

# Sukhothai Kingdom: The Golden Age of Buddhism

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## **Abstract**

This article entitled “Sukhothai Kingdom: The Golden Age of Buddhism.” It is called so due to the absorption of Buddhist conceptions, all Sukhothai kings were righteous rulers. The title of the kings which at one time used to be the “Lord of war” changed into the “Lord of Dhamma.” Sukhothai’s administrative regime was based on the “Father-Son” relationship. Kings were respected as the fathers to all the people, which implies that they adhered to the code of morality and protected people like their own children. People during this period believed in the principle of Kamma which is relevant to Buddhism. Thus, the Sukhothai period is regarded as the “Golden Age of Buddhism” in the history of Thailand. The arrival of Buddhism in Thailand can be supported by the archaeological evidence and literary accounts as well as other geographical and historical records and traditional beliefs, which tend to suggest that this religion was introduced into Thailand at four different phases as detailed: i) Early Theravada Buddhism in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. ii) Mahayana Buddhism in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Northern sect) iii) Pukam or Pakan Theravada Buddhism in the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. iv) Lankavamsa or Lankavong Theravada Buddhism in the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. During the fourth phase of the introduction of Buddhism into Thailand where at that time was called Sukhothai, which was recognized as the first kingdom of Thailand. It was in this period that Ramkhamhaeng the great king of Sukhothai sent messengers to invite the group of monks at the town of Nakhon Si Thammarat then known as the “Lankavamsa” monks to preach the doctrine at Sukhothai, promoting them every help and convenience. Since then Lankavamsa or Lankavong Theravada Buddhism was well patronized by king Ramkhamhaeng, it finally superseded the existing previous beliefs.

**Keywords:** Sukhothai Kingdom, golden age, Siam, Buddhism

## **Introduction**

Buddhism is the cultural essence of the Thai society. In the history of Siam nowadays known as Thailand, three main institutions; the Nation, the Religion and the Monarch are regarded as the most important. The Siamese are taught to hold them in high esteem since their school age. Three colours of the Thai-Nation Flag symbolize these three institutions. Red represents the Nation, white is the emblem of Buddhism and blue stands

for the monarch. It is also essential to note that the history of Thai sovereign state emerged with Buddhism as its religion and the ruling classes have been Buddhist(Nagendra Kr. Singh,1996)

The word "Thailand" literally means "*Land of the Free.*" Thus, at present under the system of Thai constitution with the King as the head of the state an individual has his freedom to follow any religion or creed and perform the rites of his faith, provided that it is not opposed to his duty as a Thai citizen and does not violate the peace and morality of a citizen on the ground of his religion which may be different from those of the others. It is, however, stated that the King is the Supreme Patron of all religions but he must be a Buddhist(Nagendra Kr. Singh,1996)

Before accepting Buddhism, the ancient inhabitants of Thailand professed Brahmanism mixed with animism. When Buddhism was introduced it was easily adopted because it did not conflict with both the old cults but fulfilled people's needs which were uncared for by either of them. Buddhism has been very widely accepted because of its emphasis on tolerance and individual initiative. This complemented the Thais' cherished inner freedom. Fundamentally, Buddhism is an empirical way of life. Free of dogma, it has a flexible moral, ethical and philosophical framework in which people find room to fashion their own ideals.

Thai history is normally divided into four main periods i.e. Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Rattanakosin (Bangkok). The Sukhothai period dates back to 700-800 years. From the eighteenth Buddhist century (1257 A.D.) during the Sukhothai era up to the present time, most Thais have followed Buddhism as their religion.

Sukhothai or Sukhodaya, according to historical tradition of Thailand is still recorded as the "First Thai Kingdom." The word "Sukhodaya" derives from the combination of two Pali words, *Sukha* and *Udaya*. *Sukha* means happiness whereas *Udaya* stand for dawn. Therefore, it literally means "*The Dawn of Happiness.*"

Sukhothai is so called because it was prosperous and well-governed. Its economy was self-sufficient, small-scale, and agricultural. The Thai people's basic diet was the same as that of many other people in Southeast Asia, consisting of rice and fish as staple foods, both of which were plentiful according to the inscription: (<http://www.thaizer.com/royal-family/king-ramkhamhaeng-the-great>,visited on January 21, 2016) "During the time of King Ram Khamhaeng this land of Sukhothai is thriving. There are fish in the water and rice in the fields. The ruler does not levy a tax on the people who travel along the road together, leading their oxen on the way to trade and riding their horses on the way to sell. Whoever wants to trade in horses, so trades. Whoever wants to trade in silver and gold, so trades."Such a paternalistic and benevolent style of kingship has caused posterity to regard the Sukhothai kingdom's heyday as a "golden age" in Thai history.

