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Thai Buddhist Ecology Monks: Competing Views of the Forest

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Abstract

Engaged Buddhism is a growing force in Buddhism today and is founded on the philosophy that moral and enlightened action in this life is the most important responsibility of a Buddhist monk to “alleviate suffering.” Thai Buddhist ecology monks are one expression of how Engaged Buddhism tackles contemporary problems, specifically relating to rural people, poverty, environmental degradation, and other problems on the ground level. I took on this project of studying Thai Buddhist ecology monks and their ideas, inspirations, views, and creative action in rural villages in order to understand how they fit into the Buddhist world and simultaneously challenge it. In this thesis I investigated how ecology monks draw on the various competing views of the environment in Thailand to form a framework for creative and environmental action to remove suffering from communities and the environment. My work situated ecology monks in the context of the two traditional paths of the Buddhist forest monks and village monks in Thailand. I contrasted how ecology monks view the forest with that of the Thai government, the Buddhist forest monks, and the indigenous people of northern Thailand. I discussed views of the forest and the ecology monks as a new hybrid vocation of Buddhism by using scholarship to date on the Thai environmental crisis, Thai environmentalism, ecology monks and their rituals, the forest monk tradition, and indigenous beliefs and practices in Thailand. I found that ecology monks are a new form of Engaged Buddhism and a hybrid of Thai forest and village monks because of their use of dialogue between indigenous spirit beliefs and Buddhism aiming to revive an intimate relationship of humans with nature. The ways in which ecology monks bring together religious elements to resist the Thai environmental crisis and fight for the livelihood of local people is important to the future of the health of the environment and various religious expressions in Thailand. Competing views of the environment stemming from different ways of

knowing the world are important in understanding historical events that have led to the contemporary environmental crisis and how it is being acted upon.

Introduction

Deep in the forests of Thailand, Buddhist ‘ecology monks’ are fighting for the forests and the rural people, run down by rapid development. In Thai, they are called, “*phra nak anurak thamachat*,” an informal term meaning “monks who conserve nature” (Darlington 2012: 10). Many known ecology monks emerged independently in the mid-1970s and did not gain recognition at the national level until the mid- to late 1980s with the rise of Thailand’s environmental movement (Ibid: 142). These ecology monks innovate ecological rituals inspired by Buddhist models such as the Tree Ordination and Long Life ceremonies for rivers. The Tree Ordination and Long Life Ceremony for rivers draw on traditional Buddhist teachings as well as indigenous beliefs in spirits as a response to the current situation of rapid deforestation of Thailand’s native forests. Ecology monks use these rituals and creative teaching methods to address the three root *kleshas*—greed, anger, and ignorance—emotions that according to Buddhist doctrine hold all beings in perpetual suffering within a never ending cycle of death and rebirth. Thai ecology monks interpret the Buddhist path as a responsibility to resist international development models that have precipitated the Thai environmental crisis because of its impact on the biodiversity of the forests and waterways.

Thailand’s forests began to decline over a century ago when Britain forced the country to open trade access. British logging companies took the largest trees while local logging companies took medium trees, which were used for drying tobacco, beginning the spiral of deforestation in Thailand (Darlington 2012). In 1961 an aerial survey of Thailand’s land mass

recorded 53% forest cover and by 1985 the land was 28% forested. According to Apichai Puntasen, “Two major historical factors responsible for this situation have been the reform of the bureaucracy in 1892, resulting in the establishment of strong, centralized state control, and the direction of government development policy since 1961 through the process of ‘modernization.’” (Puntasen 1997: 72). This centralization of state control took away the freedom of communities to manage their forests, and the development boom used Thailand’s natural resources in a quick pursuit to catch up to developed countries in the economic sector. These events set the stage for the rise of Buddhist development monks and Thai NGOs from the 1970s onwards, and ecology monks and the environmental movement in Thailand in the 1980s onwards. All these groups in Thailand are fighting for health and livelihoods of rural people and the forests that are at the expense of Thailand’s development policies.

Ecology monks draw from Buddhist concepts of impermanence, dependent origination, and suffering in conjunction with indigenous belief in forest and tree spirits to foster a relationship between the forest and human communities. Ecology monks weave spirit beliefs into Buddhism based on the work of *eco-dharma* intellectual, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, of Thailand, who critiques the materialist direction of Thai society. Monks engaged with environmental and developmental problems refer to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu for guidance in interpreting Buddhist philosophy in a nature affirming way. Using a synthesis of spirit beliefs and interpretations of eco-Buddhism, ecology monks bring the health of the forests and the communities who rely on them to the center of their priority. These monks resist Thailand’s governmental development policies and “conservation strategies” that compromise the health of the forest and rural people through political activism, grassroots projects, education, and religious rituals.

To investigate the work of the ecology monks and their use of religious and ecological teachings and practices, I rely on Susan Darlington's *Ordination of a Tree: The Thai Buddhist Environmental Movement* (2012). Darlington investigates the response of ecology monks within the Thai environmental movement, how they draw on rituals and indigenous practices, their relationship with environmental and developmental NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and their unique innovative ecological and Buddhist response. I build on Darlington's work by situating ecology monks in Thailand as a hybrid between forest and village monks, drawing on competing views of the forest interpreted by the Buddhist path. I use scholarship on the forest monks of Thailand and Sri Lanka from Stanley Tambiah's *Forest Monks and the Cult of the Amulets* (1984), Jim Taylor's *Forest Monk and the Nation State* (1993) and Michael Carrithers' work on *Forest Monks of Sri Lanka* (1983) to investigate their view of the forest and how their vocation of meditation in wild places contrasts with village monks who focus on knowledge of scripture and rituals for the lay people. I use essays in Phillip Hirsch's anthology *Seeing Forests for Trees: Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand* (1993) and Forsyth and Walker's *Forest Guardians and Forest Destroyers: The Politics of Environmental Knowledge in Northern Thailand* (2008) to study the developmental policies of the Thai government, alternative community forest management, indigenous spirit beliefs, indigenous attitudes towards the forest, and the various perspectives on ecology monks. To consider key figures and movements of Engaged Buddhism, I use essays on the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and Sulak Sivaraksa in *Engaged Buddhism*, an anthology edited by Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (1996). I also draw on the work of Romila Thapar (2004) on Indic imaginaire, which parallels that of Thailand, and the work of Stan Mumford (1989) in thinking about religious syncretism and the "dialogue" between competing worldviews and religious

outlooks. All of these works inform this paper and contribute to my approach and understanding of ecology monks, the Thai environmental crisis, religious syncretism, and the flux of the forest in the public imagination.

Throughout my research on of ecology monks I have found, like Darlington, that their use of ritual and ecological teachings from Buddhism and indigenous traditions is an innovative approach to immediate problems surrounding their villages. I think their success comes from their ability to reflect and apply Buddhist teachings and methods to the immediate problems of suffering of the forest and rural villagers in a way that is in line with spirit beliefs in Thailand today. This paper will focus on how the ecology monks draw on competing views of the Thai environment that impact rural people and nature, creating a new worldview that differs from traditional Buddhist forest monk and village monk traditions. Previous scholarship shows how the ecology monks have engaged with local traditions to respond to deforestation from cash cropping and the push by the national government to modernize Thailand. It has also been shown how ecology monks work alongside NGOs and other activists to fight social, developmental, and environmental problems for the people of Thailand. What I seek to draw attention to in this thesis is how ecology monks draw on the various views of the forest and how they reject the role of a Buddhist monk that is not involved with issues and problems in society.

Ecology monks are part of the larger movement of Engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism responds to immediate causes of suffering through political action, grass-roots projects, and spreading awareness. This form of Buddhist action challenges orthodox Theravada Buddhism as “selfish” because of the monastic focus on ritual and meditation and lack of action for the suffering of lay people around them. Ecology monks challenge both the village monastic

tradition and forest tradition because of their passivity towards community problems on the ground, forming a new role distinct from forest monks and village monks.

Using scholarship to date I shed light on the ecology monks as a hybrid that exist between the vocations of forest dwellers, focused on meditation and renunciation, and village monks, steeped in orthodox scripture and ritual. I argue that the Thai ecology monks, as Engaged Buddhists, diverge from traditional vocations of forest and village monks and in doing so engage in a dialogic response to the Thai environmental crisis and synthesize Buddhist ritual and indigenous views of the forest. I apply Romila Thapar's work on the relationship between the forest and societies in the Indic imaginaire to the current views in Thailand in order to situate the ecology monks into a larger discourse about the relationship between humans and nature. I identify these distinct and competing discourses of the environment and discuss how the ecology monks draw on and resist these in order to encourage sustainable practices of forest management by local communities.

In Part One of this thesis I discuss competing discourses of the environment in Thailand—discourses by the Thai state, by the forest monks, and by the local people. First I discuss governmental policies and projects such as the Thailand Yadana Pipeline from Burma and the agricultural push in the 1960s under Sarit Thanarat for cash cropping to maximize economic benefits. Then, I show how the government reacts to the problem of environmental degradation through the international discourse of the environment as “pristine” and separated from the people in order to conserve and restore it. The government's solution, “green” eucalyptus plantations, demonstrates a top-down World Bank approach to conservation that uses the environment solely as natural resources, and employs environmental rhetoric to create the illusion of these projects as environmentally sound. Next, I consider the indigenous beliefs and

practices, such as Karen communities from the Mae Wang watershed and village people from the Nan Province. I discuss their relationship to the forest by looking to traditional beliefs, community forest management, and swidden¹ agricultural techniques². To consider a normative Buddhist worldview, I look to the forest monk tradition in Thailand and its view of the forest through the exemplary figure and forest saint Acharn Mun, specifically how he used meditation and calm abiding to pacify demonic spirits and wild animals. I explore the interaction of forest monks with villagers rooted in nature spirits and animist traditions, emphasizing how forest monks have in recent decades gone from being feared and shunned to sought out by the lay people because of their charismatic powers. In considering the position of ecology monks in the Theravada world, I contrast the vocations of village monks and forest monks, which are both integral to Thai society.

In Part Two, I show how ecology monks appropriate and resist the views of the environment, discussed in Part One, to address specific problem of suffering caused by environmental degradation and deforestation in Thailand. First I address examples of development monks' and NGO responses to Thai environmental degradation through grassroots developmental projects, which provide a model for the success and achievements of ecology monks. I discuss key figures in Engaged Buddhism: Sulak Sivaraksa and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and their core teachings and achievements. Next, I introduce the Tree Ordination and Long Life Ceremony for rivers and streams to show how Buddhist and indigenous beliefs are incorporated into new traditions. Then, I transition to narratives of Phrakhru Manas Nathipithak, Phrakhru Pitak Nathankun, Phra Paisal Vasilo and Luang Phor Khamkian to highlight key themes in the

¹ Swidden farming as an intricate agricultural system that allows restoration of the soil cover and prevention of crop disease and pests through natural techniques (Ayuthaya 1993: 126-130)

² See page 16

environmental work of ecology monks. In telling their stories, I discuss projects in integrated, sustainable agriculture that attempt to revive indigenous techniques in land cultivation. Finally, I situate the Thai ecology monks as a hybrid vocation drawing on yet distinct from the traditional village and forest monks because of their incorporation of local spirit beliefs, creating appropriation of Buddhist ritual, and dialogic encounter with conflicting views of the forest.

