PART ONE

1. Introduction: Reconstructing a Journey

Let me begin on an autobiographical note. When I first went to Thailand in the early sixties on a UNESCO assignment lasting some three years, although I lived half the time in Bangkok, my fieldwork and intellectual interests were focused on certain villages located in the northeastern, northern, and central parts of Thailand. I was conscious then, and even more so later on subsequent visits and especially when I was writing the book *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*, that my view of the Thai world was a projection outward from the village. Such a perspective, though partial, was rewarding, for my intensive close-to-the-ground labors gave me some idea of how religious conceptions and rites were interwoven with village institutional life and some inkling of how the great tradition of Buddhism, in both its doctrinal and cosmological aspects, may be refracted in the microcosm of village life.

I promised myself that some day I would attempt a macroscopic view of religion's connection with society as a whole, especially in society's aspect as a polity. I already knew that the most able and vigorous young monks and novices frequently left the village *wat* (monastery) to go to the primate city of Bangkok, where they lived and pursued their studies in the greatest monasteries of the land, and had dealings with aristocrats, high officials, and generals. I realized that if I wanted to study how kingship and Buddhism interrelated, how religion and politics informed and interpenetrated each other, I would have to manage a panoramic and telescopic view of the society, from a vantage point located high above the bustling metropolis of Bangkok. So in 1971 I began wide-ranging fieldwork in Bangkok, studying closely four urban monasteries and visiting others (including some in provincial towns); inquiring into the organization of the monks' universities, particularly Mahachulalongkorn, and the careers and views of their administrator-monks and monk-students; interviewing officials at the Department of Religious Affairs and collecting whatever official documents I could; and doing many other things such as visiting shrines and meditation centers, attending ceremonies and curing sessions, and so on.

My plan was to write a first volume on the larger question of the present-day interrelation between Buddhism, *sangha* (the order of monks), king-

ship, and polity against a historical backdrop, before embarking on a second volume on urban monasteries and urban religion, particularly the internal organization and economic bases of selected wat, the transactions monks have with various categories of the urban population, the array of roles played by monks as educators, astrologers, meditation teachers, or ritual experts, and the character of certain flourishing urban cults.

My first volume – this one – as it took shape continually pushed me into areas I had originally not intended to enter in any detail, especially with regard to the portrayal of the "historical backdrop." Since the book is unconventional and lengthy and has two parts, I had better explain what the thread is that makes it a coherent whole and why the problem I had undertaken had to be examined and resolved in this manner.

I began my analysis and writing with current data I had collected in the field – in fact all the substantive areas that now constitute Part Two of this book (Chapters 13–19): the scrutiny of the provisions of the Sangha Acts of 1941 and 1963; the study of present-day monastic educational institutions; the plotting of the careers of monks, the routes they took and the patronage system they relied on; the appreciation of the doctrinal interpretations and activism currently in vogue among the educated monks; the probing of the links between the ecclesiastical and political hierarchies, between prominent monks and ruling politicians; the discerning of the present role of kingship vis-à-vis Buddhism on the one side and ruling elites on the other.

Soon I discovered that I could not systematically and meaningfully treat these issues unless I referred developments and structures to those of the nineteenth century. Thus, for example, the existing ecclesiastical hierarchy, the recent Sangha Acts, and the educational aspirations of the present-day monks had to be referred back to developments in King Chulalongkorn's reign, especially culminating with the Sangha Act of 1902; similarly, today's issues, idiom, and language of reformism and scripturalism take their major precedents from the era of Mongkut, first when he was monk and later king (1851–1868), not to mention the sectarian split and the policy toward educated monks who disrobed to take up valued lay positions. Moreover, these developments were inflected by the nineteenth-century political history of Thailand – when it collided with the West and launched upon modernization.

But nineteenth-century Thailand itself was predicated on conceptions of kingship and polity, of merit and rank, of monkhood, its quest and its relation to society – in sum on a holistic conception of a Buddhist polity that not only had its precedents and resonances in the antecedent Ayutthayan and Sukhodayan eras extending back to the time of Thai political emergence, but also in part in the Sinhalese Buddhism of the later Polonnaruva period (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) from which the Sukhodaya civilization claimed to draw its main inspiration and example.

