

## *Saṅgharāja who later became a Monarch*

**S**IAM (= Thailand) is the only Buddhist kingdom now existing in the world. About 90 per cent. of the Siamese nation consist of a primitive peasantry entirely devoted to agricultural pursuits, with an infusion of Chinese merchants, tradesmen, and artisans. The remainder include the sovereign and his court, the uncles, brothers, cousins, and nephews of the king, with their households, engaged in the administration.

Siamese Buddhism is similar in its tenets to that of Burma and Ceylon. The king is in fact religious primate, and there is a complete hierarchy by law established, as well as an ecclesiastical department to control the secular affairs of the Church. There are over ten thousand monasteries, and the monks number nearly two hundred thousand.

The Siamese kingdom was consolidated in about 1350 A.D. when they founded their capital Ayudhya (= Ayuthia). The period from 1350 to 1765 A.D. constitutes the Ayuthia era. With internal upheavals, and struggles with Burma and Cambodia, this period seems to have been one of almost continual war. In 1550 Ayuthia was taken by the Burmese, and the Siamese king was carried into captivity. Thirty years later a complete recovery had been made, Burmese armies had been defeated, and Pegu pillaged, and a successful war had been prosecuted against Cambodia.

In 1759 a serious war with Burma broke out again, Aloung Pra, king of Burma, invading Siam with a great army. Ayuthia was invested, but the Burmese king died and his army thereupon retired. The successor of Aloung Pra renewed the conflict and again drove the Siamese behind the walls of Ayuthia. A long siege followed, ending in 1765 with the destruction of the city, the death of the Siamese king, and the general break up of the kingdom.

Phaya Tak, a half-Chinese ex-official, having taken to the jungle on the fall of Ayuthia, raised an army and defeated the Burmese in occupation, made himself king in 1772, founded the capital of Bangkok, and in 1781 went mad and was dethroned. The people now chose as king Phaya Chakkri, a prominent war leader. The Burmese came on to the field again. Chakkri enticed the enemy far into the country, then cut off their supplies by removing the entire population, and, having starved the invaders attacked them with vigour and defeated them.

The remainder of Phaya Chakkri's reign was passed in consolidating his hold over the country, which he did in such a manner that when he died, in 1809, his son succeeded without opposition and passed his rather short reign in almost unbroken tranquility. On the demise of this ruler in 1825, a lesser



prince forestalled his brother, the rightful heir, by a stratagem, and, under the title of Phra Chao Prasat Tong, reigned 27 years. His popular name was Pra Nang Klao. He died in 1851, when the rightful heir, who had lived in retirement as a monk, succeeded under the title of 'Phra Paramindra Maha Mongkut'.

This is the person that was mentioned in my caption. He was born in 1804 A.D. as the eldest son of the Chief Queen of the king of Ayuthia, whose title was *Pañcaçajaratana-sāmissarādhipati*. Known by the name of 'Makuṭasammatavaṅsa', this prince, from his boyhood, was a pious person; and having learnt the Dhamma and the Pali language in his youth, entered the Order when he was twenty. In entering the Order he chose the new sect of the Order which was recently founded by the monks of Rāmañña (= Lower Burma). The older sect which was called Mahānikāya, and the members of which wore the robe exposing one shoulder, was somewhat corrupted. The prince having no liking for them selected the new sect named *Dhammayuttika-nikāya*.

Since the ordination the prince was known by the name of Vajirañña. Soon he became the Supreme Head of the Saṅgha of both sects and caused many reforms to be carried out among the community. Being a great scholar he compiled several books, among which is the *Sugatavidatthividhāna* written in Pali on the measurements given in the Vinaya.<sup>1</sup> He had many Sinhalese Elders as his friends with whom he corresponded freely until he had to leave the Order. A letter sent by him to the Anunāyaka of Hulava (of Kandy) contains the following beautiful verses which show his erudition and his own biographical sketch:—

1. 'Visādhiko suparipuṇṇavayo athāhaṇ  
mātāpitūhi anumānita-dhammanando  
ohāya ñātiparivaṭṭa-mahantakam pi  
hitvā ca kāmalalanāni anappakāni
2. uddissa naṇ sucira-nibbuta-lokanāthaṇ  
nikkhamma dhammavinayamhi paribbajanto  
Rāmaññathera-paṭipattiparamparāyaṇ  
pabbajjam eva upasampadam ādiyanto
3. Āciṇṇakappika-nikāyagaṇaṇ jigucchaṇ  
bhikkhūsu pabbajitabhāvagato idāni  
sikkhattayaṇ paripuremi yathākathañci  
āciṇṇakappika-nikāyagaṇaṇ pahāya'.

(= When I was over twenty I obtained the assent of my parents to enter the Order. Having left aside a multitude of relations and numerous pleasures

1. This book was printed in Ceylon with a Sinhalese translation by the Venerable C. A. Seelakkhandha, High-priest of Sailabimbārāma, Dodanduwa.

of sense, I left the world, following the Supreme Lord who had entered nibbāna long ago, and took orders of the discipline in the sect established by the Elders of Rāmañña. As I developed a dislike of the members of the old sect who adhered to traditional practices, I left them and entered the Order under the guidance of the Dhammayuttikas, and now I am observing the three modes of discipline).

There is another set of eight verses in Pali composed by this Supreme Elder in accordance with musical rhythm. I have the whole set with me, but I shall content myself by giving the transliteration here only of one verse as a specimen:

Nānā bhūri-sumedhāsivisi medhāyaṇ dhanabhūrī nā  
nānā thaṇ tarulilāphullita-kāyā sobhītavēdānā  
nānā kānana-ajjhākārīta gantvā pītapamā nānā  
nānā vandīta vande tam muni devindehi ca mānānā.

