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BUDDHADASA AND DOCTRINAL MODERNISATION IN CONTEMPORARY THAI BUDDHISM:

A Social and Philosophical Analysis.

>

By

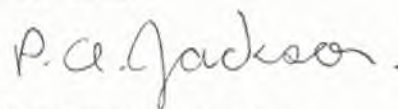
Peter Anthony Jackson.

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the Australian National University.

January 1986

DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated
this thesis is my own work.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "P. A. Jackson." The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Peter Anthony Jackson.

January 1986

ERRATA.

<u>Page & Line.</u>	<u>Error.</u>	<u>Correction.</u>
Page 63, line 27	osition	opposition
page 79, line 18	negelcted	neglected
page 129, line 20	defintion	definition
page 141, line 2	respecitvely	respectively
page 151, line 16	unwholseome	unwholesome
page 155, line 24	defintion	definition
page 186, line 7	attinment	attainment
page 242, line 5	harmonioulsy	harmoniously
page 263, line 20	acknowledge	acknowledge

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In Thailand: Acharn Banyat Ruangsi, Acharn Bamrung Torut, Acharn Sangiam Torut, Associate Professor Sunthorn Na-Rangsi, Phra Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Phra Rājavaramuni.

ABSTRACT.

Phra Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu is without doubt the most controversial and the most innovative interpreter of Buddhist doctrine and teachings in contemporary Thailand. Buddhadāsa has devoted his life to a systematic and thorough re-interpretation of the entire body of Theravāda Buddhist teachings, with the explicit goal of revealing the relevance of the Buddha's message to men and women living in the modern world. However, a comprehensive analysis and evaluation of his total re-interpretative system requires more than simply a philosophical study of Buddhist doctrines and theoretical teachings. Because of the social and political role of institutional Buddhism in Thailand, and because of the importance of his work to educated and progressive Thai laypeople, the sources, motivations and aims of Buddhadāsa's ideas can only be fully detailed when their extra-religious social and political influences are also considered.

That is, Buddhadāsa's systematic re-interpretation of Buddhist teachings should firstly be understood in terms of its relation to the history of doctrinal interpretation and Buddhist studies in Thailand. But this theoretical analysis should at the same time be complemented by an appreciation of the social context of Buddhadāsa's reforms, and the critical as well as supportive responses to his work from the various sections of Thai society. Only when Buddhadāsa's doctrinal reformation of Theravāda Buddhism is appreciated as being both a theoretical and a sociological phenomenon can its significance in contemporary Thailand be fully appreciated.

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PREFACE.

1 Presentation of Thai and Pali Materials.

A considerable amount of the material studied and detailed in the following chapters has been taken from Thai language sources, and the majority of the terms and concepts relating to Theravāda Buddhism are derived from the Pali language. In addition there are occasional references to the Sanskrit terminology of the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism, and some English language authors quoted have used the Sanskrit forms of Pali terms when discussing Theravāda teachings. The systems used for transliterating Thai, Pali and Sanskrit terms, respectively, into Roman script are given in the following tables. I have followed the usual convention of transliterating Thai terms phonetically with no attempt to mimic the actual Thai script spelling. In contrast each character of Pali and Sanskrit terms, as written in *devanagari* script, is given a Roman script equivalent.

1.1 Systems of Transliteration.

A. Pali.

The Pali Text Society system for rendering Pali terms into Roman script is followed. The following characters are used:

i.Vowels:	<i>a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, e, o.</i>
ii.Gutturals:	<i>k, kh, g, gh, ṅ.</i>
iii.Palatals:	<i>c, ch, j, jh, ñ.</i>
iv.Cerebrals:	<i>t, th, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ.</i>
v.Dentals:	<i>t, th, d, dh, n.</i>
vi.Labials:	<i>p, ph, b, bh, m.</i>
vii.Semi-vowels:	<i>y, r, ḷ, l, v.</i>
viii.Sibilant:	<i>s.</i>
ix.Aspirate:	<i>h.</i>

x. *Niggahīta* (Nasal): *m̐*.

B. Sanskrit.

The characters used to transliterate Sanskrit terms are the same as for Pali, with the addition of palatal and cerebral sibilants: *s'*, *ṣ*; the vowels and diphthongs: *ṛ*, *ai*, *au*, and *visarga*: *ḥ*.

C. Thai

The following system is used for phonetically rendering Thai into Roman script.

- i. Tone marks are not indicated.
- ii. When the repeat symbol ๑ is used the syllable is written twice.
- iii. The symbol ๑๑ is written la.
- iv. Thai consonants are sometimes purely consonantal and sometimes followed by an inherent vowel, which is written o, a or or depending on the pronunciation, e.g. ๑๑ - khon, ๑๑๑ - khanom, ๑ - kor.
- v. Silent consonants with their accompanying vowels, if any, are not written, e.g. ๑๑๑ - rit.
- vi. When the pronunciation requires one consonant to serve a double function, at the end of one syllable and at the beginning of the next, it is written twice according to its pronunciation, e.g. ๑๑๑ - thatsana.
- vii. In four common words ๑ occurs preceding another consonant to mark a tone, and is then not written, i.e. ๑๑๑ - yák, ๑๑๑๑ - yáng, ๑๑๑ - yá.
- viii. When ๑ precedes another consonant to mark a tone it is not written, e.g. ๑๑๑๑ - máy.

Using these principles the Thai alphabet is represented by the following characters:

i. Consonants.

