

A Synthesis of the Major Concepts and Characteristics of Thai Buddhist Literature¹

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Abstract

This article aims to provide an overall picture of the concepts of Thai Buddhist literature by synthesizing concepts from major Thai Buddhist literary works that have appeared in the culture of Thai literary art, and conclude that Thai Buddhist literature derives from the *Tripitaka* and post-*Tripitaka* Buddhist scriptures, both in terms of substance and form. The origin of the creation of the texts can be traced and the teachings can be verified with the *Tripitaka*. Nonetheless, the creation of Thai Buddhist literature has focused on sentimental aesthetics for the presentation of spiritual principles by using literary techniques. Furthermore, Buddhist literature belongs to the category of literature of experience and has the concept of utilitarian literature, aiming to present Buddhist philosophical concepts that are easy to comprehend, such as karma, giving and good deeds, all of which are significantly influential to the thought, behavior and customs and rituals in Thai society.

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Introduction

In Thai society, there are numerous Buddhist literary works, which shows that Thai society has long given importance to the creation and reading of Buddhist literature. With respect to creating Buddhist literature in a Thai context, the main purposes are for education, teaching, and for the aesthetic creation and reading of literature. Thus, it is apparent that Buddhist literature in a Thai context has many merits.

Thai Buddhist literature derives from Indian Buddhist culture. Thailand received the influence of Pāli Buddhist literature, which spread to lands with Theravada Buddhism as the major religion, such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia. Thai Buddhist literature is literature with content about Buddhism with respect to substance, events, persons and teachings. As regards the texts, there are those translated from Pāli to Thai and those composed in Thai. The creation of Buddhist literature with regard to translation, recomposition and composition of new works has resulted in Buddhist literature with diversity in form and substance. However, these literary works are all based on Buddhist teachings, the origins of which can be traced.

It is possible to synthesize Buddhist literary works in Thai society to find the major concepts and characteristics of Buddhist literature in a Thai context. The study of these concepts also leads to an understanding of the basis of Buddhist notions in Thai society. The scope of this study was from the Sukhothai period to the early Rattanakosin period because during this time a large amount of Buddhist literature was produced and the influence of Buddhist literature during this time has continued until the present.

Major Concepts and Characteristics of Thai Buddhist Literature

Studying the major concepts and characteristics of Thai Buddhist literature means considering the overall picture of Buddhist literary works in order to analyze the creative concepts, utilization, merit and

role of such literature towards humans and society. The results of the study can be summed up as follows:

1) **Thai Buddhist Literature was created from the *Tripitaka* [พระไตรปิฎก], *Aṭṭhakathā* [อรรถกถา], *Ṭīkā* [ฎีกา] and *Pakaraṇavisesa* [ปกรณ์วิเสส].** The creation of Thai Buddhist literary works of all kinds involved the major scriptures, the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā* (the commentaries), and scriptures of a later time, *Ṭīkā* (the sub-commentaries), *Anuṭīkā* (the sub-sub-commentaries) and *Pakaraṇavisesa*,³ both directly and indirectly. The direct use is the use of the teachings, stories, events and passages from the major scriptures in the compositions. These elements can be verified by drawing connections to the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā*. The texts also include references to the titles of the scriptures used in the compositions. The indirect use is the adoption of the influence in terms of story and teaching from later Buddhist scriptures. Verification by drawing connections to the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā* can still be made, however. In addition, there are Thai Buddhist literary works with adaptation of the stories to fit Thai society without the teachings being altered from the source scriptures.

The substance and plots of Buddhist scriptures are the important sources of creation that can be referred to in Thai Buddhist literature, which are the major elements of such creation. In choosing topics for literary composition, the authors did not just translate the entire Pāli version, but they selected and synthesized main ideas from different sources to construct harmonious literary works that would correspond with the ideas and beliefs of Thai people and the messages the authors intended to communicate.

Thai Buddhist literary works were created by using topics or stories about Buddhism as the primary information, for instance, stories about the Buddha and his disciples, to compose stories that are complete. For example, *Pathomsombōdhikathā* [ปฐมสมโพธิกถา] is considered a complete history of the Buddha. *Nanthopanandhasutra*

³ *Pakaraṇavisesa* are types of Buddhist scripture composed to explain Buddhist teaching drawing on the content of the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā*. *Pakaraṇavisesa* has been accepted as a standard text for studying Buddhism.

Khamluang [นันทโปกนันทสูตรคำหลวง] and *Phramalai Khamluang* [พระมาลัยคำหลวง] present the occurrences encountered by the disciples during the course of their Buddhist spiritual practice. *Tribhumi* is an integration of knowledge on cosmology in accordance with the Buddhist concepts from numerous scriptures into a literary work that has a particular form and is very complete. Moreover, in *Tribhumikathā* [ไตรภูมิิกถา], it is mentioned that the story was constructed from over 33 Buddhist scriptures.

Furthermore, there is also creation by adopting the forms of the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā*, for example, the *Jātaka* form, as seen in the *Pannāsa Jātaka* (ปัญญาสชาดก), which was created by adapting local folktales into *Jātakas* after the style of *Aṭṭhakathā Jātaka* to present the concepts of the Bodhisattva, karma and the cycle of rebirth, which are important teachings in Buddhism.

