

Chapter 6

The Movement and Its Followers

Having attempted to understand the dynamic, the characteristics, and the role of Buddhadasa movement in modern Thai society, we will now examine the social composition of the movement which partly can be derived from an analysis of social background of the followers, including the impact of the movement on their ideas and practices. The social composition of the followers also reflects the actual operation of the movement as well as its ability to expand. The main questions we seek to answer in this chapter are: who are Buddhadasa's followers? what are their social backgrounds? why do they join the movement? what are their perceptions of Buddhadasa's teaching? and what is its impact on them? First, something needs to be said about the nature of data to be used.

The data presented in this chapter has been collected through questionnaires, interviews, and personal participation with Buddhadasa's followers over a period of two years (1988/1989). The important instrument was an eleven-page, 43 item-questionnaire developed after I first surveyed and visited Buddhadasa's monk-followers and their activities in six temples in four provinces of Thailand: Surat Thani, Bangkok, Nakhon Ratchasima, and Chiang Mai.¹ I wrote this in Thai language, pretested with monks and laymen at Chiang Mai, and corrected it. The questions were of two kinds: those that were "choice" and those that were "open ended". The interviews were all taped and the recordings were later transcribed. Because of the uncertain size of Buddhadasa's followers, systematic sampling methods were not used. Fifty in-depth interviews (10 monks and 40 laymen) were conducted and generally took place at 6 selected temples.² From each selected temple, a sample population from laymen, who indicated that they were interested in or disseminated Buddhadasa's teaching, was selected by taking two persons who came to the temple during a holiday. A sample population of monks was also derived from six temples in four selected provinces. Ten monks

1 Surat Thani in the South Region is where Suan Mokkh (Buddhadasa's forest monastic centre) is located; Bangkok in the Central Region is where the main propagation centre is established; Nakhon Ratchasima in the Northeast Region and Chiang Mai in the North Region were selected as areas of field research because here, a more active followers hold their community development activities.

2 Six selected temples as follow: Suan Mokkh and Santi Mitre in Surat Thani, Thammasthan in Bangkok, Wat Pa Thammada in Nakhon Ratchasima, and Wat Umong and Wat Pha-laad in Chiang Mai.

who had launched activities in towns, districts, and villages were selected, half of them were abbots of temples. The interviews took an average of about three hours: the longest was eight hours, the shortest was just under two hours. The interviews followed the items in the questionnaire, but the actual order of topics was fairly flexible. I wrote the answers out as fully as possible without interrupting the flow of talk, and recorded the interview on tape as well. Most of interviews were carried out in a pleasant atmosphere. Much useful data was gathered through indirect observation. It did not take me long to realize that many interviewees wanted to teach me about Buddhadasa's teaching. Some interviewees took me to be a Buddhadasa's follower.

The characteristics of Buddhadasa movement will be taken as a starting-point not only for answering the question about what the movement actually seeks to do, but for understanding how the movement tries to express it.

Characteristics of the Buddhadasa Movement

Buddhadasa movement originated and developed under affiliation with the Thai Sangha. Even though his interpretation of Buddhism seems deeply unorthodox and opposed to the traditional teaching, his theory of double meaning of language, which argues for two perspectives of interpretation and understanding of Buddhism enables the retention of traditional modes of understanding. This is probably the way Buddhadasa is posing his challenge against the Sangha and carry his message into Thai society. Though Buddhadasa has strongly criticized the traditional Thai Sangha, he has never rejected the authority of the Sangha.

Buddhadasa's movement, a religious movement, aiming at returning to the original meaning of the doctrine as well as a strategy to adjust Buddhism to the needs of the modern world, has often been characterized as an intellectual movement. The movement shows little interest in bringing about structural change within the Sangha, neither in building up an effective organization nor a special system for itself. The dominant feature of the movement lies in Buddhadasa's interpretation of the Pali Canon; and emphasizes attaining the heart of

Buddhism rather than relying on the different appearance and details of monastic discipline and practice. The legitimacy of the movement rests on Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhist doctrine.

Another striking characteristic of Buddhadasa's movement is its organization. As I have already discussed, standards of doctrine and attempts to enforce moral purity have largely been devalued by Buddhadasa (see Chapter 5). All followers have to be responsible for themselves. This trend seems likely to continue, with an increasingly fluid type of organization in which many special purpose sub-groups form and disband. The movement has proved to be a relatively loosely knit association, so informal in its organization that many of its followers were led to believe that it has no "organization" and that it did not exist as a "separate" group. This was felt to be true because there is no committee, no bureaucratic officials, no legislature; no regular pledges of financial support were organized; and no efforts were made to formulate an explicit creed of beliefs and practices. Suan Mokkh plays the role of being the center of Buddhist ideology rather than functions as an administrative headquarters with branch offices. Moreover, there is no membership list, and no tests of any sort for distinguishing those who were acceptable for membership from those who were not. I use the word "membership" but actually the movement has no "members". Phra Pho Jantasaro, the deputy abbot of Suan Mokkh, said that "Buddhadas movement", is not an organization ...there is no member, you can't join; you can't resign....you are either in or out by the quality of the life you live."³

