

The Legacy of Thailand's Reformist Monk

By PHRA PAISAL VISALO - November 1, 2017



In honour of the 100th birth anniversary of Buddhadāsa, an article by Venerable Phra Paisal Visalo, abbot of Wat Pa Sukato (Thailand), previously published by The Bangkok Post on 28 May 2006. This new electronic edition was prepared by the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in 2017 with the kind permission of the author.

With only Mathayom 3 (Primary 3 equivalent) schooling and clerical training deemed as rather basic, the 26-year-old Phra Ngerm Inthapanyo took what was later known to be a hugely historic step in Thai Buddhism. In concrete terms, he founded Suan Mokkh. In less tangible terms, the reformist monk reintroduced a novel Buddhism that is both relevant to the present time and still in keeping with the practice dating back to the Teacher himself.

Phra Ngerm, later known as Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, played one of the most crucial roles in reshaping Thai Buddhism to relate intelligently with the modern world. Many educated Thais, largely influenced by Western schools of thought, have also returned to the Buddhist roots, thanks to the monk's guidance.

Technically, Buddhadāsa may not have had much formal education. But his knowledge in modern sciences – be they physical or metaphysical ones – went so deep that he could both see their shortcomings and use them to explain Buddhism in an eloquent manner. Buddhadāsa once flunked an examination of Pāli scriptures, and yet his understanding of the Buddhist Canon cut right to the core of the religion. He could make Lord Buddha's teachings understood by his contemporaries *“to the very heart of their egos.”* His critiques of society were far-sighted, his contributions to the modern education inimitable.

Apart from linking the old and the new, the reformist monk also served as a bridge between the two camps within Theravāda Buddhism. The influence of Sri Lankan traditions has resulted in a division among Buddhist practitioners: one stresses theoretical knowledge, the other austere discipline. At Suan Mokkh, however, both streams merge into one. The monks there follow the traditional forest monks' practice: meditating in the midst of nature, leading a spartan, frugal life by

taking foods as little as a cat, bathing in the ditch, sleeping in a pig's sty, listening to the mosquitoes' song.

At the same time, they also study the Tripitaka and listen to regular Dharma lectures by the venerable monk as well.

In *Phuttasasana*, a religious periodical put together by Buddhadāsa and his brother, Dhammadāsa Panich, two indispensable chapters were on a Thai translation of the Tripitaka and Dharma practice, respectively. In retrospect, Buddhadāsa was a product of serious scriptural study and rigorous practice. During his intensive retreats in the forest, he also diligently studied the canon by himself. Within the first year of his founding Suan Mokkh, he completed a book titled *In the Footsteps of the Enlightened One*, to be followed shortly by *Buddha's Life in His Own Words*, and *The Noble Truths in Buddha's Own Words*.

Moreover, the late monk expanded his inquiry to include a study of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Zen. Indeed, he cleverly applied Zen teachings – Buddhadāsa translated by himself the well-known *The Sutra of Wei Lang* and *The Teachings of Huang Po* – to lead people to get at the heart of Buddhism. He also made effective use of several Zen stories and riddles. “An empty mind in a busy body,” “The river is winding, the water is not,” or “To polish a tile into a mirror,” are examples of what Buddhadāsa deliberately used to urge people to think harder.

He went further by introducing the spiritual painting that teaches about *Paṭicca-samuppāda* (the law of co-dependent origination or co-evolution), an integral aspect of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

The practice of Dharma, in Buddhadāsa’s scheme, has likewise transcended to cover everyday living. For him, Dharma practice does not mean secluded, solitary, shutting-your-eyes sessions in the forest or in a room. We can work and practise Dharma at the same time. His oft-cited words are “*To work is to practise Dharma.*” Most people may seek success or try to finish their job as quickly as possible. The monk yet teaches people to work mindfully, to live in the present and not to cling to results. He compared *kilesa* (defilements such as greed, anger and delusion) to a tiger. To work is like playing with the creature – the more it “plays” with us, the more we learn of its power and flaws, to the extent that we can keep it in check. If we do not work with it, we will never know the tiger. Nor will we know how to control and win over it.

When work and Dharma are one, the “secular” and the “spiritual” are no longer two separate realms. Most Buddhists tend to see the secular – and all worldly achievements – as exclusively householders' affairs, and the spiritual as referring solely to monks' pursuits toward liberation. In contrast, Buddhadāsa believed that householders must also train their minds: The secular life is full of frustrations and miseries and an untrained mind will endlessly suffer otherwise. Thus Buddhadāsa encouraged monks at Suan Mokkh to leave their *kuti* to do manual chores and at the same time, he tried to guide the lay followers to work with an “empty mind,” a mind that is free from desires and ego. He often said,

To live, to eat, to work, to do anything without a clinging mind, without me- and mine-ness, only then will you be free from suffering.

The maxim works on the personal as on the social levels.

It is thus not unexpected that Buddhadāsa always called for morality to be the basis of politics, economy and development. In one of his lectures, titled “Dharma and Politics,” the monk emphasised that the secular and the spiritual are one and the same.

And indeed, when looking deeply, they literally are one and the same. Likewise, the Dharma for the “mundane” and “supra-mundane” levels cannot be separated. One can both live in, and above, the world. A householder can lead a normal life, but with his or her mind unfettered by suffering, uncertainties, the grip of materialism. When facing losses, such a mind will not be swayed, for it understands the way of the world. Such a state of mental peace can be called Nirvana. Buddhadāsa used to say,

Dharma for the lay people means not to let themselves drown, but to lift themselves up from the pits, to become carefree, liberated and reaching Nirvana eventually.

In other words, any one of us can attain Nirvana right in this lifetime. There is no need to wait for the next round of rebirth. For a long time, the concept of Nirvana has been perceived as something remote, fit for the few who have

turned their back to the world. Buddhadāsa has returned the teachings of Nirvana, and supra-mundane Dharma, back to the present. True, our world is full of frustrations and all the causes of grief. It is also true that

the extinction of a fire is in the fire; the extinction of suffering is in the suffering.
Nirvana can be found in the cycle of *saṃsāra*.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu has made us aware that *saṃsāra* cannot be separated from Nirvana. It is awaiting us there – the “temporary” or permanent path of liberation.

In a polarised world, Buddhadāsa has transcended it all. He has led us to rediscover “the Buddha” within. A number of people have discovered that “Buddha” can be found right in the middle of our own heart, that we can all become the Awakened, the Knowing, the Joyful.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu is a true sage who has revived Buddhism to become once again rich, deep and meaningful to Thai society. He has also revived our own humanity. In a world that views people as selfish economic beasts, robots, beings whose genetic traits can be arbitrarily manipulated, it is of utmost importance to restore our humanity from the plunder of the material world.

On the centenary of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's birth, there are many things to remember. But what we must never forget is what his life-long teachings have taught us – who we are and how much we can do.
