

# BUDDHISM AND SYSTEMS THINKING: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGEMENT ACTIONS IN THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT

One of the main themes in western management education today, systems thinking, shares many similarities with a centuries old practice in Thailand: Buddhism. It is this link that I hope to draw a clearer set of management practices for Thai managers who continue to rely on connections and opinions to run their companies.

The focus of this paper is to draw Buddhism and systems thinking into a cohesive decision-making model that Thai managers can use in their organizations. This model is grounded in traditions that are part of the Thai culture, and thus, are not as foreign as they may appear. After a brief description of systems thinking and Buddhism, this paper will draw comparisons between the main "teachings" of each and how these teachings form a more focused viewpoint and decision-making approach that will help Thai managers overcome many of the self-imposed and environmental obstacles they face.

Areas such as Management and employees interactions, the view employees hold of management, and leadership roles are all addressed through Buddhism and systems thinking in this paper. Also, this paper will examine the nature of workflows and the impact this new thinking will have on a manager in this area.

Finally, conclusions will be reached as to the various areas this hybrid system will affect and the outcomes that can be expected from its implementation as well as keys to successful implementation.

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## KEYWORDS: BUDDHISM, MANAGEMENT, DECISION-MAKING, SYSTEM, THAILAND

Historically, Thai businesses have not been models of effective management and for some time resisted the idea of a professional manager taking control of the company. These companies, typically owned by Thai families of Chinese descent, have been forced to accept that the business climate of today requires a more decentralized approach. To that extent, professional management in Thai companies has become more accepted.

One of the main themes in western management education today, systems thinking, shares many similarities with a centuries old practice in Thailand: Buddhism. It is this link that I hope to draw a clearer

set of management practices for Thai managers who continue to rely on connections and opinions to run their companies.

The focus of this paper is to draw Buddhism and systems thinking into a cohesive decision-making model that Thai managers can use in their organizations. This model is grounded in traditions that are part of the Thai culture, and thus, are not as foreign as they may appear. After a brief description of systems thinking and Buddhism, this paper will draw comparisons between the main "teachings" of each and how these teachings form a more focused viewpoint and decision-making approach that will help Thai managers overcome many of the self-imposed and environmental obstacles they face. Finally, conclusions will be reached as to the

various areas this hybrid decision-making system will affect and the outcomes that can be expected from its implementation as well as keys to successful implementation.

It should be noted that his paper is not a

judgement on what sect of Buddhism is best or whether it is a superior religion. Simply, this paper seeks to draw information from the main teachings of Buddhism that can have a significant impact on the actions of Thai managers.

## EXPLANATION OF SYSTEMS THINKING AND BUDDHISM

### Systems Thinking

Much has been written about systems thinking since Peter Senge first wrote *The Fifth Discipline*. Simply, systems are interrelated parts that form a whole. "A system is a collection of parts (or subsystems) integrated to accomplish an overall goal. Systems have inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes, with ongoing feedback among the various parts" (McNamara, 1999). These systems are found everywhere around us and within us. It is important to note that all systems are made up of subsystems and a failure in even one subsystem may lead to the failure of the entire system.

Ideally, systems thinking allows a manager to see the company from a broader perspective, focusing not only on details, but how these details work together to form a whole and how one whole interacts with another whole. Managers can then manage more effectively as they understand the causes and effects of events on the company and employees. When looking at a company as part of the surrounding environment, influencing and being influenced, a manager can find faults within the structure, patterns, and events that are taking place and act accordingly. As Bellinger states, "management is an activity which endeavors to induce resources to migrate something from a current state to a desired state" (Bellinger, 2001). The gap between the current state and desired state is where managers operate. Systems thinking allows managers to stay focused on all of the little gaps in order to seem them through to completion without abandoning one and allowing the gap to continue or grow, thus, never

achieving the desired state.

Further, if the employees and management of a company can adopt such a way of thinking, increased benefits in all areas of the company can come about.

