

## Monasticism in the Church in Thailand

*Written in French in March 1973, and translated for the A.I.M. Congress (October 1973) at Bangalore (India)  
Published in Cistercian Studies, No. 2 and 3, 1974*

Buddhism spread through Eastern Asia in two different directions and two different cultural domains: through central Asia towards the countries of Chinese culture, as far as Japan and Viet Nam; and by the Indian Ocean towards the Hindu countries of South East Asia. This gives us roughly the boundaries of each of the two branches of Buddhism: the Sanskrit Buddhism of the north, the Great Vehicle; and the Pali Buddhism of the south, the Small Vehicle. These are not two Buddhisms, but basically the same.

However, there are obvious differences and they do not come merely from the cultural differences of the two areas of expansion; they came about almost at the origin of Buddhism, that is, in India itself. The Buddhism of the south is aware of being closer to the primitive Buddhism-Ancient Buddhism, or the Buddhism of the Ancients (*thera*)-and therefore calls itself Theravada ("the way of the Ancients").

Though the starting-point for the second phase of the expansion of Theravada Buddhism was Sri-Lanka (Ceylon), its geographical centre is certainly Bangkok. But one must not expect to find, either at Bangkok or anywhere else, a sort of "Vatican" of this Buddhism. For the subject that interests us, one of the things that deserve to impress every newcomer in Thailand is the high proportion of yellow robes and of monasteries. Monastic life is so common that one meets it all day and every day, from morning until night. Is there any Christian country, apart from Athos, where anything comparable to this can be found? Perhaps those who lived in the street the major seminary was in might have been under the impression, a few decades ago, that the world was overflowing with clergy - twice a week, at any rate, when the students in their cassocks went out for a walk. But there is no street here in Bangkok where you do not see yellow robes by the dozen every day. Monastic life is not morose, and the people like to see their monks look cheerful and healthy; the only exceptions they allow are the old, whom they expect to be ascetics, and the young, who study too much. Apart from these two categories, monks are expected to be a credit to those who support them. In the monasteries of Bangkok there are many young bonzes who come from the provinces to study and they study as long as they can and whatever they can. Every certificate, no matter how unimportant, is a step towards promotion. Without the pagodas as a channel, most of these young countrymen would not have been able to study. They are monks or novices for the time being; they are in the monastery "for as long as they stay", as the mother of young Samuel said to Eli according to some of the old translations. Their monastic life is similar to the life lived in our major seminaries before the war and they all observe celibacy of course... but for those who received the Bikkhu (Bhiksu) ordination, i.e. almost all who are more than 20 years old, some sins cannot be washed for them as easily as with our private confession.

All this bears on our subject only superficially, but it does situate the problem in its context. That problem is to imagine a form of Christian monasticism *here* and its relation to the local non-Christian monasticism. How can it be brought about? What would that relation be? One of dialogue? Or contrast? Or combination? Or symbiosis?

Until recent years, very little seems to have been done here in the way of Christian monasticism for men. At present however an experiment is in progress.

When one speaks of the attempt to implant Christian monasticism, one means of course something serious, not the superficial attempt of the amateur. But the Buddhist monasticism we are considering often seems to us missionaries to lack this serious character. That impression began to change only after some of our men went to stay in Buddhist monasteries for a week or two and had contact with the revered masters of meditation. And these were only young men, new-comers to

Thailand and still at the early stage of learning the Thai language.

It should be recognized too that when anyone stays for a short time in some monastery with the intention of assessing things, as Westerners do, he runs the risk of returning with a bad opinion. If he wants to find the valuable elements of the life he will have to look for them. They will not force themselves on his attention during a tour of inspection.

One thing is clear, however: there are far too many monasteries, monks and novices, to correspond with Buddha's intention. When he accepted new members into his order, he meant them to be "true disciples" who, like himself, would completely renounce life as "householders" in order to seek the way of definitive salvation. Nowadays there are many and varied reasons inducing men of means to found new monasteries, and young men of good family to ask for clothing, tonsure and "ordination" as members of the Order of Disciples.

