

Buddhism and Education



**Phra Rajavaramuni
(*Prayudh Payutto*)**

Translation and poetry by Grant A. Olson

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Dedication

This small volume is dedicated to our daughter, Teal Metta Olson, on her first birthday, March 8, 1987 (coincidentally also International Women's Day). Her father, Grant, has recently finished a translation of one of Phra Rajavaramuni's works entitled *Looking to America to Solve Thailand's Problems* (Mōng America ma gāē panhā Thai), which expresses this monk's interests in applying Buddhist principles to the solution of social problems. The essay included here expresses yet another concern of Phra Rajavaramuni: problems of monastic and secular education in Thailand. It primarily deals with problems of education for men, but implicit in the essay is a concern for all children involved in education in Thailand. The separation of monastic and government education systems has meant that there has been less exposure to Buddhism in the government system for both young men and women. Phra Rajavaramuni feels this is a regrettable aspect of the evolution of education in Thailand. Monks are hardly involved in the secular education system: students must form "Buddhist clubs" at their schools and universities in order to meet and discuss Buddhist issues and invite monks on campus. This has made for a loss of valuable traditions and literature, and perhaps even accounts for a certain lack of direction among today's youth.

We thank Phra **Rajavaramuni** for offering his kind assistance in checking the translation. Grant has offered what he calls "a couple of tentative poems on growth" for Teal **Mettā**. It is our hope that Teal will find her own path to knowledge and wisdom, her own way to bloom in this often confusing world, and be able to point a finger of guidance for others. May she have a long, prosperous and peaceful life.

Dedicated with love,
Chalermsee Olson
March, 1987
Bangkok, Thailand

At One, With Mettā

With finger pointing out the moon,
You express more
than we can imagine;
With one little digit,
You already reveal more
than we had hoped for--
To have made it this far is enough
to say that we can still go further.
But be kind and patient
 with us,
If we grow impatient
 with you,
Only our ignorance makes us weary;
We know that we must trail,
that we cannot always remain at one
 with Metta,
We only ask not to be left
 too far behind.

-- **G.A.O.**

Younger River Ping

Cool stream of water
not yet too deep,
but swelling with promise,
You run far and long,
defy normal laws and
flow north towards the pole,
While your friends flow away
to the girth of the earth
ending up wasted there
unable to dilute the ocean's tears.

Your course is true enough
but purpose still murky.
Shifting eddies, your coy, playful eyes
attract, but do not yet invite
contemplation.

On more sultry days,
you reward those who are pulled under
For a moment
but they do not drown.

With years of current flowing,
You will carve a more definite path
and end up feeding those on the other side
of the mountain.

As your waters reach out to a wet, fertile
plain,
Their memories of you will be
special,
warmer, clearer and more profound
than their ancestors',
 who were never afraid to let their children
 play by your placid side,
and now do not allow themselves to mourn
 too much
when they lose one to you.

-- G.A.O.

Buddhism and Education

When we speak about Buddhism and education, we are prone to referring to the past when temples were the center for education and monks were the trainers and teachers in charge of education. This type of reference is a way of showing the value of Buddhism in society, which once really existed. But at the same time, it is like accusing oneself of a kind of negligence because now these values and benefits no longer exist, which can be called a kind of degeneration. Moreover, turning away from the confusion and void of the present and finding amusement and pride in the richness of the past might be viewed as a symptom of people who have run out of hope, who are trying to escape the sorrow of the present by turning to and making references to the past and finding pleasure and fulfillment there. This is not an auspicious thing to do nor a sign of progress that we should be pleased with.

This article is like some other articles in one respect, it turns back again to reclaim the past when temples were the center of education and learning in Thai society and when monks, since ancient times, had the important role of trainer and teacher of the populace. At any rate, in this article I will not revert to describing how the temple was the source of education and how the monks were the bestowers of education; I will only refer to these things to link them with the present. The important point is that I will make sufficient references to show that, even at the present time, Buddhism has not completely lost its importance in education; it still has a residual or latent role and sometimes these residual things have a great importance for Thai society.

