



Peace and Non-Violence in Phra Aphai Mani, A Poetic Tale by Sunthon Phu

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Abstract

Phra Aphai Mani, a poetic tale by Sunthon Phu, one of the great poets of Thailand, is significantly concerned with peace and non-violence, which makes it stand out from other Thai literature of his time. The very name of the hero, which is also the name of this long poem, means the Jewel of Forgiveness. Phra Aphai Mani chooses to study music instead of undertaking any martial art more fitting for a future king. He believes that music can stop anger and violence. Both Phra Aphai Mani and Utsaren, a Lankan prince, love the same princess of Phaluek who does not care for Utsaren. This leads to wars between Phaluek and Lanka. Phra Aphai Mani tries to avoid bloodshed by the use of music. To end the long war, the holy hermit from the Crystal Isle is invited to preach to the two warring sides and bring about reconciliation. The hermit preaches the end of anger and revenge and recommends the practice of friendship and compassion. When the war is over, Phra Aphai Mani forgives his enemies, sets them free, gives back their possessions and provides them with transports to return to their respective country. Towards the end of the tale, Phra Aphai Mani gives up his throne and worldly wealth. He becomes a hermit who preaches that all human-beings must die and leave their possessions behind. It is a hint to all to give up greed, anger and attachment to transient things. Non-violence is recommended in order to attain peace.

Key words: Peace and non-violence, Phra Aphai Mani.

Introduction

Sunthon Phu (C.E. 1786-1855) is one of the great Thai poets (See Picture I). His works are numerous and *Phra Aphai Mani* is generally agreed to be his best work. *Phra Aphai Mani* is a long poetic tale about the life of Phra Aphai Mani, the main hero, and the life of his brother Sisuwan. Phra Aphai Mani's sons: Sinsamut, Sudsakhon



Picture I

Wax Image of Sunthon Phu

Owner: Thai Human Imagery Museum



and Mangkhala also play important parts that make the story interesting and exciting right to the end.

The name “Aphai Mani” means the Jewel (mani) of Forgiveness (aphai). It seems that Sunthon Phu may intentionally name his hero in order to convey his great message of forgiveness. If the virtue of forgiveness is not maintained, wars and conflicts will occur unceasingly. Peace and non-violence cannot be achieved without forgiveness.

Before discussing the concepts of peace and non-violence in *Phra Aphai Mani*, the meanings of the two words should be agreed upon. The meaning of peace or shanti in Sanskrit, according to the Hindu belief and also the Buddhist belief, means the condition of the mind that is calm and undisturbed by any destructive feelings such as anger, revenge, greed. Non-violence is the inadequate translation of the word Ahimsa in Sanskrit. Mahatma Gandhi explains that Ahimsa means love for mankind, compassion and tolerance without which Ahimsa cannot be attained. Ahimsa must be expressed in the heart, words and deeds. Ahimsa is very hard to achieve. In Gandhi’s own words, “We may never be strong enough to be entirely non-violent, in thought, word and deed. But we must keep non-violence as our goal and make steady progress towards it ... The truth of a few will count. The untruth of millions will vanish even like chaff before a whiff of wind.” (Singh, 2009,23)

In short, peace means more than a peace treaty and non-violence means more than ceasing the use of violence. Peace or Shanti, and non-violence or Ahimsa, must originate from a heart that is well-controlled to generate calmness, love for all beings, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness. Peace and non-violence must go hand in hand, being motivated by sincere love for mankind and true forgiveness.

Why Phra Aphai Mani is an outstanding work

The Tale of *Phra Aphai Mani* is different from other tales of Sunthon Phu’s time. Most literary works of his period are about wars and stress the martial prowess of the heroes. The prominent works are of foreign origins such as the *Ramakien* from the Indian *Ramayana*, *Inao* from the Panji Romance of Java, Indonesia, and Sam Kok from the Chinese *Tale of the Three Kingdoms*. Although *Phra Aphai Mani* is also about wars with foreign lands, the tale is about the Thai people and there is a hint that Rattana is in fact the Thai capital, known officially as Rattanakosin. The story is created from the imagination of Sunthon Phu, not a foreign story retold in Thai. However, Sunthon Phu may be influenced by a Chinese chronicle named Sai Han which relates the story of a great piper who can play the pipe and induce swans



and peacocks to dance. His song can also make soldiers think of their home and family and no longer wish to fight. In *Phra Aphai Mani* the pipe song not only makes soldiers think of their home but also sends them to sleep. Additionally, the pipe has the power to kill too. The use of the staff as a war weapon is also of Chinese origin. Sisuwat, Phra Aphai Mani's younger brother, is a talented fighter with his staff. Yet this does not make *Phra Aphai Mani* less original. Sunthon Phu is only capturing the trend of the time.

Sunthon Phu was very much aware of the current events of his time. For example, he knew that Lanka (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka) was ruled by the Europeans during his time. He knew about foreign nations such as England, France, and Holland, besides Asian races such as Javanese, Malays, Tamils, Chinese. Phra Aphai Mani, the hero, learns to speak foreign languages fluently while he lives with shipwrecked people in the Crystal Isle. The music box in the story is the forerunner of the gramophone and the Pirate Surang's gigantic ship is the forerunner of the Titanic.