Theravada Buddhism of the Lankavamsa sect, which recorded as the fourth phase of the introduction of Buddhism into Thailand, was first

settled at Nakorn Sridhammaraj ( Modern province, some 800 kilometres at the south of Thailand) and their fame soon reached Sukhothai. King Ram Khamhaeng (The third great king of Sukhothai kingdom) then invited a dignitary called Phra Mahaswami (Highest level monk in Sri Lanka) to his capital and gave him royal support in propagating the Doctrine. ( Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto),1984) After that the Theravada Buddhism of the Lankavamsa sect became popular and more and more widely practiced in Thailand. Some of the Thai monarchs such as King Lithai (King Ram Khamhaeng's grandson) of Sukhothai and King Borom Trailokanath (The King who ruled over Ayutthaya, the second period of Thailand after Sukhothai was annexed to Ayutthay kingdom) of early *Ayutthaya* even entered the Order and lived for some time as Bhikkhu. This later resulted in the custom of Thai youths entering the Order for a short time at least once in their lives. And Pali language was also studied and used as the fundamental language of the scriptures instead of Sanskrit. The monks of the older sects gradually joined those of the reformed tradition. The Mahayana Buddhism adopted under the Srivijaya and Khmer rule declined and finally disappeared. This marks the period in which all Buddhists in Thailand were unified under the one single faith of the newly revised Theravada Buddhism(Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto),1984)

### **The Emergence of Buddhism during Sukhothai**

Sukhothai period is the most important in the history of Buddhism in Thailand, as it witnessed the introduction of Buddhism into the country. The rise of the Sukhothai kingdom in about 1257 A.D. (B.E. 1800) marked an important landmark in the history of Thailand. Before the formation of this great empire, the Thais were ardent followers of religions. Most of them were already Mahayanists, but when the Thais migrated from their habitat to settle in the Indo-Chinese peninsula, they also became the devotees of Hinduism. The Khmers, who were the original masters of the area now comprising modern Thailand, were the followers of Hinduism and the Mahayana sect of Buddhism during the same time. Therefore, naturally, the Thais who were much influenced by the Khmers became followers of both Buddhism and Hinduism.

But, after the foundation of the Sukhothai kingdom by King Sri Intrathit in 1257 A.D. there was an important change in the religious life of the people in Thailand, especially during the reign of the great Emperor Ram Khamhaeng. It was during this period that introduction of the fourth phase of Buddhism in Thailand began, which is popularly known as Lankavamsa or Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism.

The Lankavamsa or Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism was introduced in the Sukhothai kingdom towards the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. under the patronage of king Ram Khamhaeng the Great, who was the third monarch of the Phra Ruang Dynasty and of the Sukhothai empire. (R.C. Majumdar, 1996)

It is said that in 1157 king Parakkamabahu reigned in Ceylon. Being himself a devoted follower of the Buddha, he dedicated much of his personal property and his own happiness for the promotion of Buddhism in his land. His unique achievement was that he had managed to unite the Bhikkhus of various sects who had some minor doctrinal differences and also had convened a Council of well-versed Theras (Elder monks) for the sake of settling the contents of the three Baskets of the Buddhist Canon as it had been previously done in Ceylon and India. Due to the success of this Council, the Pali language was once again revised and proclaimed as the formal language for the research and study of Buddhism. His fame spread far and wide in foreign lands; several Buddhist countries such as Burma and Thailand then sent out groups of Bhikkhus to further their study of Buddhism in Ceylon. Seeing with their own eyes how the Ceylonese Bhikkhus were well-behaved and well-grounded in their beliefs, most of these Bhikkhus were strongly impressed and took the opportunity to remain in Ceylon and have a thorough study of the Buddha's teachings. For this purpose, these foreign Bhikkhus were to be ordained once again in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Ceylonese Bhikkhus. On their return, they brought to their homeland the refined manners, well-grounded beliefs and Ceylonese culture which again made no less impression upon their people than they themselves had been so impressed. More young men left their homes for the homeless life of a Bhikkhu and the Ceylonese religious culture from that time had taken its root in various countries such as Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