Once arrived at this point in the journey, it became inevitable that the

ultimate push had to be made to early Buddhism in India, to document in what way its tenets, world image, and ideas of salvation and societal order diverged from the brahmanical. Another push was in the direction of the manner in which the early Buddhist conception of kingship and polity was realized (or rather was seen by later times as being realized) in the epochal reign of Emperor Asoka, whose edifice, though shattered soon after his death, was to constitute the great precedent and model for some of the emergent polities of South and Southeast Asia.

Now this is not merely an account of a regressive passage linking events in a chronological order, for it revealed certain lessons in method and interpretation. The major fact I had to come to terms with was that the best possible account of twentieth-century relations between Thai Buddhism and Thai polity and society must at one end moor itself to a central conception between Buddhism and polity predicated in early Buddhism. A second realization was that I had uncovered, in following the trajectory from contemporary Thailand to early Buddhism, a recurrence of structures and their transformations in systematic terms.

In revealing a mode of interpretation my intellectual journey also suggested the method of presentation adopted here. Although the primary focus would be the nexus among religion, sangha, and polity in contemporary Thailand (Part Two), I had to work toward its present contours from an initial position in early Buddhism (Part One). Sartre in his preface to *Search for a Method* (1968) makes this statement: "Do we have the means to constitute a structural, historical anthropology? . . . if such a thing as a Truth can exist in anthropology, it must be truth that has become, and it must make itself a totalization." In interpreting this remark I have taken as my task the understanding of the "becoming" of Buddhism and its sangha in their association with the polity as a total social fact. Totalization for me then means how the systematically accountable, in terms of continuities and transformations in an open-ended way, produces a historical totality that is best understood not in disaggregation but in combination. It implies thus the passage of a totality and its "becoming" in its present shape over time.

The following postulates have informed the sequence of chapters and the organization of the contents in Part One:

1. Early Buddhism forged a macroconception that yoked religion (*sasana*) and its specialized salvation seekers, the monks in their collective identity as sangha, with a sociopolitical order of which kingship was the articulating principle. This macroconception not only contrasted with the brahmanical; internally, its paired terms were related both by complementarity and symbiosis and by dialectical tensions, ambiguities, and paradoxes. Asoka's empire as the alleged realization of the paradigmatic Buddhist polity suggests some of these complexities.

2. The Thai notions and social formations concerning kingship and polity successively took shape in the Sukhodaya, Ayutthaya, and, finally,

Bangkok periods – from the twelfth century to the present day. There were two axes to their development: On the one hand they were by their own account influenced by Sinhalese traditions (but in practice also by Pagan, Mon, and Khmer traditions), which included not merely Pali Buddhism but also the important notion of guardianship and purification of the sangha by the king, at the crucial period of their first efflorescence in Sukhodaya. As its successor, Ayutthaya was not only heir to these, but it also self-consciously incorporated certain conventions of court life from Angkor which it politically destroyed while at the same time borrowing from it. On the other hand, the political vicissitudes and instabilities of the Thai kingdoms, their rise and fall, were integrally related to the homologous levels of cosmological, territorial, and politico-economic designs that constituted them into a total formation that we have called the galactic polity, characterized by a pulsation between weaker and stronger states or modalities. The galactic structure of the traditional Thai polity, as, for example, during Ayutthayan times, gives us an understanding of the varying intensity of the political penetration and regulation of the sangha and the hierarchical variations in the ecclesiastical structure that accompanied this penetration and regulation.

3. The final piece of territory covered in Part One is the historical cumulative transition of the traditional galactic polity to the radial polity, particularly during the reigns of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among other factors, the impact and challenge of Western powers and the expanding agricultural and commercial horizons enabled the polity to reach a position of strength and a stability previously unknown under royal leadership, from which various policies of national integration, centralization, and modernization were launched. The sangha did not escape being affected by this political trend, which produced a unique amalgam of kingship, polity, and religion in the only country in Southeast Asia that saved itself from colonial rule and which affords us a rare opportunity for in-depth study.

