

James: Translated Extracts from Extended Interviews with Buddhadasa

1. Temple Boys

There's another tradition that each and every temple has. It is to train temple boys to be intelligent people. Or to put it in the language around here, it can also be called 'training to become a smart ass.' Played among temple boys, with (*sāma*) *ṇera* [novice monks] included too. No need for anyone to organize it for them, they organize it themselves, huh huh huh huh (laughs, softly). It's cheeky. So, when sat together in a group, that kid who is more of a ringleader, he would set the topic up, like, "OK, today we will talk about steaming rice, who goes first?" Mostly the ones who volunteer first are bound to be ones who are less smart than others. They would have to tell how to steam rice, how it's done. The kids wait and listen. If the one going first is a little bit of a stupid person, he might start so: "Well, I put milled rice in the pot and put it on the fire." The other kids will then join in objections "Ya haven't even gone into the kitchen how can ya do that, huh?" Like so, for instance. Or there might be a quip: "Ya still haven't started the fire yet." If there are many grounds for objections he'd need somebody else to tell (the story). With each objection landing there is a round of cheering. It could be detailed to the point that 'haven't opened the door, how then can you enter the kitchen?' or 'haven't picked up a water dipper, how can you draw water?' Like so, for instance. In the end he would tell each and every step until there is nothing lacking, like the narrations of an author, detailed, meticulous, complete. Because the objectors are many, many objections can be made. It's an exercise in meticulousness and painstakingness, to practice the use of logic [logic, the English word is used here as is]. The smart person tends to be among the ones who tell (the story) last, who can tell in great detail so that no one can object.

The topics that are set up are of many kinds, cultural topics, traditional topics, cheeky topics, matters of lies. Who can tell (the story) well is considered able. These are not topics from books directly, but these are topics that create much intelligence indeed. If its a kid who spends his days in paddy fields, the story to tell, is of course one about ploughing fields, tying up water buffalos. Or he can memorize a story, not his own story, but be responsible for telling it so that it cannot be objected to. Because of that, the kids are all storytellers. At the temple they have a chance, but at home they don't. Before bed is the chance for a while. And sometimes the master [*ācariya*] (monk-teacher-elder) also helps to organize the game once in a while but not so often. Since, like the master at the temple I was at, he doesn't really have time, has too much work.

Stories of the grandpa monk & the grandma nun, there are tens or scores of them, who knows. Some of them dirty, some of them cheeky, some of them clever. It's a school that makes people smart without realizing it. Topics about women are almost non-existent, and not much *kilesa* (mind poison) that tempts the kids in carnal terms. There were only stories of goodness and greatness, all of them.

But nowadays it's no more y'know. Because there are no kids sleeping at temples. The chain is already broken. Back then it was maybe like public school [public school, the English term is used here]. The kids could not be recalcitrant, had to do work and assignments according to their responsible duties. Some methods are not possible at home, but at the temple are possible. Like, you can't wake up late, if you wake up late you will be splashed with water. Friends have the right to bring water to splash them so everything's all wet. Now, what is considered 'waking up late'? — it had to be defined as, once the chicken is down from the perch, down on the dirt, still asleep, this here is 'waking up late' — can splash with water.

Now, if we were to prank each other, how? Chase the chicken down to the dirt, a couple of them, then splash our friend with water. It was a matter of exercise in many ways, whether intelligence, work, fun [ความสนุกสนาน] (*Sanuk*, a Thai unique cultural concept, somewhat akin to fun, but distinct; Buddhadasa uses this word frequently, even as the reason he studied Buddhism. See: Pewnim, Maneewan (1995). *Sanuk: A study of Thai "leisure" activities in transition* (PhD dissertation). University of Hawai'i at Manoa.)

Back before we had schools (in Thailand), if parents didn't wish to make the kid work, then he would stay in the temple until ordained as (*sāma*) *ṇera*, as monk, and then stay on for three or four vassa [yearly three-month rainy season retreats to reduce the chance of stepping on little critters like frogs and injuring or killing them while walking in the rain.] Then, disrobing and in possession of domicile ([ครองเรือน] *khrong ruean*, Thai Buddhist term for laity, as monks are those who relinquish domicile). And there is something special that makes parents satisfied to have kids stay in temple because they come to know how to do this and that, like weaving, for example. Bullying and harassment occur very little due to fear of the master.

*The story of the grandpa monk & the grandma nun, ตาเถรยายชี *tha ten and yai she*

A story format popular in Thailand, maybe not so much today but the legacy remains so that "grandpa monk" is one way to exclaim "oh, shit" even today.

The prototypical story is grandpa monk and grandma nun having sex in a clearing in the bushes. The novice monk peeps from the trees, Grandma nun spots the novice and screams, Grandpa monk! Novice! But *samnera* (novice) in the Thai accent of Pali sounds like Thai for "more" causing grandpa monk to pump grandma nun harder, with hilarious results to all observers.