In Thailand, however, Nakon Sridhammaraj was the first place where the Lankavamsa monks came to settle and propagate the Lankavamsa sect. This place later on became one of the strongholds of the Lankavamsa sect. The archaeological evidence supports that Nakon Sridhammaraj of South Thailand was the first place where the sect spread. There is a Great Stupa at Wat Mahadhatu, which witnessed two periods of construction. (R.C. Majumdar, 1996) After Nakon Sridhammaraj, the activities of the Lankavamsa monks soon spread to Sukhothai, the capital of Thailand in those days. King Ram Khamhaeng, who was ruling Sukhothai at that time, was very much pleased to know about the deep learning and strict discipline of the Lankavamsa monks of Nakon Sridhammaraj. So, he sent a mission there to invite some of them with a view to propagate the Lankavamsa doctrine and discipline in Sukhothai. At Sukhothai, the king gave the Lankavamsa monks propagate the Doctrine. (But other sources tell us that King Ram Khamhaeng of Sukhothai extended his suzerainty towards whole area of modern Thailand. His conquest extended far and wide and a large number of territories both on the Thai border and neighboring countries became his vassal states. Southwards according to his Stone Inscription No. I, he had subdued several areas including Nakon Sridhammaraj. It is true to say that in the time of his occupation of Nakon Sridhammaraj, he had seen the significance of *Lankavamsa* Buddhism there. So he, on his return to Sukhothai, took with him the Lankavamsa monks and

scriptures to establish the Buddhist Sangha in Sukhothai.) During the reign of Ram Khamhaeng, third king of the Sukhothai lineage, the kingdom was greatly extended as far north as the town of Luang Phra Bang and as far south as the Malay Peninsula. In the East it was bordered by the Mae Khong River and in the west it annexed the whole of the Mon kingdom. The flood of Srivijaya power was now ebbing away due to the downward pressure of the Thais together with the upward pressure of Java. And, just as before, with the ebbing away of military power, its faith was in decline. Thus it was now the turn of Theravada to gain spiritual power over the people, whereas Mahayana of Cambodia and Srivijaya that, having once risen to power together, were once again having an equal share in their declining days. Now that the Lankavamsa Buddhism was well patronized by King Ram Khamhaeng, it finally got the edge over the existing beliefs of the Theravada and Mahayana. Sanskrit, the language held sacred by the Mahayanists, was accordingly replaced by Pali, the sacred language of the Theravadins and the Lankavamsa. The study of Pali was certainly at that time greatly enhanced ( David K. Wyatt, *Studies in Thai History*, Silkworm Books, Cornell University, p. 58. Also see: Stone Inscription I, side 4)The golden age of Buddhism commenced by King Ram Khamhaeng reached its zenith in the reign of his grandson, King Lithai the pious. (Many Inscriptions tell us about the progress of the Singhalese Buddhist monument ) He had also crystallized his research into the form of a book called in Thai “*Triphumi Phra Ruang*” or in Pali “*Tebhumikatha*” (sermon on three worlds) which is considered the earliest manuscript of Thailand. It is historically interesting. The achievement of King Lithai represents the beginning of Buddhist tradition and customs which were not seen before.It, therefore, marks another important landmark in the history of Buddhism in Thailand. (R.C. Majumdar, 1996) Thus the stone inscription I of King Ram Khamhaeng stated that: (H.H. Prince Dhani Nivat, Kromamun Bidyalabh ,1965)

“People in this state of Sukhothai are inclined towards charity and to observe the precepts. King Ram Kamhaeng of Sukhothai as well as his household and his court...men or women, they all have faith in the religion of Buddha; they observe the precepts through the duration of the rains, after which they present the Kathina ceremony during the stipulated month thereafter. In this ceremony they present, by way of offerings, moulds of cowries, of betel, of flowers, also cushion seats and beds, as well as the usual accessories of the Kathina amounting to two millions each year. For this presentation of the Kathina they go out to the park (on the hill); and on their return to the city the cortege stretches from the park right up to the edge of the plain, which becomes resonant with the sound of music and chariots. Everybody is free to play, to laugh and to sing.”

