only if the fundamentals of Theravāda are distorted to an “unacceptable” extent would PMTS disapprove or refuse to lend support. In this way, so PMTS believes, villagers can gradually develop their understanding of authentic Buddhism and their moral behavior. The aim is to lead them to the core teachings of Buddhism in a way that ties in with existing local beliefs. That means existing beliefs are not replaced, but are given a new meaning that helps villagers to progress gradually to “authentic” Buddhist ideals.

His approach in this regard, together with the corresponding facilities in his temple, could be explained in Phra Payutto’s dichotomy of *Dhamma*-practice on the big/small scale, and is a way of translating the *Dhamma* into a language that can be understood by the villagers. On both scales (big and small) the basic components of the Eightfold Path have to be present (*sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*), and as long as the ultimate aim remains the same: liberation/escaping from *vaṭṭasaṃsāra* (cycle of rebirth), or in other words *nibbāna*. In this way, the basic structure of the Four Noble Truths can be applied both on a social and an individual level. PMTS’s basic concept and strategy of teaching complex Theravāda doctrines to his local community is strongly informed by Phra Payutto’s understanding of the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, which Phra Payutto explains as follows:

In everything we do at all times, no matter what our actions or undertakings, we are able to train, develop, observe and watch ourselves in all three aspects of this Threefold Training (*sikkhāttaya*). This means to train ourselves in all three aspects, in morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) at the same time and all the time . . . . At any time, at all times, there is the application of the threefold training on the “small scale” [*cunlaphak*], that is, all the three are practiced in the same action or activity. At the same time, there is development of the threefold training on the “large scale” [*mahapphak*], that is, gradual development step by step, appearing from the outside like a dedicated training of each level, in order, one by one. The application of the threefold training on the small scale supports its strong development on the large scale; and conversely the development of the threefold training on the large scale supports its application on the small scale, until there is a growing stability and perfection that leads to the highest stage. (Payutto 2540c B.E.:22-23)<sup>34</sup>

PMTS gives an example for this approach at the community level in the form of the amelioration of addiction to alcohol, which is a kind of “low level” cycle of rebirth.

Initially, when he came back from Suan Mok, he refused to perform magical rituals like “to make auspicious markings on cars” (*coem rot*), or consecrate water (*suat nam mon*), as he was “*ronwicha*” (literally: “hot in his knowledge”, that is, extremely eager to show his knowledge). But he quickly learned that this approach would not be accepted by the villagers, for whom these rituals are vital. He therefore started to do these markings and consecrations but only by connecting them with *Dhamma* teachings, that is, to teach and remind villagers to drive mindfully (i.e., with *sati*, mindfulness, and *sampajañña*, clear comprehension)



and amicably. Now, he also uses “magic formulas” (*khatha khlang*): for example, if someone expresses the wish to become a millionaire he gives the formula “*u ā ka sa*” and based on the Pāli canon (A.IV.281) explains that these abbreviations stand for diligence (*uṭṭhānasampadā*), protection (*ārakkhasampadā*), the association with good friends (*kalyāṇamittatā*), and a balanced way of life (*samajīvikatā*) (see also Seeger 2005a:268-269).<sup>35</sup> This is done to motivate them to practice the Buddhist Path. This is another example of his flexibility and inclusive, integrative hermeneutics that are very similar to Phra Payutto’s approach in this respect. This again represents an attempt to localize a wider set of discourses and teachings, in this case those emanating from Suan Mok and Phra Payutto’s interpretive approach, to fit local realities. Very similar to Phra Payutto, PMTS sees villagers as being at very different levels of spiritual development. Some still need the belief in the efficacy of magical things whereas others have developed to higher levels of spiritual development as outlined in the Pāli canonical scriptures (Seeger 2005a:275). In order to keep things harmonious and inclusive, he tries to integrate these people by accommodating their various religious beliefs, but also with the aim of further spiritual development. And very similarly to Phra Payutto, as we have already repeatedly seen, he perceives Buddhism as being “very flexible”: the important thing is directing people to the principles of Buddhism while, at the same time, not corrupting these principles (compare with Payutto 2542 B.E.:95-96 where Phra Payutto explains that there exist two Buddhisms: “authentic Buddhism” (*phutthasatsana tua thae cing*) and “folk Buddhism” (*phutthasatsana baep chau ban*). Between both there exists a “connecting bridge” (*saphanchueam*), that is, the engaging of “authentic Buddhism” with the aim to teach its principles and gradually develop people while taking into account the variety and different levels of people’s spiritual development. In this way, even Thai descriptions of *nibbāna* as a “great city of non-dying” (*amatamahankhon*), as opposed to the canonical teaching that *nibbāna* is a self-less state of mind, can be accepted from a Theravāda doctrinal point

of view, as long as the “authentic principles of Buddhism are not destroyed” or “distorted”).

PMTS thus recognizes the prevalence and persistence of folk beliefs and practices, but while accommodating Buddhism to local culture and reaching out to the local community, as PKS does, PMTS also uses local referents and understanding as a cognitive route to a deeper appreciation of core Buddhist principles and ideals. In other words, whereas PKS conflates *phutthasat* and *saiyasat*, PMTS uses *saiyasat* as a conduit to *phutthasat*.

Although their approach and underlying philosophy show many differences, PMTS has also recently started to become involved in local environmental projects in a broadly similar manner to PKS. Nonetheless, the way he orchestrates villagers’ interaction with the local environment differs in degree and method. PMTS has carried out a chemical-free reforestation project on a sixteen-*rai* (2.56-hectare) plot adjacent to his *samnak*, and he styles the forest as “the supermarket of the villagers” (*suppoemarket khong chau ban*). For dietary supplement the villagers can obtain red ants eggs, mushrooms and young bamboo shoots from the forest area, as well as various types of herbs, the cultivation and processing of which is intended to preserve and maintain local knowledge of herbal medicine. The villagers are allowed to take whatever they need. There is only one rule: it is forbidden to take life. The recipes and procedures for these medicines have been transmitted orally or can be found in “old books.” Herbs are also used for the treatment of addictions (mostly alcohol and cigarettes, and formerly amphetamines) in accordance with the “slogan”: “The *Dhamma* cures the mind, the herbs cure the body.” Yearly, about 100 drug addicts of both genders come to his *samnak* and ask for help. In addition to the traditional herbal medicine which makes them vomit, and a promise to Buddha, *Dhamma* and *saṅgha*, threats are also used in the treatment process: “If I am not able to quit,

let me die!” Some of the drug addicts might sit in meditation. Consecrated water (*nam mon*) is also used as part of the healing process, in order to “motivate people” (*hai kamlang cai*). This is an example of how *saiyasat* is used to bring the people to *phutthasat*, and contrasts with the widespread practice whereby *phutthasat* sometimes takes people to, or at least fails to deliver them from, *saiyasat*: PMTS cites the commercialization of Buddhism by selling amulets as his primary example. His approach also tries to reconnect to the past where, so he believes, *saiyasat* was used to bring people to *phutthasat*, and not the other way around as is often the case nowadays. This attitude is the key to our notion of “re-localization.”

