

Puey Ungphakorn: An appreciation

There is a Buddhist saying that the lotus was born out of mud and grew within water, despite fishes and turtles which could eat the plant. And yet some manage to appear above water. Once the lotus is above the water, its leaves and flowers do not cling to the water, even when water drops on them. Likewise a man or woman who was born from a poor family, with bad social circumstances, temptation etc, who does not succumb to any vice, shines above the rest as a symbol of virtue and goodness.

This saying could really be applied to Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, who was born in the poor neighborhood of Chinatown in Bangkok on 9th March 1916. His mother was a woman of strong character, honesty and integrity who would have liked to have her son educated in the best private school nearby, yet she was in debt that she nearly committed suicide. Only a lucky lottery result saved her. Hence this influenced Puey to dedicate his life and work for the poor and to eradicate poverty of the Thai. Eighty-five percent of them are indeed very poor. There is also a strong trace of his mother's character on him. Indeed as most Siamese mothers, she had much more to contribute to character building of her children than the father did.

Dr. Puey was a bright student and a generous person. He was much liked by his teachers and admired by his peers at all educational institutions: be it at the Assumption College, where he also became a teacher, or at the University of Moral and Po-



litical Sciences, where he was one of the first crops to enter in 1934 and ended up with a first class honors. Then he won the State scholarship for an MA and Ph.D. at the London School of Economics, which made him an honorary fellow.

While he was in England the Second World War broke out. Siam was occupied by the Japanese troops and our dictator declared war against the allies. This was against the wishes of the Thai people. Previously the government had declared that we would be neutral and if invaded we would fight for our survival and our independence until the last Siamese. Unlike most Thai students in the UK, he refused to return home but was instrumental to form a Free Thai Movement in that country. While his former teacher and rector of his former university, Dr. Pridi Banomyong, then Regent for King Rama VIII, had already started a similar venture within the Kingdom. Later Dr. Puey was sent by the

British to enter Siam clandestinely, a mission in which he nearly lost his life. Yet he managed to join the movement in the country and to work for Dr. Pridi until the end of the war. Then, on 16th August 1948, the Regent declared in the name of H.M. the King and the Thai people that the war was void and the declaration of war against the Allies was unconstitutional and against the wishes of the Thai people, most of whom joined the Free Thai movement.

After the war, Puey returned to London to get his higher degree. Meanwhile Dr. Pridi and all of the Free Thai leaders were eliminated, many were even assassinated by the former dictator who was a war criminal but came back to power with a military coup in 1947. Dr. Pridi himself spent 21 years in exile in China and 18 years in France where he died in 1983.

Puey returned to Siam with a Ph.D. and had a distinguished career in the Ministry of Finance.

He eventually became the governor of the central bank, the Bank of Thailand, which was created by his former mentor, Pridi Banomyong.

Although the country was ruled by one dictator after another, Puey helped to create the central bank to be an independent financial institution steering away from political interference. Even the army generals and politicians respected him and did not dare to interfere with the management of the bank. He was governor for 12 years, the longest ever, and he created a team of able technocrats, not only at the central bank and the Ministry of Finance, but at the National Commission of Economic and Social Development. Many of the bright young officials were sent abroad for further education. Unfortunately a great number of them do not possess his character of honesty and many were tempted by money, glory and prestige, without caring to dedicate their lives for social justice and environmental balance. About these two elements Puey cared so much. He also cared for beauty and goodness as well as conserving national resources. He helped Professor Silpa Bhirasri who inspired so many young creative artists at Silpakorn University. Puey was in fact chairman of the Silpa Bhirasri Institute of modern art, the first one in the country, unfortunately it is now defunct. He also created awareness that banks should help artists and the poor. Indeed his inspiration for social welfare and for cultural activities was much appreciated by the rich and the middle classes. Puey did not stop there. He wanted fundamental change for civic society and participatory democracy—which he coined the word Santi (peace) Pracha

(real participation by the people) Dhamma (with an ethical force for righteousness) — the dream which did not come true for his mentor, Pridi Banomyong, and Puey too followed the path of Pridi but the dream is still not a reality.

Had Puey remained at the central bank, with his various activities for the government to improve the country without including a democratic element, he would have been much admired by all including the most reactionaries in the feudal court who wished to maintain the status quo of structural violence, which helps the rich and the privileged at the expense of the poor and the degradation of the natural resources. But Puey set his heart to educate the young for moral courage, for social justice and for the spirit of real democracy—not formal democracy, which is in fact a window dressing for tyranny and to serve the transnational cooperations.