Nobody knows or can tell how many scattered followers or "disciples" Buddhadasa has. There is no membership list, and no record concerning the number of the followers or where they are found. Even if one were to attempt such a count, it is important to recognize the diversity of followers, ranging from monks, active followers, sympathisers to some people who are interested in only certain aspects of Buddhadasa's teachings. Moreover, it is impossible to estimate the number of people who, while living in their own homes and employed in "outside" jobs devote almost all of their spare time to promoting Buddhadasa's teaching by their own methods in their own localities.

3 Interview with Phra Pho Jantasaro, the deputy abbot of Suan Mokkh, Chaiya, 1988.

Asked by an author at Suan Mokkh in 1988 concerning the network of the movement and the number of disciples, Buddhadasa replied that: "That we don't know, we keep no records. We received a number of letters which expressed thankfulness for the benefit they gain from our books. Most letters come from monks."⁴ He also insisted that Suan Mokkh has no branch, no disciple or member. Those who lead their lives with "correct understanding" (*samma-ditthi*) are disciples whether they know Suan Mokkh or not, and those who do not lead such kind of life are not disciples even if they may claim to be.

From the above point of view, however, it is not to say that there is no organization within the movement, or no plans, or cooperative activities and projects. Indeed, various groups and foundations have been established by monks and lay devotees for spreading Buddhadasa's message into society such as setting up a meditation center, a printing press, and supporting publications and dissemination. Workers in such groups were not assigned or appointed by anybody; they voluntarily followed their own interests and skills. The activities of the groups have continued through their own capital and labor. Through their work the Buddhadasa movement appear as a more formal and tightly coordinated movement. However, it can be noted that the groups never acquired the formality of an organization, lacking even the mechanism by which a cohesive self-disciplined group of religious functionaries might be maintained. The movement does not allow any sense of centralized organization. The leaders of the workers arise from acceptance of others or from benefit of their having worked so long that they become an expert and can skillfully employ the resources.

Another striking fact are the sources of funds used to maintain any of the movement activities. It appears that there is no formal solicitation of funds among followers. Neither Buddhadasa nor his followers felt it necessary to reveal the sources of funds received. Certainly, all funds came from donations. In addition, by various accounts given by followers, one is led to conclude that most of those who were active paid their own way or were helped in various informal ways.

4 Interview with Buddhadasa at Suan Mokkh, Chaiya, 1988.

Buddhadasa's movement is often taken note of by many persons, including, Prawase Wasi, himself a follower of Buddhadasa's, as lacking in systematization or modern organization.⁵ Phra Bhodhirak, the leader of the Santi- Asoka movement (a Buddhist movement in contemporary Thailand), criticized Buddhadasa movement because it cannot establish a large organization to propagate its doctrines systematically and cannot assess its work to make sure that the doctrines are seriously practiced.⁶ On this matter, Buddhadasa commented that:⁷

"To make people understand the teachings more is organization itself. Right understanding is power. The need to do similar things enables people to get together themselves without conditions. And when they do not gather together, they have no conflicts. This is a natural organization."

It is rather obvious that Buddhadasa's movement emphasizes attaining the heart of Buddhism. What is significant for the movement is Buddhadasa's teachings, not how they are spread. The disseminators of the teachings arise from the teachings. The existence and expansion of the movement has more to do with the dissemination of the teachings more than the organizational growth. In fact, the teachings and the organizational form of the movement are separate. The movement, moreover, neither rely on superficial appearance and details of the vinaya (the monastic discipline) nor establish a specific form or system for itself. There is no externally apparent practice like ceremony, trivial regulations, or particular dressing. Buddhadasa said that:⁸

"For the people who went out to be ordained and become enlightened in the Buddha's time, their Buddhism was completely formless and riteless; there was only the attained truth. For Buddhists today, there are only pattern, ceremony, and sacredness.

5 Interview of Dr. Prawase Wasi at Suan Mokkh, March 1987. Mr. Prawase is a medical doctor who devote himself to the health development programs in rural areas in the Northeast of Thailand. He was a recipient of Magsaysay award in 1980s. He is now the Dean of the Public Health Faculty, Mahidol University, Bangkok.

6 Interview with Phra Bhodhirak at Santi Asoka, Bangkok, 1988.

7 Interview of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu at Suan Mokkh, July 1988.

8 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Tua-ku Khong-ku* [I-Mine] (Bangkok: Suwichan, 1962), p.12.