He adopts a similarly flexible approach in relation to villagers’ daily lives. PMTS teaches that any work should be performed in a way that is *Dhamma*-practice. This means that the three aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path, morality (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*), can be integral to one’s daily life and work. This is consistent with Phra Payutto’s teaching on the flexibility of the Eightfold Path, which allows practice of all three aspects anytime, anywhere. When villagers follow the Buddhist rules of morality (*sīla*); are happy with their daily work and are determined in it (*samādhi*); and understand the interconnectedness of their work, and critically examine information that is presented to them through the various media (radio, TV), that is, *sutamaya-paññā* (wisdom resulting from study) and *cintāmaya-paññā* (wisdom from reflection) (here he is referring to D.III.219), villagers can practice the Eightfold Path in their daily lives (Payutto 2538a B.E.:571-572; Payutto 2540c B.E.).

This is also reflected in his meditation teaching. As already mentioned, PMTS annually offers seven-day sessions during which meditation is taught. Several hundred people attend these sessions, both locals and also people from further afield. He invites various meditation mas-

ters to teach meditation. PMTS himself teaches two kinds of meditation: that which can be practiced in all of one's daily activities, and that which is more focused, intensive and technical. This too can be connected to Phra Payutto's understanding of the flexibility of Buddhist practice, on a small scale and on a large scale.

PMTS teaches how to ameliorate the actual problems of villagers (such as addiction problems, family problems) in accordance with the structure of the Four Noble Truths, that is, to identify the roots of the problems (*samudaya*) and methods/strategies (*magga*) in order to escape from the individual (metaphorical) rebirth cycle (*vaṭṭasamsāra*) and to eliminate (*nirodha*) the problems. He uses the Four *iddhipāda* in his teaching in order to give advice on how villagers can gain happiness from their work. In his view, work should be done without the expectation of salary: villagers should investigate things in order to understand what their "true and artificial values" are, what their material and what their spiritual (*guṇa*) value is.<sup>36</sup> They are encouraged to propagate the happiness that comes from non-material things (*nirāmisa-sukha*) as opposed to carnal happiness (*sāmisa-sukha*). These two approaches, too, seem to be strongly influenced by Phra Payutto, who has extensively written on these two concepts (see for example,; Payutto 2538 B.E.:543;694-695; Payutto 2548a B.E.). Problems should not be perceived as "obstacles" (*u-pasak*) but as opportunities to develop one's wisdom. He explains that in this way the villagers can experience *nibbāna* because their life becomes "cool." In order to explain this concept he uses *kusalopāya*, "wholesome means," which is actually rather a Mahāyānist concept. *Kusalopāya* also includes the distribution of amulets or the use of sacred water in order to drive away malevolent spirits (*phi*), holy spells (*kāthā*, for example, or "u ā ka sa" discussed above), making auspicious markings on vehicles, and exorcism. This, however, is connected with the teaching of Buddhist principles. He also teaches "communal *kamma*" (*kamruamkan*): chemicals that are used in the growing of food can cause cancer to the consumers.

Morality has to comprise society like “a big family.” Misbehavior or goodness of one single community member might affect the reputation of the whole community.

PMTS thus differs from PKS, not least in relation to their relative degrees of detachment/engagement. Whereas PKS actively goes out into his community to address and become involved in secular aspects of their development, albeit with strong but not clearly overt spiritual underpinnings, PMTS requires local people to come to him, ostensibly on his terms, and principally in order that they also seek religious meaning through their interactions with him, albeit couched in a locally comprehensible manner. The difference between them is subtle but still very vital, and points to a very different viewpoint, especially in connection with Phra Mahathongsuk’s understanding that “going out” might slow down the process of one’s own spiritual self-perfection. This understanding is actually the outcome of a process: PMTS had been “going out of his monastery” in the past and he had also been involved in the *sangkha asa phatthana*.<sup>37</sup> In this respect, PMTS is building on the traditional role of the monastery, that is, people come and are welcome.

But in quite sharp contrast, PMTS is also engaged in activities and practices which are much more congruent with his characterization as a “forest monk” and can be understood as belonging to the intensive practice of the Eightfold-Path, that is, what Phra Payutto calls the practice on the “large scale.” PMTS has a close connection with, and supports, a forest temple in a 3,000-*rai* forest conservation area, called *phuyim*, “smiling mountain” (of which 2,000 *rai* are looked after by his follower monks). Due to its remoteness this monastery offers the opportunity for very intensive meditation practice: there is no electricity, the monks live in caves, it is remote and difficult to access, and thus it offers plenty of opportunities for practice in the wilderness in extreme solitude. Further examples for the practice on the “large scale” are a small hut in his *sam-*

*nak* where monks/people can engage in highly intensive meditation practice while being locked in for a long period of time (for several days or even a week): water is provided by a pipe through a wall, and there is a small hole in the floor with a concrete lid where the practitioner can urinate/defecate. The purpose is to allow the practitioner to fast and not see or talk to anyone for a long period of time, and thus exclusively focus on his/her meditation practice. There is also a tree trunk that has been placed horizontally about one meter above the ground, on which walking meditation is practiced. All of the above elements clearly express the intensity and high level of meditation practice that is pursued in this *wat pa*.

These more intense or austere aspects of his Buddhist practice are influenced by the teachings of eminent monks of the forest tradition, such as Ajan Cha and Ajan La, which are used exclusively for the intensive practice that leads toward permanent *nibbāna*. PMTS is thus able to use in a complementary manner, and also localize, the socially engaged Buddhism of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and Phra Payutto as well as the individual liberation approach of important forest tradition monks.

For PMTS it is vital that monks preserve local culture and reflect critically on new things, in order to counter-balance modern things.

*Phra Phromma Suphattho, Wat Suanthamruamcai, Tambon Phosai, Amphoe Pattu, Yasothon*<sup>38</sup>

Phra Phromma Suphattho (PPS) is a strong admirer and follower of the Santi Asok movement's leader, Samana Phothirak. He believes in the strict separation of *phutthasat* and *saiyasat*, and finds no place for ritual, ceremony, superstition and "god-ism" (*thewaniyom*) in his temple. He promotes high ethical standards and strict adherence to the *pāṭimokkha*, practicing vegetarianism, organic farming, and demonetization. He be-

believes monks should contribute to society through leading by example, and should not shy away from political issues. Although lay followers are strictly selected, and many find it difficult to adhere to PPS's somewhat puritanical regime, the temple reaches out to a very wide local audience via the abbot's community radio station. This case study provides an example of the localization of reform Buddhism, taking some of the core principles of the Santi Asok movement and applying them in a local context outside the movement's formal structure and network.

