

# Phra Payutto and Debates ‘On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon’ in Thai Buddhism<sup>1</sup>

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*In this paper I investigate a number of public intellectual debates in current Thai Theravāda Buddhism that are related to several fundamental questions regarding the meaning and function of the Pali canon. This investigation focuses on debates in which the Thai scholar monk Phra (Ven.) Payutto (b. 1939) has been playing a significant role. In these debates, the Pali canon is regarded as a central text-corpus endowed with special normative and formative authority. I will look at contestations that concern Theravāda-ness and, at the same time, and inextricably linked with this, at concepts of demarcation between the Theravāda and systems of religious beliefs and practices that are believed to be ‘outside’ the Theravāda. This, of course, engages the question of inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism within the Theravāda. In so doing, I explore and posit concepts of the meanings and functions of the Pali canon that position it either as the or an authoritative reference.*

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1. A short version of this paper with the title ‘Authority, Identity and Pluralism: “On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon” in Thai Buddhism’ was first read at the Annual Conference of the UK Association of Buddhist Studies at York St John University, York (UK), on 2 September 2008. A few parts of it have more or less literally been translated from my PhD dissertation (Seeger, 2005a) which was written in German. Major parts of this paper, though, have been the outcome of more recent reflections and research. Also, I was able to add many additional sources which underscore the major lines of arguments that I was developing in my PhD thesis. A part of the title of this paper is an allusion to Steven Collins’ seminal paper ‘On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon’ (Collins, 1990) and I hope that mine will make a contribution to the investigation of the role the Pali canon has in the modern Theravāda world. When using ‘Buddhism’ or ‘Buddhist’ in this paper, this has to be understood as referring to Theravāda Buddhism, unless stated otherwise. In this paper, I will leave aside recent discussions on the problematic usage of the term ‘Theravāda’. I have used my own standardized phoneticization of Thai script except in cases where the author’s or person’s name mentioned in this paper have an established way of transliteration. Throughout this paper, Thai words are differentiated from Pali words by underlining (Pali words are italicized; Thai words are italicized and underlined). I would like to thank Louis Gabaude, Justin McDaniel, David Pattinson, Mudagamuwe Maithrimurthi, Peter Harvey and Robin Moore for their valuable comments on this paper. Also, my deepest thanks go to Phra Payutto, who has given enormous support for this research in various ways, and Samana Phothirak for their time. All the translations from Pali and Thai are mine, unless stated otherwise.

In the context of Thailand, the scholars of Buddhism Ajan Prapod and Peter Skilling have observed that:

[t]he Tripiṭaka [Pali *tipiṭaka*] is not simply an inert collection of manuscripts or books. It is a living thing, a store of ideas that has marked many aspects of life, from ritual to ethics to meditation practice, to literature, art and education. The ideas and ideologies pervade society. (Prapod and Skilling 2002, 1)

In this paper, I intend to look into the role of the Theravāda's *tipiṭaka* (i.e. the Pali canon) as a 'living thing'. Specifically I want to investigate a number of public intellectual debates in current Thai Theravāda Buddhism that are related to several fundamental questions regarding the meaning and function of the Pali canon. In these debates, the Pali canon is regarded as a central text-corpus endowed with special normative and formative authority (cf. Assmann 2000, 53–59, and 2002, 103–129). The way that the 'ideas and ideologies' from the Pali canon are being brought to life and give meaning to Thai religious, cultural, social and even political discourses is obviously quite crucial. As a consequence of this, hermeneutical practices and concepts of the authoritativeness of the Pali canon have become contested (see also Seeger, 2006 and 2007). In the following, I will also investigate contestations of conceptual boundaries that have recently emerged in Thai Buddhism in which the Pali canon is taken as the centre of reference for identity or legitimation for religious practice. Consequently, the contested concepts that I examine not only deal with the demarcation between authentic and non-authentic Theravāda practice and teaching, but also include ideas concerning the relationship of the Theravāda to other, non-Theravāda religious practices and teachings. This means I will look at contestations that concern Theravāda-ness and, at the same time, and inextricably linked with this, at concepts of demarcation to systems of religious beliefs and practices that are believed to be 'outside' the Theravāda. This, of course, engages the question of inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism within the Theravāda. In so doing, I explore and posit concepts of the meanings and functions of the Pali canon that position it either as *the* or *an* authoritative reference. As we will see, this will also necessarily include an investigation of Thai concepts of how Theravāda Buddhism should be screened and meaning be controlled and preserved.

As shown by a number of academic studies, there exists a closely and complexly intertwined relationship between mainstream Thai Buddhism and the Thai nation-state.<sup>2</sup> Despite being certainly very intriguing and important, due to the complexity of this relationship, in this paper I will focus solely on the debates and lines of argumentations that concern the functions and meaning of the Pali canon. This will be done by primarily and almost exclusively looking at them from a Buddhist studies perspective. This means I aim to study how the proposed Buddhist hermeneutics and lines of arguments in these debates are connected to and built on Pali texts: how Theravāda identity is constructed and contested by various interpretational approaches to canonical and post-canonical texts of the Theravāda tradition. The implications of these interpretations for Thai national identity or the possibly involved sentiments of nationalism, male chauvinism and

2. See e.g.: Jackson, 1989; Ishii, 1986; Swearer, 1999; Tambiah, 1976; Taylor, 1993; Terwiel, 2005.

religious intolerance are not addressed here.<sup>3</sup> Also, the role of the Thai state and constitutional law and its interpretations will not be considered.

Historiographically, there are ample references that demonstrate the importance and authority of the Pali canon in Thai history. Traditionally, the Thai Buddhist kings have been depicted as, and been expected to be, supporters and protectors of Theravāda Buddhism. In this way, the king's concern has been to work against the distortion and disappearance of Buddhist scriptures in order to secure the integrity and longevity of Buddhism (Suchip Punyanuphap 2539, 29–46). In Thai history, we repeatedly come across kings who, by following the paradigms of Indian Buddhist kings, sponsored the organization of Buddhist rehearsals (*saṅgītis*) with the objective of establishing and securing the intactness of the canonical texts. Possessing a complete and intact collection of Pali canonical texts was perceived to be crucially important for 'the health of the state' (Reynolds 1973, 53–54). Thai kings also screened the behaviour of the Thai monastic community (*saṅgha*) when they determined that monastic practice was deviating from canonical norms to an alarming extent. Prominent examples for this are the 'cleansing' of the *saṅgha* by the Thai kings Narai (r. 1656–1688) and Taksin (r. 1767–1782), or the issuing of Ecclesiastical Laws by King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) (Channarong Bunnun, 2546). Furthermore, kings supported Buddhist scholarship (*pariyatti*) as the study of the canonical and post-canonical texts was believed to be crucially important for the survival of Buddhism. Rama I, for example, had the Pali canon copied and distributed to all royal monasteries<sup>4</sup> so that these texts could be studied by the monastic community (Reynolds 1973, 50; Wyatt 1994, 152). The importance attached to Buddhist scholarship for the longevity of Buddhism is nicely expressed in an eighteenth century Thai chronicle where it was said that 'as long as the study of scriptures [*pariyatti*] is existent, the religion [*sāsana*, i.e. Buddhism] is existent'.<sup>5</sup> In the process of building a new kingdom after the devastating defeat by the Burmese in 1767, the Pali canon played an enormously significant role for King Rama I. Using the threat of the death penalty, he tried to rid Thai religion of phallic worship. According to his understanding, this practice could not be legitimized from a canonical perspective (Wyatt 1994, 156). Furthermore, he:

appointed a commission of eleven judges and royal pundits to revise or edit (*chamra*) all the legal texts from the beginning to end. They were to make the laws accord with the Pali (presumably of the Tipitaka), eradicate errors and duplication, and arrange the various sections logically. (Wyatt 1994, 156)

Prince Patriarch Phra Wachirayan (1860–1921) reportedly referred to the words of the Buddha in order to justify Thailand's<sup>6</sup> involvement in the First World War (Phaisan 2546, 36).

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3. This, of course, does not imply that the interpretations that are discussed in the following, either consciously or sub-consciously, are not motivated or influenced by these kinds of sentiments or views. This question is simply not addressed here.
  4. McDaniel explains 'royal monasteries' as, 'loosely meaning monasteries directly supported by royal coffers and more formally meaning monasteries ritually dedicated by the king and given a royal seal' (McDaniel 2008, 110).
  5. '*pariyattiyā thitāya sāsanaṃ thitam hoti*' (Phra Wannarat 2536, 324).
  6. Before 1939 known as Siam.

These examples demonstrating the historical importance of the Pali canon should not, however, disguise the fact that Pali canonical core teachings, like the Four Noble Truths, the Three Characteristics of Being, the Dependent Origination or the Noble Eightfold Path, have not had a major influence on Thai cultural and religious life. Rather, as can quite easily be seen from temple architecture and murals and Thai religious ceremonies and rituals, *Jātaka*-stories, particularly the *Vessantara-Jātaka*, and accounts of Buddhist cosmology (particularly, the '*Traiphum Phra Ruang*' and '*Phra Malaisut*') have, for many centuries, exerted the most significant formative impact on Thai religious life, as these texts have been circulated and used most widely in Thai Buddhism (Keyes 1989, 179–181). In fact, it seems that canonical texts on central Buddhist teachings were referred to and studied, if at all, mostly by the social and religious elite, i.e. the highly-educated court and monastics. Nevertheless, as shown above, the Pali canon and the privileged monastic study of it had an enormous symbolic and legitimating importance for the Buddhist state.

At the same time, however, it seems that Thais often have a rather blurred concept of the Pali canon, as they 'use the term *Tipiṭaka* to refer to all types of religious texts, not simply the three baskets' (McDaniel 2002, 24). McDaniel points out that the Pali canon, 'in practice, is fluid and open'.<sup>8</sup> While having a significant symbolic function in the Thai Buddhist belief system — for example it is a wide-spread Thai custom to donate a set of the Pali canon in a cabinet with glass windows to monasteries — Thai scholars remark that only a rather small number of Thais, both lay and monastics, are actually familiar with the content of the collection of books that Western or Thai Buddhist studies scholars have in mind when they refer to the 'Pali canon'.<sup>9</sup> With regard to this, the Thai Pali scholar Adisak Thongbun relates:

There are numerous monasteries [in Thailand] that preserve the Pali canon like a treasure [*yang huanghaen*]: they do not allow the Pali canon cabinet to be opened explaining that the Pali canon is the fundamental scriptures of Buddhism and 'we have to preserve it from destruction. Once lost, we certainly have to wait for a long time before devout people will donate another set'. Other monasteries, though, might explain: 'Even if we open the Pali canon cabinet so that people can read it, no-one will understand it anyway. We have to wait for a Pali canon expert who will explain it to us'. For these reasons, the Pali canon cabinet remains closed and locked, until in some cases it becomes the food of termites.