These characteristics and statements convey the idea that Buddhadasa's movement is to be a movement within Thai Theravada Buddhism which is drawn from the Sangha, resembling a new ascetic denomination or in a sectarian sense. The movement is probably the largest religious movement in contemporary Thailand which has no formal organizational machinery. In this characteristic can be seen that Buddhadasa's movement took no step towards challenging any of the established Sangha with an organization of its own.

Some scholars, such as Sulak Sivarak, frequently refer to the followers of Buddhadasa as "unorganized masses". They assumed that this characteristic diversity partly resulted from the unsectarian objective of the movement. But such a pronouncement does not lead to a better understanding of the background and characteristics of Buddhadasa's followers. In our study it is important to be able to offer some possible aspects understanding about the structure and function of the "unorganized masses".

Followers can be characterized into two main groups: monks and laymen. This division has a significant implication. The data suggest that there are considerable differences in the social backgrounds of the two groups. This distinction accounts for the different role of monks and laymen in the development of the movement. For example, there are a number of Buddhadasa's monk-followers who came from peasant families and most of them have been engaged in community development in their home town or village. This group plays a crucial role as a bridge to take Buddhadasa's teachings to the rural areas, where villagers are the vast majority of the population of Thailand. This dimension of rural expansion of the movement is often overlooked. At the same time the lay-followers, who live in urban areas, promote Buddhadasa's teachings among people around them. Thus the social background of the two groups will be considered and some comparisons between them highlighted.

Social Background of the Followers

Regional Distribution of Buddhadasa's Followers

One important piece of information provided by our research sample is the regional

distribution of Buddhadasa's followers, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Distribution of Buddhadasa's Sampled Followers by Regions

Region	Number		Total	Percent
	Monks	Laymen		
Central	-	-	21	42
Bangkok	-	17	-	-
Others	1	3	-	-
South	3	9	12	24
North	2	9	11	22
Northeast	3	1	4	8
East	1	1	2	4
Total	10	40	50	100

Followers of the Buddhadasa movement are spread through all regions of Thailand therefore the research sample has been drawn purposively to reflect the distribution of followers. The Central Region, particularly Bangkok, contains the largest number. In the South, where the movement originated, and the North where Buddhadasa's followers first launched the propagation of Buddhadasa's teaching are found the remaining sample (24 and 22 per cent respectively). The proportion of the followers in the two regions are very similar. They are nearly less than one half of those in the Central Region. The uneven concentration of the movement throughout the country partly reflects the ways in which the movement expanded. For example, we found that Buddhadasa's teaching is hardly rooted in the rural areas. But at the same time, there is a strong impact of the Buddhadasa movement at the village level. This is reflected in the Northeast where although the number of Buddhadasa's followers is small, monks have been particularly successful in their village development activities such as rice banks, buffalo banks, cooperative shops, and day care centres (See Chapter 7). These activities emphasize the role that villagers have played in development. There are a number of villages where alcohol is not consumed, and there is no gambling and "worldly" entertainment. The people are striving to gradually solve their economic problems, and to live in a healthy environment. As we shall see Buddhadasa's teaching was further interpreted and adapted to the specific problems of village life.

To some extent, the relative number of Buddhadasa's followers is socially insignificant. In order to understand the impact of the Buddhadasa movement on Thai society, the degree of penetration, or involvement has to be considered as well. When we consider the degree of expansion of the movement in terms of the number of followers, Buddhadasa's movement appears to be more wide spread in the north than the northeast. But in terms of penetration, the north lags behind the northeast. Variation in the degree of penetration between regions may be largely explained as a result of the strength, social status, personal characteristics, and the presence of followers.

A significant finding concerning regional distribution of our sample emerges when we consider the place of origin (rural and urban) from which the followers came.

Table 4 Place of Origin: Rural versus Urban

	Monks	Laymen	Total	Percent
Rural	9	4	3	26
Urban	1	36	37	74
Total	10	40	50	100

The above figures indicate that the majority of our sample (74 per cent) are of urban origin. But the largest proportion of them (72 per cent) are laymen, and only two per cent are monks. A further 26 per cent are from farm families who have spent the greater part of their early lives in villages. Table 4 gives some support to the assumption that the majority of the followers are urbanized. Moreover, ninety per cent of our monk sample (nine out of ten) are of rural origin. This is linked to the level of their education. Examination of the data in more detail suggests that half of the monk followers (five out of ten) live and work in villages. This reflects the general rural orientation of the Buddhadasa movement.

Sex Composition and Marital Status

There is a slight sex imbalance among the followers sampled. That is the movement

appears to contain more male than female (male 54 and female 46 per cent). The slight dominance of men reflects the importance of monks in the expansion of the movement. This was offset by the fact that among lay-followers the number of women appears to exceed the number of men.

