

The Framework

Only the genuine Buddhists (those who have Dhamma and know the Buddha) can conserve Nature, while those who are Buddhists in name alone cannot do it. True Buddhists are able to conserve the deeper Nature, that is, the mental Nature. Non-genuine Buddhists can't conserve Nature, even the material kind. When the mental Nature is well conserved, the outer material Nature will be able to conserve itself.

—Buddhadasa Bhikkhu¹

THE IMAGE of ordaining a tree sparks strong reactions. A scholarly debate surrounds the degree to which Buddhism is inherently environmental, but that debate remains primarily abstract: whether the Buddha raised concerns for the suffering of the natural world or focused primarily on humans; whether Buddhist scriptures encompass an environmental ethics; and what Buddhist concepts of nature are (Harris 1991; Holder 2007; Schmithausen 1997). The idea of wrapping a tree in a monk's orange robes in order to preserve the forest goes beyond these debates. The question of whether a tree can even be ordained because that status is reserved solely for humans aside (see Blum 2009; Darlington 2009), the act raises issues of politics, economics, inequalities, and power. What can religion offer these situations? In Thailand, Buddhism is a lived religion, one that responds to ever-changing circumstances and a variety of agendas. How it is interpreted and acted upon impacts not only how people perceive the world and their place within it, but their social responsibilities as well. Ordaining a tree is a radical, provocative, and controversial act that challenges people to take responsibility—for themselves, the society, and the natural environment.

Environmentalism captured the Thai imagination in the latter half of the twentieth century. While the issues involved ranged from urban pollution to hydroelectric dams to resource depletion, nothing seemed to occupy the growing environmental movement more than deforestation. What happens to trees is part of a much larger, complex problem, but trees matter.² They are tangible reminders of the power of the natural world, homes for not only birds, monkeys, and tigers, but, in the Thai world, spirits as well. And they symbolize the predominant religion in the country, Buddhism, because of the Buddha's intimate relationship with trees: He was born in Lumbini grove, enlightened under a bodhi tree, and physically passed (*parinibbana*, Pali) under a grove of sal trees. Not all trees are sacred, but they have come to embody the debates, struggles, successes, and failures of environmentalism in Thailand, particularly the efforts of a small number of Buddhist monks engaged in conserving forests, protecting wildlife, and changing the imbalance of negative effects of resource degradation and livelihood choices.

Five images of sacred trees encapsulate the evolution of what has become a Buddhist environmental movement in Thailand. The first is of the numerous trees with colorful cloths tied around their trunks (Plate 1). They are usually found in temple compounds but exist quietly in other auspicious sites across the country. Little notice is taken of them as Thai Buddhists proceed about their daily lives. They are just there.

The second image occurs in a dark forest (Plate 2). A Buddhist monk reaches around a moderately sized tree, tying an old orange robe with no fanfare. He utters a quiet incantation, but not loud enough for observers to hear. Nearby a small number of lay villagers do the same, marking trees throughout the forest as valuable to someone.

Far more conscious and conspicuous is the image of twenty monks seated near a large tree in the mountains of Nan Province. The monks chant, connected with each other and the tree by a white thread that conveys sanctity from the words to the tree. Shortly thereafter two monks wrap a tightly twisted orange robe around the wide circumference of the tree (Plate 3). The act is documented by multiple photographers, and witnessed by more than two hundred people—villagers, nongovernmental workers, and academics. A sign nailed to the tree reads, "*Tham lai pa khue tham lai chat*," which can be translated as "To harm the forest is to harm life," or alternatively, "To harm the forest is to harm one's future lives," or "the nation" (Darlington 1998, 10).

Henry Delcore provides the fourth image through his description below, the setting of a tree ordination performed in 1996:

The focus of the ritual space was the altar at the front of the clearing, a tiered structure of carved wood tables four feet wide and five feet tall, the lower levels occupied by candles, flowers and incense, the top level by a foot-tall Buddha image. To the right of the altar stood an easel with a photo portrait of the King, set about level with the Buddha image. To the left of the altar was a folding table with the microphone for the public address system, where speakers stood to address the crowd later in the day. Directly to the right of the altar were chairs for the monks, who had not yet arrived. Eventually, another cluster of chairs formed near the monk section and would be occupied by the local officials and other honored guests in attendance; the villagers sat on mats on the ground. . . . Each ordination made use of a primary cloth marked by the kanchanaphisek symbol [the seal of the current Chakri Dynasty], which was tied to the “mother tree,” the largest tree in the area. A large number of smaller, unmarked cloths, all the saffron color of monks’ robes, were also tied by participants to trees in the area. A *saay sin*—a white string used in many Thai rituals to symbolically bind together the *khwan*—had been tied to the Buddha image on the altar, and ran around the entire clearing area, encompassing the participants. (*Khwan* is a kind of soul stuff possessed by both animate and inanimate entities.) Over the altar, a twenty foot long banner announced the formal title of the forest ordination program: “Program for the Community Forest Ordination of 50 Million Trees in Honor of the King’s Golden Jubilee.” (Delcore 2004b, 11–12)

