

BUDDHIST CONCEPTS IN MODERN THAI LITERATURE^{*}

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Abstract

Poets and writers of any culture act as mediators. They have a message to convey, and often use ways and means, or rather techniques, by which they can be understood by their readers. It is known, for example, that the Indian poets presented complicated philosophical aspects of their religious beliefs through their epics, which were either recited or performed before rapt audiences. Literature is indeed the receptacle for a nation's beliefs, ethics and values.

There are various ways in which Thai writers deal with Buddhism. Through the reading of Thai literature we can thus learn much about Buddhism from a Thai perspective, not

as presented by scholars or monks, but at the popular level.

I have selected a short piece in prose entitled "My Dog is Missing" by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, "A Poet's Pledge" by Angkarn Kalyanapong, who is known as Thailand's nature poet, and **Time**, a novel by the widely acclaimed novelist Chart Korbchitti to describe the Buddhist concepts embedded in their writing

The study of literature evolves around the reading of a selection of poems, plays and fiction. But a look at some course descriptions of literature courses makes it obvious that something more is intended.

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Here are two examples from a university syllabus:

The course offers a survey and study of English and American works of literature in prose, poetry and drama. It includes reading and discussions of some outstanding, representative works where the philosophical, social, religious, political, and scientific aspects have been depicted. Attention will be given to the writing techniques in the various literary genres, particularly the short story and the novel.

Or

This course acquaints the students - through the medium of English - with recent literary works by Thai writers, who either write in English or whose works have been translated. The reading of this selection of short stories, poems and novels which will lead to a larger understanding of Thai culture and the political, social and religious concept embedded in the writing. The learning methods include critical analysis and a term paper.

It is true that professors intend a lot more in their courses than just the appreciation and enjoyment of some excellent pieces of writing we call literature. The course descriptions show that professors make sure that their students learn something from reading literature. Without being overtly didactic, literature is indeed our

teacher. It gives us robust models of knowing and doing. Some work may present a large canvas of life and the times, another a particularly important philosophical view of a certain writer. One of the really rewarding discoveries I made after seven years of teaching Thai literature in an international environment, is the various ways in which Thai writers deal with Buddhism. Through the reading of Thai literature we can thus learn much about Buddhism from a Thai perspective, not as presented by scholars or monks, but at the popular level.

Here I want to draw an analogy to dealing with some difficult concepts for one of my earlier papers, which was on "The Importance of the Ramayana in Today's World." At least, I had to find an approach to the work. I asked a colleague from India what the Ramayana was. The answer was simple. "The Ramayana is the story of our God," she said. Then was it a sort of Bible? Or an epic like Homer's *Odyssey*? Without a doubt, a great work by the poet Valmiki, there are actually in existence other versions of the *Ramayana* (by Kamban and Tulsidas, and in different Indian languages and their translations). The Indian epics really belong to the oral cultures of antiquity. An Indian professor of Philosophy threw light on the whole, "The Vedas and Upanishads are elitist. Their metaphysical content is not easily understood by the common man. The Indian epics, however, operate on a popular level. They contain the same

philosophy of the ancient scriptures in a social background which is commonly known and understood by the Indian people.”

“Poets are the antennae of a nation”, a pronouncement made by Ezra Pound places the poet, or writer of any culture as a mediator. Writers in their works embrace whatever is the common conscious of that nation. I have therefore applied similar assumptions to this selection that Thai writers present difficult Buddhist concept in a form that can be understood by all.

The Thai writers or poets I will discuss have dealt in their works with Buddhist concepts to varying degrees – from the more ostensible to the most complicated – which we often define as “thinking the unthinkable” in Buddhism. I have selected a short piece in prose entitled “My Dog is Missing” by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, “A Poet’s Pledge” by Angkarn Kalyanapong who is known as Thailand’s nature poet, and *Time*, a novel by the widely acclaimed novelist Chart Korbchitti.

“My Dog Is Missing” was originally published in Siam Rath, a Thai newspaper founded and edited by M.R. Kukrit. The piece was later reprinted in a collection of his writings and has since been accepted into the canon of modern Thai literature. It is really his editorial comment on that particular day (December 11, 1968). As a seasoned journalist, he states matter-of-factly how he was parted from his

dog. He could think of nothing and nothing else to write on that day. But understatement was rare in the gifted writer. With a great flurry of words he then evokes all the emotions that visited him since his dog went missing. He thus expresses his sadness, and his love for the dog, his loneliness and his suffering, his aspirations and disappointments in life in a long expression of grief. At one particular point the writer refers to the teachings of Lord Buddha.