When he started the Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement in the late 1960s, this was tolerated because it linked with the anticommunist ideology and capitalistic tendency in the like of those in the Philippines and Taiwan. And when he became dean of the Economics Faculty at Thammasart (the former University of Moral and Political Sciences), the army, which was and is a state within the state, still approved of his role because they thought that he would only train economists to serve the status quo. Even when he started the Graduate Volunteer Service, in imitation of the British VSO, which was open to every university, he cautiously worked with the Ministry of Education which is a very conservative institution. He allowed students to be in the

provincial towns only when the local governors and district officers could keep their eyes on the volunteers, who could not go out to the remote areas, some of which were dominated by the Communist Party of Thailand. He took great care of visiting most of the volunteer posts and he asked all volunteers to write their observations in the area as a kind of thesis. This really helped change graduates, mostly from the middle classes background, to understand the poor and to appreciate local wisdom.

By late 1960s, the then dictator wanted to experiment with the mild form of democracy, with a limited constitution and general election, which had been destroyed in 1947. Even the appearance of democracy was eliminated in 1957, with all intellectuals or dissidents silenced either by putting them in gaol without trial, or by assassination. Many of them had to be abroad or joined the Communist party in the jungle. But after less than four years of this experiment with democracy, the dictators again abolished parliament and the constitution in November 1971.

Meanwhile Puey was a visiting Professor at Cambridge University where he wrote a mild protest to the then dictator, which not only upset the dictator, but it also disturbed many bureaucrats and bankers, most of whom preferred the stability under totalitarianism rather than democracy. For the first time that Puey became a persona non grata to the Thai establishment. Yet the mild letter in February 1972 which he signed with a nom de plume which he had used in the Free Thai Movement created such a stir that it led to the great demonstration with over one hundred

thousand participants in October 1973, the result of which was that the three dictators fled the country.

It appeared that democracy had returned once again to Siam, but it was not real, as the army was still a state within the state. However Puey was recalled and became President of Thammasat University. Yet he was not able to guide his alma mater in the line of the dream of Dr. Pridi, the founder, because Maoism and the communist party influenced the students. They accused him of being a liberal who followed the American imperialism. The faculty was too conservative to welcome any change from the ivory tower to an open university for the poor and underprivileged.

When the coup came about on 6 October 1976 it was the bloodiest one in Siamese history and a total eradication of any form of democracy whatsoever. Puey himself had to resign his post at the University and go into exile in London. At least he had his wonderful English wife who understood him and cared for him, as she also cared for the poor and the under privileged. His three sons were also with him in England. And he helped created Mitra Thai Trust there to help those who fled to the jungle or abroad as well as to promote freedom of expression by smuggling free publications into the country. In the early 1971 he also helped create the Komol Keemthong Foundation whose objectives are to promote youth's idealism for social change non-violently.

Yet in October 1976 both the KKF and the TRRM were branded communist organizations. A group photograph taken at a seminar in Loey organized by the KKF and the AFSC (an

American Quaker organization) with Puey and some of us in it was also regarded as evidence of a meeting of the Communist Party of Thailand.

As an exile Puey worked hard to raise consciousness among the Thai abroad to dedicate their lives for democracy. He was invited by the American Congress to testify against the abuse of human rights by the Thai authoritarian regime in 1976.

Unfortunately he had a stroke in 1977. Hence he could not speak or write. Yet he could read and enjoyed listening to traditional Thai music, as he used to play flute beautifully, to welcome friends at his humble home in Southfield, near Wimbledon, where he sometimes walked to the Thai temple. Puey claimed to be an agnostic, but was much influenced by the teaching of the Buddha. His contented life, his loving kindness and compassion as well as his lack of envy and his equanimity exemplify a life of a dedicated lay Buddhist, who does not care for rites and rituals but for the essence of Buddhism. He once told me "Sulak, we Buddhists are agnostic are we not?" I think it is indeed true, since Buddhists are not required to have faith in the unknown. What we learn from the Buddha or from any other scriptures, if we put them into practice to eradicate or reduce greed, hatred and delusion, we are on the right path.

From Puey's life and work it is clear to me that he dedicated his life against the three causes of suffering — not only for himself and his family, but also for all sentient beings. He led a simple life and a life with dedication. He had an aspiration for truth, beauty and goodness that could be clearly seen by those who wish

to learn from the example of his life and his works.

