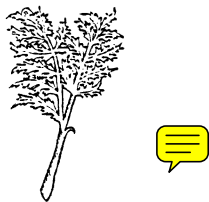


# THE ORDINATION OF A TREE: THE BUDDHIST ECOLOGY MOVEMENT IN THAILAND<sup>1</sup>



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**As part of a growing environmental movement in Thailand, a small number of Buddhist monks engage in ecological conservation projects. These “ecology monks” teach ecologically sound practices among Thai farmers and criticize rapid economic development nationwide (which they see as one of the primary causes of the country’s environmental crisis). This article examines how one northern Thai monk used a tree ordination, adapted from a traditional Buddhist ritual, to build villagers’ commitment to his ecology projects. (Buddhism, environmentalism, ritual, Thailand)**

A Buddhist ecology movement, developing in Thailand and other Buddhist nations, addresses local and national problems of deforestation and ecological destruction. While this is only one aspect of growing environmentalism in Thailand (Hirsch 1996), the Buddhists involved in this movement see their religion as critical for providing practical as well as moral guidelines for ecological conservation. This article focuses on how Buddhists, especially monks, put their concepts of Buddhism and ecology into action, and the consequent reinterpretations of both sets of concepts that result from such behavior. As Buddhism is increasingly used to promote social activism such as conservation, its role in Thai society is also being implicitly challenged and reworked. While the exact changes that will occur are unknown, the Buddhist ecology movement’s potential direction may be glimpsed by examining how rituals, particularly ordaining trees, promote the ecology movement, lending it economic, political, social, and moral force.

The “ecology monks” are those actively engaged in environmental and conservation activities and who respond to the suffering which environmental degradation causes. A major aim of Buddhism is to relieve suffering, the root causes of which are greed, ignorance, and hatred. The monks see the destruction of the forests, pollution of the air and water, and other environmental problems as ultimately caused by people acting through these evils, motivated by economic gain and the material benefits of development, industrialization, and consumerism. As monks, they believe it is their duty to take action against these evils. Their actions bring them into the realm of political and economic debates, especially concerning the rapid development of the Thai economy and control of natural resources.

The scholarly debate that has arisen regarding the relationship between Buddhism and ecology revolves around whether Buddhism promotes an environmentalist ethic and what the basis of such an ethic is within the religion. Much of this debate has occurred on an abstract level, looking to the scriptures, such as the Pali canon, either to uphold or to refute the idea that Buddhism supports environmentalism (e.g., Chatsumarn 1987, 1990; Harris 1991; Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel 1995; Thurman 1984). Other work has focused on the forest monks of Thailand and Sri

Lanka, meditation masters who emphasize a relationship between the *Sangha* (monkhood) and the forest but not the monks' involvement in explicit environmental activism (Chatsumarn 1990; Tambiah 1984; Taylor 1993a). A few studies examine the interaction between Buddhist principles and concepts of ecology; looking, for example, at the promotion of wildlife and plant conservation within temple grounds due to the Buddhist notion of preserving life generally (Pei 1985; Sponsel and Natadecha 1988). While understanding the scriptural bases of ecology and how daily practice coincides with conservation is critical, for the most part these studies have not examined the conscious efforts of Buddhists to become actively engaged in dealing with the environmental crisis beyond the inherent connection between Buddhist teachings and nature. This essay describes the response of a handful of Theravada Buddhist monks to the severe environmental crisis in Thailand and its impact on the lives of rural peoples.

### THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Although it has been suggested that Buddhism has been "co-opted to argue the case for a more environmentally friendly approach to development" (Rigg 1995:12), the severity of the environmental crisis and its link with development in Thailand cannot be denied. As will be explored below, the monks are responding to the consequences of environmental degradation on rural people and their quality of life. The debates surrounding environmentalism are inherently political, involving control over and access to natural resources (especially land, forests, and water) and the causes of rapid deforestation and other environmental problems. The focus here is on deforestation because of its relevance to the rural people with whom the monks work; deforestation, however, is only one element of a complex environmental situation in a rapidly changing national economy.