There are two kinds of important Thai customs related to Buddhism and education which are fundamental to the current situation:

1) Customs in which the temple is the center of education and learning for the people and the monks are the teachers who carry out their duty of training others. This custom may be almost invisible to the urbanites and city-dwellers of the current day, but for villagers in the distant countryside it is still visible; even though it **may** not be the center it was in the past, it is still a path or a last refuge.

2) The custom of ordaining and studying (buat-rian), which can mean entering the **monkhood** along with studying, or when one ordains one must study, or ordaining for the purpose of studying; this might even mean being a monk for as long as one wishes to study, and after studying, those who want to stay in the Order can stay, and those who do not, can disrobe. This has become the custom of temporary ordination. One aspect of this custom still well known today, is the "three-month ordination" which continues to shrink to one month, half-a-month, even to seven days--that is one thing; and when one has remained in the **monkhood** for a time, one can leave the Order whenever one wishes--that is another thing.

Actually, these two customs are one and the same thing; but here I have divided them into two because the effects of these two aspects--which have come down to us to the present day--are different, as we will see below.

There are two important events and conditions which have resulted in the present state of Buddhist education:

1) The State established a system of education following the Western model and separated education for the masses away from the temple. At first, it was done with the cooperation of the temple, giving the temple an important element of responsibility; later, the two gradually became more and more distant to the point that the State and the temple might be considered as completely separate in educational matters.

2) The State has not yet been successful in establishing education for the general public and has not yet been able to give its people an equal opportunity to receive an education, because some people have not had access to this important opportunity: Some have lost this for geographical reasons, in that many places do not have access to a school; and some have lost out for economic reasons, because if a student studies well and has no money, schooling must cease.

Saying this is tantamount to criticizing the government as the primary cause of this degeneration, but actually it is not this way. The two points mentioned above are accepted facts, especially point number two. Educators themselves bring this up and discuss it. The government is trying to find a way to rectify this. Just the opposite of criticizing are the points that follow: Because the conditions of the nation are this way, this still allows the temples and the **Sangha** a role and some importance in education; but if the government were to successfully perform the two activities mentioned above, the temples and the **Sangha** may completely lose their role, shrinking in importance in the area of education. We do not have to turn to the past to make suppositions about this; in the

present we can see this more and more clearly. Whenever the government expands and spreads its service of education, wherever it goes, the role and importance of the temples and the **Sangha** are reduced or else their role must change, becoming different from before. It is understandable that the condition which will disappear most slowly (or very lastly), which will help the temples and the **Sangha** still maintain a role and importance in education for some time to come, is the lack of equal opportunity in education due to economic conditions. When the government is able to successfully solve the two problems above, then the educational role of the temple and the **Sangha**, as it exists today, must fade away and be lost, or change to become something very different. All of this depends upon working with knowledge that can keep pace with this situation, and whether or not, or to what degree, one is willing to accept the truth.

The current conditions resulting from the clash between the two customs above and the two major causes just mentioned, can be summarized as follows:

1. When the State does not have enough power to spread education to the masses and is still not able to provide equal opportunity to the people, the poor peasants and villagers in the countryside depend upon the custom of ordaining and studying and the temple as an ancient place of education, as a channel or path, even to the point of being a "path of mobility" (*thāng phān*) which allows one's children to receive a certain amount of education. This also has many other effects, such as:

a) Most of the so-called permanent monks and novices (*sāmaṇera*) in Thailand who reside at temples (numbering approximately 230,000) come from poor farming families in the distant countryside. These monks and novices flow into the temples in the major cities for further education. This makes the temples, even in the capital city, a community for upcountry people right in the middle of the city (more than 90% of the monks and novices residing at temples in Bangkok are from the countryside).

