

CONSUMERISM, PROSTITUTION, AND BUDDHIST ETHICS

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I

This article is intended to examine the inter-relationship between globalization, consumerism, and prostitution and the role Buddhist ethics may play in tackling these problems. Background research revealed that although consumerism is beneficial in general, excessive consumerism or uncontrollable desire to consume brings about many subsequent problems, one of which is prostitution. One of the important factors driving people into prostitution is the need for an extra income for fulfillment through material possessions. Prostitution, therefore, is not caused solely by the drive to be free from poverty, but also by excessive desires. When these desires cannot be met by the compensation from decent employment, prostitution seems to stand out as a prominent shortcut. Religiously speaking, prostitution undermines the moral values in a society. Buddhist teachings must be applied to give guidance concerning prostitution quoting principles such as the principle of *middle way* (knowing moderation) and *right livelihood* (knowing wise consumption) will lead to well-being.

According to the field work undertaken at *Dok Kham Tai* village, a place rather well known as one among Thai villages where people seem to adopt prostitution as not immoral, the consumption pattern has been influenced by consumerism and perceived more as a “means” of having higher prestige, rather than an “end” in itself. The addiction to status symbols means people give more importance to a material than its essence *per se*. It may be concluded then that economic concern is the root cause driving girls/children at *Dok Kham Tai* village to enter prostitution, either as a means of supporting their parents and/or family, or out of the desire for a better status of life.

Although it is very difficult to prevent girls/children from entering prostitution, it is still possible to discourage them from doing so. For example, if villagers could practice the *middle way* of living and right livelihood it would help, to a certain extent, to solve this problem. Buddhism does not directly condemn prostitution, but the harm, deceit, and disease caused by this occupation are acknowledged as dangerous. It strengthens the lustful while weakening the power of love. With regard to economic pressure, people at this village have to put more efforts into working to support their families and subsequently incorporate the Buddhist teachings into their everyday lives. Therefore, it is a new challenge for Buddhist monks to help the villagers to turn their minds and hearts from being engrossed in materialism to spirituality. Apart from this task, the monks have to translate their compassion into concrete action by training the villagers to have alternative sources of income to supplement their occupations.

II

Consumerism, the consumption of goods beyond basic needs, is a worldwide and increasing trend in the twenty-first century.¹ The consumption of goods is a major driving force of economies, with both good and bad results for individual people, their culture, and environment. It is a dominant force, associated with changes in culture and in consumption patterns that move away from communal values toward

¹ Songpol Kaopatumpit, “On the Thai Press Eye,” *Bangkok Post* (Thursday, 15 February 2001).

individualism and materialism.² The excess of modern consumerism is directly related to a spiritual crisis, and to gender exploitation in the form of prostitution, especially of children and young girls.³

Prostitution and consumerism are both social issues concerning with material consumption for both physical and mental desire about which religion must show concern. It is interesting to study whether consumerism, the demand for goods and services in excess of need, is one key factor in the large-scale existence of prostitution in Thailand or not, and is particularly interested in how Buddhist ethics can respond to the changes of Thai current society. Religious traditions are not static. They respond to social, economic, and political change; indeed, they help shape such change. In stable periods of history, religious traditions seem to change only imperceptibly, but in more volatile times the disruption and transformation of religious institutions and worldviews keeps pace with and sometimes outstrips changes in other areas of life. However, the effect of factors like new political and social dynamics and elements of Western modernization like technology, consumerism, and capitalism on the Thai's belief and practice are undoubtedly immersed.

Consumerism is the fuel that helps spread the effects of globalization all over the world. Consumerism creates huge markets by persuading people they have a real and pressing need for goods and services beyond those they already possess.⁴ This desire is in many ways the antithesis of Buddhist teaching, where the focus is on contentment as the path to a happy and fulfilled life and to eventual spiritual liberation.⁵

The increasing inter-dependence of the countries of the world is based upon trade and the flow of capital for investment, and is accompanied by increases in communication and the exchange of ideas across national borders. Some see globalization as a triumph of both the democratic ideal such as free trade, and capitalism such as the need for constantly expanding market for the products all over the world,⁶ although it affects most countries in both positive and negative ways. For example, it is apparent that Thailand has been participating in the spread of globalization and consumerism for many years, more so since the end of World War II. However, only if better economic conditions permit people to live generally better lives, and make more choices about their lives.⁷ Accordingly, consumption becomes a means to flaunt wealth or powerful, and the material consumption and spiritual desire takes over.

