

A blending of Buddhism, social engagement, and alternative agriculture from Thailand : the Maap Euang meditation centre for sufficiency economy

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A blending of Buddhism, social engagement, and alternative agriculture from Thailand: the Maap Euang Meditation Center for Sufficiency Economy

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Abstract: Today, across all the places where the various Buddhist schools have established themselves, there is a broad phenomenon with heterogeneous characteristics and manifestations called engaged Buddhism or socially engaged Buddhism. What unites the advocates of this movement is the way the Buddhist notion of *dukkha* (i.e., ‘suffering’) is interpreted to include the economic, political, social, and even ecological dimensions of suffering in the contemporary world. Engaged Buddhists have reformulated the normative teachings of *dukkha* to make them relevant to current issues. In this paper, I present an example of ecologically and socially engaged Theravāda Buddhism of the Maap Euang Meditation Center for Sufficiency Economy, in Thailand near Bangkok. Members of this community have developed a form of engaged Buddhism that treats ideas of “sufficiency” economy and peasant agroecology. To understand this movement, I will argue that the discipline of Buddhist Studies needs to combine the study of ancient canonical texts with the study of their contemporary interpretations.

Keywords: agroecology, Buddhist ethics, engaged Buddhism, social change, Thailand

There is much to be said about advances in the study of Buddhism and modernity represented by numerous recent studies.¹ Nevertheless, certain aspects of contemporary Buddhism are still poorly understood. This study proposes to highlight engaged Buddhism, a distinct phenomenon of contemporary Buddhism in the context of Thailand. I will focus on the Maap Euang Meditation Center for

¹ For a brief overview of these perspectives, see for example McMahan 2012; Lewis/DeAngelis 2017; Schober/Collins 2018.

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Sufficiency Economy where engaged Buddhists are confronting the environment crisis in Thailand with a relatively new discourse of agroecology based on Buddhist teachings. I will attempt to show how the study of this contemporary Thai Buddhist temple reveals insights into how Buddhism is mobilized to answer environmental and social issues. The Buddhists of the Maap Euang Meditation Center for Sufficiency Economy are participating in a global discussion about the environmental, agricultural, and social changes taking place. The Buddhist contribution to the global environmental discourse has required a creative reinterpretation of Buddhist scriptures. Other scholars have noted that the “Pāli Buddhist textual traditions continue to influence the development of vernacular literatures and local practices in what are now the modern nation-states of mainland Southeast Asia [...] They contribute to a cultural discourse through which Theravāda practices continue to be imagined among Buddhist communities and take on local and modern articulations in the rapidly changing contexts of globalization and digital mediation”.² By focusing on this case study, I wish to demonstrate the creativity and vitality of this Thai Buddhist tradition and its reevaluation of the Pāli Buddhist textual tradition to respond to the challenges of our time.

Specifically, I will try to show how central Buddhist teachings such as *mettā* (i.e., loving-kindness/benevolence) or *karuṇā* (i.e., compassion) are put in practice to eliminate *dukkha* and how they are applied to agroecology. In this context, Buddhist ideas to be mobilized to create an alternative set of farming practices aimed at sustainability and resources conservation. I propose to use a multidisciplinary approach that combines ethnographic fieldwork with the analysis of Buddhist teachings found in suttas from Pāli canonical texts. By so doing, I want to show the possible links and relations between Buddhist ideas with the practice of agroecology as they are all embodied in the study at the Maap Euang Meditation Center for Sufficiency Economy. Here, I will present the first set of data collected online. I have not yet been able to do ethnographic fieldwork on site due to the Covid-19 pandemic. My main aim is to contextualize this center in several perspectives. First, I will contextualize the function of the center as an institution. Then, I will present the figure of the current abbot, Phra S., who is the founder of the center. Next, I will discuss the reframing of Buddhist principles to cope with current issues, and how the environment crisis is envisioned as stemming from a moral crisis: that is the center as a Buddhist institution. I will then give some elements regarding the political relationships between the center and the state, particularly concerning national development and educational policies in Thailand. Finally, I will show how the center contributes to the diffusion of alternative farming techniques in its function as an agroecological institution.

² Schober/Collins 2018: 3.

1 Visiting the ‘Orchid Swamp’: the organization at Maap Euang³

The Maap Euang Meditation Center for Sufficiency Economy is located about 150 km east of Bangkok, in Thailand, in the Chonburi Province. Situated in a rural area and covering approximately 25 ha, this piece of land is the place where a Buddhist community brings together the teachings of the Buddha with the alternative farming system known as agroecology. The whole place is set and organized according to Buddhist teachings, but also to principles of self-sufficiency and sustainable development. The spot was acquired 20 years ago in 2001 as it was granted by King Bhumibol to implement the Maap Euang (literally ‘orchid swamp’) initiative when it was still a vacant lot.⁴ Under the direction of Phra S., the actual abbot, infrastructures building, and tree planting began. This process was managed by local monks and people using mainly cheap materials found on site. Houses for monks and other buildings were built with clay bricks from the ground. The center as it stands today consists then of a Buddhist temple, a pond, a water collection basin, a school of agroecology, and a village, the whole being surrounded by fields, crops, and orchards. Moreover, this place is today part of the Agri-nature foundation, a foundation operating nationwide and bringing together around 150 similar initiatives throughout the country.⁵ The result is then this unique blending of Buddhist monastic life at the temple – with its small wind turbine and solar panels! – on one hand and the school of agriculture with its permaculture farm on the other hand.

When asked by a journalist, Phra S. uses the following description: “Have you seen that it is very harmonious? A lot of trees, a lot of vegetables, a lot of fruit. Yes, that’s what we call the harmony decided, biosphere decided. [...] This is the community we call eco-village [...] You are here in ecology temple. In the Maap Euang Agri-Nature Foundation”.⁶ It is interesting to note here that the vocabulary used by the abbot with regard to the site and the temple is immediately linked with notions of harmonious ‘nature’ (“harmony [...] biosphere decided”) and ecology (“eco-village”). Spatially, this may be due to the presence of all the ‘green’ surrounding it, but on another level, it resonates with the approach promoted by

³ Information gathered here about the Maap Euang Meditation Center are based on: Coman 2020; and on the website of the center <http://agrinnature.or.th/>. (10/28/2021).

⁴ Coman 2020: 5:05.

⁵ Coman 2020: 1:44.

⁶ Coman 2020: 0:05. It may be interesting to note that the interview providing the data used here was conducted in English by the Swiss journalist. That is why the vocabulary used by Phra S. may echo other environmental discourses found elsewhere, particularly in some Western contexts.

the center, as we will see further. Moreover, regarding the agricultural setting of the place, Phra S. once again links different broad notions when he says that: “We have a lot of food, banana. We have a lot of vegetables, a lot of nature, birds. Yes, everything is most sufficient. We planted everything here by ourselves”.⁷ However, a tension seems to emanate here from these discourses. Indeed, at one point the focus is on a harmony supposedly ‘natural’ and “biosphere decided”, and on the other hand it is specified that even the ‘natural’ setting of the center was artificially built (“we planted everything here by ourselves”). Nevertheless, this articulation of a harmonious environment artificially arranged within a monastery is perhaps not as surprising as it seems. Indeed, if we are to consider historically the setting of Buddhist establishments in ancient India and the words used in Buddhist texts to describe these (*vihāra* and *ārāma*), it is clear that the vision of the austere, isolated, and ascetic place attached to ‘monasteries’ is highly misleading, as both terms were strongly associated with spaces like ‘recreation grounds’ and ‘gardens’.⁸ Moreover, the words used by Phra S. to describe the center strikingly mirror, on one hand, the expression that is used both in classical Sanskrit poetry to describe a garden in spring and, on the other, the same expression used in Buddhist texts to describe a *vihāra*.⁹ All these emphasize at once a profusion of flowers and fruit, the sound of birds, and an abundance of trees, the whole having been brought to one place and arranged thanks to a human will within a Buddhist monastery.¹⁰

On the other hand, and from the onset, a strong assertion is made by Phra S. about the connections between the temple and its environmentally based position

7 Coman 2020: 2:40.

8 Schopen 2006: 487. Moreover, on this proximity about the artificially verdant setting of the Buddhist monastery and the Indian garden, it has been remarked that: “The early Indian garden, while full of flowers, flowering and fruit trees, and flocks of all sorts of birds, was not a natural space, but a constructed and cultivated one, one that was carefully tended by gardeners, and such gardeners were commonly called – in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist literary sources – *ārāmikas*. But *ārāmika* is yet another term from the lexicon of the garden that is shared with Buddhist monastic sources: Buddhist monastic codes regularly call a category of lay menial worker who do the manual labor of the ‘monastery’ *ārāmikas*. The work-force and attendants of pleasure groves and Buddhist ‘monasteries’ are, then, called the same thing in classical India”. In Schopen 2006: 488.