Jones says, "[Senge] advocates building a deeper trust and developing higher levels of honest communication within organizations, based on inter-relationships and interdependencies. The problems in organizations come from the cumulative results of the behavior patterns and the fact that the contributing behaviors are widely separated in time and space from those results. No one is seeing these patterns and connecting them to their negative results. No one is effectively, or systematically, changing the behaviors" (Jones, 1998). This can be considered a failure in strategic management. In other words, you can put a band-aid over a wound, but unless you stop cutting yourself, you will continue to be injured.

### Buddhism

For this paper, Buddhist principles are used. Most western papers use the Mahayana Buddhism to illustrate their points. However, this paper will use general principles that are found in all forms of Buddhism and seem to create a foundation for all of the different sects. Gould says, "all forms of Buddhism share similar ethical concerns, much as most religions and philosophies throughout the world do" (Gould, 1995). While Buddhism has been shaped and changed by the various cultures it has come into contact with, the main tenants are essentially unchanged.

Dr. Plamintr describes Buddhism as not just a system of beliefs, but an "effective system for exploring reality" (Plamintr, 1994). He goes on to say that a Buddhist should be constantly looking to study and apply the principles of the Buddhist teachings, through "rationalizing and investigating them with an open mind" (Plamintr, 1994). Buddhism has many characteristics of a typical religion, but does not have a central figure that rewards or punishes actions as many other religions do. Instead, the Buddhist would look at the good and bad things as being part of a naturally occurring cause and effect: good actions lead to benefits and bad actions lead to harm. All things are interrelated in Buddhism and thus you must study the world in order to study an individual topic.

Also, Buddhism has often been called a scientific religion as it promotes the questioning, studying, and experimentation of the world via the teachings of Buddha. Also, Buddhism is processed based system as well because the teachings say that this life is not the only one and rebirth in the future is determined by actions today as well as in the past.

## Literature

The literature on the topics of Buddhism and management tend to focus on ethics in business and utilizing Buddhism as an ethical framework. Very few papers explicitly contain direct comparisons and discussions of Buddhism and systems thinking. One exception is Kakol's work on "Process Buddhism" where he says, "Process Buddhism is more at home with post-Marxist attempts to replace the base-superstructure determinism with an analysis of society based on systems theory" (Kakol, 2000).

By focusing Buddhism and systems thinking, I hope to show how Thai managers can create a Thai way of thinking that utilizes both traditional Thai beliefs and proven western management methods to create a decision-making process that they can use to improve the competitiveness of their companies. "Buddhism needs to use the western forms of process thought so as to recast its own process-like ideas into a [new] form" (Kakol, 2000).

## RELATING THE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHISM WITH CONTEMPORARY SYSTEMS THINKING

### Management and Employee Interactions

The first area to relating to Buddhism with systems thinking lies in the basic relationships between managers and employees. To aid in this section, I conducted a survey of night school students I taught who were also working. Though the survey is sample is small (47 respondents) and not highly scientific, it does offer interesting insights into management-employee relations in Thailand. To begin, I conducted the same survey orally a few months before the written one. The results of the oral survey showed that 75 percent of the people did not like their jobs and the main reason for this was their manager and the way the manager acted

towards their job and the employees. In contrast, the results of the written survey showed 89 percent liked their job and 22 percent felt their manager had a good motivation to do their job though 25 percent said that their managers sometimes act different from how they tell their employees to act. The figures of the survey show that there are some areas of concern in management-employee relations in Thailand. The difference in results from the two surveys is the result of Thai employees feeling they can say one thing about their manager because it would not come back to them because there was not proof it had been said. However, though they were completing an anonymous survey,

they felt that their boss may find out and wrote different responses from their oral ones.

Thai companies, like companies all around the world, are constantly acting in ways that are not in line with Buddhist teachings. Can Buddhist teaching strengthen the relationship between managers and their employees and thus eliminate any of the corporate problems we see today? Yes, if we begin by focusing on the role of the manager in Thailand. The survey I conducted showed that 14 percent of the people described their managers primarily as a friend or a director respectively.

### ***Employees View of Management***

Buddha thought of himself and his role in life as a teacher, providing instruction to people, but offering little else beyond that. This is concurrent with the Buddhist encouragement of individual thought and investigation found earlier in the paper. The survey showed that 10 percent of the people felt their manager was like a teacher. Buddha was essentially empowering others to explore and discover on their own. The implication for Thai managers is that they will have to decentralize their power and decision-making if they wish their employees not to act as followers.