Creation with citation of passages from the major Buddhist scriptures is an important characteristic of Thai Buddhist literature because making reference to the titles of these scriptures is very beneficial to the verification of the contents and concepts. This makes it possible to trace back to the core of the religion, which is the *Tripitaka*. In addition, using substance from different scriptures to create particular literary works, citation is important with respect of generating knowledge that is certainly correct and reliable because it enables reference to the Buddha's words or those of the Buddha's disciples.

I examined all the concepts of Thai Buddhist literature by analyzing the origins of these literary works and found that they were created from the *Tripitaka*, *Aṭṭhakathā*, *Ṭīkā* and *Pakaraṇavisesa*, which are the primary scriptures of Buddhism used as the source of data for reference to the teachings of the Buddha and his disciples. These scriptures were used to create certain literary works, some of which are of the character of *Pakaraṇavisesa*, which can be traced, according to the content of the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā*, such as *Jinakalamalipakaranam* [จินกาลมาลีปกรณ์], *Sangṭīyavaṃsa* [สังคีตยวงศ์] and *Tribhumi* [ไตรภูมิ]. These scriptures also refer to one another, connecting Buddhist knowledge and thus permitting verification and their usage as evidence for teaching. Even though the creation

involved alteration and adaptation in form and detail, the core, which is the teachings according to Buddhist principles, does not change in anyway.

The order of priorities of Buddhist literary works and their connection with Buddhist Thai literary works can be organized as follows:⁴

1. *Tripitaka* (the religious canon) considered as the primary basis for other Buddhist literary works. The *Tripitaka* is regarded as sacred because it is the Buddha's words – the text and the teachings cannot be altered. Therefore, translation of the *Tripitaka* from Pāli was done strictly in order to maintain the monks' disciplinary rules and the Buddha's words. The *Tripitaka* is thus used as the basis for Buddhist teachings and a source for reference and verification of the teachings of later Buddhist literature.

2. Scholarly treatises are literary works written to explain the disciplinary rules in the *Tripitaka*. Their function is explaining matters that are difficult to understand in greater detail in order to clarify certain Buddhist matters. For instance, *Aṭṭhakathā Jātaka* explains the incantations with vague *Jātakas* in the *Tripitaka* in a way that makes the stories complete, and is the origin of Thai Buddhist literature in the genre of *Jātaka*. In addition, there are literary works in the category of *Ṭīkā*, *Anuṭīkā* and *Pakaraṇavisesa* that are scriptures that clarify another layer of knowledge in addition to *Aṭṭhakathā*. These are Buddhist literary works that are commonly accepted as having teachings that are definite and verifiable with the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā*. The scholarly treatises had influence on the creation of later Buddhist literature. For instance, *Tribhumi* can be categorized

⁴ I applied Vladimir Braginsky's concept about writing religious literary works, in which religious literature writing in Sanskrit, Chinese and Arabic cultures is comparatively systemized. The systemization shows that there is a system of writing literary works by starting with the absolute in the religious sense as the center of other kinds of literature that are remote – knowledge, historical and sentimental literature. I compared this idea with the creation of Buddhist literature and saw that they are comparable and that literary works of all kinds and periods are related to and can be traced back to the main scripture, the *Tripitaka*. For detailed information, consult Braginsky, *The Comparative Study of Traditional Asian Literatures*, 43-51.

into this type of literature because it is the application of knowledge on earth science based on Buddhist ideas from different scriptures to create a specific story.

3. Mythology / history is a genre of literature with stories relating to people, places, incidents, or certain things – that is, stories about important people in Buddhism, history of the Buddha, history of the disciples, history of Buddhism, history of religious objects, history of religious places and history of incidents relating to the progress and decline of Buddhism. Literary works of this genre were constructed from historical information and Buddhist scriptures that were composed into complete stories and made into singular literary works, such as *Pathomsombōdhikathā* [ปฐมสมโพธิกถา], *Mahāvamsa* [มหาวงศ์], *Jinakalamalipakaranam* [จินกาลมาลีปกรณ์], *Sangītiyavamsa* [สังคีตยวงศ์] and legends.

4. Fine literature is a kind of literature that exists in abundance in the culture of Thai literary art and is characterized by emphasis on creating pathos, emotion and embellishment in substance and style of language. The origins of the stories are the *Tripitaka*, *Aṭṭhakathā* and historical literature. Some adaptation may be made to the stories for aesthetic purposes and the works are presented with fine literary techniques. They are also writings with individualities of the poets as most are written in poetic form. However, although beautifully created with literary art, connection can still be drawn from these literary works to teachings in the *Tripitaka*, *Aṭṭhakathā* and historical literary works, such as *Kāki* [กาگی], *Kumarakhamchan* [กุมารคำฉันท์] and *Samapatti-Amarindra* [สมบัตติอมรินทร์].

