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RITUAL AND RISK: ENVIRONMENTAL BUDDHISM IN PRACTICE

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**Ritual and Risk:
Environmental Buddhism in Practice**

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On June 17, 2005, the Thai monk, Phra Supoj Suvacano, was murdered. Phra Supoj was known for trying to protect the land around the meditation center where he lived in Chiang Mai Province from being converted into a tangerine plantation. His death was the most recent in a series of threats and attacks made against Thai Buddhist monks engaged in environmental conservation activities.

A handful of Thai monks consider themselves as "environmental monks" (*phra nak anuraksa thammachat*, in Thai). They work to protect the natural environment, setting up wildlife refuges and community forests, and fighting deforestation and environmental degradation, all based on their interpretations of Buddhist teachings. Their work often brings them into conflict with businessmen, entrepreneurs and government officials who aim to use land to improve the nation's economy through schemes such as commercial monoculture plantations, residential neighborhoods and golf courses, and hydroelectric dams to power the new developments. Claiming a moral high ground because of their status as monks and their use of Buddhist principles, these monks must act in a mundane world in which they affect, and are affected by, secular law and economic concerns. On one level, environmental monks must have a solid grounding in Buddhist philosophy that justifies their actions in terms of religious and ecclesiastical

regulations. On the other, they are equally judged by society on secular terms, and how their actions impact on the goals and desires of secular actors.

In an article on Thai civic religion, Frank Reynolds (1994) describes the imaginative-symbolic and the practical, programmatic discourses that together form the basis of Thai legal culture. He frames these discourses within the concepts of *chat* (Nation), *satsana* (Religion), and *mahakesat* (Kingship), the three-part formula of Thai civic religion since the early 20th century, and how various actors in social, legal conflicts use the rhetoric of these concepts to build their arguments. Reynolds points out two main strands in modern Thai Buddhism, and examines how they intersect with Thai civic religion. I would place environmental monks within the second strand of Reynolds' formula.

The first is basically conservative in that those involved are generally in concert with the mainstream interpretation of Thai civic religion and with the current patterns of Thai politics and law. The second strand is more radical in that the beliefs and practices of those involved have produced tensions within the status quo and conflicts with the powers that be. (Reynolds 1994:445)

Duncan McCargo would agree with Reynolds in his discussion of the Thai sangha as “a conservative, orthodox and authoritarian mode of Buddhism” (2004:155) that is supported by the Thai state. McCargo is even more critical of the conservative monks, seeing them as obstacles to recent trends toward democratization and openness in Thai politics and society. Since the 1980s, a series of sexual and financial scandals have shaken the public's confidence in the sangha, further pushing many toward conservatism and uncontroversial activities.

Environmental monks, who make up a small percentage of the Thai sangha, must work within the context of an increasingly conservative sangha that emphasizes fund

raising and the performance of ceremonies, trying to keep a low profile and avoid calls for reform of the sangha (see McCargo 2004, Swearer 2004). As pressures within the government and business world for economic development, and opposition to the conservative government have grown since the 1970s, socially active monks, including those engaged in environmentalism, face increasing personal threats. Activist monks have been overlooked for ecclesiastical promotion, arrested for opposing government development schemes, accused of scandal, and received death threats. And this June, an activist monk was murdered, apparently for his conservation work.

More than the personal risks environmental monks face, their cases point to the tensions surrounding the future of Thai civic religion and the role of the sangha within it. First, there are tensions within the sangha, between conservative and socially active monks. Second, the Thai public has become disenchanted with monks due to the series of scandals, which threatens to undermine lay support of the sangha. Finally, environmental monks often find themselves pitted against business powers in struggles over land use and explanations of poverty. Activist monks must negotiate pressures to conform to religious standards and secular power, all the while acting for what they believe is the moral good. These tensions have evolved over time, as have the specific responses by various monks. And the risks have grown as well.

One way many environmental monks deal with these forces is through the manipulation of religious symbols and emotions through ritual. Under close scrutiny by both the sangha hierarchy and Thai society, they draw on the trend toward ceremonialism to legitimate their positions in the socio-political arena. Rituals such as tree ordinations and long-life ceremonies for waterways engage lay people in religious merit making and

teach them the moral principles underlying the monks' efforts. As Roy Rappaport (1979, 1999) argues, participation in ritual publicly demonstrates the participants' acceptance of the underlying values and principles encoded in the rite. By performing Buddhist rituals adapted for ecological activism, and engaging lay people, from villagers to government officials, in these rituals, environmental monks hope to offset some of the social, political and religious risks they face and promote their goals for a healthy environment and social justice.