(Adisak Thongbun 2542, 57)

Furthermore, the traditional Thai monastery library is called '*hotrai*' in Thai, i.e. literally the 'three [basket] tower', but seldom contains the complete collection of the Three Baskets (*tipiṭaka*). This is further evidence that in the Thai context '*tipiṭaka*' actually does not have the same meaning Buddhist studies scholars normally have in mind when they use the term '*tipiṭaka*'.<sup>10</sup>

7. See: Brereton 1995; Reynolds and Reynolds 1982.

8. McDaniel 2006, 18; see also: Collins 1990, 102–104; Veidlinger 2006, 19–20.

9. Somphan Phromtha 2550, 17–18; Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang cited in: Editorial Board Sarnsaeng-Arun 2550, 76.

10. I thank Louis Gabaude for making me aware of this information. See also: McDaniel 2008.

That the Pali canon as a closed list of authoritative texts, nevertheless, plays a significant normative and formative role in current Thai society, can easily be demonstrated by a number of examples of public debates during which the Pali canon has been frequently referred to: various attempts have been made in Thailand to revive the vanished nun-order (*bhikkhuni*) of the Theravāda tradition. So far, however, the Thai Saṅgha Supreme Council (*Mahatherasamakhom*) has made clear that this would be impossible, as it is regarded to be in conflict with the respective canonical texts.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1990s, the fervent debates about the 'right' interpretation of canonical texts dealing with the description of the soteriological goal of Buddhism, *Nibbāna*, had been for more than a year a focal point of attention for the Thai media and public, and became so heated that death threats against a number of esteemed Thai scholars of Buddhism were made, bomb attacks were carried out and extremely costly smear campaigns were started (see Seeger 2005a, 36–38). Some five years ago, various Thai Buddhist associations campaigned against the showing of films which they regarded as distorting Pali canonical narratives (see Seeger 2005a, 34–35). The fact that formative and normative authority is attributed to the Pali canon can also vividly be demonstrated by a speech that the then recently appointed and still incumbent Thai *saṅgha* Patriarch gave in 1989 during a monastic meeting that decided that Phra Phothirak, the leader of the controversial Santi Asok movement, should be expelled from the Thai *saṅgha*. The Supreme Patriarch reportedly declared that 'someone' whose Theravāda Buddhist religious practice deviates from the canonical norm and who at the same time rejects canonical truths, 'should not live in Thailand and should not be a Thai. If you are a Thai, you will have to accept the things accepted by the Thai nation, i.e. the Pali canon'.<sup>12</sup>

Recently, a number of scholars have described the Thai *saṅgha* or individual monks as being intolerant or undermining freedom of religion. For example, the political scientist Duncan McCargo states that 'Thai Buddhism is ... highly intolerant of those who deviate from mainstream teachings, making a mockery of ideas of freedom of religion' (McCargo 2004, 155), and the Thai scholar of religious studies and philosophy, Suwanna Satha-anand remarks that:

Buddhist pluralism is negated both within Thai Buddhism as evidenced in the purging of the *Santi-Asokha* and the *Dhammakaya* groups, as well as in its relation to other religions, as evidenced in the blackening of the religious others in recent years.<sup>13</sup>

It was even maintained that freedom of religion does not exist within the Thai *saṅgha*.<sup>14</sup> The reason why I mention these comments here is not because I intend to engage with them directly; to investigate if, how and to what extent these statements might be valid. Nor do I aim, as already indicated above, to look into the actions or non-actions and nationalistic ideologies of Thai religious and secu-

11. Seeger 2005a, 194–211, 2006, and 2007, 5–6.

12. Cited in: Seeger 2005a, prologue; see also: McCargo 1997, 95. The original speech in Thai is available online: <http://newweb.bpct.org/content/view/223/33/> (accessed on 04/05/2009).

13. Suwanna Satha-anand 2003, 212; see also; Suwanna Satha-anand 2007; Streckfuss and Templeton 2002.

14. Streckfuss and Templeton 2002, 78; see also: Stewart 1999. For further comments in this respect see below.

lar authorities involved in the controversies and discourses that sparked these comments. However, I mention these comments as they have all been made in connection with controversies in which proposed concepts of meaning and function of the Pali canon have, to varying extents, played a significant role. Indeed, some of the concepts regarding the Pali canon that are investigated below have repeatedly and directly been criticized as being in conflict with or at least problematic in connection with the right to freedom of religion.<sup>15</sup> This again underscores the importance of concepts of Pali canonical authoritativeness within the specific context of Thai Buddhist studies.<sup>16</sup>

The Theravāda scholar-monk Phra Payutto (b. 1939), who is in Thailand widely regarded as one of or even *the* foremost authority on doctrinal questions, has been playing a prominent role in most of the public debates which I examine below. Due to his comprehensive knowledge of canonical and post-canonical Theravāda texts and his expertise in Pali, for many Thais Phra Payutto 'embodies' the *tipiṭaka*. This kind of idea is reflected in his former ecclesiastical title 'Phra Dhammapiṭaka', bestowed upon him by the King of Thailand, which translates as 'Venerable Basket of the *Dhamma*',<sup>17</sup> that is the basket of the Buddha's teaching.<sup>18</sup> He has also been called a 'living or walking *tipiṭaka*'<sup>19</sup> and it has been said that to 'argue with him means to argue with the Buddha [himself]' (Rawi Phawilai 2539, 111). Nevertheless, as a consequence of his advocating his concepts of meaning and function of the Pali canon, he has repeatedly come in for criticism: he was accused of 'being narrow-minded' (*mi naeu khwamkhit khapkhaep*), 'attached to the Pali canon' (*tit yu kap phra traipidok*), a 'dogmatist' or 'a purist' who tries 'to prevent religious freedom and thus promot[es] religious intolerance'.<sup>20</sup> These criticisms have been brought against him during the controversies surrounding the two prominent Thai Buddhist movements Santi Asok and Wat Phra Thammakai (Dhammakāya), during which Phra Payutto resolutely criticized these movements for 'distorting the Buddha's teaching'. In the case of the former, a book written by Phra Payutto on the 'Santi Asok Case' (Payutto 2531) was said to have played an important role in the background for monastic proceedings to exclude Santi Asok from the official Thai *saṅgha* institution.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the latter,

15. The discussions and lines of argumentations examined in this paper took place in the context of the 1997 Thai Constitution which was abolished in 2006. See also: Seeger 2009.

16. Thai Buddhist studies, here, does not exclusively refer to academic engagement with Buddhism and Buddhist texts, but also, and at least equally important here, to Buddhist practice. As a consequence of this, I will also examine concepts that have been brought forward by Buddhist practitioners as a result of their Buddhist practice (see also: Seeger 2007, 2–3).

17. '*Dhamma*' is a polysemantic word. In this paper, depending on the context, I use it mainly in the meaning of 'the teaching of the Buddha' or the 'Truth'.

18. Phra Payutto's current ecclesiastical title is 'Phra Phromkhunaphon' which was bestowed on him by the Thai King in August 2004. His titles before are as follows: Phra Siwisutthimoli (1969–1973), Phra Rajavaramuni (1973–1987), Phra Thepwethi (1987–1993), and Phra Dhammapiṭaka (1993–2004). For biographical details of Phra Payutto's life, see: Olson 1989; 1995, 1–33; Apha Cantharasakun 2538.

19. Thawiwat Puntharikiwat 2544, 45; Sanitsuda Ekachai 2000.

20. Sanitsuda Ekachai, in *Bangkok Post*, 17 January 2000; Wimuttinantha 2548, 10; Payutto 2547, 69; see also: Olson 1995, 21; Seeger 2005a, 147–151.

21. Olson 1995, 21; Channarong Bunnun 2547, 46–47.

his book 'The Dhammakāya Case', which very quickly became a 'bestseller', has been regarded as the authoritative source for opponents and critics of Wat Phra Thammakai's teachings and practices. In the course of both controversies, in these and a number of other publications Phra Payutto has proposed detailed concepts of the meaning and function of the Pali canon. In Thai society these concepts have been widely circulated through articles in major Thai newspapers, academic and non-academic books (often reprinted several times) and TV and radio programmes. Often, they have been referred to either as a source of legitimation for specific views or as focal point of criticism (see below).

### THE TEXTUAL HIERARCHY

For Phra Payutto, Theravāda tradition excels in that it has been able to transmit the earliest, most accurately preserved and most complete collection of Buddhist texts available.<sup>22</sup> He accepts the standard Theravādin view that the other early schools have developed later as they split from the Theravāda (Payutto 2542a, 47). According to him, the Theravāda has developed into a specific historical entity with a specific programme, which is the conservation of the Pali canon. Thanks to its conservatism, it has come to be not only the oldest but also the most successful school in the preservation of original meaning of the Buddha's teaching and is therefore most suitable to offer access to the authentic teaching of the Buddha (Payutto 2542a, 15–49).

Whilst acknowledging that during the long and complex period of formation and transmission of the Pali canon, distortions, loss and interpolations of textual material occurred (Payutto 2538, 9 and 2542a, 32–33), Phra Payutto seems to be confident that major parts of the canon are authentic *buddhavacana* (words of the Buddha) and largely intact; that is, to a large extent they are what they claim to be. For this reason, according to him the Pali canon is very well able to serve as standard for the ascertaining of authentic practice and teaching of Buddhism. Phra Payutto's conviction concerning the textual integrity of large portions of the Pali canon is based on his hermeneutical approach through which he perceives these texts to a large extent as being coherent, both in terms of their semantic deep-structure which he describes as 'marvelous' and in terms of their surface structure (see below).<sup>23</sup>

In order to illustrate the centrality and normative and formative authority of the Pali canon, Phra Payutto writes that 'the Pali canon is more important for adherents of Buddhism than the Constitution is for the citizens [of a state]' (Payutto 2542, 18). Phra Payutto explains that before his death, the Buddha had vested his teaching (*Dhamma*) and the monastic discipline (*Vinaya*) that he established with the highest authority in Buddhism, when he said that the *Dhammavinaya* will be the new 'teacher' ('*satthā*'; DN II 154) after his demise. Shortly after his death, during the First Rehearsal (*saṅgāyanā/saṅgīti*), the *Dhammavinaya* was compiled by disciples of the Buddha and, as it was later augmented by additional textual

22. Payutto 2542a, 32, 34, 47. Here, I will not address debates on the authenticity of the canonical Theravāda scriptures as they take place in Western Buddhist studies. Western philological approaches have shown that the Theravāda's claim to be the oldest of the early Buddhist schools must be doubted (see e.g. Salomon 1999, 7–8; Choong 2000, 2–5).

