

Chapter 4

Buddhadasa and His Interpretation of Buddhism

Buddhadasa has been called a religious reformer who sees the deeper implications of Buddhism. His interpretation of Buddhist doctrine makes him one of the most outstanding monks not only in Thailand but in Buddhist Asia as a whole.¹ Swearer compare him to Nagarjuna, the great Buddhist thinker and commentator of Mahayana Buddhism of the second century A.D.² It is generally recognized that Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism advocates a return to original Buddhism a strategy to adjust Buddhism to the needs of the modern world. This direction, according to Swearer, has important long-range consequences for the development of Buddhist thought in Thailand.³

It is impossible to separate Buddhadasa's thought from his interpretation of Buddhism. Almost all of his writings and preachings concentrate purposively on the interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. Buddhadasa points out that when it is claimed that religion is unintelligible or irrelevant for the everyday life of contemporary man, religion itself, particularly, the problem of the "meaning" of religious language is partly to blame. The significance of the interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, for Buddhadasa, goes far beyond the simple problem of communication. It is rather a problem of making religious forms "come alive" in modern world. The essence of the so-called "crisis of religion", is, thus, the problem of religious language.⁴

As an initial step to resolve this crisis, Buddhadasa interpreted the Pali Canon (the original Buddhist Scripture). A further step was to evolve a constructive criticism of Thai Buddhism, in which he attempted a more relevant interpretation and application of Buddhist teachings.

1 Swearer, D.K., "Reformist Buddhism in Thailand." in *Fifty Years of Suan Mokkh*. Suan Usom Foundation ed. (Bangkok: Suan Usom Foundation, 1982), p. 486.

2 Swearer, D.K., trans. & ed. *Dhammic Socialism* (Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1986), p. 14.

3 Swearer, D.K., "Recent Trends in Thai Buddhism" in *Buddhism in the Modern World*. Dumoulin H. and Maraldo J. eds. (New York: Macmillan & Co.,1976), p. 104.

4 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Upasak Tee Mee Au Nai Kam Puud* [The Obstacle exist in Words],

This present chapter does not aim to deal directly with the whole contents of his teachings. I will not attempt the theologian's task. My perspective on him will be a sociological one. Thus one major focus will be to attempt to understand why Buddhadasa felt a reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrine was necessary, and how he has attempted to interpret the relevance of Buddhism for contemporary society. It will be useful to divide this chapter into three parts: the first part contains a summary of the underlying ideas and substantive methods of Buddhadasa's interpretation, the problem of his reinterpretation, and the consequences of misinterpretation; the second part deals with Buddhadasa's criticism of Thai Buddhism. In the final section I will examine the new perspective of his interpretation for Thai society.

Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism has been studied in recent years by anthropologists, theologians, and philosophers, but few have attempted to present his interpretation as well as its problems from the perspective of its own. As I already mentioned the significance of Buddhadasa's interpretation goes far beyond the simple problem of communication. Rather it addresses the problem of religious language per se. Therefore it is necessary to investigate this problem directly with reference to his works in order to understand what he considers as the cause of religious crisis. For these reasons, I choose to refer only to Buddhadasa's original works.

Buddhadasa's Reinterpretation of Buddhism

A consideration of Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism shows quite clearly that the central focus of his interpretation concerns the problem of meaning. This focus is highly complex as I have already mentioned in chapter 3. After Buddhadasa examined original texts of the Tipitaka (the original Buddhist Scripture) and practiced meditation at an abandoned temple, he realized the profound difference between the traditional Buddhist teachings and the doctrine in the Tipitaka, which he attempted to understand in terms of his own practical experiences. He thus became strongly committed to interpretation. Although in the initial

stage his interpretation focused on the meaning of language, later he worked on the more doctrinal aspects. It should be noted that during the first thirty years the development of his thoughts was not quite systematic. Buddhadasa first introduced the concept of his interpretation in 1966.⁵ *Phasa- Khon Phasa-Tham* (Everyday Language and Dhamma Language) is one of his most important essays. He introduced a distinction between the meaning of everyday language and religious language (dhamma language). The so-called concept of Phasa Khon-Phasa Tham is very important for understanding the structure of Buddhadasa's interpretation.

A General Understanding of Buddhadasa's Interpretation

Buddhadasa's concept of interpretation has nothing to do with a systematic presentation of language analysis in the context of Western philosophical terms and methods. He is not a philosopher in the Western sense. According to Seri Phongphit, he is a "Guru" or a "Master" who experience the Buddhist way of life and wants to transmit his comprehension to others.⁶ Buddhadasa's argumentation centers around the distinction between everyday and dhamma language. Because of this distinction Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhist teaching is generally recognized in both lay and monastic circles as a creative interpretation which offers one of the most fruitful possibilities for the development of Thai Buddhism as a whole.⁷

An exploration of Buddhadasa's methodological interpretation helps us to comprehend the breadth and dynamism of his interpretation. We cannot pursue Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism without understanding the structure and function of his conception.

5 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Phasa-Khon Phasa-Tham* [Everyday Language and Dhamma Language]. (Bangkok: Aksornsampan, 1967). See Pun Chongprasert, *Khon tay lae mee vinyan rue-mai* [Whether soul exists after death]. (Smutprakarn: The Buddhist Reform Organization, 1971), Preface.

6 Phongphit, Seri, in *Fifty Years of Suan Mokkh*. ed. by Suan Usom Foundation, Bangkok: Suan Usom Foundation, 1982, p. 429.

7 Swearer, D.K., in *Fifty Years of Suan Mokkh*. ed. by Suan Usom Foundation, Bangkok: Suan Usom Foundation, 1982, p. 496.

From the beginning Buddhadasa has clearly professed his commitment to understand and interpret Buddhism. He said that the main obstacle of Thai traditional Buddhism in making the Buddhist doctrine relevant to daily life lies in the very complicated problem of religious language. Religious language has special meanings which need to be interpreted by particular means. This is due to the fact that all profound words used in Buddhist doctrine, while identical to the everyday language of the people, also carry abstract and spiritual meanings. Most of all, it is another mode of meaning different from everyday language.

The Concept of Interpretation: Everyday and Dhamma Language

Buddhadasa noted that a sage or the Buddha naturally turn to the use of everyday expressions when they discover a spiritual insight or a new aspect of knowledge. They inevitably borrowed the spoken language of people at that time in communicating their new experiences but gave a new meaning to it. This new meaning is spiritual. It is another level of meaning which can be characterized by the intangible, or the non-physical; it is somehow impersonal and does not refer to "person" or "self".⁸ This special mode of meaning is what Buddhadasa calls the "dhamma language" (*Phasa Tham* means the language of dhamma). By contrast, the meaning of ordinary language is based on sensory things and to be used under ordinary circumstances. It serves only physical and tangible things or possesses moralistic meanings. Buddhadasa names it the "everyday language" (*Phasa Khon*).⁹ The categories of everyday and dhamma language do not refer to two different realities. Rather they are different ways of understanding the meanings of language. That is, there are two possible modes of meaning in a single word: one is the meaning the word has in everyday language; the other is the meaning that the same word has in dhamma language.

Buddhadasa emphasizes the differences in the twofold language meaning system, and stresses that the two levels must not be fused. Whenever they are confused, it is almost

8 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Phasa-Khon Phasa-Tham* [Everyday Language and Dhamma Language]: 1967, pp. 4-6.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

impossible to understand Buddhist teachings in the Buddhist sense. This is because the distinction in the levels of meaning points to distinctions in the ways of thought, understanding, and practice.

Buddhadasa noted that because of the depth and abstraction of the spiritual meaning of the teaching and the limited perspective of human language, the profound aspects of the teaching cannot to be taken literally. The confusion of interpretation, according to Buddhadasa, occurs when the profound is taken literally. He asserts that the significance of Buddhist teachings rest on spiritual meanings although it is transmitted in the form of ordinary language. The Tipitaka was recorded with ordinary language but it does not derive its meaning from ordinary language.¹⁰ This is the problem.