PPS has been a monk for twenty-two years (as of 2005) and was ordained at the age of twenty. For him, the current world has distanced itself quite enormously from "authentic" Buddhism and actually goes against some of its core principles. Buddhism as practiced in Thailand is dominated by ritual and has hardly any space left for "real" Buddhism. For him Samana Phothirak, the founder of the Santi Asok movement, whom he knows personally, is the most important *Dhamma* teacher in Thailand and he tries to emulate his example. Samana Phothirak's teaching exerts an enormous influence on the ideas, thinking, teaching and practice of PPS. Nevertheless, he still formally belongs to the Mahānikāya denomination in Thai Buddhism and is not formally affiliated with Santi Asok, which has been expelled from Thai institutional Buddhism and now operates outside it.

The monastery ground comprises more than 100 *rai*. There are five monks and one novice living in the temple, and also approximately fifteen lay people (mostly women) who live in the monastery compound, albeit in a strictly separated area; there is also gender separation. Thus, compared with PKS, who leaves the monastery to position himself in the middle of the social world, and PMTS, who tries to distance himself from the mundane world to enhance his personal spiritual development, PPS welcomes the world into the monastery, albeit with strict conditions for moral behavior. It is a principle that within the monastery vegetarianism

must be practiced. PPS argues that, if monks eat meat, they become an indirect “cause” (*pen het hai*) of other people killing animals, through the economic principle of “demand” (*upasonḅ*) and “supply” (*upathan*). He thus adopts a holistic view of the interconnectedness of things (*idapaccayatā*).<sup>39</sup> PPS has intensively studied the Pāli canon in this respect, including canonical accounts that suggest the Buddha has allegedly eaten meat, for example, “*sūkaramaddava*” (“soft pork” or the name of a sort of edible mushroom?)<sup>40</sup> in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D.II.127). Be this as it may, he believes (*attanomati*) that the Buddha did *not* eat meat (admitting however that the Buddha did not explicitly state this): as this would be problematic given the first training rule. For this view, he refers to the four *mahāpadesa* (that is, the principle of coherency) in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D.II.123-126) and *Jīvakaṣutta* (M.I.368-371). The latter text, however, is also referred to by those who argue that meat can be consumed as long as it clear that the offered meat is *tikoṭiparisuddha* (that is, “pure from three angles”), which means “the monk had not seen nor heard that the animal had been killed particularly for him, nor had any reason for suspecting so.” (Schmithausen 2005:189). For PPS, however, it follows from Buddha’s first training rule (*sikkhāpada*) that refraining from killing implies that monks should not consume meat. He applies this principle in order to help the villagers to gain merit by not killing living beings. PPS perceives that the point when he first refrained from consuming meat constituted his entrance into “real” *Dhamma* practice. He says that the realization of these high ethical standards is probably not possible in society on a large scale, but is doable on a small scale, on an individual level or in small communities such are found within the Santi Asok movement.

Although strictly separated from the monks, villagers live in the temple grounds, practicing organic farming (which is described as “*phut-thakaset*,” Buddhist agriculture) of rice, fruits and herbs. They operate within the constraints of the five *sīla* and the five *vaṇijjā* (trades which



should not be performed by lay disciples: see A.III.207). In terms of keeping the five precepts, intention (*cetanā*) is decisive (for example, unintentionally destroying living beings while digging the earth). The villagers share their products for free and do not employ people.

According to PPS, Buddhism prescribes social engagement and interaction with others. To him, highly concentrative meditation in solitude in a deep forest or a cave is worthless and a waste of potential: “Buddhism that doesn’t leave the world behind is the highest form of science as it allows us to learn, to experience and to teach and learn from each other.” Interacting and living with the world is thus the best way for spiritual progress. Getting into dispute and disagreement with others can reveal one’s own *kilesa* (impurities) and thereby help one to study them in order to make spiritual progress: “When you are alone [in a forest or cave], who can provoke your anger: the trees, and dogs?” In a later interview PPS was rather reserved in answering a question about *sammāsamādhi* (Right Concentration, the eighth component of the central concept of Buddhist practice, that is, the Noble-Eightfold Path, *aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*, see for example: D.II.312; M.I.61; M.III.251): “This is a very scholarly question”, he said. He feared answering this question incorrectly. According to him, the widespread understanding in Thailand that in order to practice meditation you have to perform sitting meditation is distorted. But this doesn’t mean that he denies this form of meditation practice. In his teaching he emphasizes the keeping of *sīla*, and to a much lesser extent the practice of meditation. The meditation in his monastery is not very intensive: work is in the foreground, and meditation takes place during and through work. This is very much in line with Santi Asok’s understanding of *sammāsamādhi*.<sup>41</sup>

PPS runs a radio station in his monastery, which he calls the “community radio” (*withayu chum chon*, allowed for in the then Thai Constitution of 1997), through which he both engages with the wider society

and responds to people's life and livelihood needs, as well as their spiritual needs. The radio programs comprise *Dhamma* talks and other kinds of "good things," such as playing "meaningful" songs: there are no songs aired that "mislead/brainwash" (*mommau*) or are "non-sensical." There are no advertisements. The radio is supported by people's donations and from voluntary work. The station has been in existence since 2002, broadcasts within a thirty kilometer radius, and has an audience of around 10,000 listeners. He recently (i.e., 2005) conducted a survey amongst the listeners (8,000 questionnaires were sent out of which 7,000 were returned). The station has been an overwhelming success, and is now the most popular radio station in Yasothon province. During its initial phase, the radio station was nearly ordered by the state to close down because of its content. PPS makes phone calls to *phu yai*, that is, "important/influential people," for example, senators and politicians, and airs the interviews on the radio station. Programs about politics are very popular amongst the listeners, where PPS analyses and criticizes political and social phenomena. Through the radio station PPS actively engages with the local society. Nonetheless, there are a lot of people who do not understand why a monk is talking to society about worldly things and not "*Dhamma*."

With regard to the rightful role of monks in politics, he believes that monks have a duty to teach politicians not to be corrupt, but at the same time the monk must not "play politics" (*len kan mueang*). Due to their charisma (*barami*) monks have a very important role: they "have to teach" politicians: "monks have to explain to villagers which politician has done right and who has done wrong." But he sees a danger of monks being used by politicians as canvassers. In his view monks can support political parties: "if a party is good, then a monk can support it." But he also admits that it is rather difficult if not unrealistic to find an "ideal political party." Nevertheless he would refrain from doing this through his radio station: "it does not look good." There are many other ways of

doing this, such as through seminars. As is the case with Samana Phothisrak, he is well-informed and at the same time very critical about the political, economic and social scene and happenings on a national and international level. For PPS, the world is currently in inexorable moral decline: “the Buddha said that in BE2500 the world will continue to deteriorate more and more. It is difficult to get back to the past.”

