

THE VALUE AND ROLES OF THAI BUDDHIST LITERATURE IN THAI SOCIETY¹

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Abstract

This article is a study focused on the value and roles of Thai Buddhist literature in Thai society. I examined major Buddhist Thai literary works found in the culture of Thai literary art. The conclusion obtained is that Thai Buddhist literature has value and roles in Thai society as follows: 1) Value and roles in respect of being Buddhist art 2) Value and roles in respect of teaching 3) Value and roles in respect of ideas and belief 4) Value and roles in respect of politics and government 5) Value and roles in respect of continuing Buddhism. It also has the value of maintaining Buddhism in Thai culture due to its distinctive character that corresponds with the context of Thai society and its gratification in terms of the aesthetic spirituality of the people in the society.

Keyword: Thai Buddhist literature; value and roles

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Introduction

I think that Thai Buddhist literature has great importance to society, for creating emotion and permitting understanding of Buddhist teachings, ideas and beliefs. It also has a significant function of creating unity in the society because, as people share the same notions and faith, there will surely be coordination and compromise in society in terms of ideas, which contribute to the peace of the society.

The creation of Buddhist literature has a role of no little importance in directing the attitudes of people in society because literature and society are related. Although a literary work is a specific work of a poet, "a literary work is not brought about by inspiration or the spirit of the author exclusively; it also pertains to the author's conscience, perception and worldview, which are actually what the author receives from society" (Sinthusang, 2007). In Buddhist literature, the significant sources of inspiration for the poets was a knowledge and understanding of Buddhism with faith, and the intention to communicate the spiritual messages to the population, however, it was the composition of literature that spread Buddhism. As people in Thai society shared the same faith in Buddhism, Buddhist literature was a product of the society, and once created, it must have some valid roles and functions in that society, accommodating the needs of the society.

Therefore, I became interested in examining the value and roles of Buddhist Thai literature, which abundantly exists in the culture of Thai literary art. This thorough study would permit knowledge and comprehension of the value and roles of this kind of literature to Thai society in all aspects, both to individuals and to society as a whole. The study was conducted from information gathered in Thai Buddhist literature. This article aims to synthesize the values and roles of Thai Buddhist literature from the Sukhothai period to the Rattanakosin period. I have selected important literature which is well known within Thai literary culture. This Buddhist literature played a significant role and is also relevance to other Thai cultures such as Buddhist arts, customs and rituals as well.

Result: Value and Role of Thai Buddhist Literature in Thai Society

After studying the overall picture of Thai Buddhist Literature in Thai society, I could sum up the main points as follows:

1) Value and roles in respect of being Buddhist art

Literature is a form of art with the purpose of creating emotion. Creating literature means creating beauty through language and literary methods in combination with ideas. This results in artwork, and, as with other forms of art, it has the function of creating aesthetic pleasure to the audience, both through reading and viewing. Bhirasri (2003) mentioned that in good art there must be oneness, a 'unity', with the parts being composed into a form, which is called its 'composition'. Whether the composition will be beautiful or not depends on the harmony. If all the components fit well together, it can be called a harmonious composition, which can make the viewer, or listener, pleased and gratified with the beautiful or pleasant-sounding composition. This feeling is called aesthetic sense.

Art and religion have always been profoundly related. Religious sentiment can be retained or conveyed best with art as the medium, or tool. Hence, to convey religious sentiment effectively, one needs to use art as the medium, or tool for conveyance (Srinivasan, 2002). As regards Buddhist literature, the main contents are Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist stories, which are the inspiration that poets conveyed in their literary artworks and beautiful linguistic styles.

From one perspective, creating Buddhist literature is communicating the teachings through the aesthetic quality, so exquisiteness of language and distinct concreteness in the creation of the stories are needed. Even ordinary stories need to be made capable of stirring emotion to draw the reader into religious sentiment, faith, and finally wisdom and knowledge.

