

BOOK REVIEWS

Science and Development in Thai and South Asian Buddhism, by David L. Gosling. Routledge, 2020. 308pp. Hb £130, Pb 36,99. ISBN-13: 97800320846023.

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This book brings together a series of articles that were published over several decades up until 1998 in journals such as *Modern Asian Studies*, *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, *Biomass*, *Journal of the Siam Society* and *Anthropology and Medicine*. Most concern fieldwork carried out in Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s, funded initially by the Social Science Research Council and then by bodies such as the Leverhulme Trust. The author has re-framed the articles with a contemporary introduction, a minimal amount of cross-referencing and previews for each of the three sections: “Buddhism in transition”; “Monastic development activities”; and “Aspects of development and science.”

Unless one reads the acknowledgements (p. xiii) or the first line of the endnotes before beginning the main chapters, it is not immediately obvious that the collection concerns research that is several decades old. The questions, therefore, that must be asked are why these articles should be re-published now and why they should be re-read or read for the first time by contemporary scholars. There is no doubt a personal reason behind the first question. For David Gosling, these articles represent a particularly fruitful part of his academic life. They form a coherent whole, were meticulously researched, and have never been published together. In answer to the second question, they offer a remarkable time-capsule of Thai Buddhism in transition. On the one hand, secularisation and commercialisation were making inroads into Thai religion. On the other hand, engaged Buddhism and gender awareness were emerging, taking inspiration from the this-worldly interpretation of Buddhism of Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa (1906-1993), the work of Mahā Ghosānanda (1913-2007) among Cambodian refugees on the Thai borders, the research of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (b. 1944 now Bhikkhuni Dhammanandā) into women in Thai Buddhism and the engaged Buddhism of Sulak Sivaraksa (b. 1933).

Gosling’s focus throughout the collection is Thai monastic communities, including those of the *mae chi*—contemporary nuns who wear white and follow eight precepts. His prime interest is the attitudes of monastics towards science—for example whether rebirth can be considered a scientific proposition—and monastic involvement in social development, agriculture and health care. Given the variety of journals for which Gosling wrote, there is inevitably some repetition across chapters. All, however, display comprehensive and accurate knowledge of

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the Thai religious and socio-economic context at this time. In this review, I concentrate on a representative selection of chapters.

Within the first section, the second article entitled, “New Directions in Buddhism,” is based on research carried out in the 1970s into the attitude of student monks and novices at Buddhist universities in Bangkok towards the changing needs of Thai society, with a particular emphasis on their attitudes towards science. Gosling found that the trainee monks did not see Buddhism and science as incompatible and that they were favourable towards community service. He received frank and sometimes amusing answers to his questionnaire, for instance on what the students would do if they disrobed after their education, one declaring that he would “sell candy” (42). Key to his analysis was what the students saw as appropriate and inappropriate for a monk, a theme that continues throughout the collection. Seventy-two percent of his respondents, for instance, saw attempting to cure drug addicts as appropriate but, when it came to reading a horoscope, sixty-eight percent judged this to be inappropriate. Also in this section is an article first published in the *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* entitled, “The changing role of Thailand’s lay nuns (*mae chi*).” The relevance of this article is that it offers a snapshot of the attitudes of and towards contemporary nuns in Thailand before the higher ordination of Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who became Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā in 2003, in Sri Lanka. Kabilsingh’s work on women in Thai society is used by Gosling. He quotes, for instance, her view that Indian and Chinese ideals about gender had influenced the subordination of women in Thai society. Yet, one of Gosling’s goals in this article is to contest a stereotype about these contemporary nuns, namely that they had little agency or expertise in Buddhism. Through a series of meticulously documented interviews with individual nuns, he demonstrates that many had leading teaching and paramedical roles, and that some were even instructing Buddhist monks in meditation. Most saw their role as involving educational, pastoral and socially beneficial activities, and stressed the need for the government to raise the standard of their education (86–87). Only thirty-four percent of his respondents, however, expressed a wish for higher ordination (81).

Moving to the second section, the first article, entitled “Thai Monks in Rural Development,” uses fieldwork among monks in the Chiang Mai region in 1980. Gosling found that urban monasteries were helping rural monasteries to meet the needs of the people in areas such as education, healthcare, agriculture and opium-awareness. He cites, for instance, a cable-car across a river that had been built by monks and continued to be operated by them (104). Monks were involved in agriculture and educational programmes, outside government structures, for communities which would otherwise not have received help. At the end, Gosling points out that some of these activities were technically inappropriate for monastics under a strict interpretation of monastic discipline but added that they could be “tolerated” if there were “overriding factors which relate positively to some aspect of Buddhist teaching,” for instance if operating machinery helped the sharing of Dhamma and brought monks and lay people closer together (112). The result was that the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour was “essentially transcended.”

Also in this section, the chapter entitled, “Redefining the Sangha’s role in Northern Thailand: An investigation of monastic careers in five Chiang Mai wats” is a fascinating study. Published in 1983, it offers a detailed and nuanced contextual examination of monastic Buddhism in the Chiang Mai area. Monks at this time, Gosling demonstrates, were re-defining their roles. Fewer were entering the Order on a temporary basis. Charismatic head monks, such as the one at Wat Bupparam, were stressing that the monastic role was not only to teach and practice meditation but also to drive developmental activities to improve the lives of the people. Contained within the chapter is an investigation of lay and monastic education that stresses that monks were being educated not only in strictly religious subjects but also in practical subjects linked to development. Case studies of individual monks and responses to questionnaires about appropriate and inappropriate monastic activities ground these points.

Moving to the last section, the first article, “Thailand’s bare-headed doctors” is worth noting. Based on fieldwork in 1982 in Northeast Thailand, a particularly poor part of the country, it examines an innovative programme to train monks in health care in the context of the over-prescription of western medicines—the Maw Phra training. The programme sought to equip the monks to use traditional Thai diagnostic medicine and herbal treatment together with aspects of western practice. Gosling praises the wholeness present in this system, with monks referring patients to other institutions if they could not deal with the medical problems brought to them. The next two articles expand on this research, the first concentrating on monks in rural healthcare and the second, on monks and *mae chi* in urban contexts, including hospital roles. Significantly, in the latter, explaining the prevention of AIDS came top in what Gosling’s monastic respondents judged to be appropriate hospital roles for monks and nuns (246).

The last two chapters of the book are the only ones that do not relate specifically to Buddhist monastics. The first examines how Thai scientists hold together their religious and scientific beliefs and the second, entitled, “Embodiment and rebirth in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions,” focusses on the attitudes of young Thai scientists.

In terms of sociological method, this book is a classic. Gosling’s introduction, however, attempts to do too much. The focus of Gosling’s research is Thailand. Yet, in the introduction, the reader is given a whistle-stop tour of Buddhism in south and southeast Asia, in which the contextual meticulousness of the individual chapters is lost. It might have been better if the title and the introduction had focussed on Thai Buddhism alone, albeit recognising the importance of the wider geo-political and religious context. Nevertheless, I recommend this collection. Since the research was carried out, Buddhism in Thailand has of course developed further, in response to the globalisation of religion and market forces. Yet, social engagement as a legitimate activity for members of Buddhist monastic communities in Thailand continues. This collection offers an intriguing window on the development of this movement in the latter part of the twentieth century.