

BUDDHISM OF THAILAND

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Buddhism (The Theravada School) is the state religion of Thailand and an integral part of the everyday life of the Thai People.

Buddhism came into the land which is now known as Thailand during the time when King Asoka the Great of INDIA sent his missionaries to the east to propagate Theravada Buddhism in the 3rd century B.C.

According to Mahavansa, the group that went to Suwannabhumi was led by Venerable Sona and Uttara.

Luong Buribal Buribhand curator of the National Museum in Bangkok has explained that Suwannabhumi and Dvaravati are the same place, differing only in name, the Indians called it Suwannabhumi and the Chinese called it Dvaravati.

Professor Rhys Davis and others have agreed that the land of Suwannabhumi was a Kingdom stretching from the land of the Mons. (Saithern Burma) to Annam; and Burma to Malay Peninsula.

Nakhorn Pathom was the capital of Suwannabhumi and the Kingdom of Mons. Ven. Sona and Uttara Theras first went to this Nakhorn Pathom and built a Sanchi style Pagoda, 39 meters high, (it was remodelled into Lanka Style, 375 feet high in the reign of King Rama V) enshrined the relics of the Buddha, ordain many monks and spread the Theravada Buddhism throughout the country.

According to the reports of archaeological department of Thailand they could find out many Dharmachakras and Asoka pillars from Nakhom Pathom Province. Indeed Nakhorn Pathom was exactly the story of Buddhism in Thailand begin.

But in 1300 B.E. a King of Sirivijaya Kingdom captured this country up to Surastani and spread the Mahayana type of Buddhism in this country and again in 1550 B.E. another King of Sirivijaya captured this country up to Lopburi and strengthened the Mahayana belief by making pagodas and temples as Siriivijaya style.

Again in 1600 B.E. the King Anawaratha of Burma captured this country up to Lopburi and Lanna territory and introduced a Theravada type of Burmese Buddhism to the country. When the Thai people came into power in this country under the great King Khun Sri Indraditya in about 1780 B.E. there was a Mahayana and Theravada mixed Buddhism in Sukhothai .

In the meantime under the patronage of the King Parakramabahu the Great of Ceylon the Lanka type of Theravada Buddhism had come to Nakhorn Sri Dhammaraja, the capital City of Southern Thailand and popularized immediately.

The fact that Ceylonese Buddhism arrived in Nakhom Sri Dhammaraja in the eighteenth Buddhist century is known from the Great pagoda in that town, remodelled into the Lanka style as seen nowadays by the Ceylonese Bhikkus.

Among other archaeological evidence is the Emerald Buddha image in that temple which was also sculptured after the Ceylonese fashion.

When Khun Sri Ramkamhang the great came into power at Sukhothai in 1800 B.E. having heard about the newly popularized Lanka Vangsa and invited the Holy men to Sukhothai, the first Kingdom of Thailand.

With regard to the Ceylonese Bhikkus invited from Bakhom Sri Dhammaraja to Sukhothai, we learn from an inscription that King Ramkamhang allowed them to stay in accordance with their preference for a secluded place in a forest monastery.

It is evident that Bhikkus of the Lanka Vangsa were highly venerated because of their profound knowledge in the scriptures and of the devotion and austerity in their mode of practice.

Ceylonese Theravada Buddhism is said to have reached its peak of progress in the reign of the fifth monarchy of Sukhothai dynasty, grandson of King Ram Kamhang whose name was Lithai. He is known to have been an enthusiastic student of a Ceylonese elder. In 1905 B.E. he climaxed his religious faith by inviting the Mahasami, the Patriarch of Ceylon to be his preceptor in the Royal ordination ceremony. He also established a new system of administration for the Buddhist order in accordance with the Ceylonese structure in order to fortify the stronghold of Buddhism in this area. For this purpose he invited an elder from Ceylon to be the patriarch of Sukhothai and divided the Bhikkus into two group called the Gamavasi and the Arannavasi .

It is generally agreed that as far as Thailand is concerned Buddhism of the Ceylonese Theravada school reached the Zenith of its progress in the Sukhothai period. "A philosophy of Education for Thailand" published by the ministry of Education 1970 A.D. says that about the year 1357 A.D. (BE 1900) a Thai King of Sukhothai Dynasty requested a missionary to be sent from Ceylon where Buddhism flourished at that time. This further strengthened the Theravada School of Buddhism in Thailand, with Kings entering priesthood themselves. The religion was solidified, and has become the state religion.

After the Capital City of Thai Kingdom was moved to Ayutha also the center of the Thai community was monastery and Buddhism was the theme of life.

Around the year 1967 B.E. about 25 Thai monks went to Ceylon, reordained there under Mahasami Vanaratana, they willingly accepted the condition and thus became members of the Lanka Theravada Buddhism. Having studied and practised the Lanka system to their hearts content and returned home in 1974 B.E. with some Ceylonese Brethren and established Seehala Vangsa Gamavasi sect in Chienmai, the second capital of Thailand today.

So Chienmai and Ayathya periods there were three groups of Bhikkus, two of whom the Gamavasi town dwellers, Arannavasi forest dwellers were Sukhathai origin and the other one was Vannaratana group brought over directly from Ceylon. It was that later group that was called right wing gamavasi town Dwellers.

The end of the Ayathya period also there were these three groups of Bhikkus. Somdej Phre Vanarata was the leader of the Seehala Vangsa, Somdej Phra Buddhacariya was the leader of Lanka Vangsa and Somdej Phra Buddhaghosacarya was the leader of Purana mixed Sect. These three groups according to some scholars are collectively called as Siam Vangsa. Venerable Upali and Ariyamani went to Ceylon for stablish the upali vangsa around the year 2296 BE, from the united Siam Vangsa.

Then in the Bangkok period in the reign of King Rama III, his brother who was succeeded as King Rama IV ordain within Ramamma Bhikküs and established a new sect as Dhammayuttika. After establishing this fourth group, former three groups, that were called as siam vangsa was known as Mahanikaya and the latter was known as Chulanikaya or Dhammayut.

Nowadays there exist these two groups of Bhikkus in Thailand performing the Buddhist activities and duties in an out of the country. According to the statistic report of the Religious Department 1968 there are 24, 105 Theravada Buddhist Temples and 175260 + 87661 Bhikkus and novices respectively in Thailand.

Extract from “Sri Lankaramaya Vesak Annual 1971” Published by Singapore Sinhala Buddhist Association, St. Michael’s Road, Singapore