PPS strongly emphasizes that monks have to abide strictly by the original 227 rules of the *bhikkhu-pāṭimokkha*, and any adaptation of these rules is impossible. Whenever, during a monk’s work, a rule might be broken in order to do this specific task, villagers will take over these specific tasks, for example, cutting grass, digging the earth, producing herbal medicine for consumption by the villagers (monks are only allowed to produce herbal medicine for other monks), and so forth. He upholds a strict divide between *phutthasat* and *saiyasat*. PPS opines that, as Buddha images historically developed 300-700 years after the time of the Buddha, they cannot be representative of “original” Buddhism. In his monastery no consecration rituals of Buddha statues or amulets are performed as these rituals belong to the realm of *saiyasat*. *Saiyasat*, so PPS holds, is a major problem in Thai society, and his efforts to eliminate it represent a form of “purification” of Buddhism at the local level. He cites examples of scandals in connection with the widespread amulet cult in Thailand, such as the amulet business linked with amulets of Luang Pho Khun, which even led to murder, and to Luang Pho Khun fleeing his monastery because of the conflicts that were caused by differing business interests. This is used as an example of the bad effects of the amulet cult, namely the commercialization of Buddhism (*phutthaphanit*). According to PPS, “*saiyasat*” (magic spells, amulets, holy things) cannot be found or legitimated by the original teaching. Here, we find a clear contrast with Phra Mahathongsuk’s, Phra Khru Suphajarawat’s and Phra Payutto’s approach. According to PPS, these two realms “have to be separated clearly [*tong yaek hai chat*]. I like to have a clear separation, black is black, white

is white.” However, he later on [after Phra Payutto’s views on this matter has been explained] admits that amulets can give mental support and can give encouragement (*soem kamlang cai*): “OK, it can be connected [to pure Buddhism] . . . it depends on how you use amulets.” In this respect, he believes that the *tipiṭaka* (Pāli canon) has been partly corrupted by later accretions. *Saiyasat* elements and “cultural elements” might have been added to the original body of texts by later tradition.<sup>42</sup>

Before his study of Samana Phothirak’s teaching PPS used to wear amulets (“*tem kho*”—literally “my neck was full of them”). For him Thai Buddhist ceremonies, such as the consecration of *sai sin* water with the power of sacred stanzas, are a distortion of original Buddhism. He perceives in such ceremonies a form of “god-ism” (*thewaniyom*) that has to be abolished. Due to the strict practice of dismissing superstitious things, cigarettes and betel, people who come into his monastery are carefully “selected”: that is, they have to keep the five precepts and abstain from the six *apāyamukha* (that is, drug addiction, roaming the street at unseemly hours, frequenting shows, gambling, association with bad companions, habit of idleness, D.III.182-184).<sup>43</sup> In terms of the precepts they have to live up to a certain standard (later on, he admits that people whose profession is butchery or fishing also come to his monastery and donate vegetarian food, that is, in practice he seems to be more tolerant/flexible). Also, he refuses to go to religious events in lay people’s houses when he knows that animals will be killed for this occasion or where alcohol will be consumed. For this reason, there are not many people who invite him. Due to his refusal to produce “consecrated water,” many villagers have withdrawn from his monastery. The typical people who come to his monastery are community leaders and social activists.

In his monastery only a minimum of ceremonies are performed. He criticizes other monks who comply with villagers’ desire for tradi-

tional rituals and ceremonies, and instead encourages the elimination of many “superfluous” ceremonies. In this sense he differs from Phra Khru Suphajarawat, in practice if not in principle. For PPS rituals and ceremonies are a form of “social psychology” with little or no impact on spiritual development. According to PPS the widespread use of money by monks depurifies the *saṅgha*. He is also strongly and overtly critical of Thai politics, of capitalism and of materialistic development concepts in Thailand—something which also makes him stand out from the majority of monks within the mainstream *Saṅgha* for whom the politicization of religion is a strict taboo. He is also well-informed about Thai politics and global politics. This is in line with Santi Asok world-engagement and its highly politicized profile (see McCargo 1997:74-103).

He is very critical of the widespread, distorted understanding of the word “*bun*” (*puñña*): for example, the consumption of alcohol during the *bun bangfai* festival, or monks who organize boxing events for the creation of “*bun*.” He performs only a minimum of funeral rites. He explains to the villagers that merit transfer to the deceased is not possible and he is not willing to perform such rites for the deceased. With regard to the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, he is in total agreement with Samana Phothirak.

When PPS chants (and he tries to chant as little as possible) he always gives a translation from the Pāli so that the chanting gets demythologized; that is, it ceases to be chanting to dispel *phi* (ghosts) and becomes a teaching that is to be implemented by the listeners (see Tambiah 1970:195ff. on the words that are meant to be heard but not meant to be understood). His funeral rituals are reduced to a minimum, whereas villagers typically place great ritual emphasis on death: “Death is in fact the most important rite of passage.” (Tambiah 1970:179).

According to PPS, monks should help society in the right way according to the Pāli “*attā hi attano nātho*” (“you are your own refuge”;

Dp.160). This he applies to such concepts as the self-sufficiency economy. More than 100 of the villagers have formed a group to practice the five *sīla* and abstain from *apāyamukha* through the cultivation of *khau khunatham* (“righteous/virtuous rice,” namely chemical-free rice). This project has received funding from Kasetsart University. As in the case of PKS, PPS is the leader of this project. He teaches the villagers to become self-reliant (unlike politicians, so PPS claims, who distribute things and in this way make the people weak and dependent and devoid of wisdom). He produces neither *watthumongkhon* (“auspicious things”) nor *phayan* (cloth with magical drawings); also, he doesn’t use *katha* (magically efficacious stanzas). He opines that the Buddha did not force his monks to get engaged in these development activities but he says that his religion is the religion of compassion (*hitāya sukhāya anukampāya*) which should support the world in a Buddhist way, that is, help people to become self-reliant.

The community has a shop, “Sahadhamma,” which is the main source of income for the monastery and where various basic commodities (self-produced shampoo, rice, some herbs, and vegetables grown within the temple grounds) are sold in the temple compound. Commodities are sold at a cheaper price than on the open market. This is in accordance with the Santi Asok ideal of *bunniyom* (“meritism”) which the movement wants to offer as an alternative system to capitalism. Heikkilä-Horn explains Santi Asok’s concept of *bunniyom* as follows: “Bunniyom does not emphasise profit, but emphasises instead the spiritual merit gained when donating goods to the customers or when receiving as low profit as possible from the customers” (Heikkilä-Horn 2002:48; see also Sunai 2534 B.E.:91-107). The money is used to support the monastery’s activities, and to purchase food and electricity. The reason for running the shop is that the monastery—unlike the other monasteries—does not have donation boxes and does not perform the traditional *pha pa* ritual when lay followers usually offer substantial amounts of money

to the temple (*pha pa* is not refused but the participants have to abstain from *apāyamukha*). The monastery has a rice mill which is also used by the villagers. The monastery teaches about how to produce natural fertilizer/micro-organisms in order to get better results from agriculture.