Part One: Competing Views of the Forest

The earliest vision of the forest among settlements in Northern Thailand is as “wild and forested spaces of sparse settlement where malevolent spirits roam uncontrolled” (Forsyth and Walker 2008: 28). Imagine Thailand’s northern mountainous region that flows down into diverse teak forests of the hill regions and into lush lowland valleys. Lowland villages represent the epitome of human settlement (*muang*) and centers of merit and chiefly power, contrasting with the uninhabited, forested hills. The lowland was spatially and symbolically distinct from the upland *pa*, a term that translates to forest, but also carries the notion of wildness and lack of domestication. For lowlanders of *muang*, “the *pa* is a dangerous place, best approached with caution” (Ibid). Upland forested zone lies outside the civilizing control of the lowland. Similarly, as Romila Thapar (2004) suggests that in ancient India, “[the forest was] initially regarded as unfamiliar space, a wilderness hosting people whose culture was alien.” She suggests that the demons and ghosts found in Hindu literature were in fact a reference to the foreign people of the forest. “Demonizing the ‘other’ is sometimes a technique to justify holding such people in contempt and even attacking them” (Thapar 2004). Thapar implies that there has always been a practice of creating boundaries between human settlements and the wilderness in addition to other foreign peoples. In Buddhism, the use of such othering discourses justifies “taming” the spirits in animist traditions and the wildness of the forest.

In Thailand, the natural world has shifted as the wild *pa* has been transformed into *thamachat*, the modern Thai word for “nature” that carries a sense of abundance and pristine order without the “disturbance of human influence” (P. Cohen 1984b from Forsyth and Walker 2008: 28)). Forsyth and Walker explain how negative connotations of *pa* nature have changed to a more desirable pristine vision of nature influenced by the international discourse, which has impacts on modern environmental policies and actions taken by the Thai government. Romila Thapar explains how in India, from the mid-first millennium C.E. when Kautilya wrote the Arthashastra text on state policy, the forest is a resource from which the state derived revenue such as clearing of forest and converting to cultivation, selling timber, gemstones and elephants, etc. As in Buddhism, the othering discourse of the state justifies “taming” the forest for economic benefit. Let's consider the source for these divergent views of the forest and the activists that stem from them in more detail.

Developmental Model of the Thai Government

The Yadana Gas Pipeline project and the introduction of cash cropping and slash-and-burn agriculture to northern Thailand's farming communities expose an economic development model that exploits the environment for profit. From the 1960s onwards, the Thai government and agricultural sector pushed for slash-and-burn agriculture and cash cropping. Before this, people were engaged in subsistence farming, sustaining themselves by growing a large variety of vegetables and crops and using the forest for shelter and wild foods. Darlington describes that Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat and his autocratic government pushed Thailand into an intensive development policy based on a Western capitalist model beginning in the late 1950s. Motivated by capitalist ideas, “Sarit promoted agricultural intensification and expansion toward an export-oriented and industrial economy” (Darlington 2012: 102). Within Sarit's governmental policies

he also tied in longstanding Buddhist ideas to help promote them. “He encouraged a shift toward cash cropping, bringing more forest land under cultivation, thus ‘civilizing’ the wild forest (Stott 1991) and making it useful for humans” (Darlington 2012: 102). Sarit twisted the traditional Buddhist concept of taming the wild forest for economic development and gaining power for Thailand.

When cash cropping became dominant, village people were encouraged to buy seeds from big agro-businesses, which led to the need to buy chemical fertilizers and pesticides from the same companies, thereby locking them into a cycle of debt (Darlington 2012: 35). Cash cropping, along with slash-and-burn agriculture, exemplifies a model of domination of nature for economic benefit. Mono-crop cash cropping strips the soil of nutrients and reduces growing capacity. This form of agriculture accelerates erosion and encourages more deforestation for commercial gain, and produces agrochemicals contaminating water supplies and fragile upland soils (Forsyth and Walker 2008: 9). Slash-and-burn agriculture is a process of cutting down forest or forest regrowth and burning the forest biomass to add nutrients to soil for effective vegetable farming (Ibid: 8). Environmental ramifications in northern Thailand from slash-and-burn agriculture are soil erosion on mountain slopes, farming problems in uplands, sedimentation in lowlands, and the reduction of water-holding properties of the soil (Ibid). Culturally, the economic policies of the Thai government have led to a loss of ecological knowledge, loss of a reciprocal relationship with wild forests, and the view of the forest as commodity of solely an economic resource.

The spread of communism from neighboring Southeast Asian countries and the strong negative reaction to the cultivation and trade of opium during Sarit’s rule in the 1960s led the government to push for increased development and new agricultural policy in the north. In the

1960s, a dissident communist party practiced guerilla warfare against what they saw as Sarit's autocratic rule. In response, the Thai military built roads and pushed economic development in these areas to destroy the Communist hiding places in the forest, and to prevent villagers from joining with Communists (Darlington 2012: 34). This led to further environmental degradation and opened these areas to future economic exploitation.

Around the same time, the government encouraged cash cropping in order to replace and route out opium production. Northern Thailand is part of the "Golden Triangle" of opium trade because of its cool highland slopes, ideal for opium cultivation. The poppy fields of Thailand's northern mountains supply the raw material for seventy percent of international opium production (Forsyth and Walker 2008: 5). The government implemented cash cropping with the goal of replacing opium production, and giving highlanders alternative cash crops such as cabbages, potatoes and strawberries (Ibid).

The Yadana Gas Pipeline is another controversial project supported by the Thai government that demonstrates a top-down view of nature that is detrimental to the environment and local culture. The pipeline was built along the Three Pagoda's Fault where six earthquakes were recorded between 1983 and 1988. It slices the forest in half, cutting off the migration route of elephants and other animals. In Burma, the pipeline transgresses the Tennasserim region, home to ethnic minorities. Parvel Gmuzder writes that the State Law and Order Restoration Council in Burma stationed troops in the region to quell uprising against the pipelines, pointing out that they already knew what a disaster the pipeline would be, foreseeing uprisings and protests, and intended to use force on people who resisted. In addition to human rights abuses, such as relocation of villages, forced labor, rape, and killings, the controversial Yadana Pipeline

shows a lack of care for the population of Burma and Thailand, and the motive for economic gain by the government and petroleum companies.

In reaction to diminishing forests and environmental health in Thailand, the Thai government and Thai Royal Forestry Department have implemented conservation projects and policies that are influenced by international discourses on conservation. The Thai Royal Forestry Department was founded in 1896 to oversee logging of northern forests, but recently it has switched roles to forest protection. In 1989, Thailand created a national logging ban responding to the outcries of the people against deforestation (Forsyth and Walker 2008: 7). Forsyth and Walker explain, "Since then ambitious national targets have been set for 'conservation forest,' and national parks and wildlife conservation areas have proliferated—many of them in the northern uplands—in order to protect newly recognized wilderness values" (Ibid: 8). Setting aside areas for wilderness conservation reveals the belief that humans should be separate from the forest. Santita Ganjanapan writes, "With the passages of the 1960 Wildlife Preservation Act, the 1961 National Park Act and the 1964 Reserved Forest Act, the government has continually enclosed more forest areas to conserve natural forest and solve deforestation problems" (Ganjanapan 1993: 261). The western concept of national parks as wilderness and nature as "preserves" is a product of Native American Conservation Ideology. This view of environmentalism portrays Native Americans as having no impact on the land, promoting resource conservation. However, this portrayal does not sync up with actual resource use by Native American tribes and twists their complex heritage into a romantic pristine way of interacting with nature. Hirsch describes the ideology, which sets land off limits to human habitation, as "pernicious and detrimental" when imposed in different cultural and socio-economic contexts because it "creates alienation of marginal people's resource base" (Hirsch

1997: 7). The international influence of western environmentalism is embodied by the transition in Thailand from the forest as *pa* to *thamachat* discussed above.

Conservation policies implemented by the Thai government demonstrate an environmental rationale at the government level that justifies state control over resources at the expense of local access. Forsyth and Walker write that the conservationist position of the Thai government is notoriously represented by the Thai Royal Forestry Department. In 1998, the Department Director General "ruled out the principle of coexistence between man and nature in tackling the problems of people living in the forest." He justifies expulsion of upland residents from conservation areas because "the forest exists for hundreds of years but you are just born... you can live in the forest if you live like barbarians. But now your life is civilized and we have no more forest left, so you have to go" (Plodprasop Suraswadi quoted in Chakrit 1998 in Forsyth and Walker 2008: 9). In his words, the Department Director General implies that only barbarians live in the forest. There is no consideration for beliefs and practices of communities that have lived for generations in close proximity with northern Thailand's forest ecosystems. Furthermore he denotes a complete separation of communities and the forest by the term "civilized." The logic behind conservation presented by the Thai Royal Forestry Department is that people should not be living in the forest, even communities that have effective land management practices, because no civilized person lives in the forest.

The Thai Royal Forestry Department and the Royal Thai Army created a relocation scheme called *Khor Jor Kor* that was apparently for the protection of reserved degraded state forests from encroachment but in actuality created an excuse to evict people for the commercial monoculture tree farming. This was advertized by the 1985 National Forest Policy as "the conservation of natural forest." Ecology monks Phra Prajak Khuttajitto (Taylor 1997) and Phra

Paisal Visalo, along with village leaders from all regions of Thailand opposed the plans for eucalyptus plantations and *Khor Jor Kor*. Hubble and Rajesh, who both work with Thai NGOs, explain the situation as follows:

In Thailand's northeastern region, the Royal Forestry Department and the Army have targeted 250,000 village communities that the Forestry Department contends are encroaching on 22,530 sq km of protected forest land in 352 forest reserves. The Royal Forestry Department and the Army have begun resettling these families on 5,920 sq km of land. Another 1,760 sq km are being cleared of villages to make way for infrastructure projects. The remaining 14,720 sq km are to be commercially reforested, mostly with eucalyptus (Hubbel and Rajesh 1992: 20).

Khor Jor Kor is a government scheme that illustrates the top-down approach of development and conservation. The National Forest Areas that were promised to be conserved wilderness were converted to monoculture eucalyptus plantations that compromised the livelihoods of many marginalized people living in the forests. *Khor Jor Kor* and the logic of the Thai Forestry Department reveal the misguided nature of government environmental policies, appropriating the rhetoric of conservation to further exploit forests.