The last image is the most recent, although forms of all the others continue to this day. Three beautiful, young Thai women pose holding a monk’s robe around a large tree (Plate 4). Behind them a few other wrapped trees can be seen, but no other context identifies the place or the smiling women. The caption of this newspaper photograph reveals the women as contestants in the 2010 Miss Thailand Universe contest in Kamphaeng Phet Province (“Beauty Contestants Ordain Tree” 2010).³

All five images represent tree ordinations in Thailand. All but the first occurred since the late 1980s. The tree ordination—the ritual described in all but the first image—is the quintessential symbol of the Thai Buddhist environmental movement. Since the late 1980s a small number of monks have performed these rituals in which they consecrate a tree and the surrounding forest to bring attention to environmental problems, especially concerning

the forests and water, that make life difficult for Thai villagers, and by implication, for the nation as a whole. The rituals and the trees wrapped in orange robes remind villagers of their dependence on the forest for their livelihoods—food, materials for daily life, and water. As monks depend on the laity for their material needs, so too the forest depends on the people who live around it for preservation. People can either protect the forest or cut it down. Monks concerned with the consequences of the latter use the image of ordained trees to encourage people to do the former.

The movement is not about trees per se, but the monks and the people with whom they live and work who must deal with the direct consequences of environmental destruction. In fact, the monk credited with performing the first tree ordination did not intend to ordain a tree. He performed a ritual to consecrate a forest and seedlings for reforestation to raise awareness of people's dependence on them and to object to deforestation occurring due to logging. The villagers who participated referred to the seedlings as "ordained trees" (*ton mai buat*), thereby coining the term that has come to identify a broader movement. Buddhist environmentalism is only one aspect of a larger, vibrant environmental movement in Thailand comprised of many interpretations and goals, a movement that Hirsch (1996, 15–16) describes as "a multi-faceted discourse that deals with key social, economic and political issues, including questions of control over resources by empowered and disempowered groups."

The different manifestations of the "ordained tree" in the images above represent change in the forms, meanings, and control of the Buddhist environmental movement. They illustrate a general progression from an understated belief in spirits and honoring of the Buddha to ritual and symbolic invocation of the Buddha's teachings to protect the forest and the humans who depend on its resources, often in a manner that criticizes the direction of state-led economic development. The ritual eventually became associated with the king and the state, and even incorporated within popular culture, limiting the sanctity of the ritual in some cases while claiming its moral implications. At the same time, environmental monks continued to perform tree ordinations for their own, non-state projects. Some incorporated new approaches or shifted their focus to a more local rather than national level, countering the appropriation of their symbolic action. Behind these images lies a set of interrelated and contested discourses: of how Buddhism can and should be used in the modern, social world; of the goals of environmentalism and the relationship between humans and the natural world; of the meaning of "development," and the related tensions between material growth and

spiritual progress as measures of improving the lives of Thai citizens;⁴ of concepts of power and knowledge, and the construction and appropriation of new forms of knowledge, including interpretations of Buddhism itself.

This book is the story of the Thai Buddhist environmental movement, the monks involved, and the debated meanings underlying their actions. I look at the movement historically to place it into its larger context of socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand as monks responded to social, political, and economic changes that impacted people's perceptions and practice of the religion. Socially engaged Buddhism, a phrase coined by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, refers to the active use of the religion and its teachings to address social issues, such as violence and war, economic development and inequalities, gender issues, and environmental degradation. I witnessed the rise of environmental Buddhism in Thailand in connection with other forms of socially engaged Buddhism.

Although a few monks first explicitly engaged in environmental issues in the 1980s, monks have been involved in social and political issues in diverse ways throughout Thai history. The sangha (the order of monks) formed one-third of the triad of Buddhist society—the sangha, the monarchy, and the laity. In Theravada Buddhist societies in particular the sangha and the monarchy supported and legitimated each other. Some monks challenged this system, either by removing themselves from the influence and control of the king to practice an austere lifestyle in remote forests, or, in the case of a small number of millenarian monks in Northeast Thailand and Burma, leading unsuccessful uprisings against the state (Ishii 1975; Keyes 1977). Other monks have been used by the state to promote its agendas, such as the forest monks in the early twentieth century who enabled the central state in Bangkok to expand its influence into peripheral regions, especially in the Northeast (Tambiah 1996, 1984; Kamala 1997; J. Taylor 1993a). In the 1960s, Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat created Buddhist community development and missionary programs, Thammathud and Thammacharik, to push his economic development ideas and concepts of national identity into remote and border regions through the participation of monks (Ishii 1986, 115).