#### TEMPORARY MONASTIC LIFE

But whatever the value of these reasons and however far they fall short of the ideal envisaged by Buddha, they do provide some real advantages, however slight they may be. Thus, there is an established custom that every young man, before marriage, should receive "ordination" - greater or lesser, according to whether or not he has attained his majority - and should lead the monastic life for some time, traditionally at least one rainy season. This seems a good tradition and a gain on the human, cultural and spiritual level for the one concerned, even though Buddha probably did not envisage this temporary monastic life within his Order.

There are missionaries who are now regretting that an accepted custom like this has not been adopted and adapted by the Christian missions. It could be a great help in the Christian formation of adolescents and the young - much more solid than what they get from the catechism in the four years of obligatory primary schooling. The Christian missions have imported the idea of the European school catechism, into a country where "religious" or spiritual initiation is traditionally given not to children but to young people.

In the same way, the Christian missions have introduced the idea of parish priests and curates with the power of orders and jurisdiction, as in Europe, into a country where the spiritual animation of the people was ensured in an entirely different way: that is, by a monastic community living within each natural human community, through the simple spontaneous influence of its fidelity to Buddha's Way, and without any other authority than the quality of this fidelity. Many missionaries, especially in rural areas, wish that one of themselves would have the courage to introduce this method for the Christian villages, but no one feels he has the necessary initiative or capacity. When people are converted from Buddhism they learn to reject and even despise these customs which the Buddhists still have. Is there no hope of changing this state of things?

Such reflections seem to belong more to pastoral theology than to the study of pure monasticism. But no study of the place of Christian monasticism in Thailand can afford to neglect this essential aspect of Buddhist monasticism. The community of monks has as its very *raison d'être* and function this service of spiritual leadership of the lay disciples that choose to have it and keep it going. This is an interesting aspect of the traditional local monasticism and as such it is of value to us; it contributes to the picture of what Christian monasticism could be in this country.

#### [MONASTICISM HERE AND EVERYWHERE]. MYSTICISM AND RELIGION

How then can we define the phenomenon of monasticism? How is it traditionally structured in this country?

Let us examine some of its elements. We have:

- monasticism, or the mystical life lived in community ;
- the monastic order, or the group formed to seek spiritual "fulfilment";
- the mystical life, or the Way of spiritual fulfilment, i.e. the endeavour to realize to

the full all that is deepest in man: ultimate and essential values, the full development of what human nature already is, eliciting its profoundest potentialities.

When I speak like this, I know from previous experience that I make the Western monk and the type of Christian who is called "religious" feel dissatisfied and perhaps uneasy. As a truly spiritual Christian he is sure to find that in comparison with the truth he lives by, my approach is very restricted - static, limited, undeveloped, falling back on itself because it lacks dynamism and goal, because it has failed to identify its adequate object, God.

Some see the highest point of human fulfilment as the final union of man with the Ultimate Reality, return to the great All. These see the mystical life in an immanentist, pantheistic perspective. Again, some see the Ultimate Reality to be attained as the supreme, transcendent Being, totally other in relation to other realities: this is the deist perspective. And when the supreme, transcendent Being is seen as a personal God with whom one enters into communion, that is the theist perspective.

In all three perspectives the goal of the spiritual Way is seen objectively, i.e. is defined by its object, its objective, whether the approach is monist, dualist, non-monist or non-dualist.

It must also be mentioned that a mysticism consisting of communion with a personal God does not, of itself, have anything specifically Christian about it. A mystical system does not become Christian by the mere fact of being religious!

The problem of a non-religious mysticism is that it is a way of spiritual fulfilment that is non-religious. Preliminary comments: non-religious does not mean irreligious; non-theist does not mean atheist; non-religious or non-theist does not mean materialist. This is very important. Christian apologetics, seeing that Buddhism is essentially non-theist and even non-religious, have often concluded that it is therefore atheist, materialist, irreligious and nihilist, and that if in fact Buddhists do not seem to be irreligious, materialist or nihilist, this is inconsistent with their doctrine and theories.