Environmental Monks

All members of the Sangha uphold ecological principles to the extent of protecting the environment within their temples and following the Vinaya rules. The term "environmental monk," however, refers to the few monks who consciously use Buddhist principles to preserve the natural environment of the wider society in which they live. Their activities range from studying the scriptural roots of conservation and adapting traditional rituals in order to promote ecological awareness to leading protests against environmental destruction and forming environmentally-conscious development organizations.

These monks are concerned about the negative effects of capitalist economic growth. They see consumerism in particular as evidence of greed or desire, one of the three root evils in Buddhism (the other two being ignorance and anger). They sponsor activities to preserve the natural environment and help people whose livelihoods are based on exploitation of it to find alternative and sustainable means of surviving. They base their activities in interpretations of Buddhist principles that emphasize the

interconnectedness of all beings and the responsibilities of humans towards the larger environment.

Local environmental monks are also concerned about the social impact of economic policies that promote cash cropping and export agriculture. They witness villagers indebting themselves to companies that provide seeds and fertilizers for cash crops. Villagers frequently find themselves deeper and deeper in debt to the seed companies and unable to extricate themselves.

Villagers who do make some money through cash cropping tend to spend it on material goods that mark their financial and social success. Serving cool water from a refrigerator, having neighbors watch one's television set, or running a room air conditioner have all become markers of social status in rural Thailand. Often these goods are purchased through loans, contributing to further debt and further entrenchment in the cash economy.

Many of today's monks participate in these trends themselves. Men join the sangha for several reasons. Some are genuinely called to religious practice. Others see the sangha as a means of social promotion, as they instantly gain high social status. Others view the monkhood as an easy livelihood, as the laity takes care of their material needs. Duncan McCargo (2004) argues that the majority of Thai monks ordain for social or material reasons, and that the sangha as a whole has degenerated. He points out that the main activities of contemporary monks involve fund raising and performing ceremonies.

In this context of rising farmer debt and an increasing number of monks focused on their own material concerns, a small number of monks is struggling to maintain the

relevance of the religion in today's society, and to counter the negative effects of consumerism and materialism. Environmental monks epitomize these efforts, and the risks they are willing to take on in the name of social justice.

Each environmental monk has his own story. In the 1990s, environmental monks frequently gathered in small seminars, first sponsored by environmental non-government organizations (NGOs), then by the organization *Sekhiyadhamma*, run by monks themselves, to share their stories and support each other's efforts. Their stories illustrate their motivations as well as the challenges they face. They also point to the dynamic nature of the land conflicts across Thailand, and the growing stakes involved in determining land use. What is at stake is not just the future of any given plot of land, but the nature of Thai society and the place of Thai Buddhism within it. Each story illustrates the growing level of risks these monks face; each can be placed within the broader context of the evolving nature of Thai civic religion and the concepts of *chat*, *satsana*, and *mahakesat*.

Phra Phothirangsri – ecclesiastical invisibility

Thai monks first became actively involved in environmental issues in the mid-1980s. A key issue that drew monks in was the controversy of a proposed cable car up the sacred mountain, Doi Suthep, in Chiang Mai. Doi Suthep hosts Wat Phra That, one of the most sacred historical temples in northern Thailand (see Swearer et al 2004). Wat Phra That is the site of Buddhist pilgrimage. In the mid-20th century, the charismatic abbot of Wat Phra That, Khruba Siwichai, organized his followers to build a road up the mountain so that pilgrims could more easily reach the site.

In the 1980s, Chiang Mai began to look for ways to improve its tourism, a major source of revenue for the city, including emphasizing its Buddhist temples and the sacred Doi Suthep. The then abbot of Wat Phra That concurred with city officials and the Tourism Authority of Thailand that the road up the mountainside was outdated and dangerous. The most efficient way of getting pilgrims and tourists to the temple would be via cable car (see Chayant 1998, Swearer et al 2004:33-35).

Opposition to the cable car emerged immediately. The proposal brought together students, environmentalists, journalists, and monks, all with differing concerns about the negative effects of the cable car. While many of those opposed worried about the cable car's impact on the biodiversity in the forest on the mountainside, the monks were concerned about the commodification of the temple and changing the environment of the sacred mountain.