Local Spirit Beliefs and Land Practices

From a local perspective, the forest gives livelihood. Instead of the forest as commodity, or a pristine world separate from the human societal sphere, or as wild, demonic and needing to be tamed, the forest is seen as more of a commons of shared land among people. "Commons" is the term for the forest and environment before there existed separation between human settlements and wilderness (Snyder 1990). It was the place of common resources; food, shelter, and water. Two examples of indigenous beliefs and practices, with regard to the forest, come from the village Dok Dang in the Nan province and the Karen communities of the Mae Wang watershed.

The small village Dok Dang sits in the high mountains of Nan province, north of Nan city. There is a strong belief in the spirits who occupy the surrounding forest. Susan Darlington explains that the oldest stories used to describe the region as a rich deep forest with many animals. This was before it became crowded and marred by deforestation and cash crop agriculture. Darlington describes the remote province of Nan as having both a tradition of spirit lords who helped protect the region and serving as a reliquary holding relics of the Buddha's remains. Darlington writes, "Before the land could be cleared or plowed, the farmers made offerings to the spirits that lived in the trees, streams, and forest" (Darlington 2012: 30-33). The spirits govern the cutting of trees, or any changes to the natural environment, and when offended they bring accidents, illness, or death. People depended on the forest for food, hunting for meat and gathering mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and other vegetables, along with catching fish and crabs in streams. When they traveled to the city they would sell meat, hemp, leaves and bark for making *saa* paper, and grasses for making brooms in Nan city (Darlington 2012: 34). The way of life in Dok Dang, before the 1960s push for heavy agricultural production, was wholly dependent on the health of the forest. Therefore the villagers of Dok Dang place great value on the forest, believe that its spirits are active in their lives, and thereby strive to protect their means of livelihood.

Community forest management by local people represents an interdependent relationship between humans and nature. Another example is the Karen communities in the Mae Wang watershed. One way the people there protect the forest is through the traditional practice of hanging the umbilical cord of newborns on special trees that become sacred as the source of thirty seven "soul components" of that newborn. If the tree is hurt, illness or death will befall the "soul sibling" of that tree and of the person who harms the tree (Ayuthaya 1993: 122). In the

Karen view, nature is owned, guarded and regulated by supernatural powers. Ganjanapan relates, “This power comprises not only good spirits of watershed, paddy land, weirs, and trees, but also evil spirits haunting streams, springs and salt licks ready to punish intruders” (Ganjanapan 1993: 260). In the Karen communities, Ayuthaya describes seven types of forest, each with different inhabitant spirits. One part of the forest, called “village forest,” is used for livelihood while the other six are left alone. “Moist forest” and “head of springs” are two types of forest surrounded by mountains and are sources of streams. Both hold particularly fierce spirits, and so few people dare to settle there. Forest at the “head of fields” (swidden and wet rice fields) is stewarded by owners of adjacent fields who understand its importance to preventing soil erosion. Ganjanapan continues, “It is also seen as the residence of water spirits, whose departure with cutting of the trees would lead to drying up of water sources needed for farming” (Ayuthaya 1993: 124) Forest “surrounding salt licks” also holds a water spirit, and has bodies of standing water, large trees, and abundant wildlife. Karen people also fear the spirits in this type of forest and leave it intact. The Karen communities have a model of conservation that is tied up with respect for the spirits that inhabit the forest. It is a radically different way of conservation than the top-down governmental conservation separating indigenous communities from their homes in the forest. The forests at the “village burial area” are seen to hold spirits of the dead and their descendents, so any disturbances would trouble these spirits and thus this forest is conserved. Lastly, there is the “mountain pass forest” that is the pathway for spirits and is left alone. The types of forest and the spirits associated with them demonstrate a worldview that supports local people as managers and conservers, not destroyers of the forest. Given these types of indigenous beliefs and practices, effective that conservation of the wilderness relies on conservation of the way of life and associated knowledge passed down through generations (Ayuthaya 1993). Karen communities

see areas that are the most ecologically productive as a home of spirits and in that sense conserve them.

The “swidden” practice of land cultivation is closely tied to the matrix of spirit belief that links people with spirits residing in the wilderness. Ayuthaya describes swidden farming as an intricate agricultural system that allows restoration of the soil cover and prevention of crop disease and pests through natural techniques. Various plant species are conserved to preserve the balance of the natural ecosystem, and many useful plants are found in swidden plots including vegetables, wild edible plants, herbal medicines. In addition, windbreaks are planted among the rice. Traditionally in northern Thailand, wild plants are conserved and tended by the plot user and seeds of different plants are collected to ensure their propagation in the future. For conservation purposes, Ayuthaya notes that seed saving is excellent for genetic preservation and “the natural cultivation methods, conservation technologies, and rotational swidden farming of the Mae Wang Catchment area constitutes a model of conservation of edible plant species” (Ayuthaya 1993: 126-130). Swidden practices used to be important for the livelihood of residents of upper Mae Wang for all three major ethnic groups there before the major shift to rice paddy fields and cash cropping. Karen communities and Dok Dang residents used natural swidden techniques for growing food through seed saving, rotation, and other techniques. It is no surprise that with the replacement of cash crops and slash-and-burn agriculture from the 1960s onwards, swidden methods are now being looked to as necessary to revive the health of the forest and the people.

Conversion Model of Buddhist Forest Monks: Nature as Wild and Demonic

To understand one traditional Buddhist view of the wilderness and natural world, I look to the tradition of renunciation embodied in forest monks. The forest monk sees the forest as a realm entrenched in the same suffering as human beings and a wild place that needs to be tamed. The forest monk tradition that is present in Thailand today originated in Sri Lanka from the original *vinaya* monastic code and the later *Visuddhimagga* text (fifth century C.E.) written for forest monks on strict ascetic practices and rules. In the fifteenth century Thailand's forest monk tradition arose with the Theravada doctrine and Pali literature, and monks energetically built temples (Tambiah 1984: 66). In the 1900s the forest monk tradition was part of the revival throughout Theravada Buddhist countries. Wandering forest monks in Thailand oppose the path of monasticism which emphasizes scholarship of Buddhist scriptures and instead are dedicated to meditation spend their time in secluded places like caves and wilderness. As the monks focus intently on the practice of meditation and are removed from society, they have few encounters with the laity.

On the other side of the Buddhist spectrum from forest monks are village monks who live in society. Michael Carrithers states that village monks in Sri Lanka are legitimated by their ceremonial role, rather than by their moral purity or their ordination. He writes:

[Village monks] spend most of their time with villagers, and therefore share the latter's values and behavior; and when they become custodians or even owners of land, as they inevitably do, they share the views of landowners (Carrithers 1983: 141).

Compared to forest monks, village monks are seen as contaminated with the ills and corruption of society and for this reason are less likely to attain meditative levels and powers of calm abiding. On village monks in Thailand, Taylor writes,

More worldly monks were less likely to attain such mastery over external powers and self-control (personal attributes highly valued among the Thai)

without physical and psychological detachment from society as a whole (Taylor 1993: 155).

In terms of purity, they are seen as compromised because of living in close proximity to laity and sharing their concerns. Village monks focus on knowledge and teaching the dharma to the lay people, performing rights, and providing “fields of merit” for them. Village monks are more attuned to socialized calendrical rituals of an agricultural community whereas forest monks held to strict training rules (*winai*) less evident among village monks (Taylor 1997: 250). Because of their proximity to contaminated and corrupt society, village monks are regarded as compromised in moral purity.

Away from society and village monks, forest monks seek out wild forests because they are the ultimate place of learning and taming the mind, as Taylor asserts:

Within the natural ecology of the forest, away from sensory distraction, one is continually made aware of the mutability and vicissitudes of the way of the world (*thaanglok*). Forest monks emphasize the uselessness of infatuated attachment to ‘conditioned *dharma*,’ turning inwards to training the mind-heart (*jit-jai*) in the way of *dharma* (Taylor 1993: 155).

The outside material world, including the forest, is still conditioned and steeped in suffering. The emphasis on being in the forest is not on interdependence and connections in nature but to conquer useless attachment to them and turn inwards to train the mind-heart. Forest monks have a detached view of the forest yet it is still central in their path of meditation.

The hagiography of renowned Thai forest saint Acharn Mun illustrates the forest monk’s view of nature as wild, demonic, and needing to be tamed by meditative powers. Mun spent most of his time alone in Thailand’s forests pursuing the path of meditation to free his mind of suffering.

Acharn Mun once conquered a demon, which was actually a local tree spirit, in Sarika Cave. After entering the cave, despite warnings of the demon by local people, Mun became sick.

His sickness led him to conquer his mind by realizing the nature of the five aggregates and how they arise, and with that his sickness left him and he became totally fixed, his mind in “unshakable one-pointedness” (Tambiah 1984: 87). After the sickness disappeared, the physical demon appeared and was swayed by the power of the dharma because of Mun’s radiant being and calm mind. Then the demon confessed he was the chief of the local tree spirits and promised to guard the monk and became a devotee of Buddhism with the monk as his teacher.

Taming the wild forest spirits is here conceived as both an internal and external battle of an individual ascetic. Tambiah suggests that through Acharn Mun’s encounters with demons and local spirits in the wild forests of Thailand he developed fully “the awareness of weariness and illusory nature of man’s present circumstances and was moved by pity and compassion for human beings’ suffering because of their ignorance, self-delusion, and vanity” (Ibid). This incident can also speak to the Buddhist belief that the dharma can subdue local deities and spirits and turn them into guardians. This is important because it shows that the forest monks recognize the existence of the local tree spirits and the need to subdue them by *dharma* and convert the spirits to Buddhism. Taylor, who also focuses on Acharn Mun’s influence on the forest tradition in Thailand writes, “Mun, like his contemporaries, believed in an active spirit world, but one that was always liable to be tamed by the logic and power of pristine *dhamma*” (Taylor 1993: 173).

For the Buddhist forest monks, the wild forest is a metaphor for the wild mind. This view of the wilderness suggests that wild places and animals provoking fear are symbolic in the cultivation of the eight-fold path of Buddhism. Through taming the wild jungle of the mind the monk also tames the external wilderness. This view of the wilderness suggests that wild places and animals provoking fear are symbolic in the cultivation of the eight-fold path of Buddhism.

Wild animals within the forest represent for forest monks the untamed mind to be tamed

with meditation. Fear is thus the main element to overcome in the face of wild animal dangers. By battling fear of being eaten by tigers, the mind is pushed to concentrate intensely in meditation and will fix to the dharma. Tambiah suggests the relationship of the monks with wild beasts is both the representation of the beast within the human mind and the external power that can be created through these encounters. Tambiah has demonstrated, the wild animals are important for the conquering of the mind and overcoming its wild nature, and thus it is no surprise that Acharn Mun saw the wildest places as the best for developing the mind.