9 Schopen 2006: 493. Consider for instance the following expression found in the *Cīvaravastu* (GMs iii 2, 107.15): “...made lovely with various trees, filled with the sound of geese and cranes and peacocks, of parrots, mynas, cuckoos, and pheasants, made lovely with all kinds of flowers and fruit” as compared to Phra S.’s words: “Have you seen that it is very harmonious? A lot of trees, a lot of vegetables, a lot of fruit [...] We have a lot of food, banana. We have a lot of vegetables, a lot of nature, birds”.

10 Regarding the various attitudes toward the environment found in ancient Buddhist texts, see Schmithausen 1991.

(“ecology temple”), as well as about its integration of food self-sufficiency and lush environment (“a lot of food [...] a lot of nature [...] we planted everything by ourselves”). This last description strongly echoes the agricultural system of agroecology and its theoretical foundations, by emphasizing on the one hand the important yields produced at the center, and on the other the lush ecosystem that accompanies these farming techniques. To briefly introduce some elements about agroecology, let us for the moment consider that this type of agriculture is usually characterized by minifundaires farmers working their land in a way to produce maximum added value on the limited available surfaces, as well as to use biological processes to enhance already available natural resources by recycling leftovers of each crop and livestock farming systems.¹¹ Moreover, such small-scale peasant agriculture is particularly efficient in the management of its available family labor force, equipment, and resources, as well as in the combining of several crop and livestock farming systems within its production unit.¹² Such is the case with agroecological strategies which focus on breaking monocultures in favor of field diversity, as well as landscape heterogeneity, strategies that are the most viable paths to bring increases in productivity and agroecosystems sustainability and resilience.¹³ As we will see, these are the farming techniques used and promoted at Maap Euang.

2 The engagement of a Monk: Phra S.

Let us now turn to the figure who is at the origin of Maap Euang. As it is quite frequently the case when discussing eco-activism among Thai Buddhist monks,¹⁴ Phra S. became an ‘engaged’ monk because he felt he had a responsibility to act, as a leader of his community. As he himself reflects upon it, he became an “eco-monk, yes, because, I mean, my responsibility to spiritual features. That’s why my work has to be always involved with the environment. My work has to be care, take care for more of human beings and all beings, you see? That’s why I’m all respectful to Mother Earth”.¹⁵ What is significant here is the way in which Phra S. directly links his religious responsibility as a monk to the environmental cause by connecting notion of care not only to his fellow human beings but to all beings

¹¹ Dufumier 2004: 542.

¹² Dufumier 2004: 542–543.

¹³ Nicholls/Altieri/Vazquez 2016: 1.

¹⁴ Susan Darlington has discussed this biographical pattern in detail in the following work, Darlington 2012.

¹⁵ Coman 2020: 6:36.

as well.¹⁶ Moreover, it seems possible to link the point highlighted by Phra S. with the central philosophical Buddhist teachings on *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *upekhā*, and *muditā* aiming towards the welfare of all creatures (*sabbapāṇa-bhūta-hitānukampin*) to see how engagement in favor of others, be it animals, humans, or other beings, could stem from Buddhist teachings. This enlargement of the moral community to be considered enables then Phra S. to introduce himself as an “eco-monk [...] all respectful to Mother Earth”, and to motivate his actions. Moreover, the shift in meaning at work here from the Buddhist consideration for all beings to the somewhat New Age personification of the earth as “Mother Earth”, possibly echoing certain Western environmental discourses.¹⁷ What is more, a personal element may have influenced the choice of Phra S. to focus on agriculture. Indeed, the abbot reveals at one point that: “Like my mother, and she passed away because she was suffering from all the chemicals who killed her”.¹⁸ We see here how the death of his mother, who was a farmer, due to the use of chemicals may have merged with a wider care to ‘Mother Earth’ to counter industrial agricultural practices.

More specifically, it is as a monastic leader that he worried about the concrete consequences of climate change he could directly observe in Thailand and decided

16 This position echoes for example the well-known verses of the *Mettā Sutta* (Sn 1.8):

Na ca khuddaṃ samācare kiñci yena viññū pare upavadeyyuṃ
Sukhino vā khemino hontu sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittatā
Ye keci pāṇa bhūtatti tasā vā thāvarā vā anavasesā
Dīghā vā ye mahantā vā majjhamā rassakāṇukathulā
Diṭṭhā vā yeva addiṭṭhā ye ca dūre vasanti avidūre
Bhūtā vā sambhavesī vā sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittatā
Na paro paraṃ nikubbetha nātimaññetha katthaci naṃ kañci
Byārosanā paṭighasaññā nāññamaññassa dukkhamiccheyya
Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttaṃ āyusā ekaputtamanurakkhe
Evampi sabbabhūtesū mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimānaṃ
Mettaṃ ca sabbalokasmiṃ mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimānaṃ
Uddhaṃ adho ca tiriyañca asambādhaṃ averaṃ asapattaṃ.

“Do not do the slightest thing that the wise would later censure. Think: Happy, at rest, may all beings be happy at heart. Whatever beings there may be, weak or strong, without exception, long, large, middling, short, subtle, blatant, seen and unseen, near and far, born and seeking birth: May all beings be happy at heart. Let no one deceive another or despise anyone anywhere, or through anger or irritation wish for another to suffer. As a mother would risk her life to protect her child, her only child, even so should one cultivate a limitless heart with regard to all beings. With good will for the entire cosmos, cultivate a limitless heart: Above, below, and all around, unobstructed, without enmity or hate”. Translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu 2004.

17 On this issue about Buddhist environmental discourses and their vocabulary, see for example Harris 1997.

18 Coman 2020: 6:36.

to use his own knowledge, that is Buddhism, to try to cope with it. This is particularly strongly stated by Phra S. when he acknowledges the fact that: “As I’m the leader of the monks here, you see, I care the climate change, I’m worried about it. I have to use my wisdom with innovation, how to build buildings, to cool it, and harmony for our meditation to practice. I keep my care and help to our youngster, young generation, young monks. They have to learn how to care to disasters, to global warming. And also, we prepare to defend because with climate change sometimes you cannot plant the food, so we need to learn how to survive with climate change”.¹⁹ Similarly, it seems possible here to consider at least some of the four sublime attitudes (*brahmavihārās*), namely love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, as oriented towards other beings and their well-being to lay the implicit basis for the abbot’s action. This could be the case when he says: “I have to use my wisdom with innovation [...] I keep my care and help to our youngster, young generation, young monks”. The emphasis put by Phra S. on ‘care’ and ‘help’ for younger generations could stem from and corroborate Buddhist attitudes of love, compassion, and sympathetic joy as envisioned in an innovative way (“use my wisdom with innovation”) and a particular context. In turn, this would then echo the main function of these four attitudes understood in ancient Buddhist texts as to motivate individuals to think and act in a certain way. For example,

Love is the state of desiring to offer happiness and welfare with the thought, ‘May all beings be happy’, and so forth. *Compassion* is the state of desiring to remove suffering and misfortune, with the thought ‘May they be liberated from these sufferings’, and so forth. *Sympathetic joy* is the state of desiring the continuity of [others’] happiness and welfare, with the thought, ‘You are rejoicing; it is good that you are rejoicing; it is very good’, and so forth. *Equanimity* is the state of observing [another’s] suffering or happiness and thinking, ‘These appear because of that individual’s own past activities’.²⁰

Moreover, it could be that Phra S.’s actions materialize the fact that “the cultivation of these attitudes would affect the nature and scope of the meditator’s manifest fraternal activity. A practitioner developing concentrated universal love or compassion would be deeply moved to help a wide range of individuals, without exception”.²¹ It is due to his sense of responsibility and care to others that Phra S. set the Maap Euang initiative into motion. This last point is particularly interesting because it sheds light on what is generally termed as *engaged* Buddhism.