One of the leading monks to oppose the cable car was Phra Phothirangsri, assistant ecclesiastical governor of Chiang Mai Province and abbot of Wat Phan Dong, located in the center of the city, far from Doi Suthep. Phra Phothirangsri spoke publicly against building the cable car because he feared it would bring too many people to the mountaintop temple, which would disturb the peace of the sacred site. While his opposition focused primarily on the impact on Buddhism itself, the involvement of monks in the coalition brought monks explicitly into the environmental movement.

Phra Phothirangsri's position challenged that of the abbot of Wat Phra That, himself a high-ranking and influential monk. The abbot hoped that the cable car would bring more visitors to the temple, strengthening its economic base. Phra Phothirangsri noted several years afterwards in an interview that he believed he was passed over for

ecclesiastical promotion because of his position on the cable car issue (personal communication, 9 September 1992). His influence among the northern sangha diminished, despite the success of the opposition to the cable car.

Phra Phothisirangsi acted based on his beliefs of the dangers of building the cable car to both the religion and the natural environment. His actions entailed speaking out in support of the opposition, lending the coalition legitimacy through the backing of a well-known and high-ranking monk. At this point, monks did not perform any rituals in conjunction with the movement – the tree ordination, the quintessential Buddhist environmental ritual, was not yet on record as being performed. The involvement of monks in the opposition, especially when a leading monk was a proponent of the cable car project, marked a critical moment in Thai Buddhist history – when the mundane environmental movement shifted into a moral argument. This involvement also opened the activist monks to intense public scrutiny and made them potential targets of opposition.

Phra Phothisirangsi did not suffer any direct attacks because of his environmental work. He remained abbot of his wat, and continued to advise other monks engaged in social and environmental activism, even as his overall influence waned. His ecclesiastical career was over, however, as he was continually overlooked for promotion. He resigned himself to this fate, accepting that his role was through continuing to support environmental conservation and working to keep Buddhist principles at the forefront of economic development planning. The immediate risks he faced were personal and low key. His case, however, highlighted growing tensions within the sangha over the

activism of monks, and marked the beginning of increasingly significant conflicts between environmental monks and powers that favored economic growth.

Phra Prajak

Perhaps the best-known environmental monk during the early 1990s was Phra Prajak Kuttajitto. A forest monk living in the woods of northeastern Thailand (Isan), Phra Prajak emerged onto the public stage in 1991 (Taylor 1993, 1996:39-46). Through his practice and life in the forests of Isan, Prajak became aware of negative social and environmental effects of government- and military-sponsored development schemes. His controversial efforts to protect forest reserves and help villagers impacted by those schemes led to him twice being arrested and imprisoned for allegedly violating state laws.¹

The significance of Phra Prajak's arrests was not that a monk was arrested. This had happened before. In Prajak's case, though, he was not defrocked before the arrests. In other cases of monks who were arrested, their robes were removed and they either wore white lay robes or lay clothing, as their misdeeds were seen by the public and the police as having been carried out by them as men, not monks.² Pictures of Prajak in his robes being detained by police brought into sharp relief that he was being arrested because of his actions *as a monk*. I believe the authorities arrested Prajak in his robes as a warning to other activist monks. The high visibility of the case brought the tensions between business and development interests and socially concerned monks to the forefront in Thai politics and society. Prajak became a pawn in this tension.

¹ On the rhetorical arguments made for and against Phra Prajak, see Reynolds 1994:443+.

² Reynolds 1994:444, n. 14, notes that in traditional practice, monks are defrocked before they are arrested as the secular law can only deal with them as lay men.

As I conducted research on the work of environmental monks across Thailand from 1991 until mid-1993, people frequently asked me if I knew Phra Prajak. His case symbolized the struggles between environmental monks and big business and the government. Prajak was a charismatic figure that commanded attention from everyone in his presence. He was also outspoken, charging many public figures and institutions with wrongdoing through carrying out public policies that harmed villagers' livelihoods and damaged the forest. Such accusations did not win him any supporters from within the political hierarchy or business world. Nor did the sangha hierarchy speak out in support of him. Instead, the sangha distanced itself with silence, leaving him to fight his legal battles on his own.

