

## Mongkut the Great – Buddhism and Science

Mongkut the Great (1804-1868) was King of Siam from 1851 to 1868. His great task was to strengthen Siamese society so that it could resist the European colonial powers which had conquered Siam's neighbors. An important part of this project was the revitalization of Buddhism. For the 27 years before he became king, 1824-1851, from the ages of 20 to 47, Mongkut was a Buddhist monk. During that time he studied Pali, the language of the oldest Buddhist writings, the so-called Pali Canon. He conducted



archeological expeditions expanding knowledge of Siamese history. He studied English and contemporary science, especially astronomy, which he loved. After years of study, he promoted a new denomination of Buddhism, the Dhammayutika, which promoted rationalism and science in place of ritual and tradition.

## Mongkut the Monk

Mongkut believed that the monks who were at the center of Siamese Buddhism were not really following the rules set out by the Buddha. They had become more like wealthy landlords than serious spiritual seekers. Traditionally, the oldest record of the Buddha's actual words is the Pali Canon. In 45 years of teaching, the Buddha had said quite a lot, so the Pali Canon is long, 47 volumes, and contains a range of perspectives. But the first and oldest part of the Canon is about rules for monks' behavior. The Buddha is quite strict. For example, The Pali Canon describes the Buddha's response when it was reported to him that one of his followers had had sex with his ex-wife.

### Pali Canon:

The Buddha then had the Sangha of monks gathered and questioned Sudinna: "Is it true, Sudinna, that you had sexual intercourse with your ex-wife?"

"It's true, sir."

The Buddha rebuked him,

"Foolish man, it's not suitable, it's not proper, it's not worthy of a monastic, it's not allowable, it's not to be done. How could you go forth on such a well-proclaimed spiritual

path and not be able to practice the perfectly complete and pure spiritual life to the end? Haven't I given many teachings for the sake of dispassion, not for the sake of lust; for the sake of freedom from bondage, not for the sake of bondage; for the sake of non-grasping, not for the sake of grasping? When I have taught in this way, how could you choose lust, bondage, and grasping? Haven't I given many teachings for the fading away of lust, for the clearing away of intoxication, for the removal of thirst, for the uprooting of attachment, for the cutting off of the round of rebirth, for the stopping of craving, for fading away, for ending, for extinguishment? Haven't I in many ways taught the abandoning of worldly pleasures, the full understanding of the perceptions of worldly pleasures, the removal of thirst for worldly pleasures, the elimination of thoughts of worldly pleasures, the stilling of the fevers of worldly pleasures?



**Mongkut the monk**

Mongkut was far from the first to see the contradiction between the words of the Buddha and the actions of many contemporary monks. But as the brother of the king and heir apparent, he was in a position to found his own movement. Dhammayutika monks not only followed a strict code of behavior, they rejected astrology and other mystical beliefs in favor of rational study of the real world, that is, science. Buddhist rationalists find support in the following passage from the Pali Canon:

The Kalama people of Kesamutta asked the Buddha how to deal with all the wandering preachers.

#### **Pali Canon**

“There are, sir, some ascetics and brahmins who come to Kesamutta. They explain and promote only their own doctrine, while they attack, badmouth, disparage, and smear the doctrines of others. Then some other ascetics and brahmins come to Kesamutta. They too explain and promote only their own doctrine, while they attack, badmouth, disparage, and smear the doctrines of others. So, sir, we're doubting and uncertain: 'I wonder who of these respected ascetics and brahmins speaks the truth, and who speaks falsehood?'"

“It is enough, Kālāmas, for you to be doubting and uncertain. Doubt has come up in you about an uncertain matter.

Please, Kālāmas, don't go by oral transmission, don't go by lineage, don't go by testament, don't go by canonical authority, don't rely on logic, don't rely on inference, don't go by

reasoned train of thought, don't go by the acceptance of a view after deliberation, don't go by the appearance of competence, and don't think 'The ascetic is our respected teacher.' But when you know for yourselves: 'These things are unskillful, blameworthy, criticized by sensible people, and when you undertake them, they lead to harm and suffering', then you should give them up.

Many Buddhists, then and now, would say that it was a stretch for Mongkut to interpret that above passage as endorsing science. In practice, the conservatives tolerated Mongkut and he tolerated them. Today about 10% of Thai monks are Dhammayutika. The rest follow a more traditional path. They argue over plum jobs, but generally get along.

### **Mongkut the King**

In 1851, at the age of 47, Mongkut became king. He was in a position to promote science and rationality in Thailand, always emphasizing that he was following the true Buddhist tradition.

Mongkut strongly believed in religious toleration. He explained his views in an 1861 letter addressed to the Pope in Rome.

#### **Mongkut:**

Never, in the long and continuous history of Siam, had any of its kings ever constituted himself an enemy of any religious faith in this Kingdom. Although numerous other faiths were professed all at variance with Buddhism, which was for the



**King Mongkut and Queen Debsirindra**

Capital the centre of unity and the object of veneration for all its kings, all such other faiths had always been tolerated and sustained, making it possible for those who professed them to continue in their own religious practices and spread their respective gospels among the people of this country. Particularly speaking, no hostility to Christianity has ever been manifested here in this Kingdom as in the cases of the Emperor of China, the King of Annam [Vietnam] and other heads of states. This tradition is considered to be well-founded by Siam and it breathes a spirit of happy tolerance among the people of the Kingdom. For in as much as it is difficult to foretell the shape of the life to come hereafter, it is only just to allow every person the right to seek happiness therein in his own way.