b) Normally, even though these monks and novices have the duty to study coursework related to Buddhism, because of their background and some other good supporting reasons, they are inclined to desire worldly studies as well--and this inclination increases, especially when one sees his contemporaries studying in the government system. If the temples and the **Sangha** are willing to accept these monks and novices into the Order, then it becomes their duty to see to what extent and degree they will have a way to motivate or force them to study courses related to Buddhism, and how much they should yield to their needs for worldly education. It is also normal that these needs and attitudes of the monks and novices of school age will not coincide with that of the **Sangha** or the ecclesiastical administrators of the **Sangha**; the greater the gap between their educational needs and the education offered by the **Sangha**, the stronger the conflict becomes. To put this as some modern people do: the situation has become sharply polarized. When things have reached this point, it ordinarily follows that the administrators of the **Sangha** only increase their concern; having become very concerned, they are likely to strictly, or even forcefully, make

the monks and novices remain within the framework they stipulate. In modern terms, this is called working on the minus side (in a negative or destructive way). At any time or place, if these administrators have sufficient power to successfully control, they become overjoyed, but the overall conditions worsen each time. I feel that the way to bring about positive results cannot surpass the way of old Thai custom--that is, employing a policy of tactful conciliation and allowing benefits for both sides. To further illustrate this point, Thai custom is not averse to using a "path of mobility," quite the opposite, it supports using it, but it insists that those who tread this path must maintain it.¹ The more the path is walked, the more progressive it becomes--including all those who walk the path, the path itself, and the community involved with this path--and the more everyone thrives together. Aside from all of this, there still will be only a certain number who will always remain in the Sangha and work there.

c) When monks and novices from the countryside flow into this path of mobility for education in the city and there is no flow back to the countryside, this makes for a further loss, a continuous loss of strength on the part of the

¹We must understand that using the term "path of mobility" (*thāng phdn*) here is a manner of speech used simply to describe the condition or reveal phenomena in society. It does not mean that it is the intention of monks and novices to use the temple as a path of mobility, because most of them enter the Order at an age when they do not have knowledge or understanding of these matters. They, therefore, do not know themselves that they have entered such a path. These monks and novices entering the Order can be called a product of society which tradition and custom have established.

countryside. In the cities, even though a monk may be well-educated, it still is not enough for him to acquire the status of being a leader; whereas in the outlying areas, whatever knowledge the monks and novices may have, or do not have at all, the villagers regard them as leaders. But the qualified monks, who might provide good leadership in the countryside, jam into the cities, which makes for a two-fold loss.

d) When the role and condition of the education of the **Sangha** must depend on the deficiencies and ill-preparedness of the State education system, especially for potential ordinands, then when the State education system spreads or develops to any place (or the economics develop to any place) the number of young boys who ordain as novices decreases to the point that we can say there are no such ordinations at all, aside from novices ordaining at a cremation ceremony (*kān būat nā fai*), or else gathering a group of young students together to ordain for a short period during the **summer** recess.' There are always some novices around, but they have come to be novices from the far away countryside where the State education system has not yet reached. This is the cause for an ever-increasing lack of monks who are leaders in the countryside, which goes hand-in-hand with a decline of the temple and the Buddhist religion.

²According to traditional belief, ordination is an act of merit. Merit can also be transferred. It is believed, therefore, that an ordinand (*nāḱ*) who ordains upon the occasion of a cremation can pass merit on to the deceased--trans.

2. Meanwhile, inside the structure of the State education system, the higher the students go, the more they have to move into the urban areas. Some middle-class people in the upcountry may have partial means to send their children to study in the State system, but this still is not sufficient to support them completely; so when their children progress to higher levels of study and are to enter the market towns and major cities, they are often put in the care of the urban temple as dependents of the monks. This makes the temple a dwelling, a boarding house, for students from the countryside enrolled in the State system. This condition has even more evidently turned temples in the middle of cities into communities for people from the countryside; while at the same time, the temples have, in another way, become places offering support to the State education system.