A letter sent from Siam to the Asgiriya Vihāra in Kandy contains the following paragraph in which mention is made of this Supreme Elder: *Sam-māsambuddha-parinibbānato dvinnam vassa-sahassānam upari sattasatthime vasse eko rājaputto tassa Paramadhammika-rañño vemātikabhātā Makuṭasammatavaṅsakumāro nāma paripuṇṇavāsativassakāle yeva pabbajitvā bhikkhubhāvappatto upasampannakāle Vajirañño ti garūhi gahita-nāmadheyyo nāmadvayam upādāya 'Vajirañña-makuṭasammatavaṅsatthero ti paññāyi,* (= Prince Makuṭasammatavaṅsa, who is a half-brother of the present king, Paramadhammika, entered the Order in 2367 B.E. at the age of twenty. When he received the higher ordination he was given the name Vajirañña. So this Elder became known as *Vajirañña-Makuṭasammatavaṅsa* by the combination of two epithets).

In a letter sent to the Venerable Bulatgama Sirisumanatissa of Paramānanda Vihāra, Galle, the king himself has stated how he was unwilling to accept the crown, and how he was forcibly disrobed by the chief ministers. In the same letter he has stated that it was not customary in Siam to address any letter to the king's person, but to a high dignitary. So the Elders of Ceylon should address letters to his Private Secretary. The following is the summary of his own description:—

Jeṭṭhādhipatinda-Paramadhammika-Rājādhirāja reigned for twenty-six years. When he was at the end of his life he wanted to hand the kingdom to his second son or the eighth. But the ministers and the public were against his wishes. Then he gave power of selection to three supreme dignitaries of the kingdom. The three dignitaries assembled those of the royal blood and the commons, who declared with one accord that the Supreme Elder Vajirañña should be selected to the throne.

Then the chief ministers went to the monastery, Pavaranivesa, where the Elder was residing, and most respectfully requested him to accept the throne. As the Elder was unwilling, they stationed two thousand armed soldiers all around the monastery that the Elder might not escape from there. If he would not accept the throne there were several princes who would fight for it. So they got ready their own armies and the capital seemed as it was engaged in a war. After two weeks of this undertaking (i.e. surrounding of the Vihāra) the king died on the first day of the dark half of April. Early morning, next day, the king's treasurer, ministers Siri Suriyawaṇṣa, Rājasubhāmati, and Sirivaḍḍhana, together with the brother princes of the Elder, came to the monastery, and with great pomp and ceremony conveyed the Supreme Elder to the Royal Palace. Then they deposited the king's body in a golden coffin and kept it with due respect in the palace named Rājavekusita.

After that they led the Elder to the image-house, named *Siriratana-mahābimba-paṭimāghara*, where the precious emerald image of the Buddha was kept. There they declared him king, and his younger brother to be the viceroy (= yuvarāja). After the declaration fifty-three princes who were directly descended from five former royal houses, more than one hundred princes of the royal blood, one thousand five hundred councillors and six ministers, rank by rank, bowed down before him and gave their oath of fidelity. After two days they disrobed the Elder and decking him with royal garments and insignia, led him to the Royal precincts and kept him in the Suraṇakosa Palace. Now they began to make preparations for his coronation, and to provide every article that was needed for the purpose the government had to spend fifty crores (or 500 millions) of rupees. After the coronation his full name was *Varaṇparaminda-mahā-makūtasammāti-devavaṇṣa-rājādhirāja*.

The Siamese name of this illustrious king was "Maha Mongkut". His reign of 27 years was peaceful and prosperous. It is interesting to read what has been written about this king by W. A. Graham in his book entitled *Siam: A Handbook*.<sup>2</sup>

'This king brought to affairs of state education and enlightenment in an unusual degree. A student of European customs, and efficient in the English language, his attitude towards foreign relations differed from that of his forebears. His reception of Sir John Bowring, the envoy sent by Great Britain to Siam in 1855, was highly favourable . . . Maha Mongkut strongly encouraged education and gave special care to that of his own children. He also did much to purify the national religion. Though strictly celibate up to the age of forty-seven years, he married

2. Taken from the *Peoples of All Nations*, Vol. VI, p. 4632.

a number of wives on becoming king, and when he died left about a hundred children . . .

'Mongkut died in 1868, and his son Chulalongkorn succeeded as a minor. The state was under a regency, but the king soon assumed full power. He reigned forty-two years and devoted himself solely to the interests of his country . . .

'Chulalongkorn visited Europe twice. He inaugurated military conscription, ports and telegraphs and railways, fostered education, and reformed the revenue, justice, police, and social systems. He died in 1910 deeply mourned, and was succeeded by his son Rama VI'.

A photograph of the King Maha Mongkut in his full attire and regalia, sent by him as a present to the Venerable Piyaratanatissa of Dodanduwa, is still to be seen there.

His son Chulalongkorn visited Ceylon on the 19th April, 1897, while he was sailing for England. He had brought many valuable offerings for the Tooth Relic, and when he visited Kandy the relic was exhibited to him. The king wanted to be blessed by the relic by taking it in his own hands, which the guardians of the Temple refused to allow. The king became exasperated and sent back all offerings to the Queen's Hotel, Kandy, where he had taken lodgings. Again he visited Ceylon on the 29th November of the same year, on his return home, but this time he spent the night in the steamer itself.

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