

Programme : WBU SUNDAY FORUM
Topic : THE MOTHER OF THAILAND
Date & Time : August 14, 2554 (2011), 12:00 – 13.30 : P.M.
Speaker : Assist. Prof. Boon Ketutarsa
Moderator: Dr. Somboon Duangsamosorn
Rapporteur: Suttinee Yavaprapas

Assist. Prof. Boon Ketutarsa graduated B.A. in Buddhism from Mahachulalongkorn Rachvityalaya University Thailand and M.A. in Comparative Religion from University of Lancaster England. He has had experiences in Tourist Business more than 25 years and taught Meditation in England and Thailand for more than 30 years. He said all centres of meditation with their own style of practice have their own achievement according to their master namely Buddhadasa, Luang Por Soth and Mahasi Sayadaw U Sobhana, who had a significant impact on the teaching of Vipassana (Insight) meditation. Ajahn Vichit taught meditation according to Mahasi Sayadaw U Sobhana. Yet, his approach is different. It is based on his personal experience. Ajahn Vichit can prove it by himself.

In this context, celebrations of mothers and motherhood which occur throughout the world have their own style of practice. In most countries, Mother's Day is a recent observance derived from the holiday as it has evolved in America. When it was adopted by other countries and cultures, it was given different meanings, associated to different events, and celebrated on various days in many parts of the world, yet most commonly in March, April, or May. Mother's day in Thailand is celebrated on the Birthday of the Queen of Thailand (Queen Sirikit) on 12 August. It started being celebrated around the 1980s as part of the campaign by the Prime Minister of Thailand, Prem Tinsulanonda, to promote Thailand's Royal family. It complements Father's Day, the celebration honoring fathers, on the Birthday of the King of Thailand (King Bhumibol) on 5 December. The extent of the celebrations honoring mothers and celebrating motherhood, maternal bonds, and the influence of mothers in society vary greatly in accordance with Thai culture.

Assist. Prof. Boon Ketutarsa pointed out that Thai culture has been a culture of father and mother since the very first days of Thai history in the *Sukhothai* period(13th-14th centuries). Originally, the Thai King is regarded as father and the Thai Queen as mother. Apart from *Por* (father),the words of *Mae*(mother) and *Look* (sons and daughters) are worth and sacred in Thai society. In the university, we have *Look Sit* (students). They are also sons and daughters to the teachers (*Kru*). Any problems among *Look Sit* are easily solved through the culture of father and mother.

Historical evidence shows that the majority of Thai people worship Buddhism, but Buddhism in Thailand is a mix of Animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism. Many animistic practices are still upheld and the traditions and rituals continued from past generations. Animism is a word derived from Latin *animus* or soul. Basically referred to every object, even inanimate ones that possess a soul or spirit, Animism is practiced in various forms, and one of which is ancestor-worship. The belief in spirit shrines is widely held in all parts of the country but differs in practices and architecture. In the northeastern region, there is one important shrine called *Pu Ta* shrine. This spirit is the guardian spirit of the village called *Pu Ta* or grandfather. This shrine, built close to the ground, is usually situated at a specific place under a large tree. It is forbidden to cut the large tree next to the *Pu Ta* shrine. Generally speaking, there are two types of spirit shrines, *Sarn Phra Phum* or spirit shrine and *Sarn Chao Tii* or abode of the spirit lord of the land. Both shrines are common sites in urban and rural communities and hosts will sometimes place both shrines near each other on their property. Normally the *Sarn Phra Phum* will be higher than the *Sarn Chao Tii*. Gods and guardian spirits reside in *Sarn Phra Phum* while spirits of nature and ancestors reside in *Sarn Chao Tii*.