		<u>Initial and Medial.</u>	<u>Final.</u>
๑	-	k	k
๑, ๑, ๑	-	kh	k
๑	-	ng	ng
๑	-	c	t

จ, ช, ฉ	-	ch	t
ซ	-	s	t
ญ	-	y	n
ก, ฎ, ท	-	d	t
ก, ฏ	-	t	t
ถ, ฐ, ฑ, ฒ, ฑ, ฒ	-	th	t
ทร	-	s	t
ณ, น	-	n	n
บ	-	b	p
ป	-	p	p
ผ, พ, ภ	-	ph	p
ฝ, ฟ	-	f	p
ม	-	m	m
ย	-	y	-
ร	-	r	n
ล, ฬ	-	l	n
ว	-	w	-
ศ, ษ, ส	-	s	t
ห, ฮ	-	h	-

ii. Vowels and Diphthongs.

ฤ	- ry, ri, roe.	ฤๅ	- rý.
อว	- úa.	อวย	- úay.
ออ	- ôr.	ออย	- ôy.
อะ	- a.	อั	- a.
อัย	- ay.	อัว	- úa.
อัวะ	- ua.	อ่า	- â.
อาย	- ây.	อ้าว	- âw.

อ่า	- am.	อิ	- i.
อิ	- iw.	อึ	- í.
อึ	- y.	อึ	- ý.
อุ	- u.	อุย	- uy.
อู	- û.	เอ	- è.
เอ	- e.	เอย	- ôèy.
เอว	- éw.	เอ็ว	- ew.
เออ	- ôé.	เออะ	- oe.
เอะ	- e.	เอา	- au.
เอาะ	- or.	เอ็	- ôè.
เอ็ย	- ía.	เอ็ยะ	- ía.
เอ็ยว	- íaw.	เอ็อ	- ýa.
เอ็อะ	- ya.	เอ็อย	- ýay.
แอ	- âé.	แอว	- âéw.
แอะ	- ae.	โอ	- ó.
โอะ	- o.	โอ	- ai.
โอ	- ai.	โอຍ	- ai.

Except where there is an established convention, such as where Thai authors have already decided on the spelling of their names in English, Thai terms are presented as such and not in the Pali and Sanskritised forms sometimes used. Where in quotations from English language sources other authors have followed different transliteration systems their slight variations are retained. What differences do result are few and minor and easily traceable. In keeping with their traditional canonical and literary languages Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist technical terms are written in this text in their Pali and Sanskrit forms respectively. For example,

the Pali term *nibbāna* here always refers to the Theravāda notion of salvation while the related Sanskrit term *nirvāṇa* is always used to refer to ultimate salvation as conceived within Mahāyāna Buddhism. These linguistic differences are retained because such cognate terms often have different nuances in the two traditions, the most notable example in this work being the differences between the notion of "voidness" in Theravāda Buddhism (Pali: *suññatā*) and in Mahāyāna Buddhism (Sanskrit: *s'ūnyatā*) discussed in Chapter Seven. I do not follow the custom of many authors who give Theravāda technical terms in artificial Sanskrit forms, but where in quotations and references other authors have used Sanskrit forms for Theravāda terms those forms are kept for accuracy's sake¹.

Below is a short list of some of the most common Pali terms used in this work and their cognate Sanskrit forms sometimes used as alternatives.

<u>PALI.</u>	<u>SANSKRIT.</u>
<i>attā</i>	<i>ātman</i>
<i>cakkavattin</i>	<i>cakravartin</i>
<i>dhamma</i>	<i>dharma</i>
<i>jhāna</i>	<i>dhyāna</i>
<i>kamma</i>	<i>karma</i>
<i>nibbāna</i>	<i>nirvāṇa</i>
<i>sutta</i>	<i>sūtra</i>
<i>tipiṭaka</i>	<i>tripiṭaka</i>

To avoid confusion Thai words transliterated into Roman script are underlined while Pali and Sanskrit words are italicised. Proper names of persons, organisations, religious sects or places given in either Pali or Thai are capitalised but not underlined or italicised.

In keeping with the analytical focus on Thai Buddhism in this work references to and quotations from the *Tipiṭaka*, the canonical Theravāda scriptures, are wherever possible taken from the Thai version of the canon. Throughout this work all references to the *Tipiṭaka* are to the forty five volume *Phra Traipitok Phāsā Thai Chabap Lūang* (พระไตรปิฎกภาษาไทยฉบับหลวง *The Official Thai Language Edition of the Tipiṭaka*) published by the Thai Department of Religious Affairs or Krom Kānsāsānā (กรมการศาสนา) in B.E. 2525

¹Pali is a language closely related to Sanskrit, probably being a vernacular in Northern India soon after the time of the historical Buddha. While Pali is the classical language of the Theravāda scriptures some authors tend to give Theravāda terms in their equivalent Sanskrit forms. This custom is artificial and has no theoretical justification other than indicating an assumed greater stature of Sanskrit, the classical language of Hinduism and of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India.

(A.D. 1982)². In referring to this Thai edition of the *Tipitaka* I follow the Thai system of citing sections of the scriptures or *suttas* by: volume/verse/page³. In a very few places where it was deemed appropriate the Pali Text Society's English translations of the *Tipitaka* have been referred to instead of the Thai version.

2 Footnoting and Bibliographical System.

In the text I follow the custom of using the first names of Thai nationals as the formal form of address, although in most cases both given and family names are used for clarity's sake. For non-Thais I follow the Western custom of using surnames as the formal form of address. For example the Thai author Sulak Sivaraksa is referred to as Sulak while the English author Trevor Ling is referred to as Ling.

Because of the diversity and varied nature of the Thai and English language sources referred to in this work and because of the different bibliographical conventions used for describing works in the two languages I have had to use special footnoting and bibliographical systems capable of fully documenting my source materials. Two separate bibliographies are listed at the end of this book, the first for English language materials referred to in the text and the second for Thai materials. References in the body of the text to Thai language materials as well as quotations which I have translated from Thai sources are marked with a bracketed capital T, i.e. (T), indicating that the relevant bibliographical details are found in the Thai language bibliography. All Thai language bibliographical details, both in the bibliography and in footnotes, are given in Thai script as well as being transliterated into Roman script. The translated titles of Thai works are also given in brackets. Following the Thai custom, materials in the Thai language bibliography are arranged in Thai alphabetical order according to the author's first name, not according to the author's surname.