One main concept of Thai Buddhist literature is connecting literary works with the major scriptures, the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā*, both in terms of story and teaching. The major scriptures are information sources for reference to the teachings of the Buddha and his disciples, which illustrates that one significant concept of Thai Buddhist literature is based on Buddhist principles. Although the stories are somewhat adapted or altered, their cores, which are the teachings according to Buddhist principles (for example The Four Noble Truths, Karma, *dāna*), are not changed in any way and the literary works serve to preserve the teachings well.

2) Thai Buddhist Literature is literature of experience.

Experience is a major factor in inducing knowledge. Buddhist literature was produced by authors with religious experience through learning (*pariyatti* [ปรียัติ]) and practicing (*patipatti* [ปฏิปัตติ]), which leads to achievement (*pativedha* [ปฏิวะธ]). The texts of Buddhist literary works created from Buddhist teachings with evidence in the *Tripitaka* are manifestations of the authors' experience. The authors studied and checked the knowledge to convey it in literary works and the substance of these literary works can be verified by drawing connections to the *Tripitaka*. The authors transformed their experience and knowledge into literary texts of exquisiteness, both in terms of teaching and literary style, to be the tool that can induce experience and knowledge in the readers. The coming into being of Thai Buddhist literature involves the three parts – author, text and reader – coordinating in creating religious experience, which can be put to use.

Religious experience in Buddhism is unlike that in theistic religions, which means finding God or having other supernatural experiences. Instead, it pertains to comprehension and the search for the absolute or the supreme teaching to benefit life, both secularly and spiritually. This means having profound knowledge and understanding of the teachings and applying them to the development of life to progress towards spiritual liberation.

The history of the Buddha shows that his process of generating experience led him to think of a way to be free from suffering. He started by considering the experience of perceiving sickness, aging, death, and most importantly, suffering. He intended to search for the cause of suffering. In this search, he did not have any fixed presumption. He did not believe that there was a god or any divine entities that could provide the answer, but he experimented with his own experience. Hence, Buddhism is focused on problems caused by mental experience.⁵ That is, Buddhist spiritual concepts came into being through his accumulation of experience. He was the one who initiated or discovered the teachings and passed on his experience to his disciples. When the Buddha taught or preached, he would think of

⁵ Wit, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 50.

the matter and method appropriate to each person. Although the subject matter is the same, with people that were different in capacity, he would use different means for them to be able to understand, which signifies that understanding depends on the varying experience of the message receivers. Afterwards, the disciples worked together in passing on the experience through councils, which eventually resulted in recording in written form. The *Tripitaka* is, therefore, a literary work about the experience of the prophet and his disciples.

Therefore, Buddhist literary works are books created with compilation of teachings from Buddhist treatises – teachings, or ideas of communities that followed Buddhism. Hence, Buddhist literary works have the value of being records of the teachings of the Buddha, reflecting the experience of the Buddha and his disciples in their spiritual practice. They are also historical writings that show changes in ideas and manners of interpreting Buddhist teachings in different times and regions.⁶ Therefore, the texts are very important to the study of Buddhism because they are the only evidence or tool that can be used to study and verify the Buddha's teachings, and the tool that will continually evoke and produce experience in the readers and practitioners.

The knowledge of the authors or poets is of the kind that comes through insight. It is perfect knowledge or knowledge of the high level. Although the experience regarding this cannot be explained with any particular language, for it is abstract experience and knowledge, special experience that cannot be proved, the literary works certainly exhibit the profound knowledge of the poets who could create and express that special experience through the texts. One can say that the authors' ability is in creating an ordinary world that humans can perceive and comprehend through the senses from the spiritual dimension that is beyond ordinary human understanding, such as in the explanation in *Tribhumi*, which is aimed at passing on profound knowledge to the readers. *Tribhumi* explains high-level meditation; that attaining the highest level of the eight meditative absorption stages means attaining an understanding of the universe, seeing

⁶ Supapan, *History of Pāli Literature in India and Ceylon*, 2.

heavens and Brahmās in one's palm. Those who attain this level of meditative absorption will be able to see and understand all the worlds in the universe vividly.⁷ The authors used comparison as a means to render the greatness of meditative absorption.

The authors had to communicate with language to create concrete imagery in the mind of the readers or message receivers, which takes great proficiency to assemble such an abstract picture and make it extensive, deep, and distinct for others to perceive. This process is called creation, which means bringing something into existence out of nothingness.⁸

Most of the authors of Thai Buddhist literature have been monks or were so for some time, receiving education for monks, studying Buddhism, both in theory and practice. When passing on their experience, they usually expressed the intentions in creating the works to glorify the Buddha, a sublime undertaking, and to communicate Buddhist principles for the readers to comprehend. Thus, there is both the merit of continuation and that of utility to the readers. For example, in the beginning of *Phramalai Khamluang* [พระมาลัยคำหลวง],⁹ the author talked about his faith in Buddhism that was to such a degree that he related his knowledge in a refined style in terms of both substance and literary style. For the substance, the author transmitted the knowledge and experience obtained from Buddhist scriptures with strictness and affirmed the knowledge from which the story derives, aiming to produce a literary text both beautiful and beneficial to the readers. The Supreme Patriarch, H.R.H. Prince Paramanujitajinorasa wrote the *Pathomsombōdhikathā* [ปฐมสมโพธิกถา], and checked whether it was correct according to the major scriptures so that the story would be faithful to the Buddha's words. One important duty of authors who use their experience and knowledge is to check correctness and create literary works that will benefit others.