The presuppositions, structures, and empirical manifestations of the relation between Theravada Buddhism and polity will emerge as we proceed. But before the reader embarks, it might be illuminating to situate that relationship, however briefly and roughly, in regard to that between the Christian church and polity at some specific time and place.

If one were to restrict oneself to the place of the ecclesiastical church within the feudal society of Europe in early medieval times, one cannot fail to see the marked differences, which in a negative sense help us to see what the Buddhist polity was not, though perhaps they little help us to see what it positively was.

Marc Bloch (1962) tells us that within the European feudal world the church was constituted as a "legal" body with its own law and jealously guarded rights of jurisdiction but that it was in no sense a "social class," for it contained a multitude of tonsured persons ranging from parish priests

and ordinary monks of lowly origins to the prelates and archbishops of the church, all living varied modes of life.

Significantly, Bloch used the telling phrase "feudalization of the church" to describe the church's assumption of a feudal political coloring. This meant that the church's patrimony, as represented by mode of rent collection, exercise of authority and organization of military vassals, was essentially of a seigneurial nature, so much so that the concepts and practices of vassalage impregnated the relations of subordination within the church. Because the church itself was a feudal power equal and separate from the nobility, there were inevitably various forms of collisions between the church and secular powers over important ecclesiastical appointments. These collisions were enacted in an idiom that was typically feudal, as witnessed by the fact that a priest could take the oath of fealty but not undergo the ceremony of homage to secular authorities, for the latter meant subjection.

It was this parallelism as well as opposition of church and political authorities, of pope and Holy Roman Emperor, and their mutual symbolic exchanges that is vividly captured in these words:

> Infinite cross-relations between church and state, active in every century of the Middle Ages, produced hybrids in either camp. Mutual borrowings and exchanges of insignia, political symbols, prerogatives, and rights of honor had been carried on perpetually between the spiritual and secular leaders of Christian society. The pope adorned his tiara with a golden crown, donned the imperial purple, and was preceded by the imperial banners when riding in solemn procession through the streets of Rome. The emperor wore under his crown a mitre, donned the pontifical shoes and other clerical raiments, and received, like a bishop, the ring at his coronation. These borrowings affected, in the earlier Middle Ages, chiefly the ruling individuals, both spiritual and secular, until finally the *sacerdotium* had an imperial appearance and the *regnum* a clerical touch (Kantorowicz 1957, p. 193).

Whatever the resonances and embryonic developments in these same directions, the sangha in Thailand (or for that matter anywhere else in Theravada Southeast Asia) did not reach that degree of "feudalization" or patrimonialization that made it a parallel estate to the king's, nor did the *sacerdotium* and *regnum* participate in each other's symbols so thoroughly, despite the growth of a hierarchical apparatus in the sangha.

Nor indeed did the Buddhist canon or the sangha ever systematically embark like the medieval Christian church on a theory of organically graded hierarchical society that "attempted to spiritualize the material by incorporating it in a divine universe, which should absorb and transform it" (Tawney 1940, p. 36). In the words of a famous papal bull: "The way of religion is to lead the things which are higher through the things which are intermediate. According to the law of the universe all things were not reduced to order equally and immediately; but the lowest through the intermediate, the intermediate through the higher." But this Christian

cosmology was employed in the context of the church's accepting the world and trying to transform it according to a divine purpose.