23. Payutto 2543a, 95; see also: Seeger 2005a, 94–107.

material, developed into the Pali canon. In this way, the Pali canon had become the 'surrogate' or 'dwelling place' (*thisathit*) of the Buddha (Payutto 2543b, 5, 11), and it has, therefore, come to be the text embodying the 'standard' (*mat-trathan*) by which Theravāda Buddhist teaching, faith and practice have to be assessed and validated (Payutto 2545b, 63–65): 'If the Buddha's teaching [which is imbedded in the Pali canon] is existent, it is as if the Buddha is still existent' (Payutto 2545b, 62). According to Phra Payutto, the Pali canon is the 'fundamental text' of Buddhism that generates identity and gives guidance both on a personal and social level and 'the highest method of preserving Buddhism is when the Pali canon has been ingested into one's life and does not just consist of letters' (Payutto 2543b, 15).

As already discussed elsewhere,<sup>24</sup> based on various canonical and post-canonical concepts, Phra Payutto explains that statements about Theravādin teaching and practice have to conform to a specific textual hierarchy. Here, the 'words of the Buddha' (*buddhavacana*) in the Pali canon are taken as the most authoritative standard, followed, with descending authority, by the commentarial, sub- and sub-sub-commentarial textual layers of the Theravāda tradition. One's 'own opinion/view' (*attano mati*) is the least decisive authority on statements on Theravādin teaching and practice. This means that teachings or statements of contemporary monks, academics and meditation masters that claim to be Theravādin would have to be regarded as less authoritative than any of the above texts. Each layer of text or teaching has to be in conformity with the most authoritative layer, so that it can be accepted as a valid view of the Theravāda. This, however, Phra Payutto explains, does not imply that critical comments about the Buddha's teaching or the Theravāda cannot be made, or that critical engagement with or innovative interpretations of the Theravāda text corpus is not permissible: while the authoritative texts have to remain untouched, one can disagree, be critical of, or even disapprove of the texts.<sup>25</sup>

For Phra Payutto, faithful referencing to the Pali canon and complying with the textual hierarchy prevents semantic erosion of original meaning. He observes, however, that in Thai Buddhism the principle of textual hierarchy is disregarded to an 'alarming' extent: often the teachings of contemporary monks are referred to as the authority to decide fundamental principles and teachings of the Theravāda. Furthermore, Phra Payutto perceives a major danger of distortion of original meaning, in the process of communicating Buddhist meaning: as original meaning derived from the Pali canon is in Thailand very often transmitted by passing several 'stations' from teachers and elder generations in an oral tradition without double-checking the information with the scriptural 'standard', the danger of semantic distortion and loss is quite high.<sup>26</sup> For him, another cause for concern is that numerous contemporary publications on Buddhism level out the textual hierarchy whereby peripheral post-canonical texts are given at least the

24. Seeger 2005a, 126–127; 2007, 7.

25. Payutto 2547, 66–67. Besides this hierarchy of textual authority, Phra Payutto also often refers to the arguably most famous 'control mechanism' that is to prevent the distortion of original meaning, i.e. the so-called four 'Great Authorities' (*mahāpadesa*) which occur twice in the Pali canon (DN II 123–126; AN II 167–170; see also: Lamotte 1947, 218–222; Bareau 1970, 222–239; Fernhout 1994, 42–43; von Hinüber 2000, 6; Bond 1982, 22–30; Gethin 1998, 46–47).

26. Payutto 2542a, 35–36, 189, 230; see also: Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang 2550, 115.



same authority as the central canonical texts. In this way, authentic and original teachings might become distorted too (Payutto 2538, 928).

According to Phra Payutto, the annulling or leveling of the textual hierarchy leads to the confusion of authentic with non-authentic and central with peripheral information. This can cause ‘semantic chaos and distortion’ of original Buddhist practice and teaching. This state of ‘anything goes’ will lead to the disappearance of ‘true’ Buddhism (see Seeger 2005a, 131–34). Phra Payutto says that:

to teach things that are not in the Pali canon as teaching of the Buddha or to delete, distort, or add interpolations to the *buddhavacana* and promulgations of the Buddha [*buddhapañatti*] in the Pali canon (...is called *saddhammapaṭirūpa* [pseudo-Dhamma]) ... [and] is the worst thing [*chua rai raeng thisu*]. It is the direct destruction of the essence of Buddhism.<sup>27</sup>

For Phra Payutto, it is the duty of every Buddhist, but particularly of members of the *saṅgha*, to counteract distortions of original meaning and the deviations of monastic behaviour and practice from canonical norms (Payutto 2533, 6–7). Phra Payutto strongly emphasizes this duty of monastics: ‘When monks reject and do not accept [*patiset mai yomrap*] the Pali canon, this is equal to the rejection and non-acceptance of their own being as monks’ (Payutto 2542a, 19–20, 97). Elsewhere he writes that: ‘By being a monk, one is obliged to teach correctly according to the principles of Buddhism’ (Payutto 2533, 78).

For Phra Payutto, the control of original meaning is not only important for intra-Buddhist interpretations, though, but also for how adherents of other beliefs use Buddhist vocabulary. When Buddhist terminology and concepts are distortedly used by other religions with the purpose of misleading and conversion, Phra Payutto considers it necessary to ‘criticize’ this approach. He perceived such a ‘danger for Buddhism from the outside’, when texts published in Thai by Catholics declared that God established Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) or that the Buddha was a precursor of Jesus.<sup>28</sup> A number of Thai scholars saw these kinds of statements as having been made in the context of alleged Catholic attempts to ‘assimilate’ Thai Buddhism under the disguise of interreligious dialogue.<sup>29</sup>

#### AN OLD DISPUTE: THEORY AND PRACTICE OR PRACTICE AND THEORY?

Phra Payutto contends that the study (*pariyatti*) of *buddhavacana* is a necessary condition for one’s practice: ‘A practitioner without *pariyatti* is impossible, unless these are practitioners who have no connection to Buddhism, that is, they founded their own religion’.<sup>30</sup> Also, in order to prevent diachronic and synchronic

27. Payutto 2533, 64. Needless to mention, here, this statement and the following statements of Phra Payutto have to be understood in the context of Theravāda Buddhism and in reference to the Pali canon, only. They are, of course, not intended to criticize other Buddhist schools or their production of ‘new’ texts, as these schools do not claim to be Theravāda. For more about this, see below.

28. Payutto 2545b, 31–40; see also: Olson 1989, 287–334.

29. See: Cohen 1991; see also: Rabaeb Ṭhitañāno 1984.

30. Payutto 2544b, 48–49. According to Phra Payutto, this does, of course, not imply or necessitate that each Theravāda Buddhist has to study the Pali canon directly. Authentic canonical meaning is very often communicated by a teacher, who explains and contextualizes the

fragmentation of the Theravāda, 'the *paṭipatti* [*Dhamma*-practice] has to have a stable *pariyatti* as basis' (Payutto 2529, 69). For Phra Payutto, historical and synchronic unity and integrity of the Buddhist community are important necessary factors for the longevity of Buddhism (Payutto 2529, 69–70).

These concepts of 'textual hierarchy' and '*pariyatti* as basis for *paṭipatti*' have repeatedly either directly or indirectly been discussed or challenged both by Thai academics and Buddhist practitioners. A prominent debate on the relationship between *pariyatti* and *paṭipatti* took place in 1972, when Phra Mahabua (b. 1913), the most famous of the very few still living disciples of Acan Man Bhūridatto (1870–1949), the ultimate paradigm of Thai forest monks, was criticized for his biographical accounts of Acan Man's life. Phra Mahabua described how Buddhas together with a great number of their awakened disciples came to visit Acan Man in order to converse with him and congratulate him on his own awakening (e.g. Bua Nāṇasampanno 2541, 127).<sup>31</sup> In a column published in the newspaper Sayamrat, Kukrit Pramot (1911–1995), who was to become Thailand's Prime Minister, (1975–1976), argued that such accounts are 'most strange' (*plækpralat yangying*) and can 'certainly' (*naenon*) not be found in the Pali canon (Kukrit Pramot 2547, 570). Phra Mahabua replied to this criticism by referring to Acan Man who had told him that *Dhamma* comprises many more aspects than those outlined in the Pali canon, as the Pali canon contains only a very small fraction of the *Dhamma*:

The *Dhamma* that is not written down in the Pali canon can be compared to the amount of water in the great ocean, whilst the *Dhamma* that appears in the Pali canon is comparable to the amount of water in a small jar.

(Bua Nāṇasampanno 2541, 344)

In addition to this, Phra Mahabua explained that, due to their long history of transmission, the canonical texts might also have come to be corrupted by concepts and personal opinions of later tradition (*at faeng pai duai khwamru khwam-hen khong phucotcaruek*). Scholarly study, despite being useful, would not be able to lead to the comprehension of the enormously profound and comprehensive *Dhamma*. For this reason, the fact that the Pali canon contains no reference that could authenticate some of the supernatural occurrences in Acan Man's biography would not invalidate these insights and experiences. Consequently, as a source for determining the real meaning of *Dhamma*, Phra Mahabua advocated the superiority of personal experience as result of *paṭipatti* over the study of truths as outlined in the Pali canon (Bua Nāṇasampanno 2541, 343–346).

Another debate during which the relationship between *pariyatti* and *paṭipatti* was discussed occurred during the controversy surrounding the Santi Asok movement in the 1980s. As mentioned above, this controversy finally resulted in the decision to defrock Samana Phothirak, the leader of this movement. Amongst other things, Samana Phothirak has been accused of distorting central canon-

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*Dhammavinaya* so that the believer attains most possible benefit from it in his/her individual context. In this way, this teacher acts as a '*kalyāṇamitta*' (good friend) (see Seeger 2005a, 66).