¹⁹ Coman 2020: 15:13.

²⁰ Pj II 128. Cited in Aronson 1980: 63–64.

²¹ Aronson 1980: 64.

Indeed, there is an important subtext that emerges from our case study at Maap Euang, where a process of local rearticulating concerning the ‘appropriate’ function of the monk and the role of the monastery within its local community takes place.²² As has been observed elsewhere about this emergent process, “monks are increasingly ministering the communities’ social and livelihood concerns, as well as their spiritual needs [...] The debate [is] as to whether a monk’s primary preoccupation should be as a ‘world renouncer’ seeking detachment from mundane life in order to promote and deepen his spiritual enlightenment, or a ‘world reformer’ who is actively, even proactively, engaged with confronting the issues and challenges of modern everyday life, with and on behalf of their local communities”.²³

3 Reframing Buddhist teachings: the environment crisis as a moral crisis

Today, this kind of (socially) engaged Buddhism is found across the Buddhist world among different countries, schools, and lineages. It can appear virtually wherever there is a Buddhist presence because what unites this heterogenous movement is the way in which local Buddhist *sanghas* or communities – often set forth by religious or lay engaged individuals inspiring a community around them – begin to include a dimension of active social service into their religious or spiritual practice.²⁴ In turn, these local engaged Buddhists will then for example raise funds for the needy or advocate for progressist social changes in favor of great ideals like peace, justice or more local projects like environment protection or the empowerment of rural populations.²⁵ Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of engaged Buddhism is the (re-)interpretation of traditional Buddhist doctrines such as the absence of a self (*anattā*), dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the five precepts (*pañcasīla*), the four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) to make them relevant to address today’s issues.²⁶ Indeed, the specificity of this engaged approach lies in the intention to respond to the problems of a given society by building on key values and teachings of Buddhism

²² Parwell/Seeger 2008: 87.

²³ Parwell/Seeger 2008: 87.

²⁴ Queen 2013: 527.

²⁵ Queen 2013: 527.

²⁶ On the reading of canonical sources in light of contemporary issues, see the excellent analysis provided by McMahan in his ground-breaking work on the dynamics of Buddhism and “modernity”, in McMahan 2008: ch. 1 and 3.

to create a distinctive Buddhist way of making sense of these realities and coping with it.²⁷ In short, “engaged Buddhism draws extensively from tradition, key texts, and well-established concepts, values, and practices of the tradition, interpreting them and applying them in accordance with the challenges and demands of modernity and with its own ethos of response to the immediate needs of sentient beings”.²⁸

To Phra S., the best way to achieve this was to provide a combining set of spiritual and pragmatic solutions in the form of a Buddhist temple integrating on its site a school of agroecology, to counter what is perceived as the moral and environmental effects of the environment crisis. According to Phra S., the location of the temple amid all these trees and fields should serve to explain the approach proposed by the center in an explicit manner to the people visiting. Indeed, as he puts it: “You see banana, this is vegetables, even that you can eat, you can eat right over here. You see, this is all vegetables, you know, we can eat because it’s easy for us to show the people, to show the kids. And it’s delicious”.²⁹ In that sense, what is aimed is to show the mutual continuity and combining of Buddhist teachings – as preached in the temple – with their practical applications in the form of agroecological farming techniques – as taught in the agroecology school. All this results at Maap Euang in an abundance of food, sustainable agricultural practices, and a verdant environment. Moreover, this can be seen for example in the non-use of chemical pesticides, which is as well informed by the agroecological farming goal of not to decrease soil fertility, as well as by the First Buddhist Precept of restraining from the destruction of life (*pāṇātipātā*) by not killing pest.³⁰ This attention to the surrounding environment is found at Maap Euang when the abbot explains that: “We try to keep life simple. No disturbing nature, we try to keep our nature alive. Respecting the Mother. Every building we not put [sic] air conditioned on because we care our people, we care about Mother Earth. We don’t want put on pollution to Mother Earth”.³¹

At first, this union may look strange as the monastic texts of the Vinaya explicitly forbid monks to farm, as they are not allowed to dig the soil to avoid

27 King 2005: 4–5.

28 King 2005: 12.

29 Coman 2020: 5:05.

30 Buddhist ideas for sustaining agroecological practices can be found in various canonical texts, for example in the *Mahāvagga* (I. 78. 4) section of the Vinaya with the following rule: “A Bhikkhu who has received the upasampadā ordination, ought not intentionally to destroy the life of any being down to a worm or an ant”. Translated by Rhys-Davids and Oldenberg 1881.

31 Coman 2020: 2:40.

harming life.³² However, there seems here to be a tension between the monastic code of conduct and monks' daily lives, especially in a local and rural context. In the Thai countryside, it seems that monks were more active than what the textual injunctions of the Vinaya would have allowed them. Indeed, in many parts of Thailand, laypeople from regional traditions expected monks to perform hard labor to be self-reliant and self-sufficient because they had to work to support the monasteries by growing food, raising cattle, or carving boats.³³ Moreover, and specifically related to agriculture, it seems that monks were even the primary force working the land because villagers feared spirits believed to dwell in the fields.³⁴ Indeed, it is still common for Theravāda Buddhist villagers in rural Southeast Asia to believe that successful agricultural production depends on the compliance of 'natural' laws (for example regulating the rains or affecting the ripening of the rice) traditionally conceived in terms of spirits or gods.³⁵ This last point could parallel what Hidas has remarked vis-à-vis an ancient Buddhist "detailed ritual manual giving various instructions enabling the Sangha to provide agriculture-related services to laypeople. These techniques, primarily for rainmaking and also for other kinds of weather control, work by overpowering Nāgas held responsible for precipitation; furthermore, there are prescriptions for the use of specially empowered pesticides to eliminate crop damage".³⁶ However, this is perhaps not

32 *Pācittiya X* (Vin I 10): *Vigarahi buddho bhagavā: kathañ hi nāma tumhe moghapurisā pathaviṃ khaṇissatha pi khaṇāpessatha pi. jīvasaññino hi moghapurisā manussā pathaviyā. n'*; *etaṃ moghapurisā appasannānaṃ vā pasādāya –pa– evañ ca pana bhikkhave imaṃ sikkhāpadaṃ uddiseyyātha: yo pana bhikkhu pathaviṃ khaṇeyya vā khaṇāpeyya vā, pācittiyā ti.* / "The Enlightened one, the Lord, rebuked them, saying: 'How can you, foolish men, dig the ground and have it dug? For, foolish men, people having consciousness as living beings are in the ground. It is not, foolish men, for pleasing those who are not (yet) pleased' ... And thus, monks, this rule of training should be set forth: 'Whatever monk should dig the ground or have it dug, there is an offence of expiation'. Translated by Horner 1949.