The thrust of the (Theravada) Buddhist view of sangha vis-à-vis kingship, of the realization of "religion" in polity and of polity's contribution to the maintenance of religion, was quite different and contained its own peculiar ambiguities and generated its own characteristic tensions. But interestingly, despite their marked differences, one component of the medieval Christian church, namely, its monastic orders, and the monasteries of the Buddhist sangha may unexpectedly converge in one important aspect. The Christian monastic orders may well have participated in the economic "colonization" of Europe; their Buddhist counterparts on the other hand may have followed the flag and contributed to the political "colonization" of Southeast Asia and to the stabilization of kingship. Of this we know little. But just as surely as the majority of the monastic orders and lower rungs of the medieval Christian church (and even its contemporary manifestations in Italy, Spain, and Latin America) were filled by men of lowly origins, primarily rural, who found in the church the avenues of education, achievement, and mobility, both social and geographical, so in the Buddhist kingdoms and their postcolonial successors, the monastic foundations recruited and continue to recruit largely from the rural poor and afford them the possibility of education and a special kind of unimpeded achievement. This phenomenon as it occurs in Thailand today, and occurred in the recent past, we shall document in detail in the second half of the book; its possible weightier occurrence in the past, when royal monastic foundations were the primary seats of literacy and learning, produced the literati and acted as magnets for the monks for whom learning and religious proficiency were defined as being the same thing, may go a long way toward understanding the social dynamics of the proposition that king and sangha supported each other.

2. From *Rajadharma* (the King's "Whole Duty") to *Dharmaraja* (the "Righteous Ruler")

The Buddhist Book of Genesis

The *Agganna Suttanta*, which the Rhys Davids (1921) christened *A Book of Genesis*, gives the Buddhist version of the origins of the world, society, and kingship. This myth is important for two reasons: It is a cosmological representation that time and again has been alluded to, developed, and embroidered both in the later Pali literature of Southern Buddhism and in the Sanskritic works of Northern Buddhism;[1] it is also unmistakably a statement contrary to the brahmanical version of the origins of the world and societal order.

My previous book *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* gave a central place to Buddhist cosmology. I described there briefly the cosmology that postulates that world systems are destroyed and reformed in cycles of vast stretches of time (*kalpa*), that the world system consists of 31 planes of existence divided into the three major worlds – *kama loka*, *rupa loka*, and *arupa loka* – which again are subdivided into regions extending from terrifying hells at the bottom through the worlds of animals and men to the guardians of the world atop Mount Meru, and from there to the still higher numerous brahma heavens. I do not wish here to repeat that description except to remind the reader of two major points made in it: firstly, that the stratification presenting a gradient from black torment suffered by those in hell to pure bliss and tranquillity enjoyed by the gods is a continuous scheme of ascent from gross materiality to ethereal spirituality in which all forms of existence – god, man, animal, asura demon, and wandering ghosts – participate; and, secondly, that all those forms of existence belong to *laukika*, this world of sensation, and are to be distinguished from *lokottara*, the true "otherworld" of *nibbana* at the

[1] For example, the *Mahavastu*, a Sanskritic work that belongs to the canon of the Lokottaravadins, a branch of the Mahasanghikas, reproduces the account. A Tibetan version is found in the Dulva section of the Bhak-gyur (of the Mulasarvastivadin school). The Lokaprajnapti (a part of the Sarvastivada canon) contains a version of the cosmic story. I take these references from Ghoshal (1959), ch. 14. We may also note that Paul Mus' essay "Thousand-Armed Kannon, a Mystery or a Problem" (1964) concentrates on Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa*, a work partly based on the canonical version of the origin of kingship and social order.

very top of the pilgrim's progress, which stands for the bursting out of the web of consequences that derives from this-worldly entanglement.

I excluded from this cosmological picture that portion of the Buddhist cosmology relating to the origins of sociopolitical order in the world of men via the institution of kingship, because this matter was not directly relevant to the empirical contents of my earlier book. But it is central to the concerns of this book, and therefore we shall begin with it.

The *Agganna Suttanta* is composed of two parts, the first a dialogue between the Buddha and two probationary disciples in which the Buddha disputes the social and moral claims of the brahmans, and the second, the recitation of the cosmological myth of the genesis of the world.