Meditating monks are said to have the power to calm wild animals by their practice of compassion that encompasses the animal. The monk can also communicate with the animals through the language of the mind, said to be “supreme to all languages of the Three Worlds” (Tambiah 1984: 88). Through mind language of calm and compassion, practitioners of the dharma who have conquered their minds can assist all sentient beings visible and invisible. While both are outside society, “[the meditator] transcends the animal state and incorporates and transmutes its lower passions and gross energies” (Tambiah 1984: 120). A meditating monk’s compassion has the potential to calm an animal and even gain some of its wild powers. Tambiah explains that by pacifying animal desires and mental impurities the forest monk is understood to “not only subdue but to incorporate its powers” (Tambiah 1987 in Taylor 1993: 239). As Tambiah has demonstrated, the wild animals are important for the conquering of the mind and overcoming its wild nature, and thus it is no surprise that Acharn Mun saw the wildest places as the best for developing the mind.

Charisma and apotropaic power transferred to forest monks creates a source for their religious authority. They lay people—village and town householders—pursue forest saints because of their supranormal powers from their meditational exercises and ascetic lives. The

saint, or the Acharn, are not spiritual leaders of the community like the village monk, but exemplary figures who makes accessible to the masses the great mystical virtues, giving their mundane lives infusion of energy (Tambiah 1993: 169). Through his saintly activities and charisma, forest master Mun captured the imagination of the laity and brought Buddhist commitment and ritual to northeastern villages of Thailand. When Mun brought Buddhism to the villages that were “infested with spirit beliefs and spirit cults,” he and his followers sought to convert them to the Buddhist doctrine. While the objective was to convert to Buddhism, Buddhism also took on many elements of local spirit beliefs and customs. As Thai forest monks came into contact with villages steeped in a world of spirits, they incorporated the spirits into a Buddhist hierarchy of beings in which the Buddha and realized beings occupy a “presidential position” (Obeyesekere 1963: 139-153) and gods and spirits fill out a pantheon subordinate and in service to them. Stories of Buddhist saints subduing local deities and incorporating them into their worldviews point to how traditions encounter each other and interweave like a dialogue (Mumford 1997).

Forest monks in Thailand were not always revered by lay people but feared as wandering forest dwellers on the edges of society. During the beginnings of the forest monk tradition in fifteenth century Thailand, “ascetic monks were the complete antithesis of socialized village monks attuned to the vitality of the village community” (Taylor 1993: 110). There were conflicts between the wandering monks and villagers because “some monks would try and change the villagers’ belief in magic and the spirit world (*naptheurphii*) through concentration powers” accrued through meditative techniques (Ibid: 111). At the time people believed the northeast was ruled over by ghosts, spirits, and demons. The goal for the forest monks in fifteenth century Thailand was to spread the triple gem of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, rituals of reciting

Buddhist chants, and the practice of mediation to the laity instead of getting involved with spirits and demons (Ibid: 116). As a result, villagers mistrusted the forest monks who stayed on the outskirts of the village and promoted a doctrine with little room for compromise (Ibid: 112). Conflicts between rural northeastern Thai villagers and forest monks led to villagers feeling separation, exclusion, and distance from the forest monks when they passed through the village on their way to distant forest monasteries or local cemeteries. Villagers also perceived the wandering forest monks as a potential threat to the security and established familiar order of the village with its relatively discrete bounded world. The relation of the forest monk tradition to northern rural villages was largely based on conversion and conquest to overcome the local spirits. However, in the stories and hagiographies of forest saints, it is clear that they still *believed* in the spirits regardless of trying to subdue them with meditation and the *dharma*.

The forest monks on the Buddhist path of renunciation seek to tame wildness of nature in parallel fashion to taming the wild mind. Inherent in the trajectory of forest monks are interactions with villagers as they wander from place to place. From the fifteenth century forest monk revival, the forest monks sought to convert rural villagers in northeastern Thailand to the Buddhist dharma. They became revered by the lay people because of their charisma from meditative powers that they achieved through their lives in the forest dealing with wild forests and animals. The forest monk tradition represents a conversion model of the forest and of rural people, where wildness and wild spirits need to be tamed by the dharma.

Part Two: Ecology Monks

The ecology monk differs from the forest monk because he seeks to engage in the world of the village, larger society, and the forest instead of to renounce it. He mediates between the

‘pure’ and canonical Buddhism that forest monks embody in ascetic and meditative wandering and the ‘compromised’ village monk who focuses on knowledge of scriptures and conducts rituals for the lay people. The ecology monks are also active in community life, contrary to both the traditional roles of forest and village monks. Ecology monks reject the passivity of forest monks towards issues in society, and the selfish motives of village monks who focus on knowledge and merit making rituals, and do nothing to confront outward issues in their communities. Engagement in issues and political action is new with the rise of Engaged Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia responding to issues in society. Ecology monks emerge from this new form of Buddhism, alongside development monks and non-governmental organizations involved with issues in society, as an Engaged Buddhist hybrid of both the traditional Thai vocations of the forest and village monks.

In this section I introduce Engaged Buddhism with the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement and development monks in Sri Lanka, NGOs in Thailand, and intellectual monks Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand, that set the stage for the responsibility and work of ecology monks in Thailand. Next, I discuss two major ecological rituals: Tree Ordination and the Long Life Ceremony for rivers adapted from Buddhism and incorporating local spirit beliefs by Phrakhrū Manas Nathipithak. I discuss specific stories from the lives of four individual ecology monks to better show how these monks draw on the contesting views of nature from Part One and how they compare with forest and village monks. Lastly, I argue the for unique vocation of “ecology monk” as a hybrid of the forest and the village monk, emerging as an Engaged Buddhist mandate for practical and effective moral action in response to Thailand’s environmental crisis.

Engaged Buddhism and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs): People & Forest Model

Engaged Buddhist values, focused on engagement with issues in society in order to relieve suffering for all beings, contrasts with the traditional forest monk tradition of renunciation from society. Engaged Buddhism recognizes traditional Buddhist values but with a strong responsibility to act and use knowledge and discernment to take on development problems, environmental problems, and political problems. This form of practice evolved with modernity and industrialization, and problems concerning social justice and abuse of power by political administrations in South and Southeast Asian countries.

Non-governmental organizations and their efforts in development and environmental issues create a complex web of actions on the local level that draw on the various discourses at the international, Buddhist, and local level. One important NGO in the Theravada Buddhist world originally started as a small-scale Buddhist revival movement—the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka. Along with Sarvodaya Movement and development monks in Sri Lanka, Thai NGOs are intertwined with Buddhist, local, and international worldviews. The following examples will demonstrate the network of views that creates action at the local level and set the grounds for ecology monks their role in the larger Thai environmental movement.

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement is one of the early expressions of Engaged Buddhism and social work for Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. Buddhist layman, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, founded the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in 1958. It is one manifestation of the revival in Theravada Buddhism that begun in the late nineteenth century and extended to all Theravada Buddhist countries. A key theme in movements out of the nineteenth century Buddhist revival is universalism; the laity is thought to have the spiritual potential to attain

liberation. The Sarvodaya Movement argues, "Buddhist liberation involves not only individuals but also society" (Bond 1996: 122). Bond writes:

Neither the classical Theravada monastic interpreters nor the other reformers had stressed as clearly as Sarvodaya the implications of the *dhamma* for social change. Sarvodaya affirmed the world by arguing that the path to individual liberation ran through social liberation (Bond 1996: 122).

Sarvodaya follows Mahatma Gandhi's idea that selfless service for humanity is the highest form of religious practice. Sarvodaya was a term used by Gandhi that referred to a "new, nonviolent, socio-economic order" that is governed by the spiritual law that originates in peoples hearts and extends throughout social, economic, and political spheres. Like Gandhi, the Sarvodaya Movement sees the village as the heart of the new socio-economic order, opposing industrialization, materialism, and the drive for wealth. The movement was also influenced by Angarika Dharmapala, who argued for a Buddhist path of activity and service, responding to Western and Christian criticism of Buddhism being too otherworldly. Drawing on these two influential figures in the Hindu and Buddhist world, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement reinvented the Buddhist path as "a path of selfless service in the world," and changed the Buddhist goal as "the development of a new social structure that embodied the Buddhist ideals and facilitated a dual liberation process [of the individual and the society]" (Bond 1996: 124).

Naturally, A.T. Ariyaratne is highly critical of forms of Buddhism like the forest monk tradition that lacks social and worldly focus. He also criticizes traditional Theravada Buddhism of lay Buddhists who follow a system of rituals and rules for accumulating merit for rebirth. Sarvodaya looks to the Pali Canon, the *Tipitika*, that talks as much about living in the world as the path to transcending the world. The development monks in Buddhism interpret the scriptures of the Tipitika and the Jataka Tales as guides to living and acting in the world and claim Buddhism's original meaning. Development monks do not see themselves as an offshoot from

traditional Theravada Buddhism (Bond 1996: 124-125). The same Buddhist texts hold the framework for the forest monk tradition in Thailand and Sri Lanka, which see village life as corrupt and leaving it behind to focus on taming the mind in the forests.

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement holds that the four Buddhist virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity are central factors in this-worldly path. Instead of using these virtues solely in meditation, removed from society, Sarvodaya teaches that the four virtues are guidelines for social action. Loving-kindness is reinterpreted to mean respect for all life and cultivating love for all beings, leading to compassionate action. Next, the virtue of sympathetic joy comes from acting on loving-kindness and compassion because one can see how they have affected others. "This joy represents an important factor in Sarvodaya's mundane awakening, for to be awake and liberated is to be joyful" (Bond 1996: 127). The fourth virtue of equanimity is important for developing personality unshaken by praise, blame, gain, or loss.

Sarvodaya's method of cultivating the four virtues and taking on a this-worldly Buddhist path is the *shramadana*, or the work camp. Shramadana means "the gift or sharing of one's time and labor." The movement takes volunteers to work with villages to solve problems in rural villages like the need for a well or building a road. There are four principles of the group behavior" generosity, kindly speech, useful work, and equality. Ariyaratne regards the four principles as the grounds of traditional village communal life, and the antithesis of modern materialist social life (Bond 1996: 127-128). The central paradigm for Sarvodaya ideal person is compared to the Bodhisattva, a being who postpones his own enlightenment to help work for the enlightenment of all beings, or the *karma yogi* of the *Bhagavad Gita* who sees doing service or work as the highest form of religion. The Sarvodaya Movement sees the process of awakening as intertwined with the process of development, in six stages: personality awakening, family

awakening, village/community awakening, urban awakening, national awakening, and global awakening. Sarvodaya applies the different types of awakening to form a radical reinterpretation of social and economic development—as an interconnected process of reform of the social, political, and economic elements of society in conjunction with the reassertion of its moral, cultural, and spiritual elements. When development of this nature happens, it leads to society based on "spiritual and traditional values where people can live together in harmony and where individuals will have an opportunity to awaken their personalities to the fullest" (Bond 1996: 130). Sarvodaya seeks a new social order, and romanticizes ancient village life as a “pure” society untainted by the ills of modern times. Over four decades, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, with its origins near Colombo, Sri Lanka, has evolved from a student work camp movement to a large non-governmental organization dedicated to facilitating alternative development.