33 Kamala 1997: 24.

34 Kamala 1997: 25.

35 Keyes 1995: 114. Indeed, as Keyes drawing on the argument of Tambiah puts it: "The various theories of causation, including beliefs in spirits, in 'vital essence', in gods, in the influences of the stars as well as more modern beliefs such as the germ theory of disease, are to be understood, as Tambiah has argued, in terms of a 'total field' of belief that is cosmologically constructed [...] The spirits and gods believed in by peoples in this part of mainland Southeast Asia provide explanations for the proximate causes of some types of illnesses and accidents, for the abundance or scarcity of the wild plants and animals they eat, for the fertility of the land in which crops are grown [...] On occasion certain events can be explained by villagers either due to a proximate cause, conceived in terms of spirits or gods, or an ultimate cause, conceived of in terms of the Law of Karma". In Keyes 1995: 114–115.

36 Hidas 2019: 26.

that surprising given that monks always had to interact within wider society and find ways to handle their ‘business’.³⁷

Indeed, as Phra S. says about the possibility for monks to implement new practices: “People in Thailand they respect the Buddhist monks, their customs. When they saw the monks ordained trees, they don’t want to cut it. They don’t want to deforestation. But some people they don’t care how much you ordain the trees. It’s not enough prevention to forest. What done is you have to teach the people, make the people can survive and live with the tree. Not only the tree, ordain the people!”.³⁸ This last point is of capital importance because it demonstrates how Buddhist monks in Thailand can benefit from the respect shown by the lay people in order to create new practices. By linking ancient teachings to contemporary issues using their honored place in Thailand, monks show the vitality, creativity, and relevance of their tradition to society, as well as their capability to urge others to act. The respect shown to the monks supersedes then strict adherence to canonical rules and makes room for new customs, invented or rearticulated, to be followed by lay people.

In this regard, the most striking example lies in the profound (r-)evolution of the central notion of *dukkha* (i.e., suffering) which is viewed as stemming from political, economic, social, and environmental causes. *Dukkha* is then still presented by engaged Buddhists as the universal lot of all sentient beings, but its roots go further than mental characteristics of canonical sources (the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion) to include for example market economy or environmental degradation.³⁹ It is interesting to note here that such a position as advocated by engaged Buddhists strikingly mirrors recent critical research in development and environmental studies which state for example that in the “absence of an analysis of the *historical and structural roots* of poverty, hunger, unsustainability, and inequalities, which include centralization of state power, capitalist monopolies, colonialism, racism and patriarchy [...] the prescription will not be transformative enough”.⁴⁰ We can therefore see how such conceptions could work together and reinforce each other. Similarly to what has been observed elsewhere about other similar figures, Phra S. “broadened his role due to recognition of the suffering farmers encounter from rapid economic and agricultural changes and resulting environmental degradation [and] witnessed the impacts of government development policies that promoted contract and cash-cropping, and the rise of consumerism and its consequent tolls on the well-being of villagers’

37 This can be clearly observed from the works of Gregory Schopen, particularly in Schopen 1997.

38 Coman 2020: 17:55.

39 Queen 2013: 532.

40 Khotari/Demaria/Acosta 2014: 364.

lives”.⁴¹ In this sense, framing the environmental crisis and its adverse effects on rural populations in terms of Buddhist morality enables religious activists to provide a basis for shaping behaviors towards solutions.⁴² This is precisely the strategy used by engaged Buddhist to try to motivate their respective communities. These links can be noticed between the lines when Phra S. observes: “When I attach to the Mother Earth that spirituality, a lot of people they try to take advantage from Mother Earth and destroy without care of Mother Earth. So, they always do something harm [*sic*], they put poison, chemicals, and then the Mother Earth is sick [...] That’s why when I became a monk, spirit, harmony, and soul came to be goals along the same path with economy, with the agriculture. That’s why my work has to be always involved with the environment”.⁴³

The case of Phra S. and the Maap Euang Center illustrates well the process through which “environmental monks interpreted the roots of these problems as lying in the greed, anger, and delusion of people across society. They therefore began to look for ways to help people out of the cycle of debt and social and environmental destruction. They turned to Buddhist principles and practices to motivate change in the farmers’ behavior”.⁴⁴ This point is particularly latent in the words of Phra S. when he emphasizes morality: “That is the Buddhist teaching: we have to accept the kamma. But you cannot change the past, even you cannot make sure of the future, but you have to do the present moment as much as you can. Think good, speak good and do good. That is the real Buddhist teaching. Thinking good, speaking good and doing good in this life so next life is good life”.⁴⁵ The focus on ethics or morality (*sīla*) which is considered to be “the real Buddhist teaching” that should motivate the practitioner to act as well as possible in this life. In turn, it seems that, as it is envisioned at Maap Euang, living a virtuous life of this kind could possibly restore a sustainable environment.⁴⁶

This last point is of capital importance because there seems to be an impossibility, in Buddhist texts and teachings, to conceptualize what we could term as ‘nature’ or the environment outside of an extended ethics concerning all sentient beings, comprising for example animals and plants. The central Buddhist teaching at work in this process linking every being and phenomenon arising in the *samsāra*

⁴¹ Darlington 2019: 8.

⁴² Darlington 2019: 4.

⁴³ Coman 2020: 6:36.

⁴⁴ Darlington 2019: 3.

⁴⁵ Coman 2020: 23:05.

⁴⁶ This relation between morality and its effects on the outer world can perhaps be linked to the ‘creation’ story of the *Aggañña Sutta*, where beings’ morality influences the state of the world around them, becoming less and less ‘heavenly’ as they act more and more immorally. In Collins 1993.

is that of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, usually translated as ‘dependent origination’. Moreover, this concept of dependent origination is often referred to as *dhammatā*, that is the Buddhist term for the nature of things as they really are, and within which human experience is not thought of as distinct from every other being or phenomenon coming to existence in the *saṃsāra*.⁴⁷ Therefore, it can be considered that human life and values are not to be contrasted with nor radically set apart from the world around, as it “arises from the recognition that according to the law of nature (Thai, *kotthamachāt*) humans and all other sentient beings are bound together in a universal process of birth, old age, suffering, and death”.⁴⁸ From a Buddhist point of view, these relationships drawn from the teaching of *paṭiccasamuppāda* are to be placed in relation to another key Buddhist concept: that of *anatta*, or ‘non-self’. Together, it is thought that both teachings aim at decentering the self and extending one’s consideration to others, to see the real ‘nature’ of things.⁴⁹ Acknowledging that such a link to ‘nature’ being impossible to be thought of outside of an extended ethics including all sentient beings never had primarily an ‘ecological’ purpose, it seems nevertheless possible to assert that “stating the traditional Buddhist attitudes of not injuring (*ahiṃsā*), benevolence (*mettā/maitrī*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) to entail ‘ecological’ behaviour, is surely justified in so far as these attitudes are not limited to human beings as their object”.⁵⁰ Consequently, it seems possible to consider that the core of Buddhist teachings lies first and foremost in ethics and in a practical method that should be applied in everyday life.⁵¹

47 Kalupahana 1989: 252.

48 Swearer 1997: 33.

49 As Eckel has forcefully argued: “To say that one’s self-interest is served by realizing and enacting an ideal of no-self is to say that one’s own interest is best understood by realizing one’s location in a network of interdependence or ‘interdependent co-origination (*pratitya-samutpāda*) [...] But the practical force of an ‘other-centered’ position emerges quite clearly in different kinds of Buddhist meditative traditions [...] The self’s greatest benefit come from seeking the widest possible benefit for the network of all living beings”. In Eckel 1997: 342–343.

50 Schmithausen 1991: 32. This last point echoes what others have observed, namely that: “Both Buddhism and ecology pursue a view of the world that recognizes interconnection, instead of one that dichotomizes either organism and environment or human and nature; both also consider all life, including humans, as subject to natural laws; doctrinal exponents follow a systems approach regarding the unity, interrelatedness, and interdependence of the components of nature; and both advocate respect and even reverence for nature [...] While these similar elements may be merely parallels rather than identities, today we can see their complementarity and the potential for mutual reinforcement in both theory and practice for Buddhists. In Sponsel/Natadecha-Sponsel 2017: 321.