Buddhadasa further indicates that there are a great many aspects of profound teachings most people do not understand because they are familiar only with everyday language. Moreover, when the Tipitaka is interpreted in terms of everyday language it is incomprehensible. He observes that the confusion between Buddhism and popular beliefs, and traditional formulations of Thai Buddhism consisting of miracles, and supernatural accounts, result because the Buddhist doctrine is not interpreted in terms of dhamma language. He suggests that the discrepancy between Buddhist miraculous stories and the accounts of modern science is inconsequential since these stories were not written as scientific accounts but rather to illustrate spiritual meaning. Therefore, whatever cannot be understood in ordinary language and considered as "myth" or "supernatural" could be "scientific" in the sense of dhamma language. That is, for Buddhadasa, in the deepest sense of traditional interpretation of Thai Buddhism, the form of everyday language which seems to be fundamentally misguided, is based on the standards of everyday and dhamma language.

Buddhadasa is concerned with the significance of dhamma language, and firmly maintains that everyday language is not the Buddhist language. He states however, that we should not understand these two layers of language as an extreme polarity such that everyday

¹⁰ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Sandassetabbadhamma* (Chaiya: Dhammadana Foundation, 1973), pp. 189, 204.

language is incorrect, while dhamma language is correct. Both the literal meanings of doctrine and their underlying spiritual meanings must be taken into account in order to prevent the ambiguous confusion between the two modes of meaning.

Moreover, notes Buddhadasa, the Tipitaka contains both possible meanings of the doctrine. There are many examples in the Tipitaka which show that Buddha Himself taught dhamma using the two levels of meaning.¹¹ Buddhadasa stresses that it behooves us to be careful and to study diligently for correctly separating the particular teachings which have to be interpreted and the general teachings which needs no interpretation. But both of them were expressed in ordinary language.

The above notion reflects not only how an ordinary language may have two different modes of meaning but also implies that Buddhadasa understand language at two levels of meaning and form them basically as a key concept of his interpretation of Buddhism: the everyday and the dhamma language.

It is true that the particular concept of Buddhadasa's interpretation which lies behind the extensive use of the two categories of everyday and dhamma language is not new. This distinction is rooted in the traditional Theravada conception of two approaches in understanding Buddhist teaching, namely, *puggladhitthana* and *dhammadhitthana* (personification, abstraction),¹² *lokiya-vohara* and *lokuttrava-vohara* (mundane,

11 Buddhadasa mentions both the Buddha's Own Word and the evidences in Sutta in order to demonstrate that Buddha utilized conventional language to communicate with ordinary people who in turn attempted to gain Buddhist teaching with their old beliefs so that they could better comprehend the meaning of their faith. Ordinary language enables them to approach the profound meaning gradually if they are provided with an appropriate explanation. As for the profound meaning (dhamma language) Buddha taught to the intellectuals who could understand another level of meaning. Thus the Tipitaka contains both possible meanings of the doctrine.

If Buddhadasa's observation has validity the question can be raised in any perspective assumed about the original form of the high intellectual Buddhist teaching or "old Buddhism" providing only to the certain group of intellectual elite which has been imagined by certain scholars, including Max Weber.

12 *Lokiyavohara* (personification) means giving a dhamma discourse by a relative means, that is, by talking an object or a person as the demonstration point. It always involves morality teaching through fairy tales, biographies, or tales of miracles. *Lokutravohara* (abstraction) is the method of discourse based on dhamma principle, or conditions.

supramundane), etc and implies two levels of understanding.¹³ And from our exploration we find that Buddhadasa uses these traditional principles as a base to set up his own hermeneutical principle. However, Buddhadasa's concept functions differently from conventional principles of interpretation which stand as a general reference of traditional formulations of Buddhism.

The categories of Phasa Khon and Phasa Tham (everyday and dhamma language) are more dynamic, flexible and go against the tendency towards stereotypical rigidity. They can be used in other ways than in terms of language. The concept of Phasa Khon and Phasa Tham open up several dimensions of Theravada tradition because they produce an openness toward the non-literal dimension of the Buddhist teaching. This allows Buddhadasa to develop a holistic understanding of Buddhist teaching from the perspective of human existence, whereby the highest ideals of Buddhism can be fused into the course of living in everyday life.

Thus the emphasis on the distinction between everyday and dhamma language is important for various reasons. It allows Buddhadasa to translate Buddhist teaching into two levels of understanding and practice. As a result, his concept is more than a means employed by Buddhadasa to criticize particular ideas and practices within Thai Buddhism. It also functions as the principle method which allows him progress beyond the confines of Theravada tradition to discuss the similarities between Buddhism and other religions.

However, it cannot be said that Buddhadasa has set up a new methodology or interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. Instead it is fair to say that Buddhadasa has built on the traditional principles in order to arrive at a more holistic interpretation of Buddhist teachings from the perspective of everyday life.

13 The traditional Theravada conception of two levels of dhamma expounding is as follow:

- 1) Puggladhitthana-Dhammadhitthana (exposition the teaching in terms of persons and of ideas)
- 2) Lokiya and Lokuttara Vohara (mundane-supermundane exposition)
- 3) Sammuti-sacca and Paramattha-sacca (conventional truth and absolute truth)
- 4) Khanikavada-Sassatavada monentary saying and eternal saying)
- 5) Ditthadhammikatha and Samparayikattha Vohara (the meaning that can be experienced here and now; the meaning concern about the life to come).

Religious Language: the Problem of Interpretation

The problem of Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism can be formulated at two levels: one of meaning and one of translation.

Problems at the Level of Meaning

Buddhadasa places strong emphasis on the problem of the "meaning" of religious language, as well as on the confusion of communicating and expressing its meaning. He points out that although religious language is not a "private" language, it is ordinary language used in "another context" with qualifications which try to reflect "another experience". However, the difficulty rests on the breadth and abstraction of its spiritual meaning which cannot be exhaustively expressed in the limited scope of human language. Buddhadasa observes that the spiritual meaning of teaching (dhamma language) is not the literal meaning of the words. It cannot be completely understood through study but through realization and experience in daily life.¹⁴ Therefore any interpretation inevitably encounters the following problems of understanding the meaning of religious language:

Borrowing and giving a new meaning

Borrowing and giving a new meaning to ordinary language generates two different levels of meaning. This is caused by the narrow and limited perspective of ordinary language which is insufficient to encompass the wider and more abstract dimensions of spiritual meanings. For instance, the word "enemy" in everyday language means someone whom we hate or who wants to harm us but its spiritual meaning is our own incorrect view or misdirected mind. Our own mind and the misuse of it is our real enemy, not someone else outside. It can be the most harmful enemy which we insufficiently know.

Moreover, giving a new meaning to ordinary language also creates a gap or mismatch

¹⁴ Buddhadasa Buikkhu, *Obroom Phra Thammatut* [Training Monks for Mission Vol. I-III], (Chaiya: Dhammadana Foundation, 1969), p. 28.

between the name and the new spiritual meaning: the new meaning is wider and more abstract, while the name used to call it remains the same. For example, the word "eating" in everyday language means to take in nourishment through the mouth in the usual way. But eating on dhamma level refers to a wide variety of sensual attachments, it can be done by way of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. The eye sees a form, the ear hears a sound, the nose smells an odor, and it is much like eating. More problematically, the wider the spiritual meaning becomes, the looser it is. Therefore, it can be interpreted in great many ways.

The inadequacy of ordinary language and its limited scope play a part in putting the profound level of explanation of Buddhist doctrine in the negative form because it can not be actually said that "such a thing is anything" in the scope of human language. It is "not" this and "not" that. Therefore many Buddhist scriptures clarify the doctrine by a negative reference to the everyday expression. This leads to many other problems resulting in various misinterpretations of doctrine.

