

จิตวิญญาณในศิลปะ และอิทธิพลของค่านิยมในพระพุทธศาสนา

เลิศศิริ บวรภักดี

ความเด่นชัดและความสำคัญในคุณค่า, ความหมาย และแนวคิดเชิงจิตวิญญาณ มีกระแสเพิ่มมากขึ้นในโลกตะวันตก โดยการแสวงหาสมดุลทางโลกจากมิติทางจิตวิญญาณดังกล่าว อันเป็นทางออกทางหนึ่งของมนุษย์ ที่ต้องมีชีวิตอยู่ในกระแส ของลัทธิวัตถุนิยมอย่างหลีกเลี่ยงไม่ได้ ทั้งนี้ส่งผลต่อการแสดงออกเชิง จิตวิญญาณ ในศิลปะ อย่างเห็นได้ชัด. ความหมายของคำ "จิตวิญญาณ" ในความรู้สึกของคนไทยในปัจจุบัน จะนำไปสู่ประเด็น สำหรับการวิพากษ์ศิลปะไทยในบริบทของพระพุทธศาสนา และจิตวิญญาณ ดังข้อคิดเห็นของศิลปินไทยกลุ่มหนึ่ง เพื่อศึกษา ความสัมพันธ์ และอิทธิพลของพระพุทธศาสนาที่มีต่อการแสดงออกด้านคุณค่า และแนวคิดเชิงจิตวิญญาณในงาน ศิลปกรรมไทยร่วมสมัย.

คำสำคัญ : จิตวิญญาณ, ศิลปะ, พระพุทธศาสนา, ศิลปะไทยร่วมสมัย

The increasing importance of alternative spiritual meanings and values apparent in the modern Western world certainly indicate that the significance and the presence of "spirituality" in art is enhanced. The meaning of the word "spirituality" and the way Thais interpret it will be introduced in order to open a discussion on this concept in contemporary Thai art. The emphasis of the discussion will be the philosophical characteristics and values of the concept of spirituality in art, and of its relationship with Buddhism. The conclusion that Buddhism is the main source of Thai spirituality will be supported by the views of selected Thai artists.

In the next phase, Buddhism and its teachings are briefly described along with the significance of Buddhist values in Thailand. Thus, the Thai concept of karma (cause and effect) and gam-dham-boon (merit-making) in relation to Buddhist practices will be discussed in the context of Buddhist values.

Overall, this article will lay the groundwork for understanding the characteristics and values of "spirituality in art" in Thailand as perceived by artists and by the public. The result will be the emergence of a theoretically framed dialogue that provides a basis for understanding the term spirituality in art in the Thai context, and the relationship between Thai art and Buddhism.

Spirituality: A Definition

According to Webster's New World English Dictionary, "spirituality" (noun) means spiritual character, quality, or nature: opposed to sensuality, worldliness. From this comes the adjective "spiritual" which means:

1. of the spirit or the soul, often in a religious or moral aspect, as distinguished from the body.
2. of, from, or concerned with the intellect, or what is often thought of as the better or higher part of the mind.
3. of or consisting of spirit; not corporeal.
4. characterized by the ascendancy of the spirit; showing much refinement of thought and feeling.
5. of religion or the church; sacred, devotional, or ecclesiastical; not lay or temporal.
6. spiritualistic or supernatural.

In general, the meaning of "spirituality" is profound, and beyond physical dimension; and is thus philosophical and abstract. "Spirituality" in Thai culture is strongly connected with the spiritual values of religion and the spirituality of nature, as opposed to attachment to what is material and to the corporeal. Moreover, the Thai notions of "spirituality" are deeply connected with the spirit of the "soul".

"Spirituality" in the Thai Context

ments, folk beliefs and more formal sacred beliefs that are deeply embedded in Thai culture. It is true that mystical power and the sacredness of the unknown still have some effect on the life of Thai people even in the this century, where science and technology have influenced every aspect of living. The majority Thai people believe in the world of spirits, where one cannot understand without having real experience.

In conjunction with the perception of 'spirituality' as a value that is opposed to sensuality or worldliness, or simply as mind as opposed to body, Thai people also connect the word 'spiritual' with the ideas of the 'sacred' in religion. In the context of religion, they think of spirituality as an extension of Buddhist values, as well as in terms of the sacredness of Buddhism.