Some Thai authors cited below have written books both in English and in Thai. Such Thai language works are listed alphabetically in Thai according to the author's first name, while the same author's English language works are alphabetically listed in the English language bibliography according to his or her surname. To help avoid confusion the name under which bibliographical information is listed is always printed in bold type in footnotes.

²Thailand uses the Buddhist calendar, dating from the Buddha's death in 543 B.C. The year A.D. 1986 is in the Buddhist Era (B.E.) the year 2529.

³lem/khōr/nā เลม/ขอ/หนา

e.g.

Sulak **Sivaraksa** - English language bibliography.

Sulak Siwarak - Thai language bibliography.

Many Thai authors and personalities prefer to spell their names in English according to the Thai spelling rather than according to the actual pronunciation. Because Thai names often include silent letters when written in Thai script such English versions often vary significantly from the actual pronunciation. For example, the monk referred to in this work as Buddhādāsa, which is that monk's own preferred spelling of his name in English, is in Thai referred to as Phutthathāt, and the monk Rājavaramunī is referred to in Thai as Rāchworamunī. Where a person has already decided on the English spelling of his or her name I respect that non-phonetic convention in the body of the text and in footnoting and bibliographical details for his or her English language works. However, to retain such non-phonetic conventions when detailing Thai language materials would introduce severe contradictions and breach the Thai alphabetical ordering of the Thai language bibliography. Consequently, in the bibliographical details given for the Thai language works of such authors in the Thai language bibliogrphahy and in footnotes all names are spelt according to the phonetic transliteration system detailed above. Some of the most common differences in the spelling of Thai names found in this text are listed below:

ENGLISH CONVENTION.

PHONETIC THAI SPELLING.

Buddhadāsa

Phutthathāt

Bodhiraks'a

Phōthirak

Khukrit Pramot

Khykrit Prāmōt

Rājavaramunī

Rāchworamunī

Sulak Sivaraksa

Sulak Siwarak

INTRODUCTION.

1 The Goals of This Study.

Since the early 1970s the thought of the aging Buddhist monk Buddhadāsa¹ has become a primary focus of theoretical and doctrinal discussions of Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand. Buddhadāsa began a systematic re-appraisal and re-interpretation of Theravāda Buddhist doctrine in 1932 and some of his sermons and articles were published in local Buddhist journals in the 1930s and 1940s. However, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, in particular during the brief, turbulent period of civilian government from 1973 until 1976, that Buddhadāsa's ideas found a broader national audience in Thailand. This is because it has only been during the last couple of decades in response to the rapid socio-economic development of the country that considerable numbers of fellow Thais have come to share the modernist and reformist views on Buddhism that Buddhadāsa has been propounding for over fifty years. By his supporters and followers Buddhadāsa has been hailed as a progressive reformer and even a genius. His critics, however, have labelled him a dangerous heretic whose work subverts both the teachings of the Buddha and the national institution of Buddhism in Thailand.

But whatever the status of such conflicting claims and accusations it is nevertheless still the case that no detailed study of the interpretation of Buddhist doctrine in Thailand today can omit a consideration of Buddhadāsa's views without being left deficient and inadequate. This is true whether one's interest lies in the area of Buddhist doctrine and contemporary accounts of the notions of salvation and spiritual practice, or whether one's concern is with more pragmatic issues such as debates on the proper role of Buddhist monks and laypeople in modern Thai society, for Buddhadāsa's re-interpretative work covers all areas of Buddhist doctrine and practice. Indeed Buddhadāsa's life work can be seen as an attempt to develop an ordered and thorough modernist re-interpretation of the entire body of Theravāda

¹ Buddhadāsa is the Pali spelling of the name. In Thai Buddhadāsa is called Phutthathāt (พุทฺธทาสี) or in full Phra Phutthathāt Phikkhu. Both of the Thai terms phra (พระ) and phikkhu (ภิกขุ Pali: *bhikkhu*) denote a Buddhist monk and are variously used as honorifics in combination with a monk's actual name.

doctrine, including both the soteriological and the social aspects of Buddhist teachings. Not since the *Visuddhimagga* and other related commentaries written by Buddhaghosa in Ceylon in the fifth century of the Christian era has there been such a comprehensive attempt to systematically re-interpret the entirety of Theravāda doctrine in the light of contemporary views and expectations.

I believe that both the theoretical and social implications of Buddhādāsa's work are of equal importance, and that it is necessary to consider both aspects in any attempt at analysing or interpreting the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of his half century of scholarly activity. Consequently I take the starting point of this analysis to be the total phenomenon of Buddhādāsa and his re-interpretative work, a phenomenon which at one and the same time has theoretical and doctrinal as well as social and political significance in contemporary Thailand. It is my goal in the following chapters to develop a subtle and complex analysis adequate to the task of both describing and evaluating this complex phenomenon. More specifically the goal of this work is, firstly, to delineate and systematically describe the details of Buddhādāsa's doctrinal re-interpretations and, secondly, to evaluate the import and significance of his views and theories for Theravāda Buddhist thought.

It is necessary to devote a significant part of this work to the straightforward presentation of Buddhādāsa's views, because no systematic overview or account of the details of his various theories and doctrinal re-interpretations has yet been published in either Thai or any European language. In order to evaluate Buddhādāsa's theoretical and socio-political importance it has first been necessary to construct from his voluminous writings - including pamphlets, theoretical tracts as well as reports of his many talks and sermons - an overview of his arguments and the theoretical emphases and foci of his work. Buddhādāsa himself has not presented a summary or guide to the total system of his views which has rather developed organically over the decades. The various theoretical foci respectively chosen as the bases of the following chapters are my own interpretation of what Buddhādāsa has said and argued, and while I consider them to be the core of his views other readers and critics could no doubt have chosen other concepts or theoretical points about which to articulate an alternative account of his system of doctrinal re-interpretation.

