



The Dynamic Heritage of the Thais through Five Philosophical Paradigms

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Abstract

Though the Thai language is not suited to metaphysics in the Western sense, it is still appropriate for philosophical study in the Thai way. We can classify this development by historical periodization, but critical analysis according to paradigms is also a good working methodology to express Thai thought in philosophical jargon. This study is aimed at inviting more Thai thinkers to exert their capacity to enhance creativity.

Key words: Thai Philosophy, Paradigm, Thai Heritage

Introduction

“The Thais like to describe, while the Aryans like to define” is the first statement of my research on Thai Philosophy. Through this preliminary observation, we cannot expect the intellectual heritage of Thailand to discuss the definitions of being, substance, categories, etc. “To be or not to be: that is the question”, said Shakespeare in one of his plays to represent Aryan thought. But “to be or not to be” is not relevant to the Thais’ intellectual heritage, because they are not familiar with the verb “to be” as people of the Aryan culture are: we can speak all day in our language without the need for the verb “to be” but are unable to express any substantial idea without the verb “to be” in any of the Indo-European or Aryan languages.

Without that familiarity with the verb “to be”, our intellectual ancestors hardly saw the need for “to be” and “not to be”. They took the existence of all things for granted, and when they accepted the Buddhist Metaphysics of Anatta, they never discussed “to be” nor its definition but were satisfied with the descriptions of the condition of Nibbana as the ultimate happiness and the ultimate emptiness, citing from the Pali Scripture: “Nibbanang paramang sukhang” and “Nibbanang paramang sunyang”. The problems covering the incongruity of these two adjectives “sukhang”



and “suyang” qualifying the same subject “Nibbanang” are of recent interest, especially after we had learned Western Philosophy.

All this does not mean that the Thai heritage had no creativity: it created in its own way, not aiming at definitions of the terms, but rather at how to use the terms in the most effective way to describe the daily life of the Thais.

From this important premise, we can go on to search for Thai Philosophy’s dynamism according to the World Pattern of Five Paradigms.¹

Dynamism in the Sukhothai Period (1238-1378)

Many of the 1st paradigm’s sayings from the pre-Sukhothai period remained rigidly adhered to by the Thais of the Sukhothai Kingdom, as:

- Villains of stinking secretion condemn rainfall and curse drought: why bother the gods, (it intends to teach that everybody should comply with the gods’ will rather than go against their will.) (ฝนตกคนก็แข่ง ฝนแล้งคนก็คำ มนุษย์ชี้เหม็นเกี่ยวข้องกับเหตุ)

- Let no boat obstruct the rushing torrent, (because it is the gods’ power with which everybody must comply). (น้ำเชี่ยวอย่าขวางเรือ)

- Don’t go against the will of your superiors (because all superiors are the gods’ representatives). (อย่าขัดแย้งผู้ใหญ่)

However, the Kings of Sukhothai tried to raise the people up to the 2nd paradigm, through another set of sayings called today Phra Ruang’s proverbs, e.g. :

- Ten hearings are weaker than one seeing, ten seeings are weaker than one touching, ten touchings are weaker than one’s own experience by working through by oneself. (Empirical Epistemology) (สิบปากว่าไม่เท่าตาเห็น สิบตาเห็นไม่เท่ามือคลำ สิบมือคลำไม่เท่าทำเอง)

- Truth is unchangeable. (Metaphysics) (ความจริงเป็นสิ่งไม่ตาย)

- Fetch water while the tide is high. (Utilitarian Ethics) (น้ำขึ้นให้รีบตัก)

- Knowledge is no burden. (Philosophy of education) (รู้ไว้ดีกว่าใส่บาต)

and through the spreading of belief in the “Kwan” which is the third reality of human being between body and soul. It had never been defined by our Thai ancestors, but one can gain an understanding through a wide range of usages. I take it to be a kind of deus-ex-machina in the Western tradition.

Under the influence of Buddhism, which became “The State Religion” in the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great, Thai intellectuals reached the 3rd paradigm.

¹ About my idea of Five Paradigms please read my *Contextual Philosophy or Contextual Religions*. Both English texts are published by the Assumption University Press.



Dynamism in the Ayutthya Period (1350-1767)

The 1st paradigm was strongly manifest in the Formula of the *Oath of Fidelity to the Throne*, which invoked all kinds of gods and spirits to be witnesses and to bless or to punish the Oath-takers, according to whether the Oath is kept or transgressed.

Magic of all kinds flourished and gained prominence during this period. As it advanced, it tended more and more to become the 2nd paradigm, that is it started after a period of time to seek the rules behind the power of magic.