The rate of deforestation in Thailand is higher than in any Asian country except Nepal (Hirsch 1993:2) and possibly Borneo. The official figures given by the Royal Forest Department (RFD) indicate that in 1961 (when the current drive toward economic development seriously began), 53 per cent of the nation was covered in forest. By 1986, this figure dropped to between 25 and 29 per cent. Nongovernmental organization (NGO) estimates place the current figure as low as 15 per cent (Hirsch 1993:26-27; Pinkaew and Rajesh 1991:22-23; Trébuil 1995:68). These figures represent a decrease from approximately 75 per cent forest cover in 1913 (Hirsch 1993:27).

The differences between the official figures and NGO estimates are largely due to how forest is defined. The RFD includes forest reserve lands, despite the fact that much of the area labeled as such has been cleared. They also include economic and productive forests, including monocrop plantations such as eucalyptus forests. Environmental NGOs rarely consider these lands as forested. The forest reserve lands are particularly problematic as even areas which still have forest cover (usually secondary forest) tend to be inhabited by small-scale farmers who either lived there

at the time the government designated it as forest reserve land or later migrated into the area in search of land. These people have no legal title to the land although they depend on it for their livelihood.

Environmentalism in Thailand is not equivalent to the Western distinction between development and pristine natural areas that must be preserved. In Thailand nature is inextricably linked with economics. The critical issue is access to land and resources and the need to maintain sustainable livelihoods. The debates revolve around whose concepts of sustainable livelihood are to be upheld.

The causes of deforestation, complex and inherently economic and political, range from poverty in rural areas to economic development and consumerism in Bangkok (Rigg 1995:6). They include commercial logging (illegal since 1989), gathering fuel wood and making charcoal by rural poor, and swidden agriculture in highland areas (although the blame placed on swidden agriculturalists often ignores the recent decrease in available land that would allow sustainable fallow periods and the upland migration of increasing numbers of lowland peoples). Rural people, encouraged to clear more forests to join in the market economy, have increased cash-crop production, but at the cost of clearing natural forests. National security, especially during the pre-1980 era of Communist insurgency based in remote forest areas, contributed to deforestation by building roads to make the forests more accessible and diminish the areas in which the Communists could hide. Farmers in search of land quickly moved into the secured forests. The process of state formation linked the national peripheries with the center in Bangkok over the past century, similarly creating greater access to previously isolated areas (Hirsch 1993:29). Cultural views also promoted deforestation as the forests (*paa* and *theuan*) were traditionally seen as wild or untamed (Stott 1991) and available to the general population as common land to be brought into civilization and productivity. These factors contributed to deforestation and the integration of the rural population into mainstream political discourse (Hirsch 1993:14). Both the environmental degradation and the limits placed upon rural peoples through public policy (in particular, the efforts by the government to remove farmers from national forest reserve lands in favor of either conservation or economic development of productive forests) affect the quality of life of the rural population. These issues have provoked some monks into socially conscious action in the name of religious practice and responsibility.

### ECOLOGY MONKS

In Thailand, the self-proclaimed ecology monks (*phra nak anuraksa*) are at the core of the Buddhist ecology movement. Although some of these environmental activists participate in the scholarly debate on the issue, their priorities lie in action to preserve vanishing forests, watersheds, and wildlife, and to mitigate the negative consequences of their disappearance on people's lives. Their efforts provide the motivation for re-examining the scriptures in light of environmentalism rather than the study of the canon creating the impetus for conservation. To understand the

current ecology movement in Thailand, and ultimately in other Buddhist nations, it is important to examine the effect of the practice of the ecology monks on religion in Thailand, to see how they base their projects on Buddhism, reinterpreting and rearticulating religious concepts, the role of the Sangha, and the function of Buddhist rituals in the process.

The number of monks involved in the ecology movement in Thailand, although small, has recently grown rapidly<sup>2</sup> with the popularity of environmentalism currently sweeping Thailand. Given the respect the Sangha commands in Thai society, the potential for their ecological activism is high. This can be illustrated through the analysis of an ecology project conducted in 1991 in Nan Province, northern Thailand. This project, co-ordinated by a Buddhist monk, involved the creation and sanctification of a protected community forest through the ordination of the largest remaining tree in the forest. The tree ordination provides insight into how ecology monks throughout Thailand are rethinking Buddhism and adapting Buddhist rituals to promote their cause. Their concern is as much to maintain the relevance of the religion in a rapidly changing world of industrialization and modernization as to create an environmental awareness among local people and the Thai nation as a whole.

