THE
GOLDEN
PENINSULA

CULTURE AND ADAPTATION IN MAINLAND
SOUTHEAST ASIA

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northern Thailand and the Siamese of central Thailand. In other words, the culture of the Lao represents the adaptation of Tai to an environment in which Khmer, Yuan, and Siamese influences were important.

The Tai and the End of Pagan

Tai-speaking people also played a key role in the transition in Burma from the classic civilization of Pagan to the historic cultures of postclassic Burma. In the early fourteenth century, in the wake of the Mongol defeat of Pagan, Tai chiefs from small Tai principalities founded in what is now the Shan state of Burma succeeded in uniting much of Burma under their rule. The Tai rule of Burma, however, was not to be permanent. By the mid-fourteenth century a new Burman state, with its capital at Toungoo, had emerged. Meanwhile, the Mons in lower Burma had reasserted themselves and established another state. The collapse of Pagan, thus, was followed by the emergence of three rather than one historic cultures. In lower Burma, the tradition was that of the Mon. In Upper Burma, it was Burman. And in the Shan states, it was Shan, a new tradition born by Tai-speaking people who had adapted themselves to Burman civilization. Eventually the Mon tradition was to be almost absorbed, after a long period of violence, by the Burman.

The historic traditions that emerged from the thirteenth century on were, in part, the product of a period of great turbulence caused by the expansion of Tai-speaking peoples in the region. The new historic cultures of the Yuan, Siamese, Lao, Khmer, Burmans, Shans, and Mons were not, however, simply the products of political conflict between the Tai and the classic civilizations. The new historic traditions were also associated with a new ideology, one that not only legitimated new types of political systems, but had marked implications for all aspects of social life. This ideology was Theravada Buddhism. We must turn now to the story of the introduction and triumph of Theravada Buddhist orthodoxy in Southeast Asia.

THERAVADA BUDDHISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Development of Theravada Buddhism

Buddhism has its origins in the teachings and the exemplary life of Siddhattha Gotama who was born in north India in 563 B.C. and who passed away 80 years later. Early Buddhism was the religion of a small number of religious virtuosos, that is of monks (bhikkhu) and nuns (bhikkhuni) who attempted to practice as closely as possible the way taught by Gotama Buddha. These monks and nuns together made up the Sangha or Buddhist order.

Buddhism underwent a marked change in the third century B.C. when it received the royal patronage of the great Indian king Asoka (269–232 B.C.). Asoka is credited in legend with the sending of Buddhist missionaries to Southeast Asia and of sending his own son, Mahinda, who was a Buddhist monk, to establish Buddhism in Ceylon. This legend has a certain plausibility, but archaeo-
logical evidence does not attest to the presence of Buddhism in Southeast Asia before about the third century A.D. Although it may not be possible to trace the spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia to the reign of Asoka, it is possible to trace to this king the encouragement of a distinctive tradition of lay, as distinct from clerical, Buddhism. These lay adherents of the Buddhist religion were, however, drawn almost exclusively from the elite. It was not until about the twelfth century A.D. that Buddhism was to become a truly popular religion.

Early Buddhism was divided into a number of different schools of thought, associated in some cases with different languages used for the communication of the tradition. The most well-known division of Buddhism, and one that persists to the present, is that between Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddhism of the “Greater Vehicle,” used a textual tradition written in Sanskrit, whereas Theravada, the “Way of the Elders;” the Buddhism the Mahayanists call Hinayana, the “Lesser Vehicle,” uses a textual tradition written in Pali. Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism are also associated with quite different interpretations of certain fundamental Buddhist doctrines. Mahayana Buddhism spread through northern India, to China, and thence to other parts of East Asia. It also spread to Vietnam, and we will consider Mahayana Buddhism again when we look at the Vietnamese tradition.

Although Theravada doctrines were probably transmitted orally in Pali from the time of Asoka, they were not written down until about the first century B.C. In the fifth century A.D., the Theravada Buddhist tradition was interpreted by the famous monk Buddhaghosa, and his interpretations have remained the orthodox interpretations for Theravada Buddhists to this day. It is perhaps worthy of note that a legend from lower Burma has it that Buddhaghosa was a native of that area; it is more likely, however, that he came from India.