“Although not everything I implement is from Santi Asok, many things are . . . . The villagers say that the practice in this monastery is good but they say they can not live up to [these high standards].”<sup>44</sup> PPS lives harmoniously with other monks and monasteries in the vicinity: he does not criticize their practice, even though he sees “conservative Buddhists” who are attached to rituals (that is offerings of flowers/incense to the Buddha), which he does not have in his monastery. He differentiates between *āmisapūjā* and *paṭipattipūjā*: “here, we stress *paṭipattipūjā* (that is the practice of Buddhist teaching is perceived as worship) whereas normally elsewhere they emphasise *āmisapūjā* (that is taking material things for worship).” When asked if he is networking with other monasteries, he says that other monasteries in this area differ from the activities of his monastery. Most of the other monasteries are “traditional monasteries” or “conservative monasteries.” He works intensively with the state organization Rural Development Bank, and gives a lot of training to villagers who are in debt. Also, he works together with several charitable and developmental foundations.<sup>45</sup>

Despite their similar philosophical position on questions of local development, there are no joint activities between PPS and Phra Khru Suphajarawat, although he often visits him and they exchange their respective experiences. For him, PKS can be regarded as an example in terms of helping the villagers with their livelihoods and with sustainable development, such as the production of herbs for the natural medication project. He praises and likes him. According to PPS, PKS is arguably the first development monk in Yasothon province. Pho Wicit, from Ban Sökkhumhun [another of our study villages, adjoining Ban Thalat, and

where PKS originally ordained as a monk], is the president of the foundation of the monastery (Foundation *thammaruamcai*), and thus there is a point of connection between the two communities.<sup>46</sup> PPS works very closely with Pho Wicit (for example, in seminars about politics and agriculture). He also admires the practice of Phra Mahathongsuk. He calls his monastery a *wat pa* (forest monastery), whereas that of Phra Khru Suphajarawat in Wat Thalat is a traditional village monastery (*wat ban*). He indicates that his thinking is very much in line with that of Phra Mahathongsuk, yet he says that there are also a lot of differences. These can be explained by local culture and beliefs which can be constraining, and influence the practice of the monastery. PPS's monastery refuses a lot of traditions which are "unnecessary and useless." But

. . . in the case of all the aforementioned monasteries [Wat Thalat; Samnak Buddhadhamma], they have pressure/reasons not to refuse these things [rituals and ceremonies], unlike my monastery. The pressure is explained by the beliefs of villagers not yet having reached a (spiritual) development level that would allow them to go without these traditions/beliefs. Also, it can be explained by the fact that we dare revolutionize, promote reform in a way that deviates from traditional beliefs. We do away with these things. We are leading the society and we are not a monastery that follows the society, no matter how the society is. We show and lead: what is wrong is what we do not accept. What is right is what we want people to follow. The other [aforementioned] monasteries do not yet have this extent of clarity. A *wat pa* is a *wat pa* because of the landscape and here we have forest and are separated from the village. That's all. *Wat ban* and *wat pa* should not differ in their practice. But most people say that there are differences between both and this is indeed the case.<sup>47</sup>



## Conclusion

The case studies presented in this paper have hinted at some of the changes that are taking place within Thai Buddhism today. They suggest a diversity of Buddhist doctrinal hermeneutics in rural Thailand, not least concerning the appropriate role of the monk and monastery within the local community and the complex articulation of Buddhism with local culture. The studies appear to support the suggestion with which we commenced this paper that a uniform or standardized Buddhism is in the process of being superseded by trends of fragmentation, diversification and purification, with civic religion increasingly overlain by civil religion, notwithstanding their common core. All three monks, to different degrees, appear to evince a certain tension with the diktats, bureaucracy, hierarchy and lack of local groundedness of the institutionalized *Saṅgha*. The case studies, far from suggesting that Thai Buddhism is in “crisis,” propose that quite progressive and innovative developments are taking place away from the metropolitan core, at least among the “faith communities” that surround influential local clerics. The discussion has also illustrated interesting connections between Buddhism, localism and alternative forms of local development that have recently flourished in rural Thailand. Quite whether the phenomenon of “relocalization” equates to a process of “revitalization” is a little difficult to judge on the basis of just three highly personalized cases.

The case studies show how three local individuals have adopted a wide and interesting diversity of approaches both in their use and interpretation of Buddhist doctrine and in their community interaction. PKS might be described as a pragmatist: he understands the needs and capabilities of his local community and responds accordingly by trying to inculcate Buddhist values into people’s daily life routines. He recognizes that men will not wish to join his monastery if he aspires to disciplinary standards that are “too rigid” (*khaeng koen pai*), and he also makes com-

promises in the way that he accommodates locals' beliefs and value systems (*anulom pai tam sangkhom*).<sup>48</sup> But this, in turn, enables him to reach out and interact widely and freely with his local community. However, his pragmatic compromises have a considerable personal cost. PKS conveyed to us a sense that he has sacrificed his own individual progress toward *nibbāna* by trying to open up a broader path to Awakening that others in his community might follow (see also: Prida 2542a B.E.:6). He has also, on occasions, felt the need to “escape” from his monastery as the demands and expectations of local villagers have become too much, or to step back from some of the projects that he helped initiate as competing interests have challenged the principles that he has espoused.<sup>49</sup> And he also has sleepless nights due to worries about community disharmony.<sup>50</sup>

In quite stark contrast, PPS requires his followers to comply with a relatively strict disciplinary regime which reflects a purist approach that draws clear lines of demarcation between what is and is not “genuine” Buddhism. Whilst this has limited the number of genuinely local devotees who come to his monastery and partake in its activities, his radio station allows him to reach out to a very wide provincial audience and also to engage with a myriad of non-local, national and even global issues. Additionally, there are also a number of what PPS calls “leaders and activists” who come to his monastery from communities elsewhere in Yasothon Province, and who generally can cope with and may even be attracted by the monastery's pure and strict regime. PPS describes these people as “convinced and committed” who, in taking his message back to their home communities, also suggest that PPS's teachings are influencing a wider local constituency.<sup>51</sup>

When he first arrived in the locality, fresh from Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's temple Suan Mok, PMTS adopted a somewhat idealistic approach which did not fit very easily within the local context, but over

time he has adopted a more inclusive strategy, maintaining his core Buddhist principles whilst communicating them to the local community in innovative and imaginative ways. He provides an interesting illustration of the tensions associated with localization. Since becoming a local leader he has been in a constant process of adjusting and readjusting, seeking the “right” balance between his individual and the community’s development. He first became involved in community activities outside the “monastery” (for example, being part of the *sangkha asa phatthana*), before later withdrawing because he realized this would slow down his spiritual development, but now he feels obligated to help deal with villagers’ social, developmental and environmental problems that increasingly confront him.