To tell this joke changes the amusing activity between grandpa monk and grandma nun into something else, and encourages the novice wordplay with other words and actions.

Sociologically, it reinforces the Thai Buddhist belief that Buddhism is beyond mortal man's ability, so I'll just procrastinate until the next life, whatever. In contrast with elites insisting on reforms and removing corruption and failing.

Primary source: King Rama V Personal Letters, published.

2. Curry-making

One other thing. Early on, living in the temple, there was a tradition of curry-making¹ at that temple that was passed on and on, from when I don't know. Generally, it was called "vile curry." Back when I was there, I was the leading person to preserve the tradition, not letting it be lost. Did it for 2, 3 years. After vassa, in what is called "winter," using very big pumpkins, one is enough. Seasoning, uh, use bird's eye chili, big bowl, around maybe 1 liter, and there's also the typical big chili. Lemongrass, well, a big, big bowl, like a liter or two. And then also galangal, and other curry spices to a surprising level (soft laughter). Coconuts, how many, can't remember. Back when I was in command, an entire chicken was added also, but before it was not, only pumpkins. We get the (temple) boys to buy from the market. And then there's sugar, a pot or two. After curry-making, then it's time for *chăn*.² when scooped into the mouth, it's sweet, with chewing and eating it gets more and more spicy, eventually, burning hot (laughter in the throat) snot, tears, all flowing like whoosh whoosh. Kids can eat like the end of one spoon, eat who knows how much rice, plates upon plates. When cooking, stew it in the pan until it's all melted into one, blackish color, because of long time stewing, the color and consistency is like water buffalo poop. Making a big pan, the smell is all over the temple because spices are put in. All monks, at most, *chăn* a spoon or two each. Special case is one grandpa monk, who can *chăn* a bowl. Everyone cries, the kids, the *nera*, even the grandpa monks who are considered the most able, all whoosh whoosh. But it's delicious. Even now I still think it's delicious. It might be this curry that the laity walking past the temple—the smell is all over the temple—have to come in and ask for a taste. It's called "vile curry," scooped into the mouth at first will be sweet, and then spicy, and then it's hot, to the point of madness, tears flowing, it's like *chăn* rice with tears. I was afraid of the custom being lost, so I made it, and made it to the fullest. Before, it was no joke, the chili, and so on, but that year that I'd gotten into command, that year, a bit much, a bit to the max, because I am a mad man, gave it my all. Now, there are consequences, so, eventually you poop as hot as flames, it was also a fun³ thing. But as they say, they say it's medicine, it's an elixir of life, it probably has something to do with it because you break out in sweat, bathed in sweat. After I was gone, it seems no one took over, because there was no lunatic.

(The interviewer) *ācariya*, in that one vassa, what changed in your life? Did you have ideals in life yet? And *ācariya*, were you interested in meditation and vipassana?

Feelings, nothing changed, it didn't feel like I was either monk or layman as if they are opposites. Ideals of being a monk or devoting myself to the religion, none whatsoever. That came about later when I learned much more. Thought more and more later. About meditation and so on, still none, nobody talked about it. What I learned from the Theologian⁴ and so on, was just typical stuff that I acknowledged as typical stuff. Nothing deep and profound like thinking of saving the religion, it was just the fun⁵ of a student.

¹ Needless to say, monks cooking food for their own consumption is in violation of the monastic rules, requiring confession of wrongdoing. (exact reference later, but roughly Pali Canon volume 5, the disciplinary volumes, volume 5, mahavaga part 2, no. 81). Contrary to the idea that Buddhadasa is a fundamentalist Pali Canon thumper, the truth is in his interviews, where he admits to so many of these little wrongdoings, as monks in Thailand often do, as per local tradition. But Buddhadasa draws the line at visiting prostitutes and so on. In another story he refuses to join the other monks to party and go to prostitutes in Bangkok.

² *ฉัน*, *chăn*, the ecclesiastical word for eating, is used here.

³ Sanuk

⁴ A certification program for monks in terms of knowledge of Buddhist theology with three levels of proficiency.

⁵ Sanuk

3. Carnal Pleasure

(The interviewer) Ācariya, that you became interested in radios, cameras, records, how did this all come about?

We were among the few odd monks out. Mr. Mani Sithat (มนั สีหัด) who disrobed, he was also playing around with these things since he was a monk. We have been friends. It is fun⁶ and useful, you could say. Like typewriters are useful. We⁷ bought a radio that was broken from Woeng Nakornkasem⁸ to fix and use. Once fixed, sold it again to buy a new one, got a better one. The same later whenever I buy something ... Cameras too, the first camera I used, a Kodak Vesta,⁹ 12 Baht, bought at Woeng Nakornkasem, it shot well, and then we learned how to develop the film ourselves. It's easy-peasy work, the chemical liquid is ready-to-use, premixed in a bottle, add ten times water, ready to develop. Postcard paper a Satang¹⁰ a sheet, if Japanese, 100 sheets for 75 Satang, developed into mountains of photos. When I took photos, I did it without fussing about, like how they do it today, not at all. And not much shooting people—scenery, temples, more like. Vinyl records, to learn languages and so on, Linguaphone and such. Music I didn't buy. But listened to those people who asked me to buy for them, always people asking me to buy. There's a funny story, back then I was in the corner cell, not far from the deputy abbot's cell who is as fierce as a tiger. I forgot. Turned the record player up to eleven, he walked *bang *bang to open the door, leaned in for a view, smiled and then left. (laughter in the throat). Everybody probably thought I was in trouble.¹¹ That vinyl album was very popular. Rabbit brand. The singer's name was His Excellency Seni.¹² As loud as a loudspeaker. Mostly I used records to learn English, well, it wasn't very effective. But I didn't know what else to do.