Another important tool for understanding and reaching the supreme principle of Buddhism is the text. The text is important for being the medium for learning experience and to replicate the

⁷ *Tribhumikathā*, 257.

⁸ Kusuma, *The Jewel of Rattanakosin*, 24.

⁹ *Thai Literary Works of the Ayutthaya Period Vol. 3*, 162-163.

experience of the author for the reader, generating wisdom and faith. In Buddhism, importance is given to literary text (*Tripitaka*), and with the great quantity of texts in Theravada Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism can be considered a “religion of the book”.¹⁰ The text is thus a tool for creating experience because it produces profound sensory perception. *Tribhumilokvinijchayakathā* [ไตรภูมิโลกวินิจชยกถา] says learning Buddhism through texts is very important because the knowledge acquired will be the path to understanding Buddhist teachings. Those who are tired of the round of existence and intend to practice spirituality to achieve nirvāṇa depend on the texts for guidance and clarification.¹¹

The texts are sacred and important, given the belief that the *Tripitaka* are the words of the Buddha, so the literary texts that can be associated with the *Tripitaka* are important. Despite the fact that Thai Buddhist literature involves emotion, if the Buddha’s words are cited, the status of the text seems to be more important. A clear example is the *Jātakas*. Although the origin is folktales, the work belongs to a higher status because besides the contents, the *Jātakas* are also related to the faith of the readers. As the readers regard the text as important, the status of the text is elevated, as evident in the creation of *Jātaka* books to glorify the religion and the gesture of homage made to them. In creating Buddhist literature, the authors did so with delicacy and aimed to make the texts sacred and important.

The important role of the text is also significantly related to the message receiver or reader who will apply the author’s experience in and knowledge of Buddhism that is communicated through the text to studying and practicing, and assume the task of preserving and passing on the teachings. It is important that the reader should have some religious experience and imagination so as to be able to perceive the religious substance. In Buddhism, it is believed that an important concept that the Buddha gave to the world’s philosophical circle is the notion that the search for knowledge must begin where one is, not anywhere else.¹² Therefore, to gain experience and knowledge, one

¹⁰ Bond, *The Word of the Buddha*, ix.

¹¹ *Thai Literary Works of the Rattanakosin Period Vol. 2*, 6.

¹² Adwin Arthur Burt cited in Wit, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 36.

must begin with oneself, through learning. Buddhism teaches *sutta maya panya* [สุตมยปัญญา], knowledge acquired from reading or from listening, which clearly denotes that readers of Buddhist literature can gain knowledge and wisdom through the tool, which is the texts, and learning, whether through listening or reading, from enlightened ones.

On the reader's part, the experience, knowledge and understanding of anything are caused by one's senses, by human nature in the Buddhist sense. Being human is a combination of body and mind. Both are important and closely related, dependent on each other. That is, the mind depends on the body for appearance and perception of emotions or the outer world and the body depends on the mind for performing actions signifying a living entity. Both aliveness and perception of humans are possible through the working together of the body and the mind and since both play important parts in the experiencing of humans, in Buddhist philosophy, what one perceives with the body and the mind is "experience" and human cognition is possible in both ways – physical cognition and mental cognition. Experience is the base, the most important origin or generator of knowledge. The Buddha said, "All dharma is induced by sense impression." In Buddhist philosophy, experience is an important basis and importance is primarily given to experience as the origin of knowledge.¹³

Therefore, the message receiver obtains the experience and knowledge from the author through the texts, which are tools for creating sense impression, and combines them with his previous experience and knowledge to obtain imagination from the text. This results in an understanding of Buddhist teachings at the level that is in accordance with the level of one's religious experience. Buddhist experience involves not only belief or faith, but also wisdom for there are methods of acquiring knowledge level by level, from the fundamental to high level and it is the knowledge that can be passed on, affirmed and verified.

To sum up, the coming into existence of Thai Buddhist literature requires three parts – author, text and reader – coordinating to create

¹³ Laksanawat, *Epistemology Buddhism*, 75.

spiritual experience or stages of creating the knowledge of Buddhist teachings that eventually leads to the capability to transmit and utilize the knowledge. No matter how far apart post-*Tripitaka* Buddhist literature is from the major scriptures, from the messages of every story, connections can be drawn to the *Tripitaka* for verification. The creation of Buddhist literature in the later time and in Thai society is thus evidence of the continuance of the teachings by the authors who convey their experience and knowledge in literary texts that are exquisite in both teaching and literary style to be a tool of the readers to induce experience and knowledge within, at whatever level.

3) Thai Buddhist Literature was composed using various literary techniques. One major function of literature is to induce emotions, or literary flavors, which are feelings responding to emotions, in the reader. Emotions, such as love, hate, greed, infatuation, happiness and distress, are stronger than ordinary feelings. They are emotions in response to situations, people, or objects with results relating to changes in physical stimulation and perception.¹⁴ Emotion is produced by a creation with a delicate style and well-chosen words and expressions. Emotion caused by the beauty of literary art is what the reader will receive and will produce impression and captivation leading to comprehension of the ideas and values of the literary work. Thus, emotion can produce gratification in terms of aesthetic sentiment and provide the value of spiritual knowledge fully.