The theoretical foci of Buddhādāsa's work which I have chosen as the bases of my account and critical analysis of his views are:

- (1) Buddhādāsa's theory of scriptural interpretation, called phāsākhon - phāsātham (Chapter Three),

- (2) his criticisms of traditionally accepted canonical scriptures and commentaries, especially the *Abhidhammapitaka* and the *Visuddhimagga* (Chapter Four),
- (3) his re-interpreted theory of salvation based on the notion of cit-wāng, "voided mind" or "freed mind" (Chapter Five),
- (4) the system of practices presented as leading to the attainment of salvation or *nibbāna* by the development of cit-wāng (Chapter Six),
- (5) the influence of Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhist notions on his re-interpretations of Theravāda doctrine (Chapter Seven),
- (6) the social doctrine that emerges from Buddhādāsa's system of thought (Chapter Eight) and,
- (7) Buddhādāsa's specific comments on and criticisms of political activity and political involvement (Chapter Nine).

In re-interpreting the totality of Theravāda doctrine Buddhādāsa is fundamentally concerned to shift the focus of Thai Buddhism from the transcendent to this world and to incorporate the hopes and aspirations of Thai laymen and laywomen into Buddhism by conferring religious value on action in the social world. But to do this Buddhādāsa must move the entire theoretical structure of Buddhism, or to use another structural metaphor, he must rebuild Buddhist doctrine upon the new theoretical foundations that he lays. In this work I wish to consider the entirety of this theoretical reconstruction of Buddhism, to follow and evaluate the overall contours of the new vision of Buddhism revealed in Buddhādāsa's work, and also to reveal the major structural weaknesses of this new edifice.

At numerous points in the following chapters the analytical movement of tracing the general development of Buddhādāsa's total system work could easily have stopped in order to concentrate on any one of the many specific issues raised by his doctrinal re-interpretations. By taking up each of these various issues in detail each of the chapters that follow could easily have been expanded to a size equivalent to that of this complete study. However, this temptation to stop the general analytical movement of the study in order to concentrate on details has had to be systematically resisted in many places, and in this study I have only detailed Buddhādāsa's work to an extent that I regard as sufficient to demonstrate the import of the specific points and issues treated and to show their place in his work. Because of the broad scope of this study the reader may sometimes feel frustrated that a certain idea or suggestion is not developed further. However, a high degree of descriptive and analytical economy has had to be maintained throughout in order to keep the focus of this study on the whole "forest" of Buddhādāsa's work rather than diverting to observe individual conceptual "trees" in too great detail.

2 Methodological Approaches I: A Social and Philosophical Analysis.

While it is important to isolate the conceptual and theoretical pivots upon which Buddhadāsa constructs his system (these pivots forming the bases for the following chapters as briefly delineated above) a simple study of the explicit details of Buddhadāsa's thought would not reveal its full significance. It is equally important that from any account of the explicit details of Buddhadāsa's system the underlying and often implicit themes which provide the structuring and consistency-giving framework to his broad and diverse body of thought are also clearly revealed. The many details of Buddhadāsa's re-interpretations, the relations between concepts and the significance of particular notions and ideas are not all self-evident. I suggest that the significance of his theories and ideas is often only able to be clearly comprehended when their relation to general underlying themes whose provenance lies outside of Buddhism - in the contemporary changes in society, economy, education and cultural expectations which are transforming Thailand - is made manifest.

Underlying all of Buddhadāsa's detailed theoretical re-interpretations are two broad and often implicit themes. The first is Buddhadāsa's desire for Buddhist teachings to conform to what he regards as modern rational and scientific standards of argumentation and analysis. This desire is demonstrated most forcefully in his systematic demythologisation of Buddhist doctrine and in his reduction of all supernatural conditions and non-empirical entities described in the Buddhist scriptures to psychological states. Buddhadāsa re-interprets the entire traditional cosmology and soteriology of Theravāda Buddhism, which involves successive rebirths over eons in an elaborately structured cosmos of heavens and hells, as occurring within the mental scope of human beings alive on earth here and now. The second and related theme informing Buddhadāsa's work is his wish for Buddhism to maintain its social relevance in contemporary Thailand in the face of rapid socio-economic development and cultural change. Buddhadāsa believes Buddhism should demonstrate its ongoing relevance to human life and aspirations by functioning as a moral and ideological basis for action in the social world which simultaneously integrates and promotes both progressive social development and the individual attainment of spiritual salvation.

Each of these themes, the desire for discursive modernism or rationalism and for contemporary social relevance, represents a radical departure from traditional Theravāda teachings and in order to develop and justify his radical views and analyses within the conservative Thai Buddhist context Buddhadāsa has been forced to take an equally radical approach to the interpretation of doctrine. In order to

demonstrate the full significance of Buddhādāsa's thought the details of his doctrinal re-interpretations, in addition to being analysed in terms of their explicit conceptual relations, are in each chapter also related to these two general themes which fundamentally inform and determine the character of his work.