Paralleling Sri Lanka’s Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, secular NGOs and development monks emerged in Thailand because of the critique of the Thai government development policies on Thai society, culture, and the environment. Grassroots work of most Thai non-governmental organizations (NGOs) revolves around the local people in rural areas and their role in conservation. From the 1970s onwards NGOs have been a major social opposition movement in Thai society. One of the major development NGOs in Thailand is the Foundation for Education and Development of Rural Areas (FEDRA) founded by Luang Pu Phuttapoj in 1974. The mission is to support livelihoods of farmers by giving them tools and knowledge to remain in the villages. Taking a Buddhist approach from the basis of relieving immediate suffering from poverty in rural communities of Thailand, FEDRA’s motto is “spiritual and economic development must work together to solve problems” (Darlington 2012: 17). Just like

Sarvodaya, FEDRA sees spiritual development going hand in hand with development of society. The NGOs that are the most involved in the rural communities use Engaged Buddhist principles, which serve as a basis for dealing with poverty and its suffering, and at the same time, these NGOs challenge the premises of government-led economic development. NGO activists and “people-oriented” development practitioners both work to protect lifestyles in the Thailand’s uplands. This work is based in a view that places priority on local governance and democratization as counterpoints to conservationist concerns of the state, most notably the Royal Forestry Department, “portrayed as insensitive to needs of poor farmers and too akin to a heavy-handed state” (Forsyth and Walker 2008: 9). Locally-based conservation strategists argue that longstanding traditions of local resource management can be the framework for effective managing of natural upland resources when given state recognition and protection from inroads of commercialization. During the 1991 national movement for local recognition of community forests, the common thread from activist monks was promoting the local people’s role in caretaking forests.

Noticing the prominent and influential position of monks in village life, NGOs and academics in the community forest movement reached out to also support the emerging Buddhist environmental movement (Ibid: 18). World Wildlife Thailand and other NGOs helped minimize criticism of ecology monks initially because of their interest and urgency in educating monks on the environment.

Thai NGOs range from a people based approach to a nature as wilderness approach to conservation and development based in international principles that serve the middle class. Their influence is nevertheless important to environmental and development work in rural areas. Help from larger Thai NGOs like World Wildlife Thailand is important to legitimizing the work of

ecology monks in Thailand and as providing educational seminars on ecological systems and integrative farming techniques. NGO projects are much more successful in villages when supported by monks. Darlington writes that:

When NGOs, especially those based in the capital or provincial cities, entered a village with the aim of getting the people to help protect the forest, watershed or other natural resources, villagers were more likely to listen to them if a famous monk supported the effort (Darlington 2012: 185).

Ecology monks work from the ground up, and gain more headway in their projects and protests when helped by NGOs. In a reciprocal relationship, the ecology monks provide moral and ritual authority in the villages, and NGOs supply funding, educational seminars, numbers, publicity, and national and international influence. Larger networks of monks and laypeople are important to environmental and development work on the ground. The Sarvodaya Shramadana NGO that is important to development work in Sri Lanka, and various Thai NGOs are crucial in legitimizing ecology monks' work in conservation, protest, and education.

Thailand's Engaged Buddhists: Sulak Sivaraksa and Buddhadasa Bikkhu

Just as the Sarvodaya Shramana Movement represents a revival of Buddhism as an expression of Engaged Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Buddhadasa Bikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa implement these very values in Thailand. The work of the Thai Buddhist monk Buddhadasa Bikkhu has inspired Engaged Buddhists like Sulak Sivaraksa, development monks, and ecology monks on the ground. His work is to restore Buddha's teachings to its pristine state, just as the Sarvodaya Movement looks to reinterpret Buddha dharma to its pure form. Buddhadasa Bikkhu grew up six hundred kilometers south of Bangkok, in Chaiya, where both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism have flourished. Santikaro Bhikkhu comments that before twentieth century, life followed the old traditions centered in Buddhism, the effects of which were

pervasive and profound. Customs and values of the people were still steeped in Buddhist roots of their culture, life was simple and family oriented, sharing was common, crime was rare, and the seasons and cycles of rice planting were followed by festivals of the people (Bhikkhu 1996: 148). Buddhadasa Bikkhu spoke of three key influences for his work: his mother, the Wat, or temple, and Nature. His mother taught him morality and values that underpinned the rest of his work. At the Wat Buddhadasa learned to read and write, learned discipline, hard work, cooperation, punctuality, responsibility, humor, cleverness, and unselfishness. Buddhadasa grew up in nature while taking his father's cows to the field to forage and while collecting herbs from the forest for his abbot of the temple. He studied Siamese fighting fish, other animals, and plants, especially orchids, which led to his many insights into nature.

Buddhadasa began exploring the connection between study and practice, arguing for their integration rather than separation. As we have seen, the village monks and forest monks have long been separate paths of Buddhism in Thailand and Sri Lanka, but, as Santikaro Bhikku writes, Buddhadasa integrated both strands of monastic life, not seen for centuries—if ever, in Thailand. Buddhadasa himself was a forest monk who kept many of the traditional ascetic practices written in the *Vissudimaggā*. To experiment with study, practice, and Dhamma teaching, Buddhadasa created Suan Mokkh, or "The Garden of Liberation" (Bhikkhu 1996: 152). His philosophy and take on Buddhism tried to integrate all genuine elements of traditional Buddhism into a balanced middle way. Santikaro Bhikku relates:

Buddhadasa utilized the full range of the Pali Canon, plus other religious traditions, modern science, and the phenomena of Nature to explore the Dhamma, which is whole. As he often said, citing the Buddha, "Truth is one, there is no second" (Bhikkhu 1996: 155)

Dhamma means Nature, which can be distinguished in four aspects: Nature itself, the Law of

Nature, the Duty of living things according to Natural Law, and the results that follow from performing duty according to Natural Law. All four are known by the single word "Dhamma." (Buddhadasa in Santikaro Bhikku 1996: 159). In Buddhadasa's interpretation of the *dharma*, nature and humanity are not separate; human beings and all their creations are a part of nature just like insects, trees, rivers, and stars. Santikaro believes that "this insight, [that humans are not set above nature but are apart of nature] is important for overcoming both personal egoism and collective or structural egoism, such as the materialism and consumerism of modern societies" (Bhikkhu 1996: 160). Buddhadasa advised people to live in intimate contact with nature, of rocks, insets, trees, weather, etc, which has not been altered by human greed, anger, and ignorance. Santikaro explains that by living close to Nature, we are closer to Dhamma and it is easier for us to understand Dhamma. For this reason, Buddhadasa stressed that all Buddhas are born outdoors, awakened outdoors, and enter *parinibanna* outdoors. Buddhadasa says:

Material progress nurtures selfishness and selfishness nurtures material progress, until the whole world is filled with selfishness (Bhikkhu 1996: 160).

Furthermore, by cutting down the forests, we cut ourselves off from *dharma* by cutting ourselves off from nature To Buddhadasa, the law of Nature that governs all of Nature, which Buddhists call "conditionality," is like "the Buddhist God," in that it is the creator, persevere, and destroyer all in one. It is also omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, and absolute, being the Supreme Thing.

Along with interdependency, emptiness, Nature, and the end of suffering, Buddhadasa points out the importance of action in society, "the social goods and acting for the benefit of society are prerequisites of traveling beyond to [nirvana]" (Buddhadasa in Bhikkhu 1996: 163). In this view spiritual attainment is not to some otherworldly place, but right in *samsara*, the cycle

of birth and death. In addition, the goal of ending suffering extends to both personal and social problems. Buddhadasa's ideal of society is by living for the benefit of society, not for the individual benefit of each person. This type of "dharmic socialism" is the antithesis of liberal democracy and individualism, which he saw as sharing a common root of selfishness.

Buddhadasa Bikkhu interprets the Buddhist doctrine in support of engagement with the world and also maintains that spiritual progress and morality are most important. His ideas supply the grounding for many activist monks, arguing that Buddhism must be relevant in the modern world.

Buddhadasa chose to live as a forest monk, rejecting a formal role in the *sangha* organization (Darlington 2012: 171) but came to reinvision the role of monks in Thailand. Although Buddhadasa did not get directly involved with activism, his writings supplied the Buddhist grounding for intellectuals such as Sulak Sivaraksa and activist monks, especially ecology monks. Buddhadasa writes,

Buddhist monks are wanderers, not hermits... wandering to be involved with people who live in the world, rather than living in the forest cut off from social contact. Their duty is to help the people of the world in whatever way is suitable so that they do not have to suffer or, in the words of a Thai proverb, so that they can know 'how to eat fish without getting stuck on the bones.'

Buddhist monks, with the Buddha as their head, are always involved in society in order to teach people about the true nature of the world, to overcome suffering and avoid choking to death on the bones of life. Buddhism wants people neither to escape from the world nor to be defeated by it, but to live in the world victoriously (Buddhadasa 1989 83).

Buddhadasa's words concerning the role of monks justifies action in the world and rejects the traditional vocation of forest monks who seek to leave society and focus on meditation.

Buddhadasa attempted to demythologize Buddhist doctrine by "moving away from the idea of the Buddha as a figure of reverence who could intervene in the world, and away from merit-making as the predominant form of Buddhist practice in Thailand" (Darlington 2012: 172).

Buddhadasa maintains that action in this world is the main responsibility of those who desire to remove suffering. Buddhadasa writes that socio-economic and political issues should be dealt with by working for this-worldly salvation of the populace. He writes that liberation from suffering is not solely about attaining nirvana but also about escaping the suffering oppressive conditions in the world.