31. Here, it should be mentioned that the life account of Acan Man, written by Phra Mahabua, contains numerous stories describing a broad range of supernatural experiences. The belief in the supernatural is quite widespread in Thai society and has been lent support by the unusual experiences Acan Man and many of his disciples are reported to have had.

cal teachings and meaning, such as by claiming that a person can concurrently be an *arahant* and a *bodhisatta* (Buddha-to-be); that monastics can from a canonical point of view legitimately ‘proclaim one’s own *ariya*-status’ (i.e. as partially or fully awakened) in front of non-monastics; and that monastics should be vegetarians (see Sunai Setbunsang 2537, 62–63). He has also been reproached for his repeated public claims of having reached transcendental states of mind. Samana Phothirak maintains that only people who have attained transcendental insight (*paṭivedha*) into the *Dhamma* have the competence to apprehend and, therefore, to teach authentic canonical meaning.<sup>32</sup> W. Chaiphak, writing in support of Samana Phothirak, vindicates this approach by arguing that language keeps changing and,

is only a ‘medium’ or a conventional truth [*sammutisacca*]... the person who has already achieved the status of Highest Truth [*paramatthasacca*] is arguably able to explain language in such a way that it leads to the Highest Truth in the best and most direct way. (W. Chaiphak 2533, 44)

Based on his alleged higher insights (*ñāṇa*), Samana Phothirak claims to be able to ascertain the original meaning of canonical Pali terms (Sunai Setbunsang 2537, 58). He contends that if Buddhism is taught by *puthujjanas*, that is un-awakened persons, it will inevitably and continuously be infiltrated by *attano mati* (personal opinion) and therefore decay, as authentic meaning would inevitably become distorted (*au phian pai*).<sup>33</sup>

In stark contrast to this, Phra Payutto argues that the canonical texts are unambiguous in this respect: referring to the fourth *pārājika* (Vin III 91)<sup>34</sup> and a *pācittiya* rule (Vin IV 25) of the canonical monastic code (*pātimokkha*), he maintains that Theravāda monks are not allowed to reveal their actual or alleged spiritual attainments to non-monastics (and novices). In addition, he also explains that sanctioning public claims to transcendental and supernatural abilities and insights would be dangerous to Buddhism, as it would open the floodgates for impostors. Also, Buddhism could be monopolized by individuals and would potentially depend on the fate of these individuals:

It is the duty of the founder of the religion to refer to his awakening ... In terms of teaching [the religion], the responsibility of followers [*sāvaka*] who later voluntarily joined this religion lies not in referring to their own spiritual attainments but is to teach in accordance with the teaching of the founder of the religion. (Payutto, 2538: 442)

In the opinion of Phra Payutto, allowing followers of Buddhism to refer to actual or alleged personal spiritual attainments runs the risk of exploitation, in the case of impostors, and distortion of meaning, in the case of impostors or

32. Interview with Samana Phothirak on 30/10/2002.

33. Interview with Samana Phothirak on 30/10/2002.

34. ‘Whatever bhikkhu should, while not knowing [for certain], boast a superhuman state, knowledge and insight deserving the name “noble”, as being present in himself, [saying], “I know thus, I see thus”, then afterwards on another occasion should, whether being examined or not being examined, having committed the offence and looking for purification, say thus, “Friend, not knowing, I said, ‘I know’; not seeing, I said, ‘I see’ ; I spoke falsely, lying”, other than from an overestimation [of himself], he too becomes defeated, not in communion’ (Pruitt and Norman 2001, 11).

people who have a weak *pariyatti* or mistakenly believe in the authenticity of their spiritual insights. Either possibility might lead to ‘the loss of integrity of the [authentic] Buddhist teaching (*sia ekkaphap haeng khamson khong phra phut-thasatsana*)’ (Payutto 2538, 442). In his magnum opus ‘Buddhadhamma’ (2538), Phra Payutto writes that, according to the commentary to the *Vinaya*,<sup>35</sup>

You don’t need to fear that those who have attained *ariya* status will boast or announce it, since it is natural for them not to do so. In other words, whoever boasts to be a noble one [*ariya*] is actually saying that he/she is not. (Payutto 2538, 442)

He argues that it is not relevant who is teaching the *Dhamma*, but rather whether the statements that are made and purport to be Buddhist conform to the textual hierarchy. In this way, even when uttered by insane or drunk people, authentic teachings can allow a person who listens to and thoroughly reflects (using *yoniso manasikāra*) on them to comprehend the *Dhamma* (Payutto 2538, 641, 924). Moreover, Phra Payutto explains that an *arahant* who is not a *bahussuta* (a man of great learning) ‘is only adept in the *paṭipatti* method that he himself has practised’ (Payutto 2542b, 30).

W. Chaiphak vehemently criticizes Phra Payutto for his seemingly purely textual approach. Perhaps alluding to MN II 197, he contends that due to his ‘entirely worldly’ (*lokiya*), textual (*pariyatti*) approach that does not involve *paṭipatti*, Phra Payutto is a dogmatist (*ekamsavādo*) and not an analyst (*vibhajjavādo*) (W. Chaiphak 2533, 92). As the latter designation has become synonymous with the Theravāda school, W. Chaiphak seems to imply that Phra Payutto’s approach is not Theravādin.

Repeatedly and not only in connection with the controversy on Samana Phothirak’s untraditional teachings, Phra Payutto has been criticized for an alleged ‘lack of competence’ in ascertaining ‘authentic meaning’ as, so it was said, ‘he is only a scholar (*nak pariyat [pariyatti]*)’<sup>36</sup> who ‘write[s] about mangoes without first giving them an adequate taste’.<sup>37</sup> In particular, in the on-going controversy about the textual interpretations of characteristics of *Nibbāna*, this criticism has repeatedly and from various sides been brought against Phra Payutto. Since the early 1990s, the question as to whether there is a Higher Self (*attā*) to be found in *Nibbāna* or whether *Nibbāna* is void of Self (*anattā*), has been fervently discussed in Thai Buddhism (cf. Williams, 2009: 125–28, Cholvarn, 2007). Various groups of followers of the famous Thai meditation master Luang Pho Sot (1884–1959) have been teaching that *Nibbāna* is *attā*. As a reaction to these teachings, Phra Payutto has written several books and articles, which have been published in several editions and reprinted many times. Also, he has repeatedly given interviews and

35. ‘*tattha abhūtaṃ ārocesuṃ, idha bhūtaṃ. Bhūtampi puthujjanā ārocesuṃ, na ariyā*’ (Vin-a IV 752). This commentary passage explains ‘*Yo pana bhikkhu anupasampannassa uttarimanussadhammaṃ āroceyya bhūtasmiṃ, pācittiyanti*’ in the *Vinayaṭṭhaka* (Vin II 211) where the Buddha forbids his monks to announce their actual (*bhūtasmiṃ*) superhuman accomplishments (*uttarimanussadhammaṃ*) to people who are neither a monk (*bhikkhu*) nor a nun (*bhikkhuni*).

36. Manat Komontha 2547, 186, 187, 209. Samana Phothirak admits, though, that Phra Payutto’s books are of immense value for the study of Buddhism, but ‘it is a pity...’, as he [Phra Payutto] should practice [*paṭipatti*] in order to achieve higher insights [*banlu tham*]... Then, he would be extraordinary and he would be even more useful for the world’ (interview with Samana Phothirak on 30/10/2002).

37. Olson, 1990, 261; see also: Olson 1989, 369.

talks on this topic. In these speeches and publications, Phra Payutto forcefully criticizes these groups for their teaching that *Nibbāna* is *attā*. In his major publication on this topic ‘The Dhammakāya Case’ (which is over 400 pages long), he accuses the Thai Wat Phra Thammakai movement, the most influential of the aforementioned groups, of doctrinal distortion, ‘insulting the Buddha’s teaching [Dhammavinaya] (*cuangcap phra thammawinai*)’ and ‘showing disrespect to the Pali canon (*loplu phra traipidokbali*)’ (Payutto 2542a, 12). While admitting that there is no *buddhavacana* in the Pali canon that explicitly states that *Nibbāna* is *anattā*, Phra Payutto asserts that later canonical (*Parivāra*; Vin V 86<sup>38</sup>) and post-canonical texts did so (Payutto 2542, 63–71). As this is in conformity with a number of *buddhavacana* in the canon that allow the interpretation that *Nibbāna* is *anattā*,<sup>39</sup> for Phra Payutto it is undoubtedly clear that from a Theravāda point of view the teaching ‘*Nibbāna* is a Higher Self (*attā*)’ is not acceptable. Those who write in defence of the Dhammakāya movements have attacked Phra Payutto for his criticism of the Dhammakāya teaching. Some of them have argued that, based on their alleged spiritual insights, numerous acclaimed Thai meditation masters<sup>40</sup> were able to confirm the existence of a Higher or Real Self (*attā*). Some of Phra Payutto’s critics seem to warn him and others who get ‘this issue wrong’ by their teaching ‘*Nibbāna* is *anattā*’: they refer to the fate of two post-canonical figures who are rather well-known in Thai Pali scholarly circles:<sup>41</sup> that is ‘Empty Palm-leaf’ (Tucchapoṭṭhila)<sup>42</sup> and Kapila.<sup>43</sup> Both, so the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* texts tell

38. ‘Impermanent are all conditioned things, painful, not-Self, and conditioned, and certainly *Nibbāna* is a description meaning not-Self (*aniccā sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhānattā ca saṅkhatā, nibbānañc’eva paññatti anattā iti nicchayā*)’. Translation by Peter Harvey.

39. Here, Phra Payutto is e.g. referring to: Kvu.68; SN III 46; MN III 64; AN I 27 and most frequently to ‘*sabbe dhammā anattā*’ (Dhp 279; Thag 678; AN I 286).

40. They made this claim with regard to, amongst others, Acan Man Bhūridatto, Luang Pho Sot and Phra Mahabua.

41. Sompho Chanawangsa 2537, 114–115; Phutthathamprathip, n.d.: 28–34.

42. This narrative can be found in the *Dhammapada* commentary (Dhp-a III 417–21). The monk Poṭṭhila had excelled himself by his great learning of the Pali canon for an extremely long period of time (a time period which spans over the lives of seven Buddhas!), when the Buddha thought that it is time for Poṭṭhila to attain *Nibbāna* for himself (*attano dukkhanissaraṇam*). For this reason, the Buddha decides to stir him up (*saṃvejessāmi*) by frequently calling him ‘Empty-Palm leaf’ (*tucchapoṭṭhila*; the texts being written on palm-leaves). This prompted Poṭṭhila to pursue the Buddhist practice and he started to look for a teacher. This, however, was not easy for him, as all monks he asked refused to teach him, due to his pride (*māno*). Only when his pride was finally removed (*nihatamāno*), and Poṭṭhila was willing to learn from a seven-year old novice who was using rather unusual methods of instruction, did he attain arahant-ship himself (*arahatte patiṭṭhahīti*).