To explain, if the employees see the manager primarily as a director, they will follow orders to the letter for fear of having the manager lose face or become upset with them. Also, they lose their ability to speak out against the manager, despite there being support for their opinion because of the aforementioned factors. Further, having a manager as a friend tends to be a positive aspect for the manager, but in Thai society, that friendship with a more senior or powerful person could lead some employees to follow their leader without question in order to maintain the friendship. I propose that managers must begin to allow their employees greater freedom and decision-making ability. The friendship they have will reinforce the willingness of the employees to carry out their duties to the best of their ability in

order not to let their manager down. Further, there is some evidence that this is happening as 28 percent of the survey respondents said their manager allows them decision-making freedom "usually or always". Buddha said that man was master of his own destiny and thus, "he must be responsible for his own actions" (Plamintr, 1994). This can be seen in the Buddhist approach to ethics where self-reliance and responsibility are critical aspects of morality in life. A Buddhist parable says, "if a sick man seeks not treatment even when a physician is at hand, the physician is not to blame" (Plamintr, 1994). Buddha also hoped that monks could be self-sufficient and learn to be content with little in life, that way they could study and develop the teachings of Buddhism better. Suntipong Dhammadhamron, a once high flying businessman in Thailand and now a self-sufficient farmer, said "Buddhism teaches that in order to develop ourselves and or spirituality, we must live a life of self-reliance and constant learning" (Achakulwisut and Chajitvanit, 2001).

### ***Adding Employees to the System***

A second way to apply Buddhism and systems thinking is to open employees to the system in order for employees to reach their potential is for managers should strive to remove the obstacles from their way. Systems thinking allows a manager to see trends in the forces that shape and affect the company. Seeing these obstacles allows the manager time to remove or minimize them for the employees so the employees can maximize their efforts on a particular matter. Further, "how human beings act together greatly affects how systems will respond, a better understanding of this response will aid methodologies that may be used to intervene" (Hall, 1995). Corporations sometimes seem to be experiencing the same problems repeatedly over time. "Members of the organization come to recognize the pattern of events in the cycle, rather than the cycle itself" (McNamara, 1999), thus management needs to intervene in the

system and make the employees aware of the cycle and teach them how to see the cycle for themselves.

Further, Buddhism calls for the mutual interaction between the religious (monks and nuns) and the lay people (everyone else): "a spiritual bond and traditional basis for close cooperation" (Plamintr, 1994). The same principle can be applied to managers and employees where both are thinking systematically and driven towards the same goals, thus creating a better understanding of the responsibilities each has to the other and encourage working towards the benefit of each party through their everyday actions for the company. "Once an individual realizes that he/she is really a series of processes, he or she will no longer think in terms of self-interests. It is the realization of this that can lead to the disinterestedness that frees us from social conditioning and group interests as well as from self-interest" Kakol, 2000). To further add to the systems versus self-interest argument, Alexandrin points out that "the behavioral force which derives the Buddhist system is that of co-operation, not competition. Both motives have large circumferences and their circles overlap" (Alexandrin, 1993). If people can work together, then they can achieve both their own Buddhist goals of co-operation, and also succeed in the competitive environment which leads to the growth and strengthening of other aspects of society as Bubna believes when he says, "a market exchange is a co-operative relationship" it is when such a relationship is abused for "excessive" profit that problems arise" (Bubna, 1995). This thinking also leads towards the minimization of the agency problem where shareholders and managers may be working for different goals.

Buddhism talks about suffering and that suffering is caused by ignorance. Buddhism dispels the ignorance through education and guidance, exactly what a manager needs to do for their employees.

### ***Leadership Responsibilities of the Manager***

Another area is the leadership of the manager and the attention paid to employees. Each employee is different requiring managers to adopt a situational leadership approach to dealing with their employees based upon the forces acting on them at the time. Situational leadership allows the manager to examine the systems that are directly affecting the employee (positively or negatively) and take steps to ensure that the employee is properly encouraged or educated depending on the situation. Buddha gave "spontaneous discourses, attuned to particular listeners and situations" (Plamintr, 1994) essentially practicing management by walking around (MBWA). This forces the manager to take a bottoms-up approach "whose starting point and unswerving main focus is on the individual and his or her experiences and sense of self-responsibility" (Gould, 1995).