Table 5 Sex Distribution of Buddhadasa's Followers

	Male	Female	Number	Percent
Monks	10	-	10	20
Laymen	17	23	40	80
Total	27	23	50	-
Percent	54	46	-	100

Based on field observation, it appears that most of the women followers are more highly educated and wealthy. They also play a prominent role in the movement for instance, as lecturers in dhamma practice courses, organizers of financial support and activities, publication, translation of Buddhadasa's teachings into English and so on.

While both men and women have played an active role in the growth of the movement, their marital status is very interesting. That is the proportion of married and single is equal (46 per cent were married and 46 per cent were single) and 8 per cent were widowed. The relatively high proportion of single may not be surprising for religious movements.

When we consider only the lay-followers we found that the number of married is much more than single (46 per cent were married, 26 per cent were single, and 8 per cent widowed). The number of single females is double that of single males (10 per cent were single male and 22.5 per cent were single female). But the proportion of married and widowed between men and women was nearly equal (27.5 per cent married male, 30 per cent married female; widowed male and female were equal, 4 per cent). This figure rejects the generalization of the movement that the majority of Buddhadasa's followers are youths. Moreover, the high proportion of married ones reflects that Buddhadasa's followers are not so far removed from ordinary men.

Table 6 Marital Status of Buddhadasa's Followers

	Monks	Laymen		Total	Percent
		Male	Female		
Single	10	4	9	23	46
Married	-	11	12	23	46
Widowed	-	2	2	4	8
Total	10	17	23	50	100
Percent	20	34	46	-	100

Age Distribution of Buddhadasa's Followers

Age distribution may be a significant index of the state of the movement. As Table 7 shows, the movement attracts people from all age groups and appears to spread more into the older age groups. However, half of the sample (50 per cent) are under fifty years and another half (50 per cent) are fifty years and over. Thus it is not heavily skewed towards either the younger or older age groups. This partly substantiates the movement's claim that they do not work with the concept "target group" in terms of a particular age group or at least Buddhadasa's teaching do not appeal to a special age group alone.

Table 7 Age Distribution

Age	Monks	Laymen	Total	Percent
70 +	-	5	5	10
60-69	-	8	8	16
50-59	4	8	12	24
40-49	3	7	10	20
30-39	1	7	8	16
20-29	2	5	7	14
Total	10	40	50	100
Average age	43.6	49.9	48.6	-

One might expect that the movement, which has existed for a generation, would cease to attract youths. But it appears that the movement continues to attract youths in considerable numbers, while at the same time it remains relevant to adults. The striking figure in Table 7 is the average age of the followers is so high (48.6 years). Particularly, the average age of lay-followers is higher than monks (49.9 and 43.6 years).

Table 8 Age on Joining the Movement

Age	Monks	Laymen	Total	Percent
60+	-	1	1	2
50-59	-	3	3	6
40-49	-	8	8	16
30-39	1	8	9	18
20-29	8	12	20	40
20-	1	8	9	18
Total	10	40	50	100
Average age	23.4	32.4	30.6	-

Thus, though the average age of the sample tends to be high, but most of elder group tend to be well educated and wealthier than others. Though age difference often manifest themselves in difference of social experience. But it appears that different age group in the movement are associated with each other. The old age group seems not to be an obstacle in the development of the movement. In contrast, both older monks and laymen actually are the main sources of support for the younger generation in propagating the movement. They said that "for them are now old, but they were "new men" in their own eras".⁹

Education, Occupation, and Income

There are three general criteria noted here for estimating social status: education, occupation, and income. Under education, the data demonstrates that Buddhadasa's followers are found at all educational levels, although they appear to be drawn disproportionately from the highly educated and the not-formally educated categories. The largest proportion of the sample (48 per cent) are university graduates and post graduates. This highly educated group consist almost exclusively of the laymen. A further 16 per cent had been educated up to High School and College; 18 per cent had received education up to Secondary school, and the remaining 14 per cent had some Primary school. It should be noted that half of the monk-followers (50 per cent) were educated only in Primary school. Four per cent of the sample had received no-formal education though they could read and write the Thai language.

Table 9 Educational Attainment

	Monks	Laymen	Total	Percent
University	1	23	24	48
High School & College	2	6	8	16
Secondary School	2	7	9	18
Primary School	5	2	7	14
No-formal Education	-	2	2	4
Total	10	40	50	100

With reference to the distribution of occupations, the greatest number of the sample

9 Interviewed with Mr. Chun Sirorot, Chiang Mai, 1988.

were officials (46 per cent). The second largest proportion were "monks" (20 per cent). Another 14 per cent were employed in the private service sector; a further 8 per cent were students; 2 per cent were traders; and 8 per cent were others (a farmer, a carpenter, a tailor and a house wife).