Buddha's Way of spiritual fulfilment is not theist: this is affirmed so clearly that no one can doubt it. To the Buddhist, gods and divinities naturally call to mind mythological characters (especially Hindu) and the more or less imaginary inhabitants of the heavenly regions, of which the creating God, Brahma, is the chief. Buddha is a man, the type of perfect human fulfilment: he is not a divinity. For the true Buddhist, as for us, this means that Buddha is greater than all the divinities, because they are all more or less mythical. He is even greater than the God of the monotheists, who is envisaged as the First or Father of the other heavenly beings (as "Jupiter" and "Zeus-pater").

Buddha's Way of spiritual fulfilment refuses to objectify its goal. The Way is defined, not by the goal sought but by the quality of the existential effort. It is defined not objectively but subjectively; not in terms of the objective to be attained but of the state and quality of one's life. The problem is not: what or who is the Absolute Being that is to be sought? But: what is the absolute or highest inner disposition? And this disposition is defined as the "non-absolutization" of self, or the dispossession of self. The correct and ideal attitude for man is *kenosis*, renunciation. When this ideal attitude is realized, truly assumed and stabilized, it is called Nirvana. In expressing this absolute attitude all language finds that only the negative form is adequate (cf. our own negative theology). The tangle of rational speculations in philosophy and the vague constructions of the mythological and religious imagination are usually sterile on the existential plane. Faced with them, Buddha deliberately chose to adhere strictly to the anthropocentric, empirical, existential point of view.

Hence the endless discussions about whether Buddhism is a philosophy or a religion, and whether this Way of spiritual realization deserves the name of mysticism, mystical journey, and quest for the Absolute.

In the Buddhism that is faithful to the attitude of the Master, the Ultimate Reality must never be named or objectified. One must not yield to the temptation of escaping from life into philosophical speculation or religious beliefs. The endless elaborations of the Buddhist Scriptures and the many

generations of commentaries on them have only one end: to make a detailed, empirical and anthropological study of the way in which this “absolute” human attitude of inner liberty and perfect detachment may be attained. This has nothing to do with metaphysical speculation. It involves a great deal of psychological analysis, and consequently has a link with psychoanalysis: the analysis of inner dispositions, the cure of defective dispositions, conditioning for “correct attitudes”, etc. All this has one single objective: to establish the perfect, “absolute” interior attitude, the “Ultimate” human attitude. Since this objective belongs to the “order of the Ultimate” (*lokuttara*, supramundane), it is legitimate to see in this a “religious” project in the deepest sense: the project of attaining what is Ultimate for man. But it does not postulate any of the elements which go to make up the “religious” in the current sense: worship, rites, prayers, devotions and observances. These things may be integrated or tolerated, according to the “religious needs” of the faithful; but they are only supports, essentially relative, and must never be taken as essentials.

The Buddhists call “materialist”, that is, non-spiritual, those who give paramount importance to these “religious” elements, and think that they play an essential role and have boundless, automatic and almost magical efficacy.

If we ever have Christian monks in Thailand, “spiritual” men by definition, they must make a special point of respecting this requirement of the Buddhist “spiritual” men; we have hardly respected it so far.

For Christian monks in dialogue with Buddhist monasticism, this would pose the problem of a “non-religious” Christian spirituality or mysticism, in the sense of one that would relativize what are commonly called the “religious” elements. It was in this sense that Jesus could say: “The Spirit is life but the flesh profits nothing.” This statement seems to stress the meaning and the spiritual aspect of rites and see as relative their material and “literal” aspect. Both Jesus and the early Christians were called irreligious.