51 Payutto 1995: 37.

4 The Maap Euang center vis-à-vis governmental and educational policies

Although Thailand's agrarian landscape has undergone tremendous changes during the twentieth century, it is useful to bear in mind that even today a majority of the Thai population could be termed as 'rural',⁵² and a significant part of it is still employed in agriculture. Indeed, official statistics show that in 2014, 53% of the Thai population lived in rural areas, and 40% of it was employed in agriculture,⁵³ reflecting the importance of the agrarian landscape in social and economic terms in Thailand. As mentioned before, the most dramatic changes of the twentieth century regarding the transformation of existing patterns of farming techniques may have occurred in the 60s, when the new military power of the time, especially Prime Minister Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, focused on 'development'⁵⁴ and new economic goals. As Darlington puts it, "in search of a more comfortable life and encouraged by the government, many farmers shifted from subsistence farming and small-scale production into cash-cropping and contract farming".⁵⁵ These changes can be dated when Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat established the National Economic Development Board (NEDB) in 1959, an event that was followed by the issuing, since 1961, of 12 successive five-year development plans under the aegis of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB).⁵⁶ According to Rigg, the promulgation of the First Plan (1961–1966) "can be seen to mark the beginning of the country's development era (*samai pattana*), when the achievement of development (*kaanpattana*) became the driving logic and core raison d'être of much domestic state policy".⁵⁷ This First Plan emphasized the introduction in the Thai context of 'modern' farming techniques from the 'Green Revolution', that is the extensive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers and inputs, extension of cultivated areas, new crop varieties grown for export, and mechanization.

To sum up, it could be said that, since then, the main perspective on agriculture as promoted by successive governments has been "resolutely economic and productivist, with the modus operandi of drawing the population of rural Thailand into the commercial mainstream. It was aimed at promoting market

52 Jonathan Rigg gives a useful analysis and a cautious warning of this term in general and as applied to the Thai context in Rigg 2019: ch. 1.

53 Rigg 2019: 43–44.

54 For a thorough analysis of the history and contextualization of the term, see Rist 2013.

55 Darlington 2019: 2.

56 Rigg 2019: 67.

57 Rigg 2019: 67.

integration and intensifying production on the basis that these were the best means to secure development, both for rural people and for the nation”.⁵⁸

Moreover, a short time after the First Plan was drafted, “the government prohibited Buddhist monks in Thailand from preaching *santutthi*, the teaching of austerity and contentment with what one has [...] The government believed that the teaching of *santutthi* was opposed to the ideals of economic growth, and hence opposed to development. This is merely one example of the many ways in which the government has attempted to confine the role of religion to the performing of rituals”.⁵⁹ This kind of obstacles facing Buddhist activist initiatives in Thailand may be explained by the very close links between the Thai sangha and the state. From an institutional point of view, while it seems that it was in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that royal patronage of monks, monasteries, and monastic lineages began to define the close relationship between Buddhism and the state in Thailand, Buddhism would be truly promoted to the rank of state religion by King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–1925) with the promulgation of the motto ‘nation, religion [Buddhism], king’ symbolized, among other things, by the national tricolor flag.⁶⁰ As Tambiah observed regarding this relationship,

In Thailand, I would argue, Rama I [r. 1782–1809] providing us with the first supporting evidence, there was a further evolution of *dhammasattham* in the direction of a positive law, whereby royal decisions were directly connected with *dhammasattham* rules. This amalgamation of *rajasatham* with *dhammasattham*, which accepts the principle that the king can himself legislate because he embodies dharma, is no doubt historically connected with the development of powerful and stable dynasties. It is exemplified in Thailand by the Chakkri kings, particularly Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, who were the agents of much change in the nineteenth century [...] when the Chakkri kings established themselves in Bangkok and their kingdom steadily grew larger, stronger, and more centralized, with political authority being exercised more effectively than ever before in Thai history. Correspondingly, the sangha too attained a centralization and hierarchization hitherto unknown.⁶¹

This proximity between the Thai sangha and the politics is found spatially in the capital, Bangkok, which acts as the physical location where the most titled monks and the ecclesiastical officers are situated, next to the royal palace, so that there is a strong parallel between the locus of religious, political, and military power which is exclusively concentrated in the capital.⁶²

⁵⁸ Rigg 2019: 73.

⁵⁹ Udomittipong 2000: 191.

⁶⁰ Swearer 2004: 831–832.

⁶¹ Tambiah 1976: 188–189.

⁶² Tambiah 1976: 369.

Going back to the tremendous changes occurring during the twentieth century, it is important to remind that thrown into the broader paths of ‘development’ and ‘Green Revolution’ as it was, Thai society could however still hear some discordant voices. It was particularly the case with what has been termed loosely as the localist movement of the 70s which reached its peak during the 80s. Based on the critical view that market imperatives and global integration in economic flux were not in the advantage of rural populations, proponents of localism advocated and articulated heterogeneous elements such as local knowledge, food production for consumption and not for sale, community participation and decision-making, self-reliance, as well as Buddhist notions of moderation and contentment.⁶³ However, no matter how loud these voices could call for alternatives, they remained limited in effect and did not have enough strength to directly weight in the political arena. Furthermore, the need for alternatives gradually faded away from the mid-80s until 1997, thanks to an extremely rapid economic growth and an important decline in poverty. The situation and context changed dramatically in July 1997 with the Asian financial crisis when the Thai *baht* collapsed, leading to the contraction of the Thai economy by more than 10%, signing the strong comeback of localist ideas and the emergence of the concept of Sufficiency Economy (SE).⁶⁴

This concept was a new economic theory set forth in December 1997 and 1998 by King Bhumibol when he addressed the nation on the occasion of his annual birthday’s speech. In the context of the severe economic crisis of these years and referring to the race to development that characterized Thai domestic policy since the 60s, the King declared in his speeches that “so many projects have been implemented, so many factories have been built, that it was thought Thailand would become [...] a big tiger. People were crazy about becoming a tiger. Being a tiger is not important. The important thing for us is to have sufficient economy. A sufficient economy means to have enough to support ourselves [...] Sufficiency means to lead a reasonably comfortable life, without excess, or overindulgence in luxury, but enough”.⁶⁵ These declarations by a King who was so highly respected by his subjects and whose word weighted so much – remember nevertheless that you can be sent to jail and charged with crime of *lèse-majesté* if you openly criticize the King in Thailand – are indeed an important stage that should not be omitted. It seemed to run directly counter to what had been done and promoted by successive governments since the beginning of the “development era” of the 60s, as we have seen. On the other hand, the practical effects of such declarations should not be

63 Rigg 2019: 76–77.

64 Rigg 2019: 77.

65 UNDP 2007: 20–29. Cited in Rigg 2019: 77–78.

overestimated. In the case of official appeals from the King to change the pattern of economic development in his kingdom, a certain gap can indeed be observed in the implementation of such a policy supposed to lead to effective changes on the level of everyday life, other than specific initiatives⁶⁶ like the one in Maap Euang. This remains the case even though the concept of SE was later included as a broad national goal in the Ninth Plan.