The monks with whom I am concerned here fall into another category of social activism. They do not support the state's objectives, and usually criticize the negative impacts of many state policies on rural people.⁵ In particular, as I conducted my initial research on the rural development work of a high-ranking monk in northern Thailand in the mid-1980s, I realized the links between independent "development monks" (*phra nak phatthana*) and the criticisms of state-led development and modernization that these monks

articulated, with the “environmental monks” (*phra nak anuraksa thamachat*), those monks who focused on the effects of environmental changes (human-made) on people’s lives. Both groups—even as the label “group” may be a misnomer because of the fluidity of these movements—took on political issues surrounding the direction of Thai society and economy. They did not aim to engage in politics directly, with a couple of exceptions, but through their interpretations of the causes of suffering faced by the lay people they served they saw it as their responsibility as monks to raise questions and challenge the power of political and business interests. They struggled against the power of greed, anger, and ignorance (the root evils in Buddhist teachings), but also the dominant social views and agendas (i.e., concepts of consumption and accumulation) grounded in those attitudes. Ultimately, development and environmental monks use and reframe religious practice and interpretations to legitimate not the government, but local people—those who usually have no power.

Engaged Buddhism and the Environment

The main goal of Buddhism is to relieve suffering. Suffering (*dukkha*, Pali) has a specific meaning in Buddhism. The leading Thai scholar monk, P. A. Payutto, defines *dukkha* as “suffering; misery; woe; pain; ill; sorrow; trouble; discomfort; unsatisfactoriness; problematic situation; stress; conflict” (1985, 380–81). The concept lies at the heart of the Four Noble Truths, a central set of Buddhist principles: There is suffering; There is a cause of suffering; There is a cessation of suffering; The path to the cessation of suffering is the Eightfold Path (Payutto 1985, 181).⁶ The philosophical concept involves mental dissatisfaction as much as physical pain and the attachment to a concept of self. The distinctions between philosophical Buddhism and socially engaged Buddhism lie in how suffering is interpreted and the actions taken to relieve it. Buddhists have always addressed suffering as a philosophical, spiritual, and metaphysical state of being; socially engaged Buddhists add to this list social, political, and economic forms of suffering. In addition to the philosophical extinction of suffering (*nibbana*, Pali, or “enlightenment”), engaged Buddhists work to end suffering in the here and now, targeting the social, political factors that affect people’s lives, especially those who have little or no power in society. They see social justice as crucial to being Buddhists.⁷

The term *engaged Buddhism* is attributed to Thich Nhat Hanh. During the war in Vietnam in the 1960s, he used Buddhist principles to work for

social justice and peace. The concept of engaged Buddhism as a means of responding to modern social problems emerged concurrently in many Buddhist societies in the mid-twentieth century. Initially, activists who took a Buddhist approach focused on local issues and communities. Globalization not only brought capitalism and multinational business to Buddhist countries but also introduced alternative ideas intended to help people oppose dominant concepts of large-scale economic development and rapid growth. Buddhists concerned with social issues in different nations began to support each other as part of this process. In 1989, the Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa founded the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), a nonprofit organization that brings together Buddhists from around the world concerned with social justice. Information and ideas exchanged at INEB conferences and through the journal, *Seeds of Peace*, sparked new actions on local levels. The actions of engaged Buddhists, whose work is grounded in Buddhist philosophy, are contributing to a rethinking of the application of Buddhism in the modern world.

Among the many foci of engaged Buddhists is concern for the natural environment and the impact of its destruction on all forms of life. Thai environmental monks did not invent the idea of using Buddhism to deal with environmental issues. Buddhists across Asia and America point to scriptures that document reverence for nature and ground ecological activism in Buddhist teachings. His Holiness the Dalai Lama included environmental issues in his call to make Tibet a zone of peace; the Korean nun Jiyul Sunim fought the destruction of a sacred mountain to build a railway tunnel; and American Buddhists draw from different forms of Buddhism to express concerns about, and responsibility for, nuclear waste, deforestation, and water usage, to name only a few cases (for more examples, see Kaza and Kraft 2000; Tucker and Williams 1997). Beyond the Buddhist world, a movement linking religions of all kinds with ecology has been growing worldwide over the past several decades.⁸

Most of the literature on Buddhism and environmentalism focuses on the philosophical issues underlying this relationship. Some of it criticizes any claims to authenticity in the Buddhist scriptures or early Buddhism (Harris 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997; Schmithausen 1997). Others counter these critics through close documentation of the philosophical underpinnings of environmental concepts in Buddhism (Holder 2007; Swearer 1997). The irony is that most of this literature remains abstract. Socially engaged Buddhism is ultimately about relieving suffering in *this* world. Yet scholars of engaged Buddhism often idealize or silence local variations and the messiness of the

application of Buddhist principles to contemporary problems in their efforts to justify engaged Buddhism as an authentic form of Buddhism. Buddhism is a lived religion, however, one that has been adapted throughout its history to multiple contexts and new issues. Environmental Buddhism is one of many examples of this process.

The goals of environmental Buddhism, based on both the ecological concept of interconnectedness found in deep ecology (Devall 2000; Halifax 1990; Macy 2000) and the Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising (*paticca samuppada*, Pali), emphasize modern, scientific methods and ancient religious principles.⁹ In this way, Thai environmental monks are neither “modern” nor “traditional.” The monks’ interpretations of religion and science, and tradition and modernity, do not fall into clear-cut categories, but rather represent a creative blend of approaches appropriate for a changing world. Their example complicates and highlights the tensions inherent in the environmental crisis itself, and the questions facing Thai society as it attempts to deal with the crisis. The presence of these monks challenges Thais at all levels of society to confront what it means to be modern or traditional, local or global, Thai, and even what it means to be Buddhist.