Other activist monks perceived Prajak's arrests as warnings to activist monks for their engagement in politically sensitive issues. While the two arrests were for specific incidents, the Thai public associated them with his environmental activism. Throughout 1992, Thai newspapers were full of articles debating Phra Prajak's activism and arrests. The cases came to the courts slowly; only in 2004 did his convictions and parole quietly make the news. Years earlier Prajak had gone into hiding and then derobed from the sangha, no longer receiving support from the laity because of the controversies surrounding him. Sulak Sivaraksa, a well-known social critic and supporter of socially engaged Buddhism, still backed Prajak and remained one of his closest allies. Few among the Thai public seem to remember his case or his cause today.

Ajahn Pongsak Techadhammo

At the same time Phra Prajak was fighting government and military involvement in the controversial development programs and their environmental and social effects, Ajahn Pongsak worked in northern Thailand to help villagers reclaim degraded agricultural land and fought to protect watershed regions from mountain agriculture. He founded the Dhamma Foundation for Conservation and Rural Development in 1983, aimed at supporting forest conservation and development according to principles of morality, and helping local people (read lowland Thais) practice dhamma and develop their communities in ways that do not harm the natural environment on which they depend. Ajahn Pongsak's work itself was controversial, especially his views on the agricultural practices of minority mountain peoples.

Mountain peoples primarily live through swidden agricultural practices. As the land in the hills became more crowded and valuable, the mountain people had few options for letting their land remain fallow for sufficient amounts of time. Lowland Thais began to blame mountain people for deforestation and degradation of the forestland in northern Thailand. The involvement of many mountain people in growing opium poppies became particularly controversial. Through the support of both the Thai state and the Thai-Norwegian Church Aid Highland Development Project, the Hmong in the Chom Thong region of Chiang Mai Province, where Ajahn Pongsak worked, shifted from opium production to commercial, chemical-intensive cabbage monoculture agriculture (Lohmann 1999).

Cabbage is a controversial crop itself because of its dependence on chemical fertilizer, as well as the market. It requires large areas of land to be devoted to the crop to make up for the profits of opium poppies. On the hillsides, cabbage fields quickly

contribute to erosion as large areas are clear-cut for cabbage cultivation. The chemical fertilizers wash down hill, polluting the streams and fields below them. In Chom Thong, the Hmong grew their cabbage in a watershed area. The Thais living below them in the lowlands blamed them for their decreased water and soil degradation problems.

Ajahn Pongsak agreed that the Hmong, who live in the highest altitudes, contributed to the degradation of vital watersheds. Besides needing to find substitute crops for their opium poppies, he believed they needed to move off the mountaintops and away from the watersheds. The crop substitution program highlights the complexities within the environmental movement. All environmentalists place watershed protection high on a list of priorities, but the consequences of moving the Hmong off the mountains raise questions of methodology and racism.

Academics from Chiang Mai University and abroad, journalists, and other development non-government organizations all called the Dhammanaat Foundation racist for placing concerns for what it deemed a people-less nature over those of poor, minority mountain peoples (Lohmann 1999, 2000, Paibool 2003). In fact, these sentiments are reflected in comments made by Ajahn Pongsak himself when, according to Lohmann, he warned his followers that a

calamitous drought is spreading across the whole country, withering the land because a small group of people have migrated into Thailand from neighbouring countries. Should anyone insist that human rights take precedence over this law of nature, ... then these people must take responsibility for the destruction of the people of our nation, the land and the life of that land ... Which is the larger undertaking -- ensuring the survival of our land and our nation or the resettlement of the hilltribes? (Pongsak 1991a)

Ajahn Pongsak and Dhammanaat's position on the need to prioritize nature and the needs of lowland, Buddhist Thais plays on the rhetoric of Nation, Religion, and

Kingship. Twice Dhammanaat funded lowland villagers to erect a fence in the mountains: In 1986, an 18-kilometre, barbed-wire fence kept Hmong villagers from the Chom Thong watershed where they farmed. Again in 1998, Dhammanaat put up another fence dividing mountain people from “natural” areas. In this case, the fence posts were painted in the colors of the Thai flag: red, white and blue. As Larry Lohmann (1999) points out, “the message was both unmistakable and provocative: those on one side of the fence belonged to the Thai ‘nation’; those on the other did not.”

The tension with this case lies in Pongsak’s use of Buddhism to justify his position of prioritizing nature over people, and in labeling the Hmong as outsiders or non-Thais.

