

Meeting with Forest Monks

Re-Visioning Engaged Shin Buddhism

by Naoyuki Ogi

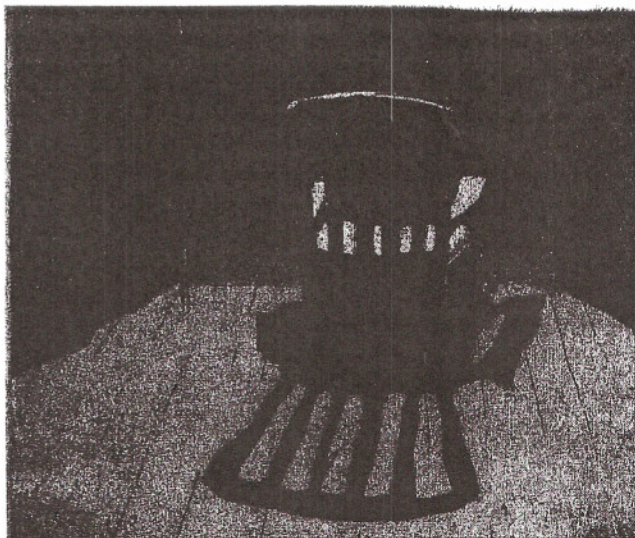
Around 5 PM on a June evening, I stepped off the plane into the humid, sticky air and looked for the sign bearing my name. Amidst hundreds of people crowding in front of the gate at Bangkok International Airport, I found the man who was to meet me. We exchanged simple greetings in English. He was a taxi driver and had come to pick me up and take me to my destination. For the next three hours, I was jolted back and forth in the back of the cab. This was the beginning of my summer in Thailand to participate in a one-month intensive program of engaged Buddhism at Webster University in Hua Hin.

On my journey, I had a lot of time to think about the path that had brought me here. I imagined that this trip would somehow influence my future life as a Buddhist minister in Japan. Seven years from now, I will become responsible for my family temple, which is now in the care of my parents, and I will share the dharma with my community in the beautiful rural countryside where the temple is located. My hometown in Yamaguchi Prefecture in western Japan faces a challenge shared by much of Japan—how to take care of an aging population.

After three long hours, we arrived in Hua Hin, located along a beautiful stretch of sea coast in southern Thailand. The class I would be taking was titled “Socially Engaged Buddhism in Thailand.” The other students in the program came from the United States, Austria, Germany, Nepal, and Vietnam, as well as Thailand. Everyone seemed to come from different backgrounds: politics, economics, law, and more. But all of us were interested in how Buddhism could be applied to our lives.

During the program, we went on two excursions to visit forest monks. On our first trip, we traveled four hours by bus north of Hua Hin and met monks living in the forest, near the people in their village. They lived a simple life there, following the *vinaya* (rules) of the community, living as Shakyamuni Buddha did. We stayed one night in the village and had a chance to experience their way of life. There were very few modern amenities: no toilet paper, no mat or futon to sleep on. We had to lie on a floor made of hard boards. We were provided only with an extremely thin mat and a pillow, both made of straw. Despite these uncomfortable sleeping and toilet facilities, I recall that the food was wonderful, fresh, and natural.

We shared a meal together in the village. The place where we ate was like no temple facility I had ever seen in the U.S. or Japan. The building was made up of three levels of floors: the highest floor for monks; the middle floor for nuns; and the lowest floor for village people and us guests. I imagined that the different levels of floors separating the monks and nuns might indicate a problem related to gender issues in Thai Buddhism and society, but it didn't seem this



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was the case, at least through their eyes.

Two weeks later, we went on a trip to see Phra Paisal, one of the most prominent engaged Buddhists in Thailand. I had heard that Phra Paisal was a Theravadin Buddhist social activist and that he was involved with Thai society, even though he lived in the forest. I thought that I, too, might be able to establish my own Buddhist activist life while living in the rural countryside of Japan, and I hoped he might help guide me in how to do this.

We traveled over 10 hours in two ramshackle vans from Hua Hin to the forest in Chaiyaphum, in northern Bangkok, to see Phra Paisal. The forest was located at the top of the mountain. Some students experienced terrible car sickness because the roads were extremely rough. I was one of those students. When we arrived, Phra Paisal and one of his disciples came down to the temple hall where we were to spend the night. Usually monks stayed in a simple small house in the middle of the mountains, about 30 minutes by foot. They gently explained some of the rules of their community.

