



The Buddhist and the Secular

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Religion and the process of modernization have encountered each other with dramatic consequences in various parts of the world. Southeast Asia is now undergoing such an encounter, with consequences still to be determined. For Buddhism presents itself in this encounter in ways that are quite different from those of other religions.

Recent trends in international politics suggest the beginnings of a new relationship between the industrial nations of the world and the Third World countries. The traditional worldview of the affluent—in which developing nations were assigned a secondary or supporting role—has undergone a radical change as these states increasingly influence global events. A rational dialogue, based on a sensitive understanding of the local cultures and social patterns of the developing nations, is now not an esoteric luxury for specialists, but is an urgent necessity in order to maintain international stability and continue the prosperity of the wealthier regions of the world. This dialogue demands an appreciation of the traumas that modernization imposes on vital areas of the Third World.

Southeast Asia is a focal point of that world. Deeply entrenched traditions and customs struggle to accommodate two devastating forces: (1) a revolution in lifeways; and (2) an involvement of industrial powers in the affairs of this region. In numerous ways these two forces are connected. Modern society incorporates many of the concepts of social, economic, and political organization that have matured in a European or American milieu in the past two centuries. An increasingly interdependent world economy and a global communications network draw once remote territories

into the larger world of internationalism. This projection of ideas and material influences into Southeast Asia is accompanied by, and flows from, the close involvement of almost every major industrial nation in or around this area in the past thirty years.

The United States has fought three bloody wars and expended vast amounts of life and treasure in the Eastern Pacific, Korea, and Indochina. The protracted passage of colonialism allowed European empires to flourish until the mid-1950's. Japan, barely three decades ago, occupied much of this region, and is now a growing economic presence. Since the early 1950's the Soviet Union has sought a major role here. Its Indian Ocean naval operations, its aid programs and policies, its alliance with India since August, 1971, and its desire to promote an area neutralization pact, all reveal its concern with Southeast Asia. All these powers have sought to develop special relationships with the peoples and countries of the region. To the extent that none of them has been able to evoke the empathy and consolidate the durable friendship they seek they have failed to establish enduring and mutually appreciated links with local nations. An examination of this failure is instructive. Each of these major powers has its own special reasons, but there is also a common theme to all their relationships. This is a shared misperception of approach, based on an assumption that the crises of modernization are secondary to the benefits modernization brings and that this view is an accepted premise of life in Southeast Asian countries. Thus the strength of indigenous faiths, institutions, and lifeways is implicitly discounted, and an adaptation to modernization is expected and seen as both inevitable and to be welcomed by governments and peoples of the region. This flawed perception has created many of the diplomatic and political tensions currently evident in Southeast Asia and has caused relationships between outside forces and nations in this region to deteriorate.

An improvement in the quality of these relationships

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demands many reappraisals. Among the most important of these is a focus on the vital significance of Buddhism in the lifeways of much of Southeast Asia. In Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and the two Vietnams there are approximately a hundred million people whose thought processes and civilizational perceptions have been molded for many centuries by Buddhist influences, the Buddhist faith having both a spiritual quality and a profound impact on the secular conditions of society. This tradition is currently under severe pressure as it interacts with the external forces of modernization. The extent of this crisis of values, by extension a conflict over the direction and purpose of national life, is best understood through an examination of the implications of Buddhism and the counterimplications of modernization as they manifest themselves in important parts of the Southeast Asian world.

The principal form of Buddhism practiced in Southeast Asia is the Theravada (sometimes called Hinayana), or Southern, school. Its doctrinal features and organizational structure are distinctive and, in combination with the geography of this area, tend to produce clearly definable social conditions. Doctrinally, Theravada Buddhism has four central themes, each of which has important secular concomitants. The first of these is the concept of Karma and rebirth. Essentially this implies a law of consequence in human existence, the results of an individual's actions creating the events of life in either his present lifespan or when he is reborn after death. Rebirth is an assured and necessary phenomenon, because the laws of consequence work through many lives until a final state of perfection is reached and the salvation of Nirvana is attained. The presence of the Karmic concepts at the center of Buddhist thought provoke two social situations. On a personal level it produces a lack of urgency in secular accomplishment because of the possibilities for completion or retrieval of undertakings in another life. In a larger sense it produces an acceptance of, or resignation to, the conditions of life and society because they are the product of actions by the individual in an earlier form of existence. Oppression, misery, and discomfort are not to be blamed on others, but on ourselves. The Karmic consequence will take care of those who inflict pain, and the sufferer must try to understand that the causes of misery and joy are primarily self-engineered.

