

Book Reviews

Keeping the Faith: Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads. By Sanitsuda Ekachai. Edited by Nick Wilgus. Bangkok: Post Books, 2002. 328 pp.

Sanitsuda Ekachai's new book is a collection of short, critical articles and commentaries on various aspects of contemporary Thai Buddhism, arranged under eight sub-headings with a short introduction. An appealing feature of this ensemble is that "other" voices are heard with reader-friendly and short, insightful comments over debates concerning the relevance and place of contemporary Thai Buddhism, especially monasticism.

The author uses few words and some broad brush strokes to construct some extraordinarily vivid frames of everyday religious life in Buddhist Thailand.

In reviewing a book such as this on Thai Buddhism, we need to ask ourselves what this religion is, which is not always lived in accordance with the texts that most Thais seem to follow and identify with to some extent. The imagination, itself a social fact, is important as a means of informing the way we think, feel and act, in this case in relation to religion. It also accounts for the many expressions of Thai Buddhism that we see around us. Perhaps also these days we need to venture outside the monasteries to experience living religion and what it means in the construction of everyday contemporary life in the villages, towns, and cities. Lest we forget, Thailand is still one of the few remaining Buddhist countries where the Arahant (self-accomplished "saint") ideal — and its liberating possibilities — remains alive and well in the collective imagination. Not so any longer for the wellspring of Theravada Buddhism, Sri Lanka, and doubtful in neighbouring Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. It seems to me that many Thais are now asking

the question: if these “acclaimed” exemplars or monastic teachers are still around, where are they to be found?

Modern Buddhists would seem to claim that what is needed these days is a system of standardization as a requirement for continued monastic registration. Imagine, if you will, a situation in this period of globalization where each monastery (and monks), like many businesses in Thailand, would carry an “ISO” classification engraved over the front gate; for those “good monasteries” able to show that they have adhered to “best-practice standards”. But, more seriously, who would determine what is “best practice” — monks or laity?

As an expression of diversity, Thai monasticism, we are told, needs to recognize the contribution of monk-activists engaged in this world, in as much as it recognizes the normative spiritual achievement of the reclusive, disengaged meditative “Path” questers (to be found among the remaining forest enclaves). This is certainly a theological mute point. These modern activist-exemplars are to be found in urban monasteries, places of teaching and learning, various refuges, rural community centres, conservation sites, and hospices. Importantly, as the author says, while encouraging a worldly engagement we should not forget the all-important questions of monastic discipline.

In the past decade or so we have been overwhelmed by media accounts of serious monastic infringements, abuses of monastic privilege and power. These are the “other” images of Thai Buddhism that are not usually affixed to either glossy tourist brochures and postcards to send back home, or media representations, circulated and consumed widely through both print and electronic media (Thai and English). These images have not been favourable to defining a respectable “place” for Buddhism in modern Thai society. At this point we may ask ourselves, what, if anything, has gone wrong with Thai Buddhism in recent times? Or has the media had a greater influence than we realize? There is not much talk around about “good monks”, as these persons are in any case hardly “newsworthy” (unless the reader believes there are no exemplary practising monks left any more — which I do not believe, and clearly neither does the author — though we may differ on what constitutes an “ideal” monk).

Sanitsuda Ekachai attempts to capture this complexity, while at the same time show us that there are “other” religious possibilities, mainly from the social interstices. At the same time the author shares the concerns of many educated Thais in suggesting that Thai Buddhism needs to be linked to the wider processes of democratic reform so that internal change can likewise occur in the Sangha (male and female monastic orders). The assumption is that Thai Buddhism is in a state of “crisis” needing serious structural attention and that little trust can be placed in the monastic elders who, we are told, are unaware of current social realities. The position throughout (in so far as it is possible to identify a consistent thread) starts on the premise that the forces of modernization in Thailand have destroyed the fundamental basis of tradition, especially cultural forms such as religion. This has led to a new materialistic and individuated society based on consumption.

Thais, it would appear, clearly like to go shopping instead of going to the monastery, or in a manner of speaking, the Buddha has been “relocated” in the shopping centres and arcades. Thus said, we need to be careful in assuming cultures are static, without any capacity to change through internal and external influences. Thai Buddhism has always been contested and changing (Is this not one of the fundamental tenants of Buddhism?) and, in going with historic flows, this has accounted for its continuities.