After evening chanting at the temple hall, I asked Phra Paisal a question about how to engage suffering. He replied that he contributes to the alleviation of suffering through his writing and meditation training for Buddhist members in the forest village. He said he got his news about the problems of the world by reading books and using the internet. He said he went to Bangkok twice a month and that through talking with people there, he was able to determine the circumstances and realities that affect the country and all Thai people.

I asked Phra Paisal why he chose to live in the forest. I thought that he would do better to remain in the city so that he could have constant access to updated news and information. He explained that it is a Theravadin tradition to stay in the forest and that he meditates there in order to understand these problems profoundly and mindfully. He said that living away from cities helps the monks to maintain a tranquil and mindful mind. While I understood this idea, I could not imagine how much these monks could actually know of the challenges of the world while being so far away from worldly life.

I asked Phra Paisal about his goal as a Buddhist social activist. He responded that he wanted to contribute to the creation of a peaceful society. I realized that Phra Paisal was a universal Buddhist who seeks to do whatever he can for others. He is not attached to any sect or temple, and tries to find solutions to problems in human society through his own efforts. I feel that this attitude, based on a heartfelt mind and the wish for all sentient beings' happiness, is the embodiment of compassion. This moved me deeply.

Before we left the forest the next morning, I asked Phra Paisal for advice on how to become an engaged Buddhist. His answer was simple: it is dependent on the situation. I realized that Buddhists have to adapt and accommodate the Buddha's teachings to problems in the context in which they exist. His answer reminded me that we should not forget the attitude that encourages us to seek to do what we can do for others. Before I went to Thailand, I thought I had to do something very special to be an engaged Buddhist. I learned that I did not need to be bound by this obsession. The ideal of being an engaged Buddhist will naturally emerge in the process of seeking to do what we can do for others; it is not a goal unto itself. This has become one of the most important teachings I have received in my life.

On my way home, I met Phra Yuki Naradevo, a Japanese monk who lives in a forest near Phra Paisal's community. He sat on the porch of his small hut, surrounded by trees, and smiled at me. He was wearing a washed-out yellow robe like those of other Thai monks. Phra Yuki had come to Thailand to study pol-

itics and get a masters degree at Chulalongkorn University, but he had decided to leave his academic program and enter into monastic life.

I spoke with him about my concerns and understanding of engaged Buddhism in Japanese. Phra Yuki smiled and responded to me in a way that made me feel like he knew all about my thoughts and ideas. Before we parted, he said to me, "Believe what you believe and live with that." I will never forget his words and his compassion.

During my time in Thailand, I was finally able to understand my own definition of engaged Buddhism. It is a realization that allows us to develop a Buddhist practice toward the many kinds of suffering in society, in every corner of this planet. Engaged Buddhism gives Buddhists the courage to step forward and to respond to the suffering of others. The most important question becomes, "What can I do for you?"

Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhism, put the Eighteenth Vow of the Larger Sutra on Amityus at the center of his thoughts:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten directions who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my land, and call my Name even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment.

Through my experience, I finally understood the profound meaning of this vow and how it is part of Shinran's wish for a universally equal society. I believe that this vow can be the starting point for engaged Shin Buddhism.

My vision is to live my life as a Shin Buddhist with the question "What can I do for you?" forever expressing itself in my actions and heart.

I extend my deepest appreciation for the guidance of Prof. Theodore Mayer, Dr. Paul Fuller, Phra Paisal, Phra Yuki Naradevo, and my classmates at Webster University in Thailand. Thanks to these and so many other inconceivable causes, I have finally found my way as a Buddhist. *Namo Amida Butsu.* ❖

Naoyuki Ogi was born in 1982 in Yamaguchi, Japan. He is a graduate of Ryukoku University, one of the oldest Buddhist universities in Japan. He was ordained into the True Pure Land Sect priesthood in 2003 and will become the 14th generation hereditary lineage resident priest of his family temple, Choshoji. He is currently enrolled in an M.A. program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, with an emphasis on engaged Buddhism.

The day hunger disappears, the world will see the greatest spiritual explosion humanity has ever seen.

—Federico Garcia Lorca