Ajahn Pongsak takes the Dhamma further than most other ecology monks in reinterpreting it in relation to conservation. Every aspect of the religion is associated with nature (personal interview, 18 March 1993; see also Dhammanaat 1990; Pongak n.d., 1990, 1991b). Like other activist monks, his main motivation comes from putting the Dhamma into practice, teaching people to live according to its principles rather than following selfish desires.

This practice is carried out, according to Ajahn Pongsak, through a true understanding of *silatham*, one of the basic principles of Buddhism. While *silatham* is usually defined in a broad sense as “morality,” Ajahn Pongsak defines it as “the maintenance of balance with the nature of the individual, the society and the environment” (Dhammanaat Foundation 1990:10). For him it involves attaining a harmony between the natural and social environments and between the physical and mental needs of both individuals and society. Being concerned with only one of these

environments or needs leads to imbalance and the rising of selfish aims. Ajahn Pongsak sees the well being of the forest as crucial to achieving this balance.

The Balance of Nature in the environment is achieved and regulated by the functions of the forest. Hence the survival of the forest is essential to the survival of *silatham* in our environment. It is all interdependent. When we protect the forest we protect the world. When we destroy that Balance, causing drastic changes in global weather and soil conditions, causing severe hardship to the people [sic].... Thus the forest is the creator of environmental *silatham*, ensuring a healthy harmony in people's lives both physically and mentally. (Pongsak n.d.:2)

Ajahn Pongsak describes forests as our “second set of parents” (Pongsak 1990:3). They support our life through filtering the air we breathe, acting as water reservoirs, harboring watersheds and nourishing the soil in which we grow our food. They are also our first homes, "giving sanctuary to both body and spirit" (personal interview, 18 March 1993; Pongsak 1990:3). The forests not only provide the four necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter and medicine – but also the quiet and peace essential for the well being of the mind.

Ajahn Pongsak’s emphasis on the value of the forest for Buddhist practice seems at odds with accusations of environmental racism. Yet other environmental monks and NGOs criticized Pongsak for insensitivity to the mountain people and a narrow view of Buddhist application. Nevertheless, the community of activist monks was shaken when, in November 1992, a scandal emerged surrounding Ajahn Pongsak. A photograph of the senior monk with a woman’s legs draped across his was sent to newspapers across the country. This incident followed a series of sex scandals involving monks over the previous couple of years. The public’s confidence in monks had been shaken, and people were questioning the purity of the sangha. Such an accusation hitting a well-known, activist monk also shook the network of environmental monks.

Only two local Chiang Mai papers published the photograph. The rest questioned its authenticity, as it had been mailed anonymously. Ajahn Pongsak's followers immediately challenged the photo as well, claiming it was digitally altered. As the debates whirled around the Buddhist activist community, Ajahn Pongsak quietly derobed and returned to wearing the white robes of devout laity.

Ajahn Pongsak had been suffering from Parkinson's disease for years. When he spoke in public, his shaking was obvious and his voice quivered. He was weak and tired. His decision to derobe, however, had more to do with his concern about the impact of the scandal – true or false – on the sangha as a whole. He told me in an interview in March 1993 that he derobed in order to defuse the negative effects on the sangha. He chose not to fight the accusations directly, but left that to his followers. As a layperson, combined with the questions about the authenticity of the photograph, the scandal did not carry the vast public attention that Phra Prajak's cases had.

In December 1992, I attended a small seminar for environmental monks in Prachinburi Province that examined the challenges monks undertaking social activism face. News of the accusation against Ajahn Pongsak reached the group quickly, as did word that he had derobed. One of the monks attending belonged to Pongsak's temple in Chiang Mai. He claimed to have taken the picture, a claim dismissed by the NGO workers there as his story seemed incomplete. Most telling was that he left the monkhood shortly thereafter, and went to work for one of the companies trying to buy land in Chiang Mai that Ajahn Pongsak helped farmers to recover and preserve.

Regardless of the truth of the accusations, the case against Ajahn Pongsak and his decision to leave the sangha disturbed many of the activist monks. In Phra Prajak's case,

the monk seemed prepared for such opposition and the tactics used to discredit his efforts to preserve the forests of northeastern Thailand and aid the poor farmers whose lives had become entwined with commercial agriculture. Prajak's manner invited criticism, as he was outspoken and even somewhat brash.