The learned Buddhist monks tried to develop the 3rd paradigm from the teaching of the Buddha. There remain today many classical works of this period such as the *Phra Malai Divine Comedy* which is the best Cosmology in the Buddhistic perspective, comparable to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. More than 50 stories were added to the 500 previous lives of the Lord Buddha.

Dynamism of the Thonburi Period (1767-1782)

During this short period of only 25 years, there appeared some hints of the 4th paradigm, owing to contact with intellectual foreigners of the time.

Indeed, there were many contacts with foreigners during the Ayutthaya Period, but the 4th paradigm had no opportunity to reach Thai intellectuals, being confined within the walls of Lavo's Royal Palace.

Dynamism of the Bangkok Period (1782- present)

After King Rama IV opened the country to the modern world of Western culture, came the time when the Western world was highlighted by the 4th paradigm through the efforts of the Enlightenment Movement. Thai students who went to Europe and the United States to study a variety of subjects, absorbed the 4th paradigm formulated by the said movement in full. They were so enthusiastic about their new knowledge and new vision of the world that they applied them to Thai culture and propagated extensively what they had learned. Let us look at some examples:

1. Luang Vichit Vadakarn (1898-1962) He studied Law and Political Science in Paris and London and was a very prolific writer. His works cover a wide range of knowledge including Buddhism which he tried to expound in a Stoic way.

2. Samak Burawas (1916-1975) He studied Mineralogy at London University and read Philosophy as a hobby. When he came back, he worked in the Department of Mines and wrote more than 100 papers on Science, all of which became obsolete. His



actual fame lies in the philosophical and Buddhist treatises which he expounded in line with August Comte's positivism. He is the first member to be appointed to the Department of Philosophy in the Royal Institute.

3. Pridi Banomyong (1900 - 1980) He studied Law and Political Science in France. He became Prime Minister and wrote intensively about Law and Politics. It is a matter for discussion whether his tendency was communist or only socialist.

4. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) He had only a little formal education, but read and reflected much. He became the pioneer of the 5th paradigm in Thailand with his small treatise on *Human Language and Dharmic Language*, which formed the foundation for all his subsequent sermons, which are collected by his disciples and published in various forms, many of which had been translated into English.

5. Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P. A. Payutto 1938 - present) His main topic of formal study is Buddhism but he reads extensively. The book that brings him fame as a writer on Buddhist philosophy is "Buddhadhamma" (1971) which shows a strong 3rd paradigm. But in his later treatise on "Buddhism as the Foundation of Science" (1992), he suggested Kalamasutta as the Hermeneutics of all Buddhist Scriptures and hence shows himself reaching the 5th paradigm. His subsequent works show more and more characteristics of the 5th paradigm.

6. Wit Wisadavet (1931 - present). He is the first Thai to graduate as Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy. He first studied Education, then wrote his Doctorate Dissertation on Jean-Paul Sartre for the Philosophy Department of Indiana University. His works show the attitude of the 5th paradigm, but so far he did not systematize his philosophical trend which seems to be naturalism in the prospect.

7. At present there are many of Doctors and Professors of Philosophy teaching in various Universities and Colleges throughout Thailand. They display extensive knowledge of Western and Eastern Philosophies in their articles and point out lectures, but characteristic trends are not yet clear enough to spot.

Thai Heritage

Thai intellectuals in the past learned Hinduism and especially Buddhism from Indian teachers who were Aryans, with "to be" centered language. Thai intellectuals accepted the Buddha's teaching, not so much because they had devotion to His metaphysics, but rather to His way of life and His teaching thereof. The Buddha liked to define and divide concepts which Thai intellectuals tried to memorize by devotion,



without much further inquiry, but rather they developed His monastic way of life to suit the Thai character. The Buddha's philosophy of life had been expressed in Thailand rather better in literature and the visual arts than in philosophical discussions. Without the influence of such discussions, the history of Thai Philosophy is not one of a series of successive systems and schools of thought, but rather a continuous growth of thought, always adding something new to the preceding old systems, instead of rejecting one system in favor of another. The progressive development of the beliefs in Kwan or Phi² are examples of how new creations are added to existing beliefs, without giving rise to worry about the underlying conflicts. Schools of Vipassana Meditation prosper instead of creating conflicting and combatting schools of Buddhist metaphysics.