Prostitution, providing sexual services for money, is usually regarded as an outlaw activity and most countries in the world have legislation controlling it. One traditional view of prostitution is that it is a form of sexual slavery and directly linked to sexual exploitation. Commercial sex and a negative attitude toward sexual relations outside marriage and at an increasingly younger age, are hardly just a Thai problem; they are a global phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is doubtfully why Thailand seems to have an unusually large number of prostitutes, for example, there are about 700,000 to one

² Norman K. Denzin, *Journal of Consumer Research* (Vol. 28, September, 2001), p. 325.

³ *The Magazine of ILO, World of Work* (No. 42, March 2002), p. 14.

⁴ Norman K. Denzin, *Ibid.*

⁵ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 219-222.

⁶ Riuhei Hatsuse (Kobe University), "Historical Globalization and Asian Implications," CSGR 3rd Annual Conference, Scarman House, University of Warwick, 16-18 September 1999, p. 3.

⁷ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Isra Sarntisart, *Globalization and Inequality: The Case of Thailand*, Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 10 November 2000, p. 2.

million⁸ of prostitution in Thailand, and make Thailand as an unfortunate international reputation for child prostitution. However, what is known is that women and children enter prostitution both voluntarily and involuntarily, and that prostitution is one means by which person can earn a substantial amount of money.

Prostitution, although not unique to Thailand, has been highlighted both internationally and domestically as being especially prevalent in Thai society. It is usually understood that the number of women and children involved in the sex industry in Thailand is high because of poverty.⁹ This understanding was based on the fact that many prostitutes came from agricultural families, where their daily life depended on natural and primitive farming as is the case in Northern Thailand.¹⁰ It is notable that since the studies were conducted, government measures have been made to help the poor by promoting employment in industrial areas across the country, and by launching projects for social insurance and security to support good health have much improved a lot of the poor.¹¹ However, prostitution is still a dominant problem in Thai society. Is poverty the main driving factor for those who enter the sex trade?

The problems relating to child prostitution are deep-rooted, stubborn, and prevalent. Furthermore, this form of child abuse brings with it a host of other serious social problems. As child prostitution and related problems are complex, no single remedy can provide an ideal solution, the related social problems worsen, the aggravating effects become more widespread. A great deal of planning and cooperation from all parties in society must be involved. It must be realized that many children and adults get involved in prostitution not only out of poverty, but also for reasons relating to the relationship of people in their families such as to pay gratitude and support parents by entering prostitution for more money.

It is interestingly about the comment from NGOs points out that none of any measures have been entirely successful, and no country has succeeded in eliminating prostitution no matter what measures have been taken. Government action at the material and legal levels is imperfect because it lacks an understanding of the mind-set of both the people who pay for prostitutes, and those who provide the sexual services.¹² It also fails to promote a change in the attitudes of the population itself on material consumption.¹³ Therefore, the intent of this study is to explore the relationships between consumerism and prostitution and how to minimize the social problems caused by consumerism and prostitution through Buddhist ethics. Can

⁸ The estimation of Dr. Pasuk Pongpaichit, cited from "Thai Women in Buddhism" by Chatsumal kabilsingh, (<<http://keg112.eng.ohio-state.edu/~jirapinyo/profck.html>>).

⁹ According to ECPAT (a global network of organizations and individuals working together for the elimination of child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes), commercial sexual exploitation of children is mostly associated with poverty in Thailand. (<http://www.ecpat.net/eng/~thailand.html>)

¹⁰ Most of the poor are in the rural, especially in an agricultural sector. Thai Farmers Research Center (TFRC) Co., Ltd. March 2, 2001.

¹¹ The Ninth Plan Development Vision Framework (2002-2006) of Thailand, Strategy 1 : Human development and social protection; and Strategy 5 : International competitiveness.