For centuries, with the dominance of Buddhism in the kingdom, religion's value system developed as part of Thai thought and discipline. Being a religion as well as a philosophy that is based on understanding and rational thought, it is actually a way of life of a people, an all-encompassing, multi-leveled lifestyle, and the instrument of a people's identity and cultural continuity. (Ishii, 1986)

Buddhism as a Thai cultural signifier has been the greatest source in the search for spiritual wisdom for the Thai people. They are familiar with the teachings of Buddhism and of the Buddhist values that influence their way of living. These values are elementary to the moral and ethical standards of Thai culture. Buddhist values underline the Thai "moral" practices in relation to the law of karma that encourage *gam-dham-dee* (right action). This is how human response to spiritual awareness works: Buddhist teachings create moral and ethical values in human thought and therefore influence all human behavior. This indicates that the way of life in Thailand is lived in association with Buddhism, by way of the teaching of the Buddha and in the sacred elements of the religion.

In all walks of life in Thailand, from simple village life to complex city living, the various symbols, rituals, beliefs, and patterns of life reveal the impact of Buddhism. Many Thais strive to live in accordance with Buddhism's values and its teachings.

Thai art and Buddhism have long been interrelated, and one historical purpose of early Thai art was its use for teaching Buddhism to a growing population.

This influence is strongly evident in Thai arts, and the culture that characterizes Thailand today. Art as an important element in Thai arts and culture has been the subject of Buddhist teachings, as exemplified by Buddhist manuscripts and temple wall paintings.

The term "spirituality" is intangible and is connected with the sacred nature of Thai religion. The idea and meaning of "spirituality" has become established as a philosophical doctrine, upholding and supporting the meaning of life.

Through a strong manifestation of religious thought in the Thai cultural system, most Thai people comprehend "spirituality" by way of these Buddhist values. The search for balance and harmony in life through spiritual values is also an alternative to oppositional values caused by worldly problems and struggles.

Today, as Thai society still emphasizes Buddhist values and the ultimate goal of Buddhism; the way to enlightenment. It is Buddhism and its teaching that informs spirituality in Thai art.

Art and Spirituality

The world is changing radically as we advance into the "Information Age", central to contemporary globalization. World economics (as opposed to regionals) has become increasingly paramount, creating a more competitive and self-conscious world. Consumerism is now a dominant world principle that bla-

tantly encourages material values above all offers.

Thai people have been drawn towards this consumerist culture, becoming ever more concerned with the comfort and luxury accessible through material gains. But many believe passionately that there must be a balance between the material world and the spiritual world. In society at large, there is a great need for an alternative to the dominance of consumerist culture.

Optimistically, globalization also creates an awareness of the integrity of the world's religions, languages, and cultures. Many developing countries are encouraged to preserve their art and culture regardless of economic change.

In principle, the visual arts are closely associated with the spirituality of the Thai people. Consequently, art is one area that is directly related to their inner feelings and expressions. Prinya Tantisuk (1998), a lecturer at Silpakorn University, believes that art gives aesthetic expression to the inner thoughts and feelings of the artist. (interviewed with the artist, 1999) He said that his art brings his audiences closer to virtue, the reflection of his idea of aesthetic value. Thus, his art is means of fulfilling the aesthetics, which is in turn viewed as a way of the expression of spirituality.

Thepsakdi Thongnopkoon's *Love No.1* (2001) (Figure 1) depicts idealized images of mother and her child in perpetual landscape of mysterious mountains and serene flowers to symbolically represent loving kindness created by mother and child relationship.



Figure 1
Love No.1, 2001
acrylic on canvas, 60 cm x 90 cm.

Spiritual awareness is undoubtedly accessible through art. Kindness, peace and spiritual wisdom among human beings may result from engagement with art that expresses spirituality.



Figure 2
Falls of Heaven, 1998
acrylic on canvas, 190 cm x 200 cm.
(Collection of Surind Limpanonda)

Artist and art lecturer, Panya Vijnthanasarn (1998), whose artworks are discussed later in this exegesis, believes that art can bring the Thai public closer to virtue and to the subject of morality. (interviewed with the artist, 1999) stimulate a feeling of calmness and serenity in the viewer. *Falls of Heaven*

(1998) (Figure 2) portrays a peaceful Buddha facial image along with debris made by colour variations (representing lust, desire and evil) to depict the fall of "goodness". Actually, Panya wants to persuade people to follow the Dhamma path by exposing the deterioration of Buddhism in Thailand.

