

Thai Scholars' Interpretation of Socially Engaged Buddhism

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Abstract:

This article discusses the concept of socially engaged Buddhism in the Thai society. It aims to study the perspective of two prominent Thai scholars; the venerable Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and the venerable Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P.A. Payutto). The study found that both scholars assert that socially engaged Buddhism is an original concept of Buddhism. Phra Brahmaganabhorn's view lies on the level of *Sila* and *Vinaya* which aid in organizing social system and social environment that are relevant to human development, however, Buddhadasa presents it based on the teaching of *Idappaccayatā* or the principle of interdependent arising.

Introduction

The term 'Socially Engaged Buddhism', in this paper refers to the concept and process in Buddhism which Buddhism and society must be engaged, and that there is no dualistic split between spiritual and worldly domains, or an individual and a society. It is interested in solving problems in social structure rather than an individual's. It is also tries to interpret and adapt the methods in Buddhism to solve such social problems as injustice, environment, violence, economics, and political, etc.²

At present, there is an academic question whether socially engaged Buddhism exists in traditional Buddhism, or it is just a movement of modern Buddhists. This movement took place as an answer to social context after the World War II in the countries attempting to free themselves from being colonized. They made effort to search for their own cultural roots as guide to the direction in developing their countries after being freed. The concept of Buddhist socialism was set examples by General U Nu of Myanmar and Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka. However, there are some dual views between the academics. The first group sees that socially engaged

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² Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.86.

Buddhism existed during the period of the Buddha time, but it has not been concretely studied. Those which are abided by this view are Buddhist thinkers and scholars. The later take that socially engaged Buddhism did not exist in the history of Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, but formed by modernist Buddhists to solve social problems of the new age. Most members of this group are Western scholars.

Nonetheless, I do not attempt to argue whether socially engaged Buddhism has existed or just been formed, but to discuss the concept of socially engaged Buddhism in that society. Also, their concepts on socially engaged Buddhism are a most systematic and clear one and I will focus on the views of the two prominent Thai scholars, the venerable Buddhadasa and the venerable Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P.A.Payutto).

Buddhadasa's View

Buddhadasa was the forerunner Thai Bhikkhu who believed that socially engaged Buddhism is the original foundation of Buddhism. He saw that the principle of *Idappaccayatā* which was reflected social concept in Buddhism. Buddhadasa's speech on "*Dhammic Socialism*" was so significant work which reflected his perspective on socially engaged Buddhism. He presented this concept at the time when Thai society fell in the situation that the social and political turmoil was resulted from incident on the 14 October 2516 (C.E 1973). Buddhadasa explained the meaning of *Dhammic Socialism* as society or socialism which stood on the Dhamma or comprised the Dhamma. He also defined "Dhamma" as the nature or the law of nature. He said, "*The true nature characterized by socialism, and socialistic intention. It is socialism because nothing is independent. There is no any person, thing, part, element, or particle existing alone. It is impossible. Things are compounded. Socialism exists even in one particle.*"³

Buddhadasa viewed that the nature which embraces socialistic intention is the system of interdependent arising of all things, ranging from the smallest particle of the vast universe. It is this socialistic intention that supports the existence of all things. He asserted that, "*There must be socialistic system in the body to survive. A village can also survive because of socialistic system, just as*

³ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, **Dhammic Socialism** (Bangkok: Siamprathes Publisher, 1995), p. 144.

the world. It should be laughed at when say that the universe system is socialism, otherwise, it would come to an end."⁴

According to Buddhadasa, socialism is utilized in term of ethics in defining the social responsible conscience which is opposite to selfishness. He further explained the, "*Socialism means for the sake of society, therefore, one cannot be selfish.*"⁵ Buddhadasa stated on an example of the Bodhisatta ideal. He said a person who attempted to help others display socialistic intention of activities. "*Bodddhisattava ideal focuses on helping others, dedicating to others; he can even sacrifice his life for sake of the society. Buddhism accepts this ideal because it has socialistic intention.*"⁶ In term of the systems of *sīla* and *vinaya*, he saw them as the rules laid down in accordance with the Dhamma of socialistic intention or the nature (*Dhammic Socialism*). That is the system created to bind people in the society by the intention of Dhamma. As said:

*The Vinaya system laid down by the Buddha shows us as an inseparable binding system. The term "Sangha" means a group or members. It does not mean an individual, or a person. When there is a group, there must have relation or the principle of truth that connects the Order of the Sangha from a myriad of units into the right society.*⁷

It can be said that the concept of social dimension in Buddhism presented by Buddhadasa based on the concept of Dhamma or the law of nature (*Idappaccayatā*). Buddhadasa saw the Dhamma or the law of the nature has socialistic intention (*Dhammic Socialism*). Nothing exists freely by its own because all things in the universe are interdependent arising in accordance with this law. Men live together in a society and share mutual benefits that they have followed the socialistic intention of nature (Buddhadasa argued that individualism and consumerism do not follow the will of nature). In order to follow the will of society, the Buddha laid down the *vinaya*, established the Order, and exhorted men to help others with loving-kindness.