For example, Prince Thammathibet praised his own work (Nanthopanandhasutra Khamluang, 2002) for being beautifully composed in the Thai language with the intention of providing teachings faithful to the Pāli scriptures and make the work valuable to Buddhism, which he believed would make the author safe from all harm. Moreover, Somdet Phra Wannarat said that his work *Sangītiyavamsa* has substance that is both beneficial and valuable to the world and it is also intended to have a

pleasant-sounding quality. (Sangītiyavamsa, 2001)

An excerpt from *Rai Yao Mahavessantara Jātaka*, *Kumārṇ chapter* by Chao Phraya Phra Khlang (Hon, 2004) exhibits high-level literary art in creating linguistic beauty and emotion for the presentation of dharmic substance. As the Bodhisattva gives his children to Choo Chok, the language enables the reader to empathize with the emotion caused by the commiseration for the two children. What follow are the verses of the Great Being's lamentation.

*"O when at morning or at eve for food my children cry,
Oppressed by hunger or by thirst, who will their want supply?
How will their little trembling feet along the roadway go,
Unshod? Who'll take them by the hand and lead them gently so?
How could the Brahmin feel no shame, while I was standing by,
To strike my harmless innocents? A shameless man say I!
No man with any sense of shame would treat another so,
Were it a servant of my slave, and I brought very low.
I cannot see him, but he scolds and beats my children dear,
While like a fish caught in a trap I'm standing helpless here."*

He could not get away from the pain of thinking how the Brahmin cruelly beat his children, and he resolved to go in search of the man, and kill him, and to bring the children back. But no, he thought: that was a mistake; to give a gift, then to repent because the children's trouble would be very great, that was not the way of the righteous. And the two following stanzas contain the reflections which throw light on that matter.

*"He bound his sword upon his left, he armed him with his bow;
I'll bring my children back again; to lose them is great woe.
But even if my children die 'tis wicked to feel pain:
Who knows the customs of the good, yet asks a gift again?"*

(E. B. Cowell, 1907: 284-285)

The bereavement and solicitude make the Bodhisattva confused and angry. When Choo Chok mistreats the two children in front of him, he experiences a combination of sorrow and anger, which are common human emotions that occur when losing something dear. Nevertheless, as the Bodhisattva uses his mindfulness, detachment, restraint and thinks of the goal, which is the supreme knowledge, he can finally suppress his emotion and be at peace.

The teaching of Buddhist doctrine is also intended to supply the knowledge of profound and fine spiritual principles. That is, *dāna* can lead to the understanding of high-level spiritual concepts. For instance, the story of Vessantara in *Kumārñ Kamchan* provides clarification about giving in order to attain the supreme knowledge. In the scene when Vessantara entreats Prince Jali to get out of the water because he has agreed to give the two children to Choo Chok, one can see the detail of the dharmic teaching, which talks about getting trapped in the cycle of birth and death, which is a cycle with the suffering that leads to worlds, birth, aging and death. To be free from all this suffering requires great giving and the giving away of one's children can be a path to liberation. The expression comparing the giving away of one's children to a ship is a metaphor found in every version of the *Mahachat*, Story of the Last Great Incarnation of the Buddha. However, in Buddhist Thai literature, the metaphor is magnified to the level of the grandeur of a golden ship representing the sublime Buddhist doctrine that will take the Bodhisattva and all mankind across the painful cycle of birth and death to happiness, which is nirvana. (Princess Montha and Princess Ubon, 1996: 46-50).

Therefore, the value and role of Thai Buddhist Literature in respect of it being Buddhist art, involves the creation of the aesthetic sense through the beauty of substance and the beauty of language. The literary styles used in conveying Buddhist stories cause emotional impact in the readers, which can lead to understanding, belief and faith. The reception of sentimental messages through sense impression, experience and knowledge will induce sentimental richness, which will develop into profound thoughts. While some Buddhist matters are of an abstract character, literary works created in the concrete form can certainly be an instrument that leads the mind and emotion of the reader to comprehend religious principles.

2) Value and roles in respect of teaching

An important value and role of Thai Buddhist Literature regards teaching. After considering the substance, it was found that the creation of Buddhist literature was an attempt to provide clarification about Buddhist doctrine in the form of fine literature in order to reach as great a number of people as possible. There are a variety of themes, and the level of interpretation varies according to the knowledge and experience of the reader.