An outspoken but hugely active and influential Buddhist speaker, Sulak Sivaraksa, is an activist whose activities span from creating grassroots NGOs in Thailand to writing essays on Buddhism, development, and environmentalism. Sulak Sivaraksa looks to the influential Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh who is credited as a founding figure of Engaged Buddhism who adapts the concept of interdependence to discuss and address ecological concerns and social practice in Buddhist terms. Hanh coined the term *Tiep Hien*, or *interbeing*, to characterize interdependence. He states: “In one sheet of paper, you can see the sun, the clouds, the forest, and even the logger. The paper is made out of non-paper elements. The entire world conspired to create it, and it exists within it. We, ourselves, are made up of non-self elements, the sun, the plants, the bacteria, the water and the atmosphere. Breathing out, we realize the atmosphere is made of all of us. I am, therefore you are. You are, therefore I am. We inter-are” (Sivaraksa: “Buddhism and Environmentalism). Within Thich Nhat Hanh’s framework of interbeing, Sulak Sivaraksa expresses the need for Buddhists and development workers to learn more about each other, particularly indigenous spiritualism and animism and their intimate approaches to nature. In these traditions, people are seen as products of natural and spiritual forces that created and continue to govern the world. The animist traditions see a world inhabited with spirits whereas interbeing explains a world of all interconnected parts, including the animist traditions one of its parts. One of the roles of the animist traditions is their relationship with nature, which Engaged

Buddhists seek to cultivate. Sivaraksa writes that religions should be active in the struggle to insure ecological balance is made part and parcel of economic and social development (Ibid). Responsibility of action towards social and environmental action based firmly in morality is a key theme informing work of Engaged Buddhists.

Sivaraksa illustrates an Engaged Buddhist approach, protesting governmental development projects that exploit the environment and human communities. The June 3, 1997 protest against the Yadana Gas Pipeline was inspired by Kalayanamitra Council, a Group of Thai, North American, and European activists formed in 1996 under Sivaraksa (Gmuzder 1999: 220). In October 2000, when a second public hearing for the pipeline took place, nearly 5,000 villagers were barricaded by the police and forced out of the building. Only proponents of the project were allowed to attend. Criticizing the government, Sulak writes in his essay “Buddhism and Environmentalism”:

This type of mock participation orchestrated by the government is worse than no participation at all. It is demoralizing for organizers and is part of a strategy of deflection and evasion practiced by the government with the aid of corporate powers. Nonetheless, the rallies, seminars, and petitions must go on in order to raise the consciousness of more people about the issue (Sivaraksa, “Buddhism and Environmentalism”).

The hearing was not public at all and the governmental force in implementing the pipeline without regard for many of its people shows its top-down development approach. In his essay, Sivaraksa shows his philosophy behind his work explaining how people need “education for nurturing the heart, mind and will.” At one of his schools, Moo Ban Dek, in Kanchanaburi province, he explains, “‘nature’ is not separate from ‘schooling’ or ‘community’ and environmental education is reinforced by science, civic education, and spirituality” (Sivaraksa “Buddhism and Environmentalism). Along with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and the Sarvodaya Shramana Movement, Sulak applies interdependence to schooling, community and nature. Sulak

elaborates on this notion, in that both social activism and learning should go hand in hand with spiritual development, as an awareness that politics, economics, and education are not independent ends in themselves but are interdependent parts of a total human being and human community (Swearer 1996: 205).

One famous interview in 1986 with Sulak Sivaraksa is "Small 'b' Buddhism," in which Sivaraksa rejects capital "B" Buddhism as an acculturated, conventional, ritualistic Buddhism, a civil religious Buddhism, identified with Thai chauvinism and militaristic, aggressive values. Instead, small "b" Buddhism "refers to its personal and socially transformative relevance. It has the practical applicability to solve contemporary problems as well as the power to fill one's life with meaning in a chaotic and threatening world" (Swearer 1996: 215).

Along with Buddhadasa, Sulak sees the essential teaching of Buddhism as selflessness. The moral equivalent is "nonexploitation," rejecting typical capitalistic materialist motives of Western life. For Sivaraksa, to be selfless is to act empathetically and nonexploitively towards others, ourselves, our communities, and the world. He holds the same views of the four Buddhist virtues as Buddhadasa (Swearer 1996: 216).

Sulak reinterprets the Four Noble Truths that are foundational to Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha's first teaching. On the First Noble Truth of suffering, Sulak asserts,

When Prince Siddhattha saw an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a wandering monk, he was moved to seek salvation, and eventually he became the Buddha, the Awakened One. The suffering of the present day, such as that brought about by Bhopal and Chernobyl, should move many of us to think together and act together to overcome such death and destruction, to bring about the awakening of humankind (Sivaraksa in Swearer 1996: 217).

Sivaraksa echoes Buddhadasa in his view of suffering as "dehumanizing social, economic, and political forces that sacrifice the long-term common human good for vested self-interest and short-term economic and political gain" (Swearer 1996: 217). The path to ending suffering is in

broad-based, nonviolent, grass-roots movements challenge these causes of suffering in the modern world. Sivaraksa interprets the five precepts in the same way, applying them to the contemporary context of Thailand and the world. For example, the use of chemical fertilizers and insecticides that deplete the soil of rich microorganisms is against the Buddhist precept of killing because it is taking life of the soil, destroying the forests, and causing the loss of many animal species. Depriving people of livelihood is a kind of killing, and living in luxury and consuming wastefully also goes against the First Precept. To understand Sivaraksa's interpretations of the Four Noble Truths and Five Precepts is to understand the interconnectedness of modern day processes of consumerism, economy, development policies, agricultural policies, and all other forces at work in the modern world. Integral to Sulak's approach of Buddhism and contemporary issues is that individual spiritual perfection and social justice are inherently linked. Donald Swearer argues that Sulak Sivaraksa and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, in their reformist interpretations, "frame a vision of the world in which the religious and the moral are essentially integrated" (Swearer 1996: 224). He goes on to say that this rational worldview of Theravada Buddhism for the modern world was defined by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and espoused by Sulak Sivaraksa. Today, in the context of ecology monks, it is this very framework that integrates environmental, religious, and developmental action.

As we have seen, Engaged Buddhists reject the traditional bounded framework of Buddhist roles of monks, traditional interpretations of the foundations of Buddhism, and challenge unjust and corrupt motives of Thailand's policies and development projects that are detrimental to the health and well being of the population. Buddhist NGOs and development monks in Sri Lanka and Thailand, forest monk and intellectual Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and activist Sulak Sivaraksa have all paved a niche for the ecology monks. Ecology monks apply Buddhist

teachings and ritual to fight environmental suffering of the many forests and waterways in Thailand.

Ecology Monks and Rituals: Tree Ordination and Long Life Ceremony

The Tree Ordination and Long Life Ceremony for rivers are two key rituals innovated by the ecology monk, Phrakhru Manas Nathiphitak, inspired by Engaged Buddhist views of responsibility to alleviate suffering. In these rituals ecology monks combine traditional Buddhist ceremonies and indigenous spirit beliefs to protect the forests and waterways. The Tree Ordination ritual broadly symbolizes the Thai environmental movement, headed by the ecology monks. During this ritual, trees are wrapped in saffron robes, symbolically ordaining them into monkhood and signifying their sacredness to the *sangha* and the world. The ecology monks adapt the ritual sanctification of water that accompanies the ordination by placing a small Buddha image in the monks' alms bowl and dripping candle wax into water while monks chant. Instead of sprinkling the holy water on participants to bless them, the headmen from the villages drink the water in front of the Buddha images to seal their pledge to protect the forest (Darlington 1999: 201). This sacred symbol reinforces the idea of environmentalism as karmic action: protecting the forest brings good merit and destroying it brings bad merit.

The Tree Ordination not only invokes karmic responsibility for protecting life in this world but also invokes the spirits of the forest. One village elder told Darlington in 1993, "Ordaining the tree and asking the spirits to help have equal success. The spirits and the Buddha work together to protect the forest" (Darlington 2012: 67). Thus, combining Buddhist ritual with the understanding of the spirit beliefs in the villages of northern Thailand in the Tree Ordination and other ecological projects became a successful way to reinvigorate local stewardship of the

forest, as afterward more people treated the waterways and forests with the same respect they have for spirits and monks. Darlington explains how it makes sense for monks to synthesize these local views of nature into Buddhist ritual framework as more connected with humans because the villagers of Nan already saw the natural world inhabited with spirits with which they interacted with. Phrakhru Manas Nathiphitak of the Phayao Province conducted the first Tree Ordination, noting, “The villagers believed in and respected the spirits of the forest. The relationship with these spirits, along with the various *thewada* and other *phi* [spirits] that share their world, defined and reaffirmed their understanding of how the world works—in its natural, supernatural, and human aspects.” (Darlington 2012: 68). Manas and the ecology monks sought to reinvolve this intimate relationship among villagers and Thai people that becomes lost with the loss of subsistence lifestyles for monetary ones. The Tree Ordination has become a spiritual dialogue between Buddha dharma and local forest spirits to protect the forests and educate villagers.

The Tree Ordination in its syncretic nature has found its way to other Thai religious communities. Avery Morrow discusses several different Thai minorities who have also adapted the Tree Ordination ritual such as the Karen people who use their own symbol “the Lord of the Land” when conducting the ceremony. In a Mien village, a local shaman was asked to provide the spiritual part of the ceremony. For the Mae Malo village, almost all Christian, a Tree Ordination was performed in 1996 where the people chanted from Buddhist scriptures but prayed to God instead of local spirits. For the people of Mae Malo, the Tree Ordination was not religious and the reason they dressed villagers and trees in saffron was to “present the trees to the king of Thailand as a gift” (Morrow 2011: 58). Morrow notes that “The more important connection was to the royal family and the national Tree Ordination campaign; even if villagers

already felt they have a sufficient sustainability program, they joined the campaign out of support for the king.” Even though it drew on Buddhist and spirit beliefs, the ritual was able to spread so fluidly through communities. Lastly, the Hmong hill tribes in northeastern Thailand are not Buddhist and also do not have a tradition of spirit trees, and thus initially became targets to blame for deforestation, not conducting Tree Ordinations, and not planting new trees. In response, Morrow states:

In order to emphasize their Thainess and devotion to the environment, the Hmong therefore adopted Tree Ordination on their own, joining the campaign to ordain 50 million trees by conducting five ceremonies in their own region. This supplemented their sanctification of trees through the *ntoo xeeb* ceremony, which they described as a show of ancient environmentalism (Morrow 2011: 58).

As related by Morrow, the Hmong already had their own ceremony to sanctify trees. The Tree Ordination has become a symbol of loyalty and devotion to the king of Thailand in addition to a religious responsibility to respect and conserve the environment.

The ecology monks themselves understand the ritual on a symbolic level necessary for reviving the relationship of humans and the forest in order to attack both environmental and human suffering. Pitak explains that the function of the ritual is not to use the image of the spirit tree in a “proper” ritual but to double the spiritual power of the ceremony. He says, “It’s not true Buddhism to conduct such rituals. But in the villagers’ beliefs they respect the Buddha and fear some of his power... In general, villagers also believe in spirits. Therefore we set up a shrine for the guardian spirit together with the Buddha image. This leads to the saying that ‘the good Buddha and the fierce spirits work together to take care of the forest’ (Ibid). A dialogue between the villagers’ beliefs in spirits and in the Buddha takes place when both are asked to help protect the forest.