⁴ Ibid., p. 136.

⁵ Ibid., p. 141-142.

⁶ Ibid., p. 124.

⁷ Ibid., p. 122.

Phra Brahmagunabhorn's View

Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto) is also one of the Thai Bhikkhu who takes socially engaged Buddhism as a basic concept of Buddhism, but it has been overlooked and lost its social dimension because of misinterpretation. It is widely known that *silā* and *vinaya* which are the common practice in the Thai society mainly focus on the virtue of an individual. It views that many good people make a good society. Nonetheless, the significance of *silā* as the process of establishing the social structure and environment which is appropriate for human development has not been mentioned. It can be said that Phra Brahmagunabhorn is the precursor Thai Bhikkhu who attempts to present the social dimension of the *silā* and the *vinaya*. Moreover, he has dedicated a book-chapter in his *Buddhadhamma* (20 pages) explaining social dimension of the *silā* and the *vinaya*. In this chapter, "*Silā and Social Intention*"⁸, Phra Brahmagunabhorn says that the most distinction in the Buddhist teaching which confirms social dimension in Buddhism is the teaching of *silā* and *vinaya*.

*Silā is the teaching and rules for practice in Buddhism. It mostly involves in society, and reflects the Buddhist intention in terms of the social relation. Because silā is the system that controls a human's external life, verbal and bodily expression, and the order of relationship with others and environment, especially relationship among people, thus, it allows proper arrangement of social activities, living, condition, and environment of the society. It also brings happiness to all members of which the society encourages them to perform better deeds.*⁹

Phra Brahmagunabhorn sees that if we do not understand social intention of *silā*, not only will it not grow into the practice of lay people, but existing intention of discipline in the *Sangha* will be torn down to only religious rite performance as well. Hence, in order to revive *silā* and the *vinaya*, one should not focus only on the restriction of form, but to maintain social intention of *silā* and the *Sangha vinaya*. Moreover, social intention of *silā* should be expanded

⁸ Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto), *Buddhadhamma* (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Press, 1999), p. 431-451.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

into the practice of lay people by arranging the order of disciplines which is appropriate for the system of lives, and social order of the people.¹⁰

In term of *Sangha* disciplines and rules, Phra Brahmaganabhorn says that it is the system that covers external life of the monk in all aspects, beginning with a specific quality, rights, duty, and methods for accepting new members into the *Sangha*, and the training for its new members. Moreover, it involves the appointment of qualified officer to oversee various activities of the Order; and rules regarding examining, managing, maintaining and sharing the four requisites as well as rules for receiving and dividing portions of food, robe making and rules on using the robes. Besides, there are rules concerning with the sick and persons who take care of the sick, arrangement of accommodations, rules for residents, rules for the construction and its responsibility, including the arrangement for *Sangha* living quarter. Also, there are procedures for the meeting, the case of disputation, the complainant, the defendant, the judge, legal action, judging, and punishment. The above mentioned are procedure in social intention of *silā*.¹¹

Conclusion

To conclude, both Buddhadasa and Phra Brahmaganabhorn agree that socially engaged Buddhism is the original concept in Buddhism. While Phra Brahmaganabhorn's view is based on the teaching of *silā* or *vinaya*, the Buddhadasa's based on the teaching of "*Idappaccayatā*" or the teaching of interdependent arising. Buddhadasa focuses in depth the socially engaged Buddhism on the law of nature because this law unavoidably determines social dimension in Buddhism. As for Phra Brahmaganabhorn's perspective, socially engaged Buddhism is based on the level of *silā* or *vinaya*. It deals with the social rules and order fit for human development. He does not focus as deep into the law of nature as Buddhadasa. Nonetheless, Phra Brahmaganabhorn accepts that the Buddha laid down the disciplinary rules of *silā* or *vinaya* from his knowledge, penetrating through the law of nature, and acquired this law to set forth social system. However, he does not confirm there is socialism in the Dhamma or the law of nature as presented by Buddhadasa.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 451.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 448-449.