Literature is a kind of art created to communicate thought, beauty and goodness by assembling elements to form literary artwork. Sathiankoset talked about the character of literature as a kind of art, mentioning the elements of literature, namely, emotion, concept and technique.¹⁵

Even though the primary elements of Thai Buddhist literature are Buddhist substance and teachings, since the stories were created in the form of literature, which is a kind of art with emphasis on beauty and emotion, the beauty of language and aesthetics is an important aspect

¹⁴ Kamjorn, *Aesthetics*, 69.

¹⁵ Sathiankoset, *Studies of Literature*, 20.

of Thai Buddhist literature. The beauty that is the substance of Buddhism is the beauty of Buddhist dharma or the teachings presented by the Buddha. This beauty of Buddhist dharma is due to the truth or the substance of truth of Buddhist dharma. Furthermore, with the organized and fine composition, the beauty of Buddhist dharma is beauty caused by integrating literary elements with the objective or substance of Buddhist dharma for lucid communication. Expression with literary techniques is thus an important concept of Thai Buddhist literature.

Emotional conveyance in Thai Buddhist literature might be done through the portrayal of the greatness of Buddhism, such as the miraculous nature of an event or a person, to create sacred significance. For example, in *Pathomsombōdhikathā*, the author created a scene when the Bodhisattva was born by describing that all the creations of the earth were mystified by the birth, that the earth and the whole universe trembled and there was light everywhere. Every kind of gem glittered. Every musical instrument played on its own. The moon glowed brightly. The radiance of the sun became pleasantly cool; all this because of the birth of the Buddha.¹⁶

Tribhumikathā describes the horror of hell, in contrast to the joy of heaven. This contrast induces emotion with the purpose of encouraging people to abstain from doing evil; while the imagination of the joy in heaven induces people to do good deeds so that they will go to good and happy worlds. The description of such joy with imagery can lucidly depict Dharmic messages, inducing understanding through imagination, thought and emotion. The same is true of the description of infernal creatures and hungry ghosts in *Nirayahathā-Petakathā* [นิริยกลา เปรตกลา], about how they suffer, being pierced by spears, beaten by metal hammers, skewered and roasted over open fires for having done evil.¹⁷

Thai Buddhist literary works were written both in prose and verse to communicate Buddhist teachings. Prose is a form of verbal composition commonly found in religious teaching. The *Tripitaka* or

¹⁶ *Pathomsombōdhikathā*, 30.

¹⁷ Niyada, *Compilation of the Inscriptions of Wat Phra Chetuphon*, 222.

scriptures at the level of *Aṭṭhakathā* were mostly written in prose. The main purpose of using prose is to communicate with a clear understanding.

Prose is a kind of verbal composition with a descriptive function because it can contain messages more meticulously than any other sorts of verbal composition. It is not bound by rules. One can compose as desired, adhering merely to the syntactic rules. Prose is often found in scriptures with long stories, such as chronicles and fictional tales, in which the authors could describe events or environments fully, such as in *Jinakalamalipakaranam*, *Sangītiyavaṃsa* and *Tribhumi*.

Prose makes the narration and description clear and induces emotions and feelings. Thai Buddhist prose works usually render imagery and teach dharma. For instance, the prose in *Sangītiyavaṃsa* narrates events chronologically and logically. As a result, the reader, whether reading or listening, can certainly understand the story consecutively. Another example is *Tribhumi*, in which prose was used to explain the cause and effect in karma; that covetousness and theft cause one to be born in hell and suffer for a long time. After being free from hell, one will be born as a poor person.¹⁸

Another prominent form of Thai Buddhist literature is in verse, which is a style of composition with emphasis on form and rhyme. In selecting words to convey meanings according to the rules of the types of verses, when the emphasis is on selecting words that will produce pleasant sounds and rhythms, it is harder to communicate the objectives of the stories. Nevertheless, in Thai Buddhist literary works, the pleasant-sounding asset of verse was utilized to create emotional impact in the readers. It makes them see the beauty of language and be emotionally influenced, which will lead to the contemplation of spiritual messages present in the stories by the use of thought and imagination, and eventually comprehension of the main ideas of the stories.

Rai [รำย] and *kap* [กาพย์] are verse forms that were often used in composing Buddhist literary works. In addition to their pleasant-sounding quality, they are also verse types suitable for chanting,

¹⁸ *Tribhumikathā*, 106.

preaching and the oral tradition. Examples of *rais* in early Buddhist Thai literature are *Mahachat Khamluang* [มหาชาติคำหลวง], *Kap Mahachat* [กาพย์มหาชาติ], *Phramalai Khamluang* [พระมาลัยคำหลวง] and *Nanthopanandhasutra Khamluang* [นันทโปกปนนทสูตรคำหลวง]. There are also compositions by adding Thai parts to a Pāli chant in alternation.