Fortunately, I did not become interested in sexual stuff. If I became interested it would have been all done, no Suan Mokkh like today. Other monks were interested. And I had the chance. But why I didn't I don't know, never became interested. Some friend invited me to go hangout at his girlfriend's house. To have evening *chǎn*, and then *glug glag*¹³ for hours. It can be observed that there is much, that, people with daughters are happy to let them become familiar and up close and personal with monks, I observe that they are sure that if it's a monk then it's not bad surely. Like this, there's a lot. So, they don't mind. Let them talk as they do in their nature, to their heart's content until it's detestable. But because many do it does not seem detestable. In fact, it is detestable.¹⁴ I was not even the main character, just trailing after them, still they were interested. It was that very household; the mom offered her daughter to sew up my robes which just so happened to be torn a bit. I said "No. No. No. No. No. No; No need. No need. No need. No need. No need. No need."¹⁵ (laugh). Nobody has the slightest clue of what is going on, both parties don't know sin and karma, should or should not, they don't know. And so, it becomes very

⁶ Sanuk

⁷ Throughout the entire series of interviews, Buddhadasa does not use the pronoun for monks to refer to themselves, *Ātmā* (आत्मा). Instead he uses typical male pronouns.

⁸ A commercial district in Bangkok with a long history. Still active today.

⁹ Probably the Vest Pocket Kodak with a Thai accent.

¹⁰ 1/100 of a Baht

¹¹ Listening to music and other forms of entertainment is a minor infraction of the monastic code.

¹² Might be the album "Songs of Siam" containing many traditional Thai songs.

¹³ Thai onomatopoeia meaning a loud sound of a ball of dirt rolling around in a vase or pot.

¹⁴ Infractions of monastic code nos. 44 and 45, at least.

¹⁵ Buddhadasa said "no" exactly 6 times, and "no need" exactly 6 times. Repetition is used in Thai often to add emphasis, in this case there must be a lot of emphasis.

plausible. That monks disrobe and leave, most monks are determined to study for a degree,¹⁶ to find money to get married. Even venerable monks¹⁷ do this and that with a woman until ~~is~~ caught, fortunately not forced to defrock,¹⁸ so disrobed by himself, and still consummated the relationship, get to be a civil servant and be respectable in society. Traditions and customs give much opportunities—what the ordinary people believe, nobody knows it truly, nobody criticizes—have opportunities to go to a girl's house in either in the evening or at night.

¹⁶ The English word “degree” is used here.

¹⁷ Phra Rachakhana, the third highest rank in the Thai Buddhist Ecclesiastical hierarchy, something like archbishop.

¹⁸ No. 1 in the list of 4 major infractions that require defrocking. “Indulge in carnal pleasure, even with a non-sapient female animal.”

4. Bookstore

Skirt-chasing¹⁹, I know nothing of. No time to chase skirts, there was always work to be done. Never asked a girl out. Nighttime, I never went out. Never had any contact with any women. Liking someone, sometimes, yes, but never had the chance. So, could only have it in my heart. No chance to contact anyone, or go out with someone. And, was having fun with other stuff. Before ordination there was fun²⁰ from work, helping my family²¹ with keeping the shop, and just talking, I was a Dharma talking gangster.²²

I was not only selling stuff; I was also a laborer. Hauling stuff to deliver to houses. Like say, a civil servant's household, they bought a jerry can²³ of kerosene, I got to carry it and deliver it. No employees. No cars. (Huh huh laughter). It was busy. Hard work. Even had to split all the logs for our household use. Say, the family bought a whole boat-load of mangrove wood, I had to saw them all into logs and split all of them, until stacked up in our cellar²⁴. Splitting mangrove wood is fun²⁵. It is brittle. The axe touches it, it flies away, or sometimes just lay the axe flat, and bash it with the wood so it cracks, that's also fun²⁶.

As for talking Dharma, I²⁷ was acting like a Dharma teacher basically. In the morning people came to talk Dharma, I had to debate and fight. One civil servant, reporting to duties nearby, he had to walk past our shop to work at the office. And there were others around there who were relatives, if I saw this grandpa coming around, he's here for Buddhist banter and tomfoolery, until he can slip out and go to work for an hour, he also comes to my house. I had to buy books for the theologian²⁸, level one, level two, level three,

¹⁹ Buddhadasa notes later in the interview that most girls in his hometown wore traditional trousers. However, I could not find another way to translate into English in a casual way, matching his tone of that kind of way of life of frequently trying to pick up girls.