As textbooks, these literary works were obviously a tool for Buddhist education and they still perform this role in the present day. In Buddhist education these days, Buddhist literature; both the history of the Lord Buddha and Jātakas; is employed as a tool. The importance of Buddhist literary texts is thus not only limited to their being literary art, but also that they can be used as a teaching tool. For example: the Ministry of Education arranged the publication of *Rai Yao Mahavessantara Jātaka* as a textbook with a compilation of exceptional passages from *Mahachat*, such as those from the *Kumārṇ chapter* and the *Maddi chapter* of the version by Chao Phraya Phra Khlang (Hon), and it is still used as a textbook to this day.

Buddhist literature serves to teach a wide thematic range, covering secular and spiritual life, ways of life, practice and behavior, which compose the principles of conduct of people in Thai society. One can say that Buddhism is the core of Thai people's lives; it is a guide, a value and an ideology that the society desires for its reality.

An instance of teaching about being a human is evident in the notion in *Tribhumi* that humans have the potential to be developed, so being a human is a good thing. *That humans are called thus is because they have knowledge, greater knowledge than that of all other animals. Humans are rich in wisdom and intellect; that is why they are named humans* (Tribhumilokvinijchayakathā, 2012).

The literary work that presents the Buddhist doctrine of the 4 noble truths with the description of hell and heaven with the intention to teach about good and evil is *Niriyakathā*. The author clearly stated the intention to provide teachings that will afford insight into suffering and the end of suffering. He stated, *In this Deva Sutra, surely all the Buddhas preach the same, to induce perception of the suffering in hell, understanding of the noble truths and thus*

practicing to be liberated from suffering and understand nirvāṇa (Prachum Jaruk Wat Phrachetupon, 2001).

Buddhist literature presents the model of goodness in the form of an ideal type of society through the Bodhisattva's behavior. For example, Vessantara is a type of giving, Phra Samuthakhot of struggling and perseverance with endurance, and Thananchaya Bandit of wisdom. No matter what good consequences befall the Bodhisattva in the end, before arriving at this stage of success, he has to struggle with many obstacles with perseverance; he has to first encounter pain and sorrow to learn about life. There are examples in Jātakas that exhibit the Bodhisattva's attempts at doing good to accumulate merit. Jātakas are stories that show life's suffering and the development of the thought and life of the Bodhisattva who has to go through obstacles to learn and develop himself to attain higher and higher levels of merit until he is liberated from suffering in the end.

Although Buddhist literature teaches Buddhist content but the characteristic of the Buddhist literature is presentation of literary styles such as metaphor, repetition, wordplay, alliteration and allusion etc. The literary styles make a difficult content easy to understand and make an abstract content becomes clearer. For example describing the condition of hell, so frightening for making people afraid of sin, awakening the consciousness and being afraid of the results of wrong doing.

*Those who have harmed their parent, abused precept
keeping monks and Brahmins, caused conflict among the
monks, such are reborn in this Hell between the Universe.
Their bodies are huge, reaching more than 6,000 wa in height.
Their feet and hands are like the wings of bats. The size of their
hooked digits befits the hugeness of their bodies. Their toe-nail
and finger-nails are so sharply pointed that they can fasten
tightly to any surface. The wretches hook their nails into the
walls of the three universes and hang there in the manner of
bats. In dire hunger they flutter here and there searching for
food. Whenever their hands happen to touch those of one of
their fellows, they mistake them for food. Thus both of the*

famished wretches grab the other and try greedily to devour the other's hands. With their hands thus engaged, both fall into the water that holds up this hell's land. Like enormous fruit, they drop into the water and sink beneath the surface. Not since the very birth of this hell has a ray of sunlight ever touched its waters. The water is therefore inconceivably cold. At the instant that the beings fall into it, their bodies disintegrate like loose lumps of feces, and they die immediately. Then they become whole again, and climb the outer reaches of the walls of the universes. There they cling as before. These miserable beings die and are reborn over and over again and suffer thus for as long as one kalpa, which is the gulf of them between the advent of one Buddha and that of the next. (Traibhumikatha, 1985: 71)

The value and role of Buddhist literature in respect of teaching are apparent because in communicating Buddhist doctrine, the fundamental virtues mentioned in the teaching in Buddhist literature are being a good person and abstaining from evil, which are principles of conduct that are the necessary basis for self-development. Getting born as a human being is a difficult thing, and as one has been born, it means getting the opportunity to develop oneself to higher worlds. At any rate, from a Buddhist perspective, for a human being, everything must be done by oneself.