¹² ECPAT (<<http://www.ecpat.net/eng/~thailand.html>>)

¹³ According to Leslie Ann Jeffrey, St. Thomas University, "Because They Want Nice Things": Prostitution, Consumerism, and Culture in Thailand (<<http://www.aasianst.org/absts/1998abst/seasia/se164.htm>>), she examines the way in which the discussion of the problem of prostitution in Thailand today has much to do with Thailand's ambivalent relationship with westernization/modernization rather than with a concern over women's exploitation. The most popular understanding of prostitution today in Thailand is its link to the problem of consumerism.

Buddhism still play an important role in Thai society? Specifically, can its teachings cope with the prostitution issue?

III

Historically, Buddhist ethics have been in existence for more than 2,500 years. Until recently, the teachings of Buddha were believed to be the core of the daily life decisions and moral choices of millions of people, especially those in Thailand. Fundamentally, Buddhism provides moral guidance to lead people toward an understanding of the causes of the actions and human behaviors, the meaning of life, and the nature of human beings. Furthermore, Buddhist teaching describes the causes of desire, including the desire to consume, and the search for happiness which seem to be universal characteristics of human society. Buddhist teaching points out that the appropriate way to live is to know how to control the internal and external factors, the causes of desire in an appropriate manner, and to conduct life according to a "middle way," where human needs are usually fulfilled.

If the desire to consume in excess decreases, what result might this have on prostitution in Thailand? In fact, Buddhist ethics provides the means for people to cope with the day-to-day problems of life and to assess worldly pursuits, but does Buddhism still have the power to be an effective moral force in modern Thai culture? How Buddhism tackle the problems derived from globalization and its attendant consumerism? Therefore, the focus of concern for us must also be on: What is it that impels a person to consume even to the point of danger or ruining themselves (as in the case of paying for or becoming a prostitute)? To what extent do Buddhist ethics support and stimulate, control or reduce that impulse? In addition, what is the appropriate way to apply Buddhist teachings to deal with the problems derived from consumerism and prostitution?

According to the problem stated above, we realize that prostitution is a complex issue, and that the proper response of the government should be to reduce or eliminate both prostitution and its linkages. It is usually accepted that a driving factor to enter prostitution is poverty, but it is also considered that consumerism, lack opportunity of education, unemployment, and sex tourism play an increasing role. Therefore, this article aims to provide the understanding about the relationship among consumerism, prostitution, and Buddhist ethics which will enable the country to be better prepared to face and to minimize the problems derived by consumerism.

Significantly, the reason to choose *Dok Kham Tai* as the community to study was partly a by-product of an address by the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, Khun Laddawan Wongsriwong, to a workshop on Family Development.¹⁴ She stated that when she was acting as an advisor to the Minister of the Interior in the Community Development Department, she became intimately involved with the family concerns of the women in the eight Northern Provinces of Thailand. She became the head of a working group trying to develop new strategies to attack the problems of AIDS, drug abuse, illegal abortion, marriage breakdown and prostitution. As a result of her involvement with this work in these communities, she was able to identify 16 areas in the North and North-eastern part of Thailand that faced particular difficulties with social and family problems, many of them related to prostitution. In her address she stated:

¹⁴ The special lecture on "The Presentation on Pattern of Structure of Family Development Centre in the Community" by Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Welfare (Laddawan Wongsriwong) in the workshop on Project of Family Development Centre Establishment in the Community on Wednesday 26th of September 2001 at 11.00-12.15 h. at SD Avenue Hotel, Bangkok.

“According to the record of the Ministry of Labour, it is people from the Province of Udon Thani who have migrated to work in foreign countries in the greatest number. These people have faced various kinds of problems... Udon Thani is the champion of tragedy. The Consul Generals in Sydney, Australia, and in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, have both reported Thai women who have been arrested because of working as prostitutes. These women were under 18 years old and were sent back to Thailand. In the North, Chiang Rai is the Champion. However, while it is true the problem exists in Nong Khai, Khon Kaen, and Korat; the first rank still belongs to Udon Thani. I always keep updating this record. It is the truth and no fake at all.”

Deputy Minister Laddawan was born in *Phayao* Province and so feels a special duty to help solve the problems associated with prostitution in her home province. She stated that this area is very poor:

“The fact that many parents feel they are so poor they have to sell their daughter is a problem... There are examples of girls who came back from Japan and bought a big house, a truck and a pickup for their father; but we have tried to go against this trend... These children feel their family is so poor they have to show their gratefulness by being a prostitute. They have had no chance or money to study, and as a result have very little education. They feel they must become a prostitute to feed themselves and their parents... This is the truth.”