43. The narrative on Kapila can be found in the *Dhammapada* commentary (Dhp-a IV 37). Kapila together with his older brother Sāgata, his mother Sādhini and his sister Tāpanā were ordained into the religion of the Buddha Kassapa. When the two brothers inquired as to how many tasks exist in Buddhism (*imasmim sāsane kati dhurāni’ti*), they learned that there are the ‘task of textual study’ (*ganthadhuraṃ*) and the ‘task of insight meditation’ (*vipassanādhuraṃ*). Whilst Sāgata decided to pursue the task of insight meditation (*pūressāmi*), and attained arahant-ship after five rains (*pañca vassāni*), Kapila turned towards textual study. He learned the texts of the three baskets (*tiṇi piṭakāni uggāṇhi*), and ‘drunk by his eruditeness’ (*bāhusac-camadena*) argued with everyone. Having been admonished by other monks, he reproached them by calling them ignorant: ‘What do you know; you are like an empty fist (*tumhe kim jānātha rittamuṭṭhisadisā’ti*)’. Besides, he affronted and treated them with contempt (*khum-*

us, did not proceed on the spiritual path as they were too attached to the theoretical study of the Pali canon. The former finally managed to attain awakening, after being admonished by the Buddha himself, whereas the latter 'drunk by his eruditeness' (*bāhusaccamadēna*), was so arrogant in his scriptural knowledge that as a kammic result of this he was reborn in the worst of Buddhist hells.

At the same time, however, it must be noted that there are numerous monks and academics who have publicly stated that Phra Payutto is an accomplished practitioner (Seeger 2005a, 149–151). Following the principle of textual hierarchy, Phra Payutto has never publicly expressed any opinion on these comments on his competence regarding the teaching of Buddhism. Rather, he counters his critics by maintaining that the canonical texts are on the aforementioned controversies unambiguous. For this reason, for him these conflicts do not involve an epistemological or interpretational problem but a purely factual one, namely what the Pali canonical and post-canonical texts have to say regarding these questions.

Phra Payutto explains that even Sāriputta, Buddha's foremost disciple of wisdom, despite already being an awakened one (*arahant*) and (alongside Moggallāna) having advanced to become the most important disciple of the Buddha, consulted the Buddha when ambiguities regarding the Buddha's teaching arose. Furthermore, Phra Payutto refers to awakened disciples who, despite their awakening, studied the words of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) in order 'to help to preserve Buddhism (*phuea chuai damrong phra phutthasatsana*)' (Payutto 2542a, 90). Here he is referring to a passage in the *Vinaya*-commentary where the Buddhist scholarship of *arahants* is called '*bhaṇḍāgārikapariyatti*' ('the study of the storehouse keeper'; Vin-a I 24). It is also explained that an *arahant* (*khīṇāsavo*), who studies the words of the Buddha (*buddhavacanaṃ pariyāpuṇanto*), is a preserver of the holy texts (*tantidhārako*), a custodian of the tradition (*paveṇipālako*) and a preserver of the tradition (*vaṃsānurakkhako*) (MN-a II 107; Vin-a I 25).

These Thai debates seem to revolve on the question of whether the spiritual insights by a charismatic figure can uncover authentic hidden or lost meaning in or beyond the canonical texts and should, therefore, be regarded as more than, or at least equally authoritative to, Theravāda's textual tradition. In this respect, Phra Payutto's concept of textual hierarchy has been criticized as being arbitrary. In connection with the '*Nibbāna: attā or anattā?*' controversy, the academic and follower of the Dhammakāya teaching Manat Komontha asked why the opinion of commentarial texts should have more weight than the spiritual insights of

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*vento vambhento*). Even when his brother Sāgata explained to him: 'Kapila, the correct practice [*sammāpaṭipatti*] of people like you is the longevity of the religion (*āvuso Kapila tumhādisānaṃ hi sammāpaṭipatti sāsanaṃ āyu nāma*)', all these attempts had no impact on Kapila's wrong views. Eventually, this caused 'the one who behaves badly' (*durācāro*), i.e. Kapila, to be shunned by the other, well-behaved monks (*pesalā bhikkhū*). One day, when Kapila recited the monastic regulations (*pātimokkhaṃ*) and the present monks refused to give him an answer, he said that 'There is neither *Dhamma* nor *Vinaya* (*dhammo vā vinayo vā natthi*)'. As a consequence of the damage that he had caused to the teaching (*pariyattisāsanaṃ*) of the Buddha Kassapa, after his death he was reborn in the worst hell of Avīci. His mother Sādhinī and his sister Tāpanā, who adhered to the wrong views of Kapila (*ditthānugatim*), affronted the well-behaved monks and were reborn in hell. Later, Kapila was reborn in the river Aciravatī as a gold-coloured fish who stank out of his mouth (Kapilamaccha). Fishermen captured the fish and showed him to the king who took it to the Buddha in order to ask for the reason of the bad breath. The Buddha interviewed the fish Kapila and as a consequence of this Kapila died 'being overwhelmed by remorse' (*vippaṭisārābhībhūto*). After his death, he, again, was reborn in hell.

contemporary monks, especially given the fact that there is no explicit *buddha-vacana* regarding the point of controversy (Manat Komontha 2547, 116, 197). For defenders of the Dhammakāya teaching, a coherency between *pariyatti*, *paṭipatti* and *paṭivedha* has to be taken as the hermeneutical criterion by which the authentic meaning of the *Dhamma* can be ascertained:<sup>44</sup>

The investigation of solely scriptural evidence is not sufficient, as distortions from the true *Dhamma* of Buddhism might occur. This is because this is a scriptural interpretation which follows an understanding that is based on one's personal perception [*saññā*] and consciousness [*viññāṇa*].<sup>45</sup>

The debates on the relationship between *pariyatti* and *paṭipatti* are reminiscent of an old and well-known conflict in the Theravāda. In the commentary on the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, the *Manorathapūraṇī*, we find the narrative (AN-a I 192-193) on a controversy that must have taken place some 400–500 years after Buddha's death. Several hundred monks in Sri Lanka disputed the question 'Is the *pariyatti* the basis of the religion, or is it the *paṭipatti* (*pariyatti nu kho sāsanassa mūlam, udāhu paṭipattīti*)?'. The so-called *Pamsukūlika*-monks<sup>46</sup> advocated *paṭipatti* as basis by referring to a passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* where the Buddha tells Subhadda<sup>47</sup>: 'When the monks, Subhadda, live righteously, the world will not be void of *arahants*'.<sup>48</sup> However, when the *Dhammakathika*-monks<sup>49</sup> had brought forward their arguments<sup>50</sup> for *pariyatti* as basis of Buddhism, the *Pamsukūlika*-monks were silent (*tuṅhī ahesuṃ*). In this way, the dispute came to an end in favour of the *Dhammakathika*-monks. The commentary gives the following reason for this decision:

When amongst 100 or 1,000 bulls there is no cow that preserves the lineage, the tradition will not continue. Just so, there is no realization of the Noble Path when there is no studying [*pariyatti*], even when hundred or thousand monks begin to

44. Referring to Suchip Punyanupphā's explanation of the *Pāsādika Sutta* (DN III 128) Suwanna, in another context, also holds that, according to 'Theravādin Buddhist philosophy', one would have expected that insights gained through *paṭipatti* are also taken 'as criteria to ascertain the authenticity of textual meaning' (Suwanna Satha-anand 2545, 99; see also: Suwanna Satha-anand 2545, 106).

45. Students and Practitioners of the True Dhamma 2537, 19, 44–45.

46. '*Pamsukūlika*' literally means 'one who wears clothes made of rags taken from a dust heap' (Rhys Davids/Stede 1994, 379).

47. Subaddha becomes the last disciple of the Buddha before his death and after having been instructed by the Buddha he attains *arahant*-ship (DN II 149–53).

48. '*ime ca, subhadda, bhikkhū sammā vihareyyuṃ, asuñño loko arahantehi assāti*' (DN II 152).

49. A *Dhammakathika* is a teacher and reciter of the *Dhamma*.

50. The *Dhammakathika*-monks give the following rationale for their view: 'As long as the *suttas* exist and the *Vinaya* shines, the [monks(?)] will see light, as if the sun has risen; when the *suttas* do not exist [anymore], and the *Vinaya* has been forgotten; darkness will come into the world, as if the suns set; when the *suttas* are preserved, the practice is preserved; the wise person is grounded in the practice, he does not fall away from perfect freedom [=Nibbāna]'. ('*Yāva tiṅṅhanti suttantā, vinayo yāva dippati; tāva dakkhanti ālokaṃ, sūriye abhūṭṭhite yathā* 'Suttantesu asantesu, pamuṭṭhe vinayamhi ca; tamo bhavissati loke, sūriye atthaṅgate yathā. 'Suttante rakkhite sante, paṭipatti hoti rakkhitā; paṭipattiyam ṭhito dhiro, yogakkhemā na dhamsati 'ti'. ; AN-a I 93).

practise insight meditation.<sup>51</sup>

For Walpola Rahula, this decision demonstrates a shift of paradigm in the history of Buddhism, since 'according to the original teaching of the Buddha the practice of the dhamma (*paṭipatti*) is of greater importance than mere learning (*pariyatti*)'.<sup>52</sup> Ray comments on this 'change' as follows:

The vocation of texts and scholarship, with its fruition in the writing down of the Buddhist texts, must, as it rose to prominence, have changed Buddhist tradition in some dramatic and irreversible ways ... Thus there arises the tendency to locate the 'authentic teachings' not, as originally, in the understanding of the realized saint, but rather in external and objectified form, in the authoritative texts.