²⁰ Sanuk.

²¹ Buddhadasa uses the monk Pali Buddhist language term to refer to his parents here and throughout and for his uncle, too. It is gender neutral so it is not clear if it is father or mother, the translation is based on the context. Where it is unclear, it is rendered as family, where it is clear, it is mother, father, uncle.

²² นักเลง (nak leng), is a crucial word for understanding the culture of Thailand, particularly in the South. Meaning roughly, gangster, bandit, made-man, wise guy, with similar cultural significance to the cowboy in American culture or samurai in Japanese culture or gaucho in Argentine culture. Denoting someone who lives with swagger, *joie de vivre*, a sense of honor, and care for their chosen craft. With an implication of community and self-independence in a time when the Thai government did not have much influence in areas outside of the capital. In today's Thailand with its powerful central government, the term still means someone really positive within a given field, similar to *otaku* in Japanese but with no implication of social awkwardness. For instance, a bookworm is book *nak leng* (*nak leng nang sue*). Book gangster. Among younger people the literal translation of book worm is more common. With a full understanding of the archetype of *nak leng*, the entire case of Buddhadasa can be completely and accurately summarized as simply the Dharma *nak leng* (*nak leng thamma*). See: Reynolds, Craig J., *Power, Protection and Magic in Thailand: The cosmos of a southern policeman*. ANU Press, 2019, the story of a *nak leng* police officer also from the South. Buddhadasa brought the *nak leng* culture to modern Buddhism and that policeman brought the *nak leng* culture to modern policing.

²³ Not the gasoline container based on WW2 German designs, but a rectangular metal can often made of tin containing from 13 to 18 litres, common in Asia.

²⁴ Not actually underground cellar but the empty space underneath a traditional Thai house which is built on wooden platforms to elevate it from the ground in case of floods and for ventilation.

²⁵ Sanuk

²⁶ Sanuk

²⁷ Instead of using the monk language for personal pronoun, here and throughout Buddhadasa is using normal male pronouns.

²⁸ The Buddhist theological proficiency program for monks with three levels. Often shortened to just theologian.

and Abhidhamma²⁹ books to read. Back then I was much younger than them, most of them were elderly. But often I spoke more accurately, because I had books to read. They were talking from conjectures. It was fun to talk for others to listen to. Speaking of studying Dharma, I learned before ordination. Once ordained I almost had no need to study, even to the theologian level one, almost no need to study because I had read all of it before for debates.

Back then you could say it was an awakening. It just started, the theologian. The first era for that town. Anyone liked to talk about it. That civil servant made acquaintance with the theologian teacher at the temple and was out to having a good time. I had nothing against that. Fun³⁰ talking to trip him up, tripping him up by messing with him, teasing and making fun of him. Some intelligent people, even if they know nothing, they might be my supporters. Some were quick to get angry. Some old people were rooting for me (laughter in the throat). Back then Phum Rieng was fun³¹ like that.

Most youngsters, they lived life according to the station in life of their families. People with shops like us, of which there were few, often became friends. Friends to play around with bicycles. Young men, one bicycle per shop, having fun³² and whatever as it was with how rural life was generally back then. Nobody did any kind of schooling. As for the traditional culture of flirting with girls like in the North, down here it cannot be, it conflicts with sentiment. Probably none in all the South. It goes against sentiment. Mostly, when I was young, life partners, parents, the elders, chose for us. And they were going along with their parents. The elders ask the kids's consent, too. My elders also arranged something for me. You could say the arranged one, not fiancée. Back then I had never even seen her face, at first, I don't even know the name. She lived in the same province but not someone living in Phum Rieng.

(The interviewer) Ācariya, apart from Theologian books, what else did you read, during this period before ordination?

I read some. Our house was also a bookstore, as it was typical then. Mostly on sale were the “-dom -dom, dynasty dynasty”³³ stories, and miscellanies, the kind that are a quarter of a Baht “dear reader you should know”³⁴, mostly those we had. And modern books that are translated from white people³⁵, we were already starting to have. Tai publishing houses in Bangkok, they publish modern books, and probably they couldn't sell them too easily, used to send people to walk the markets in the countryside to sell them, too. Our

²⁹ The third section of the Pali Canon, with abstract Buddhist theology. Most likely Buddhadasa is referring to books about the Abhidhamma and not that section of the Pali Canon itself, since he noted how ~~much~~ difficult it was to study the actual Pali Canon later, while even getting access to it was a chore.

³⁰ Sanuk

³¹ Sanuk

³² Sanuk

³³ Short for kingdom kingdom, dynasty, dynasty stories. จักรกวางวงศ์ (chak chak wong wong). The cornerstone of Thai folk tales and oral culture, often involving princes, princesses, kingdoms, dynasties, adventure, learning special powers from wise men in forests, demons, monsters, often giants, hence the name -dom -dom, dynasty, dynasty. Could be compared to English chapbooks or Bibliothèque bleue in France. It is preserved today in the form of soap operas.