The idea that Pongsak might have been involved in a scandal first shook the other monks. This reaction quickly shifted into concern that those opposed to the work of environmental monks could stoop to such methods. The monks at the Prachinburi seminar, already examining the difficulties they must deal with in their work, realized the potential risks they face on a larger scale because of this case. Stories of the intense scrutiny they undergo became a theme in their discussions, as well as conversations about how to deal with fame.

Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun

While accusations of scandal and arrests of activist monks dominated the attention of the nation in the early 1990s, some environmental monks began to seek ways to offset the risks involved in their work. One of the best known, and quite successful in thinking through potential risks and working to deflect them before they arose was Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun of Nan Province, in the north.

Phrakhru Pitak effectively used rituals to engender support and participation of local people in his conservation efforts, as well as to teach them about their relationship with and responsibilities toward the natural environment, grounded in Buddhist teachings. He began to preach about human responsibility to the forest even as a novice, having witnessed the steady deforestation of the mountains around his home village (see

Darlington 1998; Arawan 1991). For eighteen years, Pitak preached, but the villagers continued to cut down the forest to clear land for planting cash crops such as feed corn and string beans. They also fell into greater debt with each passing year. In 1990, Pitak visited monks engaged in conservation work in the northeast and neighboring northern provinces. He observed the effectiveness of rituals in turning words into practice, especially when combined with concrete projects designed to help farmers develop new forms of livelihoods. In Payao Province, he met Phra Manas, the monk generally credited with performing the first tree ordination in conjunction with environmental conservation work.

Phrakhru Pitak returned home and that same year performed a tree ordination in his home village to establish and consecrate a protected community forest. Together with local NGO workers, he talked with villagers about the importance of conserving the forest to prevent erosion and water runoff. Given the village was facing a severe drought for the second year in a row, together with the growing debt farmers incurred, the people agreed to join Pitak in his project. The day before the tree ordination, they came together to propitiate the village tutelary spirit, asking his permission to ordain the tree and consecrate the community forest. They also requested his support in protecting the forest. In many ways, the spirit beliefs contributed as much or more to enforcing the community forest regulations for the next few years as the tree ordination. As people who violated the no hunting or logging rules became sick, were injured or even died in the forest, the villagers believed the tutelary spirit was responsible (see Darlington 2003c).

The following year, in 1991, Phrakhru Pitak expanded the scale of his project. He conducted a tree ordination to mark and consecrate a community forest for ten adjoining villages. This time he recognized the value of involving local government officials as well as senior members of the sangha hierarchy in Nan Province. He invited the monks and the government officials to participate, the former in accepting the donated robes and seedlings to be planted around the ordained tree and in the villages. The government officials were asked to serve in key lay positions in the ceremony, officiating the ritual and overseeing the donations and planting of the seedlings. NGOs from across northern Thailand joined as well, helping both to spread the word of the ceremony and to coordinate the logistics and fundraising.

In 1993, Phrakhru Pitak again raised the bar, and went even further in trying to offset potential criticism and risks. That year he organized a long-life ceremony for the Nan River. The long-life ceremony (Northern Thai, *syyp cha taa*) is usually performed by monks for lay people who are ill, getting old or face other forms of potential ailments or difficulties. Although the ritual is not technically Buddhist in origin, most monks who perform it use the opportunity both to bless the recipient of the rite and to preach Buddhist teachings. In the case of the Nan River, Phrakhru Pitak conducted the ritual in order to raise awareness of the importance of the river and all waterways for life, and the damage of water pollution. He proposed combining a long-life ceremony for the river with a celebration of the ecclesiastical promotion that he just received. He also planned to set aside part of the river alongside the ritual site as a fish sanctuary – a place where fish cannot be caught and people feed them. It gives the fish the chance to avoid being caught and reproduce. Eventually the sanctuary becomes crowded, and fish leave the

area. Then the villagers can catch them for food. The sanctuary prevents the overfishing the river and depletion of the fish population. The first village to create a fish sanctuary in Nan Province, Don Kaew, received a national environmental award in 1999 for their creative approach to conservation.³

For three months prior to the ritual, Phrakhru Pitak sent out teams of NGO workers, students and young monks to gather information on the levels of pollution along and in the river. The teams photographed piles of trash, soapsuds, oil slicks, and chemical fertilizer runoffs sites. They interviewed people who live along the riverbanks about their use of the river, noting in particular activities that pollute the river such as doing laundry, washing vehicles and using chemicals close to the water's edge.