Due to its unique combination of Buddhism and agroecology, it is therefore not surprising that the teachings proposed at the Maap Euang Meditation Center for Sufficiency Economy are based on a mix of Buddhism, agroecological farming technique, self-sufficiency, and on the concept of “Sufficiency Economy” as presented by the late King Bhumibol, Rama IX, (r. 1946–2016). With this blended set of teachings, the school seeks to enable students to develop life skills which mainly aim at food security via a good water and soil management in order to grow one’s own food. This process is thought to fulfill its full potential when the empowerment and self-sufficiency of local rural populations are reached. To fully illustrate it, here is how this approach is described by one of the instructors of the center, and how it opposes governmental development policies:

This is how we are doing our water management. This is the training center, the whole of this area. So, we did this together with the local wisdom and current knowledge. It’s bamboo leaves inside, weaved like a giant basket. We don’t want to pump up the water the whole time, it uses a lot of wasting the money and a lot of fuel and energy. So, we try to use the gravity to store the water up on this hill, next to the residents. This is the handmade mountain. It’s the local material that we can find, it doesn’t make any cost for us and this is how we teach other people that come here. It is inspired by King Bhumibol, “make it like a poor man to be sufficient” and it makes us can be self-reliant. We use what we have, we use just bamboo, soil, and make it together. We aim to teach them about the like skills. How to live a life? That’s the biggest question. And to live a life in a sufficient way but not cut out from the rest of the world, we have wi-fi here. So, the primary thing and the most important thing is to make their own food. So, we teach our students to be able to grow their own food, then we do the water management. That’s the primary thing.⁶⁷

We can observe how this scheme runs counter to wider governmental and economic interests, typically oriented to market expansion and productivity. Indeed, what is at stake here is the possibility to enable people not to be dependent anymore from others – individuals, institutions, or corporations – for food and water, and to become self-sufficient. By so doing, the center seeks to provide an alternative to the pattern of industrial agriculture for export using the techniques

⁶⁶ This point is made clear at length by Rigg when he discusses critically the concept of SE but it is beyond the scope of this paper to deeply address it here. For precisions, see Rigg 2019: 76–83.

⁶⁷ Coman 2020: 10:31.

of the so-called ‘Green Revolution’ promoted since the 60s in Thailand by successive governments.⁶⁸

Moreover, the targeted public of the center is quite large, from elementary school classes visiting for one day, to local farmers coming to learn new ways of improving their techniques, as well as college students staying during the inter-semester break. In 2019, there were 49 people staying at the center and studying for an entire year. During the curriculum, practical trainings in the crops follow theoretical courses, the whole being mixed with moments devoted to Buddhist rituals, in a way that students acquire the knowledge promoted by the center. It is important to note that these life skills and knowledge highlighted at Maap Euang directly run counter to the type of education promoted by the Thai government. This educational system stemmed from the recognition by King Mongkut, Rama IV, (r. 1851–1868) and his son King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, (r. 1868–1910) of the importance of Western knowledge, particularly of the scientific kind, for Thailand to rationalize its bureaucracy and to promote its economic development, leading King Chulalongkorn to implement a reform of education in the 1890s bringing the bases of modern education to the village level.⁶⁹ Indeed, the Maap Euang Center seeks to offer an alternative to the current Thai educative system which was based on this Westernization of the curriculum emerging during the great modernist reforms initiated by King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn.⁷⁰ Consequently, speaking about education, here is what Phra S. has to say:

We don’t believe the government’s education system or the world education because the world education always leads our kids, our young students, young generations to be a slave of the money. Our education system is the love for the money. When they stop, they go back to work for profit but not go back to work for their farm or not go back to their community, their home, to try to support their own motherland because in the university and the school they are never taught to give. They never teach the kids how to respect Mother Earth, how to be compassionate to their own family, they just teach the kids how to become industrial and consumerism. Money is like a god. That is not my ideas, not our ideas.⁷¹

Here again, we can see in these rejections, both agricultural and educational, a similar process of refusal to conform to top-down policies imposed by the state and resulting from this ‘century of changes’ (1850–1950). Consequently, it seems that the center places itself against wider dynamics found throughout Thai society and

⁶⁸ Darlington 2019: 2.

⁶⁹ Keyes 1995: 101–102.

⁷⁰ On the topic of the great reforms of Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn and for an analysis of how they draw inspiration from their European counterparts in the shaping of “modern” institutions in their kingdom, see for example Kamala 1997: ch. 1.

⁷¹ Coman 2020: 13:26.

uses a particular rhetoric which would consider that “as small-holders have become distant and uninformed component of a global trading system, their traditional environmental practices have been replaced by so-called Western attitudes of nature domination [...] It originated as a by-product of political development in post-agrarian societies. Emergences from feudal societies allowed individuals to become intellectual and economic entities which incidentally allowed a separation of socio-cultural matters from the natural environment”.⁷²

On the other hand, the success of initiatives such as Maap Euang should not be overemphasized, as well as the respect shown to monks because, as Phra S. explains: “In the south, the south of Thailand, some people they’re very, very angry when we call them not to do harm to the forest. ‘But clear cut the forest is not your business, it’s not the monk’s business’, you see? Even though we see this cheating, cheating the law, they cut the tree and we cannot defend it. It’s dangerous too”.⁷³ As we have seen, these obstacles stem in part from the contemporary symbiosis between the higher levels of the sangha soliciting the patronage of high-ranked politicians for the material benefit and prestige of their own monasteries and careers, and the politicians engaging in highly visible merit-making activities to legitimize their position.⁷⁴ This closeness between the highest circles of the Thai sangha and the political and royal power came to be materialized in a very personal way as King Mongkut was an ordained member of the sangha for 27 years, between 1824 and 1851, before his accession to the throne, and his son Prince Wachirayan came to dominate the Thai sangha from the early 1890s until 1921.⁷⁵ It was first during his time in monkhood, that Mongkut initiated a religious reformation with the creation in 1833 of a new Buddhist order within the sangha, the Thammayut sect, which was to become the branch favored by the royalty through exclusive allocation of senior positions in the sangha from 1851 to 1910.⁷⁶ This early symbiosis between the Thai sangha and the political and royal power culminated then with the person of Prince Wachirayan, a son of King Mongkut and brother of King Chulalongkorn, when he was made head of the Thammayut order by King Chulalongkorn in 1893, becoming *de facto* Patriarch of the sangha, although he formally assumed this position of Prince Patriarch from 1910 until his death in 1921.⁷⁷ It is from that period onwards that strong links of mutual dependency define the power relationships between the Thai sangha, royalty and politics, each pole trying to use the others at its own advantage.

72 Falvey 2000: 279–280.

73 Coman 2020: 16:11.

74 Tambiah 1976: 397.

75 Keyes 1995: 103.

76 Keyes 1995: 104.

77 Keyes 1995: 104.

However, even though initiatives like Maap Euang place themselves against the Bangkok sangha, and highly depend on the initial impulse from particular individuals, abbots benefit from a certain freedom in regional contexts. Indeed, out of the ‘modern state Buddhism’ created during the period of state centralization and modernization starting in the 1830s, where local temples were integrated in the standardized, bureaucratic, and centralized religion emphasizing the Vinaya promoted by the Thai crown,⁷⁸ regional Buddhist traditions and centers remain thoroughly independent. As Phra S. states: “The abbot, the leader have to have the idea first. Usually, you know, the temples, they’re not mixed atmosphere like me”.⁷⁹ This is particularly the case in Maap Euang where the monastery is woven into the fabric of the community social life, and where its actions spread in the countryside around, as it illustrates that “the reform Buddhism promoted by the Thammayut Order in Thailand [...] has not been fully accepted by a large portion of the Sangha, especially those members of the Sangha who are still firmly rooted in village society”.⁸⁰

5 The center and the concept of agroecology

Let us now turn to these agroecological practices found in the center, to the way they materialize key concepts of agroecology, and to what issues they aim to confront. As it is well-known today, the current pattern of industrial agriculture, that is the dominant pattern which was brought to what was known as the ‘Third world’ since the 50s onwards, is highly unsustainable.⁸¹ Indeed, with its unique mix of mechanization highly dependent on fossil fuel, monocultures eroding biodiversity, synthetic chemicals pesticides and fertilizers polluting soil, water, and air, and water consumption at unsustainable rates, all to increase yield and decrease costs of production, industrial agriculture is harming both the environment and human health.⁸²

What is particularly at stake here is that today’s agriculture and agri-food systems have the dramatic potential to destroy their very base. This is because

78 Kamala 1997: 2.

79 Coman 2020: 5.05.

80 Keyes 1995: 105.

81 As Marta G. Rivera-Ferre summarizes it: “Agri-food systems have multiple interactions with global environmental change [...] With regard to the GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions related to the production and consumption of food, the SRCCL estimates a significant contribution of 21–37% of total anthropogenic emissions, of which 14–28% correspond to agriculture and land use”. In Rivera-Ferre 2020: 150–151.