³⁴ “a quarter of a Baht dear reader you should know” a series of books that was one of the pioneers of affordable little books in Thailand, offering tit bits of useful knowledge and life wisdom, “a quarter of a Baht dear reader you should know (เล่มสลึงพึงรู้ผ่านผู้ซื้อ) [lem salueng phuengru thanphusue]” is one of the poems the publisher used in the books to convince people to buy them, to the point that people start referring to that kind of books with this poem instead.

³⁵ Farang, the word anyone who goes to Thailand knows, meaning all white foreigners, apart from white Muslims and Sikhs, for whom there is a different term.

store it was like we were forced to stock it. Cheap. A satang a book, like that, sometimes it was like buying paper, really. People to buy and read them were few. Sometimes we bought them from Bangkok, also. Translated works back then that reached us, for example, *Zoraida*³⁶, and *One Thousand and One Days*³⁷. What I understood is that they were books unable to be sold. After reading, not much of an impression, it was just weird is all.

Like books by Thianwan³⁸ and K.S.R. Kulap³⁹, I also read, back then. Seemed the family received them yearly for one Baht. My uncle who was ordained in Bangkok, he saw some strange things in there so he subscribed to it for us. He even got to talk to Mr. Thianwan and Mr. Kulap. Mr. Kulap, he wore this thick necklace, never brushed his teeth, uncle told me (huh huh laughter). He was interested in things, a reader wants to know this and that to tell brothers and sisters in the countryside in matters that will prove useful. Mr. Kulap sounds like the opposition book of those times, but it seemed more like bragging. Bragging with the king, get famous fast, had no evidence, but claimed to have evidence. My uncle was ordained and stationed at Wat Pathum Khongkha and then disrobed. Later he became instrumental in monks from Phum Riang and Chaiya going to study there one after another. Uncle was an active and striving person, and had more opportunities than father. Father had never been to Bangkok. Uncle, he could read palm-leaf manuscripts fluently, he could also write on palm leaves.

³⁶*Zoraida: A Romance of the Harem and the Great Sahara* by William Le Queux. First published in 1895.

³⁷ Based on the Thai version available today, which preserves Justin Huntly McCarthy's September 1892 preface, most likely, *The Thousand and One Days; Persian Tales*, 2-vol set. Published by Chatto & Windus, London, 1892.

³⁸ One of the most famous and earliest Thai intellectuals in the modern sense. Learned about the world by working on steamships.

³⁹ Possibly the first historian of Thailand in the modern sense who was a commoner. Reynolds, Craig J. "The Case of KSR Kulap: A Challenge to Royal Historical Writing in Late Nineteenth Century Thailand." *Journal of the Siam Society* 61, no. 2 (1973): 63-90.

5. Boxer and Brewmaster

(Buddhadasa showcases his extensive knowledge of herbal lore and Thai traditional medicine, derived from the temple and from just growing up back then and there)

Temples are like universities for the villagers.

I left home to live at the temple when I was 8-9-10. Learned my ABCs, up until *Munbot Banphakit*⁴⁰, at the temple. Aged 11, time to go to school, only then did I go back to living at home. Back then it was the tradition, boys all have to live at the temple. Each temple has hordes of kids. To go live at the temple, you need gifts of flowers, incense, and candles to be entrusted as a monk's apprentice. Then the temple will assign an ācariya, or two, to take care of food, take heed that the kids get to eat in an orderly manner. And to get them schooling, some instruction, in how to respect the Buddha and pray, how to be ordained as a monk. Dividing into shifts in scooping water, essential. Tending to a kitchen garden by the pond, raising ridges for planting casava, we do all that.

For food, rice we get from alms gathering, as for curry, our households send a pot, green pots, each household, their own son goes to fetch it. So, we have a lot of curry pots. Rice enough for *chǎn*, curry was sufficient. Phum Riang is a land of milk and honey⁴¹.

Monks back then, there was still no theologian⁴² to study. Most favor learning prayers. Mindfulness you get from praying, that's it. Never saw them doing it anytime else. Other than that, a lot of woodwork. Be a carpenter, build monastic cells, sheds, shacks, little houses here and there, if a temple doesn't have a prayer hall, then we help build it.

Temple boys, one special thing is being taught how to box. I was forced to practice even though I didn't like it. It was like it was a tradition. Friends pressed me into practice. Sometimes the ācariya wanted me to practice, taught me how. Kids taught each other. Phum Riang is an old boxers' town. Reasonably famous. Temple boxing is good boxing within rules, no hurting each other until bloodshed. When it's the season for parading monks coming out of *vassa*, there's boxing. Whoever wants to box, goes into matchmaking, let the referee settle it for them. After agreement, box. Many pairs boxing before parading back to the temple in boats, stopping for an evening feast at the 9-room hall, yeah, it's the way from the old Suan Mokkh to Ban Iamyai, there's a long marsh there. Once it's 2 PM, they start boxing. Before, the prefect was the chairman. The 9-room hall, the prefect of Chaiya built it, when I was first ordained, the hall was still there.