While Mongkut welcomed Christian missionaries, he did not conceal his view of Christianity, saying to Christians who tried to convert him:

## Mongkut

"What you teach people to do is admirable, but what you teach them to believe is foolish."

While Mongkut did not restrain Christian missionaries, he did compete with them, supporting Buddhist missionaries in Sri Lanka, where Buddhism had fallen into disrepute. For example, noting that the only printing presses in Sri Lanka were owned by Christian missionaries, in 1862 he funded the first Buddhist printing press in Sri Lanka.

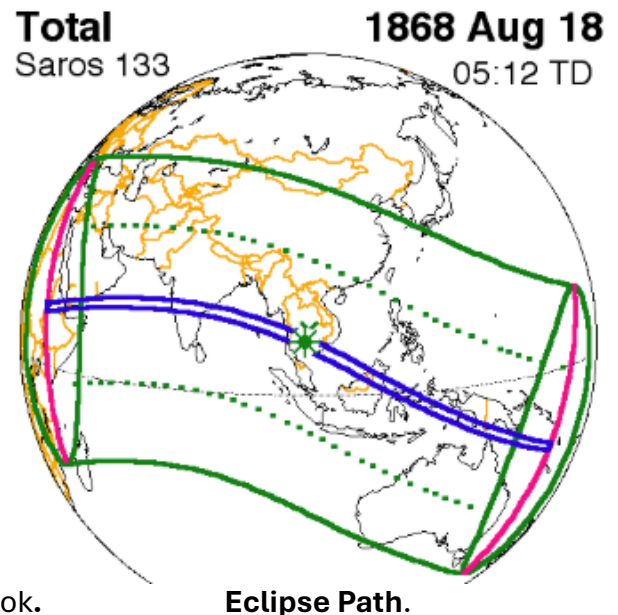
A famous event was the total solar eclipse of 1868. A student of modern astronomy, Mongkut knew the peak of eclipse would be at noon, very close to Bangkok. The traditional Buddhist astrologers denied that it could be predicted.

Mongkut had the entire court travel to the village near Bangkok where the eclipse occurred just as Mongkut had predicted. Mongkut's combination of science and Buddhism was dramatically vindicated. Unfortunately, the village was in a malarial swamp. Mongkut died from the malaria he contracted while observing the eclipse. His son carried on Mongkut's policies, promoting science and keeping the Europeans at bay.

Thailand isn't utopia. But it has maintained a political and cultural cohesion that has enabled it to resist colonialization and civil war. Thais have not fought each other over ideology, ethnicity, or religion. Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, but the monarchy remains a powerful symbol of national unity.

## Sri Lanka – Modern Buddhism Leads to a Nightmare

While Mongkut was promoting rationalist Buddhism in Siam, he was also encouraging its growth in Sri Lanka. After Mongkut's death, Buddhism in Sri Lanka developed in a direction very contrary to Mongkut's philosophy. Leading Buddhists agreed that Buddhism should not be trapped in tradition, but rather than follow Mongkut's tolerant rationalism, they developed an aggressive nationalism based on racial and religious superiority. Most of the population of Sri Lanka is Sinhalese. They speak the Sinhalese language, which is linguistically Aryan, related to Sanskrit and the Aryan languages of north India. A large minority in Sri Lanka are Hindus who speak Tamil, a non-Aryan language similar to many languages of southern India. Buddhist leaders in Sri Lanka claimed that Aryans are racially superior and Buddhism is their natural religion. They claimed that Aryan Buddhism had



been suppressed by British colonialists and their Christian and Hindu followers. The Buddhist leader, Dharmapatra, explained:

#### **Dharmapatra (around 1895):**

This bright, beautiful island was made into a Paradise by the Aryan-Sinhalese before its destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals. Its people did not know irreligion... Christianity and polytheism [i.e. Hinduism] are responsible for the vulgar practices of killing animals, stealing, licentiousness, lying and drunkenness... The ancient, historic, refined [i.e. Buddhist] people, under the diabolism of vicious paganism, introduced by the British administrators, are now declining slowly away.

(In 1880, the Theosophists Henry Olcott and Helena Blavatsky visited Sri Lanka and converted to Dharmapatra's version of Buddhism. Theosophy promoted Aryan supremacist religion with Buddhist symbolism, notably the swastika, in the US and Europe.)



**Dharmapatra Statue Today**

Aryan/Buddhist supremacy has been a driving force in Sri Lankan politics since independence in 1948. It led to a vicious civil war between Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus from 1983 to 2009 which killed 80,000-100,000 people. In the end the Buddhists crushed the Hindus in a large battle on a beach where large number of refugees had fled.

In Burma in recent years Buddhism has been the justification for the aggressive persecution of religious minorities, such as the Muslim Rohingya.

At the same time Mongkut's vision of a modern, tolerant Buddhism has flourished in Europe and the United States. Personally, I find the disconnect between the tolerant and intolerant strains of Buddhism confusing and scary.

#### **Mongkut and Popular Culture**

Mongkut's successful prediction of the eclipse received a lot of attention in Europe and the United States. People thought Mongkut must be interesting. Shortly after Mongkut's death, Anna Leonowens, who had been a governess for Mongkut's children, published a highly embroidered account of her experiences in Siam. It was a great success and formed the

basis for the musical and film *The King and I*. Although Hollywood changed the personality of the intellectual monk Mongkut quite a bit, as the pictures show, they did make a good copy of his uniform.



**Mongkut**



**Yul Brynner as Mongkut**