Orthodox Theravada Buddhism, the Buddhism that used the Pali texts and followed the interpretations of Buddhaghosa, did not flourish in either Ceylon or Southeast Asia until many centuries after Buddhaghosa’s death. Although Buddhism was an important element in the syncretic traditions of the classic civilizations in Southeast Asia, such Buddhism was most usually that of a school other than Theravadin. Moreover, it was often found as one among several Indianized traditions as can be clearly seen, for example, in the case of Angkor. Indeed, at times, Theravada Buddhism all but disappeared; however, a few centers in southern India, Ceylon, and lower Burma and perhaps central Thailand continued to preserve the tradition despite the vicissitudes to which it was subjected.

By the ninth century A.D., Buddhism of all schools was very much in retreat in its homeland India. From the ninth to eleventh centuries, Hindu Tamils waged continuous attacks against those kingdoms in southern India and Ceylon where Buddhism continued to exist. In southern India, Buddhism was finally extinguished; it was almost extinguished in Ceylon as well. Early in the eleventh century, the Singhalese had been forced by the Tamils to leave their old capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonaruva and to take refuge in the mountainous
country of southern Ceylon. In the middle of the eleventh century, the Singhalese king Vijaya-Bahu I was able to rally a significant force and, in 1065, he succeeded in reconquering the country. He found that Buddhism had practically disappeared from the kingdom: monasteries had been destroyed and sacked, the order of nuns had completely disappeared, and there were not even sufficient monks left to perform a higher ordination (it takes a chapter of five monks to perform the ordination ceremony that initiates a new member into the monastic order). In order to reestablish the religion, he sent to Burma for some monks.

Spread of Theravada Buddhism to Southeast Asia

Burma at this time was dominated by King Anoratha (1044–1077), the founder of the great classical Burman kingdom of Pagan. As we have already seen, although legend has it that Anoratha had been converted to Theravada Buddhism by the Mon monk Shin Arahan, epigraphical and archaeological evidence prove that Anoratha was far more eclectic in his choice of religious sources for the construction of the ideology that was to be dominant at Pagan. Nevertheless, he was a patron of Buddhism and there were at least some well-established centers of Buddhism within his domains. From these centers, Anoratha was able to supply the necessary personnel to Vijaya-Bahu so that the Sangha could be reestablished in Ceylon.31

The monks (who were probably Mon) who went to Ceylon returned to Burma with copies of the Theravadin texts and commentaries preserved there. Moreover, they established a pattern of exchange of personnel and texts between Burma and Ceylon that was to prove critical in the history of Theravada Buddhism.

In the twelfth century, the great Singhalese king Parakkama-Bahu I undertook to reform the Buddhist Sangha. Before his accession to the throne, there were three different sects of Buddhism, each associated with a specific monastery as its center. One of these, the Abhayagiri, was associated with Mahayana Buddhism, a second, the Mahavihara, with Theravada Buddhism, and a third, the Jetavana, alternated between these two.32 Parkkama-Bahu called a council to determine which of the three sects preserved and perpetuated the true doctrine. In 1165, the king himself decided in favor of the Theravada Buddhism of the Mahavihara sect, and he undertook to suppress the other two sects. From the time of King Parakkama-Bahu, Theravada Buddhism became the dominant religion of Ceylon.

Monks from Burma who traveled to Ceylon during the reign of King Parakkama-Bahu found Theravada Buddhism being promoted as the "true faith" with a militancy that had not heretofore been the case. The dynamism with which Theravada Buddhism had been infused deeply impressed some of these monks, and they returned to their homes to report about it. This message was carried, apparently, to other centers of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. In about 1180, a group of monks and novices traveled from Burma to Ceylon to study the Theravadin tradition as it was followed by the Mahavihara sect of Ceylon. Legend has it that this group of five monks, led by the Mon monk
Chapata, included a prince of Cambodia, another who had originally come from Conjeevaram in south India, and two from other parts of Southeast Asia. The members of this group were ordained in Ceylon and spent ten years there, thereby becoming elders who could perform ordinations. They returned to Burma in 1190 to establish the Singhalese form of Theravada Buddhism. Although this legend is in fact true, it is certain that by the beginning of the thirteenth century the Singhalese form of Theravada Buddhism had been established and was spreading in Southeast Asia.