Considering the creation of Thai Buddhist literary works, one can see that this kind of literature is systematic, organized, graceful and delicate. Thai Buddhist literature conveys ideas through concrete symbols and art that represent abstract ideas. The literary techniques in Thai Buddhist literature are thus an important part in creating imagery, resulting in emotion and experience, stimulating the intellect to be engaged in the process of idea development in order to understand Buddhist spiritual messages. This leads to comprehension of the ideas and values of the literary works. This also renders satisfaction in terms of aesthetic sentiment and fully provides the value of spiritual knowledge. This is a harmonious combination that can permit clearer understanding of the stories. Thai Buddhist literature depends on emotion and literary style as a kind of foundation for building faith, bringing learners of Buddhism to gain insight into the truth, acquiring understanding of Buddhism at the basic or high level depending on their religious experience.

4) Thai Buddhist Literature is utilitarian literature. The essence of Buddhism is knowledge that can lead to behaving in the right way, which is beneficial at both ordinary and high levels. At the ordinary level, Buddhist teachings and Buddhist stories can afford peace of mind and delight in the teachings that are beautiful according to one's belief and faith. This is elementary happiness of an individual and can lead to benefits of a higher level, which is the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths – suffering, cause of suffering, way to end suffering and the cessation of suffering. It can also lead to comprehension of teachings that are precepts for ordinary people to follow in behaving, living their lives in the path of morality, having the right conduct and abstaining from the wrong conduct to produce benefits and happiness to oneself and society. The emphasis on the benefits of the elementary level will be a base for a benefit of the high

level; that is, being able to use the teachings to improve one's mind and intellect to become finer to the level of being able to relinquish all *kilesa* (defilements) and become free from the way of the world or ordinary people.

One important concept of Thai Buddhist literature is the intention to communicate benefits in terms of knowledge, understanding and wisdom for one to be able to change oneself to become better. This involves presentation of spiritual messages for benefits at three levels, elementary, intermediate and supreme. The substance of Thai Buddhist literature often pertains to ideas about life with suffering and the causes of suffering, which are defilements, desires and changes, and presents a way to the cessation of suffering through plot and character, and the manner of presentation is direct.

Buddhist literature serves to provide these benefits didactically and do so with concrete presentation. However, the acquisition of religious experience also depends on the knowledge, capacity and experience in religious interpretation of the reader. Moreover, even if the benefits acquired are only at the fundamental level, it is a significant step towards development at a high level. At least the literary works display concrete pictures to lead to abstract understanding through emotion and various literary techniques. This may not be teaching Buddhist principles at a very deep level, but it is the way of making use of beauty to lead to knowledge and truth. In Buddhism, knowledge is for changing humans for it is believed that no matter how well one is capable of controlling nature, no matter if we organized society into an ideal picture, without being able to manage the internal conflicts of humans, their real problems cannot be completely cured.¹⁹

¹⁹ Jacobson, *Buddhism*, 22-23.

Dharma-Theoretic Principle: Generating Understanding of the World and Life

Thai Buddhist literary works portray the progression of life from the formation of the physical aggregate, becoming a human, living, problem-solving and solution to life through literary elements. Furthermore, for the most part, these works are intended to generate understanding of Buddhist spiritual messages in relation to life and the world, showing human nature and the progression of the world, which are ever-changing. Under this explanation of the progression of life and the world, Thai Buddhist literature presents substance about Buddhist teachings in matters that are important to the generation of understanding of the world and life. Some of these teachings are the principle of karma, the three characteristics and defilements and desires, which are interrelated and thus cause suffering, and a way to solve problems.

The concept of *karma-vibaka* (action-consequence) is the teaching subject that appears in every Buddhist literary work. This is an important doctrine that helps explain the progression of humans – a rule of the relation between cause and effect. The concept of karma is a Buddhist teaching that serves to explain all matters about humans and the world. All phenomena or occurrences have causes and consequences. Karmic law is a natural thing that every human must experience. The concept of karma also distinguishes human behavior in terms of good and evil with support by the consequences of actions. Every Thai Buddhist literary work presents the notion of karma – good and bad – which is an important principle in Buddhism, to show that there is a consequence to every action and consequences certainly result from actions in the past. For instance, good conduct in body, speech and mind will lead to worlds of happiness, that is, the world of humans and heaven. Committing evil karma will result in suffering in hell.²⁰

Jātaka is an obvious example for presentation about karma. There are a great number of Buddhist literary works in the category of *Jātaka* in Thai society. One can say that it is the type of Buddhist literature that is most important and it is also most influential to the creation of

²⁰ Niyada, *Compilation of the Inscriptions of Wat Phra Chetuphon*, 219.

Buddhist literary works. *Jātakas* permit lucid understanding of karma, that karma is always accompanied by *vibaka* – the cause and the effect that are related. *Jātakas* are stories about the Bodhisattva who has done both good and bad deeds on his path of accumulating merit, learning about the world and life in order to free himself from suffering going through different lives. The substance of the *Jātakas* exhibits the cycle of life, which has suffering and which the Buddha experiences himself. All that he has done in his past lives are karma that leads the Bodhisattva to enlightenment and to become the Buddha.