Table 10 Occupation

	Number	Percent
Government Officials	23	46
Private Service	7	14
Monks	10	20
Students	4	8
Traders	2	4
Others	4	8
Total	50	100

In general terms, "government official" implies employment by government which includes professionals; university lecturers, doctors, judges, lawyers, teachers, nurses. As this category is used in Thailand, it usually connotes high and middle occupational status. Another broad category, private service is used in contrast to government officials. It implies employment by private enterprises, firms, banks, colleges and will be taken here to involve middle occupational status. The categories "monk" and "student", the former in Thai society is accepted as a special status, may be here regarded as middle status. The latter, since all of them come from urban middle stata families, will have good prospects for future careers. The remaining categories trader, and others will be taken as reflecting lower occupational status.

It should be noted that the data supplied on occupation was not always sufficient to determine their social status, for "trader" may be wealthier or richer than some officials.

But one can say from our sample that the followers are heavily skewed in the direction of high and middle status. 88 per cent of the sample can be said to belong to upper-middle and middle class occupational status.

Another important determinant of social status is the level of income. The income shown in Table 11 is based on an approximate monthly individual income.

Table 11 Income Distribution (in Baht)

	Total	Percent
7000-10000	17	34
4000-6999	11	22
1000-3999	6	12
Under 1000	2	4
No income	14	28
Total	50	100

As regards income, the highest proportion are those who estimated their income between 7,000 to 10,000 baht per month (34 per cent) a range covering university lecturers, doctors, judges, and bankers. Nearly one quarter of the followers (22 per cent) earned between 4,000 and 7,000 baht. This group belongs to lawyers, teachers, nurses, and retired officials. A further 12 per cent reported their income between 1,000 to 3,999 baht, this range covered traders, chief clerks, the tailor, and the carpenter. The lowest income group (4 per cent) earned under 1,000 baht (the farmer and house wife). At the end of the scale, over one quarter of the sample (28 per cent), namely monks and students, had no regular income.

So far we have analysed the social composition of Buddhadasa's followers in terms of separated sets of variables. Each of them provided us with a criterion for dividing the followers into distinctive categories. These figures suggested that there is a highly significant association between places of origin, education, occupation, and income level. Someone who is "high" on one of these tends to be high on the others. This leads to the conclusion that the movement attracted people in all regions and from a wide range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds. However, the largest group in the movement is well-educated, urban, drawn from the upper-middle to middle strata of Thai society.

Why People Join the Movement

The previous section, which analyzed the social background of Buddhadasa's followers, provides an essential step toward a clear understanding of the movement. We now turn to answer why people join the movement and how they become committed to it. We will also attempt to ascertain what their perceptions of Buddhadasa's teachings are as well as the impact of his teachings on their personal lives. Before considering the factors that led people to join the movement, however, we must note the manner in which they were first attracted to it. The following figures provide some insights into this preliminary inquiry.

Table 12 Reasons which most influenced committment to the Movement.

Reasons	Monks	Laymen	Total	Percent
Read about Buddhadasa's books	10	37	47	94
Went to visit Suan Mokkh	-	3	3	6
Total	10	40	50	100

The figures in Table 12 show rather clearly that most interviewees joined Buddhadasa's movement after reading his books. Indeed, ninety-four per cent of the respondents indicated that they initially became attracted to the movement through Buddhadasa's books. Only 6 per cent reported that they had joined the movement after visiting Suan Mokkh, after which they began to read Buddhadasa's books as well. Thus, although the movement attracts individuals from a wide range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds, the path into the movement is through reading. This also accounts for the higher number of followers who are literate.

Another factor which plays an important role in drawing people into the the movement is personal relationships, whether with friends, relatives, or monks who have come into touch with the movement, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13 First Means of Acquaintance with Buddhadasa's Teachings

Sources	Monks	Laymen	Total	Percent
Books, Journal, Tape-recordings obtained from:				
Book-stores, Libraries	3	6	9	18

Friends, Relatives, Monks	7	31	38	76
Buddhadasa's Sermons at Suan Mokkh	-	3	3	6
Total	10	40	50	100

From our data we found that most of our respondents (76 per cent) first came in contact with Buddhadasa's teachings through books, journal, and tapes provided by personal acquaintances. Another 18 per cent first came into contact with Buddhadasa's teachings through his books, which they obtained from book stores and libraries. The remaining 6 per cent joined Buddhadasa's movement after hearing his sermons at Suan Mokkh.

Table 14 Previous Religious Interest

Degree of Interest*	Monks	Laymen	Total	Percent
No Interest	-	28	28	56
Little Interest	10	8	18	36
Great Interest	-	4	8	16

(*This classification scheme was derived from the interviewees' expression)

Table 14 shows a large number of interviewees (56 per cent), mostly laymen, expressed no interest in traditional Buddhism before they became interested in Buddhadasa's teachings because they believed traditional Buddhism had little or no meaning applied to their everyday lives and was rather more concentrated on ceremonies. However, these interviewees did not express opposition to traditional Buddhist teachings and practices. Another 36 per cent expressed a slight interest, including all the monks in our sample (20 per cent); while only 8 per cent of the laymen expressed a great interest. Surprisingly, no monk in the sample expressed a strong interest in traditional Buddhism. These figures reflect partly the small role that traditional forms of Thai Buddhism played in the lives of our sample population.