Although our information about Chapata and his associates is scantly, we can make certain conclusions about the religion they promoted on the basis of the few facts we have. First, they insisted that monks strictly adhere to the rules of the Vinaya, the scriptural regulations that define the roles of monks. Second, they strongly emphasized the line of pure succession as being that which was traced to those who had been ordained in Ceylon. For this reason this form of Buddhism is sometimes referred to as the Singhalese sect. Given that they had been trained in Ceylon at a time when there was strong political support for adherence to Theravada Buddhist orthodoxy, these monks can also be supposed to have insisted on that orthodoxy. They promoted this orthodoxy not only by oral teachings and sermons, but also through the composition of texts:

Chapata... was the author of a series of works in Pali, notably the grammatical treatise Suttanidesa and the Sankhapavagamind, a commentary on the compendium of metaphysics named Abhidhammasasangahita.

Another Mon monk of the same sect, Dhammavilasa... was the author of the first collection of laws composed in the Mon country, the Dhammavilasa Dhamnathat, written in Pali... Given that these monks were of diverse nationalities, we can see in them the expression of the idea of Buddhism being a universal religion, not one associated with a particular society. By extension it is likely that they did not see their religion as the religion of a single strata of society, but as a religion that drew its support from whomever took refuge in the Buddha, the doctrine, and the Sangha. Whether or not this last point was consciously promoted by the members of the Singhalese sect, it came to be practiced as those in this order sought recruits not only in the royal capitals but also in the villages.

One of the most intriguing facts about the monks associated with Chapata was that one was a prince of Cambodia, presumably, as Coedes has suggested, the son of the famous King of Angkor, Jayavaraman VII (1181-c. 1218). Jayavarman VII, the builder of Angkor Thom, the Bayon, and other major monuments and the Angkorean king who extended his boundaries throughout much of present-day Thailand as well as Cambodia, had broken from the tradition of his predecessors in making the state religion the worship of the Buddhajra rather than the worship of the Sivaite Devaraja. Structurally, the Buddhajra cult differed little from the Devaraja cult. However, it was important for the subsequent history of Southeast Asia that Jayavaraman VII saw himself as a Buddhist. It was probably for this reason, as well as for political reasons, that he sent (or permitted) a son to Ceylon to enter the monkhood there.
The aggressiveness with which the monks associated with the Singhalese sect promoted their religion finds a later parallel in the actions of Christian missionaries. However, their success cannot be explained by the fact that these monks felt that they knew the truth and sought to communicate it to others. Rather their message succeeded because it provided a meaningful way of relating to the world for many who had previously been marginal to the classical civilizations or who had been seriously affected by the disruption of the classical civilizations in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The first converts to Theravada Buddhism were Mons, living in what is today lower Burma, a people who had been relegated to a minority position within the Pagan empire. They were followed shortly thereafter by the Tai—the Yuan, the Siamese, the Lao, the Shan—who were newcomers in Southeast Asia. With the collapse of Pagan and Angkor, the Burmans and Khmer in turn accepted the new religion. By the early fifteenth century at the very latest, the vast majority of the people living in what is today Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos had become adherents of Theravada Buddhism.

It is important to stress that whereas Buddhism had been the religion of a small number of virtuosos and a small number of elite lay persons prior to the twelfth century, the Theravada Buddhism introduced by those who had been to Ceylon became a popular religion. Whereas prior to the thirteenth century Buddhism was practiced in only a few centers, mainly urban, after the thirteenth century it came to be practiced in thousands on thousands of villages. We need to consider now the essence and appeal of the doctrines of a religion that has so permeated the lives of the peoples living in much of mainland Southeast Asia from the thirteenth century to the present.