This element of doctrine relates to the next theme of Buddhism: All existence is suffering, the only real release from suffering being Nirvana. Thus human existence is equated with pain and endurance. This is an incentive for pursuit of the spiritual quest of Nirvana and the escape it offers from the trials of life, but it also makes possible the acceptance of suffering and provides little inspiration for rapid reversal of social circumstances. Buddhist activists often argue that the believer has an obligation to promote justice through appropriate and immediate action, but the traditionally fatalistic orientation of the philosophy (although not

fully supported by original doctrinal sources) tends to weigh on the side of reflective endurance rather than messianic crusading.

The third central feature of Theravada Buddhism maintains that the human condition is impermanent and unreal. All things, including life itself, are in transition and are of little import. Detachment, both physical and spiritual, must be cultivated; the material world is full of illusion, and the captivity of illusion is a deterrent to spiritual advancement. This feature of Buddhist thought frequently creates a barrier to social change. The essential worthlessness of possessions and power makes any effort expended in their pursuit less valuable than an equivalent effort expended in more spiritual enterprises. Change can be welcomed and even sought after, but there is little benefit (in the ultimate context) from its active promotion. A tolerance of diversity and the vagaries of human nature and circumstance combine with a deep stress on the sanctity of life to form the fourth emphasis of Buddhism. This reverence for life extends to all forms of sentient existence—unlike Christianity, Buddhism does not differentiate between human and nonhuman life—and so provokes a desire to harmonize mankind's urges with those of nature. This in turn suits the requirements of agrarian societies and has helped to preserve the balance between human needs and the capacity of the environment to sustain them.

These four core themes of Southern Buddhism, together with other adjunct doctrinal beliefs, tend to generate ethics and values that appear incompatible with the ethics and values necessary for industrialization. Development of modern industry seems to demand a sense of social urgency and a moral capacity (or incapacity!) that permits vigorous consumption of natural resources. The present is real, production is important, time has an immediacy. The collective, mutually reinforcing imperatives of Theravada Buddhism work in a contrary direction toward the ideal of the unreality of the mundane and a less than immediate perspective of time. This conceptual portrait of a faith of endurance, containing values in conflict with those necessary to support industrial growth, is given existential form by a particular vision of the route to salvation. This pattern of the lifestyle of the exemplar is also one of the principal separations between Southern or Theravada Buddhism and its more eclectic, and often more socially focused, Northern or Mahayana school.

The ideal of human excellence, the most advanced aspirant for Nirvana, is an individual popularly called an *arahat*—contemplative, profound, and supremely wise in a last incarnation prior to achieving the Nirvanic goal. This archetypal figure of Southern Buddhism is a rather withdrawn personage, whose inclination is otherworldly and who stresses internalized consciousness. The meditative path leads to this preenlightenment stage and is characterized by limited external or socially involved activity. This lonely prototype of individual excellence dominates the austere Theravada branch of Buddhism and is also reflected in the organizational structure of the faith, with its care-

fully prescribed rules for monasticism and for clerical celibacy and performance. In contrast, the prototype of excellence in the Northern school of Buddhist thought is the *Bodhisattva*—an individual of great compassion for others, an activist with deep commitment to social justice, with a willingness to make sacrifices for the redemption of humanity.

While these two images of advancement are not mutually exclusive or entirely confined to their respective schools of doctrine, there is a strong tendency for the ideal to influence the social perceptions of adherents in each area of belief. This, for example, makes it easier to appreciate the relatively positive response of Northern Buddhism to industrialization and even to Marxism or other forms of collectivist endeavor that claim to espouse the greater good of large numbers of people. It also provides part of the rationale for the relatively slow and withdrawn, often individualistic, reaction of Southeast Asian nations to modern development.