In another inscription(H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab,1962) (dated 1361) in the reign of the later king Lithai of Sukhothai there is a mention of a Patriarch “Maha Swami” of Ceylon being invited to be the Supreme Patriarch “Maha Sangha Raja” of Thailand. Also in this reign

it was recorded that the Bhikkhus were divided into two groups viz. one group preferred to spend their lives learning the Buddha's words. They liked to remain in the towns which were convenient for studying. They were technically known as the town-monks (*Gamavasi-bhikkhus*). The other group preferred practicing mindfulness in order to attain enlightenment. They often stayed in monasteries out of town, and were known as the forest-monks (*Arannavasi-bhikkhus*). This division must have originated from the two aspects of the study of Buddhism viz. Ganthadhura the burden of learning (or book-studying) and Vipassan dhura the burden of practicing or meditating for the development of insight. All through the time of the Sukhothai period Buddhism played a very important role in the field of culture, architecture and Buddha image construction, some evidences of which may be seen in the exquisite workmanship displayed in the image of the Buddha called Jinaraja (the most beautiful image in Thailand), in the grand temple of modern Phitsanulok, 400 kilometers north of Bangkok, and Jinasi in the temple of Pavaranivesa in Bangkok. (**Buddhism in the Kingdom of Thailand**, Mahamakut Buddhist University, Bangkok:Mahamakuta Rajavidyalaya Press,1972)Buddhism in Siam from Sukhothai right down to the end of the Ayutthaya period can really be regarded as a new Siamese sect. And when Ceylon was in turmoil and the Order of monks was extinct, Siamese monks – led by the Venerable Upali – were asked to go out to ordain monks and so re-establish the Buddhist lineage in Ceylon. This Order still exists and has been known in Ceylon as the Syamavamsa or Upalivamsa (Siamese Sect of Buddhism) (H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab,1962)

### **The Golden City of the Dharma**

Looking back at the Thai history, it clearly shows the close relationship between Buddhism and the Thai nation. The history of the Thai nation is also the history of Buddhism. The Thai nation originated over 2,000 years ago. Also in the same period Buddhism came and played an important part in the Thai history ever since. The Thai nation settled firmly in the present-day Thailand 700 years ago. Also seven centuries ago it adopted the present form of Buddhism. ( Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto),1984) Buddhism became the main religion of the Thai people in Sukhothai and influenced their life and social institutions of the Thais in a big way. (Thailand in the 90, National Identity Board, Office of the prime Minister, Bangkok: 1995) The people in the Sukhothai period were pious and did much for the promotion of Buddhism. Although animistic beliefs remained potent in Sukhothai, King Ram Khamhaeng and his successors were all devout Buddhists. The major cities of the Sukhothai kingdom were therefore full of monasteries, many of which were splendid examples of Thai Buddhist architecture. Sukhothai adopted the Ceylonese school of Theravada Buddhism, beginning with King Ram Khamhaeng's invitation to Ceylonese monks to come over and purify Buddhism in his kingdom.

Sukhothai's importance in the cultural history of Thailand also

derives from the fact that Thai script evolved into a definite form during King Ram Kamhaeng's time, taking as its models the ancient Mon and Khmer scripts. Indeed, this remarkable king is credited with having invented Thai script. King Sri Intrathit and King Ram Khamhaeng were both warrior kings and extended their territories far and wide. Their successors, however, could not maintain such a far-flung empire. Some of these later kings were more remarkable for their religious piety and extensive building activities than for their warlike exploits. An example of this type of Buddhist ruler was King Dhammaraja Lithai, believed to have been the compiler of the *Tebhumikatha*, an early

Thai book on the Buddhist universe or cosmos. (<http://www.mahidol.ac.th/Thailand/glance-thai/area.html>. Visited on May 26, 2007) The paternalism of Sukhothai may have been reinforced by certain Buddhist values. For example, the Buddhist principle regulating the social relationship between parents and children delineates the rights and duties of the two parties. Here, respect, gratitude, obedience and love towards parents are strongly emphasized. Parents are advised to care for their children by expressing their parental love for them, by restraining them from doing evil deeds and exhorting them to do good things (For elaboration of this point see Siddhi Butr-Indr.) It is very probable that the kings of Sukhothai had utilized the Buddhist concept of kingship to enhance and maintain their political power. The notion that Dhamma was the supreme code for regulating the social order and a moral guide for government was espoused by King Ram Khamhaeng and his successor. Ram Khamhaeng, for example, was said to have believed that: (Pisanaka Kraingsak, 1969) "If society is morally sound and the people have a high spirit by keeping steadfast to Buddhism and adhering to the Dhamma, the kingdom will be tranquil and prosperous." To demonstrate their righteous rules and thereby constitute the norm for the society, the kings of Sukhothai took a leading role in religious activities, promoting, and protecting Buddhism, and in patronizing the Sangha. King Ram Khamhaeng, for instance, not only showed his subjects his own dedication to Buddhism but also taught Dhamma to the people. On each Uposatha day (Regularly Buddhist Holy Day ) he invited a learned monk to teach Dhamma at his palace. He personally led the people to observe the Buddhist precepts strictly during the season of Vassa retreat. At the end of Vassa he presented Kathina robes to the monks. He gave donations to the monks who were proficient in Dhamma and in propagating Buddhism. He built monasteries and religious places and encouraged his subjects to follow his example. Buddhism in his reign was said to have prospered because of his devotion (A.B. Griswold and Prasertna Nagara, 1975) Ram Khamhaeng governed with justice and magnanimity his own people as well as people of other nationalities who lived in his Kingdom, whether they were Laotians, Khmers, Mons, Malays, Burmese or Chinese, so that they would enjoy peace and happiness in consonance with the name of Sukhothai.