⁴⁰ มุลบทบรรพกิจ, 1871, possibly the first Thai language textbook, by Phraya Sisunthonwahan (พระยาศรีสุนทรโวหาร).

⁴¹ Of course, in Thai it is rather rice and fish, but the same idea of plenty and abundance.

⁴² Test of competency in Buddhist theology for monks with 3 levels.

The preaching of monks back then, it was mainly the Great Birth⁴³sermon. And then ānisaṃsa⁴⁴ sermons. Build this, get what karmic reward, build a church, a bell, a castle, a hall, this and that, get this much and that much karmic reward. Preaching, teaching Dharma, like now, there was none. Once it comes time to preach again, the Great Birth sermon. We really liked it. Because we got money, and it was fun⁴⁵.

About percepts, morality, the villagers were sufficiently adhering, but better than today. Those who did not adhere were also present. But mostly if they are a household with a place to live they adhere. Because they are ashamed. But those not adhering are also many. Especially animals that are food, like crab and fish, in my household, my parents held it to the absolute of never killing a live crab or fish. It fell to me to put the crab in the pot to boil. It was considered stuff for kids. In sum, the feeling of fear of sin, it existed a lot more than today. People who will sin, or steal, or drink or take drugs, not many. Even if there were, they take just a little. My Chinese grandpa was the brew master of the tax collector, monopolizing distilling of spirits in Chaiya. Chinese grandpa was in control of alcohol production, it's called Shai Hu⁴⁶.

(After this is the logic game part.)

⁴³ Vessantara Jātaka, often called the Great Birth Sermon in Thai (เทศน์มหาชาติ) [thet mahachat], for many Thais, this is their only exposure to the Pali Canon. The story of the Buddha's last birth before being born as the person who would become the Buddha, a man who gave away everything in his life to help others, resonates with many Thais and informs them of how to be a Buddhist in the way they understand best, storytelling.

⁴⁴ อานิสงส์ (Anisong), the Thai spelling of ānisaṃsa in Pali. A popular local genre of Pali manuscript tradition, extra-canonical.

⁴⁵ Sanuk.

⁴⁶ Probably either Teochew or Hokkien Chinese dialect in Thai accent of 酒师 or 酒师傅.

6. Pali Canon

Interviewer: Mr. Chit Phibanthaen⁴⁷ wrote about when *ācariya* is going to found Suan Mokkh:

“In conclusion, must begin work in three phases. That is, find a quiet place to study and research Dhamma from the Pāḷi Canon, to gain knowledge that is true to the Buddha’s words. Once secure knowledge is gained, work together to disseminate to those who are interested. At the same time, must experiment and practice by oneself, as well.”

I would like to ask *ācariya*, whether you were actually intent on coming to researching the Pāḷi Canon or not?

Buddhadasa: It was not in three phases. These three things as they appear I did them at the same time. The founding of Suan Mokkh, I did all three things together. The Pāḷi Canon research, I thought of before. Because I had already started to fasten onto it back when I was in Bangkok. Went to buy individual volumes, sometimes I even got a volume for 5 Baht. The individual volumes, the yellow ones, they are not in a set. This volume, that volume, I went around to look for them at Woeng Nakornkasem, the volumes I did not have I bought, sometimes 5 Baht, sometimes 10 Baht, about half the set, yeah I bought them. Back then there was no Thai edition set. Only the ones from Tai Publishing House (Rongphim Tai โรงพิมพ์ไท), they only had *Dīgha Nikāya* and *Majjhima Nikāya*, in sets of 3 volumes each. The ones that were translated *sūtra* by *sūtra* in the “Treasures of the Dhamma Series (Chut Thamma Sombat) ชุดธรรมสมบัติ” of the Thamma Chaksu (“The Eye of Dhamma” ธรรมจักษุ) newspaper, there were many *sūtra*, 20 to 30 *sūtra*. It was kind of readable. But the one that’s good to read continuously was *Dīgha Nikāya* and *Majjhima Nikāya*, Nakhapraphip⁴⁸ was the translator, Tai Publishing House printed and sold it. But they couldn’t sell them, had to abort. And, there was another volume, *the Book of Udāna*, Out of the whole Book there was only one volume, the Patriarch (Chuan จวน) translated it, when he was still studying for Pāḷi proficiency exams, also published by Tai Publishing House. This publishing house had a big grand plan to publish but they failed. Mr. Hae Kraiwichian⁴⁹ (แห่ กรัยวิเชียร) was the owner. Mahakim Hongladarom (มหากิม หงส์ลาดารมย์) also helped translated many *sutra*, *Visuddhimagga*⁵⁰ this, and that.