Table 15 Year of Joining the Movement

Year	Monks	Laymen	Total	Percent
1977-1986	4	16	20	40
1967-1976	3	10	13	26

1957-1966	3	8	11	22
1947-1956	-	5	5	10
1937-1946	-	1	1	2
Total	10	40	50	100

The above figures not only provide information on the year our interviewees joined the movement but also provide some insight into the nature of the growth of the movement. As the figures show for each period a different social group (i.e., monks, laymen) accounted for increases in the number of people who joined the movement (For a more detailed discussion, see chapter 5). Interestingly, while Buddhadasa's movement has existed for a generation, it still continues to attract people, be they monks or laymen.

The circumstances which lead our respondents to join the movement are very diverse, and the impact of movement on them is difficult to quantify. Therefore a brief examination of number of case histories provides further insights. In order to flesh out the impact that educational levels, religious backgrounds, socio-economic status, occupation, and gender may have on the decision to join the movement, our case studies will focus on four different cases which illustrate and are representative of these different variables in our 50 interviewee sample.

A first example is Phra Banyat Anuttaro, an abbot of Wat Pa-Thammada, Bua Yai district, Nakhon Ratchasima.¹⁰ He is 52 years old, having finished the fourth grade of primary education, and the first grade of dhamma study (nak tham ek). He set up rural development projects in his village including a buffalo bank, rice bank, and day care center. Phra Banyat plays a significant role in stimulating the monks of the new generation in the Northeast to be interested in developing their own communities. He recounted that he was interested in occultism since he was a young man. He was ordained at the age of 21, and after finishing dhamma study he learnt occultism in earnest for 2 years. It was only during his second year of study into the occult that he received from an elderly monk Buddhadasa's books Handbook for Mankind and Stupidity. According to Phra Banyat, the first time he read these books he

¹⁰ Interview with Phra Banyat Anuttaro at Wat Pa Thammada, Bua Yai district, Nakhon Ratchasima, July 1987.

thought he had found the most authentic Buddhist teaching because it so clearly explained spiritual doctrine, something which he had never encountered before.

For the sake of clarity, we have provided below some excerpts from the interview, which have been arranged topically. This will also be done in the presentation of the other three case studies.

(i) Phra Banyat's understanding of Buddhadasa's teaching:

The two books of Buddhadasa (Handbook of Mankind and Stupidity) reminded me of my own deeds and the goal of ordination. It raised a lot of questions in my mind. The Treasure in The Buddha's Words most strongly attacks monks who are occultists. It is the book that changed my life. I abandoned absolutely occultism. The effectiveness of Buddhadasa's teaching lies in its spiritual meaning. His teaching expressed the truth of life in several aspects which is constantly demonstrated in simple language. It brings about a new spirit and new state of mind. I read all Buddhadasa's books available before going to Suan Mokkh with my friends in 1965.

(ii) Phra Banyat's experience at Suan Mokkh:

Buddhadasa welcomed us by saying that "Here is nothing, there is no master, no disciple. I don't admit you." But we did not give up our idea. He took us around to show us Suan Mokkh and told a man to find us lodging. However, turning to us he repeated: "But I don't admit you here". We did not listen to him. We stayed there for five years.

The simple life of the monks who live at Suan Mokkh and their dedication, Buddhadasa's teaching and his joining in work with other monks, all these strongly affected me. Spiritual development is through working. Work is life, and working is practicing the dhamma. I joined all kinds of work with them, breaking and grinding rocks with a hand-tool, bending iron rods, and constructing buildings, etc.

The love of work is the spirit I acquired from Suan Mokkh. I left Suan Mokkh for several reasons in 1970. My mother was old and I wanted to assist her in her old age. I also wanted to do something for our poor people in the Northeast. If you ask how I came to have the ideal of working for rural development, you can write down that it came from Suan Mokkh.

A second example is Mr. Lamai Suwanasang, 72, who is a farmer in the rural area of

Aao-luak, Krabie province in the southern Thailand.¹¹ He has completed 3 years of primary school. According to Lamai he was one of the most mischievous children in his family when he was young. He was also known as the tough guy, and earned his living by illegally brewing liquor. He also pointed out that none of the villagers liked him, and that he learned occultism. He was ordained as a monk for one year at age 22. For him, Buddhism was nothing more than doing good deeds and avoiding evil deeds. In 1952 a senior monk at Nakhon Sri Thammarat gave him the Buddhasasana journal issued by the Dhammadana Foundation, Chaiya. The monk told him this was the real dhamma.