The ecology monks come from a cross-section of the Thai Sangha. A few of them are based in urban temples, and are involved in providing scriptural justifications and scholarly examinations of the movement rather than taking an active role. The majority of the activist monks are from rural areas, the places most directly affected by threats of environmental degradation. They come from both the Mahanikai and Thammayut sects. A few are ranked members of the Sangha hierarchy, such as Phra Phothisang in Chiang Mai Province, and come under greater scrutiny and criticism than less prominent monks. Even while providing an alternative to the traditional activities of the Sangha, few of the ecology monks I have encountered belong to the more conservative radical break-away sects, such as the Santi Asoke or Thammakay movements. Most of the monks try to avoid explicit political statements (although there are well-known exceptions, particularly Phra Prajak Khuttajitto; Taylor 1993b, 1996; Reynolds 1994), but the political nature of the issues cannot be ignored. Most ecology monks are supported or assisted by local and even national environmental NGOs, some of the loci of political opposition within Thai society today.

Over the past century, the government has taken over many traditional activities of Thai village monks. While the temples remain the spiritual heart of villages, only a few still house schools or serve as health-care or community centers (Darlington 1990; Kingshill 1965 [1960]; Tambiah 1970, 1976). To compensate and maintain close contact with the laity, many monks perform an increasing number of ceremonies. For example, the consecration of Buddha images has become more frequent (D. K. Swearer, pers. comm.). The more active, visible, and in many ways controversial response has been to move toward socially engaged action. (See Queen and King 1996 for a good overview of engaged Buddhist movements in Asia.) This

first manifested itself in Thailand in the 1970s through the rise of the development monks (*phra nak phadthanaa*, an informal group made up of mostly rural, lower-ranked monks working independently of the government), who promote grassroots economic development throughout the country (Darlington 1990; Somboon 1987, 1988).

From the development monks emerged the ecology monks, who see their work as monks and Buddhists as promoting human responsibility toward the natural (and inherently social) environment. They stress an interpretation of the religion that emphasizes the Buddha's connection with nature and the interdependence of all things. While many of these monks work independently in their conservation programs, they are aware of the actions of other monks, share ideas, information, and experiences, and participate in regional and national training seminars (e.g., Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development 1992). Some provinces, such as Nakorn Ratchasima and Surat Thani, also have co-operative associations of monks involved in ecological projects. Through their preaching, educational programs, and conservation activities, the ecology monks have influenced Thai society's view of Buddhism and, to some degree, its practice. They have raised the nation's consciousness regarding its environmental responsibilities as their activities have drawn significant attention and media coverage.<sup>3</sup>

Criticism has been leveled at many ecology monks by the government, developers, and the more conservative members of the Sangha for becoming involved in political issues and activities seen as inappropriate for Buddhist monks (such as protesting the construction of hydroelectric dams). The Thai Sangha has traditionally been conservative (especially when compared with the monks in Burma, Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Vietnam), rarely making political statements or criticisms of the government. The actions of the development monks and especially the ecology monks have challenged some of the development policies of the government and questioned the industrialization and increased consumerism of Thai society. Their critics, many of whom tend to benefit from the current direction of Thai development, believe the Sangha's role should be strictly in the spiritual realm, keeping clear of political and economic issues. Some, such as the Sangha hierarchy, are concerned that such potentially controversial actions could harm the reputation of the Sangha as a whole, lessening its influence in providing moral guidelines to the people.

