

BUDDHADĀSA BHIKKHU & HIS PRACTICE OF DHAMMIC SOCIALISM

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Background

The term 'Dhammic Socialism' was coined by Ajahn Buddhadasa in the late 1960's in response to the growing political polarization in Southeast Asia. Through the sixties, Thailand had been pulled into the geo-political mess of which the Vietnam War was the major conflagration. As the sixties developed, growing violence between the Communist insurgency and the right wing military backed by the U.S. resulted in the murders of tens of thousands. During this time Buddhist monks were routinely threatened into refraining from political comment, a silencing compounded by decades of cultural belief persuading most monks that politics and other 'worldly affairs' were none of their concern.

This was the climate in which Ajahn Buddhadasa began talking about Dhammic Socialism. Since the forties, when he came to national prominence, he was one monk who had not feared to discuss politics. Previously, he did so primarily in terms of democracy, which was not the Thai system of government. During the sixties he began to assert, openly and forthrightly, that Buddhism is basically socialist in nature. He was the first major figure in Thailand to do so (some Burmese leaders had used the term "Buddhist Socialism") and the first to approach the topic with the particular meaning he gave it – something he continued to do for the rest of his life.

His understanding of 'socialism' was not a Marxist understanding. The Thai translation literally means 'in favor of society' or 'to be on the side of society.' In this sense, socialism means taking the side of society and can be contrasted with individualism. While individual responsibility is important in Buddhist ethics, 'the individual' cannot ultimately be found and Buddhism was never meant to be individualist, though it may often look that way in the modern era. Rather, Dhamma teachings naturally emphasize the collective good – not at the expense of the individual, he didn't go that far – but social well being cannot be sacrificed to personal desires.

This notion of socialism arises from the core perspective that Dhamma is nature and nature is Dhamma – inseparably. Since everything is Dhamma; there is nothing that is not Dhamma. Dhamma also means 'natural law,' which is the law of conditionality and inter-relatedness. If you look at our world, and our place in the world, from these eyes, it's not hard to see a socialist nature, as opposed to an individualistic one. In an interconnected world, individual responsibility is emphasized over individual rights and is as responsible to the collective as to oneself.

The most prominent forms of socialism at that time, and probably still today, were materialist visions of socialism. Buddhism, however, is not a form of materialism, nor is it the kind of idealism that sees the world as just an unimportant derivative illusion. Reality is the interdependence of body and mind, group and individual, and so on. Therefore, Ajahn Buddhadasa insisted that a Buddhist socialism could never be a materialist socialism.

In addition, the primary historical forms of socialism have been violent, and clearly a Buddhist socialism would be non-violent. Ajahn Buddhadasa critiqued communism and Marxism, with their terminology of class war, as primarily motivated by revenge. He contrasted 'blood-thirsty capitalism' with 'vengeful Marxism,' and endeavored to create an alternative, middle-way understanding. Thus, he described a socialism that is primarily a moral system based in spirituality. This sort of socialism can only work if we curb egoism; it won't work with the usual incentives – such as greed and fear – employed by non-Dhammic systems.

In practice

Ajahn Buddhadasa founded Suan Mokkh in 1932. Under his influence it grew into a monastery with a character and feel quite different than most, or perhaps all, Thai monasteries. This is where we can most clearly see how he himself practiced the principles of Dhammic Socialism. Because nature and natural law are inherent in his understanding of Dhamma and Dhammic Socialism, Suan Mokkh places an emphasis on intimacy with nature. He believed that to be able to understand the ‘socialist nature of nature’ one must live close to nature. Without such intimacy, we merely have abstract notions about Dhamma, and abstract notions of our political theories as well. Thus, he lived immersed in natural surroundings and developed a place for others to do the same.

Similarly, he did his best to guide Suan Mokkh as a cooperative enterprise. A capitalist version of cooperatives was promoted in Thailand by German experts while Marxists introduced another. Ajahn Buddhadasa had his own perspective on cooperatives. He pointed out that nature is a cooperative: In the forest, plants, animals, bugs, and germs are all doing their parts cooperatively to sustain the forest. Those who live closely and observantly with nature understand this. He believed that human beings too can learn to live in a cooperative way with the forests, fields, and other natural environments.

In the administration of Suan Mokkh Ajahn Buddhadasa’s style was not one of ‘administering people.’ In certain ways he ran Suan Mokkh as if he was in charge, making the important decisions that he considered his responsibility. While he was a strong leader in that respect, he didn’t run people. He didn’t tell them what to do. He advised each person to “find your role.” If someone had difficulty doing so and wanted his help, he would discuss circumstances with that person, but wasn’t fond of assigning jobs. People chose the work they wanted to do and he advised them on how to go about it as Dhamma practice. For such a place to work harmoniously, everyone must be motivated to do ones part.

