

BUDDHADĀSA BHIKKHU: TO ACT OR NOT TO ACT?

What makes a Buddhist monk an “activist”? Is there anything more to it than being an activist who also happens to be a monk? Is there is a certain activist role especially suitable for bhikkhus? What if she never did grass-roots organizing, never had anything to do with the setting up of activist organizations, never had a political agenda, and never took part in protests? These are questions I often ask myself, a monk who like Ajarn Buddhadāsa is often accused of being an “activist” or worse.

In her recent book *Power Politics*, Arundhati Roy considers the assumptions and disparaging that occur when “activist” is hyphenated with “writer.” More or less the same occurs when monk and activist are wedded by a hyphen. Doing so implies that the two words don’t normally or naturally go together. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and many others reject that assumption. Those who buy such an assumption generally want to silence the moral and spiritual voices of monks lest they show up the corruption and venality of the state and powers that be. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu was a monk among other things and one of the great triumphs of his life was that he remained himself more than conform to the kind of monk defined by power, wealth, and mere tradition (despite the efforts of disciples to remake him in their own images). In that “himself,” were things nowadays associated with activism.

I’ll put aside the A-word, for now, and look at some of the ways he was himself as a monk. He didn’t expect others to be the same sort of bhikkhu; after all, each must find his own Dhamma, that is, Duty. Nor should any of these ways and more be excluded from the possibilities of bhikkhu-life. Let’s forget the romanticized and domesticated stereotypes to look at some of the ways that Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu practiced his Dhamma for letting go of self and serving Dhamma and humanity.

Dhammic socialism

In 1930 something, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu gave a series of controversial lectures at the old Buddhist society in Bangkok. One of them was “Buddha-Dhamma and Democracy.” He professed how Buddha-Dhamma is fundamentally “democratic,” more so than the Western versions then being pushed onto Asian societies even as they were about to erupt in Europe’s World War II. Fraternity, equality, and liberty are each more perfectly developed through Buddhist practice, he claimed. Within Asian Buddhism this view was not unique. Leading monks in Sri Lanka and Burma were saying similar sayings as they struggled against British imperialism. For Thailand, however, he was unique. Ever since the Prince Patriarch ran the Sangha in the decades before and after the turn of the century (during the reign of his older brother Rama 5), Thai monks have been afraid to say anything about politics except to echo the state, whether monarchal, military, or pluto-democratic.

In Ajarn Buddhadāsa’s unique case, Pridi Panomyong — then the prime minister and leading progressive of the ‘32 coup — came to listen to the democracy lecture and subsequently requested a meeting. Pridi was deeply impressed and wanted to build a Suan Mokkh in his home province of Ayudhya, the pre-Bangkok capital. Regrettably, Pridi’s ouster by right-wing generals ended such possibilities along with hopes for an awakened democracy in Siam. One can only wonder what path Thai society would have taken had the genuinely decent and democratic Pridi remained influential with Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu as an adviser.

Ajarn Buddhadāsa’s political thinking continued to develop through the decades of U.S. sponsored military dictatorships. He was given the works of Hegel and Marx, which he read critically. There was much in them that he did not accept, especially the “class warfare” that seemed motivated by vengeance. Later, these books had to be burned during one of the anti-Communist witch hunts.¹ He had students in

¹ Commie regimes weren’t the only ones to prosecute people for the books they read.

the government, such as a long-standing Justice Minister, and received regular visits from insurgents in the nearby jungles. In the polarized situation of the '60s and '70s, he did not overtly take sides with one movement or another. After all, while there were decent and sincere participants on both sides, there was also violence, agreed, dishonesty, and a lack of respect for basic Buddhist teachings. Nonetheless, he did not remain neutral. Rather, he took his stand for what he came to call "Dhammic socialism."

Note: Copying explanation of DS from elsewhere.

We can see that there are many kinds of socialism. For example, the socialism of Karl Marx is just the revenge of the workers. There's nothing to it other than revenge by the workers or laborers. Such socialism of revenge is angry and acts through its anger.

Whereas the socialism of Buddhists must include the word Dhammic, which means consisting of or having Dhamma, that is, correctness. Then acting and practicing correctly in line with Dhamma principles, not acting out of anger or revenge. "Dhammic" means connected with and going according to Dhamma.