The simplicity of the meaning

Buddhadasa points out that the simple meaning of the language can become the obstacle for access to the deep meaning. Because people tend to overlook common matters, Buddhadasa emphasizes that the profound meaning of the doctrine frequently exists in the simple words that people do not take into account. Thus the simplicity of the meaning of language can shade or obscure the depth and useful meaning of the doctrine.

The variety of meaning

Buddhadasa notes that one should not rush to take one meaning of a word as a definite central meaning because one word can have many varieties of meanings. More frequently, in Buddhist language the meaning of a word is in the context of its use. For example, the word "death" has three possible meanings: the first is the meaning people generally understand, namely, physical death; the second is more profound; it is the meaning in terms of morality such as loss of virtue or sinking in vice; the third one is the spiritual

meaning, which expresses the complete extinction of suffering.¹⁵

Meaning beneath meaning

In Buddhadasa's sermons, he often mentions the "essence" of meaning. It is true that sometimes explanations or definitions do not clearly state the essence of things or events. Although there are many ways to express the essence of things, frequently, in profound dhamma, the "essence" is not directly perceived from the general literal explanation. It is likened to a visual experience of waves which are in motion but beneath which is stillness (the waters are still non-motion). Thus the meaning of what is directly observed does not lie in the observed. Beneath the common meaning of everyday language is another layer of meaning which constitutes the essence of the message.¹⁶

Change in the meaning

Buddhadasa notes that the meaning of religious language can be transformed from time to time or with geography, and social conditions. For example, the word "nibbana" existed in many religions in India both before, and at the time of Buddha, but its intended meaning was not the same as in Buddhism. The meaning of "nibbana" was developed through the progress of spiritual innovation.¹⁷ Thus the meaning of religious words can be uncertain even in a dictionary.

15 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Etappaccayata* (Chaiya: Dhammadana Foundation, 1973), p. 198.

16 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Kaay Thammabudr* [Dhamma Successor Camp], (Chaiya: Dhammadana Foundation, 1975), p. 173.

17 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Patipata Paritat* [Practice Review]. (Chaiya: Dhammadana Foundation, 1976), p. 225.

The similarity of a contrary meaning

According to Buddhadasa the difference between things can be determined by various factors including contrary meanings. He remarks that the opposite meaning of dualism is valid only in the ordinary language such as gain and lose, good and bad, happiness and suffering. But in dhamma language this is not so. Differentiation and dichotomies are human formulations. Nature recognizes no boundaries and no division. Thus contrary meanings at the everyday language can be insignificant at the dhamma level.¹⁸ For example, saying like "heaven is hell", "death before death", or "laughing is crying" are dhamma expression which have special meanings. More importantly, they are in contrast to the meaning of ordinary language. Buddhadasa points out that these paradoxies cause one of the most arduous problems in interpreting the doctrine.

Inexpressible meaning

Buddhadasa often insists that there are many profound aspects of meaning of the doctrine which cannot be exhaustively expressed because they are so abstract that they defy human description.¹⁹ He suggests that the more we talk about the profound meaning of doctrine the more incomprehensible it. Zen say the same thing, what is Zen? and what people can answer is still not Zen. Such is the difficulty of grasping and expressing all the meaning of the teachings.

18 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Sawan nanlae kua Narok* [It is Heaven that is Hall], (Bangkok: Dhammabucha, 1973), p. 9.

19 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Obroom Phra Thammatut* [Training Dhamma for Mission]. 1969, p. 28.

Problems on the Level of Translation

Another crucial problem in interpreting Buddhist teachings rests on the problem of translation into other languages particularly from Pali, an ancient Indian language, to Thai. He indicates that in dhamma the literal meaning of words cannot be taken as a definite determining factor. The "essence" has to be the basis of meaning. From this standpoint it can be said that Buddhadasa rejects a word for word translation of the doctrine which is at present the only one approach of translation existing in Thai tradition today.

Buddhadasa comments that Buddhist scholars who worked with Pali texts commit themselves to the literal meaning of the words in a dictionary. Their understanding of the doctrine seem to be limited to the definition of words; what goes beyond than literal translation are not comprehended. Therefore, they hardly realize the existence of the other different mode of meaning which is hidden. Thus every translation from the original language to another language encounters many dangers of referring to unsuitable meanings. Consequently, there is no chance to interpret the doctrine from the second language into the daily life for ordinary people while preserving the essence of the doctrine.

Moreover, Buddhadasa points to the fact that Buddhist teaching was an oral tradition for many hundred years before it was written down in the form of Buddhist Scripture. Then it was continually transcribed for more than 2000 years. Therefore taking the literal meaning of a word as a decisive factor can simply lead to a misinterpretation of the whole set of doctrines.

Buddhadasa insists firmly on the significance of comprehending the meaning of language because according to him understanding the meaning of language influences the way people interpret the world and, to an extent, it shapes their perception of reality. All of his writings and preachings are attempts to communicate and express the meaning of religious language. At the same time he stresses that the profound meaning of doctrine cannot be attained only through understanding the language. Terms are borrowed from ordinary language and are given new meanings which attempt to provide some general guidance. For

Buddhadasa, dhamma is not something that can be transmitted in words but must be discovered for oneself.

Buddhism, according to Buddhadasa, is not found in the Tipitaka, manuals, nor in rites and rituals. It is a way of life or a system of practice. It is to be lived and not only to be studied. Enlightenment can be attained without literacy or studying the Tipitaka.²⁰ Dhamma does not exist in any scriptures but in life.²¹ This involves conscientious conduct and doing one's duty in everyday life. The search for adequate standards of action, is at the same time a search for personal maturity and social relevance. The answers to religious questions can be sought in various spheres of secular art and thought. That is, understanding the true value of life helps man realize and take responsibility for his own fate. This is actually learning and practising dhamma in itself. Understanding the truth of life means obtaining the ultimate goal of Buddhism (nibbana) without having to know the Tipitaka or what they are getting is called.²² This realization leads him to the process of the simplification of the whole set of the doctrine so that it may be realized by everyone here and now.

We can thus see the perspective from which Buddhadasa blends Buddhist teaching with everyday life. He does not attempt to point out any social aspect of Buddhist teaching but demonstrates that an understanding of the broader sphere of life reveals a central social dimension.

The Consequence of Misinterpretation

Personal Religious Life

Buddhadasa strongly asserts that so long as the Buddhist doctrine is not interpreted in terms of dhamma language there is not only no opportunity to amalgamate the whole set of Buddhist doctrine to everyday life but also the perception of teaching must be based on faith

20 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Patipata Paritat*. 1976, p. 216.

21 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Obroom Phra Thammatut* [Training Dhamma for Mission]. 1969, pp. 26-27

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 216-220.

because only at the level of dhamma language the meaning of teaching can be expressed independently from "faith". People can thus gain and experience the teachings for themselves at any moment in their daily lives. For example, heaven and hell in everyday language are realms which can be experienced only after death. Most people spend large amounts in merit making in order to be able to enter heaven. But in dhamma language heaven and hell refer to happiness and suffering in the present life. Thus they are to be found in everyone's own mind and may be experienced any time at all.

Further, Buddhadasa notes that when the spiritual meaning of the doctrine is not explained, the real purpose of the teaching can not be known. People are then led to expect something different from what Buddhism can actually offer. Buddhadasa points out the example of the majority of Thai Buddhists who do not understand the aim of merit making, thus they make merit and expect something in return in the form of rewards such as fortunes, happiness in this life and the next life. Frequently they hope to get back a thousand times more than what they give. They are acquainted only with how to get and how to take. It is the religion of getting and taking. That is not Buddhism. The giving in order to wipe out selfishness, for them, is incomprehensible. Therefore, such people are not successful in religious life. They cannot gain fully from Buddhism in their daily lives because they do not know its spiritual meaning.

