articles

A Dragonfly: Outlook of Pira Canning Sudham as Suggested by His Novel *Shadowed Country*

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Abstract

Through textual examination, this paper suggests possible influences on Pira Canning Sudham. It focuses on his novel *Shadowed Country* and that novel's central character, PremSurin. It considers representations of the education system through which Prem passes and the outlook of his primary school teacher, who is a major influence on Prem as a youngster. It also considers Prem's outlook on, or engagement with, the world in terms of voices and his awareness of the danger of speaking out against authority figures. Finally, it turns to representations of karma and the intermingling of animism and Buddhism in *Shadowed Country*. The paper is meant to stimulate thinking rather than answer a question, and is thus left open-ended.

Keywords: Pira Canning Sudham, *Shadowed Country*, education, karma

แมลงปอตัวหนึ่ง:
จากมุมมองของ พีระ สุธรรม(Pira Canning Sudham) ดังที่นำเสนอ ในนวนิยายเรื่อง *Shadowed Country*

บทคัดย่อ
บทความนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงอิทธิพลที่กระทบ Pira Canning Sudham โดยเน้น นวนิยายเรื่อง *Shadowed Country* และตัวเอกของเรื่อง ชื่อเปรมสุรินทร์ โดยการพิจารณาระบบการศึกษาจากประสบการณ์ของเปรมและจากมุมมองของครูประถมที่มีอิทธิพลสำคัญต่อเปรมตอนเป็นเด็ก นอกจากนี้ยังพิจารณาจากมุมมองของ เปรม ที่ต้องผจญกับโลกและความตระหนักถึงอันตรายจากการพูดต่อต้านผู้มีอำนาจ ท้ายสุดจะกล่าวถึงกรรมและ การผสมผสานกันระหว่าง ความเชื่อและศาสนาพุทธในนวนิยายเรื่อง *Shadowed Country* บทความนี้ต้องการกระตุ้นให้เกิดการคิดมากกว่าการตอบคำถามและจบลงด้วยคำถามปลายเปิด

คำสำคัญ: Pira Canning Sudham, *Shadowed Country*, การศึกษา, กรรม

Pira Canning Sudham is a writer from Isan, the northeastern region of Thailand. He writes in English, and has published several novels and several collections of short stories. His novel *Shadowed Country* grew out of (is a revision and an expansion of) his earlier novel *Monsoon Country*.*Shadowed Country* is organized around the life and experiences of PremSurin. In his life and experiences in the novel, PremSurin shares similarities with the author. Both PremSurin, in the novel, and PiraSudham, in his life history, belong (among other places) to a village called Napo in a province called Buriram. Further similarities are as follows:

being schooled in Napo;
attending high school in Bangkok;
staying at a temple as a monk's acolyte;
attending Chulalongkorn University;
winning a scholarship to study overseas (Pira to New Zealand, Prem to England); spending time in the monkhood on returning home;

being a writer of several works in English.

Throughout *Shadowed Country*, Pira remains strongly critical of rote learning. In *Shadowed Country*, Prem (as Pira had done) attends high school in Bangkok, staying at a temple as a monk's acolyte:

> English was a compulsory subject taught at WatBorombopit Secondary School, to which PremSurin had been fortunate enough to gain admission. But like most schools in the country, authoritative teaching and rote learning reigned with unchallenged supremacy. They left no space in the formative minds for curiosity and no chance for questions should inquisitiveness arise. Almost all the learning hours were crammed with using brainpower to memorize pages from textbooks. Later, in the examinations the young learners would give back to the teachers the well-remembered lines and passages whole and undigested. There was no room for teacher-student sessions, and absolutely no discussion, opinion forming or critical comments to be made. (*Shadowed Country* 102)

After high school, Prem goes to Chulalongkorn University (in Bangkok). While there, he wins a scholarship to study in London. He spends several years in Europe and a number of years, after having returned to his home village, as a monk. When he leaves the monkhood, he works as a researcher in Bangkok. One day, visiting his hometown, Prem talks to Anucha, a former student activist at Dhamasart University who is now working as a teacher at Napo Primary School. At Anucha's request, Prem observes the headmaster's teaching:

> Prem could see himself, a starving eight-year-old, sitting at the back and listening attentively to Kumjai's customary dictum, which was being firmly repeated now: "Education improves the mind. It is the light to show the way in darkness. And that's why

every child has come to school to learn to read and write and count. Being illiterate, you will always be at a disadvantage. You'll not be able to know whether the shopkeepers, the traders and the millers give you correct payment or change. You would not know how their weighing machines work and whether you receive a fair price or not. That is why we are learning to read and to count. So then, where were we? Oh, yes. Read after me: *Life of a dragonfly*."