In Southeast Asia doctrinal tendencies toward a more contemplative and fatalistic relationship between humans and their environment are reinforced by ecclesiastical structure and geography. The *Sangha*, the Buddhist order of monks, is organized hierarchically on a national scale. Discipline within the orders is still well maintained, although considerably less rigid than in the past, and senior prelates enjoy major secular influence. In Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos they have traditionally had important roles in education and other areas of public life and have been supported by the public exchequer, revenues from monastery properties, or tax-privileged income. To a lesser extent, because of the eclectic nature of religion there, this is also true of South Vietnam. Conservative inclinations, often contrary to the early teachings of the faith, have evolved and have induced an atmosphere congenial to the preservation of the social status quo. Clerical radicalism draws largely on the energies of younger monks, whose frustrations or convictions or ambitions lead them to challenge the established order. There is very limited international association between national communities of monks and consequently no real possibilities of internationally inspired reform.

A powerful, all-pervasive clergy with considerable capacity for social and political mobilization of devout believers represents a built-in conservative bulwark for a social system of which they are an integral element. This appears to be the principal reason why Theravada Buddhism has been an effective agent of political change, but poor at producing social and economic change. In the past fifteen years events in Burma, Thailand, and South Vietnam have validated this observation. Further afield, in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), the same situation has prevailed. Political agitation has been inspired, often successfully, by a *Sangha* who feel their interests or the interests they see as vital are endangered. However, in all these areas social and economic change, if any, has tended to come primarily from measures introduced by political or military forces. Geography has been an important supportive

element in this panorama. The lush, monsoonal climate has afforded a comfortable social and economic existence and cushioned the limitations of rural life.

This general picture of a slow-moving, conservative tradition operating within a physical environment well organized to resist change, but inadequately organized to accept it, prevailed for several centuries, and its imprint still persists throughout much of Southeast Asia. However, in the past sixty or seventy years several new dynamics have entered the social spectrum to produce a profound impact on the character of life, the nature of the human habitat, and ways of thinking. Two of these forces are of special importance—political movements centered originally on anticolonial struggles, and socioeconomic movements bringing with them the concepts and the consequences of modernization.

Almost every Asian nation, especially those in Southeast Asia, was engaged in some type of anticolonial effort in the first half of the twentieth century. Buddhism was deeply involved in these struggles and, as the national faith, provided both a rallying center and a legitimacy for political movements. In this process the politicization of the clergy gathered momentum, and Buddhist clerics often became leaders of protest (as in Burma, where the dynamic monk U Ottama led the anticolonial offensive in the 1920's). When political independence was achieved in most Southeast Asian countries in the 1950's, the Buddhist clergy felt they had earned a leading position, not only in religious affairs, but also in secular policy-making. However, this role has been largely denied them through a combination of secular events and political constraints. Professional politicians grew increasingly wary of religious influences on public policy, and social modernization tended to mitigate the power of ecclesiastical organization. In Burma Premier U Nu, whose own Buddhist credentials were impeccable, eventually fought to resist demands made by the Buddhist order, and clerical influence on politics has lessened substantially since General Ne Win assumed governmental office in 1962. In Thailand a strong military dictatorship paid lip service to Buddhist ideals, but excluded all except their own chosen followers from influence. In South Vietnam a Catholic President, Diem, and successor military politicians allowed little clerical participation in affairs of state. In Cambodia Prince Norodom Sihanouk preempted any clerical involvement in government by assuming a semidivine personal authority. The desire for political power and the power of religion in political action that had been aroused, used, and proclaimed in the anticolonial struggles was not frustrated by modern, secularly oriented national leaders. If this was the consequence of political modernization, it was an unwelcome surprise to most monks, who had expected greater recognition and reward for their activities.

During the past two or three decades the beginnings of social and economic modernization have been felt deeply by many Southeast Asian nations. The early

stage of preliminary urbanization, the growth of popular media and communications, mass education, the introduction of economic modernization, and the widening acceptance of liberal, humanitarian ideas of social welfare and advancement (even under authoritarian governments) are powerful contributory factors. In every Asian country indicators of social progress have moved upward since political freedom was achieved. These phenomena have in turn begun to change traditional approaches to the role of human beings in relation to the order of society. Concepts involving activism, egalitarianism, and material satisfaction are carried, implicitly or explicitly, through many vehicles of thought or expression. New values sap the values of tradition, which long extolled virtues such as passivity, hierarchical deference, and otherworldly pursuits. Yet a dangerous paradox emerges in most nations of this area—the sense of values and social circumstances changes rapidly, but does not deliver satisfactions of personal or economic fulfillment. Education without opportunity creates a mass-educated unemployed who replace the uneducated unemployed; learning in an authoritarian political environment creates political tensions; knowledge of social change without the ability for social mobility creates deep emotional stresses; scientific information erodes religious verities without providing alternate repositories of belief.

