

The Middle Way Theravada Buddhism and its special nature in Laos

'This is my final birth', thunders the lion-like voice of Siddhartha in all directions of the compass as he emerges into the world from the right hip of his mother, Maya, and takes his first seven steps. As fruits of his good deeds in previous existences, he bears on his body the thirty-two signs of a Great Man which destine him to become either a world-ruling king or a Buddha. Siddhartha grows up well-protected in the palace of his father, a landed noble, and he enjoys all the pleasures of a luxurious, sensuous existence. Nevertheless, at the age of twenty-nine he decides to give up his seemingly carefree life. During three outings he sees an old man, a sick man and a dead man, and he recognises that all beings are inevitably subject to this fearful destiny. On a fourth excursion he sees a wandering ascetic and interprets this as the sign of the way that he himself must take in order to discover the deep truths of existence. He secretly leaves his wife and newborn child by night and moves 'from home into homelessness'. He discards the tokens of his elevated status, his magnificent robes, his jewellery, his turban; he cuts off his hair with his sword and becomes a wandering ascetic in search of enlightenment. He learns from wise yoga masters, subjects himself to the most severe self-discipline, but he still does not find the liberating answers to his questions. Finally, almost starved to a skeleton, he decides to abandon his rigorous exercises and depart on a moderate 'Middle Way'. He goes to bathe in a river; he accepts nourishment again; he sits beneath a fig tree, and finally he starts to meditate. At first he is disturbed by Mara, the personification of the eternal cycle of life and death, which he would like to overcome. He manages to gain power over him through the strength of his concentration and then gradually progresses into the four stages of contemplation which lead him to enlightenment. His lucid mind recognises three basic conditions: he sees that all beings involved in the turmoil of the cycle of birth are reborn into better or worse existences as a result of their good or bad deeds. He remembers all his earlier existences, and finally he identifies the Four Noble Truths of Suffering: he recognises what constitutes suffering (the transience of all life), the cause of suffering (the desire for life which leads to ever new existences), the way to overcome suffering (breaking the chain of cause and effect), and the way to stop desiring and suffering (the Noble Eightfold Path). At this point he entered into buddhahood. He had become a Buddha, an 'Awakened, Enlightened One' and had attained a state of absolute peace and spiritual bliss, nirvana. His outstanding virtues are omniscience and great compassion. As he has perceived that there is no eternal, unalterable self, no individual soul that remains after life has left the body, he is certain that, as he announced at his birth, he will never be born again. The omen of his name Siddhartha, 'he who has attained his goal', has reached fulfilment. Near Benares, in the Gazelle Grove of Sarnath, he speaks for the very first time about his insights to just five listeners. In this sermon he imparts the 'Four Noble Truths of Suffering', and explains that it is not life itself that is full of suffering, but the fact of its transience. At this point he 'sets the Wheel of Law into motion'. From now on, he will wander the lands until his eightieth birthday, he will gather a great number of followers around him and, in his great compassion for those trapped in ignorance and buffeted from one existence to the next, he will teach about enlightenment. His death is mourned painfully by all who are close to him, but the gods celebrate this event with music and showers of blossoms, because the Buddha has now entered for ever into the 'Great Complete Nirvana' (*mahaparinirvana*) as a result of all his merits and his spiritual lucidity. Siddhartha Gautama was a member of the Shakyas and also known as Shakyamuni which means the Wise One of the House of Shakya. He was active in northern India around 500 BC and is the ideal and inspiration of all Buddhists. In Laos, as in other countries where Theravada Buddhism is prevalent, both he and the legends from his life have a fundamental significance. Having departed to the complete nirvana the Buddha will no longer actively intervene in human existence. Yet his unmistakable image is a source of spiritual strength to his followers, and his life story sets their moral standards. In most pagodas, wall paintings illustrate the legendary and historical episodes of his life, as they contain the key thoughts of his message and can be easily understood by all. The monks follow in Buddha's footsteps and study his teachings with great dedication. The three pillars, also known as 'The Triple Jewel': the Buddha, the Law (*dharma*) and the Monastic Community (*sangha*), form the core of the Theravada tradition which refers back to the teachings of the elders who either knew the Buddha personally or were taught by his senior monks (Theravada: 'Words of the Elders').