The concept of karma is an important concept in Buddhism. It is a concept that explains the occurrences and progression of life, as the results of past actions for the present life. As for the future life, this concept creates hope and ideologies, offering a path for behaving right in order to accumulate merit, which will lead to better things. It is also a concept that is easy to understand and put into practice because it is presented together with the concept that good deeds beget good results, while bad deeds beget bad results. The important benefit of the concept of karma is, therefore, the fundamental benefit of encouraging good conduct.

The three characteristics of existence (*trilakṣaṇa*) are common, natural characteristics of the world and humans. This is a concept about the uncertainty of life. The concept consists of impermanence, suffering and soullessness. That is to say, nothing is certain; the condition that is hard to tolerate is suffering; and nothing has actual self. *Tribhumi* tells how things in this world must change and degenerate. Doing good deeds will guarantee that the changes will be positive ones.²¹

The three characteristics of existence are the natural conditions of the world where all things must always change; nothing stays the same. The concept of the three characteristics, which explains the nature of humans and this world, also conveys the teachings on caution and detachment. The three characteristics or the common characteristics are presented in every Thai Buddhist literary work, both directly and indirectly. The plots show suffering, conflicts and

²¹ *Tribhumikathā*, 253.

the condition of fluctuation and uncertainty. For instance, *Tribhumikathā* talks about impermanence, which is part of the concept of the three characteristics, by describing in great detail how everything must be subject to the law of nature; there is no certainty in nature, the earth or mountains. Everything, whether humans, animals, angels or brahmas, must undergo change.

As humans have physical aggregates, and are in a state of flux according to the principle of the three characteristics, it is hard for humans to bear when they encounter unwanted changes. They also want possession that results in *tanhā* [ตัณหา], which is the cause of all suffering. According to Venerable Phra Dhammapitaka, *tanhā* means thirst, ambition, longing, affection, and insatiable restlessness. An important fact that one should know about *tanhā* is when one perceives any emotion, whether pleasant or unpleasant, and then feels happy or unhappy or apathetic, *tanhā* will occur in one form or another. If one feels happy, one becomes fond of and influenced by the thing that causes the happiness and one becomes addicted, wanting more of it. If one feels unhappy, one gets frustrated and repelled, wants to avoid the thing that causes the unhappiness, or wishes that it would disappear.²²

Every Thai Buddhist literary work portrays human suffering through the characters and portrays the main causes of human suffering, which are desire, avarice, anger and delusion. These are the sources of all suffering and lead to misfortunes. The characters are usually depicted as showing symptoms and emotions of suffering to create emotions in the readers for them to see the detriment of *kilesa* and *tanhā* and understand that if they do not wish to suffer, they should relinquish and remove *kilesa* and *tanhā* of all kinds. For example, *Kaki* [กากี] is a story derived from the *Jātakas* in the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā* with the aim to show the detriment and pain of *kilesa* and *tanhā* experienced by the four main characters, Kaki, King Phrommathat, the Garuda and Gandharvas. The causes of suffering are the *kilesa* and *tanhā* that dominate all these characters. All of them are infatuated with physical form and eroticism. This

²² Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, 492-493.

exhibits the human nature that is so deep in *kilesa* and *tanhā* to the point of not being able to restrain oneself. Another distinct instance of teaching about suffering caused by *kilesa* and *tanhā* is *Tribhumi*, which manifests the penal consequence of committing sins, which is going to hell. The details of the sins caused by *kilesa* and *tanhā*, which lead to the states of loss and woe, are complex and give insight into suffering.²³

Practice Principle: Right Conduct Leads to a Good Life

Buddhism has the aim to teach the practice guidelines for freeing life from suffering and living happily in society. All of these practice guidelines proposed by Buddhism, and conveyed through literature with emphasis on doing good deeds, accumulating merit, as a foundation for purifying the mind and progressing towards benefits of the high level together, are called *kusalakamma* [กุศลกรรม], which is right, good conduct.²⁴

Good deeds in Buddhism can be done both at simple and difficult levels. For instance, giving material gifts is a good deed that can be done more easily than forgiving or giving up avarice, anger and delusion. Therefore, the level of doing good deeds depends on the individual. In Thai Buddhist literature, this is clearly presented through the ideas, plots and characters. The notion of good deeds begetting good results is present in every literary work. Good deeds that are concrete and definitely shown, such as giving, result in happiness, heaven and nirvāṇa; whereas wrong conduct, which is bad deeds, results in suffering and hell. The comprehension of the concept of right conduct also entails making merit and giving up sins so that the mind can be at peace. For example, *Phramalai Khamluang* says that different kinds of good deeds will certainly bear different results.

A good deed that is very important in Buddhist culture is *dāna* (giving). *Dāna* is a basic practice that anyone can do and appears as a subject of teaching in every Thai Buddhist literary work. Buddhists believe that giving is a good deed that will lead one to good results

²³ *Thai Literary Works of the Rattanakosin Period, Vol. 2*, 106.