82 Horrigan/Lawrence/Walker 2002: 445.

“climate change has the potential to irreversibly damage the natural resource base on which agriculture depends, with grave consequences for food security but also for the economic development of a large number of developing countries that significantly rely on agriculture”.⁸³ One example of the variety and depth of questions that can be addressed when starting from agriculture is the fact that

This food system, buttressed by historically-continuing structures of power, including anthropocentrism, coloniality, patriarchy, capitalism and developmentalism, coupled with updated modes of accumulation by dispossession, like neoliberal restructuring and land/water/ocean grabbing. Besides failing to feed the world’s people, this food system propagates environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity/agrobiodiversity loss, health problems, cultural erosion, and mass displacement/forced migration from rural to urban areas across the Global South and to the North. Consequently, its structural violence reinforces other crises.⁸⁴

What is at stake here is that by changing the modes of agricultural production, it could therefore be possible to solve political, economic, environmental, gender, health, cultural, or migration problems. In our case, we will limit here the discussion to the broad environmental factor by turning now to what has been identified as one solution to adverse effects of industrial agriculture: agroecology.

The concept of agroecology first emerged during the 80s and was seen to resist and be an alternative to simplification through monocultures, industrialization of all aspects of the food system, and corporate control over it.⁸⁵ From the beginning, it ambited to counter the system set forth with the techniques of the Green Revolution. Concretely, the greater the vegetational diversity among an agroecosystem, the greater its capacity to react against parasite and disease problems will be enhanced, as well as its capacity to adapt to climate change, whereas in a simplified agroecosystem (monoculture) key functional species are eliminated, thereby reducing its capacity to deal with changes and to provide ecosystem services (i.e., soil fertility, parasite regulation, pollination).⁸⁶ Moreover, when compared to industrial agriculture or monoculture crops, diversified agroecosystems following agroecological techniques were found to support “greater biodiversity, better soil quality and water holding capacity, and exhibited greater energy output/input ratios, and resilience to climate change. Diversified farming systems also enhance the regulation of weeds, diseases, and insect pests while increasing pollination services”.⁸⁷ Therefore, we

83 Hoffmann 2020: 40.

84 Figueroa-Helland/Thomas/Perez Aguilera 2018: 175.

85 Gliessman 2018: 599.

86 Nicholls/Altieri/Vazquez 2016: 1–2.

87 Nicholls/Altieri/Vazquez 2016: 2.

can see that agroecology has the potential to address concretely issues stemming from “conventional” agriculture.⁸⁸ In the crops and at its best, an agroecological system reaches a strong diversification through integrated crop/animal assemblages increasing interactions and allowing the agroecosystem to create and sustain its own soil fertility, natural pest control, crop productivity, without any external input.⁸⁹

This is exactly the case in Maap Euang. Indeed, next to the Buddhist temple, the school of agroecology and self-sufficiency seeks to deal concretely and efficiently with the diverse local issues found in nearby villages. These initiatives consist for example of projects developing or improving water catchments, soil fertility, and farming techniques. Whatever the aim, these are as often as possible based on materials available locally such as clay or bamboo to build houses, wells, or any other infrastructure needed by local farmers and villagers. Indeed, as Gliessman has defined it,

Agroecology is the integration of research, education, action and change that brings sustainability to all parts of the food system: ecological, economic, and social. It's transdisciplinary in that it values all forms of knowledge and experience in the food system. It's participatory in that it requires the involvement of all stakeholders from the farm to the table and everyone in between. And it is action-oriented because it confronts the economic and political power structures of the current industrial food system with alternative social structures and policy action. This approach is grounded in ecological thinking where a holistic, systems-level understanding of food system sustainability is required.⁹⁰

After having briefly presented biological features of the agroecology approach in relation to the environment or ecosystem, this definition points out the social change feature inherent in agroecology. This last feature is of vital

88 It has been observed that agroecological practices could benefit efficiently to:

- Increased ecological resilience and reduced risk in weathering changing climate and environmental conditions;
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation through reduced reliance on fossil fuel and fossil fuel-based agricultural inputs, increased carbon sequestration and water capture in soil;
- Conservation of biodiversity and natural resources and protection of ecosystem services;
- Improved health and nutrition by providing diverse, fresh and nutritious diets and reducing incidence of pesticides poisonings;
- Economic stability from diversified sources of income, a more even spread of labor requirements and production benefits over time and reduced vulnerability to commodity price swings and rising costs of purchased inputs;
- Increased social resilience and institutional capacity, including shared knowledge and collectively managed economic and social support networks. In Ishii-Eiteman 2020: 23.

89 Nicholls/Altieri/Vazquez 2016: 2.

90 Gliessman 2018: 599.

importance because it shows that, as a movement, agroecology can join and support other ones, such as food sovereignty or Indigeneity, to suggest a dialogue between varied and marginalized ways of knowing challenging assumptions supporting dominant approaches to ‘development’.⁹¹ That is why agroecology should not be thought as only a mere alternative to the dominant agri-food system. Indeed, this approach is much more than that. “While it produces ‘food’, it fosters (agro)/biodiversity, polycultures, closed metabolic cycles and ecosystem restoration, coupled with labor and decision-making based on communality, reciprocity, consensus, equity, and intersectional social justice”.⁹² Therefore, agroecology is essentially a political project as much as an agricultural revolution.⁹³

As we have seen from the discourses of Phra S. and the instructor, farming techniques drawn from agroecology as practiced at Maap Euang echo at least some of the critical points raised by this alternative approach and seek to advance change around the center. Moreover, these agroecological techniques are embedded in the framework of Sufficiency Economy, which they contribute to reinforce. What is important for us here, is the way in which the community at the Maap Euang Meditation Center for Sufficiency Economy is inspired by and embodies spatially and in its very name the concept set forth by the late King Bhumibol, along Buddhist teachings and agriculture. Spatially, SE proposes to concretely operate the following division of the territory: out of 100% of a given land plot, 30% of the total surface should be devoted to water management only, 30% exclusively to rice cultivation, 30% to trees and orchards, and only the 10% of remaining surface to human infrastructures. Without surprise, it was the blueprint followed when establishing the center. As Phra S. puts it: “I will show you the good projects. How the projects follow Rama IX [i.e., King Bhumibol]. We call it Sufficiency Economy, and the new theory is we divide the land, like 30% we have water, 30% we have to have the rice fields, 30% plant the trees and vegetables, and 10% we have to have a shelter. That means 100% not just monocrops but the 100% have ecology, like an Eden”.⁹⁴ In addition to this

91 Ishii-Eiteman 2020: 22.

92 Figueroa-Helland/Thomas/Perez Aguilera 2018: 182.

93 For a thoroughly discussion about the political aspect inherent to the agroecology approach, see the recent and detailed work of González de Molina et al. 2020.