According to King Ram Khamhaeng's Stone Inscription, most of the

people engaged in agriculture and cultivated rice, while others carried on trade, which was greatly facilitated because no rate or tax was collected from those who were engaged in it. In fact, he allowed free trade to spread throughout the land. ( Rong Syamananda, **A History of Thailand**, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University)His successor, King Luthai followed Ram Kamhaeng's mode of government and continued to support Buddhism. As a Buddhist king, he proclaimed himself Maha Dhammaraja (king of righteous kings). He is said to have thoroughly studied the Three Pitakas (A.B.Griswold and Prasert na Nagara,1975) During his reign, Buddhism appears to have prospered because of his devotion. He was recorded to be the first Thai king who donated land and slaves, probably prisoners of war, to the monasteries,(A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara) a practice that was followed up to the early Bangkok period.

Probably the most important religious act of King Lithai was his ordination. He was the first Thai king who temporarily left his throne to enter monkhood, an act that in Thai belief gains the highest merit. Besides, his ordination should be seen in the light of the political conditions of Sukhothai in this period.

When King Lithai came to the throne he was confronted with at least two heavy responsibilities; that is, first to ward off an invasion from the newly emergent and expansive Ayutthaya, and second to recover his father's territories and to pacify rebellious vassals. In both cases he needed alliances with independent neighboring rulers. By promoting Buddhism, and establishing himself as a righteous king, exemplified by his ordination, he projected Sukhothai as the center of Buddhism. At his ordination it was recorded that the rulers of Lanna and Nan came to participate in merit-making. They and some other in the North sent diplomatic missions to Sukhothai in order to bring Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism to their homelands. (For fuller details: see Satuan Supasophone, Phraputtha Sasana kap Phra Mahakasat Thai, Bangkok: Klang Witthaya, 1962, pp. 65-69; and also Barbara Andaya, Statecraft in the Reign of Lithai of Sukhothai, Cornell Journal of Social Relations, Vol. 6, No.1, Spring 1971, pp. 61-83) His devotion to Buddhism also assured his vassals that they would be treated with kindness and compassion, the essential virtues to be observed by a righteous Buddhist king. We are told that Lithai's policy of pacification of his vassals involved a military campaign followed by a generous peace. When he succeeded in subduing the vassals, he assured them that they could rely on his justice and mercy. He taught them to be good Buddhists (A.B.Griswold and Prasert,1975)

## **Conclusion**

Buddhism is the cultural identity and essence of the Thai society. Thai state has been bound up with Buddhism for long time, particularly the First Kingdom of Thailand that was Sukhothai. According to historical and archaeological evidence three main institutions of Thailand, the Nation, the Religion and the Throne are regarded as the most important, emerged



during the Sukhothai period. It is also essential to note that the history of Thai sovereign state emerged with Buddhism as its religion and the ruling classes have been Buddhist. Furthermore, Sukhothai's administrative system and social institutions through its culture, tradition, language and literature came of age during the same period.

Buddhism had a profound influence on the cultural life of the Thai people. It moulded their manner of thinking and acting. It became an integral part of the Thai life. Thailand has the reputation of being "*The Land of Yellow Robes*", "*The Land of Smiles*" and "*The Land of the Free*" which it owes to the influence of Buddhism.

Therefore, it can be concluded that since the Sukhothai period until today Buddhism has been the main focus of religious life. It has not only inspired the life of the Thai people, but also played an important role in social and cultural life. It is this unbroken tradition which accounts for the immense significance of formation of the Buddhist arts during Sukhothai that is alive and vibrant in modern Thailand, and for the fact that it permeates so deeply so many aspects of Thai life.

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