Sangha, Politics, and Environment

The environmental crisis to which these monks are responding is the result of Thai society buying into global capitalism and rapid economic and industrial growth. The monks’ response takes an ideological stance that criticizes this form of modernization, arguing that capitalism and consumerism are pulling people away from spiritual practice. Capitalism, they argue, emphasizes greed, ignorance, and anger. The monks call for a return to religious values as a guide for living simply and purely, and an emphasis on community-level society in which people care for each other and are sensitive to the impacts of their actions on others, including the natural world. In this way, they create an environmentalism distinct from that in the West, which tends to emphasize separation of people and the natural environment.¹⁰

In an article on Thai civic religion, Frank Reynolds (1994) describes the imaginative-symbolic and the practical, programmatic discourses that together form the basis of Thai legal culture. He frames these discourses within the concepts of *chat* (nation, including the people), *satsana* (religion), and *mahakesat* (kingship), the three-part formula of Thai civic religion since the early twentieth century. He examines how various actors in social, legal

conflicts use the rhetoric of these concepts to build their arguments. Reynolds points out two main strands in modern Thai Buddhism and how they intersect with Thai civic religion:

The first is basically conservative in that those involved are generally in concert with the mainstream interpretation of Thai civic religion and with the current patterns of Thai politics and law. The second strand is more radical in that the beliefs and practices of those involved have produced tensions within the status quo and conflicts with the powers that be. (Reynolds 1994, 445)

Reynolds places engaged Buddhists within the second, smaller strand because of their “anti-establishment” perspective (*ibid.*, 449).

I agree with Reynolds that engaged Buddhists in Thailand, especially monks involved in environmental work, tend to challenge the “status quo” and the “powers that be,” including the state. The relationship between environmental monks and the state, however, is not static, shifting as the two respond and adapt to each other. At times, environmental monks such as Phra Prajak Khuttajitto embody criticism of the state and its agenda.¹¹ Other times, these monks negotiate with the state, finding cooperation and collaborations that place people rather than politics at the center of their actions.

Environmentalism has become a major site of contestation in Thailand since the mid-1980s. The state, corporations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), people’s organizations, and monks all vie for the moral high ground to control forms of development, the definition of environmental problems, and the land. Forsythe and Walker (2008, 25–26) linked the production of environmental knowledge with the politics of state making through the use of “environmental narratives.”¹² With echoes of William Cronon’s (1996) critique of a wilderness approach to environmentalism, they argue that two main narratives dominate Thai discourse about the major environmental issue, the forest: One emphasizes an image of the forest as “wild,” needing to be protected from people; The other prioritizes “local knowledge” of people living in the highlands for taking care of and conserving the forest. Both, they claim, “serve important political functions by enabling the Thai state to increase its control over resources and people, and by providing many of the ground rules within which environmental debate takes place and diverse social actors negotiate with the state” (Forsythe and Walker 2008, 18). Certainly the shifting engagement of environmental monks with the state falls into this description.

Yet the case of environmental monks is more complex than Forsythe and Walker's framework would allow. James Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts" may be more accurate in describing the monks' evolving relationship with the state. He argues that "every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant" (Scott 1990, xii). Since the 1980s, these monks have both openly and quietly negotiated with and challenged the dominance of urban elite, business, and the state in environmental affairs through rituals, seminars, networking, and even public protests, all contributing to the construction of a new knowledge of Buddhism in society. On one level, they acquiesce to the state's authority, for example, inviting government officials to play key roles in public rituals such as tree ordinations that promote forest conservation. On another, the monks quietly use the officials' participation in these rituals to legitimize the involvement of the sangha in environmental issues and their version of environmental knowledge that usually supports local people's control of the forest, subtly criticizing state policy in the process.¹³ Here we can see a version of Scott's hidden transcripts at work, albeit one in which a higher group (the sangha) speaks for a subordinate one (rural farmers).

The case of environmental monks illustrates the complexities of the connections between religion and environmentalism, and the challenges faced by monks who believe that engaging in social problems is a responsibility of the sangha. "*Phra nak anurak thamachat*," the term applied informally to these monks, literally translates as "monks who conserve nature." I loosely translate the term as "environmental monks" rather than "conservation monks" because, as with environmentalism more generally, their activities place them within political debates. The term *environmental* embodies political debate and activism, while *conservation* conveys a more static, less political goal, one focused primarily on a concept of the natural environment separate from humans. These monks do not merely conserve nature, nor do they have a deep knowledge of the science of ecology. Their actions, aimed primarily at relieving the suffering of rural people, challenge the political and economic powers they believe encourage material development, consumption, and greed, ultimately resulting in suffering.¹⁴

While these monks work with environmental and development NGOs and challenge people with political, economic, and social power through their use of religion, they also seek to redefine the issues at stake. Aware of economic and social inequities, they frame the debates—about whether

people can live in and care for the forest, for example—in Buddhist terms, placing the relief of suffering at the center of their projects. Their actions serve to educate and motivate rural people to engage in conservation activities. More significantly, they add a moral element to environmental debates. Although they face risks and some have evoked strong criticism, through the exchange of experiences, philosophical interpretations, and the invention of new rituals, these monks have constructed a new knowledge of the spiritual and moral aspects of environmentalism.