(Ray 1994, 32)

### THE TRADITION AND ITS SCRIPTURES

The controversial scholar monk Mettānando, who has meanwhile left the monkhood to pursue a political career, heavily criticizes Thai traditional studies of the Pali canon that take the commentarial texts as a framework to explain the canonical texts. Mettānando describes himself as a 'radical thinker', who 'dares to break [with traditional thinking?] and investigates [things] deeply'.<sup>53</sup> According to him, the Thai traditional monastic education system is 'extremely conservative..., like the religion in Europe during the middle ages at the time of the crusades'.<sup>54</sup> Mettānando describes this system as 'stultified' (*lalang*) (Mettānando Bhikkhu, 2545a: 136) and attached to traditional interpretations of the Pali canon, not tolerating alternative exegeses. Mettānando writes: 'The method of interpretation which is used in Theravāda Buddhism ... is in contradiction to the *buddhavacana* in the Pali canon'. He argues that the Buddha criticized the Brahmanical tradition for the very interpretational approach that follows a textual hierarchy.<sup>55</sup> In connection with this, he also refers to the famous *Kālāma Sutta* where the Buddha is

51. 'Yathā hi gavasatassa vā gavasahassassa vā antare pavēṇipālikāya dhenuyā asati so vāṃso sā pavēṇi na ghaṭṭiyati, evam eva āradhāvipassakānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ satepi sahassepi saṃvijjāmaṇe pariyattiyā asati ariyamaggapaṭivedho nāma na hoti' (AN-a I 93).

52. Rahula 1966, 158. Rahula also explains: 'Out of this new development seem to have evolved, as a necessary corollary, two vocations termed *gantha-dhura* and *vipassanā-dhura*. *Gantha-dhura* or the vocation of 'books' denotes the learning and teaching of the dhamma, while *vipassanā-dhura* or vocation of meditation means reflecting on life as impermanent, suffering and without permanent entity. No such division of vocation is known to the original texts. Nor are the terms *gantha-dhura* and *vipassanā-dhura* known to the early texts. A knowledge of the dhamma as well as meditation was part and parcel of a monk's life according to the original conception. This division is found only in the Pāli Commentaries of the 5th century A.C. and other non-canonical works. Acceptance of the new idea that learning is the basis of religion seems to have given rise to this innovation' (Rahula 1966, 159–160). See also: McDaniel 2008, 253–254.

53. 'radical thinker... *kla taek hak co luek*' (Mettānando Bhikkhu 2545a, 136). In 2003 he wrote: 'I may be the most controversial figure in Thai Buddhism at present' (Mettānando Bhikkhu, 2003).

54. '*anurakniyom sut khua... muean kap satsana khong yurop nai yuk muet samai songkhrām khruet*' (Mettānando Bhikkhu 2545a, S. 122).

55. Mettānando 2548, 219; Mettānando Bhikkhu 2545b, 130. Mettānando refers here to a passage in the *Caṅki Sutta* (MN II 170), where the Buddha compares the Vedic teachers with a chain of blind people in which one is attached to another (*paramparāsamsattā*).



reported to have said ‘Do not believe tradition (*mā paramparāya*)’ (AN I 189).<sup>56</sup>

In Thai Theravāda history, as far as we can say, Buddhist scholarship that attributes normative and formative authority to the Pali canon above the commentarial texts seems to be a rather recent phenomenon, though. The Thai historian Nithi Iausiwong understands that in pre-Bangkok era Thai history, people attributed ‘a more horizontal than vertical’ relationship between the canonical and post-canonical texts. The ‘value of truth [*khunkha khong khwamcing*] embedded in the Pali canon and other scriptures was thus equal’ (Nithi Iausiwong 2527, 391). Only during the first reign of the Bangkok-era (1782–1809), due to a growingly influential ‘rationalist thinking’ amongst the elite, did the ‘respect paid to the commentaries decline’. Emerging critical approaches were undermining their authority. This trend culminated in the Dhammayuttika-nikāya movement founded by the Prince-monk Mongkut (before becoming King of Siam in 1851, Mongkut had been a Buddhist monk for 27 years). This movement pursued a ‘return to original texts, i.e. the Pali canon’ (Nithi Iausiwong 2527, 415). More recently, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906–1993), who, alongside Phra Payutto, is regarded as the most influential Thai Buddhist thinker of the second half of the twentieth century, and who also pursued a ‘return to the Pali canon’ approach, has assessed the commentarial texts as ‘late accretions, useless and even harmful to Buddhism’ (Gabaude 1993, 50).

For Phra Payutto, however, the commentarial texts seem to play a much more significant role. As shown in many of his works, he very frequently makes use of the commentaries and sub-commentaries of the Theravāda. For him, the ‘best’ explanations of the meaning of the Pali canonical teachings are to be found in the commentaries (Payutto 2539, 55). He explains that the commentarial texts are the outcome of a continuous process of oral tradition in which the Buddha’s teachings were explained from teachers to students. Students later might have become teachers themselves and added new explanations. In this way, the tradition was augmented by a growing number of texts and, thereby, developed into a specific historical entity which these very texts are the product of and give evidence of. This particular tradition excels by its conservatism; that is, its followers attempted to avoid adding their own interpretations, as far as possible (cf. Norman 2006, 195–219). While admitting that the commentarial texts contain problematic and self-contradictory statements, Phra Payutto maintains that these texts are the expression of the Theravāda and therefore to be seen as authoritative for its view (see Seeger 2005, 216–19). Whilst explaining his understanding of a passage in the already mentioned *Kālāma Sutta* where the Buddha is reported to have said ‘Do not believe in scriptures’, Phra Payutto writes that:

Both the belief and non-belief in the texts can be a blind belief [*ngom ngai*], if we lack discernment [*vicāraṇañāṇa*]... A thorough practice which does not contradict the teaching ‘not to believe the texts’ is to avoid groundless belief. Before coming to a judgment of or rejecting the texts we should thoroughly and completely study what they have to say. If we then want to interpret or take an opinion that deviates from them, we can [of course] do so (Payutto 2538, 927).

In this way, Phra Payutto himself is far from agreeing with all that the commentarial texts have to say, and admits that these texts can indeed be ‘harmful’ (*pen*

56. See however: Pagorn Singsuriya 2549.

*thot*), if they are approached in the wrong way.<sup>57</sup> However, Phra Payutto stresses that 'if we want to answer what [teachings] the Theravāda adheres to, we have to accept the views [*mati*] of the commentaries, too'.<sup>58</sup>

Suwanna described Buddhādāsa's approach to the Pali canon as 'clearing a path through the impenetrable jungle in the Pali canon (*kan phaeu thang parokchat nai phra traipidok*)'. Buddhādāsa's radically critical approach to the Pali texts caused 'shock waves' (*sansathuean*) in Thai Buddhist studies and 'immense dissatisfaction in Buddhist conservative groups' (Suwanna Satha-anand 2536, 21–22). Referring to the above instruction in the *Kālāma Sutta*, 'Do not believe in scriptures' and the four 'Great Authorities' (*mahāpadesa*) that postulate coherency as means of ascertaining authenticity, Buddhādāsa maintained that a significant part of the Pali canon is not the authentic word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*), but interpolations by later tradition. He said: 'Presently, we are too stupid [in our attitude] towards what we call the Pali canon to such an extent that we have become slaves of each letter of the Pali canon'.<sup>59</sup> Buddhādāsa suggested 'tearing out' (*chik ok*) all interpolations from the Pali canon in order to identify authentic Buddhism. When following this approach, only some 40% of the Pali canon would remain (Buddhādāsa 2529, 21–22). Phra Payutto has not joined the critics of Buddhādāsa who attacked him because of this radical approach. Quite the opposite is the case: after his views on the Pali canon were repeatedly contrasted with those of Buddhādāsa (e.g. an adherent of the Dhammakāya teaching referred to Buddhādāsa's radical textual approach in the course of the '*Nibbāna: attā or anattā?*' controversy),<sup>60</sup> Phra Payutto argued that Buddhādāsa's specific and 'possibly rather radical' (*atca run-raeng noi*) methods of teaching Buddhism aim to 'urge' (*tuean*) people to develop the correct handling of Pali canonical messages, but do not actually imply a distortion or abrogation of core principles of the Buddha's teaching. Phra Payutto views '[Buddhādāsa's teaching as] completely Theravāda (*than eng pen therawat temtua*)' and argues that Buddhādāsa's statement of 'tearing the Pali canon' has to be understood in the specific context of current Thai society where Buddhists 'have a superficial understanding [of Buddhist doctrine] and are attached to form instead of penetrating the core teachings'. Overall, Buddhādāsa was perfectly in line with Theravādin conservatism: 'Actually... Buddhādāsa wants the [canonical texts] to be preserved [as they are]'.<sup>61</sup>

#### AT THE HEART OF THERAVĀDIN IDENTITY: THE FIRST REHEARSAL

Another ongoing debate in Thai Buddhism that concerns the authoritativeness of the Pali canonical texts pertains to the event that Theravādins look to as lending ideological support to the name 'Theravāda': the First Rehearsal of elder monk-

57. Interview with Phra Payutto on 04/01/2004.

58. Interview with Phra Payutto on 10/07/2002.

59. '*rau patcuban ngom-ngai to sing thi riak wa pidok rue phra traipidok kan mak koen pai con pen that khong phra traipidok thuk tua akson*' (Buddhādāsa 2529, 6).