The sources of Buddhādāsa's theoretical concern with discursive modernism and with the social relevance of religion lie outside of Buddhist doctrine as such in the realm of contemporary social relations and social change. As will be argued in Chapter Two Buddhādāsa's work owes much to the impact of Western notions of science and rationality. His ideas can also be seen as a response to the cultural and religious challenges presented by socio-economic development and modernisation in Thailand. Consequently, it is impossible to limit this study to a purely theoretical or philosophical analysis. While necessarily reliant upon the norms, assumptions and precedents of the tradition of doctrinal interpretation in Thailand, Buddhādāsa's views go far beyond the historically defined bounds of that theoretical and doctrinal tradition. As already suggested the extra-religious influences on Buddhādāsa's thought, as expressed in the general underlying themes outlined above, are an essential element of his re-interpretation of Buddhism. In presenting and evaluating his work it is therefore as important to appreciate the character of the extra-religious or social influences on Buddhādāsa as it is to understand the details of the historical tradition of Buddhist doctrinal interpretation which is the immediate source of the specific concepts and notions that he details. That is, the methodology of any study of Buddhādāsa's work must match the actual character of that work by integrating both social and philosophical analytical approaches.

A combined social and philosophical study of Buddhādāsa's work, or for that matter the work of any Thai Buddhist thinker, is also necessary because of the concrete character of Thai Buddhism. Buddhist doctrine is part of the living tradition of Thai Buddhism, which in turn is arguably the most important cultural institution in Thai society. The teachings of Buddhism and the formal institution of the monkhood or *saṅgha* remain the basis not only of everyday social relations in Thailand but also of the Thai political structure and the related religio-political institution of the Thai monarchy. In developing a comprehensive analysis of any aspect of Buddhism in Thailand, not only of Buddhādāsa's specific re-interpretations, it is necessary to recognise explicitly that Thai Buddhism exists in a dynamic relation with Thai society, and has political, cultural and ideological as well as purely religious importance.

A purely theoretical study of Buddhādāsa's work which focussed solely on his ideas would artificially abstract those ideas from the social context which has to a

large extent informed them and in which they have become an object of public debate, finding both adherents and critics. On the other hand, a study which focussed solely on the social sources and impact of Buddhadāsa's work would not give sufficient weight to the fact that it is his ideas, presented as a continuation of a long-standing religious tradition, and not his actions in either the political or social spheres which are the object of public debate in Thailand. A combined theoretical and a social analysis of Buddhadāsa's work is therefore required in order to delineate fully its features and significance. This study, then, is an attempt to develop a socially informed evaluation of the totality of Buddhadāsa's re-interpretations of Buddhist doctrine; it is an analysis of doctrine which considers:

- (1) the social context of Buddhadāsa's theoretical work,
- (2) the relation of Buddhadāsa's doctrinal re-interpretations to the history of the theoretical tradition of Theravāda Buddhism, and
- (3) the views and reactions of Buddhadāsa's audience and readership, in other words, the social impact of, and response to, his ideas.

A second, related goal of this study, in addition to that of providing a combined social-theoretical account of both the explicit details and general themes of Buddhadāsa's views, is to evaluate those views and the arguments Buddhadāsa uses to support them. Because of the combined social-philosophical analytical approach taken here I consider any evaluation of his work which focusses solely on the strict logical consistency of his arguments or on the validity of his views in terms of canonical or traditional presentations of Theravāda doctrine to be inadequate. On the other hand I also regard as inadequate any evaluation from a social or pragmatic perspective which judges Buddhadāsa solely in terms of say the popularity of his ideas or their "efficacy" in initiating or leading to concrete social or political results. At the same time I regard both these theoretical and practical criteria as important and needing to be incorporated into any serious evaluation of Buddhadāsa's work. As a theoretical system which has social importance, an evaluation of Buddhadāsa's total system of doctrinal re-interpretation must combine specific judgements on the system's theoretical validity and logical consistency together with judgements of its social impact. To damn Buddhadāsa's total system because of certain theoretical inconsistencies despite its having a major social impact, or, conversely, to dismiss it because it lacks practical efficacy even though it may be a thorough and consistent interpretation of Theravāda doctrine, are, in my opinion, both unacceptable positions. Because Buddhadāsa's re-interpretations of Theravāda doctrine constitute a complex social and theoretical phenomenon any

evaluation of that work as a whole must mirror that complexity and avoid simplistic or monovalent judgements.

By recognising the actual complexity of Thai Buddhism and of Buddhādāsa's work as simultaneously being sociological and theoretical phenomena it is my wish in this study to approach the study of doctrinal modernisation in Thailand in a more realistic way. I do not intend to artificially divide up my object of study according to the theoretical and methodological lines of the institutionalised academic disciplines of Western universities. Rather I wish to treat Buddhādāsa's re-interpretative work as the given, and my theoretical approach to that body of work as the variable to be modified in accordance with the actual complex character of that object. I want to avoid a common and unfortunate consequence of uncritically accepting the divisions between academic disciplines, namely the taking of a methodological approach peculiar to a certain discipline as the determinant of one's study, a manner of research which often oversimplifies and fails to appreciate the theoretical and social complexity of cultural phenomena.

The theoretical study of Buddhism by Westerners has historically suffered from attempts to make it fit within the disciplinary boundaries of European philosophy. The "Buddhism" sections of university libraries are replete with theoretical studies such as, "Remarks on Early Buddhist Proto-formalism"², "The *Anattā* Doctrine and Personal Identity"³, "The Buddhist Doctrine of Two Truths"⁴, and so on. But while Buddhism is indeed a theoretical system and a philosophy, it is also much more. Unlike Western philosophy, which is by and large an academic activity, the issues of Buddhist thought are part of the cultural context of Buddhist societies. To study Buddhism as if it were just a system of thought, along with say Platonism, Existentialism, Structuralism or Behaviourism is to ignore the fact that unlike these intellectual schools Buddhism provides the foundation of the political structure, social ethics and world view of Buddhist societies. Only in this century have Buddhist societies begun to experience the segregation of activities into the religious and the secular which has characterised Western societies for several centuries. Philosophy, as understood and practised in the West today, is an intellectual product of a society in which there is a strong compartmentalisation of religious,

²Douglas Dunmore Daye, "Remarks on Early Buddhist Proto-formalism (Logic) and Mr Tachikawa's Translation of the *Nyāyapraves'a*", *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol.3, 1975, pp.383-398.