⁴⁷ Author of *chiwit lae ngan khong phutthat* (The Life and Work of Buddhadasa) published earlier in 1971. Previous studies of Buddhadasa from researchers outside of Thailand heavily relied on this work.

⁴⁸ Nakhapraphip is the penname of Phra Saraprasoet (Tri Nakhapraphip), a Thai nobleman, an intellectual fluent in Pali and Sanskrit, having learned them in Sri Lanka. *Der Pilger Kamanita* was first translated into Thai by him and his lifelong collaborator, Phraya Anuman Rajadhon, who was one of the first Thai intellectuals.

⁴⁹ Father of former Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien, infamous for being an extreme hardliner who thought Thailand would be ready for democracy in 12 years. Despite being a civilian during the Communist Civil War in Thailand that he fueled the flames of war by alienating Thais and driving them to join the communists in the jungle, so much so that he was removed by a group of soldiers who wished Thailand had democracy. He took power right after the Thammasat University massacre on 6 October 1976 when special forces and far-right groups assaulted the campus with weapons of war and mob violence, claiming they were planning a communist revolution as a pretense to launch a military coup d’état.

⁵⁰ By Buddhaghosa, an important work of exegesis on the Pāḷi Canon, perhaps the most important. What Buddhadasa attempted in his career was basically a modern, casual, and extremely accessible version of what Buddhaghosa did.

7. Buddhadasa Bullies the Interviewer

Interviewer: Ācariya, please analyze yourself: what makes a young man who is a normal, ordinary person have the ideal of devoting his life to religion?

Buddhadasa: The thing is, there was no reason. It's just renewing and promoting the religion back to the original condition. It was a flukeⁱⁱ (Huh huh huh huhⁱⁱⁱ). It was a little fluke. I didn't do a lot-much^{iv}, right? And then people gave importance to it themselves; became a lot-much. In truth, did not intend much-lot. Only just renewing the religion back to the original condition is enough. Did it as what I had to, as what I was given, as what I was able to do. I^v also saw that even the power of the Saṅgha which is very great, they cannot do it, then how can I do it. What I have been doing seriously-solemnly is: to persevere in understanding the Dhamma in the Pali Canon to the utmost correctness. I don't have any power. So, I use the intellect I have, work in the angle of inquiry and writing, that's it.

Interviewer: I see that ācariya has written: "...If I were to research on my own and had not found it, even the beginnings. So, I thought I would collaborate with those that might be sources of research. Like those yogis in India."

Buddhadasa: (Hu hu hu hu [laugh]) There might have been an instance (Hu hu hu hu [laugh]) I have forgotten all of that. Now, especially now there is none. I see it as the craziest notion. To find the Dhamma in India is the craziest notion. Must be found in our bodies; in our minds^{vi}—more you go to India; more you don't find.

Interviewer: Ācariya, in conclusion: I would like to ask you to analyze—what are the causes and factors^{vii} of you changing your thoughts and feelings from studying like typical monks and (sāma)ṇera back then—to becoming a young man with radical ideals to walk the Buddha's path?

Buddhadasa: (Huh huh huh huh [laugh]). Nothing serious about it. I believe it was many, many, coincidences. No intentions stabbed in my mind or something. I was forced and squeezed so that I cannot live in Bangkok: there was no way be able to do anything, if I were to do anything, I had to leave to go to the countryside, not that anyone forced me—but living in Bangkok was limiting, cannot do anything, so go back to the jungle. In truth, there was nothing much or many: it was a matter of dead reckoning of a leap of faith^{viii}, to go fight further ahead. But there was laying the (compass) needle that I must do this, which is: renew the practice of Buddhism that was lost, back then. Thus, the earlier volumes of *Buddhasasana* until now, will print on the cover so it is known there are 3 parts to it: supporting scriptural studies, supporting practice, and propagating religion. It is a matter of renewing, amending, improving with what little intellect I have. For the practicing, it has been a matter of trial and error. It was like accidents that happened together—there was no intention of anyone specifically—and I didn't know deeply or seriously or anything (hahahaha). I'm the kind to feel around—as much as a young man can know around that time—nothing much. It was assuming in general that Buddhism must be good, should definitely be invested in.

Interviewer: Mostly back then people did not believe that to become Arahant^{ix} was possible. But why did you believe it was possible?

Buddhadasa: Hey, well, I am one who has free thought. Nature created me to have free thought.

Interviewer: Ācariya, that you came to interpret Dhamma differently—it is a lineage continuing from (Supreme Patriarch) Vajirananavarorasa and from Thianwan, is that correct?

Buddhadasa: No. That's not it. I'm a person who likes to do things to be distinctive, strange, better than what they were before. Before ordination I had already heard the news—whenever somebody says something good, whether Thianwan or K.S.R. Kularb or (Supreme Patriarch) Vajiranavavarorasa—I have the character that whatever I do, it must be better than others (hahahaha). It is not about being cocky (around others), but it is to be cocky within myself, don't want to do anything the same as others or lower than others. To do whatever, I'm cocky, I'm mental, that there is nothing that I can't do—it is me and mine^x directly. But to do so by material and capital, that means nothing. But relying on actions via wisdom and I thought I might be able to do.