3) Value and roles in respect of idea and belief

Literature is significantly related to society, because literature is art and culture, which is the product of society through the composition of the authors, members of society with worldviews and ideas shaped by society who create literature to accommodate their needs and those of society. Therefore, literature is society's intellectual treasure, so studying literature may reveal the ideas and beliefs of a society.

Siwasariyanon (1990: 41) said that each literary work that is produced inevitably reflects the society and events in the author's time. Therefore, society has great influence on literature. That is why we often see traces of social influence, either direct or indirect, in literary works.

Accordingly, Thai Buddhist literature is important and related to the social elements. Besides literary relationship; which is the communication between the author and the reader through the text with regard to conveyance of emotions, beauty and knowledge; the communication that exhibits social matters is also an aspect of literature, because literature is created from society's worldviews. In addition, conversely, literature is influential to the shaping of the worldviews of people in society.

Notion of Karma

The concept of karma is both the theoretical and practical principles of Buddhists. In Thai society, it is given more importance than other matters. One can say that it is an important concept that is influential to one's way of life and conduct. It is an important framework that is influential to the thought and behavior, also corresponding with the matter of faith and the emphasis on the concept of good deeds begetting good results and bad deeds begetting bad results. The notion of karma is also the foundation leading to other religious concepts, such as giving, the three characteristics, and nirvana.

The notion of karma and its effect is the law of cause and effect that is referred to in explaining events or phenomena that transpire. Buddhist literature categorizes karma into many types. Especially in *Tribhumi*, the types of karma and their consequences are categorized in detail. The concept of karma is present in every Buddhist Thai literary work, and it is presented clearly and directly. Jātaka literature, which is aimed at exhibiting the Bodhisattva's accumulation of goodness, manifests the causes and effects of actions, showing how there are consequences of good and evil; it is an inevitable truth. In Buddhist Thai literature, there is emphasis on teaching about good deeds begetting good results and bad deeds begetting bad results. Mostly the concept is conveyed in comparison to hell and heaven, that is, evil is hell and good is heaven. This comparison is made in the hope that people will do good deeds, and if many good deeds have been accumulated, it can lead to liberation.

This Buddhist doctrine is closely related to the notion of Mahachat, or the notion of Bodhisattva, that is, the accumulation of merit in order to be liberated from suffering to attain nirvana and meet Phramalai Bhikkhu and Metteyya Buddha, which is a common belief of people in society. Merit-making is the basic dharmic principle that can also lead to liberation. The story of

Phramalai reflects the concept of giving and the belief in Metteyya Buddha, which is related to the concept of Bodhisattva. To meet Metteyya Buddha, one has to make merit, including listening to the Mahachat Sermon. The concepts of karma and merit-making are common concepts in the society that has determined the way of living for the objective of having a better life both secularly and spiritually.

Notion of Bodhisattva

The notion of Bodhisattva is present in Jātaka, and other literature related to the Lord Buddha. The notion of Bodhisattva is important to Thai society for its relation to the Buddha before his enlightenment, and this notion is related to the notions of karma and doing good. That people like to listen, to or read stories, of the Bodhisattva reflects the belief in working towards perfection and accumulating merit, especially by giving, which will lead one to meet Metteyya Buddha. Thus, the stories were so important and popular among Thai people that there came to be the ritual of the Mahachat Sermon and Mahachat literary works in various versions.