³Richard Taylor, "The *Anattā* Doctrine and Personal Identity", *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. XIX No.4, October 1969, pp.359-366.

⁴Frederick J. Streng, "The Buddhist Doctrine of Two Truths as Religious Philosophy", *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol.1, 1970-72, pp.262-271.

political and secular intellectual activities. In Thailand, these divisions are much weaker and less clearly defined. For this reason attempts to analyse Thai Buddhist philosophy, Thai politics or Thai society in isolation introduces the intellectual and social divisions of our own society into a situation in which they do not apply. It is possible to study Buddhist philosophy, but only if it is analysed in the context of Buddhist societies and the polities of those societies.

3 Methodological Approaches II: Sympathetic Engagement.

In evaluating Buddhadāsa's work it is necessary to recognise that his doctrinal re-interpretations are part of a non-Western intellectual tradition. Buddhism is a religious tradition with a distinct theoretical history in which notions of argumentation, methods of reasoning and even the place of reason in human knowledge differ markedly from the situation in the Western tradition. For these reasons it is not possible to criticise or evaluate Theravāda Buddhism using precisely the same intellectual tools used to critically assess Western theoretical and philosophical tracts. To uncritically apply Western analytical criteria to Buddhism may lead to the fundamental differences in the character of Buddhist thought being perceived as theoretical weaknesses and logical deficiencies, a result which may in fact unnecessarily and unjustifiably undervalue or even devalue that system of thought. What are in fact differences in the respective theoretical character of Buddhist doctrine and Western philosophical writings may be perceived as "inadequacies" by those trained in one system or the other if the existence of fundamental discursive differences is not acknowledged.

In this regard it is not only the case that Western theoreticians using theoretical criteria specific to their own tradition may perceive Buddhism's theoretical differences as inadequacies. Buddhists may also see what Westerners take as fundamental aspects of their intellectual tradition as inadequacies or theoretical deficiencies when judged by Buddhist criteria. For example, Buddhadāsa himself criticises the Western valuation of free enquiry and the operation of reason and rational analysis free of religio-moral constraints. In Buddhist intellectual culture reason is always subordinate to the religious quest for *nibbāna* or salvation from suffering, rational enquiry not directly dealing with issues concerning salvation not being sanctioned. Buddhadāsa criticises the West as being a culture which emphasises intellectualising and philosophy rather than encouraging the practical cultivation of wisdom, which in Buddhism is regarded as the foundation of attaining salvation from the miseries of human existence. In his words the West, "is drunk

and addicted to philosophy [i.e. free rational enquiry] like a spiritual heroin.”(T)⁵

To insist on applying a strict Western critical analysis to all theoretical systems, even those developed in non-Western societies, fails to recognise that significantly different discursive systems do in fact operate upon different theoretical, logical and epistemological principles. This point is developed further when discussing the place of reason in Buddhist thought, already briefly alluded to above, in Chapter Two. What from a Western perspective may be perceived as deficiencies in Buddhist theorising may, in terms of the principles of Buddhist doctrine, itself be a wholly adequate argument or interpretation. A strictly logical (Western) analysis of Buddhādāsa's thought would lead to an unwarranted concentration on the details and specific intellectual failings of his work. But such a strict logical analysis would utterly fail to recognise that when viewed in the context of the principles and intellectual history of Theravāda Buddhist thought Buddhādāsa's system cannot but be seen as an important theoretical development with profound implications.

But just as an unqualified Western-styled critique of Buddhādāsa's thought is unacceptable (because it would fail to appreciate the distinct character of Buddhist intellectual activity and the socio-historical context of Buddhādāsa's work) so too would a solely contextual or internal study which completely abandoned or held in abeyance criteria of discursive criticism be an inadequate theoretical approach. To define Buddhism as a system to which one cannot apply Western notions of logical argumentation would be to deny the possibility of a Western student developing an evaluation or judgement of Buddhist thought which has theoretical significance within the context of Western discourse and intellectual history.

This poses the question of whether Buddhist thought can in any theoretically significant sense be an object of Western philosophical analysis. In Western intellectual history Buddhist doctrine and thought have traditionally been the theoretical objects of the disciplines of religious studies, anthropology and comparative studies in the history of ideas. All of these disciplines can be described as following an “observational” methodology in which the aim is to describe, explicate and account for the characteristics of the object of study whilst declining to engage or intervene in that object. The observational or “objective” method

⁵ Phutthathāt (พุทธทาส), *Mjā Tham Khrōrng Lōk* (“เมื่อธรรมครองโลก” - *When Dhamma Governs the World*), Thammathān Mūlanithi (ธรรมทานมูลนิธิ), Chaiya Thailand, 2522 (1979), pp.139ff. N.b. In this same book Buddhādāsa also criticises the Western emphasis on individualism in intellectual, artistic and cultural activities, saying this results in confusion and social decay. He also criticises what he sees as a Western over-concern for individual political rights and democratic freedoms which is devoid of a concept of the moral responsibility needed before such freedoms can be properly utilised, i.e. directed towards the attainment of *nibbāna*.

which has been the historically dominant method in anthropology and religious studies involves an attempt on the part of the student to avoid commitment to the beliefs and values of the foreign culture being studied and so to avoid judging that cultural system. The dominance of these observational disciplines in Buddhist studies since the second half of the last century can perhaps be explained in historical terms. Western academics' reluctance to judge or evaluate Buddhist doctrine may be an attempt to avoid the self-righteous, judgemental and morally unpalatable criticisms early missionaries and other European travellers made of what they saw as the "barbaric" beliefs and practices of the "pagans", while still allowing some scope for an insatiable Western intellectual curiosity.