On top of Animism, the first layer, is the integration of Brahmanism and Buddhism. Brahmanism refers to the earlier state of Hinduism in Southeast Asia before the arrival of Buddhism. The influence of the religion dates from the *Dvāravatī* period (6th-11th centuries).In the *Ayudhya* period(14th-18th centuries), Brahmanism brought in the concept of divinity of kingship. With Brahmanism, the status of King is compared to God. Our King is believed to be descendant of God, as seen in his name beginning with Rama, a

reincarnation of God Vishnu. We may find the word 'father', referring to our King while His title is Rama the Ninth. Of course, this is the combination of the Thai first layer and Brahmanism. Today, there are some 15-20 Brāhmanas or priests in Thailand of which 11 are attached to the Bureau of the Royal Household under the patronage of His Majesty the King and perform the Royal rites on ceremonial days such as the annual Royal Ploughing Ceremony held in May at the Meru Ground next to the Grand Palace. This does not clash with Buddhism since most people pray and make offerings to the deities for good fortune and to make special requests. The everyday practice of Buddhism can incorporate Animism and Brahmanism.

There is a current veneration for two Kings: King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol. The first concerns the King deceased nearly a century ago and the other the present King, draw upon the same source: exalted expectations of what Buddhist Kingship can do for the nation and the people. King Bhumibol equals his grandfather in many respects namely their genius, compassion and leadership. These qualities may be regarded as popular renderings of the notions of Buddhist kingship and the 'Ten Kingly Virtues'. These qualities are the source of progress and prosperity, actually the result of other qualities: being hardworking, humane, gifted, and virtuous. The two Kings embody the ideal of modern Buddhist Kingship and appear as guarantors of well-being to all citizens. In the case of King Chulalongkorn, people worship a deity, while in the case of King Bhumibol, people venerate a living monarch.

Looking back to the first concept of Thai King and Queen as father and mother in the Sukhothai period, it later blended with Brahmanism, which brought in Devaraja cults in the Ayudhya period. The status of King and Queen is equal to God and Goddess. The King is Father God and the Queen is Mother Goddess. When we encounter problems, it is easily solved through the culture of father and mother. As King Bhumibol is considered Father God, Queen Sirikit is also considered Mother Goddess. The Queen has dedicated herself for the development of the nation and the people. She has also worked for the concept of self-sufficiency through the need to preserve natural forests and watershed as well as to keep alive the old traditions. Her

Majesty once said, "As the King is the water, I shall be the forest. The forest devotes its loyalty to the water."

The Queen spends much time travelling to rural areas to find sources of supplementary income in the off-season or in areas affected by droughts or floods. In order to help poor people in rural areas, the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (SUPPORT) was established on July, 21 1976 under Her Majesty's patronage. Her Majesty has trained farming families to earn extra income through folk arts and crafts; encouraged them to achieve the highest standards of folk arts design and craftsmanship; and secure domestic and export markets for their products. The foundation was able to set up training centres in all the four regions of Thailand. This has been particularly important in providing an extra source of income for farmers, while at the same time breathing new life into many of Thailand's disappearing arts and crafts. The foundation has achieved remarkable success, today thousands of rural folks and their families are benefiting from Her Majesty's countless efforts and initiatives. As a tribute to Her Majesty's boundless contributions for the happiness of the entire population and the prosperity of the nation as a whole, August 12 is now Mother's day and a public holiday.

On the other hand, the status of women is quite powerful in Thai culture. The Thai society is originally matrilineal, relating to kinship through the female line. Mother is regarded as the source of birth. According to the traditional belief, five goddesses personify 5 natural elements: earth, food, and fire, wind and water. The word Mae (mother) and Phra (high status) honour them. The earth called in Thai-Thoranee, supposed to give life to plants and other living organism, is known as Mae Phra Thoranee translated as mother of earth. The term Mae Phra Po Sop is addressed to rice goddess or mother of rice, which is our basic food. Mae Phra Plerng is addressed to mother of fire. Mae Phra Pai is addressed to mother of wind. Mae Phra Kongka is addressed to water goddess or mother of water. As such, there is veneration for the Queen who has been the **Mother of the Thai Nation**, with her immeasurable contributions to Thailand being undoubtedly self-evident to the world. Her Majesty's compassion towards the poor and the disadvantaged as well as her warm maternal love given to every single one of us, regardless of race or belief, are for all time remembered in the hearts of her people

from the northern region through the Central Plains to the Muslim-majority in the South.

This is why we long for this day of celebration. For all the Thais, 12 August is not just another day. It marks the auspicious occasion of the Birthday Anniversary of Mother Goddess.

We join all loyal and devoted Thai people in wishing our Mother Goddess a long life of good health and happiness.

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