There are obvious examples of the notion of Bodhisattva in *Mahachat* stories, namely, *Mahachat Kamluang*, *Kap Mahachat* and *Rai Yao Mahachat*. These stories manifest the belief that the Bodhisattva accumulated merit before attaining the enlightenment of the Buddha. The story of the Bodhisattva Vessantara had been widespread in Thai society before the creation of texts. These literary texts are merely evidence affirming this notion. The story of Vessantara has been known since the Sokhothai era as evident in the stone inscription at Wat Pa Mamuang, which says that Phraya Lithai accumulated the merit of giving, as did Vessantara, and accumulated the merit of wisdom, as did *Phra Mahosot*. The period from the 15th to 18th century saw the prevalence of Buddhism. The principles, that attracted the favorable reception of so many people during this period, that they turned into spiritual practices, carried over from the previous era and into later times, were the veneration of the relics of the Lord Buddha, the worship of the holy Bodhi tree, the reverence for the Bodhisattvas and the favorable regard for Jātakas (Saraya, 2009: 314). These notions are directly related to the reverence for the Bodhisattvas and the Buddha's.

The result of the Bodhisattva's giving is refinement of attachment,

the manifestation of the giving that is a difficult deed with supreme knowledge as the goal. Even though Vessantara has not yet accomplished the goal, he has accumulated more merit (Kap Mahachat, 1997: 543). In *Nanthopanandhasutra Khamluang*, although the story about the Lord Buddha or the Bodhisattva is not directly mentioned, the early part of the story talks about the Lord Buddha's accumulation of merit in the past; that his accumulation of goodness was to such a degree that he had accrued miraculously tremendous merit (Nanthopanandhasutra Khamluang, 2002: 151). Furthermore, *Phramalai Khamluang* mentions that Metteyya Buddha had once been a Bodhisattva who had accumulated merit for as long as sixteen incalculable eons before he attained supreme knowledge (Phramalai Khamluang, 2002:268).

Thai Buddhist literature emphasizes the fact that the concept of Bodhisattva had great importance in Thai society. It played the role of a sacred story about the Lord Buddha and the role of a representation of doing good, adhering to the precepts and giving to accrue merit to the point of being able to reach enlightenment in the end. The belief in the Bodhisattva led to the determination of principles of conduct to be followed by people in society in their daily lives. *Tribhumilokvinijchayakathā* (1992: 1052-1053) says that one should not have doubts about following the path of the Bodhisattva because it is the path of liberation from suffering. The Bodhisattva's conduct is the way to happiness and finally freedom from suffering. Besides, the Bodhisattva is an exemplar of a giver, a helper and a sage. He is a model of the behavior expected by society. Hence, the concept of Bodhisattva is found in Buddhist Thai literature. There are cases of the stories about Bodhisattvas being directly presented, as in Jātaka literature, and cases of the concept of Bodhisattva being presented through the notion of the poets. This idea appears in almost every Buddhist literary work, which reflects that it played a role in the ideas and beliefs of Thai people.

Notion of Metteyya Buddha

Metteyya Buddha is the Bodhisattva who will come to attain enlightenment in the future. The story of Metteyya Buddha is present in detail in the *Tripitaka*, i.e., in *Cakkavatti Sutta*, *Dikanikaya*, *Buddhapakirana-kanta*, *Khuddaka Nikaya*, *Buddhavamsa*, *Anakatavamsa*, *Mahavamsa*, *Chula-vamsa*

and *Rasavahini*. As for Buddhist Thai literature, the story is present in detail in *Phramalai Khamluang* and *Tribhumilokvinijchayakathā*. The main idea of the story of Metteyya Buddha is the merit accumulation, such as giving, and entering monkhood in order to become enlightened as a Buddha in the future.

The concept of Metteyya Buddha is the belief about the future Buddha who will come after Shakyamuni Buddha, which is a belief concerning an ideal society anticipated by Buddhists. It is a future that humans hope for, where happiness will be greater than at the present time. To meet, or be born, during the lifetime of a Buddha is a tremendous reward of merit for getting a chance to directly listen to his teachings, and it is believed that the era of Metteyya Buddha will be the era of happiness.

The substance of *Phramalai Khamluang* directly involves the concept of Metteyya Buddha. It enables one to clearly understand what great merit Phramalai has. Metteyya Buddha teaches people to make merit so that they can be born in his time when there is only happiness, (Phramalai Khamluang, 2002: 285-286).