I support the methodological approach of the observational disciplines to the extent that it recognises the existence of structural differences between the theoretical systems of different cultures. The simple observational method, however, has severe limitations when viewed from the perspective of the discipline of philosophy. Unlike the practitioners of the observational disciplines those engaged in the intellectual activity of philosophy rarely have any qualms about engaging their objects of concern. A philosophy which sought to avoid evaluating or theoretically engaging its object would have lost an important aspect if not the most important aspect of what has historically characterised Western philosophical activity. Philosophy is not a discipline which merely observes its objects dispassionately but as it has developed in Western intellectual history is an inherently interventionist discourse which seeks active participation in the issues, debates and arguments presented, assumed or implied in theoretical systems.

To approach Buddhism with such a Western philosophical method might, in terms of the criticism of one-sided Western analyses of Buddhism mentioned above, be regarded as a form of theoretical imperialism, arrogantly breaching the autonomy of a non-Western system of thought by assuming that that system should be amenable to a Western mode of analysis. In recent years the promotion of the notion of epistemological relativism by critics such as Paul Feyerabend⁶, a development of earlier notions of linguistic and cultural relativism, can be seen as an attempt to define epistemological limits to such universalising tendencies in Western philosophy and other critical Western discourses. Relativists have argued

⁶The term "epistemological relativism" is not one Feyerabend himself uses in his main text on relativism, *Against Method - Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (Verso, London, 1978), where he instead uses the term "incommensurability" (*Against Method*, p.223ff.). By incommensurability Feyerabend means that notions or theories in significantly different epistemological systems are strictly incomparable because their respective concepts and theoretical assumptions are drawn from the internal context of relations with other notions and theories within their originating or source epistemological system. According to this theory notions and theories cannot be appreciated in their original sense and import outside of their defining epistemological context.

against a philosophical or interventionist approach claiming, among other things, that when one theoretically intervenes in a foreign intellectual system one may end up not so much studying that foreign system of thought as the pattern of one's own theoretical interference in it.

Relativists have often incorporated a strong ethical component into their epistemological hypotheses. They have argued, whether explicitly or implicitly, that Western theoreticians should refrain from engaging foreign discourses as if they were simply variants of Western discourses in order to avoid imposing alien Western conceptions upon Third World or non-Western systems. Relativism has represented an epistemological expression of a much broader anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist polemic which has argued against Western political, economic and cultural domination of the Third World. In arguing for the epistemological autonomy and independence of non-Western theoretical systems (and of marginalised or suppressed systems of thought within the Western cultural tradition) by proposing that such systems can only be evaluated in terms of their own assumptions and within their own epistemological context relativism has not only attempted to define limits to Western intellectual activity but has also suggested that Westerners should voluntarily curb their theoretical and evaluative excursions into non-Western discourses. Relativism has thus functioned as an ethical epistemology arguing for a sense of responsibility in avoiding participating in acts of theoretical or cultural imperialism.

While the approach of epistemological relativism has laudable political and ethical bases, avoiding charges of participation in Western cultural and intellectual imperialism it would, if followed strictly, tend to lead to the definition of Buddhism and Western thought as two distinct, self-contained systems which cannot seriously or legitimately engage each others' views. In its extreme form this approach would deny Westerners the intellectual right to evaluate or comment on Buddhist notions, and *vice versa*. However, while supportive of the ethical and political goals of relativism and of maintaining the autonomy of non-Western theoretical systems I cannot accept the above extreme relativist position as realistic in the contemporary world. For to adopt an extreme relativist position would imply that I, a non-Thai and a non-Buddhist, cannot seriously engage or evaluate Buddhist thought. In observational disciplines such as anthropology this dilemma is in theory avoided by creating an evaluative or theoretical distance between the Western observer and the foreign "object" in an attempt to acknowledge and respect the foreign social or theoretical system.

But what the observational discourses (and I include the philosophical

approach of epistemological relativism here) do not acknowledge is the paradox that this respect is also inherently imbued with an implicit condescension which in its own way continues to devalue the foreign cultural and theoretical system. This is because the ethical component of relativist theories is based on the assumption that critical Western systems of thought are in fact dominating systems, whether inherently so or because they are part of the dominant material and political culture in the modern world. Relativist theories also make the corresponding assumption that foreign theoretical systems are weak, less powerful and susceptible to domination if not annihilation. In maintaining that one should not engage or judge a foreign theoretical system by using criteria derived from one's own cultural and intellectual context, because to do so would be epistemologically invalid and ethically unacceptable, one also imputes powerlessness to the foreign theoretical object and power to oneself by making the assumption that engagement would in fact be an act of theoretical imperialism, and an expression of a dominant intellectual power. However, the holding back from judgement which relativism and the observational approaches entail results in the isolation of foreign theoretical systems from our own and avoids the issue of how concrete interaction and engagement can or should occur. There is no true interaction with the object in the observational disciplines, as occurs between two independent and mutually respecting individuals. Rather the observational disciplines follow a zoological approach which categorises and isolates cultures and their associated theoretical systems, and is an approach which perpetuates the implied power inequality between Western and foreign cultural and theoretical systems.