(i) Lami's understanding of Buddhadasa's teachings:

I read several articles with both interest and surprise because they were about dhamma and life which I had never heard of before. The statement "dhamma is duty" was the one which impressed me most. Buddhadasa's teaching made me understand life and dhamma in the widest perspective. They are inseperate. Dhamma is doing duties to achieve good life both materially and spiritually. Working is the practising of dhamma and it is the path to access nibbana. Buddhism is really a way of life. Nibbana exists in life and can be reached in this life. It is also free of charge, and you need no money to make a lot of merit.

(ii) Impact of Buddhadasa's teaching on Lami's life and commitment to spreading dhamma:

My life had its goal. I gave up all bad earnings, abandoned occultism. I worked intensively because it is the work only which can help us. I was not exhausted, upset or suffering but was pleased and happy to have work and its results. I spent money only when necessary and kept the rest. Within 2-3 years, the economic condition of my family became better. The problems in the family were few. I had 10 children to bring up and educate but the problems never made me weak.

I did not have any conflicts with anybody in my village at all. Whatever problems the villagers had they consulted me, especially they asked me to teach dhamma to their children. I have spread Buddhadasa's teaching to the youth in my village. If they understand dhamma, it is better for the society because once you understand dhamma, everybody will work out his own duty to the best of his ability. I will stop working immediatly whenever someone shows interest in dhamma and wants to talk about dhamma with me because I saw this thing work in myself and I knew it could be in others. The dhamma conversation group in the village now consists of 90 people. Most are young and about 20 persons understand dhamma deeply and help to spread it. My 10 sons all are interested in reading Buddhadasa's books and they were ordained at Suan Mokkh.

11 Interview with Mr. Lamai Suwanasang at Suan Mokkh, Chaiya, 1988.

(iii) Lami's attitude towards the traditional monks:

I tried to spread dhamma to the monks in the village. I gave them Buddhadasa's books and tapes. Although the monks in the village are still teaching dhamma traditionally, I go to the temple to make merit and hear the sermons every sabbath day to set a good example for my descendents and for the sake of community unity which is also dhamma.

Traditional monks are like trees though they are not perfect (they do not study and practice dhamma strictly), we should not hurriedly uproot them because they still can give us some shade. We must give them fertilizer; and look after them well. Finally, they will become perfect.

I have spread Buddhadasa's teachings for more than 30 years but he does not know me. When I visit him on his birthday at Suan Mokkh, I pay my respects to him and stay for 5-7 days and when I return, I again pay respects to him. That's all because I have nothing to talk with him. His teachings are all in his books.

A third example is Mr. Thawat Kaisornkittikul, age 40, a Chinese merchant in Bangkok.¹² He narrated that his father was a Chinese businessmen. After he finished secondary school, he began to get involved in gambling. He and his close friend spent day and night in the casino. After his friend decided to become a monk, Thawat felt he had no other choice than to become a monk himself. Thus, in 1972, both he and his friend were ordained. They stayed in the same temple in Bangkok but in different kutis (monk dwelling). His kuti contained nothing but a mat, a pillow, and 10 dhamma books. On the first night he had nothing to do so he read those books. This was the first time that he had ever read a dhamma book.

(i) Thawat's Experience with Buddhadasa's teachings:

The first book, by Buddhadasa Three Months Ordination, I read which made me understand religion and the purpose of ordination. The most impressive teaching is searching for Buddha in oneself. I continued reading the rest of the books thirstily until dawn. I had never thought there would be such a teaching in religion. The real teaching is so powerful. My ideas and feelings changed, I went out to receive alms in the morning with the feeling that I had a new life.

I asked a neighboring monk about Buddhadasa's book, and he was very pleased that I was interested. He went to get Buddhadasa's books from many kutis for me- 50 more. I intended to do my duty as a new monk. After this rain retreat

12 Interview with Mr. Thawat Kaisornkittikul at Suan Mokkh, Chaiya, 1988.

(three months), I went to Suan Mokkh. I did all kinds of hard work the monks at Suan Mokkh did with pleasure to return my gratitude to Buddhadasa that his teachings gave me a new quality of life. But I never talked to Buddhadasa. After spending one month in Suan Mokkh, I had to disrobe to help my parents to do business.

(ii) The changes in his lay-life and further spreading dhamma:

Although I am a lay, I lead my life as a monk does. Of course, I don't forget that men are living their lives on four levels: spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical. I don't refuse material enjoyment but I know it is nothing. I eat one meal, lead a simple life and dress easily. I gave up gambling absolutely, including drinking, smoking. I set my life in order as well as my work and expenses. I worked hard with the feeling that everything is duty, it must be worked out best, no matter what kind of work it is. I am happy with my work. My business improved within one year. I felt that my life and my future lie in my own hands, I am the one who provides my own fate.

By leading life simply, working hard, spending little, economic conditions improved and I became a good example to my friends. I convinced them to turn to dhamma and it really affected ten of my friends's lives. I spread Buddhadasa's teachings for 15 years by giving out Buddhadasa's books to those who were interested, 100-200 books yearly. My wife is now very interested in Buddhadasa's books.