The concept of Metteyya Buddha is also related to *Mahachat* because one way to get to meet Metteyya Buddha is through listening to the Mahachat Sermon (Phramalai Khamluang, 2002: 272). The notion of Metteyya Buddha affects the conduct of people in society in that if one wishes to meet Metteyya Buddha and live in a good society, one must make merit, do good deeds and accumulate merit. That way, one can be born into a happy society (Phramalai Khamluang, 2001: 117).

Tribhumilokvinijchayakathā (1992: 501-502) talks about Buddhism in the era of Metteyya Buddha. That is, it says that those who keep the 8 precepts, those who are monks or novices, those who plant trees in temples that yield blossoms and fruits for monks, those who build pavilions for others to take shelter in, those who repay their parents and those who have faith in and worship the Triple Gem, are the people who may get to see Metteyya Buddha.

The belief in Metteyya Buddha is influential to Thai society because it pertains to the hope to a better future society than the present one. The faith and hope make people seek to do good and seek a way to live in that society. According to Soontravanich (1984:23), the favorable regard for the belief in Metteyya Buddha in Eastern societies is not hard to understand. The concept

of nirvana is, in essence, a profound metaphysical matter, difficult for ordinary people to penetrate. It is also distant and not directly related to the problems of living faced by most people. On the contrary, the belief in Metteyya Buddha nourishes the hope of most people who wait for a better life.

Kasameponkoon (2009: 250-251) shared his opinion that the concept of Metteyya Buddha plays roles in Thai society in diverse ways. As a religious legend, the story of Metteyya Buddha reasserts the notion that Buddhism will end in 5,000 years. The story also serves to give strength to the spirits of Buddhists who do good, provides moral standards, and gives hope for a future ideal society.

Therefore, this notion of Metteyya Buddha reflects the belief and worldview of society, which intends to attain an era of the land of happiness through the Buddhist path, through obeying the teachings. They believe that having faith will lead to the society of the age of Metteyya Buddha.

4) Value and roles in respect of politics and government

Thai Buddhist literature was initially created among the literate and the erudite, so naturally, the authors were in the circle of the elite. Or even if they were monks, they were monks who associated with the elite. The political and governmental connotations associated with this kind of literature are probably not directly associated, but they are indirectly so, according to the contexts of composition and usage of the literary works.

With regard to the political and governmental dimension, which is about relationships between people in society, that is, the aristocrats and the proletariat, it is noticeable that social leaders use literature as a medium, or instrument, for communicating with the people. The communication is not ordinary narration; it is for persuading and directing society to operate in conformation with the social norms as desired by the leaders. In Thai society, it is irrefutable that Buddhism is the norm, the conceptual doctrine commonly accepted because the truth according to Buddhism is the common belief of Thai society. Whenever communication is done through Buddhist culture, there will always be harmony in opinion and behavior.

Activities in support of Buddhism are apparent, such as composition or utilization of literature. The rulers' maintenance of Buddhism helped make the governing class afford peace to the state because it reduced tension and the

remoteness of the kings and the noblemen to the populace, due to the bureaucracy and feudalism sanctioned as legitimate institutions. However, conversely, it also contributed to support the power of the kings to exceed that of kings in other regions of the world, because Thai kings ruled both the secular and religious realms at the same time (Valipodom, 2001: 45).

Sangātiyavamsa is an obvious example of literature's reflection of political messages with the royal duties in government and religious affairs of King Buddha Yot Fa Chulalok and Krom Phra Rajawang Bovorn Sathan Mongkol. The literary work mentions how the two restored the nation after turmoil, comparing them as ones with great merit and compassion who came to salvage the nation (Sangātiyavamsa, 2001: 247). *Sangātiyavamsa* also presents King Buddha Yot Fa Chulalok and Krom Phra Rajawang Bovorn Sathan Mongkol in the images of Bodhisattvas who came to unify the nation and bring growth regarding culture, literature and religious activities. Their major royal duties were convening a Buddhist council for the verification of the *Tripitaka* and writing numerous major Buddhist literary works (Sangātiyavamsa, 2001: 260).