Moreover, Buddhadasa observes that the result of the separation of the doctrine between monks and laymen is that the teaching cannot be illustrated in terms of spiritual meaning. The high level of dhamma or Lokutra (supramundane) is for monks and the low level or Lokiya (mundane) is for householders.²³ For example "nibbana" in traditional interpretation is understood as a mirage city or a place where one's every wish is fulfilled. It presents another reality too "far away" from the practical needs of man's daily life. Particularly, it seems to be inaccessible for the householders in this life. Therefore, nibbana has been considered to be the subject of study for monks. Ordinary people should satisfy themselves by performing the moral precepts (five Sila), merit making and rituals. For Buddhadasa, nibbana in dhamma language can be realized by everyone here and now, and

23 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Tua-ku Khong-ku* [I-Mine], (Bangkok: Suwichan, 1962), p. 8.

refers to a state of mind free from unsatisfactory conditions. Any time that one is free from defilement (greed, hatred, and delusion) produce problems, unsatisfactoriness, or suffering. Nibbana appears in mind. If one attains the truth of life, then his state of mind contains peace and wisdom. There is no suffering at all. The nibbana state is permanent.

Religious Levels

In Buddhadasa's view religious practice without an understanding of its real meaning simply becomes a ritual which leads to a rise in what he calls "absurdity". Buddhism was increasingly mixed up with non-Buddhist elements. After a long period ritual assumes a more important role and increasingly encloses the primary form of Buddhism thus obscuring the essence of Buddhism. The real purpose of Buddhism is gradually changed and substituted. People hold Buddhism in a new view by taking visible external forms such as rituals or religious leaders. Once Buddhism loses its spiritual meaning it is no longer alive.

Buddhadasa gives the example of Buddhism's disappearance from India, which is often explained by reference to a lack of laymen organizations, the expansion of Islam, and the destruction of Buddhist monastic life. For Buddhadasa, these reasons are invalid because they are incapable of destroying the core of Buddhism. He points out that the misinterpretation of the doctrine is the real cause of the extinction of Buddhism in India. What Buddhadasa means is that the people were not provided with explanations of the important doctrine in the Buddhist sense, instead in the Hindu perspective.

For example, under the explanation about the cycle of birth and rebirth in terms of reincarnation, according to Buddhadasa, there is no Buddhism in India.²⁴ He also states that historical evidence tells us that the core of Buddhist doctrine has been explained by Hindu concept for more than 2000 years.²⁵ The third council of Buddhism in B.E.300 (B.C.200) reflects this problem. Up to now it is clear that, for Buddhadasa, misinterpretation of the

24 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Upasak Nai Karn Kao-chai Tham* [The Obstacle of Understanding of the Dhamma], (Samutparkarn: The Buddhist Reform Organization, no year), p. 44.

25 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Paticcasamuppada kua Arai?* [What is Paticcasamuppada?], (Bangkok: Dhammabucha, 1971, p. 57-60.

doctrine is one of the main cause of historical events.

Buddhadasa regards the divergence of religion into various sects or denominations including conflict between religions, as caused by a failure to recognize the "inner" meaning or the spirit of doctrine since only outer forms are being taken into account and practice. Therefore, people have no opportunity to understand or have no access to the core of their own religions, although they may hold some aspects of doctrine or rituals that seemingly manifest their understanding and grasp of the principle of the doctrine. The importance given to the different expressions of the meaning of doctrine compound religious conflicts. Eventually there is a split into different denominations and so religion itself becomes a divisive element in social life. This reality shows how religion fails in its actual purpose of fostering peace, understanding, and worldwide cooperation among human beings.

Social Level

It is interesting to note that Buddhadasa applies two levels of meaning not only in connection with religion but also in other spheres of human life. That is, the two categories of meaning can be used to refer to two distinct levels of the meaning of things.

Buddhadasa points out the significance of understanding the two levels of meaning of things. Knowing only the ordinary meaning of things is insufficient to help people understand life, society, and the world as they really are because it is only one side of things. He insists that the understanding of the two levels of meaning of things leads people to see the fundamental interrelatedness of things which generates a broader world view. This is necessary to achieve a fulfilling personal and social life. To appreciate an "inner" meaning Buddhadasa asks everybody to pay attention to and experience everyday events carefully and contemplatively in order to realize the true value of life and the real meaning of things in relation to life.²⁶ He notes that there is no other danger greater than the misunderstanding of things that is understood as correct. Man's incorrect view is what destroys him. Therefore,

²⁶ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Singtee Chao Lok Kaard Klan* [What the People of the World Lack]. (Chiang Mai: Buddha Nikhom, 1967), p. 15.

one should not rush to grasp and perceive only the superficial meaning.

From this point Buddhadasa goes further to consider the manifestation of the problem on the level of society and in such spheres as politics, peace, and war. With regard to politics, he understands it as intimately related to the variation of language meanings. That is, the meaning of politics varies with individual politicians who define politics, justice or even peace according to the special interests derived for their groups and their countries. The world, notes Buddhadasa, cannot attain peace when people do not understand the profound meaning of politics and peace. He observes that an insufficient understanding of the nature of peace and politics leads to war. Politics, for him, should not be anything other than a factor for peace or moral realization in order to help people live together peacefully. For Buddhadasa, understanding the two levels of meaning of one's life is an essential basis for the solution of problems at the level of the individual, the society and the world.

Buddhadasa and Criticism of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand

It appears that in general, Buddhadasa is critical of anything standing in the way of the fulfillment of the primary soteriological purpose of religion. His work is not limited at a broadside attack on traditional interpretations of Buddhist teaching, but also includes the criticism of various components of Thai Buddhist tradition. He opines that Buddhism has to be dynamic since once it becomes a sterile system it will lose its vitality. Buddhadasa's criticism of Thai Buddhism is a part of his attempt to return to original Buddhism. Further, it can lead us to a better understanding of the religious situation in Thailand.

Traditional Scriptures

From the doctrinal point of view the brunt of Buddhadasa's attack is directed toward Buddhaghosa, one of the greatest Buddhist commentators in the 5th century A.D., who is most acclaimed for providing a commentary and interpretative structure for the Theravada tradition, and the scholasticism of the Abhidhamma. Buddhadasa observes that in Thailand various scriptural commentaries which were later completed replaced the original Pali Text as

a source of religious authority, especially *Visuddhimagga* (the Path of Purity), a classical scriptural commentary of Buddhaghosa which is one of the most important texts of Buddhist study in Thailand. He declares that *Visuddhimagga* is one of the oldest historical evidence showing gradual use of Hindu concepts in interpreting Buddhist teachings.

Buddhadasa illustrates this argument through historical evidence, such as Buddha's Own Word, the Suttas in the Tipitaka. In his book he wrote the title "What is *Paticcasamuppada*" (1971) showing the distinction between what he considers the interpretation of Buddhist teaching using Hindu concepts and in the Buddhist sense. He is convinced that uncritical adherence to the Buddhaghosa orthodoxy has obscured a real encounter with the Buddha's dhamma. The criticism of *Visuddhimagga* implies that Buddhadasa goes against the belief and understanding of not only most Thai Buddhists but also Buddhists in general. Consequently, he is condemned by some groups of monks and laymen as an ungrateful and heretical person who destroys Buddhism.²⁷ On the other hand, his book has become an important reference which most of Buddhist students have to take into consideration.