The Change

I have been asked so often by those who have an interest in my philosophy, about my definition of Thainess (Khwam pen Thai). (Here even the word "Thainess" is a neology: we did not think of our identity in our heritage, but we start to think of it and need to coin a word for it after contact with Western Philosophy). I always answer that it is the capacity to adapt, that is, and should be the Thai identity. When there is a reason to change, we did not leave behind our accumulated heritage, but we merely absorb new elements from contact with other cultures adapting them to our existing heritage to produce a more advanced versions. Our oldest heritage is Thai Animism, with the concept of the Kwan as its metaphysical background, without an ontology however, because our ancestors described its realities without paying attention to the discussions of its being. When Buddhism spread to Thailand, our ancestors absorbed it with selectively critical minds, adopting and adapting it with the existing heritage to form a kind of Thai Buddhism, once again evolving metaphysics without ontology. And lately a number of us who have ventured to study Western philosophy meet with a dilemma: we must understand Western philosophy in full before we play the role of selective adopter and adapter, as our ancestors so wonderfully did. We are coining Thai philosophical vocabulary in order to express Western philosophy, and discuss it in our language. To this purpose, (sometimes) we have to coin words and expressions from familiar Aryan philosophical terms e.g. Being is, not-being is not = phava pen yu, aphava mai pen yu, man is mortal = Khon pen sing-ru-tai, which seem to be exotic for

²Kwan (กวน) is the immaterial body of a human that can leave the living physical body in some occasions, while Phi (ผี) is the departed soul from the dead body.



ordinary Thais. We eventually succeeded and now we can translate and compose Western philosophical treatises in our own language, which we little by little introduce to our readers, by putting the equivalent words or expressions in brackets after the exotic Thai vocabulary.

The Five Paradigms of Thai Thought

I shall try to provide a sketch of the development of Thai Thought through the 5 paradigms as follows:

The First Paradigm of Thai thought can be seen in the old Thai Literature where the mysterious powers of other-world beings play an important role as in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, *Phra Abhaimani*, etc. (ขุนช้างขุนแผน, พระอภัยมณี ฯลฯ)

The Second Paradigm of Thai Thought can be deciphered mainly from religious literature that emphasizes the strict laws of Karma such as *Trai Bhum Phraruang*. (ไตรภูมิพระร่วง)

The Third Paradigm of Thai Philosophy can also be learned from spiritual books that emphasize the inanity of this World and the most desirable happiness (Nibbhanang Paramang Sukhang) in the transcendental life. All the Buddhist books concerning meditation belong to this category. The *Phra Morakha* which was popular among Catholics during the first half of the 20th century can also be included; though its author is unknown. Its spirituality greatly influenced Thai Catholics up to date.

The Fourth Paradigm of Thai Philosophy can be seen as the richest target for research. This paradigm is expressed clearly by those Thai scholars who were among the first to be educated in Western Universities. They came back full of enthusiasm to share the fourth paradigm that they had learned from their universities, especially in France and England. The most prominent among those who expressed their philosophical thoughts are Samak Burawas (สมักร บุรวาส), Luang Vichit Vadakarn (หลวงวิจิตรวาทการ) and Pridi Banomyong (ปรีดี พนมยงค์). These thinkers, when they spoke about Buddhism at all, tried to rationalize Buddha's teaching as scientific knowledge. If they chanced to refer to other religions, it was the positivistic views learnt from the Enlightenment Movement of their universities that they expounded.

The Fifth Paradigm of Thai Philosophy was grouped by Kirti Bunchua while he was teaching Philosophy at Chulalongkorn University (1963-1993). When he retired from that University in September 1993, his graduate students offered him as a souvenir a jacket with the imprint of "The Fifth Paradigm". After his retirement, he was



invited to start the school of Philosophy and Religious Studies in Assumption University. There he had his best chance to develop and realize the Fifth Paradigm. The Fifth Paradigm, which was still dim in the 25 manuals that were published during his professorship in Chulalongkorn University, become clearer in the manuals published in Assumption University and St. John's University.

There are now several Doctors and Professors of Philosophy who are teaching Philosophy in various Thai Universities. It is still too soon to categorize their trends as too few books are published indicating their convictions. We can, however, spot some aspects of the 5th Paradigm from the writings of Wit Wisadavet's and Ven. Phra Brahmaganabhorn's later phase.

Conclusion

Ours is the pioneer generation to encounter Western philosophy head on. We have 3 dilemmas to solve.

1. How to understand Western philosophy and express it in our language.
2. How to adopt and adapt it without losing our identity or Thainess.
3. How to apply this new encounter to enhance the quality of life of society

To my mind, logic is hard for most Thai students. It is also difficult to train them to ask questions and induce them into lively discussion of philosophical problems: they are more inclined to argue about tastes and preferences, rather than rationality. However, I observe that the tendency of the post-modernists to exchange and share opinions might be more attractive to our students in general. That is the only real hope for teaching Western philosophy to the Thai students.

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