**THERAVADA BUDDHISM AS A POPULAR RELIGION**

*Essence of Theravada Buddhist Doctrine*

Religion provides its adherents with a perspective for interpreting reality and an orientation for engaging in meaningful social action. If a religion is "popular," the perspective and orientation it offers must allow for the fact that most of the existential concerns of the adherents are mundane. Buddhism, at least Buddhism as it has often been interpreted in Western literature, would appear to be a poor candidate for a "popular" religion, since it is portrayed as a religion in which worldly action of any type whatsoever is seen as a hindrance in the attainment of *Nirvāṇa,* that is, of ultimate salvation.

Buddhism was founded by Siddhātha Gotama, a man born into the world as a Prince, the heir to the throne of a small principality in northern India. Although his early life was full of portents of the life he would ultimately live, his childhood, youth, and early adulthood were spent surrounded by luxury. He married Princess Yasodhara who in proper time bore him a son, Rahula. But the life of a king, even a king who would be a universal monarch as was predicted at this birth, was not to be his. One night as his wife and child lay sleep,
The Buddha as represented in images from Chiang Mai, northern Thailand.

(C. F. Keyes photograph)
ing, he stole from their side and rode away from the palace on his favorite horse to a forest. There he discarded his royal garb, cut his hair, and assumed the life of a wandering ascetic, a seeker of truth.

After six years of rigorous asceticism, he determined that such was not the way to truth. One day he accepted a bowl of milk from a merchant’s daughter, thus breaking his fast. At the same time he felt that he would that day achieve the supreme enlightenment of a Buddha. He withdrew to a grove of trees and there under a Bodhi tree he spent the night in deep meditation. During this night he came to understand the essential nature of the universe and by dawn he had become the Buddha. He spent four weeks in this grove under the Bodhi tree and then set forward to teach the "Way" to salvation as he had realized it. Those who heard the message and undertook to follow the "Way" became members of the "community," the Sangha.

The "Way" taught by the Buddha was developed in the numerous sermons he is said to have delivered during his life. The discourses of the Buddha, together with the sayings of some of his disciples, were collected in a book called the sutta-piṭaka, "the basket of discourses." The sutta-piṭaka, together with the vinaya-piṭaka, "the basket of discipline," which contains the regulations for the lives of those who become members of the Sangha, and the abhidhamma-piṭaka, "the metaphysical basket," which contains elaborations on the Dharma or "doctrines," together constitute the Tripitaka, the "Three Baskets," the scriptures of the Theravada Buddhists.

The teachings of the Buddha entail a radical devaluation of sentient existence. Such existence is suffering or sorrow (dukkha); one’s experience in sentient existence is impermanent (anicca); even one’s self (ego) is not permanent (anatta). What is absolute insofar as sentient existence is concerned is the Law of Karma, the Law of Action. Good actions have good consequences; they lead to a lessening of suffering. Bad actions have bad consequences; they lead to increased suffering. These consequences may follow on the act in a single lifetime or may occur in successive lifetimes. Thus, there is a transmigration of Karma across the threshold of death and birth, although there is no rebirth of the self. So long as one is bound to the Law of Karma, there can be no absolute cessation of suffering, since even the good consequences of Karma are ultimately impermanent and when they end one must again experience suffering. As the Buddha expressed it in the "Noble Truth of Suffering": "Birth is [suffering], age is [suffering], disease is [suffering], death is [suffering]; contact with the unpleasant is [suffering], separation from the pleasant is [suffering], every wish unfilled is [suffering]—in short all the five components of individuality [forms, sensation, perceptions, psychic dispositions, and consciousness] are [suffering]."38

Salvation (nīrodha), according to the Buddha, is the transcendence of sentient existence and the Law of Karma, thus effecting a total cessation of suffering. The Way to Salvation begins with a recognition that attachment to sentient existence is caused by desire or craving (tanha). Salvation can be attained when passion has been completely extinguished, when craving has been
A Buddhist monk who has spent his life as a member of the Sangha in rural northeastern Thailand.
(Jane Kayes photograph)

completely stopped. To effect an end to desire, one should follow the "eightfold path," which has been divided by Theravada Buddhists into three types of action:

1. Wisdom (*paññā*).
2. Morality (*sīla*).
3. Mental Discipline (*samādhi*).

1. Right Understanding.
2. Right Thought.
3. Right Speech.
5. Right Livelihood.
6. Right Effort.
7. Right Mindfulness.
8. Right Concentration.