Evolution of Buddhist Environmental Knowledge

Within a decade of the performance of the first tree ordination, this knowledge entered mainstream vocabulary. Initially, the sangha hierarchy and members of the urban middle class criticized tree ordination rituals as not being true Buddhism; people were shocked and even outraged that monks would initiate trees into the sangha, a status reserved for humans. Misunderstanding the purpose of the rituals, some critics saw tree ordinations as violating the Vinaya, the disciplinary rules monks observe, since only humans can be ordained. While the rituals are not ordinations in a formal sense, the image of sanctifying trees and the forest through the ritual gained national (and international) attention, raising awareness about the difficulties people dependent on the forest face. The shock value of using ritual to highlight social problems and challenge social power provided environmental monks with an effective tool to meet their goals.

Since the first tree ordination performed for forest conservation in 1988 the rituals have become increasingly accepted and popular across Thailand. The best example of the impact and popularity of tree ordinations came in 1996–97. During that time, a coalition of nongovernmental, people's, and governmental organizations initiated a program to ordain fifty million trees in honor of the fiftieth year of the king's reign (Tannenbaum 2000; Isager and Ivarsson 2002; Delcore 2004b). The image of the ordination described by Delcore above occurred as part of this program. It would appear that the environmental monks met their major objectives, at least in part. While threats to the forest still exist, the monks succeeded in raising awareness of deforestation. At the same time, they created a powerful, visible means of keeping Buddhism relevant in society, showing its applicability to dealing with social issues.

Yet the growing popularity of tree ordinations and their appropriation by mainstream society threaten their potential to effect change and help people deal with suffering. The contexts for the rituals have changed. Rather than pushing people to question modern, consumerist values as causes of environmental destruction and human suffering, such rituals are increasingly used to support national agendas and to undermine the power of the rural people whom environmental monks aim to help. The image of beauty contestants posed while wrapping robes around trees demonstrates the degree to which the ritual has been popularized and made into an expression of consumer culture, thereby removing it, at least in part, from its religious context.¹⁵

Environmental monks worked hard to gain acceptance by both the sangha and the laity, showing their work as grounded in Buddhist teachings. As their actions, particularly tree ordinations, became more widely accepted, these monks may have unwittingly undermined the effectiveness of their projects. Once accepted into the mainstream, the actions have become expected practice for many monks. They are performed frequently, often without educating the lay participants about environmental issues or a genuine commitment on the part of the sangha or the laity to follow up on the protection of the land and trees involved. Environmental monks are now often recognized for their work through ecclesiastical promotions and have considerable administrative responsibilities, leaving them little time to invest in conserving the forest or initiating new projects. Monks with whom I spoke in 2006 expressed this concern, saying they faced difficulties in maintaining the original intention behind the rituals and their environmental work. The necessities of obtaining funding for social change work often overrode their goals, leading to shifts in what they emphasized. For example, I was told that funders preferred projects directed at HIV/AIDs rather than building community forests. Even so, according to Phra Paisal Visalo, their work is still not fully supported by the laity (personal communication 10/6/2006). The challenge is to integrate their reinterpretations of Buddhist philosophy and practice with the expectations of Thai society.

Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism

Nature is *rupatham* [tangible], with several deeper levels of meaning. . . . Conserving nature is one means of conserving the deeper meaning of the religion (*namatham* [intangible]). (Phra Maha Chan Khunwuttho, interview 7/12/1991)

According to Phra Maha Chan Khunwuttho, an older monk from Khorat Province strongly influenced by the well-known philosopher monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, rituals are only tools of monks, one method of promoting environmentalism. More important for him are the Buddhist lessons underlying environmental activism. He sees nature as a means of teaching about and preserving the essence of Buddhism (what he calls *namatham*, or “intangible”), especially within a rapidly changing society. For Phra Maha Chan, Buddhist environmental activism serves two interrelated purposes: it helps to protect and preserve the natural environment with the goal of lessening the suffering that accompanies environmental destruction; and it supports and promotes the deeper meaning of the religion aimed at realizing enlightenment, or relief from suffering.

Incorporating Phra Maha Chan’s approach with those of the activist monks (Phra Maha Chan sees himself more as a philosopher monk), it becomes clear that *rupatham*, in this case the tangible forms of Buddhist environmentalism, and *namatham*, its philosophical interpretations, exist in a dynamic, two-way relationship.¹⁶ The philosophy supports and legitimizes activism by grounding it within religious and historical traditions. It supplies a conservative link with the Buddha’s teachings that enables activists to innovate and challenge society from a sacred position. Buddhist activism, in turn, makes the philosophy relevant and applicable in the modern world. As Phra Somkit Jaranathamamo told me, the use of rituals and aspects of religious practice (including spirit beliefs) familiar to the lay people with whom activist monks work provides a context within which these monks can gradually adapt the religion—both popular practices and philosophical interpretations—to deal with new problems, including the environmental crisis.