Her address highlighted some of the problems associated with prostitution in *Phayao*. She noted that as a result of her campaign against prostitution, many people: agents, brothel owners, and some parents of prostitutes whose houses were not yet finished; said they would not vote for her again in an attempt to stop her work against prostitution. In her speech she pointed to poverty as the reason these children enter prostitution, but the elaborate size and nature of the houses being constructed in the area suggests another interpretation. These prostitutes are not only working for the survival of their families, they are also building big houses that reflect the superior financial status of their owners. This suggests that poverty is not always the key factor that forced the girls to enter prostitution.

IV

Whether it is called consumerism, materialism, or just plain greed; the desire for things appears to be a very strong human characteristic. Children fight over toys and adults compete for status in society by displays of their power and wealth. Consumerism, and the definition of self by means of possessions, has become a religion in its own right. However, such a quest for more and more things and wealth in search of true happiness is doomed to failure. In *Dok Kham Tai*, as well as in the greater Thai society, the Buddhist understanding of the control of desire to achieve happiness is weaker than the lure of material objects as status markers. The crucial point of any alternative to this pattern of mass consumption is that people must voluntarily choose a life of simplicity. People must think before they buy, and consider the consequences of their purchases for themselves, their family, and society as a whole. They must take back the personal responsibility for what they consume, and the method by which they seek their income.

One of the major factors which lead to more desire in *Dok Kham Tai* is advertising. It is mass marketing and advertising that makes people believe that they can't be modern without having electronic appliances for their home. Therefore, people need to be provided with the necessary information for them to begin challenging the notion that consumerism is the only way to live. In a sense 'consuming' fulfils needs that will require other ways of being satisfied in a post-consumer society: the need to belong, the need for variety in life, the need to show their status in society. However,

everyone has their own way of life and lives it in the way they think is right and appropriate way for them. This study made us realize that those who enter the sex trade should not be looked down upon. It should be understood as a phenomenon of human beings who are seeking survival and have made their decision based on many factors, including the surrounding social environment. *Dok Kham Tai* is a good example of the effect of consumerism on prostitution.

Presently, economic development for rural Thai people in order to reduce poverty is a major focus of many socio-economic development agencies in Northern Thailand. As projects sponsored by NGOs, governments, and multi-lateral groupings have set out to improve economic life in Northern rural areas, people in communities such as *Dok Kham Tai* become more and more dependent on a monetary economy. To minimize any problems arising from this shift, there are several key principles that should be kept in mind as follow.

a) *The duration and continuity of government postings*

During the term of this study in *Dok Kham Tai*, there were rotations of some of the government officers who have important roles in social development. Even if the rotation was done at the end of their term, it created discontinuous work. When old people go, the new people who come have to learn the job. If the overlap is not smooth or the new person cannot adapt and apply him or herself deeply into the problem, projects will be delayed. This reduces work efficiency. Fortunately, the pattern of job rotation is not typical of the NGO's, some of which have sent personnel to study the problem for a long duration, such as Khun Samai Sae Pae from CARE who has worked here for over ten years and knows the situation better than the government officers.

b) *The role of government and the administration of local organizations*

The Ministry of Education has a project called "Sema for Life" which offers scholarships for rural students who are at risk of entry into the sex trade. However, the expenditure of funds from these scholarships needs close monitoring. The focus should be on supporting their family and allowing them to continue their studies without dropping out from school. If the scholarship is spent on amenities such as fans, refrigerators, or television sets, it cannot solve the problems associated with the sex trade. The investment in education, which enables children to have knowledge and secure jobs in the future, is a long term one. People tend to be interested in short-term investment. Before launching any projects for rural areas, the government should be prepared to take a long term approach, and must remain aware of any side effects that might increase the consumerism mentalities of people.