Here, Dhammic Socialism according to Buddhist principles holds that nature created beings which must live in groups. Both plants and animals live together in groups or communities. This system we will call "socialism": the correctness necessary for living together in groups which nature has dictated. In short, for the benefit of society, not for the individual benefit of each person.²

Protected social progressives

While I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the early '80s the label "Communist" was derogatory and would make people suspicious of the ones so labeled. While there were a few who speculated that I was somehow CIA, that never put me in any danger. To be labeled "Communist," however, would have gotten me in trouble (as "terrorist" does to scapegoats today). In the '60s and '70s, the labels "Communist" and "socialist" chased people into exile, got them imprisoned or tortured, and led to the killing of thousands. It was not just a semantic game.

Ajarn Buddhādāsa had various reasons for speaking of "Dhammic socialism" during those turbulent times when Thailand was hosting U.S. Air Force bases, modernizing, and shipping heroin. One important consequence of his insistence that Buddhism is inherently socialist was that it helped remove some of the danger from the label "socialist." This was despite the fact that he used the term "socialism" differently than Karl, Vladimir, Mao, Uncle Ho, and the Communist Party of Thailand. Thus, Ajarn Buddhādāsa consciously used his reputation and stature among the educated classes, many of whom worked in government, to protect social progressives. This is one kind of skillful means that escaped other leading monks.

He also helped Sulak Sivaraksa on some of the many occasions when the latter's mouth got him into trouble with the authorities. While Ajarn Buddhādāsa often disagreed with Sulak's methods, he supported Sulak's aims and basic good intentions. Ajarn Buddhādāsa was able to pass the word through informal channels to get people in high places to help out Sulak. Sulak has many friends and enemies. In a Buddhist society, a highly respected monk empowers the former and diffuses the latter.

The case of Phra Pracha Pasanadhammo (now Pracha Hutuvatr, a close associate of Sulak's), who ordained as a monk in the mid-70s when many of his student friends went into the forest (a euphemism

² *Buddhasāsanā kap Udomgati Dhammika Sangkhomniyom* (Buddhism and the Ideal of Dhammic Socialism), (Vudhidhamma Fund, Bangkok: date uncertain, probably 1991), p. 4f.

for joining the Communist insurgency) is also illustrative. Phra Pracha spent most of his monastic life either at Suan Mokkh or closely associated with it. Some of Ajarn Buddhādāsa's more conservative disciples, including a Prime Minister, believed that Phra Pracha was a Communist and encouraged Ajarn Buddhādāsa to send the young monk away in order to protect the reputation of Suan Mokkh. Ajarn Buddhādāsa did not take such an easy way out, partly because he knew that Phra Pracha was a sincere monk and not a Communist, though Progressive and in sympathy with some Communist perspectives. But then, shouldn't all Buddhists be troubled by militarism, capitalist greed, and class oppression?

“Nationalist”

Another issue in which Ajarn Buddhadasa chose to take a principled stand concerned the intellectual, ideological, cultural, and spiritual onslaught that Thailand suffered at the hands of the West. Whether the obvious colonizers such as Western bureaucrats, businessmen, or soldiers, or the unconscious colonizers among the Thais who uncritically received Western educations, influential voices conspired to belittle Thai culture and promote that of the West. To be “civilized” as defined by the West became a Thai elite obsession. A Thai student in England, Sanya Thammasak, corresponded with Ajarn Buddhādāsa at the time that Suan Mokkh was a new upstart monastery in the boondocks of southern Siam. Sanya could not believe that his own culture was as inferior as made out of by his English hosts. Yet, Sanya and other students struggled to counter the European chauvinism. In his pioneering *Buddha-Sāsana Quarterly*, Ajarn Buddhadasa argued that Buddhism and the Thai culture based in it not only could stand up as an equal to European culture and religion, but that it was more rational and scientific than Christianity. Sanya Thammasak went on to be a lifelong disciple of Ajarn Buddhadasa, Chancellor of Thammasart University, Prime Minister, Privy Councilor, and President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists.