Despite the differences between these local monks, there are also clear points of congruence which reflect other contemporary trends in Thai Buddhism to which each is responding. An example of this is their respective understanding of the way that the concept of “*bun*” (*puñña*) has been seriously distorted through its popular local usage. Beliefs and practices concerning the “generation of merit” (*tham bun*) have increasingly come to reflect the tendency toward materialism, commercialization and commodification which have not only characterized modern Thailand during its recent phase of intensive capitalist development, but which are also perceived to have contributed to the “crisis” in Thai Buddhism which we touched on at the beginning of this paper. All three monks are highly critical of and have been trying to reform the local practice and understanding of *tham bun* (merit-making). PKS complained that when villagers came to talk to him about *bun* after his sermons they were interested only in the material implications: “they didn’t seem to understand the spiritual aspect of these terms.”<sup>52</sup> PKS and PMTS both point to the need to return to the Pāli canonical concept of the three *puññakiriya-vatthu* (that is, bases of meritorious action; for example, D.III.218, A.IV. 239) that in the commentary text *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (D-

a.III.999) has been further elaborated into the ten *puññakiriyā-vatthu*. These two sets of *puññakiriyā-vatthu* imply a practice that actually constitutes the Noble Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*).<sup>53</sup> Their efforts in this regard can be interpreted as part of the “purification” and “reining in” processes that can be identified operating in tandem with relocalization, taking the Pāli canon as the authoritative normative source.

Whatever their similarities and differences, the case studies have lent some weight to Phra Phaisan Visalo’s suggestion (1999:10) of a “return to diversity” in Thai Buddhism. They demonstrate the extent to which an individual monk’s personality, charisma and background influence the way that Buddhism is viewed, received, interpreted, taught and practiced at the local level. Although an important theme in this paper was the way that each monk has been influenced by the thoughts and ideas of important modern Thai Buddhist thinkers, their philosophies and teachings in this regard have also been molded by the intimate, but variable, interfacing of monastery and community at the local level. “*Wat* Buddhism” in Thailand is characterized by a distinct particularism and individualism which often distinguishes it from a more “universal” institutional Buddhism. The three monks also appear to be characterized by different dynamics: Phra Phaisan Visalo identifies (2546 B.E.:175) a growing tendency for Thais to revere individual monks more than the *saṅgha* as a whole. This raises a very important question about both the sustainability and coherency of institutional Buddhism in Thailand. The case studies have suggested that, whilst the institution as a whole may be in “crisis,” beset by problems of scandal, corruption, commercialization and declining authority, at the local level many of the vital signs are quite strong. Nonetheless, where local Buddhism is strongly influenced by an individual monk’s charisma, personality and energy, its sustainability relies quite heavily on the commitment of continuity of the individual. PKS is a case in point. He is in ailing health, and expressed deep concern about whom, in the local area, would be willing and able to con-

tinue his local work as a development monk. In some important respects, he has been swimming against the tide of a crisis in Thai Buddhism which threatens, ultimately, to inundate his life's work when he is no longer around to sustain it.<sup>54</sup>

Monks these days are different from the old days. I can transfer knowledge only to someone who acknowledges it or is receptive to it.... I encourage the younger monks to engage in development work. Their question would be "where would I stand?" They don't have my charisma. Their speeches, sermons, cautions are useless, they feel. I'm not so confident about their potential, and their role toward our relatives here in the community . . . .<sup>55</sup>

But, more optimistically, we can also identify a process whereby the vitality and energy that local monks have contributed to their local initiatives are, through increasingly extensive and expansive networks, coalescing with those that can be found in local *wat* throughout the length and breadth of the country.<sup>56</sup> In this way, and following Phra Phaisan Visalo's observation (2546 B.E.:468) that in Thai Theravāda monastic history (outside state-driven initiatives such as the various *Saṅgha* Acts) reform has always come from the periphery, the grassroots process of "relocalization" may hold the prospect of a genuinely "bottom-up" revitalization of Thai Theravāda Buddhism.

#### Notes

(1) In this paper the capitalized "*Saṅgha*" refers to the institution of the monkhood in Thailand, and the lower case "*saṅgha*" refers to the brotherhood of monks in Theravāda Buddhism generically.

(2) Throughout this paper Thai words are differentiated from Pāli words by underlining (Pāli words are italicized; Thai words are italicized and underlined). We have adopted a

standardized phoneticization of Thai script except with some familiar and commonly-used words, especially names, such as King Bhumibol or Phra Khru Suphajarawat.

(3) B.E.: Buddhist Era. Articles and books published in Thai are typically dated according to B.E. rather than A.D., and where this is the case we have retained this signification. B.E. = A.D. + 543 years.

(4) The ecclesiastic titles used by monks in Thailand often change during the course of their monastic careers. For referencing purposes we have indicated their most commonly used ordination name/title, and have omitted the title “Phra” from the text reference.

(5) These are the two Thai Buddhist congregations. Dhammayuttika-nikāya was initiated by King Rama IV prior to his reign during his twenty-seven-year period in the monkhood (1824-1851). Quantitatively, compared with the Mahānikāya, the Dhammayuttika-nikāya is in the minority, constituting only ten percent of the monks in Thailand (see Ishii 1986:154-160).

(6) For a biography of Samana Phothirak and history of Santi Asok, see: Phataraphon Sirikancana, 2540:6-68; Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988:350-352; Jackson, 1989:159-198; Taylor, 1990; Fukushima, 1993:131-152; Apinya, 1993; Keyes, 1999:129-138; Sanitsuda Ekachai, 2001:86-92; Essen, 2004:1-20.

(7) A.II.95-96: *Tatra bhikkhave yvāyaṃ puggalo attahitāya paṭipanno no parahitāya, ayaṃ imesaṃ tiṇṇaṃ puggalānaṃ abhikkantataro ca paṇītataro ca*. The abbreviations for the Pāli canonical texts used in this article correspond to those used by the Pali Text Society (PTS).

(8) The research was conducted jointly by Martin Seeger and Mike Parnwell of the University of Leeds, England, with financial support from the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council (RES 000 22 1421). The project built on earlier field-work by Parnwell as part of a collaborative EU-funded INCO-DEV research project in 2003 (ICA4-CT-2000-30013). We would like to express our deep appreciation to Ajan Suriya Veeravongse, of the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, who played an immensely im-

portant role in the field investigation, which took place in Yasothon Province, northeastern Thailand, during June and July 2005. We are also profoundly grateful to the villagers of the four study communities in which we worked, and to the monks who are featured in this article, all of whom generously contributed their time, energy and enthusiasm for our work. We have tried to represent their words and ideas as faithfully as possible; any errors of translation or interpretation are the sole responsibility of the co-authors.

