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Buddhist Environmentalism in Modern Thai Poetry

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the significant theme of nature and the ultimate goal of preserving nature and environment through Buddhist philosophy expressed in modern Thai poetry.

Nature and the beauty of nature have always been a significant theme in Thai poetry of various genres. In modern Thai poetry, the theme of nature still prevails. Nevertheless, since Thailand faces the serious problem of deteriorating environment, modern Thai poets try to convey their concern through their works. Angkarn Kalayanaphong is one of the most prominent poets who passionately advocate the protection of nature and to declare his ultimate goal in composing poetry to save humanity.

The poet perceives nature as the great teacher for mankind. He believes that it is the duty of human beings to follow the path of loving kindness of nature and live in harmony with nature. Without nature, human beings may not be able to attain the real value of humanity, let alone to attain enlightenment.

Another prominent poet, Naowarat Pongpaiboon emphasizes the virtue of nature as an object of contemplation. The poet describes magnificently the 'wisdom' gained through contemplating the movement, the beauty or even the mystery of nature. Thus nature becomes an indispensable environment and spiritual enhancement for dharma practice.

In summary, we can say that modern Thai poets are offering a 'Buddhist' solution to the problem of environment through the virtue and 'wisdom' of nature.

Buddhist Philosophy and Thai Literary Convention

Buddhism has always been the most important influence in the creation of Thai literary works. Most classical Thai poetry has been composed from Jataka stories and has a 'function' of 'teaching' Buddha Dharma in the most impressive and

successful manner. Therefore, one can say with confidence that most 'didactic' poetry in Thai is an expression of deep-rooted faith in the teaching of Lord Buddha.

In modern Thai poetry, the poets no longer compose long poems from Jataka tales, but they are still under the influence of Buddhist thought and value. The contemporary poets under this study are all modern Buddhists who convey the value of enlightenment as wisdom through their works.

Angkhan Kalayanapong: Love of Nature and Path of Wisdom

Like most Thai poets from the past to the present, Angkhan is very much inspired by the beauty and marvel of nature. As a painter-poet, he is capable of 'painting' nature with the beauty of language as well as with the beauty of colors. Angkhan's description of nature is vivid and unique. He uses a lot of personification to render more liveness and gentleness to nature.

His deep love for nature makes him admire the apparent beauty of nature he describes very vividly by creating beautiful images with details and colors.

Far beyond the wide horizons are the mountains lines,
With the cliffs and valleys intertwined.
Forlorn and lonely are the clouds uphigh,
And on each mountain shines the blue, pale gray divine!¹

(Angkhan, 1992: 121)

Flowering indeed are these wild green screens,
Full of buds and blossoms, yellow, red, white, and cream,
With young and tender leaves ravishingly adorning,
Thus render divine and beautiful the whole surrounding!

(Angkhan, 1992: 121)

¹All the quotation from the practical texts are this researcher's translations.

This soft golden moss, gleaming in orange beams,
Is like a magic carpet on the rocks' recesses.
Precious ornaments of the mountains are they all
With wonderful wild flower of every kind!

(Angkhan, 1992: 98)

Besides, the poet also sees beyond the surface of nature to the spiritual beauty of nature that is normally overlooked by others. The poet looks at nature closely and gives equal value to all elements in nature for he sees that all elements are interrelated and interdependent.

Thousands of grains of dust and sand
Creating the Earth for us to live
Are, no doubt, more virtuous and precious
Than any gems or diamonds!
Why look down on small wild flowers?
Are they not the precious gifts from Heaven
To beautify and adorn this Earth?

.....

Without sand, stone and earth,
What is the value of gems and diamonds?
Even the lowest creatures, insects or worms,
Are worthy of our appreciation,
With the heart free from contempt,
We can learn the values of all things!

(Angkhan, 1992: 14)

The poet clearly expresses his respect for nature especially when he declares that nature is in fact his great teacher or Guru.