60. Payutto 2539, 48; see also Payutto 2547, 66–67.

61. '*cingcing ... than tongkan hai raksa au wai*' (Talk of Phra Payutto on 'Theravāda of the Columnist and Theravāda According to Correct Principles; Part 3'; talk given on 26/08/2551; available online as MP3 file: <http://www.watnyanaves.net/sounds/wikrit-kanmuand.htm> accessed on 17/12/2008)

*arahants*, during which according to a canonical account (Vin II 283–288) the *Dhammavinaya* was compiled and it was decided that the collection of monastic rules should not be changed. As I have shown elsewhere (Seeger 2006 and 2007), the events at the First Rehearsal as depicted in the Pali canon have become extremely important for the creation of Theravādin identity. With a variety of arguments, however, various Thai scholars of Buddhism have recently advocated a return to the ‘original spirit’ of Buddhism during the time of the Buddha. They see the upholding of the decision to freeze the texts containing monastic discipline as restrictive and anachronistic, at odds with the intention of Buddha, or even, in the case of one scholar (Mettānando Bhikkhu 2545c), as a perpetuation of a Brahmanistic plot undermining ‘real’ Buddhism. In short, Thai scholars have argued for a re-opening of the Pali canon, either through applying text-critical methods with the aim of isolating authentic Buddhist teachings from ‘non’- or even ‘anti-Buddhist’ interpolations, or by ‘updating’ the spirit of ‘original Buddhism’, which would imply doing away with a number of traditionally held quite significant practices and beliefs that have become central markers of Theravādin identity. This approach would involve the Theravāda being required to reconsider its identity and traditional hermeneutical practice. In connection with the nun-ordination controversy in Thailand (see Seeger 2006), Thai scholar of Buddhism Channarong Bunnun expresses this idea in a rather critical way when he says that the Theravāda could ‘[change its history] by changing the agreement [*mati*] of the First Rehearsal so that it has less oppressive authority and prioritizes the authority of the *buddhavacana*’ (Channarong Bunnun 2548, 20). Channarong perceives the upholding of the decision of the First Rehearsal as a breach of the hierarchy of textual authority: he sees the agreement of the Rehearsal as being ‘placed’ above the *buddhavacana*. However, for Phra Payutto, Channarong’s argumentation does not hold water, as the First Rehearsal’s agreement is rather ‘a decision to pay highest respect to the Buddha’<sup>62</sup> than being in contradiction to it:

[Despite being aware of the anachronism that this would involve] the *saṅgha* [during the First Rehearsal] agreed to sacrifice itself: ‘Let us completely preserve the Buddha’s teaching! For, if we would change it, it would be for our own benefit’.<sup>63</sup>

In this context, Phra Payutto sees it as important to make the distinction between permission and an order. This seems to be congruent with the explanation of the respective canonical passage given in the commentary on the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, where it is explained that the Buddha formulated his permission to abrogate (*samūhanatu*) minor rules as an option (*vikappavacaneneva ṭhapesīti*), as he foresaw that at the First Rehearsal it would be agreed to freeze these texts (DN-a II 592). The Thai Pali scholar Thongyoi Saengsinchai argues that the agreement of the First Rehearsal conforms to the third point of the Buddha’s first set of ‘factors not leading to decline for monks’ (*bhikkhu-aparihāniyadhamma*) in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN II 76–77), and is therefore perfectly legitimate and completely in line with the *buddhavacana* (Thongyoi Saengsinchai 2546b, 108–109). The passage Thongyoi is referring to, here, translates as:

62. Interview with Phra Payutto on 04/01/2004.

63. Interview with Phra Payutto on 04/01/2004.

As long as, *bhikkhus*, the *bhikkhus* do not establish what has not (yet) been established, and do not abrogate what has been established, and practice according to the established training rules, the *bhikkhus* can hope for growth and not decay.<sup>64</sup>

For Thongyoi, Theravādin conservatism based on this instruction by the Buddha and the decision of the 500 *arahants* of the First Rehearsal forms the central marker of Theravādin identity: 'If a monastic group in Thailand has the intention to abrogate [minor rules], they will have to leave the Theravāda school [nikāya], as the abrogation of training rules [sikkhāpada] is not a principle of the Theravāda. To be Theravādin and at the same time to make use of the permission to abrogate training rules is impossible' (Thongyoi Saengsinchai 2546b, 124).

#### RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND CANONICAL AUTHORITY

Both for Phra Payutto and Thongyoi, the complete canon has to be taken as the 'standard' for practice and teaching in the Theravāda. That means that it is not only the Buddha's monastic regulations (*Vinaya*) that are to exert authority on religious practice and formation of identity but also, as shown above, soteriological teachings (*Dhamma*) claiming to be Theravādin have to conform to canonical standards, too. Mettānando seems to disagree with this concept, for he remarks that diversity in terms of interpreting Buddhist soteriology was present at the very inception of Buddhism and still is so in modern Thai Buddhism. This, he argues, has not caused dissension or segregation within the monastic community; rather, differences in the interpretation of the monastic rules were the cause of dissent and schism (*saṅghabheda*) (Mettānando Bhikkhu 2531, 57, 59). The Thai scholar monk, Phra Somchai Ṭhānavuddho, who is one of the main public figures of the Dhammakāya movement located in Pathum Thani, argues similarly, albeit apparently perceiving the normative authority of canonical soteriology as more comprehensive than Mettānando does. For him, Buddhist teachings can be divided into two parts, that is the instructions for the 'right' spiritual practice, such as the Noble Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*) and the Four Foundations of Success (*iddhipāda*), and the teachings on metaphysics (*aphipratya*), like the law of *kamma*, *Nibbāna*, and cosmology.

As the Buddha did not give detailed explanations with regard to metaphysics, but only hinted at [*bok pen nai hai sap thaunan*] them, the opinions and understanding on these things consequently are very varied and it is difficult to come to a unanimous conclusion with regard to these things. (Somchai Ṭhānavuddho 2542, 11)

He regards the insistence on one opinion in these matters and the rejection of other interpretations as leading to '*saddhammapaṭirūpa*' (pseudo-*Dhamma*) and, therefore, to the destruction of Buddhism. The realization of these 'metaphysical' things should be left to one's own personal experience in spiritual practice (see also Sawaeng Udomsi 2543, 66–67). As long as Buddhist practice consistently follows the canonical standards, Buddhism can be preserved while respecting doctrinal diversity regarding 'metaphysics'. This approach, he observes, is 'democracy

64. 'Yāvakīvaṅca, bhikkhave, bhikkhū apaññattaṃ na paññapessanti, paññattaṃ na samucchindisanti, yathāpaññattesu sikkhāpadesu samādāya vattissanti, vuddhiyeva, bhikkhave, bhikkhūnaṃ pāṭikaṅkhā, no parihāni' (DN II 77).

in Buddhism' and in conformity with traditional practice in Thailand.<sup>65</sup> Somphan Phromtha, a Thai scholar of Buddhism, agrees to allow doctrinal diversity in Thai Buddhism, even if the teachings are not justifiable from a canonical point of view. For him, it only starts to become a problem that needs to be addressed when teachings are propagated with the aim of deceiving, exploiting and cheating others.<sup>66</sup>

While advocating the Theravāda's strict conservatism and heavily criticizing attempts to undermine canonical authority, Phra Payutto at the same time acknowledges that Buddhism 'allows for a lot of space for interpretational freedom (*hai itsaraphap nai kantikhwam mak*)' (Payutto 2533, 48). As Suwanna remarks, however, the demarcation line between arbitrary and 'valid' interpretation is a rather difficult thing to ascertain (Suwanna Satha-anand 2545, 101–106). In his voluminous literary output, besides outlining his concepts of meaning and function of the Pali canon, Phra Payutto expounds his understanding of the flexible structure of Buddhism: interpretations of canonical teachings are acceptable as long as the meaning of the *Dhammavinaya* is not distorted and the interpretation conforms to the principles of the Buddha's teaching (Payutto 2533, 48–50).

Phra Payutto understands Pali canonical teachings as a complex system of meaning that has a firm and clear structure and direction. This system is enormously flexible in that it can be drawn on and adapted to a wide range of socio-cultural contexts and levels of individual spiritual development, whilst its basic semantic structure must be maintained in order to secure authenticity. In this way, based on his hermeneutical approach, canonical teachings on rebirth or heavens and hells can be interpreted and taught as referring to psychological phenomena constantly and rapidly occurring in the un-awakened human mind, that is as mental states, or can be taken in their literal meaning in which they refer to a complex cosmology that incorporates the existence of gods, demons, ghosts and all kinds of miracles (Seeger 2005b). This semantic broadness is very inclusive and allows accommodation of the religious needs of both modern educated intellectuals and people who have faith in more traditional aspects of Thai religion. Also, in Phra Payutto's opinion *suttas* like the *Āṭānāṭiya Sutta* (DN III 194–207), *Mahāsamaya Sutta* (DN II 253–262), *Dhajagga Sutta* (SN I 218–220) or *Candima Sutta* (SN I 50–51) show that the teachings of the Buddha are not interested in discussing ontological truths with regards to gods and demons, but rather have a pedagogical purpose that tries to connect to already existent belief systems with the aim of human development towards *Nibbāna*. In their pragmatics and deep structure, *suttas* like the *Āṭānāṭiya Sutta* in which gods, demons, ghosts and supernatural powers play a significant role are coherent with other canonical texts that contain more obviously Buddhist soteriology (see Seeger 2005a, 233–270). These *suttas* would thus actually lend a degree of legitimacy to traditional Thai beliefs in ghosts (*phi*) and 'holy objects' (*singsaksit*).<sup>67</sup>

65. Phra Somchai Tḥānavuddho 2542, 13; see also: Seeger 2005a, 223–226.

66. Cited in: Phiphat Phasutharachat 2549, 405.

67. For further more comprehensive descriptions of Phra Payutto's inclusive reading of Pali canonical texts with regards to 'holy objects', see Seeger 2005a, 262–270; Parnwell and Seeger 2008, 105–106, 161.

In this way, despite his conservative stance regarding the strict safeguarding of the text-surface of the relevant scriptures, Phra Payutto's hermeneutical approach is quite inclusive with regard to beliefs in the supernatural and amulets, which are quite widespread in Thai society. In addition to this, he emphasizes that Buddhism needs a process of accommodation and actualization of canonical text content so that Buddhism will not lose its relevancy to its contemporary followers: Phra Payutto himself has written numerous texts, in which he tries to contemporize and contextualize canonical text content. In this way, his publications have titles such as 'Buddhist Economics', 'Buddhist Jurisprudence', 'Hells and Heavens for Modern People', 'Modern Medicine from a Buddhist Perspective', 'Education Reform: What Role should Buddhism Play?', 'The Role of the Monastic Community in Present Thai Society'. In connection with this, Phra Payutto differentiates between two kinds of Buddhism, that is 'cultural Buddhism' (*phutthasatsana fai watthanatham/phutthasatsana baep chau ban*) and 'original Buddhism' (*phutthasatsana thae/phutthasatsana fai thammawinai*). Cultural Buddhism is Buddhism as it has become manifest in Thai cultural and religious life, that is as it is practised, understood and transmitted by the Thais. Original Buddhism, however, is Buddhism as outlined in the Pali canon. He sees a necessary interdependence between these two Buddhisms: 'If not transformed into cultural Buddhism, original Buddhism is arguably not able to immerse itself in Thai-ness'. And at the same time, however, original Buddhism has to be taken as a standard to review cultural Buddhism. It also must serve as a source for permanently augmenting and enriching cultural Buddhism with authentic meaning. Otherwise, Buddhism in general will deteriorate (Payutto 2544a, 98-100). In this way, in cultural Buddhism people might even believe in *Nibbāna* as a physical 'eternal city' (*amatamahānagara*); monks as preservers of original Buddhism must carefully try to 'link' these beliefs with canonical truth and closely watch that these beliefs do not distort or replace canonical meaning. The objective here is not to eradicate existent beliefs but to integrate them into the flexible structure of Buddhism with the goal to help people develop spiritually towards the canonical ideals (Payutto 2542, 95). Phra Payutto elaborates this point:

Buddhism ... allows for [a lot of] freedom and does not use violent methods and force. For this reason, it is necessary to have fundamental principles and methods that ensure [the existence of authentic Buddhism]. These consist in studying in order to allow Buddhists, starting with monks, to be able to differentiate between what is Buddhism and what is not Buddhism.