“I already knew that separation from a loved one meant suffering. But when that separation happens to oneself, one is incapable of suppressing one’s feelings.” (112)

Thais indeed resort to the teachings of the Buddha in all sorts of situations in their lives. M.R. Kukrit refers to the Buddhist premise “Biyehi Wibayoku Dukkhu.” or “separation from the loved one means suffering,” (112), which infers that if one knows the cause and effect of things, one should be able to handle a situation more effectively, including one’s own emotional responses. However, the writer continues his lament, that the dog does not have the consolation of being able to take refuge in the Buddha’s teachings. One critic has observed that “the power of the message in the story derives, of course, from the fact that he focuses directly upon himself and his own inner states.” (109) Through literary allusions, the use of symbolism and reference to the teachings of the

Lord Buddha, M.R. Kukrit transforms, “a somewhat maudlin issue” into a “perfect way to talk about the ultimate existential loneliness of man and the alienating qualities (including those that are self-inflicted) of Thai life.” (108)

The next piece, “A Poet’s Pledge” is a poem by Angkarn Kalayanapong which is particularly challenging because he not only refers to important Buddhist concepts but also presents a comic picture which may be a part of Buddhist mythology or the result of the poet’s extensive reading. Questions like this can be topics for further research.

“Betwixt earth and sky in the final hours” shows clearly that he sees at least two levels of existence, on the earth and in heaven. According to the poet, man lives on this earth together with other species in an environment we can simply call nature. Therefore he calls for harmony on earth instead of strife and war. He says:

Man cheats and kills to grab empires
Galvanized by greed, the breathing corpse
Spurns goodness and forgets its grave
Abdicating the dignity of the human soul.

He continues:

Components and elements of this earth
Are worth all the celestial treasures
Forever cherish soil, sky and water

Make the world brighter than the heavens.

The poet is aware of the structure of things known on this earth, which he divides in compounded and un-compounded things or elements. There is almost a metaphysical ring of poets like John Donne in the flow of his rhetoric. But he talks of the “heavens” because for Thais there exist various levels of heaven. However, there is no reference to hell in this poem. The question I wish to raise here is whether there are heaven and hell in the teachings of the Buddha – in the popular belief of the Thais there are eight levels of hell – or are they entirely the imagination of writers who wanted to confront their contemporaries with certain horrors or rewards that would ensue if they broke or followed the ethical code. I am also curious if the picture of Heaven and Hell in “The Divine Comedy” by Dante somehow correspond to the pictures of heaven and hell in “The Three Worlds of Phra Ruang” by King Lithai of Sukhothai. Both works were written at approximately the same time.

But back to the Buddhist concepts in “A Poet’s Pledge.”

Fields, forests and impenetrable wilds
High mountains that challenge the clouds
Gibbons, buffaloes, tigers, elephants,
Ants and all species in this universe

Are like man’s intimate beloved friends

Companions in the cycle of rebirths
Priceless existence in time's ageless
span
Radiant treasures of immeasurable
worth.

"Companions in the cycle of rebirth" again leaves a lot of room for discussion. There is no doubt to the reference of animals that comprise the living things on this earth just like us. But how does the poet interpret the cycle of rebirths. Does he merely follow the popular notion of rebirth or the metaphysical concept in Buddhism?

Perhaps what follows can give us a clue.

Let others soar beyond the infinite
skies
Or thread cosmic paths of moons and
stars,
But to this living world my heart is
pledged
To earth bonded in all my lives and
deaths.

I shall even refuse Nirvana
And suffer the circling wheel of
rebirths
To translate the multitudes of wonders
Into poems dedicated to this universe.

