

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Two Buddhist Educators

Mr. Peter Martin
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Dear Peter,

I've been stalled in my attempts to interview the politician who is called "half-man, half-monk"--Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang, Governor of Metropolitan Bangkok. Much of his popularity stems from his ascetic, Buddhist life-style. So, in lieu of the monkish general, I decided to seek out the real thing.

Phra Rajavaramuni and Phra Phayom Kalayano are two of the best known members of the Thai Sangha (monkhood). Both have received awards for their contributions to Thai society. Both are the undisputed masters of their own particular callings. And both are deeply concerned about the role of the Sangha in Thai society. But, in most other respects, the two monks are worlds apart.

Phra Phayom Kalayano is Thailand's most popular and controversial monk. Cassette tapes of his slangy, humorous sermons often outsell top pop songs. Many school teachers and elders dismiss him as a comedian and fault him for using language unbecoming a monk. Almost everyone under 30 loves him.

Last week, I visited Phra Phayom at his temple, Wat Suan Kaew (Jeweled Garden Temple) in Nonthaburi province, located northwest of Bangkok. Set among fruit orchards and coconut groves, Wat Suan Kaew's physical appearance represents two of the opposing roles of the Thai Sangha: the monk as agent for economic development, and the monk as radical interpreter of Buddhist doctrine who discards stale traditions to get at the core teaching of the Buddha.

The bustle near the entrance to Wat Suan Kaew showed that Phra Phayom believes in the this-worldly practice of using the resources and prestige of the monkhood to help Thailand's poor. A bulldozer cleared the land while workmen poured the foundation for a temple school and vocational training center for indigent children.

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Phra Phayom also follows the more transcendent approach of shedding material fetters and conventional forms to teach about and practice Buddhism. Inside the temple grounds, the traditional, ornate, Thai architecture has been banished. In its place, stark Egyptian murals and Zen paintings illustrate various Buddhist concepts. The monks here live quite simply and instead of the usual, gold-leaf Buddha hall is a plain, open area, covered with blue tiles and marked off by boundary stones. "The other abbots all have cars," said Phra Phayom. "I still don't have one, but I have tranquility."

Wat Suan Kaew attracts thousands of visitors every month who come to wander through its gardens and to hear Phra Phayom's sermons. Over a hundred young boys have recently arrived at the temple to temporarily ordain as novices during the summer school break. Phra Phayom predicted that many of the boys will drop out. The regimen at his temple is too tough for them.

Phra Phayom is an intense, wiry man of 38 years. Interviewing him was akin to putting a tape recorder on fast forward. At the right word, he fixed his eyes on the middle-distance and issued a stream of sharp, captivating language. He spoke in "marketplace language" (phasa talad) with the directness, slang, and lack of formality of a fish vendor. Phra Phayom is a master of the kham khu, the alliteration and pairing of tonal sounds that Thais consider the mark of an orator.

A "child of the poor," Phra Phayom stopped attending school after the fourth grade to work in the rice fields and orchards as a hired laborer. Upon his mother's death, when he was ten, he followed the Thai custom of temporarily entering the monkhood as a novice. Later, when his father died, he again entered the monastery as a novice at age 20. He intended to stay for only three months; instead, he stayed on to become a monk and studied under several noted abbots.

After years of studying and preaching, Phra Phayom captured Thailand's imagination in 1983. That year, he said, his organization sold over 40 million bhat worth of tapes (about 1½ million tapes). Everywhere one went, in the marketplace, at a bus stop, in the schools, people were listening to his sermons. When a government TV station cut him off in mid-sermon for using improper language, it made front-page headlines and only served to spread his name.

According to Phra Phayom, about 25 million of Thailand's 53 million people have heard his sermons. With his programs on two of the country's three television stations, the claim is credible. He reeled off the figures from the latest public opinion poll, which named him the most popular monk, then added, "I'm not interested in who's popular. I just keep doing my duty." Although tape sales have declined since the early, heady days, he has won increased official recognition. Last year, the government's Public Relations Association presented him with the "Silver Conch" award for his artistic approach in promoting Buddhist teaching.

Phra Phayom's sermons are aimed at the young: straight-

forward, heavy on morality rather than philosophical nuances, and laden with the latest jokes. Asked whether his listeners only get the jokes and not the dhamma (truth, or the Buddha's teaching), Phra Phayom said, "I'm sure they remember some of the teaching. Even if they only get one percent it's better than if they didn't listen at all."

While some have criticized Phra Phayom's language, he claimed that he is one of the few monks teenagers listen to. "At first, Thai society didn't accept me because there's never been a monk like me. But when the children started to listen, then the adults were willing to accept me." His language, however, does trouble a few more traditionally-minded youth. "He's fun to listen to and he swears well," said a friend of mine. "But he's not a good monk."