c) *Support for local products*

Apart from agricultural produces, *Dok Kham Tai* produces handicrafts such as cloth, which could be promoted and marketed to a wider area and might become popular. People will then become confident in their products. To improve income from the agricultural sector, alternative crops must be investigated. Garlic and red onions grow very well in the area but the planting of these crops has been decreasing. Also, farmers in the area found that irrigation via man-made canals from *Kwan Phayao* still do not enable farmers to plant outside the regular season because of insufficient water. Therefore, more efficient use of these canals should be encouraged by shifting to crops which do not need as much water as rice. Developing an agricultural and light industrial base, which is sufficiently strong to support people without seeking work outside the district is essential to the solution of problems in *Dok Kham Tai*. The pattern of seasonal migrant labour at low wage rates in provinces such as Chiangmai, Chonburi, and Rayong disrupts family life, and also hides or provides a convenient

'cover' for daughters working in the sex trade. They are just 'away' in the city working like other people in the district.

d) *Education and vocational training*

There is a vocational college in *Dok Kham Tai*, but it has some limitations. The type of training is mainly handicraft, which leads skills suitable to working in light industry only. *Dok Kham Tai* and *Phayao* province are not popular for tourists, so the local demand for handicrafts is not large and does not create enough revenue when compared with the revenue from sex services. People in the field survey noted that *Dok Kham Tai* Vocational School is in the field and far from the city. Students have to travel by car or, more popularly, by motorcycle to get to school. People are skeptical that the expenses from the purchase of motorcycles and fuel will be offset from the revenue derived from selling handicrafts.

However, vocational training is certainly one method to reduce entry into the sex trade. If sufficient revenue is generated as a result of the right vocational training, the basic needs of people should be met and participation in prostitution should be effectively reduced. At present, Naresuan University (Campus), located in *Phayao*, can grant Bachelor's degrees locally. If enough jobs are created for these graduates, changes for the better and social development will follow. Simultaneously, local people will earn more and sufficient income from employment within industries supported by these graduates, and can supplement and aid their own careers based on knowledge learned from vocational training and their experience in daily life.

e) *The role of teachers and monks*

In rural society, teachers are highly respected. However, if they confine their roles to teaching only, and do not recognize problems in the community and lead efforts to solve them, their social contribution will be much less. It was clear from the survey that some teachers, who have a long experience in the area, should have recognized the problems regarding prostitution, and should have taught the children to avoid bad behavior, i.e. providing sex services. Perhaps teachers are reluctant to cite prostitution as bad behaviour because some of the students' mothers are involved in it.

Furthermore, we must challenge Buddhist monks to play more active role in helping the people of *Dok Kham Tai* realize the priorities of life, and shift the perspective and attitude of consumerism/materialism toward concentrating on mental development, following the teaching of the *middle way* of living, and practicing meditation. The application of Buddhist ethics to current social problems will prompt others to begin a multi-disciplinary approach to the incorporation of Buddhist thinking within the ninth economic plan and to re-affirm Thailand as a nation of active and practicing Buddhists with compassion, care and concern for all.

f) *Minimizing the influence of the mass media*

Almost every house in *Dok Kham Tai* has a television, and the survey has shown that most people watch TV every day, especially dramas. People are also exposed to advertising which has a significant influence on spending and consumption. Their behavior can become dominated by this influence without much thought or people even noticing the process. A simple example is found at the local shop where children buy a lot of advertised snacks in preference to the cheaper and often healthier local ones. In fact, nowadays local snacks are not widely sold because their market has disappeared, and children are completely used to these pre-packaged and manufactured snacks. Both the media and advertising business are primarily dependent upon sponsors and companies wishing to promote their products. Companies also like to promote themselves as good corporate citizens, and this presents an avenue of approach to a more responsible and ethical standard of advertising, which attempts to limit the negative impact of consumerism on the population. Advertising which is less

associated with lifestyle promotion and more with facts and advertising which is tied to the promotion of ethical and cultural values of worth are both possible and desirable.

From this perspective on the possibilities of change, we return to *Dok Kham Tai*, for what is happening in *Dok Kham Tai* is a very specific challenge for improvement. We believe that the *Dok Kham Tai* community can be developed through utilizing the full potential of its local resources. From observation in the late afternoon after school, there seems to be more schoolgirls than schoolboys who are in their prime of life and who will grow into a new generation. We hope that they will have a good life with perfect body and perfect mind. We hope that *Dok Kham Tai*, which is known as “The Land of Pretty Women,” will also become the “Land of Dignity,” a great land of peace and coherence and Buddhist culture as its ancestors once intended.