The process of interpreting Buddhism to deal with environmental problems has been criticized by some Western scholars for either idealizing early Buddhists as having a conscious ecological ethic (Schmithausen 1997) or reading modern environmentalism into Buddhism without careful scriptural study (Harris 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997; Pedersen 1995). Buddhist environmentalists have, according to Ian Harris (1997), been overly influenced by a global environmental discourse leading them to argue for a Buddhist environmentalism that is not supported by either the texts or Buddhist history. For example, at the beginning of an article entitled, “Buddhism and the Discourse of Environmental Concern,” Harris states,

My central contention will be that, with one or two notable exceptions (Schmithausen springs to mind here), supporters of an

authentic Buddhist environmental ethic have tended toward a positive indifference to the history and complexity of the Buddhist tradition. In their praiseworthy desire to embrace such a “high profile” cause, or, to put it more negatively, in their inability to check the influence of a significant element of modern globalized discourse, Buddhist environmentalists may be guilty of a *sacrificium intellectus* very much out of line with the critical spirit that has played such a major role in Buddhism from the time of the Buddha himself down to the modern period. (Harris 1997, 378)

Perhaps Harris is right that a call for contemporary environmental activism cannot be supported through a strict philosophical interpretation of the Buddha’s original teachings. What I find interesting, however, is that many contemporary Buddhists (including some learned monks) believe it *can*. In addition, his criticisms do not take Buddhism into account as a living religion that responds—and has throughout its long history—to different and changing sociopolitical, cultural, and, I would argue, environmental contexts. I examine Thai socially engaged monks’ various interpretations of Buddhist philosophy and teachings in their own terms, as social actors making conscious decisions about how they read, practice, and apply Buddhist principles. Socially engaged monks are, in my view (and contrary to Harris’s argument above), critically examining their tradition in light of contemporary situations and problems. Through their own agency, they have aligned themselves with social and environmental activists, often taking on controversial issues. Similarly, they articulate an environmental discourse in terms meaningful to themselves and the local people with whom they work. (While the Thai environmental movement has been somewhat influenced by Western concepts of environment, most of the environmental monks with whom I have spoken do not start from that perspective. Rather, they frame their concepts of environment in terms of Buddhist ideas, even as these may not align directly with more conservative interpretations of the scriptures.)

Viewing Buddhism as a living and lived religion, with multiple forms, interpretations, and practices, I take an ethnographic approach and follow the lead of Thai people, particularly the villagers with whom I lived and studied, in looking to environmental monks as sources of Buddhist environmentalism. These monks hold positions of influence, respect, and moral authority among many Thai Buddhists in both cities and villages, thereby providing insight into what the religion means to different people in changing contexts.

Socially engaged monks—including both development and environmental monks—must continually earn and defend their reputation and moral authority. There is not one exemplar “socially engaged monk” respected by all Thai Buddhists, nor is there a single, unified interpretation of Buddhism used by all activist monks to support their work. Their various interpretations show Buddhism as a lived religion, challenged and adapted by those who practice it to make it relevant to their daily lives and immediate situations (see McMahan 2008).

In the Field

Ethnographic fieldwork is not a value-free activity that results in hard facts. The knowledge gained and created in the process contributes to an evolution of understanding of the subject matter. In this case, my research with environmentalist monks contributed to the creation of the category of “environmental monk,” in that my writing brought the activism of these monks to the world. I made certain monks famous internationally, such as Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun, because the idea of a tree ordination was as surprising and captivating for non-Thais and non-Buddhists as it initially was within Thailand (Darlington 1993, 1997, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2007).

Shortly after the publication of my article “The Ordination of a Tree” in 1998, in which I detailed how tree ordinations occur, I began to receive inquiries from various researchers, reporters, and documentary makers about contacting Phrakhru Pitak. As far as I know, none have followed through in visiting Phrakhru Pitak in Nan Province, nor have they actually written about his work. But the form of the queries—asking about the work of environmental monks through questions about him specifically—demonstrated one unintentional outcome from my research. Phrakhru Pitak became a face of the movement for the world through my writing.

One purpose for writing this book is to correct the assumptions contained within such inquiries. First, despite expectations that such a movement could not last, the movement continues, including the performance of tree ordinations. The activities and foci have evolved and the emphases have expanded. The monks and their supporters no longer focus solely on forests, but consider the impacts of other kinds of environmental problems as well. They integrate other kinds of issues that affect the lives of the Thai people, such as development projects and HIV/AIDS. Their work remains vital and critical for addressing social issues and challenging the majority of

Thai society to enact Buddhist values in their daily lives rather than the values of consumption and economic growth.