In an interview I conducted with two Thai managers and two Japanese managers, all of whom are managing directors or company presidents and who were converted followers of Buddhism, they each described how Buddhism allowed them to alleviate much of the "blackness in their lives" (Subhasavasdikul Interviews, 2001). One of the Thai managers, a deeply knowledgeable man in the field of Buddhist studies, passed along the teachings he held to his Japanese friend and business colleague. This man understood and was moved by them. He subsequently taught them to his friend, the second Japanese man, and over time, they both grew deeper in their appreciation of the Buddhist way (Subhasavasdikul Interviews, 2001). This is a natural system where friends are helping each other out of respect and admiration for the other person and not out of greed or self-gain. Both of the Japanese men said that they have begun to use the Buddhist teachings in the business dealings, but as they only recently began their new studies, they were still exploring how Buddhism worked for them. However, they made

clear that they their employees were aware that they were trying to act in a way not normally associated with Japanese business and that they felt their employees were reacting positively to the changes. In fact, the two Japanese were in Thailand for a holiday because the most recent converter was so happy that he was realizing a new peace that he wanted to take his friends away to celebrate.

Defensiveness is a characteristic shared by people in leadership position and non-leadership positions all around the world. It is unfair to label Thai managers as tower thinkers without understanding that most people, at times, act the same way. However, Thai managers do have a tendency to dislike criticism from employees fostering a "yes" organization where no one is willing to challenge a decision or make a comment contrary to the boss (see the earlier statistics I presented from my interview with Thai employees). Argyris has argued that defensive reasoning is a widespread problem among business people. He defines "defensiveness as when people become defensive, screen out criticism, and put the blame on anyone and everyone but themselves. In short, their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment they need it the most" (Knowledge Management Argyris, 1998).

Defensiveness is an obstacle that can be overcome and, in short, systems thinking would allow a manager to see the world as what it is instead of what they think it is. When the reality of world is not too different from their perceptions, they would have less reason to try and cover mistakes that may be made by themselves.

Gould supports Argyris when speaks about Buddhist ethics in business saying, "one of our worst human failings is to attribute negative things to others and positive things to ourselves. Buddhism addresses this tendency quite directly and suggests that it is the product of our self-cherishing attitude, one which favors ourselves over others" (Gould, 1995). Senge addresses

this issue in his work on learning organizations when he describe how people closely associate themselves with their jobs. "Departmental silos, with thick walls of poor communication and low levels of cooperation and trust, are a natural evolution of these mental models and their associated behaviors. Behavioral science tells us there must be plenty of individual reinforcement for these wasteful, counterproductive, 'turf protection' and 'not my job' behaviors, or they would not be so pervasive" (Jones, 1998).

As we can see, defensiveness, while a natural tendency, inhibits true systems and Buddhist understandings in the workplace and life. Reduction and elimination of these feelings allow the company and each person to grow to their full potential and succeed no matter what their chosen goals.

### ***Work and Motivation***

Finally, Buddhism teaches that a community living together harmoniously and peacefully will lead to growth and development. This systems approach is directly carried into the company where a company that has each of its parts and all of its employees working in relative harmony increases the likelihood of successful financial growth for the company, personal and professional development for the staff, and makes the company a better corporate citizen within the community. An analysis of most corporate mission and vision statements will reflect all or part of these beliefs.

"Work can either be satisfying or not satisfying, depending on which of the two kinds of desire is motivating it. When work stems from the desire for true well-being, there is satisfaction in the direct and immediate results of the work itself. Buddhist monks are known to "work hard until their last breath or until they become completely invalid, so great is their spirit of self-sacrifice and dedication" (Plamintr, 1994). By contrast, when work is done out of desire for pleasure objects, then the direct results of the work itself are not

so important (Payutto, 1998). Suntipong Dhammadhamron, says about his past business dealings in Thailand, "to succeed in business, we had to treat other people as enemies, as obstacles that must be removed. I didn't feel comfortable with the norm. I still wanted to think of co-workers or clients as my friends" (Achakulwisut and Chajitvanit, 2001).