"Wisdom" both begins and ends the path. One must first have an understanding of the teachings of the Buddha before entering the Path. When one has truly followed it, one also gains wisdom. Morality consists of all those actions that produce good consequences and the avoidance of those actions that produce bad consequences. One must be a moral person before one can undertake mental discipline. Through mental discipline, one transverses the path of purity and, ultimately, one reaches absolute purity, which is Nirvana itself.

Most Western writers who have discussed Buddhism have given emphasis
to the ultimate goal of Buddhism, that is, they have stressed the quest for Nirvana. "The Buddhist point of view," according to Edward Conze, one of the leading Western Buddhologists, "will appeal only to those who are completely disillusioned with the world as it is, and with themselves, who are extremely sensitive to pain, suffering, and any kind of turmoil, who have an extreme desire for happiness, and a considerable capacity for renunciation. . . . The Buddhist seeks for a total happiness beyond this world." 33 If the true Buddhist is one who seeks to become an Arhat, the fully perfected monk who attains enlightenment, then quite obviously Buddhism could never be a popular religion. It would be a religion of only a small number of adepts. Ancient Buddhism may have been such a religion, but it underwent a transformation first in the third century B.C. when it was brought under the patronage of King Asoka who set an example for other ruling elites. Theravada Buddhism was further transformed in the fifth century A.D., through the theological interpretations of Buddhaghosa and several of his contemporaries. Finally, it went through yet another transformation in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries when it became a universal religion, a religion for peasant farmer as well as for monk and king.

Buddhist Belief and Everyday Life

On the basis of recent research, mainly by anthropologists, it is possible to describe the interpretations of Buddhist doctrine that have made it a popular religion. Although there are differences in the popular religion as found in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and Ceylon, as well as between the population in each country, there is an underlying and fundamental similarity in the religion as it is found in almost all cases. 40

Aspirants to arahatship, to becoming fully perfected and enlightened beings, are extremely rare in all Theravada Buddhist societies and appear to have always been so. Indeed, it would be surprising to find more than a handful of such aspirants in any society. For almost all Theravada Buddhists, be they monks or laity, Nirvana is a very remote goal, a goal that can only be achieved after many, many existences. Such a view does not imply, as some observers would have it, that the quest for Nirvana has no significance in popular Buddhism. Buddhists do attempt to traverse the Path of Purity insofar as the conditions of their existence permit. That most find that they can travel only a little way along the Path reflects their realistic appraisal that they are still bound to sentient existence.

For all Theravada Buddhists, the reality of sentient existence is determined by the Law of Karma. For those who find it impossible to strive immediately for ultimate salvation, for the transcendence of sentient existence and the cessation of suffering, the belief in the Law of Karma provides an alternative religious goal, that of the reduction of suffering. Suffering can be reduced by positive or meritorious actions and the avoidance of negative or demeritorious actions. Acts of "merit making" are mainly ritually manifest and are basically
similar in all Theravada Buddhist societies. Avoidance or demeritorious action finds ethical expression, which again is basically the same in all Theravada Buddhist societies.

The Law of Karma provides a cognitively satisfying way of relating to the world. Inequalities among people, whether manifest as differences in physical characteristics, differences in the propensity for illness, differences in wealth and power, differences in intelligence, differences in motivation, and so on, can all be explained as the consequence of previous Karma. The Law of Karma also provides a guide for action that will ensure the improvement in one's existential condition, although this improvement may not be effected until a future lifetime. Psychologically, the Law of Karma is less than satisfying. One cannot predict whether one will fall ill, whether one will experience a rise or fall in social status, whether one will suffer an accident that will result in permanent bodily damage, whether one will gain an end for which one strives. Moreover, although it may be comforting to know that in a future existence one's meritorious deeds will result in a reduction in suffering, it would be far preferable if that reduction in suffering could occur in the present lifetime.