Phra Phayom plans to continue his preaching and to complete the vocational school for the poor. After a recent trip to the U.S., which included a stop by Disneyland, Phra Phayom hopes to eventually build a "Spiritual Disneyland" (Disneyland Thang Winya), which would include a movie theater to teach the dhamma.

Phra Rajavaramuni is not nearly as well known as Phra Phayom. In the past, a modest number of laity visited him at Wat Phra Phirain, which is squeezed in among a row of noisy auto repair shops in the heart of Bangkok's Chinatown. Now, because of Bangkok's polluted air, Phra Rajavaramuni has moved to a residence outside the city. I was fortunate to find him when he returned to Wat Phra Phirain to preside over an ordination ceremony as an ubacha (lit. an ordainer).

Considered by many as Thailand's leading Buddhist scholar, Phra Rajavaramuni passed the Parien 9 Pali exam, the highest ecclesiastical exam, while still a novice at age 22. It is a rare achievement for any monk and practically unheard of for a novice. One of his many books, Buddha-dhamma, is held as the most complete and systematic explication of Buddhism in Thai. Formerly the Deputy Secretary-General of Mahachulalongkorn University, he has lectured at Swarthmore College and Harvard University. Presently, at age 49, he heads a committee that is reviewing and checking the Buddhist scriptures.

When meeting Phra Rajavaramuni, after last seeing him five years ago, one again feels that he exudes wisdom, warmth, and patience. After Phra Rajavaramuni had presided over the morning ceremony, I interviewed him about his book, Looking to America to Solve Thailand's Problems. It is an incisive critique of Thailand's rush to embrace all things American. Like his book, Phra Rajavaramuni's comments were clear and deceptively simple.

Although his book analyzes the negative effects of American "Consumer Culture" on Thai society, he emphasized that western influences are not bad per se. What is important is whether Thais approach western values with the proper attitude. For Phra Rajavaramuni, it is essential to maintain the proper attitude in all matters, even while strictly following the moral precepts. In a statement that could have been (but wasn't) directed at certain monks, he said, "If we have the wrong attitude toward the observance of the precepts, we may observe

the precepts in order to show off, to show that we are better than other people. This is a wrong attitude. If we have this attitude it may cause harm rather than benefit."

Since Buddhism has traditionally been taught through dialogue or books, I inquired whether the dhamma could be taught by television. He said that the mass media could be used as a resource for teaching about ethics (sila-dhamma), mental concentration (samadhi-dhamma), and even to some extent wisdom (panna-dhamma). But, he cautioned against depending on television as the sole source of understanding to the exclusion of "the inner factor of our own wise reflection."

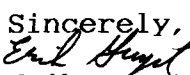
As Phra Rajavaramuni spoke, lay persons were calling him to take lunch (monks cannot eat after noon) while his assistant kept pointing to the clock. Concerned that in his generosity with his time he would miss lunch, I asked if I could leave and return in the afternoon.

Later, Phra Rajavaramuni's discussion ranged from the declining condition of the monkhood, to why the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the government tend to promote ceremonies over education. An abiding concern of his is how, through better education, the Sangha can become more relevant to modern Thai society.

Phra Rajavaramuni also talked about why he ordained as a monk. He explained that, at first, it was because of social custom, nothing more. At age twelve, he was not in good health and had a difficult time studying in school. An older brother who wanted to ordain didn't have the time, so Phra Rajavaramuni ordained as a novice. When I asked why he had continued in his studying and writing, he replied that he wanted to help bring the dhamma to other people. Although he didn't mention it, a prominent theme in his writings also explains his continual effort, despite occasional poor health, to teach about Buddhism.

Many westerners (and some Thais) believe that Buddhist doctrine brands all desire as bad and causing suffering. The implication is that Buddhism and the desire for economic production are fundamentally incompatible. Phra Rajavaramuni considers this a "misunderstanding of the Buddha-dhamma." Through his work, Phra Rajavaramuni emphasizes that according to the doctrine there are two kinds of desires. Tanha, the craving for sensual pleasures, leads to suffering. Dhamma-chanda, the desire for knowledge and truth, can lead to enlightenment. Phra Rajavaramuni calls chanda "the axis of development." In his view, chanda is both a desire to solve practical problems, which is necessary for economic development, and a desire for the truth, which is necessary for spiritual development.

These two teachers, Phra Rajavaramuni and Phra Phayom, represent the diversity of the Thai Sangha. Somewhere between the two, lie most of Thailand's 300,000 monks.

Sincerely,

 Erik Guyot