94 Coman 2020: 17:55. In addition, this artificially constructed dimension of a heavenly “Eden” may echo or confront the vision that “in Buddhist ideal worlds, in paradises like Sukhāvati, at least in the Indian conception of them, there are no animals. Only birds (whose song one did not want to miss); but these birds are merely artificial products, not living beings. These paradises are extremely unnatural also in many other regards: without mountains, with quadrangular ponds, crowded with people (all looking alike), and containing trees and flowers that are not living plants

physical dimension, SE as practiced at Maap Euang follows the definition we can find in the NESDB's Ninth Five-Year Economic and Social Development Plan (2002–2006):

“Sufficiency economy” is a philosophy that stresses the middle path as the overriding principle for appropriate conduct and way of life of the entire populace [*sic*]. It applies to conduct and way of life at individual, family, and community levels. At the national level, the philosophy is consistent with a balanced development strategy that would reduce the vulnerability of the nation to shocks and excesses that may arise as a result of globalization. “Sufficiency” means moderation and due consideration in all modes of conduct, and incorporates the need for sufficient protection from internal and external shocks [...] In particular, great care is needed in the application of theories and technical know-how and in planning and implementation [...] A balanced approach combining patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom, and prudence is indispensable to cope appropriately with critical challenges arising from extensive and rapid socio-economic, environmental, and cultural change occurring as a result of globalization.⁹⁵

As can be deduced from such a definition, SE tries to give a rather loose theoretical framework to a moderate way of life that can be put into practice in a variety of situations and interpreted in many ways. This is exactly the case at Maap Euang where the concept is linked with agriculture and is strongly linked and thought in connection to the late King Bhumibol, thereof giving its legitimacy to the center's efforts – we will remember here that it was the king himself who granted the land to build the center. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the ideas behind such a definition are conveyed in, or at least resonate with, a Buddhist vocabulary. Compare for example the passage above with the following discussion of the two types of happiness (*sukha*) present in Buddhist philosophy,

Most people are usually caught up in the search for the first kind of *sukha* [*sāmisasukha* – a kind of *sukha* that attempts to fill a lack or feeling of deficiency and is dependent on the allurements of material things (*āmisā*)]; it is impossible for them to fulfill their desires at all times and sustains this type of *sukha*, because it is subject to external causes and changes in accordance with natural law. It is necessary, therefore, for people to establish a state of mind similar to the second type of *sukha* [*nirāmisasukha*, a spiritual happiness that is problem-free, allowing a person to assist others with their difficulties], so that this *sukha* may be the foundation for living in the world with comfort and true happiness, with the least amount of *dukkha*.⁹⁶

but, like the soil, made of jewels (so that they do not wither, die and decay)”. In Schmithausen 1991: 16.

⁹⁵ NESBD 2002: i. Cited in Rigg 2019: 80.

⁹⁶ Payutto 1995: 70–71.

As we can see due to the proximity of these passages, the concept of SE and Buddhist ideals of living could mutually reinforce each other to create a somehow distinctive framework containing the social and economic behaviors of individuals. However, this eco-activism advocated by monks as found in Maap Euang and elsewhere is still contested and sometimes hardly fought in Thailand today because it opposes the Thai sangha hierarchy, which is very closely linked to the royalty, hence to politics. Running counter to wider government interests, initiatives like the one briefly presented here are nevertheless and overall acquiring growing support and legitimacy in contemporary Thai society. Indeed, as it has been remarked, “the material benefits of the orthodox top-down, growth-driven approach to development had started to percolate down to the rural periphery, but were accompanied by increasing problems in the form of social dislocation, economic dependency, environmental degradation and constrained local potential. Grassroot development encouraged specific and targeted development interventions which were in tune with local resources and needs, and which drew on local knowledge”.⁹⁷ This process of growing support mainly happens now via synergies with actors from the civil society, like various environmental or social NGOs working to halt damages caused by climate change or trying to empower rural populations, as well as collaborations with college research programs on farming techniques, in order to provide technical experience sharing, policy advocacy, and discussion groups.⁹⁸

Consequently, our case study could provide another example of the way ‘technology’ (or ‘progress’, or ‘development’) is not culture-neutral any more than value-neutral because to adopt a given ‘technology’ is to adopt the matrix of presuppositions in which it is embedded; that is modern technology or development is embedded in the dominant Western paradigm.⁹⁹ The Maap Euang case shows then how such tensions, reframing, and articulations take place today within the Thai context.

6 Conclusions

Coming to term with this paper, I have tried to show the way in which Buddhist ideas, social engagement, and agroecological practices join forces in a particular Thai case study. We have seen how these aspects could mutually reinforce each other to create an ecological consciousness informed by an alternative Buddhist

⁹⁷ Parnwell/Seeger 2008: 85.

⁹⁸ Nitasmai 1997: 281.

⁹⁹ Callicott/Ames 1989: 280.

discourse that reframes canonical Buddhist teachings in light of the contemporary climate crisis in Thailand. We have seen how such a process aims at decentralization, localized and more equitable resource management, participation, sustainable agricultural practices and self-reliance.¹⁰⁰ In this regard, Buddhist ideas and ideals can sustain agroecological practices in a Buddhist cultural context, and vice versa. Indeed, agroecological practices could in turn emphasize and materialize certain Buddhist teachings regarding the place and actions of human beings within their wider environment. This is particularly significant in our case study where “a great potential to mobilize the community to undertake ecological restoration at the grassroots level by invoking cultural and dharmic paradigms”¹⁰¹ lies. First, I have contextualized the center and noted its specificity in that it seeks to raise awareness to the environment and promote alternative ways of thinking about and doing agriculture. Then, I presented the figure of Phra S., at the origin of this site, which enabled us to better understand the emergence of a personal Buddhist engagement, and its place within a given community. Next, I have discussed the reframing of Buddhist principles to cope with current issues, and the way in which the environment crisis was envisioned as stemming from a moral crisis. This point allowed us to see which processes are used to give legitimacy to such initiatives, and the changes it seeks to bring about. I have then given some elements regarding the political relationships between the center and the state, particularly concerning development and educational national policies. By so doing, we observed the tensions and relations at play between the Thai sangha, politics, and alternative discourses and practices. Finally, we have seen how such a particular case contributes to the spreading of alternative farming techniques in its vicinity. It is obvious that the case study presented here should be investigated more deeply in order to fully apprehend and understand its ideological foundations, internal organization, integration into its regional and national settings, and connections to other engaged Buddhist initiatives. This will be the aim of further research, mainly through ethnographic fieldwork and deeper analysis of canonical references set forth to legitimize and sustain the activities promoted in Maap Euang.

Moreover, my case study seems to corroborate the observation regarding continuous processes that see “modern Theravāda formations emerged in response to competing and especially secular bodies of knowledge, scientific technologies, globalizing networks and novel social practices [...] The conditions of modernity profoundly affected traditional lifeways within Theravāda *sāsana*, its social relationships and material conditions. Monks and kings in Thailand [...]

100 Taylor 1997: 40–41.

101 Jain 2016: 144.

and elsewhere in the Theravāda world enacted far-reaching institutional reforms and formulated modern Buddhist ethics”.¹⁰² In this sense, what I wish to have shown is how different themes merge into each other when the use of farming techniques influenced by Buddhist teachings, a scarcity of resources, and the necessity to feed one’s family collide.¹⁰³ Finally, I wish to have once again reasserted the relevance of our field to the broader academia by engaging discussion with theories, methods, and current themes found in it but interesting to the wider society as well.¹⁰⁴

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102 Schober/Collins 2018: 8.

103 Kaufman 2016: 189.

104 This largely echoes the observation made by Cabezón about the “call for an integrated and mutually interpenetrating research program aimed at the understanding of Buddhism as a multifaceted entity. It is, in effect, a critique of methodological isolationism [...] The perceived isolationist tendencies of the discipline are seen as fostering a kind of intellectual hermeticism that makes buddhological scholarship increasingly less relevant to the larger academic community [...] Intellectually, it is said to bring life to the discipline by suggesting new problems, and new perspectives on old ones; it is also said to give the discipline a voice in current debates and ultimately to help the field by demonstrating that the data from Buddhist cultures is relevant to the conversations that are taking place in the broader intellectual community”. In Cabezón 1995: 264–265.

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