

Administrative Structure of Thai Sangha Organization under the Monarchy and Politics

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Abstract

Thai Sangha influenced the conceptions of kingship in various ways such as paradigmatic *dhammaraja*, the righteous monarch, who governs justly and righteously as the embodiment of the ten royal virtues.¹ It is the symbol of monarchy in Southeast Asia. With royal virtues, king is needed for protection and for the sake of honor and security. Thus Buddhist kingship is essentially based on the concept of righteousness. It is understood that under the reign of Buddhist king in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and also Thailand, Sangha and people live life peacefully. Kings of Buddhist kingdoms in Southeast Asia absorbed the concept of ideal ruler, Dhammaraja² as part of their own traditions. They realized that the maintenance of their power rested on adherence to the Dhamma. It is necessary for the kings to keep Dhamma alive by supporting the Sangha which perpetuated and disseminated Dhamma. By patronizing and supervising the Sangha, the kings preserved the Dhamma, and in doing so, duty as righteous king could be fulfilled. It is the close relationship between the development of Buddhism in the kingdom and the patronage of the faith by Buddhist kings.

Key words: Administrative Structure, Thai Sangha Organization, Monarchy, Politics.

Administrative Structure of Thai Sangha Organization under the Monarchy

In the history, the Buddhist kings of India, Burma, Ceylon, Cambodia and Thailand are linked together as the dynasty of Buddhist kings. They succeeded one another as the upholders of Buddhism. All the kings appear to have been religious men ascending to the throne as a result of merit drawn from their actions as the supporter and protectors of the faith. The kingdoms were prosperous and progressive and their positions were secure as long as they were religious and righteous.³ However it is unfortunate that in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the kingship disappeared, which led to the decline of Buddhism in the kingdoms afterwards. In 1796 the British first entered the island and gained control of the coastal areas from the Dutch. After the Kandyan Wars and the

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¹ Swearer, Donald K(2010)Buddhist World of Southeast Asia. United States of America:State University of New York Press.

² Tikhonov ,Vladimir, Brekke, Torkel (2013) Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia. New York: Routledge.p.44

³ Terwiel B.J.(1984) Buddhism and Society in Thailand. Gaya: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies. pp.27-28

signing of the Kandyan Convention in 1815 the island recognized the King of England as the King of Kandy, hence the British Monarch. This ended 2357 years of Sri Lankan monarchy.⁴ On the other hand, in Myanmar as well, Thibaw Min (1 January 1859 – 19 December 1916) was the last king of the Konbaung dynasty of Burma (Myanmar) and also the last in Burmese history. His reign ended when Burma was defeated by the forces of the British Empire in the Third Anglo-Burmese War, on 29 November 1885, prior to its official annexation on 1 January 1886.⁵ The invasion of British empire is one reason to undermine Buddhism in terms of development, progress, and political support of monarchy.

Unlike Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Thailand never came under Western Colonial rule. Kingship in Thailand has been powerful and guardian for Buddhism continuously. For this study, due to the process of modernization, it will be started from the Rattanakosin Period⁶ in the reign of king Chulalongkorn(Rama V). After King Monkut's death in 1868, his son Chulalongkorn succeeded him and launched further modernization programmes.⁷ Under the leadership of King Chulalongkorn (1861-1910) the Buddhist Sangha was organized along national lines and governed by a Supreme Patriarch(*Sangha Raja*).⁸ Following traditional expressions of monarchical support for Buddhism and Sangha, the king developed material aspects such as building about many new monasteries and restoration of the old ones. The king's attempt to pacify Buddhism and to propagate it was manifested in the revision of Tipitaka. The revised edition was later translated from Pali into Thai and printed in book form. The translation was intended to enable the people to understand Buddhism more widely. The king himself paid privately for publication in terms of distribution to monasteries in the kingdoms and to libraries.⁹ Development and progressing Buddhism and Sangha is one of issues regarding modernization programme.

King Chulalongkorn died in 1910 and was succeeded by his son, King Wachirawut(Rama VI) who ruled the kingdom between 1910 and 1925. In the face of the threat from the colonial powers, King Wachirawut was very concerned about the national unity; it was essential to maintain the independence of kingdom. He developed a sense of nationhood comprising nation(*chat*), religion(*sasana*) and monarchy(*phramahakasat*). These constituted the pillars of the Thai nation. The king implored the Thai to unite in body and spirit to defend the nation, religion, and the monarchy from the incursions of enemies, mainly Western colonial powers.¹⁰ Furthermore the king tied national independence to the survival of Buddhism. Buddhism in the eyes of king, could provide basic principles necessary for preserving the moral order of the society and thus he

⁴ Source from http://medlibrary.org/medwiki/King_of_Sri_Lanka

⁵ Christopher Buyers.(2009) "The Konbaung Dynasty Genealogy: King Thibaw". Source from royalark.net. Retrieved 4 October 2009.