The results of this research were collected and put together in posters and informational displays before the ceremony. NGO workers organized an informational fair to occur for two days around the ritual. As several of the NGOs involved were also engaged in environmental activities, they included displays about the biodiversity of fauna and flora in the river's region. Other groups put together cultural shows, highlighting the music, dance, clothing, food and other aspects of the different groups – Thai and mountain people – that live along the river's path.

Phrakhru Pitak anticipated potential threats as the result of his conservation work. Early in his work he had received anonymous death threats and even been shot at when traveling through the forest to visit some remote villages. He believed the threats came from logging and seed company representatives as these commercial businesses stood to lose profits if his programs were successful. The companies benefited from both the

³ Henry Delcore reports that the headman of Don Kaew informed him that he got the idea for the fish sanctuary from seeing a television program about a monk in Suphanburi doing something similar in a river near his temple. Personal communication, 28 November 2005.

clearing of the forest and the indebtedness of the farmers. Following the arrests of Phra Prajak and the scandal accusation against Ajahn Pongsak, Phrakhru Pitak realized he needed to act to prevent future criticisms and attacks. He did this in two ways. First, he proposed that the ritual be performed on land belonging to the Thai military along the riverside just outside of Nan City. One of the main problems that Phra Prajak had faced was his criticism of the military's policies in northeastern Thailand. None of the environmental monks question whether the military had been involved in his arrests, due to his conflicts with them. Phrakhru Pitak hoped to gain the support of the military in Nan Province in his work before any conflicts could occur. Once they were involved in his projects, it would be harder for them later to oppose or try to halt his work. Siting the ritual on land belonging to the military, and asking them to take responsibility for maintaining the fish sanctuary, Pitak ensured future cooperation with the military, or, at least, minimized the potential for future confrontations.

Similarly, Phrakhru Pitak invited the governor of Nan Province to open the ceremony. Other provincial officials attended as guests of both the governor and Pitak himself. Their presence legitimated both the ritual and the broader program for cleaning up and caring for the river and life, human and non-human, along it.

In addition to cultivating the lay powers through the government and military officials, Phrakhru Pitak recognized the value of having support from the sangha hierarchy. It was a clash with the sangha hierarchy that probably led to Phra Phothirangsri being overlooked for ecclesiastical promotion after his opposition to the cable car. Pitak consciously learned from observing the difficulties other environmental monks encountered, and realized the need for careful work incorporating the participation

and support from various factions that could be affected by conserving the forest and promoting sustainable agriculture. Pitak even curried favor with business elements, as he offered businessmen and women the opportunity to make significant religious merit through sponsoring the rituals.

Ritual and Risk

In a time in which the majority of monks in Thailand are seen as worrying more about their own well-being than the suffering of the lay people and are engaged in fund raising and ceremonial activities (McCargo 2004, Swearer 2004), the few who are engaged in social justice and environmental activities are open to the close scrutiny of the public eye. People, especially those in power (government, military, and business), are suspicious of the motivations of the activist monks. They view the monks as representatives of leftist factions, possibly influenced by student activists and political monks from Burma and Sri Lanka – seen as disruptive by government officials in Thailand (see Darlington in process). In particular, interpretations of the Religion element of the trinity of Nation, Religion, Kingship (chat, satsana, mahakesat) could influence the future direction of civic religion in Thailand. Will the sangha continue to be conservative and uphold the status quo of big business and government? Or will the actions of a small number of dedicated, socially active monks, despite personal and religious threats, contribute to a revitalization of the moral basis of Thai society?

Many environmental monks perform adapted rituals aimed at engaging villagers, government workers, military personnel, and in some cases even business entrepreneurs in committing themselves to protecting the natural environment and accepting the moral

responsibilities inherent in the Buddhist teaching of *paticca samuppada*, the Buddhist concept of interdependent co-arising. It is too early yet to know how environmental monks will react to Phra Supoj's murder last June, whether they will curtail their activities in fear or push on with more determination in his name. The response of the Northern Development Monks Organization, an informal organization of activist monks, calls for a full investigation in his death, and indicates the willingness – indeed, the necessity – of continuing to take risks in the name of the Thai environment, Thai society, and the place of Buddhism within it.

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