Although he lived an inactive life for 22 years, he was contented and happy. He died peacefully on 28 July 1999. The news of his death was kept within the family until the day of his cremation outside London on 6th August. His wife wanted the last rites to be purely private, with only 8 members of the family attending the funeral service.

We formal Buddhists who spent so much money for many religious ceremonies should learn even from the last rite for Puey Ungphakorn. Indeed if we understand the way he lived for the welfare of others more than himself and his family, our lives will be much richer. If we want to honor him, we do not need any monument or glorified words of praise in print or in speeches. We need to put his practice in our thoughts and in our work. We should tackle the social system, which is full of violence and is controlled by the transnational corporations, including the World Bank, the IMF etc. Though many of us think we are elite, and clever, unlike Puey, we never spent our lives with the poor, nor do we understand the poor. In this way we could imitate Puey indeed. Although his body is no longer with us, his name is above both mud and polluted water. Whether we praise him or not, Puey is still the lotus, clinging not to praise or blame

Sulak Sivaraksa

Centennial Anniversary Pridi Banomyong—Architect of Democracy in Thailand

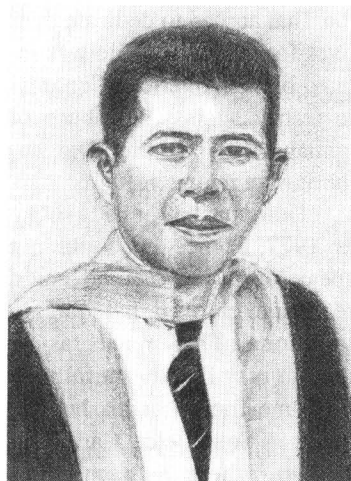
May 11th, 2000 will be the centennial anniversary of the birth of Pridi Banomyong, the great Thai senior statesman (Luang Pradit Manudharm). This event should not pass without a dignified and festive celebration on a national level.

For political considerations the Thai government apparently does not want to be the official organizer of such an event on a nation-wide basis. Still, by a cabinet resolution it was decided on May 13, 1997 that, pursuant to a proposal submitted by the Ministry of Education and Thammasat University, the name of Pridi Banomyong be entered on the calendar of UNESCO for events of great historic importance and the commemoration of outstanding personalities.

The Thai NGOs under the leadership of Sulak Sivaraksa has formed a committee to prepare a nation-wide non-government celebration of the event. In order to pave the way for the anniversary the committee supports the project by issuing pamphlets about the life and work of Pridi.

During his studies in France, in 1927, Pridi founded the People's party with a view to changing the Thai absolute monarchy into a constitutional and democratic one. In a bloodless revolution, the People's Party took control in June 1932 and promulgated a provisional constitution worked out by Pridi Banomyong.

From the beginning Pridi was aware that mere political de-



mocracy would not be sufficient to create a truly democratic society. The economy should likewise be run on democratic lines and principles. In March 1933 he submitted to the cabinet presided over by Prime Minister Phraya Mano a plan for the democratic restructuring of the economy. The plan provided inter alia the establishment of full employment and the organization of commerce and trade on a cooperative basis. In the course of lengthy discussions the aristocracy and the conservatives accused Pridi of communist tendencies and refused to accept the plan. Pridi was forced to leave the country and live in Paris in exile.

After the overthrow of Prime Minister Phraya Mano, Pridi was called back by Mano's successor Phraya Phahon and made Minister of Interior. In 1945 Pridi took over the government as Prime Minister.

After Thailand's entry into the war on the side of Japan in

1942 Pridi assumed the leadership of the Seri Thai Movement and recruited a guerilla force of some 10,000 men to fight the Japanese. In Washington the Movement was headed by the then Thai Minister, Seni Pramoj.

In July 1946 King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) was found dead in his bed with a bullet in his head. The death could not be sufficiently explained and the government was held responsible. As a consequence, Pridi resigned. His anti-democratic opponents accused him of regicide although Pridi's innocence was later proven beyond doubt by high Thai law courts.

Armed forces and civilians staged a coup in November 1947 with a view to topple Pridi. However, Pridi managed to escape and flee to Singapore. A counter-coup staged by Pridi in February 1949 in order to reestablish democracy was unsuccessful and Pridi went into exile in Peking until the year 1970. Thereafter he lived in Paris until his death in 1983.

Pridi Banomyong has laid the foundations for building a democratic state and society in Thailand. The further development of democracy in Thailand depends in large measure on how well Thais heed and implement the guidelines Pridi has laid down and the legacy he left.

Erich Reinhold