It is clear that the poet refuses heaven, but wishes to remain on earth even if it means suffering in each life. He even refuses Nirvana. These lines at one time drew a lot of criticism from scholars, saying for one that the poet went against the teachings of the

Buddha or he simply did not understand the Buddhist concepts. I am not going to solve this controversy, I can leave it to the readers, but reading these lines with reference to the whole contexts I personally feel that he is using the concepts of heaven and nirvana, the highest goals he would forgo, to express his immeasurable love for nature, the earth, and existence on earth. The poet may not have succeeded in making nirvana clear to us, something he probably does not understand too well, but he has amply expressed his love for the beauty of the earth and his passion for writing poetry. It is indeed his promise, his pledge:

To cleanse the human world of sorrows
Until peace flows into a golden age;
Then shall my ashes with earth
integrate—
A calcified fossil keeping watch.

Again, it is doubtful that the Buddha recommended overcoming sorrows with poems, but somehow we know that what the poet says is very true.

If men grew deaf to poetry's charms
What pleasures would replace the
loss?
Even ashes and dust would abhor
The dryness of the human soul.

As one famous writer said, we cannot live with our literature, but we cannot live without it either. Or as I tell my students who are majoring in Business English, you cannot do much

with poetry, but poetry gives you courage and makes you strong.

Let me talk now about the novel *Time* in which the Chart Korbchitti comes to terms with themes like life, time, death, suffering, impermanence and nothingness. The novel, which in the first place does not read very much like a novel, but sometimes looks like a drama, or rather its manuscript and at other times like a shooting script, is about a movie director who attends a theatre performance. It operates at two levels, the happenings on the stage and the events in the movie director's life; in other words, the setting of the novel is twofold. The movie director not only narrates what he sees on stage, he also talks about his feelings and reactions to what he sees. He ponders on the truth of the picture of life that enfolds itself on stage. The play depicts one day in the life of the inmates of an Old People's Home. While in his plot the writer dwells mostly on the quotidian, he is able to convey to his readers through images and symbols some of the most complex concepts in Buddhism. In my presentation I will have to restrict myself here to some of the description or visions that only after repeated readings suddenly became clear. With a strong emphasis on daily Buddhist practice in Thai life, in particular merit making, the attention is on how the movie director learns of the truth of life. Almost unperceivable, to the reader as well, the protagonist of the novel is looking at the Four Divine Messengers that made Prince

Siddhartha leave his kingdom to search for Enlightenment. The visions appear not necessarily in the same order, and not exactly in the same form. Old age, sickness and death are represented by the old women on the stage and are made complete by the vision of the monk who is revealed in an aura of pure light. Are the visions (of the truth) going to lead the movie director, other characters in the play or the reader to enlightenment?

Two of the most puzzling characters in the novel, or rather on stage, are the retarded son of one of the inmates, and an old man in a cubicle hidden from the view of the others. The retarded son operates like a visionary who draws a very graphic picture of hell in which people are overcome by illusion and greed. "The bit each other", he tells of his visions, "the water splashed, turned into blood, there was blood all over as they fought over the silver shadow of the lotuses." (187) And again, "They bite each other day and night, jump into the swamp then bite each other, fight over the silver shadow of the lotuses." Symbols are indeed implied through words and names, whereby the lotus is a symbol of religion, and the silver shadow, silver meaning money would stand for greed, materialism.

Looking at the philosophical underpinning of the writer's perception of Buddhism one is able to discover some of the most important concepts known as Suffering, Impermanence and

Nothingness. Again suffering and impermanence are aptly illustrated by the life of the old people on stage, including the movie director who has turned 63 and is beginning to think about old age. But what about nothingness or Anatta?

Perhaps the most symbolical of all the characters in the play is the old man who none of the inmates has ever seen. He lives in a cell in their ward and keeps shouting periodically, "There is nothing. There is absolutely nothing." which brings to mind plays like **The Caretaker** and **Waiting for Godot**. The play ends with the death of one of the inmates, and when the cell is opened there is nobody inside.

It is only an empty room,
It is only an empty room,
An empty room. (232)

Strangely enough, young readers who do not read much, have shown great interest in this novel. Perhaps not for anything else but to solve the major puzzle in the plot. What happened to the old man? Where did the old man go? Why was the room empty? But the main question is: Has the writer been successful in presenting the Nothingness in his work.

I would like to end my presentation here with a very pertinent statement made recently by a prominent monk, who seeing the many changes that are taking place in the structure of Thai life and Buddhism, said if we merely going

on teaching Buddhism it will survive. I would like to add that if we read and study Thai writers Buddhism will survive.

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