The putting down of the claims of the brahman *vanna* (Pali for stratum; Skt. *varna*) is occasioned by the reporting to their teacher by two disciples on probation desiring to become *bhikkhus* (monk, literally mendicant), namely, Vasettha and Bharadvaja, both "brahman by birth and family," that the orthodox members of their *vanna* "do blame and revile us with characteristic abuse," because they had renounced the best rank "and have gone over to that low class – to shaven recluses, to the vulgar rich, to them of swarthy skins, to the footborn descendants." The brahman accusers claimed that they were of the best social grade, of clear complexion and pure breed, and "genuine children of Brahma, born of his mouth."

The reference here is of course to the familiar Vedic myth of the creation of the four varnas by means of the sacrifice of the primeval man as contained in the *Purusha-Sukta* of the Rigveda and reiterated in subsequent *smrti* and other literature. We shall return to this myth later, but let us take note here of the Buddha's arguments against the brahmanical claim. He first pokes fun by asking how brahmans can claim that they are born from Brahma's mouth when on the contrary the wives of brahmans "are known to be fertile, are seen to be with child, bringing forth and nursing children." Then he makes a pronouncement that appears in many other *suttas* and is worth detailed scrutiny. He first asserts that there are four vannas – *khattiya* (nobles), *brahmana* (brahmans), *vessa* (tradesfolk) and *sudda* (workpeople).[2] We note immediately that contrary to the brahmanical order of listing, here the nobles precede the brahmans. The Buddha then says that "both bad and good qualities, blamed and praised respectively by the wise, are . . . distributed among each of the four classes," that is, vanna status does not determine the ethical achievements of individuals. Finally, the Buddha drives the point home that

> whoever among all these four classes becomes a bhikkhu, an Arahant, one who has destroyed the deadly taints . . . has attained his own salvation, has destroyed the fetter of rebirth, and has become free because he has perfected knowledge – he is declared chief among them, and that in virtue of a norm (*dhamma*).

[2] The Sanskrit terms are *kshatriya*, *brahmana*, *vaisya*, and *shudra*.

The same message is reiterated in the myth of genesis that follows this dialogue – but the myth contains many other features of cosmological and doctrinal importance that deserve close scrutiny. The Buddhist genesis myth develops in two grand movements. The first movement states the story from the dissolution and re-formation of the world to the point of differentiation in nature and among men, and then among the latter the occurrence of increasing immorality and greed. The second movement describes men getting together, as a result, and instituting kingship to regulate their affairs; and under the aegis of this institution, there develops graded society; and, finally, seeking deliverance from such society arises the salvation-seeking *bhikkhu*.

The First Movement

The sequential structure of the first movement is depicted in Figure 2.1. It develops as a dialectical interaction and evolution of nature and the physical world on the one side and of human beings on the other. Three ideas appear to be embedded in this movement:

1. On the cosmological dimension we see a gradient along which an original spirituality, or mind alone, progressively combines with and generates an increasingly gross materiality. We immediately sense that this is the symmetrical reverse of the scheme whereby from the gross animal and human state beings ascend upward on the *kammic* ladder to the heavens, progressively shedding form and sense until they burst out into the still state of nibbana.

2. The evolution that is pictured is in one sense a retrogression and degeneration of man. The psychological propensity attributed to man is that his drives of greed, immorality, lust, and so on, increase in potency as he develops in unregulated fashion. We are reminded here of certain psychological theories that propose that man's natural drives are socially destructive unless they are regulated through cultural and social impositions.

3. Finally, we recognize that the evolutionary schemes represent a progressive differentiation out of "one world of water and darkness," a differentiation that produces the complex and variegated world we know today. There is a physical differentiation into earth, moon, sun, and the planetary and stellar constellations, into night and day, and into time and calendrical sequences; there is the vegetal differentiation out of the earth into outgrowths, creepers, and edible rice; there is physical and sexual intercourse and procreation ("that which was reckoned immoral at that time is now reckoned to be moral"), and, finally, there is the "spontaneous" growth among humans of the propensity to accumulate property through the fact of private ownership of property. Thus the fall of man paradoxically gives rise to those conditions that are the ground of society. Furthermore, we realize almost with a shock of unexpectedness that at