My divine teachers are all over the sky
The Moon and bright Stars in heaven
Kindly tell me the wondrous mystery of Night
And various universes, glittering like diamond!
The Mountains teach me the taste of loneliness,
And the Clouds train my forlorn heart to wander.
The falling Dew teaches me how the heart can freeze
When love and hope fade away like Night.
The flowing stream, weeping to the pebbles,
Invites me to cry silently for my broken dreams!
For Cupid wakes me up to Love
Only to show me all its sweet sufferings!
Even the smallest wild flowers are like friends
Who help to enlighten and sharpen my mind.
Thus will I devote my life to all Nature Teachers
Trying to realize the divinity of poetry!

(Angkhan, 1992: 101)

For the poet, nature is more than just beauty but a source of spiritual wisdom. The beautiful big trees in the forest never protest the cruelty of men who slaughter them. They only give fragrant flowers, fruits and even their lives to all men with out discrimination. In fact they are like a Bodhisatava who sacrifices all for the benefit of others.

Thus the poet believes that to learn from nature the way to live without greed would be the ideal solution to the crisis of modern men. If we appreciate and respect nature enough, we could save all natural environments and know how to exploit nature within limits for the common good of all. If we follow the noble example of nature we will not only save our environment and our world but we will also save humanity from dehumanizing themselves.

Angkhan emphasizes that to be able to see and perceive the real beauty of nature is a basic quality of any human being. He persuades his readers to emulate the noble example of nature. He tries to 'wake' men up from their blindness and ignorance towards the invaluable beauty of nature by advocating the teaching of the Lord Buddha as the ideal way of life.

Now awake, let us find the divine path
Of our noble and great Buddha.
With our whole heart let us sacrifice
And truly give for joy, day and night.
Come, let us change beliefs and ways of life
To create a heavenly world well-purified.
Pray, never kill, have mercy on others.
Instead use the blood to grow flowers!
Raise our heart as high as the bright stars
Let it be shining with brilliant noblesse
With bravery and sound wisdom,
And immortal heart, forever timeless!

(Angkhan, 1992: 15)

Naowarat Pongpaiboon: Love of Nature and Dharma Contemplation

Like most Thai poets, the theme of nature and Buddhist philosophy are highly predominant in the works of Naowarat Pongpaiboon.

In his two famous collections of poetry 'The Flute Song' and 'Point of View,' the poet exquisitely combines the theme of love for Nature and Dharma contemplation. The expression of respect and love for nature is in accordance with Angkhan's attitude. The first example illustrates the poet's delicate expression of love for nature.

Roadside Flowers²

Roadside Flowers
Twinkling Twinkling swiftly
Those sweet small flowers
Dancing lively, radiantly
Parading their beauty in the wind!

The fog curtain closing
The sun softening the rays
Consoling the delicate flowers
Sinking into the unfathomable universe!

The rough wind will destroy you
Flowers sweet, be not too vain
Your precious petals falling
Spreading over, everywhere!

How fragile and precious you are
How I love and value you
On every wild Path
Sweet flowers blossoming fearlessly!

(Naowarat, 1983: 32)

In this poem, the poet is trying to convey the 'value' of natural wild flowers as an important environment for human beings. The title of the poem 'Roadside Flowers' or in Thai 'Dokmai Rimthang' has a connotation of 'worthless' or 'insignificant' flowers or 'girls.' As these flowers are easily seen and picked with no effort by anyone passing by the road or the path.

But in this poem these 'insignificant' flowers are being praised as an important element in nature that beautifies and creates natural balance for the environment.

² The titles of the poetry in Point of View and The Flute Song are given by the researcher for the convenience of reference.

The poet's respect for all elements in nature also leads to the contemplation on nature and learning Dharma lessons from nature that finally render 'wisdom' to human beings.

Follow flowing water

Follow the flowing water
Listening to its murmurs
The leaves whispering
And the glorious green grass!

Follow the flight of birds
To the yond mountain!
And in deep dark forest
Taking a sweet rest!

Follow the dance of the wind
Blustering far far away
The leaves floating in the air
Falling down to earth!