> "Life of a dragonfly," the class repeated in unison from the textbook spread in front of each of them.
>
> "I am a dragonfly," the headmaster read.
>
> "I am a dragonfly," the boys and girls imitated.
>
> "My friends and I fly all over the paddies and marshes," uttered Kumjai in a monotone.
>
> "My friends and I fly all over the paddies and the marshes," the children mimicked like a large flock of parrots.
>
> And so the dragonfly had a field day, catching insects for food over the rice fields and ponds as Prem rose to his feet and bowed to beg leave. (*Shadowed Country* 585)

When Prem reports his findings, Anucha observes of the headmaster: 'he was trained to become an instrument that maims the minds of the young, that nips them in the bud, so to speak [...] He himself isn't aware of this' (*Shadowed Country* 590). However, earlier in the novel, the headmaster does reflect on his teaching, considering it in relation to his students' socio-economic situation:

> "Education improves the mind. It is the light to show the way in darkness," he expounded. He paused and would have gone on several lines more if not for realizing that he was becoming rhetorical, speaking for the sake of speaking, to an audience of forlorn children of the poor. He sensed the hollowness of the jargon handed down to the graduating students at the Teachers' Training College in his time. It was unnecessary to be flowery

> with words in a rickety shack called *school*. (*Shadowed Country* 74)

The headmaster thinks to himself:

> *I have been forcing supreme authority and rote learning upon my students all these years, and that is because I know no other way. I was trained to teach only in this way to ensure obedience according to the system of governing through total submissiveness. Meanwhile I impart such bitter seeds of hatred for graft and injustice to grow in the hearts of the young.* (*Shadowed Country* 109)

And he tells himself:

> *You hope that the wind will carry every seed of your bitter words to land on fertile ground from which ideas for a better Siam could grow.* (*Shadowed Country* 110)

Reflecting on the words he uses in class, he (name: Kumjai) considers building up a student:

> He would have to adhere to: *Education improves the mind* until he could replace the phrase with a better one. The high-sounding words, the purple prose, would remain hollow and meaningless unless he could do something as an example for parents to follow.
>
> Could he afford it? To build up little by little a thatched shack without walls until it could be called a school had been a preoccupying dream, leaving him very little room to think of anything else. Now that the idea of building up a person entered his head, he wondered why he had not thought of it before. To give a scholarship and send the sponsored student to a secondary school and then to a university should not be too heavy a burden or too complicated an involvement when, in so doing, it would encourage some parents to give the chance of a lifetime to their children.

> At this point Kumjai considered the expenses to cover the school fees and living costs. Then he compared it with his own past. He had stayed in a Buddhist temple where he sought free lodging and food by becoming a temple boy, an acolyte, to serve a monk so that he could attend a city school. In this way, it cost his father very little. Apart from the expenses for clothes, textbooks and bus tickets, there was hardly anything for which to pay unless illness occurred.
>
> Resolutely, Kumjai stood up and strode off, holding his newly formed purpose as he followed a path towards Napo. (*Shadowed Country* 89)

Kumjai selects Prem as a student whose secondary-school education he will sponsor in Bangkok. In going to Bangkok and staying at a temple as a monk's acolyte while attending secondary school, Prem is following in Kumjai's footsteps.

In Praise of Reciting Lessons and Numbers?

On his first day at primary school, years before he leaves for Bangkok, Prem makes friends with Toon, a girl in his class. Toon tells Prem about a conversation she had with Prem's older sister, Piang, about what it was like to be a pupil:

> "I asked Piang what it was like to be a pupil. It seemed all fun to hear schoolchildren recite lessons and numbers when I passed the sala on my way home from the fields. Have you ever heard this? *Two times one is two, two times two is four*. And you'd hear a class reciting some verses. I used to sneak into the sala after the classes were over. There were words written on the blackboards. I dared to sit at the desk and later I wrote some squiggles on a blackboard. All the while the voices of the children rose in my mind. *Two times one is two*. And wondered why I was not among them, and when I would be among them." (*Shadowed Country* 56-7)

Toon wondered why she was not among them, other children from the village who attended school; she looked forward to being among them and reciting lessons and numbers with them, as part of the group. When the schoolchildren, together, sing the national anthem, there is a sense of wonder, with their singsong voices, almost magically, 'sending the flag upward':

> How wonderful it seemed to hear the students chant in praise of something. Mysterious words in an unknown language fluttered like wings of doves in flight; singsong voices rose and tumbled, sending the flag upward. These well-arranged words had been lodged in their memories. Every morning of the school days this anthem was sung, passed on to the new ones who could hardly understand its high-sounding phrases. (*Shadowed Country* 25-3)

Although some of the students can hardly understand the high-sounding phrases, their singsong voices, rising and tumbling together, have an effect: they send the flag upward.