He further argues that Buddhism 'neither oppresses nor impedes' other beliefs (Payutto 2549, 14) and, unlike other religions, has also no 'ritual regulations' or 'clear formal procedures like religions of faith and ritual'. For this reason, this 'freedom' has to be counterbalanced by 'study' so that both intentional and unintentional distortion of authentic meaning and, ultimately, semantic chaos can be prevented (Payutto 2545, 19). According to Phra Payutto, it might even become necessary for Buddhist rehearsals (*saṅgāyanā/saṅgīti*) to be convened in order to rectify teachings that distort fundamental Pali canonical doctrines (Payutto, 2542: 6). The mutual and dynamic relationship between canonical Buddhism and actual Thai Buddhism demands from the custodians of original Buddhism, that is primarily the monks, that their teachings and practices are grounded in the

canon, but at same time, able to be responsive to the various religious needs of contemporary Buddhists and assist them in their spiritual development.

## CONCLUSION

All Thai Theravādins and scholars involved in the debates discussed above seem to be concerned about the longevity of Buddhism. Some of them are worried that authentic meaning in Buddhism could become distorted by the fact that Buddhism is taught from the personal perspective of individuals. The understanding of what ‘personal opinion’ (*attano mati*) constitutes varies enormously, however. Some argue that ‘personal opinion’ interferes with one’s reading of the canon and has thus to be eradicated, by becoming awakened; only then is a ‘real’ understanding of the meaning of canonical teachings possible. Here it is also argued that the canon might have been corrupted during its long and complex history of transmission, during which it was redacted and semantic erosion and distortion might or must have occurred; or, that the meaning of Pali canonical terms has changed as a result of socio-cultural change that has taken place since the time of the Buddha. For this reason, so it is argued, spiritual insight is a necessary hermeneutical tool as it allows the comprehension of the ‘things’ (*dhammā*) the canonical texts are describing and pointing at. Or, in other words, understanding the Truth (*Dhamma*) first is a necessary prerequisite to properly interpreting and teaching the texts in which this Truth had been imbedded. This approach is criticized by those who adhere to the concept of ‘textual hierarchy’. They accept ‘personal opinion’ of any contemporary person as representative of the Theravāda only as the least authority and only when in conformity with the more authoritative text-layers. At the same time, they emphasize that in their advocating of their understanding of meaning and function of the Pali canon, they do not want to get involved in a debate on Truth *per se* but are only concerned to delineate the extent of possible interpretations of the canonical texts and acceptable statements in the name of the Theravāda. Realisation of Truth (*Dhamma*) is an individual experience that cannot be shared and is not up for debate. They fear that Buddhism could be monopolized and exploited by individuals who claim to have superior insights and therefore the privilege of ‘right’ interpretation and teaching. At the same time, they want to counteract processes of denominational fragmentation and semantic distortion which they see as triggered by disregarding the textual hierarchy. For them, the teachings of individuals that disregard the textual hierarchy might lead to the ‘bending’ of the Theravāda towards what they call ‘*ācariyavāda*’, literally ‘teaching of the teacher’.<sup>68</sup> Whereas ‘*ācariyavāda*’ had initially been used to refer to the commentarial texts of the Theravāda (DN-a II 567: *ācariyavāda nāma atthakathā*), it later quite ‘paradoxically’ came to designate non-Theravāda teachings and interpretations (Karunadasa 1963, 163). In present Thai Buddhism, however, this term possesses at least three different meanings, which very often seem to overlap semantically or are blurred. In this way, ‘*ācariyavāda*’ is used to refer to Mahāyāna Buddhism, to other early pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, or is understood quite literally as teachings of contemporary Buddhist teachers, whose teachings are regarded as deviations from or unacceptable distortions of Theravāda. The usage

68. See e.g.: Payutto 2542, 35–36; Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang 2550, 115–116.

of *ācariyavāda*' in many of the discussed debates above, however, expresses the concern about losing authenticity, integrity and historical continuity by becoming 'other'.

The debates presented in this paper have also shown that there are quite divergent views amongst Thai scholars as to the extent to which the Pali canonical and commentarial texts are to be taken to impose normative authority on contemporary Buddhist teachings and practice. In this way, some hold that only orthopraxis should be prescribed by the canon, whilst teachings based on personal interpretation of the *Dhamma* that are derived from individual spiritual achievements should be possible or even are desirable. As long as orthopraxis is in conformity with Pali canonical norms, the Theravāda would be able to maintain its integrity. Here, however, there is also no unanimous view on what constitutes orthopraxis: is it the monastic discipline (*Vinaya*), only, or does it include spiritual practice, like the Noble Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*), too? Others, however, hold that both praxis and doctrine are to be in conformity with the Pali canon if they claim to be Theravāda.

Phra Payutto, who is a major participant in the debates discussed above, has repeatedly been described as a 'personification or representation of [Theravāda] tradition', 'wholly Theravāda'<sup>69</sup> or 'an authentic [Theravāda] monk' (*phra thae*) (see Seeger 2005a, 27). This paper has lent some weight to these assessments: Phra Payutto, on the one hand, claims that the Pali canon contains universal and always valid (*akālika*) truths and can provide 'solutions to the problems of the world' (a concept that has also been criticized<sup>70</sup>). At the same time, however, his conservative stance aims at preventing 'centrifugal' forces (*panha kracat kracai*) in Thai Buddhism by upholding the principle of 'textual hierarchy' (Payutto 2545b, 106). Here, Phra Payutto takes the whole textual tradition of the Theravāda as a yardstick for assessing teachings and practices that can be accepted as Theravādin. Whilst being highly critical of teachings that claim to be Theravādin but, from his point of view, distort Pali canonical principles to an unacceptable extent, Phra Payutto emphasizes that his critique does not aim to doubt the actuality of individual spiritual experience. He has repeatedly pointed out that his concern, here, is not with 'Truth' *per se*. For him, *within* the Theravāda, only teachings that conform with the textual hierarchy can be accepted. Rejection of and critical engagement with Pali canonical texts are possible, but the 'changing' of them must not be accepted. Based on his hermeneutics, which comprises a synchronic and diachronic approach to the Theravādin text corpus, he largely perceives variations in canonical and post-canonical texts not as contradictions or discrepancies but either as an expression of Buddha's enormous teaching skills in accommodating his message to the specific context of his interlocutors, or as congruent with original meaning and therefore legitimate interpretations of later tradition respectively. With the help of the doctrinal variations within the canon and of later tradition, he is able to make more precise and definite statements about Theravādin doctrine, which has been particularly crucial in

69. Olson 1989, 188; see also: Olson 1989, 192. The well-known Thai scholar of Buddhism Camnong Thongprasoet once described Phra Payutto as: 'he is wholly Theravāda'. (Olson 1989, 256).

70. E.g. by the historian Thongchai Winichakul (see: Wanchai Tantiwithayaphithak/Wiwat Phanhawuthiyanon 2545, 142).



the ‘*Nibbāna: attā or anattā?*’ controversy. At the same time, the rich breadth of Theravādin doctrines allows him to respond to a wide range of religious needs of Thai Buddhists, for example with regards to widespread beliefs in spirits, gods and supernatural abilities or the amulet cult.

For Phra Payutto, the flexibility and inclusiveness of the Pali canon also allows a wide spectrum of doctrinal diversity and methods of teaching, as long as fundamental principles of the Theravāda are not undermined. This has become particularly clear from the way he has resolutely intervened in the Santi Asok and Dhammakāya cases (amongst others), but has regarded the ‘creative hermeneutics’ of Buddhādāsa (and many other Thai Theravāda monks and teachers) as being in line with the Theravāda. Or in other words, whilst arguing firmly in favour of keeping the canon closed by strictly following the principle of textual hierarchy, Phra Payutto has also extensively propounded the canon’s enormous potential for flexibility, inclusiveness and adaptability.

This understanding of Phra Payutto has become also quite clear in his stance in connection with debates regarding the revival of the Theravāda ordination lineage of fully-ordained nuns (*bhikkhunīs*): while maintaining that, as it stands, an ordination of Theravādin *bhikkhunīs* is not possible due to technical reasons (as existing Theravādin *bhikkhunīs* are required by the procedures for the ordaining of new ones), Phra Payutto argues that the Theravāda could be augmented with new elements, for example by establishing an alternative institution, a ‘*bhikkhuni* [order] in a new form’ (*phiksuni nai rup mai*) (for more on this see Seeger 2005a, 194–211, 2006, and 2007, 5–6).

In this way, it seems that, for him, the canon is closed and open at the same time: whilst clear demarcation between the Theravāda and non-Theravāda belief systems must be maintained, usage of canonical meaning carefully screened and authenticated, with nothing added or taken away from the closed list of canonical texts, the deep semantic structure of the canonical texts allows or even asks for accommodation and interpretation so that canonical teachings fit specific socio-cultural contexts and are able to unfold their salvific messages. For Phra Payutto, the Pali canon constitutes not only the source for identity of Theravāda Buddhists and the basis for historical continuity and integrity of the Theravāda, but also the source of enthusiasm, motivation and impetus for spiritual practice.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
AN-a	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya Aṭṭhakathā (Manorathapūraṇi)</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
DN-a	<i>Dīgha-nikāya Aṭṭhakathā (Sumaṅgalavilāsini)</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
Dhp-a	<i>Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā</i>
Kvu	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
MN-a	<i>Majjhima-nikāya Aṭṭhakathā (Papacasūdanī)</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
Thag	<i>Theraḡāthā</i>
Vin.	<i>Vinaya Piṭaka</i>
Vin-a	<i>Vinaya Aṭṭhakathā (Samantapāsādikā)</i>

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