They were taken for atheists, too... Were the Apostles of Christ sent to preach monotheism? Are we ourselves here for theist propaganda? Does the Gospel message begin with a lesson in theodicy? Judging by our present catechism, one might think so. We classify Buddhists as “atheists”, and the great problem of missionaries here is to bring the people to the point of admitting the existence of God. They do their utmost to convince catechumens of it by giving them rational proofs. Christian faith is understood as belief in the existence of God - and then one sets out to prove it! Can this be called faith? “I believe in God”: this is the first article of the Creed. Is this the God of the philosophers, or the Father of Jesus?

If God is the Father of Jesus, perhaps we should begin with Jesus, and even speak only of him, and learn from him what he says about his Father and our Father. Then we shall be giving the Christian message and not theist propaganda.

Perhaps this is the great conversion of Christian spirituality and its language that Christian monks in dialogue with the Buddhist spiritual men should help the local mission to carry out. The Christian terminology we have received from the West begins with a theory about the God of philosophy, which it enhances with a small amount of Trinitarian theory; and from all this theory it deduces the status of Christ, God incarnate. The spirituality deriving from this is therefore so dominated by the theist terminology and outlook that one sometimes wonders what is Christian about it. Christ is not an annex of theology.

#### WORSHIP OR REMEMBRANCE

Perhaps our problematics are beginning to worry the reader. To want to modify Christian terminology and to call the witnesses of the Christian spiritual Way to greater discretion in their treatment of religious themes and elements of every kind in order to improve dialogue and draw spiritually closer to Buddhist monasticism - surely this can only adulterate Christianity and end in

syncretism?

It must not end in syncretism. But here on the missions an inevitable and essential problem of acculturation of the Gospel message is posed. It is only natural that different aspects of the Gospel message should be differently used or accentuated according to the diversity of the cultures amid which this message is preached. This can be done without prejudice to the authenticity of the message, and will even enrich it to some degree, by the original local values that will be assimilated. There is no question of syncretism here, unless we rehabilitate the word and make it mean the legitimate and necessary adaptation of the Christian message to each cultural context.

In this sense, Western Christianity itself was a legitimate syncretism of the Way of Christ with the daring of Greek thought, the practical genius of the Romans, and the ancient religious traditions of Europe. All this gave us Western Christianity: a success perhaps, for one cultural context and one period of history. But it is no longer legitimate to hold that this form of Christianity is applicable to all times and places, and to want to implant it everywhere just as it stands.

Christianity and its monasticism have matured in the West, in a universally religious environment. Religion was taken for granted. The problem was to discover the true religion, and for Christianity the problem was to prove that it was the only true religion.

The liturgy and religious practices of the hermits in the Egyptian desert were perhaps moderate when compared with the considerable place that worship, the Office and exercises of piety, came to take up in the monastic life of the Christian West. It has become impossible for us to imagine monastic life without a good deal of worship going on. In fact, the whole monastic life becomes an endless round of worship.

What is Buddhist monastic life like from this point of view? What place does it give to worship? None at all, in a way. The central building or room of the monastery is not a place of worship, a temple, but the room for community meetings, the chapter room. A statue of Buddha presides over it, not as an object of worship but to indicate that the community always comes together under the spiritual or symbolic presidency of the founder and Master. The two daily "Offices" consist in psalmodic recitations of important discourses of the Master. When we think of worship, we mean divine worship. But among Buddhist monks there is nothing at all of this kind. The joss-sticks, the flowers, the prostrations before the image of Buddha, are not understood as "divine" worship of the person of Buddha, thought to be living or present there or anywhere else. It is not an act of worship but a "remembrance" of the Master and his teaching.

Surely it would be profitable for Christian monks in dialogue with Buddhist monks to revive and renew the awareness of what they do or live under the form of worship, by throwing into relief the meaning of "remembrance". "Do this in memory of me." Did Jesus ever intend that his disciples should give him a worship modeled on that given to pagan divinities?