(9) The research principally consisted of conducting semi-structured recorded conversations with local monks and other key informants. Phra Khru Suphajarawat was interviewed on four separate occasions (8, 11, 13 and 19 July 2005); Phra Mahathongsuk on two occasions (8 August 2005, then a follow-up visit by Martin Seeger on 17 and 18 April 2006); Phra Phomma Suphattho on two occasions (14 July 2005; then a telephone interview on 3 August 2006). The recorded interviews were transcribed by staff at the Social Research Institute at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, and some were translated by Chirasiri Kasemsin. Martin Seeger has exclusively used the original Thai-language transcripts.

(10) This of course does not mean that we overlook the fact that canonical Buddhism itself is rather varied and comprises many elements that could be described as “kammat-ic” or “apotropaic” Buddhism.

(11) At the same time it should be mentioned, however, that Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu admitted that only fully awakened beings (*arahant*) are able to eradicate completely their dependence on *saiyasat*. Due to their still existent fear and wrong concept of self (*attā*), all other human beings would necessarily still have to be dependent on some form of *saiyasat* (Buddhadāsa 2529:37). If used properly, *saiyasat* could even be deployed beneficially (Buddhadāsa 2529:37). Here it must be noted, however, that Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu defined the term “*saiyasat*” rather broadly, namely as “the attachment to tradition and ritual, the imploring to God, imploring to holy things and not knowing what truth is.” (Buddhadāsa 2529:15).

(12) Fukushima reported that at the Santi Asok center in Bangkok there is “no Buddhist statue or shrine.” (Fukushima 1993:136). However, during a recent visit (2007) to Santi Asok headquarters in Bangkok, Martin Seeger observed that Buddha images are now more in evidence, a tendency with which some of the followers of Santi Asok seem not to be happy at all.

(13) The following information on Phra Khru Suphajarawat’s work as a “development monk,” his involvement in his local community and his interpretation of Buddhist doctrine is derived from interviews with him that took place on 8, 11, 13 and 19 July 2005. Some of the quotations in the following discussion are paraphrases of parts of these interviews: where this is the case this fact is indicated in a footnote. All the other texts in this article are direct translations.

(14) He uses the term “*phra chau ban*” to describe himself, by which he means a local monk who is immersed in the traditional culture of his local community and whose *Dhamma* practice is informed by an intimate understanding of the local situation (Phra Khru Suphajarawat 2542 B.E.:8).

(15) Interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 8 July 2005. In his biography, authored by Prida Rueangwichathon, it is said that the “*sangkha asa phatthana*” was founded on 4 August 1989 with twenty members (Prida 2535 B.E.:40). However, a research team from Mahachulalongkorn University that has conducted extensive research on development monks in the Northeast of Thailand gives 1985 as the year of origin of this group (Nora-set Phisitphanphon and Sak Prasandi 2534 B.E.:31).

(16) “If a monk says something, everything becomes easy: a hundred words spoken by a layperson are no match for a single word spoken by a monk.” (interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 8 July 2005). For *liau lang lae na*, see also: interview, Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 13 July 2005.

(17) Paraphrasing of interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 8 July 2005.

(18) Interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 8 July 2005.

(19) Interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 11 July 2005.



(20) Interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 19 July 2005.

(21) One respondent noted how the influx of televisions had almost eliminated casual chatting and social interaction, which traditionally had been an occasion when older villagers in particular would talk about their dreams, through which the spirit world is locally thought to communicate with humans.

(22) Interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 19 July 2005.

(23) Paraphrasing of interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 8 and 11 July 2005.

(24) Paraphrasing of interviews with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 8 and 11 July 2005.

(25) Paraphrasing of interviews with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 8 and 11 July 2005.

(26) Paraphrase of interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 19 July 2005.

(27) The following information regarding Phra Mahathongsuk's biography, social context and his understanding and practice of Buddhist doctrines are derived from interviews with him that took place on 8 July 2005 and 17 and 18 April 2006.

(28) A "*saisin*" is a white cotton thread that is used during rituals (see Terwiel 1994:194-195).

(29) Interview with Phra Mahathongsuk, 17 April 2006.

(30) This is one famous example of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's many koans/*Dhamma* riddles (ปริศนาธรรม). Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu interprets an old local (southern Thai) poem (บทกล่อม) with the title "coconut tree" and expresses his interpretation spatially.

(31) Another famous example of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's approach of using physical aspects of his monastery to provoke the thoughts of visitors is the Theatre of Spiritual Entertainment, an innovation that contains enigmatic and provocative pictures that are intended to help gain a deeper understanding of the "meaning" of the *Dhamma*.

(32) The Four "*iddhipāda*" or Four "Basis of Success" are *chanda* (aspiration), *virīya* (perseverance), *citta* (active thought) and *vīmaṃsā* (investigation) (D.III.221; Vbh.216).

(33) This wood is also used during the cremation of the body: it is to prevent the corpse from falling off the funeral pyre.

(34) This is taken from the complete translation of Phra Payutto's book "A Brief Introduction to the *Dhamma*" that has been prepared jointly by Bhikkhu Nirodho and Martin Seeger with the help of Phra Payutto. This translation will be published shortly.

(35) Phra Khru Suphajarawat is also using this teaching approach (interview with Phra Khru Suphajarawat, 8 July 2005).

(36) Phra Payutto explains this as follows "Given that there are two kinds of desire [i.e., *chanda*, "loving interest" and *taṇhā*, "craving"], it follows that there are two kinds of value, which we might term true value and artificial value. True value is created by *chanda*. In other words, a commodity's true value is determined by its ability to meet the need for well-being. Conversely, artificial value is created by *tanha*—it is a commodity's capacity to satisfy the desire for pleasure.

To assess an object's value, we must ask ourselves which kind of desire—*tanha* or *chanda*—defines it. Fashionable clothes, jewellery, luxury cars and other status symbols contain a high degree of artificial value because they cater to people's vanity and desire for pleasure. A luxury car may serve the same function as a cheaper car, but it commands a higher price largely because of its artificial value. Many of the pleasures taken for granted in today's consumer society—the games, media thrills and untold forms of junk foods available—are created solely for the purpose of satisfying *tanha*, have no practical purpose at all and are often downright detrimental to well-being. For the most part, advertising promotes this artificial value. Advertisers stimulate desires by projecting pleasurable images onto the products they sell. They induce us to believe, for example, that whoever can afford a luxury car will stand out from the crowd and be a member of high society, or that by drinking a certain brand of soft drink we will have lots of friends and be happy.

The true value of an object is typically overshadowed by its artificial value. Craving and conceit, and the desire for the fashionable and sensually appealing, cloud any reckon-

ing of the true value of things. How many people, for instance, reflect on the true value or reasons for eating food or wearing clothes?”