Regardless of the reactions to them, the ecology monks argue that it is their responsibility as monks and as Buddhists to become engaged in this manner. The Buddhist ecologists (and socially engaged Buddhists in general; see Queen and King 1996; Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and International Network of Engaged Buddhists 1990) stress their connection with the Buddha's ideas of nature, the origins of the religion, and the Buddha's admonitions to relieve suffering in the world. Their movement does not advocate a new form of Buddhism, they argue, but is an effort to put the basic ideas of the religion in terms that meet the needs of the modern world. They see this movement as one of "radical conservatism,"<sup>4</sup> returning to the original teachings of the Buddha as applied to contemporary

situations. This movement is not limited to Thailand, but is part of a growing international Buddhist movement that goes beyond national and sectarian differences to promote ecological awareness.

There have been monks in Thailand explicitly concerned about the environment for some time, such as Phra Ajarn Pongsak Techadhammo in Chiang Mai (Suchira 1992; Renard n.d.) and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu in Surat Thani, but their actions and teachings had limited scope. In recent years, the Buddhist ecology movement has coalesced into a conscious and somewhat co-ordinated institution. Its coherence and the increased co-operation and dialogue among monks from different regions of the country have drawn public attention to the movement and greater acceptance of its methods and the appropriateness of such actions by monks. This new approach to religion and monks in Thai society and the creative application of the ecology monks' philosophy to make Buddhist rituals tools of social action may change the concepts and practice of Thai Buddhism. One example is the work of Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun of Nan Province, the monk who co-ordinated the tree ordination examined here.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Phrakhru Pitak's sponsorship of tree ordinations and other environmental actions came from his experience in a remote mountain village affected by deforestation and the promotion of cash crops and consumerism. In the mid-1970s, shortly after his ordination, Phrakhru Pitak became alarmed at the deforestation and damaged watersheds in the region around his home village due to extensive logging (legal and illegal) by large companies and clear-cutting by northern Thai farmers in order to plant maize. The villagers continually had to cut into the forest to grow maize as a supplementary source of income, and the maize itself caused significant erosion and damage to the soil, necessitating further clear-cutting for agricultural land. This caused his district to become the poorest and driest in the province, with the highest rate of adults migrating to find work in Bangkok. For years the monk preached about ecological conservation, stressing the interconnection between social and natural environments and humankind's responsibility to each.

Despite Phrakhru Pitak's preaching, the destruction continued. The villagers came to him to make religious merit and listen to his sermons, then returned home to clear the land. The logging companies cut the forest and the villagers were either too afraid of retribution or too unorganized to oppose them. If they saw a connection between their actions, their increasing poverty, and the environmental crisis, they did nothing about it. In early 1990 Phrakhru Pitak visited Phrakhru Manas of Phayao Province, the monk credited with performing the first symbolic ordination of a tree to make people aware of environmental responsibility. In June 1990, Phrakhru Pitak moved beyond preaching an ecological message and sponsored a tree ordination in the community forest of his home village (see Darlington n.d.), and in July 1991 he performed a second to sanctify the forest surrounding ten neighboring villages.

These ceremonies were only a small portion of the monk's projects, which included several months of educating villagers about environmental issues, training young temporary novices about the natural environment, the promotion of economic alternatives to growing maize as a cash crop, and the establishment of protected community forests (see Darlington n.d.; Local Development Institute 1992; Saneh and Yos 1993). Phrakhru Pitak promoted self-reliant development projects, such as integrated agriculture emphasizing planting for subsistence rather than for sale, because protecting the forest simply by denying the villagers access to it would not be successful. Since the villagers gained much of their income from the forest, economic alternatives needed to be established to ensure their co-operation in preserving the forest. Local committees were also established to manage the forests, patrol the sanctified areas against incursion, and sponsor continued ecological activities to keep the commitment of the projects alive.

The tree ordination was the symbolic center of Phrakhru Pitak's conservation program. The discussions with the villagers leading up to the ordination and the conservation activities organized by them afterward were all motivated by the emotional and spiritual commitment created by the ceremony. Throughout the ceremony, Buddhist symbols were used to stress the religious connection to conservation, the villagers' interdependence with the forest, and the moral basis of the project.

