

I was intending to be bold.

When I wrote “Liberation” as this book’s initial title, and “Religion Beyond Belief” as its subtitle, I was planning to say—really as a truism, as ‘the king is naked’ type thing—that “religions” as we know them are *not at all* what their founders intended; that *religion*—as it was meant to be—necessitated a *societal* transformation, which the *power structure* obstructed. I thought this would be obvious; just tell me: How many people do you know who actually *practice* ‘turn the other cheek’? So I thought I’d propose that instead of lamenting the loss—we focus on reviving and *federating religion*; and then use restored to function *religion* to repair *human quality*; and let *human quality* dethrone *power structure*—so that we may create, *finally*, a just and free and *humane* human society.

I changed my mind.

Religion has suffered so much under *materialism* that I just couldn’t risk adding insult to injury!

It will serve us best to be concrete.

And focus on a *specific* case; which will in a fractal-like way display the *structure* of the vast and contentious compendium of issues that is opening up in front of us.

This book has a hero.

He is **Buddhadasa**, Thailand’s holy man and Buddhism reformer; who after renouncing secular life in 1926 and spending a couple of years in monasteries in Bangkok thought *This just cannot be it!* Armed with some ancient Pali scriptures and firm dedication, Buddhadasa withdrew to an abandoned forest monastery near his native village Chaya in Southern Thailand, to live and practice as Buddha did.

Having **found out** by experimenting, first on himself and then with a community of monks that grew around him, **that the essence** of Buddha’s

teaching **is** not the belief in afterlife as it is believed but comprehensive liberation, which includes **liberation** from **belief**—in 1932 Buddhadasa founded a forest monastery called “Suan Mokkh” (The Garden of Liberation).

And having also found out, by reading the scriptures of other religions and dialoging with their adepts, that religions tend to have a common essence that tends to be likewise ignored; and that we modern people *necessitate* that essence to be able to liberate ourselves from **materialism** and **change course**—Buddhadasa saw it as his duty to do whatever he could to share his insight with the world. The Suan Mokkh forest monastery got a library, where monks and visitors could inform themselves about the way to liberation; and a workshop, where monks could render it as paintings and sculptures. Spiritual Theatre was built to exhibit their works; and to explain the way to liberation in whatever media were available to monks in a Thai forest in the 1950s.

Not long before he’d pass away in 1993, Buddhadasa created the Suan Mokkh International Retreat Center as an educational facility—where visitors from around the world could learn Buddha’s way to liberation; and the Suan Mokkh International Monastery as an experimental facility—where they could live and practice as the Suan Mokkh monks did; and as Buddha and his disciples lived and practiced centuries ago; and ‘repeat the experiment’. The mission of the Retreat Center, Buddhadasa insisted, was not to teach people Buddhism—but to help them comprehend the essence of *their own religion*, whichever it may be.

In this book I’ll be **federating** Buddhadasa’s insight; and I’ll invite you to join me in doing that in the **dialog**.

In this way well co-create a **system** that help us comprehend, and restore to function, not only **religion** but also all other threads of our cultural heritage that have fallen into disrepair; and ignite and orchestrate the **cultural revival**.



We were transported by automobile from the Suan Mokkh International Monastery to the Walailak University in a neighboring province; where about one hundred students were waiting to hear Ajahn Medhi's speech ("Ajahn" is the title given in Thailand to advanced and respected monks, who are qualified to teach others.) It was Sunday afternoon, and his speech was to conclude an intensive weekend course called "Know thyself".

I was asked to speak first; and naturally, used the opportunity to set the stage for Ajahn's talk.

Introducing myself briefly, I said I was a professor in Norway "where the soil is now frozen and my students wouldn't *dream* of going around barefoot as you do". And that I came to Suan Mokkh every year around Christmas time, to study and practice under Venerable Ajahn Medhi as teacher and abbot. I explained that a discovery was made at Suan Mokkh that could make a difference in the world; and that I took it upon myself to learn and embody it, and help it reach out further.

Venerable Ajahn Buddhadasa, I elaborated, considered his discovery to be an antidote to the global onslaught of materialism. And I asked for a show of hands: "How many of you believe that materialism *can* be stopped?"

I looked at the students while I spoke. Aside from being barefoot and seated cross-legged on the floor, aligned in straight rows and columns, they looked just like the students in the USA or Norway or any other place where I had taught—with Western-branded T-shirts, cellular phones and all. A handful of them dutifully lifted their arms; even here, in Buddhadasa's own neighborhood, and only a generation later, young people don't believe that his mission *could* be possible.

Ajahn Medhi then told them about the essence of Buddhadasa's insight; by recounting Buddhadasa's original interpretation of *Paticcasamuppada* (translated as "dependent origination", which I'll call *origination of condi-*

tioning), while pointing to a large Wheel of Life panel behind him and interpreting its imagery. Medhi is a handsome man in his fifties and an animated speaker; he has an insider's knowledge of his theme.

But does his audience understand him?

I studied the students' expressions. Do they see the relevance of what is being offered to their own lives? Are they at all *aware* of the civilizational drama which it may help resolve?

When Ajahn Medhi concluded his speech, the professor who organized the Know thyself course bowed to him three times respectfully, the Buddhist way. In Thailand Buddhism still enjoys enormous respect—among the older generation. Yet I was guessing that the profound, game-changing insight about ourselves that had been offered, which Ajahn *embodied*, did not reach its audience; that the science courses the students had taken, the movies they'd seen and the very *world* 'that has been pulled over our eyes' formed an *ecology of mind* that made communication impossible.

I was reminded of Banathy's *Guided Evolution of Society*; Banathy saw the onset of "guided evolution of society" as a revolutionary change similar in significance and scope to the advent of agriculture. Our distant ancestors learned to cultivate land; we must learn to cultivate our social habitate and ourselves. But in doing that—we must face an obstacle they *didn't* have:

While the fruits of cultivation of land are available for anyone to see and taste—the fruits of *inner* cultivation are hidden in the body of their owner!

Could this be the reason why cultural evolution lags behind the evolution of technology by thousands of years?