Buddhadasa does not stop there, he does what nobody has dared to do, that is, he criticizes the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, one of the cardinal tripartite scriptures in the Tipitaka: *Abhidhamma*, *Sutta*, and *Vinaya Pitaka*. It is a fact that most of Thai Buddhist students believe that *Abhidhamma* is the Buddha's Own Word. They prefer to study this more carefully than the other two scriptures (*Sutta* and *Vinaya*), especially since World War II, when the Burmese tradition of studying and practicing Buddhism was introduced into Thailand. Buddhadasa insists that *Abhidhamma* was completed about 1300 years after the death of Buddha. He further criticizes that a large part of *Abhidhamma* is not only in line with Buddha's dhamma but it is also antithetical to the profound Buddhist teaching.²⁸

"What is *Abhidhamma*" (1971), is one of Buddhadasa's important research works which refers to many sources of evidence taken from the Tipitaka, including the existing

27 Suan Usom Foundation, ed., *Fifty Years of Suan Mokkh*. Bangkok: Suan Usom Foundation, 1982, p. 113.

28 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Aphetham Kau Arai* [What is *Abhidhamma*], (Bangkok: Dhammabucha 1974), pp. 73-74.

opinion of both eastern and western Buddhist scholars like Phra Nanatilaka (a German monk), Professor T.W Rhys Davids, who established the Pali-Text Society in London, and Hary Singh Gour, a well-known Indian scholar. His book is regarded as the most important operation on the Thai Theravada Buddhism. As a result of this criticism, Buddhadasa is opposed by some conservative monks and laymen. He is accused of being a great sinner, as daring to criticize the Abhidhamma Pitaka as wrong. However, the Abhidhamma Pitaka has been discredited in the view of many monks and laymen. The prestige of the Abhidhamma has been affected immensely ever since.

Buddhadasa also criticizes the Buddhologists including most eastern and western scholars who write about Buddhism because he feels that their writings contain many non-Buddhist concepts. They generally use Hindu concepts to explain Buddhism, especially the concepts of kamma, birth and rebirth.²⁹ He acknowledges that it is very difficult to clearly distinguish between Buddhist and Hindu concept through only literal study of doctrine or historical evidences. This is because one of the most difficult points centres on the application of the same word which carries completely different meanings and goals: one meaning (the meaning in Hindu sense) maintaining the "self" or attachment to "self"; whereas another meaning (the meaning in Buddhism) maintains "non-self" and demolishing the idea of "self". This point, for Buddhadasa, is a border line between Buddhist and Hindu conception.³⁰

Education of Thai Sangha

Buddhadasa criticizes the education of Thai Sangha as superficial. He points out that the success of Thai Sangha educational institutions is generally measured by the number of such institutions in the cities and the rural areas and the number of monks (today reaching a total of hundreds of thousands). This, however, is not a true indication of the level of success because when the quality of education and the actual dissemination to foreign countries is considered, the Thai Sangha falls short of its goal of promoting Buddhist teaching. For example, Buddhadasa states that the study of Buddhism of the Thai Sangha, still emphasizes

29 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Tua-ku Khong-ku* [I-Mine], 1962, pp. 72-74.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8, 72.

many traditional-scriptural commentaries to serve as the main text and disregards the original texts like the Tipitaka. For Buddhadasa, it is aggravating to see how Buddhist students trust and devote their lives to these commentaries without ever examining their correctness and applicability. They do not acquire the critical awareness necessary to go beyond these commentaries.

Additionally, Buddhadasa notes that the Buddhist educational system of the Thai Sangha focuses mainly on the study of the Pali language using the traditional Pali commentaries in order that the self study of the Tipitaka after finishing formal education is assured. He observes that in reality, after finishing the education, most students pay no attention to the Tipitaka. Thus, the Buddhist knowledge of monks is still at the level of the traditional commentary. Consequently, the general laymen's understanding of Buddhism which is derived from monks, is no better than the Buddhist legends in commentary. Buddhadasa opines that the Thai Sangha lacks intellectual scholars who devote their lives to Buddhism. Therefore, there are only traditional monks. Buddhadasa observes that if the Thai Sangha continues to pursue this educational system, Thai Buddhism will not prosper and expand.

In his comparative observation of Thai Buddhism with Buddhism in Japan, Sri Lanka and Burma, Buddhadasa sees that there are monks in these countries who truly devote their lives to a profound study of Buddhism. These Buddhist scholars, including Lama monks in Tibet, have written Buddhist texts in English for different people around the world. Buddhism has expanded worldwide because of their works. Buddhadasa asks whether Thailand has scholars like these. Moreover, Japan has the most number of young Buddhist associations with Buddhist students working for worldwide dissemination of Buddhism. But in Thailand such activities are not initiated. He said that if the reason why it is not done is a lack of fluency in the English language, this is still excusable; but if the reason lies in insufficient knowledge of Buddhism then this is backwardness and therefore inexcusable.³¹

31 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Chum-num Kor-kit Idsara* (A Miscellany of Teaching). Bangkok: Klangwittaya, 1968.

Thai Sangha's Way of Living

Buddhadasa's articles show that he is not satisfied with the Thai Sangha's way of living. In Buddhadasa's view the Sangha is preoccupied with prestige, position, and comfort and they have little interest in the highest ideals of Buddhism. Most of the monks are more concerned with building new temples and governing the Sangha hierarchy than teaching the dhamma to the people. He strongly criticizes those monks who practice the magical art of fortune-telling or soothsaying for their own ends and he looks askance at a mechanistic use of merit-making and rituals that aim for the attainment of an immediate reward. Buddhist teaching is then capitalized for fortune and status. The strict monastic disciplines are diverted for prestige and fame and so Buddhism becomes a vehicle for worldly security. Most monks look at their education as a means to get an educational degree and build a career in the Sangha hierarchy; they do not aim at practicing for attainment of nibbana. They busy themselves with governing the younger monks who are provided with Buddhist education instead of a deep formation according to Buddhist principles.

Buddhadasa sees the problem of the deviated behaviors of the Sangha from the monastic disciplines can be solved if dhamma practice in accordance with the dhamma-vinaya is earnestly promoted. At the same time he requests that laymen can also be of great help if they would selectively support only those monks who really practice and follow the dhamma-vinaya and criticize those who deviate. He points out that the actual power that controls the monks is the people who provide for their four basic needs. Senior monks do not have so much power as people. Patronage of monks by the Sangha and the government will be meaningless if it is not backed by the people. Thus, if people see that any of the monks' behavior is not in line with dhamma-vinaya, they can stop supporting them. This is actually a private way of controlling monk's way of living.

Buddhadasa states that criticism and protestation for righteous construction does not contradict Buddhist principle since all of the monastic disciplines of Buddhist monks (227 disciplines) resulted from the people's criticism of the monks, or the monks criticism of

themselves.³²

Religious Dissemination and Government Policy

Buddhadasa does not agree with the government policy of propagation of Buddhism. He criticizes that the government asks the Sangha to teach and train the people to refrain from gambling, smoking, drinking, and all kinds of addictions including avoidance of obsessive sensual pleasures. But at the same time, the government allows the opening of nightclubs, sensual entertainment places, taverns, and tobacco factories in order to collect taxes from such businesses. Buddhadasa once said sarcastically that it was ridiculous that the government asked the Sangha to work against the government. If the government did all these unknowingly it could be regarded as carelessness and absurd. But if it did so in spite of knowing what it was doing, then it had to be said that the government was intentionally foolish.³³

Buddhism from a New Perspective

Having discussed the concept of Buddhadasa's interpretation and his criticism of Thai Buddhism, we are now in a position to examine Buddhadasa's teachings which will not only allow for a deeper understanding of a new perspective of Buddhist interpretation but will answer why Buddhadasa's teachings are perceived to be very concrete, and why they are seen as efficaciously fusing Buddhist teachings to the everyday concerns of the ordinary man. A systematic critique of the whole set of Buddhadasa's teachings, ideas and statements is beyond the scope of this study. A critique of Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism has already been done by Gabaude (1979) and Jackson (1988) in their respective exhaustive studies.³⁴ This section will only focus on some selections from Buddhadasa's writings which

32 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Chum-num Kor-kit Idsara* [A Miscellany of Teaching], 1968, pp. 303-304.

33 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Obroom Phra Thammathut* [Training Monks for Mission], 1971, pp. 139-140.

34 See Gabaude, Louis, *Introduction a l'hermeneutique de Buddhadasa Bhikkhu*. unpublished Ph.D thesis, La Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III, 1979. Jackson, Peter A., *A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1988.

have been cited by followers as having an influence on shaping their lives. These teachings can be illustrated in the way Buddhadasa discusses nibbana, work, and kamma.