### THE TREE ORDINATION CEREMONY

Tree ordination ceremonies (*buat ton mai*) are performed by many participants in the Buddhist ecology movement in order to raise the awareness of the rate of environmental destruction in Thailand and to build a spiritual commitment among local people to conserving the forests and watersheds. Some large-scale ordinations have been carried out for publicity and public sympathy to make the government see the environmental impact of some of its economic development plans. (This was the case in the southern province of Surat Thani in March 1991, when over 50 monks and lay people entered a national park to wrap monks' robes around all the large trees in a rainforest threatened by the construction of a dam [Pongpet 1991].) Most tree ordinations are aimed at local areas, and villagers, through their participation in these ceremonies, signify their acceptance of this adaptation of a Buddhist ritual to sanctify the forest and thereby protect it. The regulations the monks establish limit their use of the forest, forbidding the cutting of any trees or killing of any wildlife within it.

In July 1991, I attended a tree ordination ceremony in Nan Province in northern Thailand sponsored by Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun. Although the tree ordination was the culmination of months of preparation and was one aspect of a larger conservation program, the actual ceremony involved only a day and a half of activities. Phrakhru Pitak invited over twenty monks from Nan and other northern provinces to assist in performing the ceremony. Recognizing the importance of gaining the support of the

Sangha hierarchy and the local government for the project's success, Phrakhru Pitak consulted with and involved members of the province's Sangha organization, especially the seniormost monk in the three subdistricts of the ten participating villages, the District Officer, and other local bureaucrats.<sup>5</sup> Many local government officials and mid-level members of the Sangha hierarchy participated in the ceremony. Given the independent nature and potentially controversial aspects of the activities of most socially engaged monks, Phrakhru Pitak's attention to convincing the Sangha hierarchy and the government of the project's importance is significant for assuring its success. The night before the ceremony representatives of Wildlife Fund Thailand (an affiliate of World Wildlife Fund) showed slides to the villagers. Their cosponsorship of the project placed Phrakhru Pitak's work on a national stage and gave it further legitimacy. Not only is WFT one of the largest environmental NGOs in Thailand, but it also has royal patronage. The involvement of NGOs in the work of ecology monks is essential to much of their success, although at the same time it raises potential political issues, as many NGOs are openly critical of government policy.

The ordination ceremony began in the morning with a modification of a traditional ritual, *thaut phaa paa* (the giving of the forest robes). Traditionally, this ritual is performed by Thai lay people to donate robes, money, and other necessities to monks for religious merit. The funds raised support the monks and the upkeep of the temple. Since the 1980s this ritual has been increasingly used across the nation to raise funds for local development projects; those contributing offerings to the monks gain merit, and the monks allow the money donated to be used for projects ranging from building or repairing a school to establishing a local credit union or village co-operative store. People's commitment to such projects is often stronger because of the religious connotations behind the source of the funds—they not only gain merit from the original donations at the phaa paa ceremony, but from supporting the development project sanctioned by the monks as well.

Phrakhru Pitak added a new twist to this ceremony. Several nurseries around the provincial capital and some wealthy patrons offered 12,000 seedlings to the monks. Along with the donation of seedlings, there were several other innovations. The villagers paraded their offerings in three groups, representing the three subdistricts in which the ten participating villages belonged. While they carried model trees with simple offerings of money and necessities, they did not dance, drink, or play the traditional music that usually accompanies a phaa paa parade (Darlington 1990:132-37). Rather, each of the three groups performed skits they had prepared which presented their ideas of conserving the forest. Two were straightforward; for example, one group pantomimed planting seedlings. The most dramatic of the three included political commentary. The villagers acted out an incident of the forest being cut down, passing the blame from the minority hill people, to the northern Thai villagers, until it finally settled on the government for not protecting the forest. The political debate concerning forest conservation and the economic interests involved in its destruction underlies all conservation activities.<sup>6</sup> It is unusual, however, for



these issues to be brought so openly to the surface, especially during a Buddhist ritual. All three skits emphasized the urgent need for the villagers to conserve the forest.