Interviewer: Is it because of this that makes you understand suffering?

Buddhadasa: Not directly. But, yeah, it was following from this. That is, refusing to stop. Determined to go at it better than others have been doing. It's not that the results can be seen empirically. But it was that it seemed like something worth trying. There is nothing better than that. To think of doing something new, to be stranger, and better than before.

Interviewer: Ācariya, to force yourself like this, does it also cause suffering?

Buddhadasa: It doesn't cause suffering, it causes enjoyment. I choose stuff that I'm kind of able to do, and diligently train myself. To speak and share my views—that requires no investment.

Concluding in brief: there was no clever-intelligence or an ingenious-astute plan or something. It was like groping and fumbling around (in the dark). But when I was headed in whichever direction, then I wanted to go all the way until I bore through. I was born in a clan of people who buy and sell—not much relations to this direction—but if we remove the matter of 'how born' 'which lineage': all that remains is this character trait in whatever I do, I want to make it better than what others have been doing; that is, being cocky unintentionally. Thus, I am diligent-hard-working in training myself. Which is heretical for people who buy and sell.

ⁱ พระศาสนา (phra satsana), is Lord-Religion, or holy-religion; พระ (phra) is a prefix for denoting something holy or with high status, while พระสงฆ์ is the official term for a Buddhist monk in Thailand. In casual everyday language พระ is enough to indicate a monk, from Sanskrit चर, meaning selected, chosen, choice, best. Through old Khmer and Thai, it evolved to mean holy, sacred. Most often seen when talking about religion. Jesus in Thai is this prefix and then Jesus in Greek in a way that rolls easier on the Thai tongue, dropping the "s" at the end. High ranking aristocrats also have this prefix, and obviously the king. พระศาสนา means Buddhism in Thai with an honorific flavor. It basically means THE religion. Interestingly, Muhammad is not given this prefix, but نَبِي instead, nabi, prophet: Prophet Muhammad, entirely in Arabic, with a Thai accent.

ⁱⁱ Buddhadasa said the English word "fluke". This is common also today, especially in sports journalism. One humorous consequence follows the infamous trend of modern Thai nicknames sometimes being random English words; there are quite a few famous people whose name is Fluke.

ⁱⁱⁱ Laughing, self-deprecating Thai laugh.

^{iv} Buddhadasa is fond of using this Thai way of making adjectives. One adjective is that adjective. Said twice means a lot of that. And for style, instead of repeating, say a word that follows Thai phonetics but doesn't mean anything but it rhymes with the adjective, after saying the adjective.

^v The "I" here is the Thai gender-neutral casual one เรา (Rao), instead of the specific one monks are taught to use. เรา (Rao) means "we". Before this Buddhadasa did not use pronouns at all as is typical in Thai or Japanese.

^{vi} That the Dhamma must be found inside of us, here and now. Is a great summary of all of Buddhadasa's interpretation of Buddhism. Not to be found from some Bodhisattva in the heavens, a master, a book, even the Pali Canon, the next life. In terms of interfaith dialogue, it is similar to St. Augustine's Homilies on the Gospel of John: "If we love one another, God abideth in us, and His love will be perfected in us. In this know we **that we abide in Him, and He in us**, because He hath given us of His Spirit. (Emphasis mine)" This is commenting on 1 John 4:11-16, especially "16. Et nos cognovimus et credimus dilectionem quam habet **Deus in nobis**: Deus charitas est; et qui manet in charitate, in Deo manet, et Deus in eo. (Emphasis mine)" Later in that section St. Augustine elaborated that saying "love (agape; charitas)" is good and all but doing it is even better. To live a life of love in that sense is how 'we abide in him and he in us' which sounds a lot like Buddhadasa's idea that working is practicing Dhamma.

^{vii} Causes and factors, เหตุปัจจัย [het patchai] while not a unique Thai phrase, is heavily used in Buddhadasa's Buddhism. This is how he, as always, transmuted the stodgy Pali terms into casual everyday Thai language. He uses this word to explain and refer to the complex and obscure Buddhist metaphysical idea of dependent origination. With the result that his followers adopt this term for everyday speech, like the interviewer is doing here. It probably is the Thai word for context and circumstances from the time when Buddhadasa was a young man.

^{viii} There was no religious undertone in the leap of faith, it was literally, to die at the next sword, something like making it up as I go along even if disaster lies ahead, will deal with it when it happens. Whatever, just do it. You only live once. But I cannot find something like that in English.

^{ix} To achieve nibbana, or as known in English, nirvana. Nibbana is from Pali and nirvana is from Sanskrit. Arahant (Pali) is someone who has attained enlightenment in nibbana. In basic English, to become a living saint.

^x Me and mine, one of Buddhadasa's key teachings.