Second, Phrakhru Pitak, while actively engaged in environmental and development efforts based on his interpretation of Buddhist principles and groundbreaking in his creative approaches to this work, is only one of a number of innovative monks doing this work. They all take risks in the process, ranging from close scrutiny by both the sangha hierarchy and the lay society, to the arrests in 1991 that ultimately ended Phra Prajak Khuttajitto's radical participation in the movement, to the assassination of Phra Supoj Suvacano in 2005 in a conflict over land use (see chapter 7). All these monks contribute to the progress of environmental awareness, the understanding of the negative impacts of certain kinds of economic development, and the rethinking of Buddhism in society. Even though I focus on particular monks, including a chapter on Phrakhru Pitak's story (chapter 2), readers should realize that these monks are representatives of a larger, and evolving, movement.

Third, despite all they have accomplished, these monks are not flawless heroes. It is easy to idealize them and perceive them as the leaders of a valiant fight against the evils of capitalism and globalization. As monks, they occupy a revered status in Thai society, but not one that is above criticism. In my writing I try to balance my respect for these monks and their work, and the obligations I owe them for allowing me to witness their efforts, with the realities and challenges they face daily. They each negotiate many pressures—from the sangha, the laity, the government, the media, and researchers like me—and make compromises along the way. As a small minority of the sangha in Thailand, they do not represent all of Thai Buddhism, and some Thais criticize them for going beyond the “norm” of expected behavior for monks. At the same time, their successes and efforts have created new norms of expectation. My goal is to shed insight into the processes through which these monks maneuvered, and to understand the anticipated and unintended consequences of their decisions and actions on both Buddhism and the environmental movement in Thailand.

My path to Phrakhru Pitak, Phra Somkit, and Luang Pu Phuttapoj Waraporn, the three monks with whom I have studied most closely, illustrates the somewhat random nature of ethnographic fieldwork. It is important to understand both who they are and how I came to work with them, placing both their work and mine within the broader contexts of Buddhist environmentalism in Thailand and the anthropological study of this movement. I chose to work with these monks because of the innovative nature of their work, and because I had introductions and connections to them.

I could easily have chosen other monks in other regions of Thailand, and I encourage future researchers to do so to flesh out our understandings of engaged Buddhism in Thailand, the influence of Buddhist thinkers on environmental and development issues, and the ways in which Buddhism is evolving through both the work and ideas of these monks and the responses of others, lay and religious, to them.

My introduction to engaged Buddhism in Thailand came from Vira Somboon, then a graduate student of political philosophy at the University of Michigan who was one of my Thai language teachers. Vira had ordained for a year as a monk with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, one of Thailand's preeminent Buddhist philosophers and an engaged Buddhist leader. He gave me a book by Sulak Sivaraksa, a lay Buddhist leader and social critic, entitled *Religion and Development*, first published in 1976, and encouraged me to examine the work of monks undertaking alternative development initiatives based on Buddhist principles. The ideas of these two engaged Buddhist thinkers—Buddhadasa and Sulak—influenced my own approach to questions surrounding economic development and engaged Buddhism, even as I never met Buddhadasa and only met Achan Sulak¹⁷ several years after I began my research. Their impact on engaged Buddhism in Thailand, particularly with monks involved in development and environmental activism, is pervasive even today, almost two decades after Buddhadasa passed away. Their work led me to study the alternative development promoted by Buddhist monks, even though the first monk with whom I studied, Luang Pu Phuttapoj Waraporn (Chan Kusalo),¹⁸ was not directly influenced by either of them.

Inspired by Sulak's ideas, I began my research in 1986 in northern Thailand on monks undertaking rural economic development. Anan Gana-japan, an anthropologist at Chiang Mai University, directed me to Luang Pu Phuttapoj's organization, the Foundation for Education and Development of Rural Areas (FEDRA), just north of Chiang Mai city. Phuttapoj, aware of young villagers leaving for work in the cities as early as the 1970s, founded FEDRA in 1974 to support the livelihoods of farmers and give them the tools and knowledge to remain in the villages. His favorite saying, "spiritual and economic development must work together to solve problems" (*setthakhit kap chitchai tong kae panha phromkan*), captures his philosophical as well as practical approach. Phuttapoj was one of the first Thai monks to interpret Buddhism as the basis for dealing with poverty and its resulting suffering, challenging the material, consumer focus of government-led economic development.

I spent two years researching Luang Pu Phuttapoj's work, FEDRA's programs, and villagers' reactions to them. I learned about the challenges facing the minority of Thai monks who saw development work as central to their mission of relieving suffering. The predominant push in Thai society toward consumerism, measuring success and the "good life" through material goods, ran counter to the efforts of development monks and NGOs struggling to promote alternatives (Darlington 1990). During this research, I became aware of a few monks incorporating environmental concerns with their development work.

I returned to begin this next project—really a continuation of the original research—in 1991, again starting in Chiang Mai. Many of the anthropologists at Chiang Mai University are social activists, combining their research with social criticism and efforts to promote social and economic justice. By 1991, a national movement had emerged advocating for legal recognition of community forests. Although the definition of "community forest" was debated, the common element in the activists' movement emphasized the agency of local people whose lives depended on the forests. Recognizing the critical position of monks in village life, the NGOs and academics in the community forest movement reached out to support the emerging Buddhist environmental movement. Through Anan Ganajapan and the community forestry project of a coalition of academics and NGOs, I met Sakchai Parntep, an activist from Nan Province who worked closely with Phrakhrū Pitak Nanthakhun. Traveling to Nan and participating in a tree ordination supported by Northern Thai NGOs and academics, coordinated by Sakchai and other local NGO workers, and sponsored by Phrakhrū Pitak, initiated me into the Buddhist environmental movement and set me up for fieldwork in Nan.