Nibbana: the Ultimate Goal of Buddhism

Thai Traditional View of Nibbana

For the majority of Thai Buddhists nibbana is a state attained after death. It is often understood as the city of immortality -a place abounding in all sorts of good things, a place where one's every wish is fulfilled and everything one wants is immediately available.³⁵ Yet, nibbana is also generally seen as a goal far removed from the lay context. It is extremely difficult to attain nibbana in this life -the ordinary man must accumulate merits for many thousands of rebirths in the future before he can attain nibbana. Some people, moreover, regard not only nibbana as the annihilation of the whole material existence, but believe that the attainment of nibbana is beyond the reach of the laity, so it would be senseless to seek it. Only monks living in the forest may have any hope of achieving nibbana.³⁶ Significantly, this belief is even held by many monks at temples. At the same time, the concept of nibbana has been outside the realm of debate in traditional Thai Buddhism. The term nibbana itself is also often seen as a special sacred word, it is forbidden to discuss its nature -no one dares to think or speak of it easily.³⁷ Not only laymen but monks, have not questioned the meaning of nibbana in the belief that a plausible explanation of the term is not possible.

Buddhadasa's Interpretation of Nibbana

In contrast to the traditional Buddhist view of nibbana, Buddhadasa's conception is fundamentally world affirming. Buddhadasa argues that the traditional interpretation of nibbana is the meaning of everyday language. Nibbana in its spiritual meaning refers only to

35 Swearer: 1971, p. 64.

36 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Nippaan Tee Nee Lae Deav Nae* [Nibbana is Here and Now], (Bangkok: Dhammabucha, 1971), pp. 59-72.

37 Pun Chongprasert, *Arai Thuk Arai Phit* [What is Correct and What is Wrong], (Samutprakarn: Buddhist Reform Organization, 1982), p. 20.

this life and is open to all. It is not outside us as a place but inside us as internal state and experience attainable by man in this present existence. It is the natural state of freed-mind which everyone can experience by himself here and now.³⁸ The activity in the material world is a positive part of the religious effort to attain spiritual salvation. He emphasizes that there is no relation between nibbana and an after-death. Buddha himself attained nibbana before his death. Moreover, in the Tipitaka there is no account of nibbana after death. Through the concept of dhamma language Buddhadasa's interpretation of nibbana illustrates how the path of nibbana can be attained from the position of being an individual living in contemporary society. His concern for demystifying nibbana is partly reflected in his efforts to explain the meanings of the word "nibbana".

Meanings of the Word Nibbana

According to Buddhadasa, nibbana is an ordinary word used in a general way in Indian daily life, to indicate something becoming cool, something rendered harmless. It is used in reference to humans, animals, and inanimate objects. For example, a burning charcoal that has cooled down is called charcoal nibbana; a wild animal that has been tamed and is no longer dangerous is called nibbana.³⁹ Nibbana applied to man means coolness of the mind. Buddhadasa also points out that the term nibbana has not only been used in Buddhism but in many different sects and religions, both before and during the time of Buddha. The meaning accorded to the term, however, has been different for the various religious groups. For instance, in some sects, namely Kamasukhallikanuyoga, total absorption in sensuality is considered nibbana (sexual need is a hot state which cools down when satisfied); while in other sects nibbana is identified with deep concentration.⁴⁰ In Buddhism, according to Buddhadasa, nibbana refers to the absolute extinction of every kind of defilements (kilesa); the state of a free mind resulting from the complete elimination of the idea of self. This mental

38 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Thamma samrub Nuk Suksa* [Buddha-Dhamma for Student], (Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1969), pp. 30-32.

39 Ibid., p. 32.

40 Suan Usom Foundation: 1982, p. 520.

state is referred to as the ultimate coolness of mind.⁴¹

Nibbana: an Internal State Exists in Every Life

The most important result of Buddhadasa's contradictory view of nibbana as compared with the basic of traditional interpretation is that nibbana (coolness or normality of the mind) exists in everybody as a spiritual foundation at a certain level. It comes along with life and nurtures life to exist normally. He points out that nibbana can be attained at any moment that the mind becomes free from defilements (greed, hatred, and delusion) which cloud the mind with a sense of dissatisfaction or suffering (dukkha).⁴² It is not a supernatural condition but is the spiritual practice based on the principle of causality realized by Buddha. If one acts rightly through understanding this principle, it is going to the path of nibbana. Buddhadasa does not equate nibbana with the purified mind but with a state occurring in the mind when it is pure.⁴³

For Buddhadasa, freedom from defilement, at any moment, is temporary nibbana. Permanent cessation of defilement is perfect nibbana. People who experience the occasional freed-mind have tasted true nibbana, even momentarily. He also notes that the mind is basically peaceful but that defilements appear once in a while, thus tarnishing and causing the mind to lose its balance periodically. Being aware of this fact, individuals can perform correct practice that will enable them to extinguish suffering. Significantly, these practices are not equated with the imposition of burdens or even with temple visit requirements. It requires neither the special learning of the scripture or meditative practice.⁴⁴ This, however, does not imply that Buddhadasa denies a rigorous ascetic life or the systematic Buddhist meditation,

41 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Thamma samrub Nuk Suksa* [Buddha-Dhamma for Student], 1969, p. 32.

42 In Buddhist sense, suffering may be understood as any condition of life which is unpleasant, depressing, and difficult to bear, always contrary, causing problems, unsatisfaction, bodily and mental pain and sorrow, and always found in life -more specifically, in birth, old age, sickness, death, -in getting what one dislikes, in separation from (or losing) what one likes, and not getting what one desires. All these constitute suffering (dukkha). Pongsapitch, Amara, and others, *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*. Bangkok: no press, 1985, p. 26.

43 Buddhadasa, *Lak Puttasasana* [Principles of Buddhism], (Chaiya: Dhammadana Foundation, 1968), p. 286.

44 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Thamma samrub Nuk Suksa* [Buddha-Dhamma for Student], 1969, p. 39.

saying that few men are able to renounce the world to lead a strict religious life. At the same time, Buddhadasa does not entirely ignore scriptural study. He often uses classical texts as the basis of his teachings. However, he noted that if one studies the Tipitaka and does not realize its spiritual meaning, it is not Buddha-dhamma.

Nibbana in Everyday Life

According to Buddhadasa, attainment of nibbana is compatible with worldly involvement. Everyone can reach the goal by performing their everyday duties with a heightened sense of awareness. When one carries out every step of life with constant awareness its very essence will appear in his mind. If one lives in such a way, there is no way defilements appear in the mind because one has given up habits that allow them to arise. Living like this is the way to eliminate defilement which is known as living rightly.⁴⁵ Buddhadasa notes that defilements (kilesa) which pollute the mind have no essential existence but, like all other things exist dependently and when the conditions that permit them arise (the absence of mindfulness) is controlled, they have no chance to arise.

The mind, moreover, can be progressively freed from defilements in degree, and the individual can reach absolute freedom (nibbana) once the mind is completely freed from the threat of defilements. That is nibbana in which everyone should be interested, stated Buddhadasa. It is a natural way to extinguish suffering which everyone can practice according to their own ability -both monks and laymen.⁴⁶ It can apply to every area of activity and every aspect of life. The path to nibbana, for Buddhadasa, is not any kind of withdrawal from the world but at the midst of worldly activity.

Buddhadasa also argues that the separation of dhamma into those practised by monks for attaining nibbana and those by laymen who make their living in the world, is extremely wrong. They must be the same thing because the sufferings and defilements are the same. There is no difference between them. The attainment of nibbana transcends laity and

45 Ibid., p. 36.

46 Ibid., p. 38.

monkhood alike.⁴⁷ He saw, moreover, the layman's life is loaded with burdens and has more disturbing problems than monks who live in the temples or the forests. The laity are in greater need of nibbana to quench the suffering in daily life than monks. However, Buddhadasa does not reject the role of the monk but what he rejects is the traditional barrier between monks and laity.