([www.urbandharma.org/udharma2/becono3.html](http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma2/becono3.html)).

(37) He withdrew because several members of the group were smoking cigarettes: his view is that monks are the leaders of the community and should therefore set a good example for the villagers by demonstrating that “to abandon superfluous things allows you to gain the most happiness, the least suffering.” Phra Mahathongsuk does not perceive himself to be a “development monk,” although he has been operating a “buffalo bank” for local villagers who keep the precepts, are affiliated to the monastery (that is come regularly to the monastery) and are in economic need (on the condition that the buffaloes are neither killed nor sold). Since 2002 he has been giving away to villagers buffaloes that have been donated to the *samnak*. When the buffaloes have offspring, these young buffaloes will also be distributed. Annual money donations are also used to buy cows for villagers.

(38) The following information regarding Phra Phomma Suphattho’s biography, social context and his understanding of Buddhist doctrines are derived from interviews with him that took place on 14 July 2005. Also, a telephone interview with Phra Phomma Suphattho was conducted on 3 August 2006.

(39) Sunai Setbunsang, who is one of the main theoretical thinkers of the Santi Asok movement and gained his M.A. at Chulalongkorn University with a thesis on Santi Asok’s language use, explains the concept of Santi Asok’s vegetarianism, which is much criticized in Thai society, as follows: according to Samana Phothirak, animal flesh can only be eaten if the animal the meat derives from died because of a natural death or if the death is caused by other animals (*ṭavattamaṃsa*: “flesh/meat fallen down”). If killing with the purpose of producing food for humans is involved (*udissamaṃsa*: “dedicated meat”), however, monks are not allowed to accept this food. Also, Buddhists should refrain from consuming meat as they would support the breaching of the first training rule that prescribes the refraining from killing (*paṇātipātā veramaṇī*) (Sunai 2537 B.E.:60-62). This interpretation differs from a traditional understanding of Theravāda texts where the Buddha seems not to “require the bhikkhus to observe a vegetarian diet, but

permits them to consume meat when they are confident that the animal has not been slaughtered especially to provide them with food.” (*Ñāṇamoli/Bodhi* 1995:1254; see also Schmithausen 2005:188; *Buddhadāsa* 2549b B.E.).

(40) There is no agreement on the exact meaning of this word (see Malandra 1979:222-224).

(41) Again, Sunai Setbunsang gives a useful summary of Santi Asok’s understanding of *sammāsamādhi* (Sunai 2537 B.E.:63-66). He criticizes the traditional understanding of *sammāsamādhi*, which he sees perpetuated by “mainstream [Thai] Buddhism (*phuttha-satsana krasae lak*). According to Santi Asok, *sammāsamādhi* does not imply escape from society for the practice of highly concentrative meditation techniques practiced in the solitude (*viveka*) of the forest or a cave. Quite the opposite is the case: basing their understanding on the *Mahācattārīsakasutta* (M.III.71-89) Santi Asok teaches the “right” Buddhist practice of the Noble-Eightfold Path as “necessarily practiced in the context of social interaction [การมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ในสังคม] . . . Meditative states of absorption [*jhāna*] attained through sitting in meditation [*samādhi*] with closed eyes are called by followers of Santi Asok ‘*jhāna* of ascetics [*isi*]’ and not ‘*jhāna* of the Buddha.’”

(42) As an example for such a possible textual corruption PPS gives the canonical story in which the Buddha gave his monks permission to step on a white cloth as an auspicious act when lay people ask the monks to do so (*anujānāmi, bhikkhave, gihīnaṃ maṅgalatthāya yāciyamānena celappaṭikaṃ akkamitun’ti*). This permission was given after monks, following a previous prohibition by the Buddha, refused to comply with the request of a woman who has lost her unborn baby (*itthī apagaṭagabbhā*) to step on a piece of cloth for the purpose of auspiciousness (*maṅgalatthāya*) (Vin.II.127). And it is this very canonical account that is referred to by Phra Payutto in order to legitimate the idea that monks can yield to the religious needs for ritual and “auspicious” things, like amulets and other sacred things (*singsaksit*) (see Payutto 2538a B.E.:474-475).

(43) Taken from Payutto, 2548b B.E.:150-152.

(44) Telephone interview with PPS, 3 August 2006.

(45) Telephone interview with PPS, 3 August 2006.

(46) There is also a point of congruence between the respective development philosophies of the Sokkhumphun and Suanthamruamcai Buddhist communities, inasmuch as both seek to integrate Buddhist principles into daily livelihood activities (*phutthasetthasat*, Buddhist Economy). Pho Wicit is one of several members of the Sokkhumphun “faith community” (Candland 2000) who regularly attends meetings at Wat Suanthamruamcai and, as one of the more ideologically inclined members of the community, he expressed the view that his own community, which is already a national model for “alternative development,” can learn much from the more fundamentalist approach of Phra Phomma Suphattho (interview with Pho Wicit, 20 July 2005).

(47) Telephone interview with PPS, 3 August 2006.

(48) Interview with PKS, 19 July 2005.

(49) The community mill is a case in point: originally established to provide rice farmers with a fair price for their produce and to break their dependence on usurious rice mill owners, a faction within the community mill is seeking to operate it on much more practical business lines, which has caused local divisions and tensions.

(50) Interview with PKS, 19 July 2005.

(51) Interview with PPS, 14 July 2005.

(52) Interview with PKS, 11 July 2005.

(53) The three components of *puññakiriyā-vatthu* are: *dānamaya puññakiriyā-vatthu* (meritorious action consisting in giving); *silāmaya puññakiriyā-vatthu* (meritorious action consisting in observing the precepts); and *bhāvanāmaya puññakiriyā-vatthu* (meritorious action consisting [of] mental development) (English translations from: Payutto 2538a:596-597; see also; Payutto 2548b:93-94; Seeger 2005a:72-83). For the equipollency of the three *puññakiriyā-vatthu*/ten *puññakiriyā-vatthu* and the Noble Eightfold Path: Payutto 2538a:596-597; Payutto 2540c:24-28; especially Payutto 2542 B.E.:255-321 where Phra Payutto gives a very detailed account of *puññakiriyā-vatthu*.

(54) There are nonetheless several important and influential members of the lay community who remain deeply committed to the various development projects that PKS helped to initiate and inspire.

(55) Paraphrasing of interview with PKS, 19 July 2005.

(56) PKS and his local *sangkha asa phatthana* are linked to a nation-wide *sekkhiyatham* network of monks and lay people who are working to integrate Buddhism and social development. Also, we have observed that all three monks of our case studies work quite closely together, despite, or maybe because of, their varying approaches and understandings: they exchange ideas, practices, and traditional knowledge (for example regarding herbal medicines) and stimulate and motivate each other.

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