Once the forest robes were ritually accepted by Phrakhru Pitak, he and the highest-ranking monk present accepted the seedlings, thus sanctifying them and conferring merit on the donors and the participants. A few of the seedlings were planted around the temple grounds and at the site of the tree ordination as part of the ceremony. Most were given to the villagers to reforest areas that had been denuded, following the pattern established by phaa paa ceremonies conducted to raise development project funds. These new trees were chosen carefully; they were species, such as fruit trees, that were profitable without having to be cut down. Having been sanctified and given by the monks further protected them, as the villagers would see cutting them as a form of religious demerit (*baap*).

After planting the trees at the temple, the participants climbed into trucks, vans, and buses to make the five-kilometer trip into the mountains to the tree chosen to be ordained. Over 200 people accompanied the more than twenty monks to the site, which had earlier been prepared by volunteer development workers and villagers. A four-foot-tall Buddha image had been placed on a concrete stand at the base of the giant tree. The thick vegetation around the site had been trimmed, and a tent for the monks put up. Phrakhru Pitak commented that over twenty years ago, when he walked the eight kilometers from his village through the deep forest to school along this route, this tree was not unusual for its height or size. Now it clearly stood out as the tallest remaining tree. One could now see for miles from it across a landscape dotted with nearly vertical maize fields, visible because of the deforested hillsides.

It is important to note that in this ceremony, like all tree ordinations, the monks did not claim to be fully ordaining the tree, as that status is reserved for humans only. The ceremony was used symbolically to remind people that nature should be treated as equal with humans, deserving of respect and vital for human as well as all life. The opportunity of the ordination was used to build spiritual commitment to preserving the forest and to teach in an active and creative way the value of conservation. The main emphasis of Phrakhru Pitak's sermon during the ritual was on the relationship between the Buddha and nature, and the interdependence between the conditions of the forest and the villagers' lives.

During the ritual, at the same point in which a new monk would be presented with his robes, two monks wrapped orange robes around the tree's trunk, marking its sanctification. A crowd of photographers from local and Bangkok newspapers and participating NGOs, one anthropologist, and two video camera crews documented the quick act. The robes stood as a reminder that to harm or cut the tree—or any of the forest—was an act of demerit. While it was not unusual to find bodhi trees (the tree under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment) wrapped with sacred cloth, in those cases the tree was already seen as holy; the cloth served more to honor the tree than to sanctify it. The innovation here was that the tree ordained was not already treated

as sacred but was made so through the ritual. The orange robes symbolized its new status.

As in most ordinations, the ritual included the sanctification of water in a monk's alms bowl. A small Buddha image was placed in the bowl and candle wax dripped into the water while the monks chanted. Traditionally, this holy water (*nam mon*) is sprinkled on the participants, conferring a blessing on them. This water is seen as ritually very powerful, and people always make sure to receive some of the drops from the monk (Olson 1991). On this occasion, Phrakhu Pitak used the blessed water in an original manner. Each of the headmen from the ten villages drank some of the water in front of the large Buddha image to seal their pledge to protect the forest. This use of a sacred symbol to strengthen such an oath was another innovation which reinforced the notion of environmentalism as a moral action. It made the protection or destruction of the forest karmic action: protecting it would confer good merit (*bun*), destroying it bringing bad, the balance of which would ultimately affect one's rebirth or even quality of living in this life. Beyond that, it drew on the belief of the villagers in the magical powers of the holy water; while specific sanctions were not mentioned for failing to uphold the headmen's pledge, the implications were that breaking it would involve going against the power secured by the use of the water.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the ceremony (the one which in itself raises the most questions or is open to the greatest variety of alternative interpretations) is the plaque that was nailed to the tree prior to the ordination. No formal mention of the sign was made during the ritual, nor was much discussion or fanfare made concerning its content or placement. Yet it always draws the most attention and discussion from Thai who are introduced to it. The sign reads, "*Tham laay paa khee tham laay chaat*," which can be translated, "To destroy the forest is to destroy life." The word *chaat* (life) is problematic and can carry several meanings, all of which relate to the issue of conservation on various levels.<sup>7</sup> *Chaat* can mean life, birth (as in rebirth), or nation. The sentence could thus be read, "To destroy the forest is to destroy life, one's rebirth, or the nation."