In the case of Buddhism I regard it as necessary to question the assumption of the powerlessness of the foreign theoretical object and of the imperialising powerfulness of the Western observer or would-be-commentator. Is it not the case that the intellectual significance of Buddhist thought is demeaned by not seriously engaging it but instead approaching it with intellectual kid gloves? I maintain that the study of the emerging societies and economies of contemporary Asia requires a quite different intellectual approach from the traditional observational or anthropological methodology. I also suggest that in contrast to the earlier observational methods used in studying Asian societies there is a growing need for Western scholars to engage Asian theoretical systems, which in Western academic terms can be described as a philosophical rather than an anthropological approach. It is for this reason that I regard the critical and analytical methods of philosophy, when applied judiciously and with a sympathetic appreciation of the differences of foreign cultural systems, to be more appropriate to contemporary inter-cultural

studies than in the past when the avoidance of the intellectual trappings of colonialism dominated the methodologies of Western studies of Asia. To not engage Buddhism is in my opinion to patronisingly imply that that tradition is incapable of responding to Western evaluations or criticisms, an assumption I think is less valid if not invalid in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

There is an additional reason for a more interactive and less observational approach to the evaluation of Buddhādāsa's work which lies in the very character of his doctrinal reforms. As will be detailed in the following chapters, Buddhādāsa's re-interpretative work is not a "pure" Buddhist product, having been significantly influenced by Western theoretical and philosophical notions. For example, Buddhādāsa is explicitly interested in making Buddhist doctrine more scientific or at least not in contradiction with modern scientific theories. But in addition, underlying all his re-interpretations and demythologisations of traditional Buddhist teachings is an implicit rationalism and anti-metaphysical orientation which draws heavily on Western empiricist sources. While Buddhādāsa's work is in form continuous with the long history of Theravāda Buddhism, in character it represents a distinct break from that tradition, incorporating distinctly Western notions and emphases. To evaluate this Western-influenced but Theravāda-derived interpretation of Buddhism requires a clear appreciation of the relation of Buddhādāsa's system to its various sources and influences. Similarly, evaluating Buddhādāsa's work necessitates judging it according to both Western and Buddhist criteria, that is, according to secular and religious criteria. Buddhādāsa's Buddhism is in no sense traditional and any attempt to treat it as if it were the product of an isolated and completely foreign cultural context would fail to appreciate the significant Western influence and the extent of overlap with Western notions and concepts.

What is required in analysing Buddhādāsa's work is a critical approach to Buddhism which at the same time appreciates the significance of Buddhism in its own historical and theoretical context. This involves maintaining a balance between a critical analysis or theoretical engagement and a sympathetic understanding and appreciation of Buddhism in its own terms. A sympathetic engagement with Buddhism would seek neither to devalue that theoretical system because of its culturally determined differences nor to demean it by patronisingly holding criticism in abeyance and avoiding evaluative comment. A sympathetic understanding or engagement of Buddhism implies neither agreement with its theoretical assumptions nor the development of an apologetic for Buddhist doctrines. Instead sympathetic engagement represents a recognition of differences and, if necessary, an acknowledgement of the need to agree to disagree over fundamental values, but not

to either disparage Buddhism or refrain from further engagement because of these differences. Such an approach neither assumes that Buddhist doctrine is a perfectly consistent development of the religion's principles, nor does it refrain from making internal inconsistencies apparent where they in fact exist.

3.1 Sympathetic Engagement - Summary.

The approach of sympathetic engagement followed in this study is a two-pronged analysis. Engagement denotes analysing and criticising the details of arguments, the assumptions underpinning notions, the particulars of logic and reasoning. On the other hand, a sympathetic or contextual understanding denotes looking more at generalities, at the context of history and general theoretical principles which inform and pattern the particular details of doctrine and teaching. However, these two moments are not separate but occur in tandem, critical engagement being tempered by sympathetic or contextual awareness and similarly a cutting or critical edge to sympathetic understanding being maintained by critical engagement.

More specifically, the sympathetic engagement of Buddhādāsa's work means that it is criticised and evaluated both in terms of strictly Western criteria and in terms of its own internal Buddhist-derived principles. However, neither of these approaches dominates the other, the results of an external criticism always being weighed against a contextual appreciation of the issues at hand, and *vice versa*. No simple theoretical formula can be given for whether the external Western or internal Buddhist evaluation of Buddhādāsa's doctrinal re-interpretations should predominate or be the ultimate basis for making some single final judgement on the overall value and importance of his work. The reasons for this have already been given - any simple judgement is likely to represent the dominance of one discursive system's principles over the other, resulting in a loss of perspective. The method of sympathetic engagement does not and, as argued, in fact cannot define any precise theoretical relation between Buddhism and Western thought. Rather it is an ethical and political approach to the intellectual study of contemporary Thai Buddhism which aims towards a balance in theoretical evaluation. Sympathetic engagement can be likened to a methodology of diplomacy. Sympathetic engagement acknowledges that there are irreducible theoretical differences and so tensions between Buddhism and Western thought, but neither retreats into a pure, non-judgemental observationalism because of these irresolvable theoretical tensions nor attempts the impossible task of resolving the theoretical tensions by appealing to some abstract or metaphysical unifying principle between cultures. Rather, like diplomats skilled

in the political arts of international relations, this method seeks to engage the foreign party and arrive at a balanced judgement which gives value and weight to both Western and Buddhist analyses of Buddhadāsa's work.

The methodological approach of this study is then complex in two senses. Firstly, it involves appreciating Buddhadāsa's work both as a theoretical system and as a social phenomenon. And secondly, this social-philosophical analysis is undertaken in a way that sympathetically engages Buddhadāsa's work, evaluating it both in terms of the Buddhist tradition from which it is drawn and the Western intellectual tradition which has significantly influenced it.

However, before beginning the detailed description and criticism of Buddhadāsa's re-interpretations in Chapter Three and subsequent chapters the first two chapters of this study will outline the historical and theoretical background of Buddhist discourse and the social, institutional placement of Buddhism in Thai society. These introductory chapters will provide the details necessary to arrive at balanced theoretical and socio-political appraisals of Buddhadāsa's work in later sections and chapters.

Throughout this study it is assumed that the reader will already be acquainted with the history and basic principles and doctrines of Buddhism. For those unfamiliar with the terminology and concepts of Buddhist thought a brief overview is presented in Appendix I at the end of this book.