Empirical evidence suggests that most Southeast Asian nations have experienced these geneses of modernization—all the initial disadvantages without the softening effects of its benefits. In large measure these have been created by internal circumstances, including maladministration, ineffective planning, and poor organizational competence. Much can also be attributed to circumstances over which governments and peoples of the region have no control—weather conditions, international economic forces, global political contests, the dependency heritage of imperialism. The confluence of these features has resulted in a large-scale awareness of the unsatisfactory nature of much of life in the context of modern expectations and, more important, in an awareness of *why* this is so. The tensions provoked by these frustrations affect equally the heirs of the old tradition, the Buddhist clergy, and the public who have seen the offer of modernization turn empty. Yet, once begun, the process of modernization cannot be fully reversed or rejected; it can only be improved.

This process of modernization, so necessary and so frustrating, has presented Buddhism with special challenges. The origins of some of these have been noted above, but four vital interactions pose serious questions for the continuity of the faith in Southeast Asia. Two of these are closely interwoven and relate especially to the field of government and politics. The first concerns the expansion of the secular—state power and services—into areas traditionally regulated by the influence of organized religion. These are areas not directly concerned with religious life but in which Buddhism had permeated and long exercised

important social, cultural, semilegal, and educational functions. In precolonial and even in colonial times the absence or nonindigenous nature of modern governmental structures created a surrogate governmental role for Buddhism, especially in the rural regions of Southeast Asia, where most people live. Buddhism fought for and obtained change in the political segment of this condition, but the consequence of success has been almost self-defeating—it has substantially reduced the Buddhist capacity to regulate society and has thus reduced its traditional role in society.

The promotion of political change resulting in a diminished participation in its rewards had awkward results. There was simultaneously a growth in the influence of Buddhism and an alienation from the beneficiaries of political change, the centers of executive power in most of the Buddhist-influenced Southeast Asian nations. There was also the realization (among the Buddhist clergy) of the value of political agitation and its effectiveness as a weapon by which their dissatisfactions could be expressed and the public mobilized to right these grievances. The linking of these two conditions led to the next interaction related to government and politics—recourse to a remedial response through partisan politicization of Buddhism. Thus Buddhism, historically an overarching national system, became a means by which its leaders, including key clerical figures, sought to retrieve what they perceived as a lost position in society. To do this it was necessary for them to ally with or create political opposition to governments that did not comply with their vision or excluded them from participating in decision-making. Much of the political history and conflict in Buddhist Southeast Asia has, in the past two decades, been shaped within this framework.

A few examples are illustrative. In Burma in the early 1960's Buddhist monks clashed with the government of U Nu, especially on the issue of state religion. In December, 1974, they were involved in incidents over the burial of former U.N. Secretary-General U Thant. In both instances, and in several others in between, the actual events were symbolic of much deeper and larger concerns with the direction of society and the place of religion within it. In Thailand elements of the clergy have participated in both the continuing decade-old insurrection in the northeast provinces and in the October, 1973, revolution, which deposed one of the most entrenched authoritarian regimes in Asia. While they were not the cutting edge of these movements, the clergy added a powerful aura of legitimacy to the actions of others and used these occasions to manifest their own resentments. In South Vietnam religious political action has escalated or declined as the level of military coercion permits, but it has been a frequent feature in the past fifteen years. Many of these characteristics have been evident in other South and Southeast Asian countries, testifying to the increasingly partisan and political nature of a faith that once provided a consensus of national unity.

The process of resisting secular inroads on traditional Buddhist prerogatives through political actions has produced several paradoxes, among which are two

of special importance to the relationship between Buddhism and modernization. The first of these centers on the serious divisions these political efforts have caused within the clerical orders and the fragmentation created among the once-united *Sangha*. The sources of disruption are several and include ideological, doctrinal, and generational differences, but their consequences have produced and exposed to public view (and often denigration) bitter frictions among the brotherhood of monks. This is not unlike the clash of opinion and interpretation that currently separates segments of the hierarchy from nonhierarchical priests in several Catholic countries. The outcome of this dissension has been a recent decline in the popular esteem of the Buddhist clergy and an increase in the capacity of politicians to manipulate clerics rather than the reverse.