My research with environmental monks, unlike my initial study of FEDRA, was multisited. While based in Nan and focusing on Phrakhrū Pitak's projects, I traveled across Thailand to visit other monks engaged in environmental and development projects. In the early 1990s, NGOs coordinated numerous seminars for environmental monks, sometimes as many as twenty a year. I attended several of these seminars, further expanding my exposure to different monks' work. In 1992–93, I concentrated on this project, balancing my time between Nan, where I primarily stayed in Phrakhrū Pitak's home village, visiting other monks, and observing environmental seminars. I gained a sense of how villagers reacted to these projects in Nan, but mostly I focused on the ways in which monks implemented their projects and how they used Buddhist principles in the process.

I discovered that most of the activist monks did not articulate strong philosophical statements for their approaches. They used simplified explanations, aimed at getting local people committed to their projects. An extensive literature on Buddhism and ecology explores the scriptural connections, as discussed above. I was more concerned with how the monks on the ground interpreted them for practical applications, the challenges they faced, and the potential of their projects for long-term impact.

As a white, middle-class woman from the United States, I found interacting with monks different from the experiences of my Thai colleagues, male and female. First, I needed to be circumspect in my dealings with the monks, especially after a series of sex scandals rocked the Thai sangha in the early 1990s. All my encounters with monks had to be in public, or at least where anyone could listen in or witness our engagements. The fact that I was a foreigner mediated this challenge. I was often seen in a different category from Thai women. Monks and lay people alike assumed I had limited knowledge of either Buddhism or Thai society, and therefore excused mistakes in my behavior. People took the time to explain obvious details to me, often as if speaking to a child. In reality, I was a child in relation to their lives and knowledge, and I appreciated their patience in teaching me.

This exceptional category gave me access to particular settings. The Buddhist environmental movement is primarily a site for monks and men. The only women involved are a few NGO workers, who mostly focus on villagers, and academics. I never met any female monastics engaged in the movement, beyond providing logistical support. This case highlights the gender imbalances in Thai Buddhism. Until recently the only religious option for Thai women was to become *mae chi*. Mae chi are not fully ordained, and Thais hold relatively little respect for them.¹⁹ The predominant female academic promoting Buddhist environmentalism during the 1990s was Chatsumarn Kabil Singh. In 2003, she ordained as a *bhikkhuni* (fully ordained nun) in Sri Lanka, where female ordination had recently been revived (Mrozik, 2009). With her struggles to gain acceptance for female ordination in Thailand, she currently pays less attention to environmental issues than she did in the 1990s.

In 1992, I observed a small seminar on the problems faced by activist monks, including relations with women. Twenty monks participated, supported by three lay NGO workers. The only other women there were three mae chi who did not participate in the seminar but cooked for the participants. The monks allowed me to listen into all their discussions except those explicitly concerning women. One older monk expressed some hesitations

about my presence until I articulated what I was learning from them and the value of understanding their perspectives on their work, and promised to help explain their efforts to a larger audience.

As I did many times during my research, I needed to explain my position and project in order to gain access to key actors and events in the movement. The consequence of repeatedly explaining myself was that people responded to and engaged in discussion of my ideas and understandings. In this way, I tested my ideas with my informants, leading to greater complexity and confidence in my insights.

Over time I gained a broader perspective on the movement and its intersections with environmental and other social issues in Thailand. Environmental monks, despite the label, are concerned with problems beyond those affecting natural resources. Environmentalism in its very essence is political, as environmental activists must deal with broader social, economic, and policy issues that all impact the natural environment.²⁰ The monks' primary concern, relieving the suffering of, in this case, rural villagers, must incorporate problems of poverty and debt, conflict with developers, seed companies, and plantation owners, and awareness of the effects of government policies. In the early 1990s, much of Thai society debated forest policy, including the adoption of a Community Forestry Bill. In the 2000s, focus shifted to prioritize HIV/AIDS issues. Since the coup in 2006 that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the main crisis facing Thailand surrounds the government as different factions protest, stop government and economic dealings, and fight over who should run the nation and the meaning of democracy. People who have spoken out against the current government or political system have been charged with *lese majesté*, effectively silencing open dialogue about politics or society. Few other concerns compete for national media attention. Yet the engaged Buddhist monks quietly continue their efforts to improve the lives of rural people, still performing tree ordinations and other rituals and programs even while they are pushed in other directions due to funding opportunities and political debates.

The Structure of the Book

This book aims to present the work of environmental and development monks over time. While the focus is on environmental issues, these cannot be separated from development agendas and efforts, both in terms of the economic priorities of government policies and the alternative approaches advocated by development monks and NGOs. Environmental concerns