⁶ Source from <http://www.nareeya.org/Rattanakosin.htm>

⁷ Terwiel B,J.(1984) Buddhism and Society in Thailand. Gaya: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies. p.39

⁸ Swearer, Donald K.(2010) Buddhist World of Southeast Asia. United States of America:State University of New York Press. p.120

⁹ Terwiel B,J.(1984) Buddhism and Society in Thailand. Gaya: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies. p.40

¹⁰ Terwiel B,J.(1984) Buddhism and Society in Thailand. Gaya: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies.p.41

encouraged the people to adhere to Dhamma. By adhering to Dhamma, people would live in peace and happiness.¹¹ The king tried to persuade people to adhere to Dhamma and Buddhism. It can be said that development and progress of Buddhism had been interpreted as the prevention from Western colonialism, unity of nation, and strength of Buddhism itself.¹²

King Wachirawut died in 1925 and was succeeded by King Prachathipok (Rama VII-1925-1932). He was a last monarch of Thailand. The 1932 Revolution brought an end to absolute monarchy and it was replaced by constitutional monarchy. Thailand embarked on a more democratic form of government. Since the reign of the present king, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX-1946-Now)¹³ has pledged to reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people. In his sixty-year reign, his majesty has not deviated from that pledge. He is regarded as the great king (*Maharaja*) in the eyes of people nationwide and all over the world.¹⁴ The king of Thailand has supported Buddhism very well for a long time in various ways as follows; 1) Supporting in order to revise Tipitaka, develop Buddhist education system, and Meditation. 2) Supporting Sangha organization and promote venerable monk to ecclesiastical rank. 3) Supporting of establishment and restoration for Buddhist place.

Thailand Sangha development Under the constitutional monarchy.

Development, progress and support of Buddhism can be understood widely because Buddhism is the religion that ancestors have regarded as the state religion. It is also believed as the important institution of nation since ancient time till the present time. Development of Buddhism, especially Sangha occurs because of the sense of Buddhism as one of three pillars of nation that cannot be separated.¹⁵ Under the constitutional monarchy, the king still played an important symbolic role in Thai Buddhism. The king now is both the high protector and patron of Buddhism and the constitutional head of government. The Thai king, nowadays, as constitutional monarch, acts in accordance with the wishes of the cabinet. As mentioned earlier, even Thailand used to be invaded by Western colonialism, in contrast it has never been colonized by Western rule. This is the reason of continuity of kingship in Thailand. The support and protection of Buddhism by king is inevitable responsibility in terms of development and defense as well. Nevertheless the uniqueness of Buddhism in Thailand from Myanmar and Sri Lanka can be conceived by these reasons.

Summary

There is an *ecclesiastical honorific title awards* for promoting individual monk into Sangha hierarchy. This award is called *Samanasak*. The word *samana* here basically refers to the monk or the one who leads the

¹¹ Ibid.p.42

¹² Source from <http://thailand.prd.go.th/ebook/king/dhamma.html>

¹³ Baker Chris, Phongpaichit Pasuk (2009) A History of Thailand. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp.75-77

¹⁴ Punyarachun Anand (2007) The King of Thailand in World Focus. Saranrom Journal. 64th Year. pp.40-49

¹⁵ Source from <http://www.kroobannok.com/7749>

ascetic life. *Sak* or *Sakdi* means power in the sense of resources or energy. It served as a refined index or rank in secular society. *Samanasak* signifies the rank and status of an individual monk in the Sangha hierarchy. This award is conferred upon the monks by the king in order to give a lasting honour. It becomes obviously tied to administrative positions within Sangha. Under the Sangha administration, monks of various ranks are either the Sangha governors of major provinces or the abbots of important royal monasteries or both. This rank or honorific award has continued with some revisions and modifications till today. The award of honorific titles for Sangha is conferred by the king. The development policy regarding Buddhism and Sangha comes along with other policies in the country. Sangha is understood as a strong and uncorrupted for social integration and regarded as one of the biggest national organizations, with a large membership. Political authority over the Sangha can be interpreted as for development and progress. Simultaneously control over the Sangha can be understood as well.

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