Politically, the kings and the aristocrats employed Buddhist literature to render governmental justification and promote the kings' majesty and oneness with everyone because the religious institution was in proximity to every group of people in the society. The kings could guide people's through Buddhism, monks and literature. For example, during the reign of King Trailokkanat, he summoned the sages to a conference for the composition of *Mahachat Khamluang* to be chanted in the Mahachat Sermon, which was an annual tradition. This served to propagate his dignity in being a patron of Buddhism and accumulating merit and having virtue like Vessantara (Mahachat Kamluang, 1997: 324).

Besides, Kasetsiri (1999: 183) stated that *Mahachat Khamluang* was also written for the purpose of combining the kingdom of Ayutthaya and the northern kingdoms. The reason that the king wrote this work in Phitsanulok was to imitate Phraya Lithai who wrote *Tribhumi Phra Ruang* according to the ancient tradition of the kings of Sukhothai. Being known in the northern kingdoms, Mahachat's writing induced admiration there, causing him to be accepted among the people who once were significant enemies of Ayutthaya.

During the reign of King Nang Klao, a large number of Buddhist literary works were created. His major royal duty being the restoration of Wat Phrachetuphon Wimon Mangkhalaram Ratchaworamahawihan. On this occasion, he ordered the inscription of many Buddhist literary works on marble slabs. The Supreme Patriarch H. R. H. Prince Paramanujitajinorasa wrote *Khlong Dan Patisangkhorn Wat Phrachetuphon*, praising King Nang Klao for his religious duty, comparing him to Asoka the Great (Prince Paramanujitajinorasa, 2004: 25).

Thai Buddhist literature reflects the importance of the kings and the aristocrats in writing literary works and promoting the creation of literature. The aristocrats also used literature in spreading the royal honor to manifest the capacity of Buddhism. Hence, Buddhist literature was a significant political instrument.

Furthermore, the literature reflects the society's ideologies and expectations for its members. The teachings that are the subject matters could therefore be one kind of determiner of people's behavior, such as by teaching one to be afraid of sin. Hence, the political and governmental role of Thai Buddhist Literature was an important factor that enabled the literature to last because it was continued and spread by the elite of the society. In the case of the concept of Tribhumi, which was a belief already extant in the society, the king played a role in managing all this knowledge about earth science. Saraya (1996: 153) shared her view that writing works about Tribhumi, whether *Tribhumi Phra Ruang* or *Tribhumilokvinijchayakathā*, means creating textbooks, or treatises, to be models of ethics and learning to live in peace with society. It also means adjusting the notions and behavior in society to be in harmony, for there had been former ideas in this region before the organization of ideas in the mode of *Tribhumi*. *Tribhumi* is the evidence that Buddhist literature has conveyed the concept of kingship and the importance of the king. The King is a fictional deity and he is the center of human as Chakrapadraj and Bodhisatva. This importance is to show his merit and perfection to society as an accepted leader.

“Now we are desolate. We have no one to consult. We ought to appoint a person to be our lord and leader. Whenever any of our acts are in question in any way, let such man judge and determine and enforce what is wrong and what is right for us; let him divide up the lands for us, and we will give him more fields than we ourselves have”

After the meeting in which this was said, they went to pay homage to a Lord Bodhisatva, and asked him to be their lord and leader. They then consecrated the Lord Bodhisatva and crowned him their King with three titles. One title is Maha Samamati Raja, the King by General Consent; another title is Khshattiya, the Chief Aristocrat; and the third is Raja, the Splendor. The reason he is titled Maha Samamati Raja is because he is elected by the will of the people to be their lord. The reason he is titled Khshattiya is because he is entrusted by the people to divide up the farms and the fields and the “rice and the water”, for them. The reason why he is titled Raja is because he pleases the people and has their trust.

The people raise up such a man to be their lord because they see him to be more handsome than other people. He has more wisdom than other people; he is kinder than other people; he is more honest, more straight forward and more concerned with doing merit than other people. When they see a man like this, they appoint him to be their king, their lord and their leader. The practice of calling such one Khshattiya has continued down the ages until this day. (Traibhumikatha, 1985: 442-443)

Therefore, Buddhist literature is evidence of the attempts of the ruling class at organizing the thoughts of society to be methodical and developed into practices that would correspond with the notions of people in society and be commonly accepted. Moreover, the aristocrats used Buddhist literature to manifest the lordship of goodness to the population of the kingdom. In one respect, it was used as a political instrument to induce the population to revere

and admire religious royal duties. In addition, the teachings that are the subject matters helped shape the conceptual principles and practices based on Buddhism, shaping the notions of the members of the society, whether population or courtiers, to conform, which led to oneness of people in society.