## **INFORMATION FLOW THROUGHOUT THE COMPANY DOES NOT BEGIN OR END WITH THE MANAGER**

Once managers understand and develop their relationships with their employees, then they will begin to see the flow of information throughout the company. Too many times, the manager of a company believes the information begins when they give an order or make a decision and that action is communicated to subordinates. Instead, the company is a living entity interacting with many different systems and receiving and sending information all the time. Only with a systems approach can a manager hope to make sense of the vast amount of information coming in and out of the company.

### ***Knowledge Sharing***

Knowledge sharing is indeed that, sharing what you know with others and having them share what they know with you. The main obstacle to this occurring is that people believe that their job centers around something they do or know that others do not, if they were to open up and share that secret, they would be rendered useless. In fact, the sharing of knowledge enhances a person's position within a company because they are drawn closer to the other employees. This is the ideal end point, not an individual success separate from the whole, but the individual sharing in the success of the whole.

Buddhism shares knowledge all the time. When Buddhists gather in a Buddhist temple, many observers would say they are at prayer. In fact, since Buddha was

not a god, they cannot be said to be praying. What they are doing is reciting teachings from the Buddha. These passages are recited to share their knowledge with a new generation as well as to allow the older generations a chance to mediate and discuss the meanings of them. The interactions that come from a new generation learning Buddhist teachings from an older generation studying and reflecting on them can be called knowledge sharing.

Putting this into practice in the business sense, sharing knowledge with employees and having them share knowledge with each other allows a manager to cultivate a fertile ground of new ideas and possibilities that they can then harvest to achieve the best results for the company. Knowledge can be divided into two areas: tacit and explicit. Tacit knowledge includes technical abilities and "experience learning" which is difficult to pass along to others without the same level of understanding. Explicit knowledge is formal and systematic which can be easily communicated between people. Nonaka describes how the Japanese company Canon uses tacit and explicit knowledge to create a vibrant internal development system that pits teams against each other to create new and innovative products:

He says, "the fundamental principle in Japanese companies that I have studied is redundancy-the conscious overlapping of company information, business activities, and managerial responsibilities. Redundancy is important because it encourages frequent dialogue and communication. This helps create a common cognitive ground among employees and thus facilitates the transfer of tacit knowledge. Redundancy also spreads explicit knowledge through the organization so it can be internalized by the employees. It depends on tapping the tacit and often

highly subjective insights, intuitions, and hunches of individual employees and making those insights available for testing and use by the company as a whole. The key to this process is personal commitment, the employees' sense of identity with the enterprise and its mission. [This] requires managers to be as comfortable with images and symbols...as they are with hard numbers measuring market share, productivity, and ROI (Knowledge Management Nonaka, 1998).

The manager's role is to guide this process, monitoring the system and keeping employees focused on the system and what is happening with it. From this comes an operation strategy for the company and its employees to follow and refine along the way. Bubna states that "real-time strategic decisions responding to situations inevitably result in an organic, evolutionary strategy that emerges independently of any one stakeholder or plan. It is from the accumulation of numerous minute decisions and incremental responses to the chaotic and surprise ridden world of organizational life that what is called a strategy emerges" (Bubna, 1995).

Kriengsak Niratpattanasai, is a contributor for the Bangkok Post newspaper, and a consultant in the field of cross-cultural management. In one of his articles, he states that "there are no walls for knowledge, experience, and communication. You and your subordinates have the same sources of information, whether they be the latest management strategies discussed at Harvard or Stanford, or the latest news developments on CNN" (Niratpattanasai, 2000). What he is saying is that a management style of hoarding information and then issuing directions is over. Technological change has allowed greater access to information and a manager needs to address their new role in this. He suggests managers be good listeners and facilitators. That is not unreasonable, but not all they have to be. They must

be able to piece together the information systematically to find linkages among seemingly unrelated items. That is true systems management.