Similarly, **Chalermchai Kositpipat** (1998) sees art as a tool that directly serves his spiritual need through association with Buddhism. **Chalermchai** (1998) dedicates his artworks to Buddhism. He believes that the art that serves religion can bring peace and spirituality to the people. **Chalermchai's Khao Phra Sumeru** (Mount Meru) (Figure 3) depicts Mount Meru (from Buddhist manuscripts) symbolically and stylistically Thai using Buddhist elements such as the lotus and the full moon to create dream-like and surreal qualities to portray spiritual beauty and purity. **Ark Fongsamut** (2000), a Thai art curator and critic, believes that visual forms can represent spirituality and reflect its abstract meanings effectively.



Figure 3
Khao Phra Sumeru (Mount Meru), 1987
Acrylic on canvas, 93 cm x 116 cm.
(Collection of Boonyalit Pinyosophon)

Many scholars have addressed the current search for spirituality, and the world's major and minor religions have been playing a wider role in bringing kindness, peace and spiritual wisdom to their followers. Thai people turn to Buddhism and to the sacred in times of spiritual need, whilst others turn to magical power to solve their problems. The Thai attitude towards spiritualism is mainly due to their religious awareness. This religious awareness is evident in Thai art and a significant number of contemporary Thai artists have been pursuing spiritual wisdom through their works. **Somporn Rodboon**, an art scholar and curator, believes that spiritual notions and values are not only true and important for life generally but also for art and artists (Bangkok Post Outlook, 2002).

There is some evidence that contemporary Thai art has also been a catalyst for social, political and spiritual change.

Concept of Spirituality in Thai Art

The concept of 'spirituality' is essentially intangible, and interpreted in many ways in art. The concept does not convey only formal religious faith or beliefs where traditional symbols of religion have been represented, but also a wide range of abstract images and intellectual conditions.

In the West, "spirituality expresses itself across a wide spectrum of religious allegiances and belief systems" (Drury et al., 1996:7). It is aware that artistic expression such as the Thai involves the concept of 'spirituality' through such systems.

Spiritual dimension in art can be expressed in a number of ways, ranging from overt mythic and religious symbolism through to intangible and metaphysical resonances which somehow arise instinctually within the work (Drury et al., 1996:9).

The instinctive response of artists to spirituality is seen as a natural response to the spiritual "background system" of each artist. Prinya Tantisuk (1998) and many other Thai artists believe that art creation is imbued with the inner spirit of the artist involved in the making process.

However, while artists may relate to the concept of "spirituality" through an extension of the conscious mind that involves "mystery". There are also "instinctual" and "doctrinal" responses available.

The potential of human secular awareness and a sacred potential innate in all humans are also related to this particular artistic practice, and as a consequence, some artworks are potentially related to "spirituality" without actual knowing. The expression of spirituality is not at once evident, but is inherent in the work.

A number of the Thai artists interviewed agreed that the process of artistic creation at certain levels is associated with "spirituality", embodying the concepts of "soul" or "essence". This is fundamental for many Thai artists their work reflect both human awareness and an inner state of consciousness. Thavorn Kodomvit (1998) gave his opinion that artworks that carried the essence of spirituality also reflected the artists' instinctual awareness.

Drury et al., (1996:7) described spirituality in art:

In its broadest connotation it relates to the sacred and transcendental dimensions of human consciousness and touches directly on the fundamental mystery which underlies the process of creation.

Thus, spirituality in art comprises mysteriously transcendental experiences imbued in the conscious mind, and reflects the artists' instinctual awareness present during the process of creation.

The making of art in this way refers mainly to the spiritual expressions of the artist and the meanings of the subject matter, rather than to techniques, skills or aesthetic qualities of the work. This spirituality is about the relationship between an artist's consciousness/unconsciousness engagement with the spiritual dimensions of expression.

In this interpretation, artworks are able to convey the essence of the spiritual world - the underlying metaphysical truth which extends well beyond individual, ego-based perceptions - concerning the mystery and the sacred nature of life.