The purpose of the Long Life Ceremony, *suep chatta*, is water conservation or protection of the life of a stream or river. The ecology monk Phrakhru Manas adapted the Buddhist Long Life Ceremony to a river running dry, anthropomorphizing the stream's suffering illness and misfortune, to illustrate the critical importance of water to life and to people's livelihoods. The Long Life ritual is usually applied to humans and livestock but in this case and others was performed for the life of the river. Manas thought his responsibility as a monk was to help the villagers so he used skillful means, *upaya*, to invoke belief in tree spirits and water spirits and inspire action when deforestation and water shortages impose on village life. The Long Life Ceremony focuses peoples' attention on how they use the water and the conditions of the communities that it runs through as people bathe and do laundry along the streambed. He encourages them to reflect on how the water is being treated. Even government officials responded to the success of the Long Life Ceremony when they asked Manas to perform it for the lake and wetlands surrounding the Phayao provincial capital. The Tree Ordination and the Long Life Ceremony became the face of the environmental movement and took on a distinct Buddhist syncretic nature with indigenous spirit beliefs and Thai nationalism. The original heart of the Tree Ordination and long life ceremonies, however, when Manas first conducted them, was to speak directly to the local villagers whose resources were being depleted by state forces. The necessity of protection of the forests and waterways in rural Thai villages paved the way for a syncretism and dialogic interaction of local Thai tree spirits and the Buddha *dharma* and Theravada rituals.

Narratives of Ecology Monks

Narratives of ecology monks illustrate the circumstances that drive them to their environmental work. I have chosen to focus on Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakun and Phrakhru Manas Nathipithak and discuss specific examples from the lives of Phra Paisal Visalo and Luang Phor Khamkhan and their resistance to government schemes. Phrakhru Manas Nathipithak created the Tree Ordination and Long Life Ceremony for rivers and formed conservation groups in his home province, and Phrakhru Pirak used these rituals, taught and implemented sustainable agriculture, and educated children and villagers on the relationship between humans and the environment. Phra Paisal's story is about reviving community forest management using spirit beliefs, and Luang Phor's story is about fighting eucalyptus plantations across from his monasteries. Individual examples of their work will demonstrate how ecology monks negotiate the contesting environmental discourses, synthesizing Thai spirit beliefs and Buddhism. These examples also show how ecology monks are a new hybrid of the two main traditional forms of the Buddhist path in Thailand, the forest and village monks.

Phrakhru Manas Nathipithak

Phrakhru Manas Nathipithak, the creator of the Tree Ordination and Long Life Ceremony for waterways, grew up in the Phayao Province in Northern Thailand and is a respected abbot of Wat Photharam, a Buddhist temple in the Mae Chai District. As an abbot, he holds a leadership role, listening to the concerns and wants of the villagers. He watched a bad drought come to the district after loggers were granted ten logging concessions six years earlier in 1973. The district holds watersheds for many of the region's streams, and as a result of the logging, the draught brought suffering to the villagers who needed sufficient water to plant crops and for their daily needs. As a result of the loss of trees and the drought in Mae Chai, Phrakhru Manas joined together with people from the district to form a conservation committee and to perform the Long

Life Ceremony for the dried stream, aiming to revive its vitality. Darlington explains that Manas used the ritual to build community and unity among the people affected by the loss of water. Extending the Buddhist teachings to the immediate environmental problems, “[Phrakhru Manas’] interpretations of the causes of [the villagers’] suffering, and his creative approach typified the work of environmental monks” (Darlington 2012: 134). Manas and other ecology monks independently reacted to their immediate surroundings and the effects of the development policies bringing rapid loss of Thailand’s forests. Phrakhru Manas and other ecology monks articulate the value of the forest and water for people’s lives and human responsibility for the natural environment (Darlington 2012: 133-134). Manas’ use of ritual enabled these teachings to spread easily through Thailand, to other ecology monks, and to rural communities striving to protect the forest from encroachers.

The specific reaction to environmental problems along with development problems makes ecology monks different than development monks. Darlington explains that the category of ecology monks emerged from development monks because both critically examine and seek to minimize effects of rapid economic development on rural life. Phrakhru Manas was one of the first monks promoting the vocation of ecology monk, and his projects were based in local concerns: Long Life Rituals for waterways, creating conservation groups of villagers, and challenging logging companies. His work overlaps with that of development monks concerned with rural peoples’ livelihoods while going beyond them by focusing on the problem of environmental suffering of the rivers and forests in the Phayao District. Manas connected the deforestation to the drought in the Mae Chai District, and connected the greed that drove desire for logs and the wealth they symbolized for the government and people of Thailand (Darlington 135-144). Phrakhru Manas Nathipithak acted against local loss of forests by reinterpreting

Buddhist and indigenous beliefs to innovate the Tree Ordination and the Long Life Ceremonies and in doing so was one of the first monks to innovate the new vocation of the ecology monk.

Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakun

Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakun spent his childhood in the forests surrounding the village of Dok Dang in the Nan Province, a village of strong spirit beliefs. When Pitak was young, his father sent him to live at the Buddhist temple and attend school, where he stuck out with his quickness to learn and skill at working with people. He was sent back to the village when he was seventeen to build a temple, where he would become the village headman. As he grew, he witnessed the decline of the forests around him. Throughout his life, Pitak witnessed the rise of cash cropping and intensive agriculture with the push by the government in the 1960s, increased immigration and settlement in the mid 70s, and the building of roads by the Thai military in the 50s through 70s because of the communists hiding in the forests. As village headman, Pitak began teaching people in the village about the relationship between humans and the natural world using Buddhist teachings, specifically interdependence, and village spirit beliefs. Next, he joined a government-sponsored *sangha* program that promoted rural development and integration into the Thai nation, where monks worked with minority mountain people “to convert them from animism and to ‘develop’ them (Tambiah 1976: 434-74 in Darlington 2012: 42). Pitak would not end up converting people from animism but embracing it within a Buddhist worldview with his inclusive use of the Tree Ordination and *phaa paa* ceremony, or ordaining the forest with robes, where villagers donate tree saplings to be planted along with traditional alms for monks. Pitak and ecology monks display a Buddhist mode of conversion without rejecting indigenous practices.

After initial Buddhist schooling and the *sangha* program, Pitak began to travel around Thailand visiting monks known for activism and use of Buddhism to promote social justice and to find other engaged Buddhists. As Pitak grew older, he taught environmental ethics and spread Buddhist *dharma*. His activism reached its first struggle when the Nan province government proposed to make Nan “green” by planting commercial or “economic” forests of eucalyptus trees that would replace healthy native teak forests. The government propaganda claimed that the new plantations would “rejuvenate” the forest to justify displacing villagers. Pitak, other activist monks, and grassroots NGOs all fought the eucalyptus plantations, speaking against those who benefited politically and financially, and against the long term environmental damage and human suffering it would create (Udomittipong 1999: 195). Pitak fought logging and state-led development policies of cash cropping and commercialization because they cause extreme deforestation. Pitak inspired the villagers to take action towards reforestation when the 1987 water shortages came to Dok Dang. Pitak inspired the villagers to become active in protecting the forest, planting indigenous teak trees in the degraded areas to protect the watershed, and these areas slowly became more ecologically productive. After the 1987 draught, Pitak influenced people living in the Pong Mountains and Pong watershed and initiated the Kew Muang Conservation Club that expands to six villages.

Pitak tried to convince the government that local people are fit and highly skilled at managing their own resources, despite excuses from the government to encroach the forests and give them to loggers for economic benefit. In order to spread awareness, Pitak focused on teaching children because they can teach their parents and they are the future (Udomittipong in Kaza 196). He spread his Buddhist ecological views and practices all the way from the Nan highland forests to the lowlands and streams of Thailand to confront the crisis concerning

polluted and depleting waterways. Pitak started the "Love for the Nan River" project for a major river and artery in the body of Thailand. The project surveyed the river to determine its condition and educate the people and Pitak conducted the Long Life Ceremony. At the river ceremony, hundreds of monks, local people, activists and leaders participated. The monks chanted to bless and sanctify the river and as a result of the ceremony, a portion of the river was deemed a sanctuary of fish populations to regenerate, and on temple grounds wildlife is protected from human encroachment. Darlington notes, "The main emphasis of Phrakru 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."

Phrakru Pitak strongly opposes top-down governmental use of the environment because it encroaches on his homeland and causes intense suffering to local communities. When cash cropping was pushed on the people of Dok Dang, Pitak told Darlington that he and other villagers were "tricked" into buying seed, fertilizer, and pesticides from big agricultural companies. All it did for the people was cause them to abandon swidden agriculture, strip the soil of nutrients and trap them in a cycle of debt. Rejecting the current cash cropping in Nan, Pitak attempts to revive the integrative agriculture, like swidden practices. The integrative method mixes native crops and livestock that mutually support each other, thwarting the need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It is no surprise that NGOs support this endeavor and conduct seminars for monks and lay people to learn sustainable practices. The main goals of agriculture, as stated by Delcore (2004), are to decrease land under cultivation to return to native forest, to use of domestic resources over foreign ones, to avoid debt, to produce a variety of food for the homes and community and to create less intensive, monotonous work for commercial production. The following story reveals the effectiveness of integrated farming and how it radically

improved a farmer's life.

Phrakhru Pitak helped a farmer named Dang to convert his fields of feed corn into a natural agricultural farm. He helped him by supplying initial money to buy fruit tree seedlings, native rice, and other seeds. Dang gained more knowledge to start his farm by attending seminars run by NGOs on alternative farming methods. When Darlington visited Dang four years after he was beginning his new farm, she witnessed Dang managing a land covered in fruit trees, natural rice paddies, herb gardens, chickens and pigs. Dang explained that he had paid off his debt and even had a surplus of funds because he did not have to buy food (a problem when a farmer is only growing one cash crop), and was able to sell his surplus organic crops and livestock. Dang's story shows how with the right direction and start up support, a land stripped of nutrients and forest can be rejuvenated and be an abode for people living on it.

Phrakhru Pitak's story shows how with conviction and knowledge of local ecology and local projects, social, environmental, and political problems can be solved.

Phra Paisal Visalo

Phra Paisal Visalo has a remarkable story concerning the mountain Wat Pa Mahawan in the late 1980s. The surrounding forest was under threat by villagers who would sneak out at night to cut trees to sell and for the clearing of land to sell or use for farming. The abbot Luang Pho Khamkhien asked Phra Paisal and other monks to move into the forest of Wat Pa Mahawan to meditate at night. Although they had no legal authority, they held a moral authority that scared the people who were stealing trees away. Phra Paisal, the other monks, and the villagers established four places in the forest, one for protection that no one could use, one where spirits live, one as a community forest, and lastly one for finding food (Darlington 2012: 149).