Many western authors argue that the traditional, family-style of management keeps Asian (Thai) managers from achieving systems thinking. I believe they are partially correct, but they fail to see the systematic nature of families and how that can be an advantage to adopting a Buddhist/systems approach. Weidenbaum describes the family system of Asia, the "bamboo network" as he calls it, in the following way. "the family is basic unit of management. This provides loyalty, flexibility, speedy decision-making, and low overhead. It also breeds a crucial business element: trust" (Weidenbaum, 1998). While most understand the negatives associated with the family style of business, the elements Weidenbaum describes can be put in place for a non-family, "family" company as the same characteristics become accepted and applied by the employees despite their not being actual blood relatives and family members.

Professor Gordon Redding from Insead University in France states that typical problem of Asian (namely Chinese and Chinese descendent) families in running their businesses is that they "try to westernise the company in every way except strategy making. They insist on retaining a strict centralized control (Uren, 2000). This is communicated by Brooker Group CEO Mark Greenberg when describing his company's guide to business in Thailand, "information on Thailand is very difficult to obtain and Thais remained very secretive in carrying on their business, with a veil drawn over the way companies are structured and how financial statements are presented" (Vanijaka, 2001).

As we have been discussing, in Thailand, decentralized control and knowledge sharing is not so much a western idea as it is described by Buddhism as being essential for living. What managers may have been afraid of in the past, western management ideas,

can actually be found right in their very homes through Buddhism and is more of a mental obstacle than a cultural one between west and east.

### ***Problem Solving***

Finding solutions to problems comes naturally through systems thinking. When you are able to see a whole for its parts, you can actually begin to prevent problems from occurring or at least cut the reaction time to them. This ability is increased when the employees of a company are following a similar strategy as the upper management. Having a good understanding of cause and effect is what is needed to anticipate problems and solve or prevent them.

One of Buddhism's most important doctrines is called the Doctrine of Dependent Origination. This was described to me essentially meaning that nothing is absolute and a permanent self does not exist because you are part of everything around you. According to Plamintr, "[In Buddhism] nothing is absolute, nothing is permanent, for all things arise, exist, and cease depending in causes and conditions. Since all things are conditioned, interdependent, and interrelated, the existence of a permanent self is a logical impossibility" (Plamintr, 1994). Buddha said, "Whatever is of the nature to arise, that very thing is of the nature to disappear" (Plamintr, 1994). This has been described as one of the most difficult aspects of Buddhism and one that Buddha himself wished the monks to study closely.

Scenario thinking/planning, benchmarking, TQM, and other management and strategy making aids are based in this idea of cause and effect. A manager that understands this will be able to apply the aids in a more timely and probably more effective manner. Garvin suggests a five-step plan for creating a systematic approach to solving problems within an organization: 1. Scientific Method (complete with data and statistical tools), 2. Experimentation, 3. Learning from past experience, and 4. Learning from others, 5. Transferring

knowledge (Knowledge Management Gavin, 1998). This is a good start, but any application of these principles must be tailored to each individual company and that must be done by the manager who is skilled in seeing the systems in and around the company and apply the principles appropriately.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

This paper is only a beginning. I have intentionally avoided giving specific strategies and instead focused on creating a framework for Thai managers to then take into their specific company and apply them to their specific situation. After all, that is what Buddhism is, a quest for truth and a continual examination of the current state of affairs. Each manager is challenged to take the ideas of this paper and put them into practice on his own with the understanding that they are not foreign and should be feared, but instead, they are ideas buried in the heart of Thai culture and can be found within themselves if they just look hard enough.

Systems thinking and Buddhism make a powerful combination for a Thai manager to use when approaching the duties of their job. Too often, companies are run with only a profit in mind. The ideas I have proposed will allow a company to make money, but at the same time, create a better atmosphere for its employees and a better relationship with its community and customers. I hope to develop these ideas I have discussed in future papers as each area could be developed into a paper of its own, but I also hope that others will take these ideas and explore and study them. I believe that study and practice of these ideas will lead to a better environment for Thai companies and these improved Thai companies with happy consumers might just lift Thailand from the economic stagnation. After all, people always talk about change, but now it is time to take action and change Thailand for the better.

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