Follow the roaming heart
Ever unending
Till the body crumbling
No more mind nor dreams!

(Naowarat, 1992: 15)

The above poem reflects the perfection of the abundance of nature - flowing water, green grass, birds, mountains and forests. This 'perfection' of nature becomes an object of Dharma contemplation for the poet. This could be an 'indirect' message from the poet that natural abundance is so essential to the development of spiritual wisdom. The end of the poem likewise reflects this wisdom where the poet discovers the 'reality' of unending samsara.

As the poet realizes that nature contemplation enhances the understanding of Dharma, he encourages everyone to pay attention to the natural environment around us. The changes in all surrounding nature reflect both the 'fragility' of environment and the 'virtue' of this fragility that enhances the understanding of impermanence.

Now wake up

Now wake up
Look at the impermanence
And the wisdom
Side by side with ignorance

Joyous just for a day
Like the floating smoke
Going up and then falling down
Becoming the melting dust!

Red blossoms spreading
Growing into a big tree
Just to swiftly die
And give birth to a new one

Now wake up
Look at the changing impermanence
Here and there
Each moment in the wind!

(Naowarat, 1992: 26)

The poem above illustrates clearly the cycle of lives in samsara. The poet advocates the importance of 'being awake' in order to be able to see this ongoing movement of samsara. The verb 'wake up' or to be 'awake' significantly conveys the concept of Buddhist philosophy. To 'wake up' in a Buddhist sense is to be

awaken from ignorance. In other words, to be 'enlightened' in a Buddhist sense is to get rid of ignorance or defilements in the mind.

The poet seems to be suggesting that observing the impermanence of nature is a 'way' of gaining wisdom. In this sense, nature is a 'great Dharma teacher' for human beings.

This similar idea is expressed beautifully in another poem 'Beyond The World'

Beyond The World

At the merging point of blue sky and horizon
Bathed in the sun radiance
Of the sky of Time
Our hearts will meet
Myriads of Everything
Both Magnificent and Insignificant
The peaceful stability
Greeting the swift Movement
Remaining so free
No bondage, day or night
For always
In the world yet Beyond
Beyond joy and sorrow
Acting within reason
As should be done!

(Naowarat, 1992: 13)

This poem could be considered as a 'summary' of the Dharma lesson learnt through the contemplation of nature. The 'ultimate' goal of this practice is to be in this world yet be 'beyond' this world. This means to remain 'free' from all worldly bondages. By remaining free from worldly bondages, one is also free

from joy and sorrow, and could hope to attain the ultimate joy of serenity and peace.

A Buddhist Solution for Preserving Environment

From the study of the works of these two contemporary Thai poets, we will see how 'Buddhist environmentalism' is expressed in the form of poetry which has always been a means of perpetuating and sustaining 'wisdom' for Thai society from the past to the present.

These two modern poets have simply followed the 'path' of their 'guru' in advocating the ultimate goal of 'saving' humanity through their works.

Though the 'style' of the two poets are quite different, they seem to share the same aspiration and the same goal. Their passionate love for nature and their deep faith in Buddhist philosophy are 'fundamental' inspiration for their literary success.

The exquisite description of nature by both poets serves ultimately to endear nature to the reader. At the same time, the multifaceted nature explored by the poets expanded the reader's perception of nature. Thus when the poets contemplate the greatness of nature as their 'spiritual' guru, the reader could follow the poets and learn to appreciate nature more deeply.

As the readers' appreciation of nature increase, so are their love and respect for nature. This would be a great step to their awareness of the importance of preserving nature and environment.

In the case of Noawarat Phongpaiboon, the poet even strongly suggests that contemplating the movement and finesse of nature could bring 'wisdom' like the wisdom gained through meditation in Buddhist tradition which finally would lead to ultimate good of enlightenment.

When we learn to see the wisdom of nature, we can improve and develop our mind accordingly. With this spiritual improvement, we can ourselves become better environmentalists for the society and for the world.

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