Most activities at Suan Mokkh were optional. There weren’t many rules and Ajahn Buddhadasa didn’t monitor how much people meditated, what they read, or if they came to chanting. On the other hand, he could be tough, which was in line with his view of nature. Nature can be tough – foolishness and clinging results in suffering. Though he could at times be hard on people, he also gave them a lot of freedom to be responsible, make their own choices, make their own mistakes, and learn from life itself.

Suan Mokkh always had an ecological vision. Ajahn Buddhadasa was among the first in Thailand to talk about the need to conserve forests, to point out that the forests were dwindling quickly and action would need to be taken to preserve them. His ecological vision was rooted both in Buddhism and his childhood experience, where forests were part of everybody’s life, as were the rice fields and the sea.

His ecological concerns translated naturally into a preference for simplicity. At Suan Mokkh, most of the talks, ceremonies, and other activities were outdoors. Until the end of his life, when other people began taking over, construction was kept to a minimum and the food was simple. Dhammic Socialism can only be effective if people are willing to live simply. As soon as affluence creeps in, certain people will have more materially, will acquire more power, and thus will have more opportunities to exploit others.

During the political competition between capitalism and communism, Suan Mokkh served as a middle ground for both left and right. Even in Thailand's military dominated governments there were high ranking people, primarily within the liberal spectrum, who were students of Ajahn Buddhadasa. The most prominent was Chaophaya Ladplee, the Minister of Justice for many years, who arranged for Tan Ajahn to give Dhamma training to a generation of judges. Ajahn Buddhadasa didn't turn anybody away, so soldiers, bureaucrats, and businessmen, were all welcome at Suan Mokkh so long as they were interested in Dhamma. At the same time,

Marxist insurgents, radical students, activists, and peasants were equally welcome. The more moderate, more open-minded, from both sides sought him out. He was one of the few religious figures the left felt they could talk with, and he had honest discussions with both sides.

During the seventies several bloody massacres took place spurred by increasing reactionary anti-communist feeling and rhetoric. The violence had a major impact on the Thai psyche, finally shredding the illusion of a happy Thai society, as military oppression became increasingly brutal. Soldiers raped female students, including high school students, with bayonets and rifles. Dead students were hung from trees in the middle of campus, their corpses whipped and burned. The brutality created a huge wound in that generation, which is still festering thirty years later.

In the midst of this military brutality against the perceived threat of communism, Ajahn Buddhadasa chose to talk about Dhammic Socialism, pointing out that socialism is not such a bad thing, that Buddhism is basically socialist more than it is capitalist. In his view, capitalism is about making money – a system of greed more interested in personal profit than the common good. Although he at times spoke positively about democracy, he noted that it often plays out as a system of individual selfishness. As noted before, he was critical of the violent, revenge oriented nature of Marxism as well. Due to his integrity as a monk and teacher such perspectives could not be ignored.

Allying Buddhism with a particular, non-Marxist socialist understanding helped to create social cover and a certain amount of protection for people who were advocating nonviolent progressive change. It's impossible to quantify how many lives may have been saved by this creation of neutral ground, but there were people in high places, including in the military, that were influenced by him to one degree or another. I think this eventually had a role in the shift by the military government of the early eighties to a "hearts and mind" approach.

The space Ajahn Buddhadasa helped create allowed for the development of numerous NGOs during this era. Some were originally started by underground Marxists, others were developed by non-Marxists seeking a middle ground among the violent alternatives. Among these, Sulak Sivaraksa and his students were prominent. Sulak was strongly influenced by Ajahn Buddhadasa and continues to work prominently in the areas of Thai social justice and engaged Buddhism.

Ajahn Buddhadasa presented Buddhism in ways that inspired those working in the areas of alternative education, the environment, and village development, to name a few. Many of the organizers and workers were directly inspired or influenced by him – the only major Buddhist teacher of the time who thought seriously and spoke out about social issues and politics. While this is no longer a dangerous endeavor in Thailand, he was a pioneer at a time when people were killed for opposing the government. Because of his prestige, he was in little danger of being killed. Still, the supreme patriarch in the fifties disliked him intensely and tried to have him arrested, creating trumped up charges against him and accusing him of communism. The charges were proven to be untenable, but the threat was clear.

Role of education

When I asked him how Dhammic Socialism would come about, he recognized that it, like genuine world peace, might take a long time. Nonetheless, the thousand mile journey always begins and continues with just this step. He thought that education – including the formal system of the government, Buddhist education, and creative alternatives – had a crucial role in fostering Dhammic Socialism. As a prominent teacher with many teachers and educators among his followers, he set out to do everything in his power to foster right understanding of Buddha-Dhamma. This was his life's work. Central to his teaching was the truth that Dhamma and society, spirituality and politics, cannot be separated into disparate realms, and that

unselfish living was the sole way to harmonious living. He suggested the Buddha's path, in cooperation with other religions, as the best way to bring this about.