²⁴ Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, 164.

and also does others good. By the merit of giving, one can attain heaven. The story of the Last Great Birth of the Buddha, or *Vessantara*, is an important story in Thai society, as evident in its appearance in literature, rituals and ideas and beliefs. The giving described in *Vessantara* greatly impresses people in Thai society because giving away one's children is a hard thing to do, yet Prince Vessantara can do it. He has the spirit that can sacrifice his own benefits for the benefits of all, which is the supreme knowledge that leads to enlightenment. *Vessantara* describes a model of the kind of *dāna* that means surrendering everything, surrendering all ties, relinquishing the ego and attachment in order to be liberated from suffering. In addition, the liberation is not only for oneself; Prince Vessantara also wishes to attain supreme knowledge so that he can lead all mankind to be liberated from suffering.

Nirvāṇa: the Affirmation of the Ultimate Goal of Humans

Thai Buddhist literature teaches one to understand the ultimate goal of Buddhism, which is liberation from the cycle of birth and death to reach nirvāṇa, which is the supreme goal. Attaining nirvāṇa requires perseverance in doing good, getting rid of ignorance and desire, which are the causes of suffering, and relinquishing attachment. The teachings in Theravada Buddhism correspond with one another because the teachings, such as the three characteristics, dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths, all explain the same truth and are interrelated, with some principles that overlap, and nirvāṇa as the supreme goal.²⁵

The character of nirvāṇa is difficult to explain with ordinary language, yet Buddhist literature gives a description by saying that the most blissful land in comparison with nirvāṇa is like a firefly in comparison with the moon or dust with Mount Sumeru.²⁶ Even though the comparisons cannot completely render the concept, they make it possible to grasp the concept to a certain degree as there is really no language that can fully describe nirvāṇa.

²⁵ Watchara, *Theravada Buddhism*, 35.

²⁶ *Tribhumikathā*, 254.

Tribhumikathā presents the basic spiritual principle of good deeds begetting good results, bad deeds begetting bad results – karmic law. Because of bad deeds, one will be in hell and suffer extremely, the torment exceeding any torment in the human world. The rendition of horror is a way of teaching that if one does not want to suffer as such, one should not do evil. On the contrary, if one wishes for a future with contentment, one must build up goodness. The riches of heaven will be the result of one who has done good deeds. The story also teaches caution by proposing the doctrine of the three characteristics. Everything must dissolve one day, even the universe, earth, or heaven. At the supramundane level, *Tribhumikathā* teaches about real happiness, which is liberation from all suffering to reach nirvāṇa.²⁷ *Nanthopanandhasutra Khamluang* mentions how the Buddha's merit-making would lead to nirvāṇa.²⁸ For instance, sacrificing one's life is a sacrifice for attaining nirvāṇa.

Summary

Thai Buddhist literature is literature with substance about Buddhism with respect to theme, event, person and teaching. Literary works of this kind translated into Thai from Pāli, and those composed in Thai or in Thailand, can be found. They are literary works with continuous importance in the culture of Thai literary art and are numerous. In this research, Thai Buddhist literary works were studied and analyzed to find their major concepts and characteristics in the context of Thai society and culture.

The research results reveal that Thai Buddhist literature has distinctive concepts and characteristics beneficial and valuable to individuals and society. The creation of the substance and forms of Thai Buddhist literature was based on Buddhist scriptures, namely, the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā*, and later scriptures, namely, *Ṭīkā*, *Anuṭṭhā* and *Pakaraṇavisesa*. Every type of Thai Buddhist literature can be verified by drawing connections to the *Tripitaka* and *Aṭṭhakathā* to confirm the principles. Although the stories in some Thai Buddhist

²⁷ *Tribhumikathā*, 214.

²⁸ *Thai Literary Works of the Ayutthaya Period*, Vol. 3, 152.

literary works were somewhat adapted to fit the context of Thai society, the teachings or Buddhist doctrine presented do not change. A conspicuous characteristic of Thai Buddhist literature is conveyance with literary techniques for sentimental richness, which renders powerful communication and unity through the harmonious relationship between form and substance. In addition, the literary techniques in Thai Buddhist literature are one kind of instrument for generating “understanding” in the readers, which will lead them to “gain insight into” Buddhist principles as intended by the authors.

Thai Buddhist literature is literature of experience because it was created from the experience of the authors and is conveyed to the experience of the readers. The passing on of religious experience and emotions from the authors to the readers was the act of making religious knowledge concrete through a delicate literary process, resulting in literary texts to be used as a tool to access knowledge. Readers must use their religious experience to understand and gain insight into the Dharmic substance passed on by the authors. The acquisition of value from literature thus depends on the experience of the readers. Moreover, Thai Buddhist literature is utilitarian literature with the objective to communicate the Dharmic substance in Buddhism for the readers to comprehend and obtain benefits. The ordinary benefits are happiness, faith and belief, understanding of life and all creation, understanding of sin and merit, benefit and detriment, the determination to do good deeds and abstain from bad deeds for the benefits and happiness of oneself and society. The high-level benefits are the knowledge of the principles of the Four Noble Truths, suffering and the extinguishment of suffering, the utilization of the teachings to develop one’s mind and wisdom to become finer to the point of being able to relinquish all *kilesa*.

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