3. Part of the custom of ordaining and studying which still remains in principle, if incompletely, is ordaining for the three-month rainy season (*khao phansā*); but this custom has been, to a large degree, disturbed by the State education system. Because most young people do not have the opportunity to ordain when they reach the proper age, they must wait until they graduate, or postpone this even further due to work, a career, or a government post, for example. At any rate, this custom still is of great benefit to Thai society. Most importantly:

a) Young men in the cities--given the surrounding conditions and the lifestyle there--are estranged from the customs of their own society. Ordination is a tool for pulling them back to be complete Thai people, not strangers to culture and custom.

b) For the young men living in the countryside, it can be of especially great benefit. In the eyes of this writer, I see the training and daily life in the temple, even during this temporary ordination period of three months, as real education and of greater benefit than their schooling during the early ages of primary school (*prathom*) grades 1-4, because it is education which brings one's life to bear on one's studies and it is studying based on real life within the surrounding conditions, culture and customs, including the relationship with the people who belong to one's own community. Ordination, which, we say, makes one ripe or mature (*suk*), still holds true for ordination in the countryside, because it makes those monks enter into adulthood, prepares them for joining or for becoming a complete member of a community. Besides gaining knowledge of the traditions and customs of the community, during their time in the *Sangha*, monks attain knowledge they can put to good use or use to serve the needs of their own community. Aside from this, many rural youngsters graduate from the fourth grade (*prathom 4*) and go off to live in the midst of the rice fields, **almost** completely forgetting their courses, even reading and writing Thai. When they enter the **monkhood** they can reconsider, make use of that knowledge, and revive it again. Especially during a time when Thai educators are complaining that education in this country has been treading the wrong path for a long time and modern education makes students alienated from their own communities, culture and customs, the value of ordination according to custom, as I have mentioned so far, is very clear.

Anyhow, it is most unfortunate that the three-month ordination continues to fade even in the countryside--due to the state of the economy, for example--which makes the stay in the **monkhood** become shorter: one month, half-a-month, or even seven days. Daily training deteriorates. Many places have monks residing idly for a matter of days, while others lack leadership, such as lacking monks with enough seniority to become abbot, housing monks who have been in the **monkhood** only one to two years (*phansci*), continuing to maintain the temples according to the previously mentioned causes and conditions. The benefits of this custom are, therefore, in decline.

4. While monks and novices from the countryside currently use the "path of mobility" for attaining the benefits of education, taking some worldly courses and some Buddhist studies, in the end, most of them end up leaving the Order--this is the ordinary state of affairs; while at the same time, the **Sangha**, or the monks in administrative positions, are all caught up in trying to control or contain this situation, partially out of anxiety and confusion, and partly out of confidence in their own power, which can unmistakably be called busily engaging in a fight to the finish. In the meantime, a new trend has arisen: A group of young, modern people--some with high education and a lot of worldly experience--have become bored with the world or have come to see the value of Buddhism (*dhamma-vinaya*). They have been willing to leave their homes and follow out their intention to ordain for life (*thāwōn*). While at the same time, it has become clear that the **Sangha** was not prepared to receive this group of people, especially in terms of their education. Most

of these people cannot find much meaning in the existing ecclesiastical education and have a wide circle of relations with groups of students in institutions of higher learning for laymen, which also have groups studying about Buddhism, and these groups exist beyond the confines of the **Sangha** system itself. It is true that the ordination of people of this calibre is something that should bring about good results, but if the educational system cannot meet their needs, then this may be **the** cause of bad results. If the **Sangha** has not made arrangements to accommodate and assimilate this group, then it is foreseeable that this new trend may become a strong force which is currently called challenging the whole educational system and administration of the Sangha--all of which would happen within a short period of time.

5. A short time after education had separated from the temple, other aspects of the life of the laity gradually moved away as well. Yet in the rural communities, some people still depend on the temple for education, and life is still more closely tied to the temple in accordance with tradition and custom than it is in the cities. Furthermore, after older generations pass away, if the later generations who hold responsibility in the government and modern society are no longer familiar with the temple and monks and come to have any relationship with them, it is like meeting strangers from different groups; they will not truly meet each other on common terms, nor will they understand each other's problems; in fact, they are likely to misunderstand each other very easily. All of this is due to the distance between the temples, the State, and urban society, which breeds an undesirable attitude, for example:

a) Most people in city and urban society are not familiar with the temple and the **Sangha** which constitutes a community in the middle of their own society. Only seeing its outward form and its occasional superficial movements, they do not know what it is or how it exists. They then paint a picture in their mind: Seeing monks study and then disrobe, they criticize and complain saying that the monks exploit the temple for their own education and take advantage of the villagers; after they disrobe, they take jobs away from lay people; or seeing no social role on the part of monks, they say that monks are listless and useless to society. Actually, the criticisms of these people are, to some extent, correct, but because the reasons for these attitudes are not based on understanding and knowledge, this brings about more bad results than good--at least it does not contribute to the solution of problems.

