



**Nantiya Tangwisutijit** tells the story of a revered monk who suggested Buddhists should review many long-held beliefs

**J**ust when Thai society was taking its first major step toward a democratic government, independent of its 700-year-old absolute monarchy, a voice emerged urging the people to also re-examine the country's equally long Buddhist heritage.

In May 1932, one month before the shift from absolute monarchy, the 23-year-old monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu left Bangkok to follow more closely in the footsteps of the Lord Buddha.

In an abandoned temple deep in the forest near his hometown of Chaiya in the southern province of Surat Thani, Buddhadasa began his lessons in solitary contemplation.

Little did he know then that this decision would ultimately lead to one of the most significant reinterpretations of Theravada Buddhism since the Buddha's words were first put on record 2,200 years ago.

Now, 13 years after his death, he remains one of the most renowned monks in Thailand.

However, while his name is known to many, most people in Thailand remain ignorant of the extensive efforts he exerted, and the controversy he endured, to render the Buddha's teachings more relevant to their daily lives.

Some may know of his vast writings and teachings, as more

## Honour the words, not the speaker

than 4,000 of them have been recorded. Others cite his devotion to meditation practice and commitment to secluded contemplation at his temple, Suan Mokkh, the Garden of Liberation.

A few others are even aware that Buddhadasa became the first monk ever selected to be an honorary member of the prestigious Siam Society, and he was also the first person ever to receive an honorary doctorate of Buddhism from Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University.

Still, only a small fraction have endeavoured to really

understand the tremendous gift embodied in Buddhadasa's life-long work.

This remains no accident, said Phra Sripariyatmoli, vice rector of Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University.

"Buddhadasa challenged millennia-old religious doctrine and rituals ingrained in our society as being inconsistent with what the Buddha actually taught. Although Buddhadasa provided a much more reasoned and practical guide for everyone to benefit from the Buddha's experience, even many in the religious establishment have found it easier to

preserve the traditional ideas about Buddhism rather than encourage society to embrace the Buddha's wisdom as amplified by Buddhadasa."

Nowhere is this challenge clearer than in Buddhadasa's criticism of what remains the mainstay of Thai Buddhist practice, that of going to temples and partaking in religious ceremonies.

In the opening of his best-known book, "Handbook for Humankind", Buddhadasa devotes most of this first chapter to this topic. He quotes the Buddha's own words as contained in the Tripikata's ancient Pali language to illustrate the fallacy of such practices.

"If man could eliminate suffering by making offerings, paying homage and praying, there would be no one subject to suffering left in the world, because anyone can pay homage and pray, but since people are still subject to suffering while in the very process of making obeisance, paying homage and performing rites, this is clearly not the way to liberation."

Even the motivation for much of this merit-making – improving one's karma to attain greater happiness in one's next life – was shown by Buddhadasa to be inconsistent with the Buddha's teachings.

In his review of what he and many scholars refer to as "The heart or essence of Buddhism",

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