It is from global realities that Thailand struggles to find a new identity. It is from this scenario, as the author makes another important thematic point, that Theravada Buddhism in Thailand has re-established a new “relevance” for “modern Thai life and problems” (p. 10); a religion that is, contrary to contemporary images, “still alive and well in the Thai psyche” (p. 11).

The responses from the Sangha to the conditions of modernity have been mixed and not without tensions and contradictions involving various actors. Everyone, it seems, has something to say concerning “problems” over discipline, monastic training, and the maintenance of religious sanctity.

Many of the case studies in this book received media attention over the past decade or so due, in no small part, to the author herself writing

on social issues for the *Bangkok Post*. The reader is taken through some depressing scenarios of monastic corruption and scandals on the one hand, and tales of hope and promise on the other. The compilation (even if the reader has already read some of these accounts penned by the author) gives a broad overview of a modern society in change, especially through the confused and traumatic social and economic crisis of the late 1990s. However, unfortunately, the events of 1997 were not clearly factored into the discussions and implications for Thai Buddhist practices.

Although “other” voices are heard in the text, the author also makes her own position clear, which is in support for the reform Dhamma heritage of the late modernist scholar-monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and, correspondingly, an active, engaged monastic order (male and female). This engaged “here-and-now” Buddhism (espoused by the well-known Sulak Sivaraksa) confronts contemporary concerns and issues (women’s rights, environment and conservation, social equity, justice, and so forth), reaching out to a society clearly much in need of spiritual nourishment. The proviso is that these “concerned” monks keep to the disciplinary charter; though how they do this while being “engaged” and “this-worldly” (as they are encouraged to do so) is not fully addressed — as are the inherent contradictions in this proposition.

Monks gain respect and veneration precisely because of a ritual separation from society at large, where the temptations of ordinary life are minimized. Even Buddhadasa Bhikkhu — particularly popular among the Thai middle class — preferred a forest hermitage for his contemplation and scholastic pursuits.

The very problems confronting modern monks have been a blurring of spatial boundaries with the gradual attrition from the simple, distanced, reclusive life. In other words, the increasing worldliness of monks has created its own problems — as it did in the West among Protestant and Catholic clergy. There was even talk of whether Buddhist monks should be allowed to marry if they are going to be more engaged in the world.

In the matter of “keeping the faith”, the modern-day problems are indeed complicated, but the solution is simple if we go back (forward?)

to the essence of (timeless) dhamma practice. In the present “crisis” we need to understand the practical implications of the monastic discipline, and its limitations on worldly engagement. It is not possible to have it both ways. The Theravada monastic discipline is to ensure that being a monk, even these days, is unambiguous and without hindrance. It is in ambiguous situations that confusion arises.

For most ordinands, keeping the minutiae of the discipline is not easily done and disciplinary infractions occur with increasing frequency because monks, after all, are human. There are many Thais who have fallen into a crisis in “faith” over the condition of the contemporary Bhikkhu Sangha. Some even believe that most of the remaining good monastic teachers have now established branch monasteries outside the country, especially in the West, while one or two alleged monastic miscreants were forced to flee the country out the back door for fear of facing criminal proceedings. But, looking at the situation overall, these cases were few and far between. In regard to the question of women in Thai Buddhism, the author is most articulate: “It boils down to power: the male-dominated order wants to continue excluding women from entering and sharing monks’ sphere of authority” (p. 287). It is not that the author is necessarily incorrect in her moral assessments — it is more a question of whether all concerns, even more conservative ones, have been adequately considered.

The progressive position is that if the Sangha’s administrative structure (and its geriatric monk-administrators) is not in accordance with modern norms and values, it should be changed. After all, Thailand is rapidly changing. The same argument is heard over the necessity of providing secular education to monks to enable them to keep abreast with the informational world-in-change, especially information technology, though issuing bachelor’s degrees to ambitious monks, or a new digital monastic order (“Cyber-Sangha”) does not, in itself, ensure a “better fit” monastic order that is more able to respond to contemporary social needs than now.

There would be little to disagree about the subtext in the book, with its concerns for much-needed reform, which also seeks connection back to the untainted origins of the teachings. The book is about the concern

in making “faith” work in the present; making the varieties of Thai Buddhism relevant and meaningful in today’s world in order to “keep faith”. Thai Buddhism, in a sense, may be at a “crossroads”, but to my mind it all depends on perspectives, ways of seeing and understanding, and which particular road one is looking down.

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