The first meaning is the most straightforward from the point of view of environmentalists whose concerns do not necessarily involve either religious or nationalist connotations. Yet it also implies the Buddhist idea that one should respect and care for all life because any being could have been one's mother in a previous life. The second meaning, to destroy one's rebirth, invokes the concept of *kamma*. It raises the idea that destroying the forest is an act of demerit and consequently has a negative influence on how one is reborn in one's next life. The third possibility, that of destroying the nation (meaning both territory and people; Reynolds 1977:274, 1994:442), is the most complex. It evokes nationalist feelings, linking the condition of the forest with that of the state. It draws upon the moral connection between nation (*chaat*), religion (*satsana*), and monarchy (*mahakeset*), the trinity of concepts which supposedly makes up Thailand's identity (Reynolds 1977, 1994). Even this meaning is double-edged. While it invokes the villagers' loyalty to the nation and the

king in protecting the forest, it also calls upon the nation itself to uphold its moral responsibility to preserve the forest. Given the political undertones of the conservation issue, it is unlikely that this implicit meaning is present by mere coincidence.

The use of the word *chaat* on the sign demonstrates the complexity and significance of the tree ordination. Concepts of religion are being reinterpreted to promote environmentalism at the same time the latter is linked through moral ties with local and national political and economic issues. Throughout the ordination, and the larger project of which it was a part, Phrakhru Pitak extended his traditional role as spiritual and moral leader of lay villagers to embrace an activism which necessitates political involvement. The same kind of role enlargement is recreated in every project run by ecology monks, from tree ordinations and the establishment of sacred community forests to tree-planting ceremonies and exorcisms or long-life ceremonies at sites threatened by ecological destruction.

### THE MORALITY OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

Monks are not supposed to be concerned with worldly issues such as politics. At the same time, however, the ecology monks see environmental destruction as a crucial factor in their main concern—human suffering. They cannot avoid a certain degree of involvement in the former if they are to deal with the latter. They feel a responsibility as monks to teach people environmental awareness and show them the path to relieving their suffering. The root causes of suffering are, in Buddhist philosophy, greed, ignorance, and hatred. As the destruction of the forest is caused by these evils (through people's selfish aims at economic gain or unconsidered use of natural resources to meet needs arising from poverty and overly rapid development), the monks see it as their duty to adapt traditional religious concepts and rituals to gain the villagers' acceptance and commitment to their ecological aims.

The destruction of the environment was not a significant issue in Thailand until the rapid industrialization of the country became a national priority after World War II (Sponsel and Natadecha 1988:305). Even then, it was not until the 1980s that nature conservation became a widespread concern, despite the earlier efforts of such environmental NGOs as Wildlife Fund Thailand and the Project for Ecological Recovery. The adoption of the issue by the ecology monks beginning in the late 1980s has raised the movement to a new level. It can no longer be seen simply as an economic or political debate between environmentalists and developers, but has now been placed on a moral plane. The monks are concerned with the suffering of both humans and wildlife which results from the destruction of the forests and watersheds. As it is a moral issue, the monks are interpreting the scriptures to support their actions and are adapting traditional rituals and symbols to involve lay villagers in the movement.

The ecology monks are walking a fine line between their traditional responsibilities as spiritual leaders and their new practice as social activists. They are consciously using the former to support and even justify the latter, to counter the

criticisms that their environmental efforts are inappropriate for monks. The result is a complex interplay between traditional religious concepts, symbols, and rituals, and moral debates of political and economic issues. While the focus of specific activities such as tree ordinations is predominantly on local areas, the innovative use of traditional rituals, such as the parade and skits accompanying the phaa paa ton mai ceremony, and the implication of signs like the one nailed to the tree in Nan, place the issue on a national political level as well. Through the use of words like chaat, the monks raise issues that question the role and responsibility of the local and national governments in deforestation and conservation.