Up to this point, it is clear that Buddhadasa makes no distinction between spiritual activity and material world. Nibbana is readily accessible to both monks and laymen. Through the broadest perspective of his interpretation of nibbana, religious and secular motivations are completely merged and inseparable.

Buddhadasa does not stop at this point, he pushes this insight to the ultimate limit by espousing the contemporariness of nibbana and suffering. In other words, Buddhadasa places nibbana within the very social world which is suffering and the cessation of suffering (nibbana) exists not only within each other but exists within our living body.⁴⁸ At any moment when sufferings arise one can find the key to cessation of suffering. He advises people not to go busily searching for nibbana in the monastery or in the forest because the cessation of suffering exists within suffering: the greatest coolness is gained through the greatest heat quenched.

Finally, Buddhadasa criticizes those Buddhists who believe that the attainment of nibbana is beyond their abilities not only for their ignorance of their religion but also for their ignorance of their own nature. These people, Buddhadasa argues, go through life without realizing the nibbana dimension that is closely associated with life itself and which helps them to lead normal lives. This misunderstanding prevents them to adopt what already exists in life to apply most beneficially for themselves.⁴⁹

47 Ibid., p. 39.

48 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Nai Samsara mee Nippaan* [In Samsara Exists Nibbana], (Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1970), p.2.

49 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Nippaan Tee Nee Lae Deav Nae* [Nibbana is Here and Now], (Bangkok: Dhammabucha, 1972), p. 72.

Work

One of the most striking features of Buddhadasa's interpretation is the concept of work. Buddhadasa raises work to a very important place and it is made somewhat inseparable from religious life. It is through work in the world, that dhamma is best expressed. Work and dhamma practice are not really two but one. Each position is an aspect of the truth. Through the conception of dhamma language, salvation and work come to be linked. Buddhadasa united them in a practical and simple teaching. Working for the sake of work has become the very sign of nibbana. Buddhadasa's idea of work made important advances with respect to the religious regulation of everyday life.

What is Work?

Buddhadasa saw that people generally know "work" only in a limited aspect. They know of its value no more than earning a living. For Buddhadasa "work" has a special meaning. All living things can exist through action and progress of action. The progress in the action is life and what makes the progress of life all the time is work. Work is the real entity of life.⁵⁰

According to Buddhadasa, life survives through responsibility for work, consciously and subconsciously. What is required for the survival of life is inherent in all kinds of living things: a part is in the form of instincts and the other depends on learning and studying. Work is essential for all types of livings. It is the ultimate thing that helps human beings and society survive. The meaning of work, according to Buddhadasa, has two levels: one is to survive, or what makes life survive, another is an essential thing for maintaining the society. Buddhadasa mentions the Pali words bearing the meaning of work: *kammanto*, *kipca*, and *ajivo*.⁵¹

50 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Ngang Kau Arai* [What is work?], (Surat Thani: Ratanamesri, 1987), pp. 11-14.

51 *Ibid.*, p.7,8, 20.
Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Mokkhadhamma Prayuk* (Chaiya :Dhammadhana Foundation, 1987), p. 541.

Kammanto	means the last thing absolutely unexemptable from being done
Kicca	means the working duty.
Ajivo	means the maintenance of life.

He points out that not only all these three words bear the meanings focused on what must be done and cannot be exempted but also "work" is dhamma in the third meaning, that is the duty. Buddhadasa praises work of all kinds. The great stress which he places on work when he said "work is an honorable thing, being supreme as the most essential thing which saves man and world".⁵² Work, for Buddhadasa, is not only an end in itself but a part of society.

Working is Practicing Dhamma

Buddhadasa gave a further insight into the concept of work when he interpreted work as a spiritual activity in everyday life. His view of work as integrated with the religious life is shown by his remark that working and practicing dhamma cannot be separated, they are one and the same thing. Nobody observes and realizes working as an opportunity to practice dhamma. On the contrary, people separate them absolutely. He points out that working in itself teaches everything. It illustrates the truth of life, depending on how cleverly we perceive. It gives knowledge and trains us with principle (sila), concentration (samadhi), and wisdom (panya) from the fundamental level to the end. That is, working is not simply necessary for the material world but also for the progress of spiritual life. There is no other bridge but work.

Moreover, Buddhadasa indicated that several items of dhamma are immediately practiced when people are working or completing their duties in daily life. They must possess dhamma of all types and levels even without realizing it. For example, when a person has the will to do something (sacca), pleasure at working (chanda), control of oneself in working (dama), endurance and perseverance (khanti), industriousness (viriyā), attention to the work (chitta), prudence and consideration (vimansa), solution of the problem in working (caga),

52 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *What is Work?*: 1987, p. 31-32.

and wisdom (panya), etc.⁵³ Such dhamma principles, according to Buddhadasa, are the ones people generally practice in their daily life to achieve what has to be done. There are no ways by which working can be separated from dhamma. Nobody can achieve any work without dhamma in it.⁵⁴ He insisted that the path to nibbana (the Noble Eightfold Path) and the essence for enlightenment (the Seven Bojjhngas) hold the same principle as the daily practice of people in general. There is nothing different in both context and principle. This is the way that Buddhadasa merges the central tenet of Buddhism into the world of everyday life, while also imbuing worldly activity with religious quality.

For Buddhadasa, there is no aspect of human activity as being indifferent to the achievement of the highest end of life. Work of all kinds and levels is dhamma: a farmer working in the rice-field is practicing dhamma of farmers, a laborer doing his work is practicing dhamma of labor. With such working the poor will transcend poverty and become well-to-do. Everybody can see by himself that work is really the supreme thing which saves them from all problems. Ironically, Buddhadasa said that in the rice field where farmers are working and sweating exists dhamma more than in a chapel performing a religious ceremony.

Working for the Sake of Work is the Path to Nibbana

Buddhadasa takes his unconventional interpretation one step further when he points out that working can provide laymen with direct access to nibbana. That is, the conscious development of mindfulness (sati) is interpreted as being integral to activity and work in daily life. He states that all work or everyday duties performed with awareness are regarded as having the same path to nibbana. No work which is considered trivial or low even keeping the body in a fit and clean condition such as eating, sleeping, excreting, and playing.⁵⁵ All are

53 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Paramatadhamma* [The highest level of the dhamma Vol.I]. (Chaiya: Dhammadhana Foundation, 1970), p. 278.

54 Suan Usom Foundation, *Fifty Years of Suan Mokkh Vol.II*: 1982, p. 38.

55 Buddhadasa gives an example for more detail explanation on this topic that when we are hungry, we eat; when the weather is hot, we escape it by going into a shade or taking a bath, all these are works because it is a duty of man to his physical life in order to relieve what is hard to endure to keep the physical suffering away.

work because they are important things for life.⁵⁶ They must be done with most care, and prudence. Lack of awareness while working is regarded as wholly bankrupting and damaging, since it is not possible to enter the path of nibbana. The attainment of the salvation is based on constant mindfulness and awareness in order to prevent the birth of greed, hate, ignorance, and selfishness (the birth of idea of self or defilement). This is the way to extinction of suffering (nibbana).

It is clear from the above that the basis of Buddhadasa's notion of work is the non-self-centred activity which he interpreted as a means for attainment to nibbana. Buddhadasa noted that the remarkable difference between working with the aim of practicing dhamma and working without such aim. The latter can become the cause of egoism, defilements, or even exploitation of others, whereas the former can become a means for eliminating selfishness. Buddhadasa calls this "working for the sake of work".