A second matter relates to the method of implementing a Buddhist perception of change. As has been noted earlier, Buddhist agitation, in the 1950's and 1960's and in some instances since then, has been very effective in producing political change, but ineffective in translating this success into social and economic change. In that sense Buddhist political action has stopped halfway, and it has not articulated or actively sought a modern socioeconomic vision. This vacuum has been filled by ideological forces, often conceptually hostile to Buddhism, which seek to supply the blueprint for enacting change. Buddhist forces have been unable to provide. Here is the heart of the challenge to modernization, which Buddhism has yet been unable to meet—to express a social and economic philosophy that is consistent with modern conditions and will complement and extend the emotional and spiritual energies through which Buddhist action has been able to evoke political change. The ability to change governments, if combined with the inability or unwillingness to change society (perhaps because such change will transform the central Buddhist position in that society), will eventually reduce the former capacity, a tendency already observable in Buddhist Southeast Asia.

Buddhism faces two other and more long-term challenges from modernized social conditions. A critical issue concerns clerical recruitment. Traditionally, the order of monks attracted the best intellects in society. Opportunities for expression of both spiritual and professional abilities were limited elsewhere, and the Buddhist clergy provided avenues for these talents. Extraordinary excellence in many fields, including that of leadership, added distinction to the Buddhist *Sangha* and to the faith itself. Contemporary society offers competitive employment for talent, and the future of Buddhism as a widely accepted faith rests largely in its ability to counter such competition and draw high quality recruits into its ecclesiastical structure. Thus far there is little evidence to suggest that Buddhism has been able to do this, an observation supported by the fact that even great centers of Buddhist learning are tending toward curricula oriented to

secular employment. This is an often overlooked problem, and its barely perceptible nature conceals the gravity of its threat to the continued popular esteem of Buddhism. The challenge of science and technology presents another longer-term question. Buddhism is just entering the trauma that afflicted Christianity in the sixteenth and subsequent centuries, and from which it has still to emerge—the difficulties of reconciling scientific discovery and modern social patterns to doctrinal and structural traditions. In many ways Buddhism is better placed to respond to these demands than other religious forms in that its central themes permit a flexibility and acceptance of new situations. However, the incrustations of social history, the absorption of peripheral ritual, and the sanctification of nondoctrinal elements make adaptation a tense process. The trial of strength necessary to make this adaptation will test the viability of Buddhism in the future of Southeast Asia.

Social scientists and philosophers frequently have a tendency to perceive modernization as a linear and generally irreversible process, in which the decline of religion as a social force appears inevitable. There is much truth in these observations, although the persistency of spiritual faith and the immense staying power of religious institutions often surprise rational analysts. Recent evidence, especially in developing countries, suggests that the dislocations of modernization can be accompanied by, and even produce, an expanded religious attachment. In this context it is possible that Buddhism may increase in the number and intensity of its adherents. However, it is a faith facing major contests and pressures of both an internal and external nature, and its response indicates a mixed pattern of reaction. Its political momentum, so vigorous in the past generation, now appears less vital as it becomes more conflictual. Its social strength, traditionally located in its capacity for regulating the secular activities of its followers and in its clerical organization, appears to be vitiated.

The totality of Buddhism as an all-pervasive order then appears diminished, but it remains the essential philosophic construct by which most of the peoples of Southeast Asia order their lives and shape their worldviews. Individuals, no less than organized groups or nations, experience the challenges and the provocations of modernization as it impinges on their faith. Will they seek its social regeneration and, if so, by what means? Or will they passively accept a residual heritage and restrict it to an internalized religious role? The evolution of an answer to this central question will determine much of the stability of Southeast Asian society in the next decades. These will be years in which needs of the industrialized and economically advanced nations of the world will demand increasing contact with Southeast Asians. Sensitivity to their problems, both social and spiritual, is the only corrective available to errors of focus that have clouded these relationships in the past.