Similarly, the practice of religion itself is being changed, even challenged, in the process. Buddhism in Thailand has become less relevant to daily life over the past century because of increasing government involvement in lay life through schools, improved health care, development projects, and other areas. The Buddhist ecology movement, following the model of the work of development monks, is not allowing the religion to become relegated to a secondary place in Thai society. It challenges the Sangha, as well as the Thai people, to reconsider its role and not to accept complacency or merely perform rituals that have no direct relevance for relieving suffering in daily life. It forces Buddhists to question and think about the causes of people's suffering, even when these causes are controversial or political. While the activist monks' aim is to relieve suffering and maintain the relevance of the religion in a changing society, this has also resulted in questioning and rethinking the function of the religion itself.

The use of traditional Buddhist rituals (such as ordinations and the phaa paa ceremony) and the invocation of powerful religious symbols (such as holy water and monks' robes, and the implication of words like chaat in the plaque on the ordained tree in Nan Province) serve as vehicles which simultaneously preserve religious concepts and sentiments and challenge their traditional use and interpretations in Thailand. The ecology monks are responding to what they perceive as threats to or, to put it more mildly, inevitable changes in their social position. They are making conscious choices and actions, guided by long-standing religious concepts such as merit-making and karmic action, and social relations between the Sangha and the lay villagers. As a consequence, their role, the concepts and practice of the religion, and the relation between the religion (and its practitioners) and the state are all changing. While the scriptural justifications behind the ecology movement are important to understand, the practice which accompanies or motivates the re-examination of the canon demonstrates that the process cannot be examined solely on an abstract theological level. The case of the tree ordination in Nan illustrates the social, political, and economic issues involved, and reveals the levels at which the major changes are taking place.

This dynamic process of change is far from complete. The Buddhist ecology movement is still growing and becoming more vocal and controversial, challenging specific cases of environmental destruction caused by policies of the government or economic development plans. The responses of the government, industrialists, and

general members of the Sangha, as well as the Sangha hierarchy, all need to be considered to judge the full effect of this movement on the concepts of Buddhism and ecology as they are interpreted and practiced in Thai society. It is apparent that Thai Buddhism is changing dramatically and, despite some efforts to use it as a conservative force to support the status quo and government policies, it has tremendous potential to effect social and environmental change in Thailand. The extent and success of these efforts, and the true direction of the changes involved, remain to be seen.

#### NOTES

1. Research, conducted in Thailand June through August 1991, August 1992 through July 1993, and July through December 1994, was made possible by grants from the Joint Committee on Southeast Asia of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford Foundation, the Southeast Asian Council of the Association of Asian Studies, and the Ford Foundation Comparative Scientific Traditions program of Hampshire College. I thank David Brawn and Ariel Heryanto for helpful suggestions on an early draft of this article, and the National Research Council of Thailand for research permission.
2. While it is difficult to determine membership in a category such as "ecology monks," as many monks are interested in environmental work but do not label themselves as such, a sense of the scope of the movement can be gained from looking at the participation in a three-day conference (held near Bangkok in July 1991) cosponsored by 23 nongovernmental environmental and development organizations. The organizers expected around 60 monks to attend; over 200 actually registered.
3. From June to August 1991, there were articles on the conservation work of monks at least weekly in both Thai and English-language newspapers. While much of the coverage focused on the case of Phra Prajak, the monk who was arrested twice in 1991 for his ecological work as it conflicted with government policies concerning national forest land, the work of other ecology monks also received some attention. On the legal case concerning Phra Prajak, see Reynolds (1994) and Taylor (1993b).
4. This term is borrowed from the title of a book in honor of one of the best-known Thai monks, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who called for social action as an aspect of Buddhist practice (Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development and International Network of Engaged Buddhists 1990).
5. In later projects, Phrakhrū Pitak involved provincial government officials and Sangha, including the governor and military leaders.
6. Economic enterprises that destroy natural forests include the creation of eucalyptus plantations and logging hardwood trees such as teak. The former is occurring primarily in the northeast legally, and at a rapid rate (see Lohmann 1991; Sanitsuda 1992a, 1992b), while the latter continues throughout the country despite a national ban passed in 1989. The widespread belief is that both frequently occur with the backing of factions within local, regional, and national governments and the military (Pinkaw and Rajesh 1991).
7. I thank Dr. Thongchai Winichakul and Dr. Robert Bickner for pointing out to me the several meanings of chaat as used in the sentence on the plaque.

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