The most important of all, Sunthon Phu recognizes the value and the power of music. Phra Aphai Mani explains to the three Brahmins: Mora, Sanon and Wichian,

“The worth of music, it includes all things
Of untold value, like a priceless gem.
Humans, garudas, heavenly beings,
Four-legged beasts that roam the jungle wild,
Upon hearing the music from my pipe,
All lose their rage and wildness.
Calm they become, and sleep unknowingly.
An art of such great merit music is.”
(*Phra Aphai Mani* Part I. 1999, 21)

In *Phra Aphai Mani*, the hero puts music to good use, i.e., when all else fails to bring peace, Phra Aphai Mani plays his pipe to achieve peace. In *Sai Han*, music is only a war weapon while in *Phra Aphai Mani*, the chief hero Phra Aphai Mani uses music to avoid violence, to stop the fighting and killings.

The concept of music in *Phra Aphai Mani* is never out of date. Zubin Mehta, celebrated Indian conductor and music director, gave an interview on October 24, 2010 to the Bangkok Post. He says that he has been a political activist of sorts, holding public performances in areas of unrest. His mantra is “music has the power to create understanding and make things well again.” (Woolsey B, 2010, 12)



Sunthon Phu uses the pipe music as the symbol of peace and non-violence. All beings, be they human-beings or wild animals become calm, lose their rage and no longer fight against one another.

On the surface, Phra Aphai Mani may seem a weakling. He often weeps out of compassion. Yet he has the great quality of the strong: the ability to forgive. Mahatma Gandhi says, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” (India Perspectives, Jan.-Mar. 2008, 23) Phra Aphai Mani and also one of his sons, Sudsakhon, are strikingly forgiving persons.

Although Phra Aphai Mani and Utsaren are rivals in their love for Princess Suwannamali, Phra Aphai Mani tries to be helpful to Utsaren who once let Phra Aphai Mani and his companions travel on his ship. He loves Utsaren as his brother and feels indebted to him. When Utsaren insists on fighting to obtain Suwannamali from Sinsamut and is finally captured by the latter, Phra Aphai Mani rushes to ask his son to forgive Utsaren and set him free. Phra Aphai Mani feels that the fight is futile. (See Picture II)

“We should not have fought each other,
Wasting our men’s lives.”
(*Phra Aphai Mani* Part III, 2004, 165)

Sudsakhon, Phra Aphai Mani’s son born from the mermaid, (See Picture III) is also full of forgiveness. The naked ascetic steals his dragon horse and magic cane, and pushes him down a chasm to die. The boy is rescued by the hermit of the Crystal Isle and regains his horse and cane. The King of Karawek who has heard of the crime wants to kill the naked ascetic but Sudsakhon says,

“I do not seek revenge on him.
For I believe it’s due to my past karma.
If we kill him, the karma is repeated
And I’ ll suffer from it for a long time.”
(*Phra Aphai Mani* Part IV, 2006, 153)

Although Sunthon Phu does not mention that Sudsakhon is a Buddhist, it is quite clear that Sudsakhon believes in the doctrine of Karma and non-violence or Ahimsa.

Sunthon Phu points out in a subtle way the bad effect of revenge and



Picture II

Standing from left to right:

Utsaren, Sinsamut, Phra Aphai Mani, Sisuwani.



Picture III

The hermit is blessing Sudsakhon, son of the mermaid.



violence. When Utsaren and his father, King of Lanka, come to attack the Kingdom of Phaluek, Utsaren is captured. Wali, a clever woman commander, feels that if Phra Aphai Mani sets him free, the next battle will be even bigger. She therefore taunts Utsaren until he dies of rage, coughing blood. As a result, Wali is killed by Utsaren's ghost. Utsaren's younger sister Laweng Wanla seeks revenge for her father and brother. Thus in spite of Utsaren's death, the war becomes bigger and costs more and more lives.

Phra Aphai Mani has to use his pipe music to reduce the violence and deaths caused by so many wars. Finally, he takes his troops to attack Lanka, hoping to put an end to the war. Yet the war gets bigger and causes more casualties. When the troops of the two sides fight fiercely, Phra Aphai Mani plays his pipe to stop the carnage. (See Picture IV)

“Phra Aphai struck up a sentimental air,
 Diverting all to the fond memory of their lands.
 ‘We left home as birds did to their nests.
 People at home must look forward to our return.
 At dusk, beaten gongs will make men weep,
 And lament with keen nostalgia.
 Moon and stars float in the late night sky,
 And dewdrops cool the night, dampening the air.”
 (*Phra Aphai Mani* Part V, 2008, 175-176)

However, the power of music is not enough. The great guru has to set up the ritual to invite the holy hermit of the Crystal Isle to preach to the warring sides.

“Be not angry, jealous and vengeful,
 Think that it's due to your past karma.
 You reap what you have sown.
 Blame none but yourselves for your deeds”
 One thing is that we lack religion.
 The whole world is suffering now.
 To end the heat of war and bring peace,
 We must be friends and be compassionate.”
 (*Phra Aphai Mani*, 1994, 884, not yet published in English)



Picture IV
Phra Aphai Mani plays on his pipe,
sending all to deep sleep.



When the war finally ends, Phra Aphai Mani shows his magnanimity by granting forgiveness to his captured enemy. He returns all the seized possessions and men to them and gives them sloops to travel to their respective kingdom. Peace and non-violence can only be achieved through forgiveness, friendship and compassion.

Near the end of the story, Phra Aphai Mani gives up his throne and becomes a hermit. He preaches the way to reach the highest good: one must realize that all beings in this world, be they low-born or high-born, will die. None can escape death. Knowing this, one should become less greedy and stop seeking revenge. To attain peace and non-violence we should become friends and be compassionate to one another. Most of all, we must learn to forgive. Only forgiveness can end revenge and conflicts.

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