Given that the Law of Karma is psychologically unsatisfying, people in all Theravada Buddhist societies have also held to other beliefs that are not Buddhist in origin. Thus, most peoples in Theravada Buddhist societies believe that spirits and ghosts can interfere with their lives, that the constellation of heavenly bodies at birth can effect their ability to act, that deities can cause improvements in fertility and potency. In all the Theravada Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia there is also a belief that one's life force must be securely attached to the body lest one be subject to illness, social failures, and even death. In addition to adherence to beliefs with non-Buddhist sources, Theravada Buddhists have also reinterpreted Buddhist symbols such that they have acquired other than orthodox Buddhist meanings. Thus, certain images of the Buddha are believed to be more than simply "reminders" of the Buddha; they are believed to have innate power that can be tapped for immediate ends by those who worship the images. Throughout Southeast Asia there are shrines believed to hold relics of the Buddha, these relics again believed to have innate power that can be drawn by those who worship them. Certain monks are also believed to have attained supernormal powers, which they can use for those who seek them out.

That people in Theravada Buddhist societies adhere to beliefs in spirits, in divinities, in astrology, in life essences, and in the magical power of Buddhist sacra has led some students of these societies to conclude that the people in these societies are not really Buddhists—or, at least not orthodox Buddhists. The argument runs that according to orthodox Theravada Buddhism, the only cause of suffering is Karma. Therefore, if one adheres to beliefs in other causes of suffering, the Buddhist belief system has been compromised, at the very least, and perhaps even negated. Such a conclusion is, at best, misleading. It is more correct, as Tambiah has argued with regard to northeastern Thailand, to see
beliefs in karmic causation and beliefs in magical animistic causation as operating "within a total field" of belief characterized by "complementary and hierarchical ordering" of all beliefs.42

Buddhist Cosmology

It is important to stress that the orthodox Buddhist theory of karmic causation is not a theory of absolute determinism of one's place along a continuum of suffering. As Gombrich has argued: "Determinism is heresy... Karma is a doctrine of free will."43 If Karma were totally deterministic, it would be impossible to engage in actions that will alter one's future Karma. Such a conception of Karma, quite obviously, runs directly counter to Buddhist doctrine. Karma does not determine one's every change of fortune in life (and death). Rather, it determines one place along a moral continuum, each place being associated with a generalized lesser or greater degree of vulnerability to the forces (such as spirits, gods, actions of other humans and germs) that cause suffering and with a generalized lesser or greater degree of freedom of action whereby one can alter one's Karma. This moral continuum is expressed in terms meaningful to Southeast Asian Buddhists in the form of Buddhist cosmology. Although Buddhist cosmological ideas are contained within the Tipitaka, the scriptures themselves, they have been given various interpretations throughout the history of Theravada Buddhism. Perhaps the most systematized Buddhist cosmological treatise ever written was the Trai phūmi gāthā, known colloquially as the "Three Worlds (trai phūmi) of Lord Ruang," which was compiled in 1345 by a Thai prince, the future King Lithai of Sukhothai.44 This work in its various versions was, and still is, widely known, even in the villages of Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

Buddhist cosmology has provided for most people in Theravada Buddhist societies the "total field" that can accommodate both karmic and other forms of causation. According to this cosmology, one's karmically determined state of existence is that of an animal, a spirit, a human, a god, or one of the other of the eleven states in the realm of sensation, of the sixteen states in the realm of form, or of the four states in the realm of the formless. The human state is not totally undifferentiated in karmic terms; one may be born a man or woman, rich or poor, prince or peasant, whole or deformed. One may also have, if one is born a male, sufficient Karma to enter and remain for life within the Sangha, or one may have only enough Karma to enter the Sangha temporarily; some men may not have sufficient Karma to take on the yellow robes for even a brief time. Depending on the karmically determined state into which one is born, one is subject to a particular set of influences or forces that have the power to inflict or ameliorate suffering. For example, most human beings are subject to the influences of spirits, although those who become monks are much less vulnerable than are those outside the Sangha. Gods, on the other hand, are invulnerable to the influences of spirits. The same interpretation holds for all other forms of proximate causation, including scientifically based forms of causation.
such as germs—which have been adopted by many in Theravada Buddhist societies in recent times.