Outwardly, Phra Paisal and the monks who moved into the forest may look like forest monks renouncing the material world and society to focus their energy inward on taming the mind. However, the motive behind moving into the forest is not at all in line with traditional modes of the forest tradition but the ecology tradition, aimed at eradicating the suffering of the forest around Wat Pa Mahawan and reviving the local management system, which acknowledges spirits and their abodes.

Phra Paisal ended up staying at the illegal *sangha* residence at Wat Pa Mahawan until the threat of removal by Thailand's *Khor Jor Kor* relocation scheme. He strongly protested the *Khor Jor Kor* scheme, which was cancelled "due to opposition and protests across Thai society, including members of the *sangha*" (Darlington 2012: 149). Paisal's work fighting *Khor Jor Kor* and mirrors Pitak's argument for the role of local people in managing the forests. Both monks recognize the need to protest extreme measures by the Thai state that put the forests and people in danger. By protesting along with interacting and working with villagers the ecology monks oppose governmental exploitative policies and engage with surrounding communities to promote simple mindful actions like cleaning up streaming beds, planting saplings, controlling desires for material goods, etc. Protesting *Khor Jor Kor* and seeking to revive community management of Wat Pa Mahawan's forests, Paisal fights destructive government policies and pushes communities to strengthen a relationship with the forest to keep it healthy.

Luang Phor Khamkian

Luang Phor Khamkian of the Chaiyaphuum Province is the vice president of the Sekhiyadhamma organization of activist monks in Thailand. He engages with state agencies, especially the Thai Royal Forestry Department, in his environmental work. Khamkian sees his

ultimate duty as a monk to show the way to the villagers who are trapped in debt. He also blames other monks for villagers' suffering because they have the means to teach the way out (the eight fold path of Buddhism). His major contribution is encouraging other monks to take immediate action, as he was the monk who asked Phra Paisal Visalo to move to Wat Pa Mahawan to protect the forest and establish a forest temple there. Khamkhian is responsible for protecting many forested areas around forest temples by means of meditation and the moral authority of monks, rather than directly protesting the government and Royal Forestry Department. However, when Khamkhian was accused of being a communist, he said, "understandable, because what I am preaching is different from traditional folk understanding about Buddhism." Khamkhian says that people can see and judge for themselves the nature of his work. His reaction shows his Engaged Buddhist interpretation of responsibility to worldly suffering and his determination to keep working because of his responsibility as a monk. Khamkhiam explains the essence of dharma, wrapped in nature, in this way: "meditation as well as natural forest can free our minds if we can see through to the practical implications of nature. This is one reason [the monks] stay and protect the forests" (Sanitsuda in Taylor 1993: 49).

Luang Phor has two monasteries in a natural forest under threat from illegal logging and eucalyptus plantations. Journalist Sanitsuda Ekachai describes the difference between the forest under Luang Phor's protection and the eucalyptus plantation across the road:

... heaven and hell are only a few steps apart. ...A red dirt road cuts between two stands of trees that signify two very different possible futures for the 400 families who live here... One side is a lush, cool forest. Dense greenery makes walking difficult. Air is full of moisture, soil is damp and soft with decomposed leaves. Sunlight filters through the protective canopy, courting the quiet world of green that lies beneath... Other side trees are in neat rows. This is a eucalyptus plantation. Hard cracked soil covered with brown leaves that refuse to decompose. Little shade, no airiness but hot and dry. The land is cut by deep crevices, caused by severe

erosion, as if Mother Earth were wounded. (Sanitsuda 1994: 72 in Darlington 2012: 145)

With an intimate knowledge of the effects of the governmental “conservation,” Luang Phor Khamkhian and other ecology monks see themselves as necessary actors against the horrendous effects on rural people and teak forests. Luang Phor Khamkhian responds to eucalyptus plantations without fighting but acting in alternative ways like growing alternatives to eucalyptus around his monastery (Taylor 1993: 48). Acting against the state indirectly and nonviolently like Khamkhian for the sake of the forest is a radically different path than that of the wandering forest monk, who seeks to stray as far from society as possible to tame his mind along with the wild forest spirits.

Conclusion

Thailand’s ecology monks, such as Phrakhru Pitak Nathakun, Phrakhru Manas Nathipithak, Phra Paisal Vasilo, and Luang Phor Khamkhian, represent a new role of Buddhism that is a hybrid of forest and village monks. The ecology monk vocation emerged as a modern path of Engaged Buddhism, preceded by development monks in Sri Lanka working in projects such as the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. Ecology monks draw on Buddhadasa and Sivaraksa’s reinterpretation of the Buddhist path and teachings, thereby challenging orthodox Buddhist traditions that do not allow for action against environmental and human suffering, focused solely on knowledge of scripture and ritual for laity (village monks), or rejection of society and the material world for internal salvation (forest tradition). Ecology monks emerged from both forest and village monks as they “appreciated the forest for the same peacefulness and dharma lessons as forest monks, [yet] they also witnessed firsthand the negative impacts of deforestation on village life” (Darlington 2012: 142). The ecology monks take on their Buddhist

role focused on the centrality of nature in both meditation, *dharma*, and the livelihood of local people, leading them to fight against environmental and human suffering. As they break off from traditional roles of forest monks and village monks in Thailand, ecology monks follow the footsteps of Engaged Buddhism and development monks to create an alternative path where the environment and the people are central to their Buddhist work and teachings.

The ways in which ecology monks use the Buddhist framework is a strategic way of tackling environmental problems in the villages, primarily resulting from deforestation in Thailand since the 1960s. Ecology monks rose independently on the ground level, interacting with different inhabitants in rural villages. In their work, ecology monks hold a reciprocal relationship with Thai NGOs who are also fighting for environmental conservation and other problems in society. Their work is crucial in a place where Buddhism is the norm, where secularization constantly squeezes the cultural knowledge of land management out of the populace, and a place where respect and awe for spirits in nature still exist. Ecology monks are a display of religious dialogue around the impending loss of forests that affects all of Thailand and Southeast Asia.

In studying such religious and environmental struggles today, it is important to understand the total religious and cultural context of Thailand for effective environmental work. All different types of knowledge need to be drawn on, all scientific knowledge, local knowledge, agricultural knowledge and knowledge of specific regional ecological systems. Engaged Buddhism provides a way of integrating all forms of knowledge to do this in their fundamental teaching of interdependence. Political and historical events must be considered when confronting environmental crisis and implementing sustainable development work. Ecology monks have a role to play by their spiritual charisma for villagers and lay people in Thailand. Their role is in

spreading the message that top-down governmental development cannot go on and instead, local resource management along with ecological science can be used to create effective action in conservation of the forests, people, and ways of life. Skillful means of initiating a religious dialogue between Buddhism and indigenous spirit beliefs is a key foundation for the survival of forests and waterways in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Ecology monks' work on a cultural and religious level is important for rural people and forests.

The rituals innovated by Phrakhru Manas and the way in which ecology monks engage with traditions on the ground reflects a syncretism of ritual elements of nature spirits, Buddhist ritual, to promote and revive the relationship between people and the forest. Ecology monks differ from the forest tradition today in Thailand that revolves around nature as wild and demonic just as indigenous people worship the spirits that live there. Ecology monks instead draw from both rituals performed in Buddhism for lay people and indigenous beliefs in tree and water spirits in the Tree Ordinations and Long Life Ceremonies. The stories of ecology monks demonstrate a syncretism of different beliefs from different groups who all see nature in different ways. To understand the work of the ecology monk one must also understand their context of competing views in Thailand: belief in spirits, belief in the Buddha and *dharma*, and outside western and environmental approaches to development and conservation. Beyond basic development and environmental work, ecology monks weave in the powerful forces of belief and ritual.

For ecology monks, the forest is not a hostile, wild place that needs to be tamed. Contrary to this orthodox Buddhist view, ecology monks see the forest as brimming with sentient beings that require a symbiotic relationship with humans. They argue for the health of the forests because forests always held a special place in Buddhist lore, all the way back to the Buddha's

enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree. The relationship between all things in the world is evident in Buddhism and the study of ecology in interdependent patterns of the sun, moon, and stars; the coming and going of water in the atmosphere and down to the earth and how it makes plants, trees, and fungus grow; the nature of animals through their behavior; relationships between all things, which is the basis of ecology. Ecology monks teach that these relationships are learned through meditation, a practice to become more aware of surroundings and lose the sense of self and ego that arises in the mind. As famous ecology monk Phra Prajak conveys,

nowadays we don't understand ourselves, where we are (spiritually) in relation to nature; but if we practice meditation we will understand ourselves and the relationship between forests and our body... even the Buddha and his disciples knew the importance of the harmony and interdependence between man and nature (Taylor 1993: 45).

Phra Prajak saw the forest as important for all interdependent living beings regulating the four elements of earth, air, water and fire that create life. He expressed interdependence as the main concept in Buddhist environmental work, echoing popular voices in Engaged Buddhism such as Thich Naht Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Buddhadasa Bhikku.

While most ecology monks focus on interdependence between people and the forests, there are minorities of ecology monks who view nature as a necessary wilderness that should be separate from human impact. Ahan Pongsak Tecadhammo of the Dhammanaat Foundation in Chiang Mai demonstrated such a view when he pushed for the removal of the Hmong people from the watershed above his meditation center and ethnic Thai villages with which he worked (Darlington 2012). Pongsak represents a small part of the movement of Engaged Buddhists who want the forests to be untouched.

Ecology monks are effective on a small scale through reviving integrated agriculture, reviving an effective community forest management that holds respect for certain parts of the

forest, like the heads of waterways, that are most productive. This type of work is crucial to moving towards an environmentally sound way of life, contrasting with our current western capitalist models of development. Phrakhru Pitak's projects in sustainable agriculture and Phra Paisal's story of community forest management in Wat Pa Mahawan demonstrate a revival of local management in the forest like those of the Nan people and Karen communities discussed in Part One. As shown, the livelihood of communities is tied up with a way of life in which there is a relationship with the spirits of the forests. As ecology monks embody an Engaged Buddhist response applied to environmental suffering, they are pushed away from traditional focus of village monks on knowledge of the scriptures and rituals for merit making, and from forest monks and a focus on meditative attainment. Instead, they engage in dialogue with village spirit beliefs to create Thai rituals that can motivate action towards protecting Thailand's environment. Buddhism still holds its conversion of local spirits, demonstrated by the forest monk agenda in rural Thai villages, but in Tree Ordinations and Long Life Ceremonies for rivers, the spirits are included and asked to help protect the forest. Thus, the ecology monks have developed an alternative path of Buddhism, a hybrid of village and forest monk traditions. The heart of the vocation of an ecology monk, in working with the local communities to respect and take care of the forests, is the centrality of nature for both Buddhism and local spirit beliefs.

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