The "remembrance" of the Lord living for us beyond death took on in Catholic worship a whole series of sacrificial forms already used in the other religions of the beginning of our era. For Jews and pagans alike, the central abject in worship was the altar, a point of cosmic focus where blood was really or symbolically shed, as in Solomon's Temple, the temples of the Mediterranean divinities, and the secret assemblies of the Mystery cults. The early Christians in their worship adopted this symbolism of the altar to celebrate the "remembrance" of Christ immolated on the Cross. No doubt that was a legitimate and expressive "syncretism" for the first generations of converts. The liturgy's adoption of the imperial court ceremonial a few centuries later can be justified in a similar way.

All this has survived in the West far too long, however. Times have changed greatly. The time is ripe to return to the simplicity of the Founder's intention: to commemorate the Lord's Passover, the Last Supper, the Master's last meal, at which he gave himself to his chosen disciples. Without decoration and ritual representation, without the accessories of worship borrowed from the Jews and pagans,

let us gather round the Eucharistic table prepared by the Lord himself, and share, under the appearances of bread and wine, the Body and Blood of the sacrificial Lamb. Here we return to the fundamental symbolism of the simplest, least religiously-ambiguous and most significant of objects: the table - the board or mat, high or low - on which and around which people share with each other their thoughts, feelings and food. The family table, the table of friendship or encounter, where strength is regained, plans are made, hopes exchanged, and stores of vitality and optimism laid up. The board of friendship over which one can say everything, even things that would not pass elsewhere, and where that can be accepted that would not be accepted elsewhere. The sign of the whole wealth of human relations.

Will those who are nostalgic for "verticality" (for altars, candlesticks and all that points upwards) find this board too low and horizontal? For our contemporaries, the vertical dimension is now found in the heart of the horizontal. The dimension of the Absolute is found in the depth of the spiritual meaning of daily life. The mystery of the Wholly Other is found in the mystery of "the other". It is in the "brethren", Jesus and all others in him, that "one can see the Father".

For Buddha, too, the Absolute was not beyond horizontality but was the fullness of the horizontal in daily living (cf. *lokuttara* and *lokiya*).

"Worship" or "remembrance"? A battle of words, you may think. The marks of honour with which Buddha's image is surrounded in monasteries could just as well be called worship. In fact, the Buddhists have adopted the English word "worship" for them. But they make a point of adding that it is not the worship of a divinity, like the Christian worship of Christ. This means that Christian terminology has convinced the Buddhists that Christians consider Christ as a divinity, an avatar of the supreme God who is Creator of the universe. Our Christian terminology when translated into Thai thus moves right into mythology: even the word *avatara* seems correct for Incarnation. (It is surprising that there has never been a united endeavour between Christian missionaries, in countries of Indian culture using the Pali or Sanskrit language, to choose a common doctrinal vocabulary.) If our Christian vocabulary is mythologizing, it is probably often because our ideas and representations of the content of the faith, formulated in a list of beliefs, are hazy and tend to the mythical too.

The first thing to do is to take stock of all these confusions and misunderstandings, and then examine the whole matter. This can be done only by assiduous dialogue with the most lucid of the Buddhist spiritual men. The missionary on the mission is too taken up by his ministry ever to have the leisure to tackle this task. He goes at full speed, and catechizes and sacramentalizes with the means on hand, that is, with what his elders have taught him. The local clergy are rigidly conditioned by Western ways and mental categories.

We need monks, then: monks who will have as their full-time and thorough-going duty to do what the parish priest or curate cannot do, except sporadically and superficially. We need monks rather than monasteries, monks who will live in symbiosis with Buddhist monks in their monasteries.

#### COMMUNITY OF MONKS AND COMMUNITY OF LAYMEN

Monastic life is a "withdrawal from the world" or from "worldly life" (*lokiya*: not necessarily a pejorative term, for life in its material content, its literal dimension, can be spiritually of a higher order, *lokuttara*, in its interior orientation). Thus, monastic life is the witness of the one thing necessary, the choice of a priority, though not a divisive choice, as between one thing and another, for it is essential to the values of interiority to renew contact sometimes with the things of the world.