Working is Happiness in Itself

Buddhadasa noted that working for the benefit of work is the foundation for eliminating selfishness in all forms. Its essence is, working with the freest mind, awareness, and wisdom. Work would become a primary volitional content in attitude, and an enjoyable matter. For example, a farmer who realized the importance of working as the human duty or the supreme thing which can save him survive. He would be pleased with his rice farming from the beginning. Though the work is hard it will not become the cause of his suffering. When he digs the ground he is contented with the result of each digging. The pleasure and contentment in the result of the first digging is the motive for the second digging, and the process is repeated until he finishes his work. Having pleasure as the motive is the nourishment of the mind. He can work more and more. He is happy every time he works, having self-contentment and self-respect. Work in itself becomes an instrument to eradicate selfishness. This is the practicing of dhamma in working. People need not to go to the temple or receive any sermons because it is already there entirely in the work done. Buddhadasa saw

⁵⁶ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Tam Ngan Pua Ngan* [Working for the Sake of Work]. (Bangkok: Dhammabucha, 1979), p. 13.

that working is the whole deed, the deed for the progress of physical and spiritual life.⁵⁷ Working for the sake of work does not harm oneself and others from the beginning to the end.

In contrast, working for money, family, or even for religion is inferior because the ego and the sense of possession still exists. It is not the work for wiping out selfishness. In some sense, it implies the separation of work from life. People are pleased and happy only when they receive the expected benefit or honor. There must be worry, fear, strong desire, some compelling necessity, egoistic feeling, or waiting while working or as long as they have not achieved the expected result. Working could become a heavy burden, a deluding and disenchanting thing or even suffering. In deed, these feeling are the initial cause of the problem in working.

Buddhadasa noted that working for the sake of work is pure sacrifice. It is beneficial for oneself as well as others. Such practice of dhamma can be done by everybody everywhere and it is honored equally. In the sense of sacrifice, all kinds of works are equal in value.⁵⁸

As for the result from the work received in the form of money, praise, or even public benefit, Buddhadasa regards them as by-products of work because they are insignificant when compared with the spiritual and intellectual development through working. What we have in mind is Buddhadasa's interpretation of work which illustrates the gearing of social and religious thinking. Work as a means of fulfilling one's duty comes to be valued as an end in itself. It would be most interesting to analyse whether or not Buddhadasa's idea of work has any direct influence on economic value.

Kamma and Its Result

Traditional Belief in Kamma

⁵⁷ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Paramatadhamma Vol.I*, (Chaiya: Dhammadhana Foundation, 1970), p. 284.

⁵⁸ Suan Usom Foundation, *Fifty years Suan Mokkh Vol. II*: 1982, p. 106.

Kamma (intentional action), according to the majority of Buddhists in Thailand is evil deeds, bad luck, or unusual misfortune. Yet, it is generally believed that a person who has performed good or evil action (kamma) will receive its fruition by way of good and evil sooner or later as one will reap what one has sown. They also view that each person is in bondage and has a record both of good and evil kamma. One's life at present is the field where the fruits of one's previous kamma are being reaped, and new kamma are being planted.⁵⁹ Previous kamma here means action performed in the past both in this life and the remote past of many lives before this present one.

One's new kamma in this life will in turn form the conditions under which one will be reborn in future. There are no possibilities of avoiding the results of one's kamma. It will follow one wherever one goes or wherever one is reborn, as the wheels of the bullock-cart follow the hooves of the ox.⁶⁰ That is, once kamma is performed it becomes an unseen force capable of producing its consequence fruition which may appear in short-range or long-range. Kamma will not become annulled as long as its potency has not yet been exhausted by creating consequences.

Significantly, they also have the view that the condition of the poor, or some undesirable consequence because of their misdeeds which they did in a previous life cannot change until the kammic result has been fully worked out. Therefore, people make merit, giving alms to monks and donations to temples, believing that these are meritorious acts which lead to the accumulation of good kamma and so to a felicitous rebirth: one of prosperity, power, prestige, perfect health, beauty, and very little physical labor. The more merit one accumulates, the better future one can expect. Moreover, this belief is emphasized by monks in the temples, thereby giving a veneer of authority to this popular belief.

Buddhadasa's Idea of Kamma

59 Na-Rangsi, Sunthorn, *The Buddhist Concept of Karma and Rebirth*. (Bangkok: Mahamakut, 1976), p. 51.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Buddhadasa's idea of kamma contrasts sharply with the traditional Thai view. He denies not only the passive acceptance of kamma as an unavoidable result of the past fate but also denies that this kind of belief is not the true meaning of kamma in Buddhism, since this interpretation predates the Buddha.⁶¹

Buddhadasa argues that the traditional notion of kamma which puts the deeds in one life and the results in another one, is superstition, because it is beyond one's ability to control or improve anything. Moreover, one cannot evaluate oneself, as interpretations are given by priests. He points out that kamma in Buddhism is spiritual meaning. It is the subject of right here and now whether it is kamma or its results. For him, the action (kamma) and its result is contiguous. Indeed the fruition of an action exists in the action itself. Kamma in the Buddhist sense emphasizes the will while acting. The performer will receive the result of the action immediately and completely at the beginning of action. That is, doing good is good instantly and doing bad is bad in the act, both in mind and in deed. Other results following from such actions are regarded by Buddhadasa as by-products. He does not regard the present existence as a punishment for past sins but as the domain in which human beings actively control and improve their lives. He asserts that kamma and its result is not beyond understanding, rather that it is based on the law of cause and effect.

According to Buddhadasa, kamma in Buddhism focuses on action (kamma) here and now; and kamma is the ultimate and absolute source for all the good or evil things of this world. It is what differentiates people. This is the law of kamma. For him kamma and the law of kamma is the principle of being in one's own refuge, that is, taking refuge by ensuring the correctness of one's own deeds. It need not depend on anything; everything can proceed from the beginning to the end through correct action without being helped or interfered with by any supernatural things even the so-called "God". Since these are completely opposite to the principle of taking refuge in oneself. There is, moreover, no power to cancel out the power of kamma. Kamma and the law of kamma are what determines life here and now, no matter whether it is happiness or suffering, wealth or poverty, good luck or bad luck. Buddhadasa pointed out that it is only through the correct understanding of kamma and the

61 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Buddha-Dhamma for Students*: 1969, p. 21.

law of kamma that one's own refuge is attained and this is the only way to achieve the goals of every human action. Kamma in this sense is comprehensible and it is in one's ability to control and improve one's own life.

Buddhadasa, however, does not conclude his interpretation of kamma at this level but raises it to another stage of meaning by undertaking an interpretation of another remarkable kamma, that is the third kamma (the first and the second kinds of kamma are good and evil kamma). The third kamma, according to Buddhadasa, is the ultimate truth and a kind of kamma that transcends good and evil kamma.⁶² He stated that the teaching of good deeds and evil deeds is taught in almost every religion. It is the general moral principle underpinning social morality. It is not the absolute extinction of suffering and not the central meaning of kamma in the Buddhist sense.⁶³ He indicates that the kamma that Buddha aimed at teaching is the third kamma: the kamma (action) that serves to neutralize good and evil kamma, the kamma that leads one to nibbana.⁶⁴ This kind of kamma is not found in other religions.

The third kamma, according to Buddhadasa, confers a higher benefit: it frees one from the strictures of a world defined along the lines of "good and evil".⁶⁵ That is, it enables the individual to do good or perform his duties in daily life free from attachment to its fruition. Finally, Buddhadasa points out that the Noble Eightfold Path is the systematic practice of leading one's life in accordance with the third kamma;⁶⁶ it leads to a life which is above good and evil kamma where work is done for the sake of work (see the interpretation of work and nibbana).

62 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Kamma Nua Kamma* [Kamma Beyond Kamma]. (Bangkok: Dhammabucha, 1977), p.2.

63 Ibid., pp. 22-23.

64 Ibid., p. 22.

65 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Upasak Tee Mee Au Nai Kam Puud* [Obstacles in the Speaking Word], (Bangkok: Arun Press, 1968), p.34.

66 The Noble Eightfold Path consists of ; right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.