To say that Buddhist cosmology provides a total field that accommodates beliefs in both karmic and other forms of causation is not to say that there is no tension between these beliefs. Such a tension exists in all the traditions of Theravada Buddhism, and it has probably existed since earliest Buddhism. This tension does not compromise the orthodoxy of Theravada Buddhism unless other forms of causation are made equal to karmic causation. There is a tendency in this direction in every Buddhist tradition. For example, in northern Thailand, relics of the Buddha, images of the Buddha, texts from the Dharma, acts of the Sangha, and acts of lay piety have been interpreted as implicating an ultimate reality of sentient existence that is absolute and unchanging rather than an ultimate reality that is, according to the Law of Karma, constantly in flux. Despite such tendencies, karmic theory has never been displaced in any Buddhist society as the interpretation of ultimate reality of sentient existence. People in northern Thailand have always been concerned with making merit and avoiding demerit as well as orienting themselves to a fixed cosmos. Karmic theory may coexist with such competing theories as that of cosmic permanence, but since the thirteenth century at least it has never been replaced or subordinated to such theories anywhere in Buddhist Southeast Asia.

**Salvation in Theravada Buddhism**

The Buddhist doctrine of ultimate salvation has, in contrast to the doctrine of Karma, undergone radical reinterpretation among some Theravada Buddhists. Although most Theravada Buddhists have viewed and still do view Nirvana as a very distant goal, some have attempted to find shortcuts or ways to this goal other than by the route taught by the Buddha himself. In Burma, for example,
there is a common belief that if one is able to sponsor the construction of a
cetiya, a shrine for a relic, one will ensure that one will be reborn at the time of
Sri Ariya Maitreya, the next Buddha (who, it is believed by many, will come
5,000 years after the death of Gotama Buddha). And, by being in the presence
of this future Buddha, one will attain enlightenment. In Thailand, Laos, and
Cambodia there is a similar belief, although the significant act is listening to the
whole sermon that relates the story of the life of Prince Vessantara, who was
the Buddha in his last incarnation before being born as Siddhatha Gottama.
Again, this act ensures rebirth at the time of Ariya Maitreya. From time to
time in Buddhist Southeast Asia, some people have found in a king, a monk, or
some other individual one who appears to have the attributes of a Bodhisattva,
a future Buddha. Such persons are believed to be so endowed with merit that
they are able to share it with others. The effects of this merit ensures that all
who share it will enjoy a marked reduction in suffering if not its cessation.46

Although ultimate salvation, Nirvana, has been sought by some Theravada
Buddhists through unorthodox magical and messianic ways, and a few have
sought Nirvana through the orthodox practice of meditation, most people in
Theravada Buddhist societies have not and do not focus on the attainment of
Nirvana as their religious goal. Rather, they have sought and still seek to attain
a reduction in suffering, first in this life and next in a future existence, post-
poning the quest for total cessation of suffering to a remote future many life-
times away. In historical terms, it is clear that in the process of becoming a
popular or universal religion, Buddhism ceased to be a religion of radical
salvation.

The primary message carried by the monk revolutionaries of the thirteenth
and fourteenth centuries was not one whose main theme concerned the Path to
ultimate salvation but one that stressed that beneath the impermanence of
sentient existence was an underlying reality, that of the Law of Karma. More-
evertheless, they also taught that through an understand.46 of Karma, of which
actions bore evil fruit and which bore good, one could undertake action that
would result in a surcease, albeit temporary, from suffering. The actions neces-
sary to effect such an end were possible for everyone, be one peasant or prince,
ethnically marginal or ethnically a part of the majority of the great states. In
the turbulent times of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, this message
must have found a highly receptive audience among the general populace of the
Indianized states of Southeast Asia.

TRADITIONAL THERAVADA BUDDHIST SOCIETIES AND
THE CHALLENGE OF COLONIALISM

Traditional Societies in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia

The period of the classic Indianized civilizations in Southeast Asia had been
a period of centralized power, albeit power that was exercised more theatrically
than actually. The period from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, that