b) Currently, it is as if many of the people in important positions of responsibility in the State education system, or, to put it more broadly, the State does not know, does not understand, the customs and relationship between itself and the **Sangha** in the area of education--forgetting how, over time, the State had partial responsibility for the education of the **Sangha**--and so they do not take the correct stand on education for the monks, and sometimes even end up in confusion and conflict amongst themselves. For example, some people, on occasion, have been known to say that the education of the monks is the monks' business, and the education of the nation is the business of the nation: It's everyone for himself, different people, different work. But occasionally, some people are given to saying that this

'education for the monks has been conducted by the monastic institutions themselves, and there are no laws which recognize it; it is therefore, a kind of "outlaw" education, school, or university.

c) The patronage and support of the religion, since earlier times, has had, among other things, the goal of promoting and encouraging religious education--both directly and indirectly; but when educational activities of the temples continued to decrease, the meaning of this--in terms of the relationship between support of the religion and support of Buddhist education--also decreased until it has been almost completely lost. You can see that the supporters of Buddhism in this later period now focus on materialism, putting up more and more structures or monastic buildings--and even the *Sangha* guides the people in this direction.

d) The *Sangha* has become accustomed to feeling that education for the masses--or for children and young adults--is currently the responsibility of the government and the *Sangha* is only involved in teaching the monks and novices about Buddhism. This feeling is deep-rooted to the point that, generally, when one mentions religious education, the *Sangha* sees this only in terms of monks and novices and what goes on in the temples. They do not look beyond the fence or the wall of the temple; they do not think that "I ought to have a modicum of responsibility for the religious and ethical education of the children and young adults at large" at all. They, therefore, do not get involved in knowing how the young people, the children of villagers, receive their ethical training. Even if they were to talk about or criticize any news or situation of this kind, they would do it with the attitude of those who are outside the realm of responsibility.

Having said all of this, I have not wished to chastise or criticize any particular person or group; in fact, everyone and all groups are the product of all the causal factors mentioned above. The best path is one of cooperation or helping each other to study and understand the facts, accept the truth, and come together to change and solve these problems. The most unfortunate thing is that many people, especially those in positions of responsibility--either governmental or ecclesiastical--enjoy setting up regulations based on attachment to notions they have in their heads saying: "things must be like this," or "things must not be like that." When real life conditions do not fit the regulations they have established, they absolutely refuse to listen, and are unwilling to further investigate the truth with an open mind according to the related causes and effects. These people have good wishes for Buddhism and are concerned about its activities, but it is the concern and good wishes of these very same people which contribute to the increase and escalating seriousness of different problems. And it is the opposing or negative actions of these very people which have led to a kind of cooperation with their "perverted" monks, creating a field of battle for a fight to the bitter end; this, in turn, has helped to eliminate any common benefits or happiness and sometimes may even assist in the final destruction of Buddhism. Aside from the people at the administrative levels and those in positions of responsibility, we must admit that there are some monks and novices who do intentionally use the temple as a path for further study, for actual personal career benefits in a way which can be called using the "path of mobility" without helping to maintain the path. Besides, even among the

monks and novices who tread this path of mobility mindful of the reason for doing so, thinking that they will maintain the path, there are still many others who act like seeds which break away and disperse, coming to rest just beneath the surface of the earth, crumbling, deteriorating, and rotting in the middle of the field instead of withstanding being tread upon, rolled over, dumped upon, and waiting to grow quietly, without anyone noticing, until the time is ripe and flowers bloom, making people willing to appreciate--by their show of beauty--the real fruits to be admired.

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