The existence of witnesses to the one thing necessary is indispensable for the healthy human balance of the "worldly" life. It is a service to humanity. Of all the services that society provides for itself, this is the most useful, for it relates to ultimate values, *paramattha*. *Para* means beyond; not beyond in the sense of "out of this world", but a qualitative beyond, having the quality of ultimate depth of life, here and now, so that human living may be fully what it should be. Here again,

Christian terminology comes in for criticism from the Buddhist spiritual men because it places the fulfilment of the spiritual life, the goal of the Christian life, in another world, somewhere beyond this place and time but still “worldly”, *lokiya*. They see the goal as wholly other, transcending every world, *lokuttara*, as is Nirvana, the ultimate depth of inexpressible spiritual quality.

The responsibility for ensuring that this service of supreme quality is carried out and has people permanently engaged in it does not fall on the monk but on the community of laymen. The layman has had the chance of being a religious for a time, and he may well hope to fulfil this service again if circumstances permit. It is in the interest of the lay community that there should be a permanent community of monks. It is therefore up to the lay community to ensure that the monastic community has a supply of recruits, to protect it from anything likely to disturb its peace, and to ensure favourable conditions for its leading the contemplative life (“meditation”). It is to the layman's advantage that the community of monks should be regular and zealous. The layman is responsible for the monk, not the monk for the layman. The monk should have nothing on his mind but being a monk. To see that the monks have all that they need is the role, not of abbots and priors, but of the community of laymen.

Whether the monastic order is extinguished or perpetuated prospers or declines, is the laymen's business. It is for them to look for volunteers to live in the village monastery - and even to urge them to volunteer, if necessary. If the village community is very small, perhaps only a few families, and it wants to have monks, the laymen will agree to persuade some elderly widower to receive ordination and will find some youth as a companion for him in the category of novice, and a lad to serve them. The community of laymen has the monks it provides for itself. If it begins to neglect its monks, then it is obvious that it does not want them, and the monks have only to join another monastery. Without the lay community the monk can no longer live as a monk. If the community of monks disappears that is the fault of the community of laymen. The disappearance of the last monk would show the decomposition of the last community of laymen. This would be the irreparable end: one would have to wait for the preaching of some future Buddha, to see the monastic order reborn!

The “ordination” of monks is not a simple monastic profession; it is an act of the monastic community which aggregates to itself a new member to whom it transmits the “apostolic succession” uninterrupted since the first disciples, who received it from the Master. It is not the prior who gives the ordination, but the whole community: a group of ten monks, usually.

If a monk wants to live a solitary life for some time, he does not cease to belong to the community. Normally he must rejoin it for the three months' retreat during the rainy season, as well as for absolution from censure for certain infringements of the rule.

Moreover, the monastic life combines the maximum of solitude with the minimum of institutional community life, rather like the Charterhouse. But one must not imagine the responsibility of the prior along our Western lines. His role of supervision involves only a minimum of general good order. Each monk follows his own way as he likes, alone or with the guide he chooses for himself. The small rural communities have much more community life than the large suburban monasteries, where there is more study than “meditation”.

## CONCLUSION

Christian monks wanted! Perhaps we could compensate for their fewness by talking about them a great deal? The mass media and reviews could ensure publicity throughout the world. And, as with other Catholic works, schools and hospitals, we would make our own foundation, at great cost, in competition with the people over the way. (After all, aren't we excused for renouncing humility if we do so out of fear of humiliating Jesus Christ and the Church?)

Or could we not accept the hospitality of one of the thirty thousand monasteries in Thailand? (And it is said that there are five thousand of them empty!) Dozens of European monks are living in Thai monasteries, for a longer or shorter experience of Buddhist monastic life. There is only one

condition for their stay: faithful observance of monastic discipline. This is a good school of humility for us. We have a lot to learn from the Buddhist monks. And it is the ideal way of dialogue and mutual discovery. Obviously it is basic honesty to leave outside the door any pretensions and proselytism. If we have anything worthwhile to bring them they will discover it without our knowledge and to the extent of our spiritual transparency.