

THE DHAMMANAAT FOUNDATION

Rod G Nelson

The Dhammanaat Foundation is a Buddhist charity whose aims are to promote awareness of the importance of forests in the lives of all people in Thailand, and to encourage social forestry initiatives. The Foundation was formed as a response to a chronic water shortage caused by rapid deforestation in Tambon (parish) Mae Soi in the vicinity of Chiangmai.

The Mae Soi valley, an area of some 70 km², used to be covered with dense forest, seamed with watercourses. By 1980, indiscriminate commercial logging had turned the area into a scrubland. Phra Ajahn Pongsak, a Buddhist monk, provided the impetus for the ambitious reforestation programme now being implemented in the watershed valleys of the three streams which serve the Tambon. He is the abbot of Palad monastery, just outside Chiangmai. He had for many years been concerned about the scale of forest destruction throughout the country, a destruction he had experienced directly from the many years spent in retreat in forest areas.

He became actively involved in opposing forest destruction when it engulfed the forests of Mae Soi in 1983. He used to spend the *pansa* (rains) retreat in a cave in the Mae Soi forest, and was well known by the villagers. In 1984, he was approached by Tambon representatives, who were worried about declining stream flows, and fearful of resulting food shortfalls. Ajahn Pongsak called a series of meetings, in which he pointed out the direct links between forest destruction and water shortage, and made it clear that immediate and direct action was necessary, in order to avert ruin of the whole community. However, until the villagers understood the true importance of forests to their lives, the problem could only grow. Ajahn Pongsak explained these concepts to the villagers:

What is the value of forests? Many of us look at a tree and see only its value in terms of how much we can sell it for. The trees in the forests are much more than that. The forests are our first home. The one we live in and feel so possessive about is only our second home. It cannot be built without the first.

Our parents give us life but the forest sustains it. From it we get the four necessities of life - food, shelter, clothing, medicine. It balances the air we breathe, cleanses the water we drink, produces the soil we grow our crops in. It nourishes the spirit in the same way as it nourishes the body. We should be endlessly grateful to it -every grove, every tree, every leaf.

He called for a commitment from the villagers in terms of voluntary labour, and offered his own commitment to the task of redressing the damage. He also pointed out that the responsibility for what had happened must be accepted by all, himself included, and that no help from outside could be counted on, given the prevailing political climate.

Since 1985 the villagers of Tambon Mae Soi with Ajahn Pongsak have worked to preserve their remaining forest and to restore what has been lost. Their achievements are many and include:

- A 14 km fence built to protect the watershed forests on the ridges.
- Firebreaks constructed throughout the forests.
- A nursery established of many thousands of local seedlings.
- 10 km of water pipes laid on both sides of the valley for watering seedlings and aiding in fire control.
- Village volunteers maintain a 24 hour forest patrol against hunting, felling and firing.
- Badly eroded areas and degraded forests have been planted with trees to protect and improve the soil.
- The valley is being replanted with its former tree species of teak, ironwood, and wild mango.

During this time, the villagers were the subject of considerable antipathy and suspicion. From an outsider's standpoint this might seem incomprehensible, but the work in Mae Soi inevitably brought a conflict of interest with those people and organisations supporting a pilot crop-substitution programme in the hill-tribe village of Ban Paa Kwey, high on the Mae Soi watershed. A Thai-Norwegian Christian organisation was encouraging the Hmong tribespeople to grow cabbages instead of opium as their cashcrop. This unfortunately had serious consequences for the watershed forests, which were cleared wholesale for cabbage-fields. People living farther down the valleys were liable to poisoning from pesticide residues in the streams. Ajahn Pongsak saw it as vital to highlight this situation, where the livelihood of some 12,000 Khonmuang (ethnic Thai) villagers was threatened by the cash-cropping of 650 hill-tribe villagers. As a result, charges of racism, self-seeking and subversion were made against Ajahn Pongsak and the villagers.

His consistent reply has been that his duty as a monk is to concern himself with moral issues, and that the health of the forest is vital to the moral, spiritual and physical welfare of all those who live in proximity to it.

In the last two years, the tide of political opinion has swung in favour of the type of work that Ajahn Pongsak and the villagers of Mae Soi are trying to do. The involvement of the Royal Thai Forest Department (RTFD) has been wholly constructive, although they are not able to offer financial support. The Dhammaanat Foundation is funding a major social support programme for the Tambon, involving construction of dams, irrigation of new land, and establishment of rice banks in the villages. The tree-planting programme has been expanded with direct involvement by the RTFD.

All funds have come from private sources notably from M R Smansnid Svasti, a botanist, artist and conservationist member of the Thai Royal Family, who has worked tirelessly and at great personal sacrifice for the success of this project.

Further information about the work of the Foundation in Thailand is available from the UK branch of the Dhammanaat Foundation:

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