5) Value and roles in respect of continuing Buddhism

The value and roles of Thai Buddhist literature discussed above contributed to its most important role, that is, the role regarding the continuation of the religion. My examination of Thai Buddhist literature in different aspects reveals that the value of the texts as literary works and the social and cultural roles reflected through them, contributed to the value of continuing the religion. The contents of Buddhist literature serve as the instrument for recording the teachings and for transmitting the teachings, which makes it possible for the Buddhist doctrine to survive. The translation from Pāli to Thai and the writing of particular Buddhist scriptures, or literary works, for Thai people to be able to learn from, were ways of continuing the teachings.

The continuation of Buddhism requires concrete practice. Thai Buddhist literature presents the ideologies and expectations of the society and principles for behaving appropriately in the society. The notions of giving and karma have determined the society to be generous, altruistic, forgiving, and resolved to use right conduct in order to find happiness.

The value and roles of Thai Buddhist literature have been influenced by the historical, cultural and social contexts. Thai Buddhist Literature was also related to the culture and society in general. Besides the written texts, Thai Buddhist literature was also presented through other forms of art, such as painting and inscription, and traditions and rituals, through which the population could learn about Buddhism. This was also another way of continuing Buddhism. During the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin eras, Buddhist teachings and stories that were not limited to being studied by reading scriptures, were transmitted by chanting and preaching. In addition, there was communication through pictorial inscription, paintings, Buddha statues and other kinds of Buddhist art. The inscription at Wat Phrachetuphon Wimon Mangkhalaram Ratchaworamahawihan is a good example of a compilation of Buddhist knowledge to be spread widely for all the population to be able to learn from. King Nang Klao ordered the inscription of knowledge of various

fields on marble slabs and paintings to be done in Wat Phrachetuphon Wimon Mangkhalaram Ratchaworamahawihan for the population to learn from.

Therefore, Thai Buddhist literature has very important roles and value in Thai society, which is a largely Buddhist society. The existence of Buddhism is related to the existence of the literature, because learning Buddhism through literature, certainly, induces elation from literary art due to the beautiful substance and linguistic styles used to convey Buddhist doctrine in the form of literature.

The continuation of Buddhism through literature is the attempt to completely and correctly preserve the disciplinary rules for monks. This has been exhibited along the stream of Buddhist literature from the past to the present, with the style of presentation that varies from age to age, or from one cultural context to another. For the disciplinary rules to last, education is a requisite requirement. Transmission with understanding is the most important factor, and the instrument for transmission, which is literature, is also needed. Therefore, Thai Buddhist literature has an important role in continuing the disciplinary rules and Buddhist teachings and stories.

Conclusion

I investigated the value and roles of Thai Buddhist literature, which plays very influential roles in Thai society in various ways, towards both the individuals and Thai society in general. For individuals, Thai Buddhist literature probably creates the understanding of Buddhism through literary techniques, which positions the literary texts in the status of Buddhist art, conveying dharmic messages and expressing beauty of language. In this way the readers will certainly receive joy and peace through their comprehension of Buddhist doctrine. Thai Buddhist Literature also serves as an instrument for teaching and conveying dharmic messages to induce faith in, and knowledge of, the theoretical and practical spiritual principles for the attainment of the supreme bodily state, which is liberation from suffering. The benefits acquired through study depend on the experience and capacity of the individuals, with the texts functioning as a guide. As for the benefits to society, Thai Buddhist literature has both social and cultural roles in communicating social ideologies and beliefs related to traditions and rituals. Traditions and notions are related

to the prescription of principles for behaving according to Buddhist doctrine for the peace of the society. Furthermore, in politics and government, the aristocrats used literature to communicate ideologies and ideas to determine the behavioral principles of people in society. Moreover, Thai Buddhist literature reflects cultural distinctiveness and is a cultural heritage exhibiting the civilization of the nation.

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