The teachings of the Buddha represent a path towards self-enlightenment. In his day this was a revolutionary philosophy which professed that the way of life and intellectual strength are the decisive factors in the approach to enlightenment, as opposed to hereditary status, i.e. the caste. His teachings make great demands on the individual's morality and intellect. Freedom from the constraints of time is essential when following the Noble Eightfold Path with its eight elements: right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right awareness, and right concentration. Thus the monks and nuns, who do not have to support their own material existence, have the best chance of attaining enlightenment as they can devote their entire energy to spiritual perfection. Here, the emphasis lies in personal effort. As the Buddha showed through his own life, the means of achieving wise insight is

meditation. It is a method of controlling thoughts so that the good energies of the intellect can develop and then determine the action, rather than the evil energies. When the spirit has been cleansed of the four basic evils of greed, hatred, delusion and ignorance, then wisdom and goodness are free to develop, and the way is open to achieve a state of joy and ease, and eventually a state of pure peace, that is nirvana. In Laos, nirvana is popularly seen as a place of perfect joy where all desires have been fulfilled. Most people believe that they will attain enlightenment at the end of the present age of the world when Maitreya, the future Buddha and saviour, appears. But until then they will live through many existences, striving to gain merits by doing good deeds and avoiding bad ones. As every good deed erases a bad one, they are able to cleanse themselves of their sins and so work towards making the present and future existence happier.

The desire to gain merits is a decisive factor in the lives of the Buddhist Lao people. They can do this as lay people not only by following the five rules of moral conduct (do not kill, do not steal, do not live in sexual excess, do not lie and do not abuse intoxicating substances), but especially through generosity. Supporting the monastic community earns greater merit than any other good deed. But a donation to an abbot is far weightier than a donation to a freshly ordained monk or particularly a novice. This is where the women especially can do good deeds to improve their karma, for it is usually the women who fill the monks' rice bowls on their daily round for alms. It is also the women's task to prepare the food and floral decorations for the ceremonies to make them dignified and aesthetically pleasing events. A fundamental aspect of Buddhism in Laos is the concept of transferring merits. Anybody, whether a monk or a lay person, can give their merits away, especially to the dead. In the same way as they are grateful to their ancestors for giving them life, they in turn can contribute to the improvement of the deceased's karma. The act of transferring merits not only helps avoid the dangers of selfishness which can lie hidden in the conception of self-enlightenment, it also strengthens the sense of responsibility towards the community. In the final instance, unselfishness is the virtue which determines the quality of a person's deeds.

Within the present area of Laos, Theravada Buddhism began spreading in the twelfth Century and was established as the state religion around 1350 when the kingdom of Laos was founded. A symbiotic relationship developed between Theravada Buddhism and ancient, deep-rooted local rites, especially animism. Characteristic features of this include the belief in the *khuan*, certain powers which dwell in every being or object. These powers are treated as living beings and the Lao people honour them at the *su-khuan* celebrations on all important occasions, such as birth, marriage, the initiation of novices, or the festival in thanks for a bountiful harvest. Although the monks do not participate in this ceremony, they accept it as an integral part of the Buddhist way of life. And it is equally natural that the *phi*, the local protective spirits, are integrated into the Buddhist System. The little houses, which the people build for them and regularly supply with offerings, can be found not only on the land of the lay people but also in the grounds of pagodas and monasteries. Brahmanic concepts, which already existed before the spread of Buddhism, have also survived in various rites. The holy white cord which the monks wind round the statue of the Buddha during the ceremony of transferring merits to the dead, and the pouring of consecrated water onto the earth, are both of Brahmanic origin. The veneration of the snake-like *naga*, which dwell in the rivers and represent the power of water as the bearer of fertility, is known to have existed in pre-Buddhist times and has been preserved in Laos particularly in connection with the festival of boats.

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