In this we can see a kind of healthy nationalism that does not need to look down on or scapegoat other cultures, because it has a natural pride and satisfaction in what is good and decent about itself. The kind of nationalism that depends on disparaging others really has little faith in its own decency; for example, look at how imperial America must accuse an “Axis of Evil” to pretend to itself that it is good, just, God fearing, and peace loving. Thailand before it learned the unhealthy kind of nationalism from Western teachers still lived according to Buddhist values and precepts, did not invade other nations, and ... Through the '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s, Ajarn Buddhadasa was the most prominent voice of this Buddhist nationalism.

Influence on Buddhist activists & monks

Environmental ...

Development

“Wild monk” lifestyle

Suan Mokkh was the first modern “forest monastery” in southern Siam and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu described himself as a “wild monk.” This lifestyle influenced and informed all of what has been discussed above. The simplicity, discipline, and intimacy with nature of the lifestyle provided an invaluable vantage point from which to view modernity and capitalism. Life in the woods, far from the towns, and especially from dirty, noisy, corrupt Bangkok (as he saw it), allowed space and freedom to think, speak, and write

things that the elites, including monastic, could not conceive. On intimate terms with peasants farmers and necessarily taking care of many of his own needs, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu lived out an independence that was also reflected in his thought and teaching.

This wild monk lifestyle was more in tune with the rhythms and cycles of nature than that of modern civilization. Ajarn Buddhadasa believed that this facilitated an understanding of basic Dhamma principles. In the cities and suburbs, one is more likely to tune in to greed, competition, delusion, and selfishness. Back in 1932, this is one reason why he left Bangkok to found Suan Mokkh in an abandoned, overgrown temple near his hometown of Pum Rieng.

Difficulties with monastic institution

Needless-to-say, the more venal elements within the Thai monastic hierarchy did not appreciate the stands taken by young Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu. Fortunately, this hierarchy was so dependent on the State that it had little power or ability of its own to shut him up. His Vinaya (monastic discipline) was above reproach and he knew the Pali Tipitaka better than most of his critics. Most of all, senior monks and respected lay people supported him. His integrity, intelligence, and practical straight-forwardness helped protect him. A crucial support was provided by Somdet ???, the acting Sangharaja in the early days of Suan Mokkh. The Somdet made a generous show of support by visiting the fledgling Dhamma center and spending the night. In Siam's feudal society, that had great meaning.

In the 50s, one Sangharaja was especially venal and corrupt. He could not stomach Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's critiques of corruption within the Sangha, even though no names were mentioned and the critiques were primarily in the form of direct translations from the Buddha's Word. At one time, this Sangharaja and his cronies tried to get rid of Ajarn Buddhādāsa. The secular authorities would have nothing to do with this petty action and senior monks protected him.

While never a part of the hierarchy, Ajarn Buddhādāsa did not criticize it in blanket terms. He criticized behavior (kamma) rather than individuals (selves). This was not only skilful in terms of the Dhamma of Not-Self, it made it harder to get rid of him. Yet his translations of the Buddha's own condemnations of improper monastic behavior regularly hit the mark. More Upaya!

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy speaks of activist takings sides, takings stands. I like this perspective because it counters the illusion that activists (in her article) and religious folks (in this article) and human beings generally don't have to take sides. In Thailand, the status quo has been a pretense of new travel that actually takes the sides of the status quo, in other words, those in political and monastic power. This is often dishonest and the moral.

Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu took sides. He took the side of Dhamma and indirectly those of causes he felt were Dhammic. Overtly, he did not take sides with particular groups, which made it possible to not be overtly against anybody. This enabled him to focus on principles and issues. For him, Dhamma is about natural principles; and these are the foundation on which he took his stands. Actual human beings and groups — including himself, his disciples, and Suan Mokkh — are complex entities that only imperfectly live out the principles that they espouse. His role was to give voice to these principles, including those of social morality that leading monks avoided in order to survive under a corrupt state. . . . Nonetheless, as mentioned above, he quietly behind the scenes or indirectly helped out various individuals and groups.

This article has given me an opportunity to review my teacher's way of taking the side of Dhamma. This inspires and challenges me to do the same. I need not concern myself with what it means to be "an activist." I need not limit myself to domesticated definitions of what it means to be a bhikkhu. I need only, like him, be myself. That means being true to my various commitments: to the bhikkhu life, to the end of suffering, to a more just and peaceful world, to my friends, and to my teachers, including the Buddha himself. Let others worry about what to call us.

Source: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/buddhadasa>

www.what-Buddha-taught.net