The fourth example is Mrs. Sriya Wattanapahu, age 44, a medical doctor at Saraburi hospital.¹³ She recounted that she works with patients who are suffering. She would become very unhappy when one of her patients died. She was prone to believe that her patients died because of her fault more or less. Therefore, she often worked in a state of worry and irritation.

(i) Impact of Buddhadasa's teachings on Sriya's life and work:

In 1983 a senior doctor in the same hospital gave me a book Dhamma is Duty by Buddhadasa. It was the book which made me understand the truth of life, the meaning of doing duty. The key word that opens me to Buddhadasa's teaching is "working is dhamma practice". Every duty is both a spiritual and a material activity. I began to read more of Buddhadasa books more and more. His teachings create the "ideal of doing duty" in my spirit. Now I love and am proud of my work mostly because it gives me a chance to help suffering people both physically and mentally. I am not bored to talk with patients, giving them

13 Interview with Mrs. Sriya Wattanapahu, Bangkok, 1988.

confidence, putting their mind at peace, encouraging them to fight the physical disease. I work harder than before without exhaustion and discouragement but become pleased and happy. I am no longer too unhappy when a patient dies because I have done my duty to the best of my ability.

(ii) The attitude towards Buddhadasa's teachings:

Buddhadasa's teaching is the substantial dhamma, teaching to use wisdom in everyday life, not to be superstitiously silly. The teaching could be accepted as being real Buddhist teaching in essence and can apply to all. It gives me hope for the future of our country because of results that are being achieved. Each person has to "set things right" within himself and within his own family before he should presume to attack the problems that concern him on a larger scale. I believe that a way to alleviate or to solve social problems in Thai society is to spread this teaching as much as possible. I try to spread Buddhadasa's teaching among my colleagues, patients, and the students in the Nursing College of our hospital. I also set up a dhamma group (Etappachayata Club). We hold dhamma conversation groups twice a month at my house. Now there are 200 members in our group and 10 are highly interested and active in spreading Buddhadasa's teaching. We have issued a three month bulletin as a communicative medium between the members since 1986. My husband and my daughter are also interested in dhamma.

In short, our interviews show that interest in Buddhadasa's movement is sparked by Buddhadasa's books which are spread through many kinds of personal relationships. Individuals read them for a variety of reasons and are inspired and influenced by other aspects of the teaching. Though they were from different social backgrounds, however, they joined the movement on the basis of teaching understanding. More significant is the emphasis on changing values and attitudes amongst individuals. Finding the meaning of life, the condition of existence has been conceived as subject more to change and development. Behavioral changes and new moral ideals of life are frequently expressed by our respondents. Individuals perceived Buddhadasa's teachings to be of great importance in prompting them to change their lives as well as to improve their social and economic status. They also felt that Buddhadasa's teachings not only held a relevant message for the conduct of their affairs in this-world, but that they encompassed the real meaning of Buddhism. With regard to the monk-followers, Buddhadasa's teaching seems to offer meaning to their role as monks as well as attract them to devalue superstitions. This assessment of the importance of his teachings was not only expressed by the four people in our case interviews, but by most of the

individuals in our sample. His books, moreover, led many people to reconsider and radically alter their lives and values, and fostered an "unshakable devotion" in Buddhism.

Certain attitudes of Buddhadasa's followers toward social problems and problem situations reflects other aspects of the movement. Our interviews suggest that attitudes of Buddhadasa's followers toward social problems tend to focus on individual rather than social order and institutions. Problems of criminality, unemployment, corruption, and poverty are largely considered in a frame work of personal moral terms and concepts of ethical conduct. These conditions would automatically right themselves following the change of a sufficient number of individuals and influential persons in society at large.

"Greed, Hatred, Delusion" was advanced to explain the existence of the most serious problems. Many believed that the causes of thousand problems and conflicts were rooted in selfishness. Phra Maha Pratheep, a monk-follower at Wat Chonprathan who is active in propagating Buddhadasa's teaching said:¹⁴

It is foolish to develop country (nation) when failure is made in developing the men who make them...in solving the problems of individuals the social problems will melt away...Most people have planned something far bigger than they know... My hope for our country lies in the spiritual force of mankind. I am convinced that morality is more needed today than ever before.

"If you want to be in a good society the best place to start is with yourself" or "Everybody wants to see the other change, but everybody is waiting for the other to begin" or "There is no place to begin but with individuals" were the phrases I most often heard from my respondents. The solution for social problems they perceived to lie in rapidly expanding Buddhadasa's teachings. They believed that when people understood their own nature (through Buddhadasa's teachings) they would change their lives. With individual change would come solutions of social problems.

14 Interview with Phra Maha Pratheep at Wat Chonprathan, Nonthaburi, 1988.