In the past several decades, there was much speculation of a Western revival of the spiritual and the sacred in art. "Spirituality" had been a significant concept in historical western artistic expression. Currently, its unique quality has once again become more identifiable among contemporary artistic practices. Kuspit (1996) described this tendency: "spirituality is an especially unique quality today.... Spirituality legitimizes the abstract work's worldly success".

Evidence that artists have been re-exploring the concept of spirituality in art can be seen in the West since early in the twentieth century. (Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Wasily Kandinsky, 1912) For example, the idea of "spirituality in art" emerged in the work of Wasily Kandinsky, a precursor of abstract art. Kandinsky developed many theories regarding abstraction and its relationship to spiritualism in his book, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, published in 1912. His abstract paintings denote an obvious spiritual qualities, such as the series of Improvisation and Composition (1911-1913), (Figure 4).

In the aftermath of World War Two, the concept of spirituality became less popular, and unfashionable in the context of the onslaught of post-modernism. By the end of the twentieth century, "the spiritual in art" had re-emerged as "spirituality" and an international response to the global ideas of consumerism and materialism.



Figure 4
Study for Composition No.2 (1911-1913)

Such trends are also identifiable in contemporary Thai art practice. The significance of the concept of "spirituality in art" has associate themes explored by many Thai artists in the past. The level of understanding of 'spirituality in art' by historical Thai artists is immeasurable. Though it is now a strong element in contemporary Thai art, we must look at spiritual aspects of the contemporary to understand its context.

Although, spirituality in art has not been articulated in terms of current art theory nor has it been taught in visual art programs in Thailand. Panya Vijnthanasarn (1998) suggested that the idea of spirituality in art and the significance of such concepts should be developed and theorised within the discourse of art theory.

Currently, art theory in Thailand deals with conventional art methods and studies; with few exceptions, contemporary issues and concepts are not emphasised (with few exceptions). Most Thai art scholars perceive spirituality in art as an unrealistic subject and thus insignificant.

However, it is perhaps logical to study contemporary Thai art in relation to its spiritual elements in order to further identify the concept of spirituality as an art form. We should be able to more readily identify the characteristics and nature of the concept of "spirituality".

In order to find meaning in the transcendental and metaphysical world, contemporary Thai artists have associated with religion and with philosophy in an attempt to find the spiritual. As such, many have created a spiritual atmosphere of peace, serenity, calmness and tranquillity in their artworks.

In contemporary Thai artistic practice, the concept of "spirituality" depends largely on the formal religious faith and belief in Buddhism, the dominant religion in Thailand. Consequently many Thai artists express spirituality derived from their understanding of Buddhist values and ideas. This concern with "spirituality" has been an indigenous mainstream in the history of contemporary Thai art.

Thai scholars have connected Thai artists with the idea of "spirituality" since the late 1950s. Apinan⁸ (1992) asserted that some artists, such as Pichai Nirand, Pratuang Emjaroen, Tang Chang, Damrong Wong-Uparaj, Somsak Chowtadapong, Kanya Chareonsupkul, Chamruang Vichienkhet and Vichai Sithirat, explored abstract art with Buddhism to find the spiritual in art.

References

- ¹Ishii, Yoneo (1986) Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History, Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press
- ²Globalisation and the Future of Thailand, Dr Chaianand Samudthavanij (Bangkok: Manager Publishing company, 1995), cited in Localization: The Relationship of Thai Contemporary Paintings, Ark Fongsmut 1999.
- ³For related topic see Art Meets Sciences and Spirituality, (1990)
- ⁴Ark Fongsamut in Root, Bangkok Post Publishing Company Ltd.
- ⁵See Spiritual Art Exhibition, Bangkok Post, Outlook section 2001, and
- ⁶Somporn Rodboon (1995b) Notes on the Revival of Traditional Art in Thai Contemporary Art, Paper delivered at Symposium on Southeast Asian Art History and Regional Aesthetics, SPAFA/SEAMEO, March, 1995, Singapore
- ⁷Kandinsky, Wasilly (1947) Concerning the Spiritual in Art, George Wittenborn, New York
- ⁸Apinan Poshyananda (1992) Modern Art in Thailand during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- ⁹See Apinan Poshayananda, in 'Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, 1992.