Regarding groups, in London, Dani, a wealthy Siamese whom Prem moves in with after being mugged, considers how Siamese students in London often band together:

> *What is the boy's name?* Dani wondered. *Prem Somebody. It is so typical of these young students, leaving the home country for the first time, dying of homesickness or from the English food and climate. To survive they have to cling together in their dingy flats, living out of each others' pockets and each other's minds, cooking their smelly foods, speaking Siamese all the time, defending themselves from things foreign.* (*Shadowed Country* 162)

Is it possible that a teaching practice that promotes uniformity of expression, or at least a shared cultural background, may also contribute to a kind of unanimity in which Siamese, or at least close friends, are able to live not only out of '*each other's pockets*' but also out of '*each other's minds*'? Is it also possible that a teaching

practice such as rote learning may contribute to what a character in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* refers to as 'some little language such as lovers use' (*The Waves* 159), which brings to mind some symbolic language in which a word (or two) brings to mind a wealth of connotations for people who share similar backgrounds? Imagine.

Voices

Prem occasionally hears voices. For example, when attending an interview for a scholarship to study overseas, he feels 'an invisible hand touching his shoulder'; he hears Kumjai's voice, sees 'children of the poor of Napo', and visualizes 'the vast tranquil plain shimmering, changing its various moods':

> Sitting in front of these men, PremSurin felt an invisible hand touching his shoulder. His ears echoed Kumjai's voice: *I shall be your guide and your strength. I shall always be with you.* And, behind the teacher, Prem saw an army of forlorn children of the poor of Napo.
>
> "State your name, age, and parentage," one of the judges began the interview.
>
> Confronting their cynical eyes, the former buffalo boy sensed that Kumjai and the schoolchildren of the Napo Primary were backing him up to the hilt. With them behind him, he visualized the vast tranquil plain shimmering, changing its various moods: green and gold during the November harvest, smouldering under the April sun, cool and inundated during the monsoon. It was laden with layer upon layer of poetry so ancient and sublime, of age-old wisdom of the land, of misery, drudgery, happiness and sorrow that became his bucolic life.
>
> "Why do you want to study overseas?" an old Oxonian asked.
>
> *It's a sacrifice you're making*, Kumjai whispered. The candidate remembered those words very well. (*Shadowed Country* 123-4)

Likewise, after the death of a composer, Prem hears a voice:

> 'Away! Away!' Prem heard a cry. Could it be a wail from the old man? Etan's eye did not see any soul near or far. In the study, Prem sat at the edge of the bed in which Helmut had died and Wilhelm had slept.
>
> 'Away!' The cry woke him from his anxiety. But having already packed and dressed for the departure, he could afford to linger. Then he rose. At the desk, he ran his fingers along its top as a gesture of goodbye. (*Shadowed Country* 212)

When he returns to his home village, he considers his travels to faraway places and hears a voice:

> Was it truly worthwhile to have gone away to places so different and so far away? Then he heard an embittered voice. *You went away to learn so that you would not go through life believing that politicians, bureaucrats, traders and entrepreneurs had become wealthy and supremely powerful solely because of their good deeds done in previous lives. When the bribers and the bribed, the kick-back takers, the swindlers and thieves enjoyed riches, it was because they were blessed.*
>
> The vision became clearer as he could identify the voice. The image of KrooKumjai in his khaki uniform of a primary schoolteacher appeared where he had sat, sharing the shade of the ebony tree with the batch of buffalo boys on the smouldering afternoon. (*Shadowed Country* 275)

Again, a voice:

> *Perhaps Kumjai was more of a dreamer than I could have been. For now I have begun to heed a voice. This bitter voice gives me no peace; it comes to my ears every time a child recoils from me, seeing me as a weird stranger to fear; every time I look upon the*

> *ruins of the school where I learned by rote, reciting texts, verses and mathematical tables. I roam the plain of my childhood to seek peace, but in vain. Where is the peace promised me during the years in Europe? Yes, Kumjai was more of a dreamer than I, a dreamer who had never become aware of the wrath of the murderers.* (*Shadowed Country* 290)

And as a monk, when he talks to a CIA agent:

> "Now, at this very moment, I can hear a voice in my head warning me to speak compassionately or not at all." (*Shadowed Country* 351)

These voices are guiding, directing Prem, telling him what to say ('*It's a sacrifice*'), telling him when to leave ('Away! Away!'), explaining his actions in the past (*'You went away to learn so that you would not go through life believing that politicians, bureaucrats, traders and entrepreneurs had become wealthy and supremely powerful solely because of their good deeds done in previous lives*'), telling him how to behave ('I can hear a voice in my head warning me to speak compassionately or not at all'). And if voices conflict?

An Inability to Speak Out

Prem links authoritative teaching and rote learning with an inability to speak out against corruption. In response to a letter from his brother, he thinks:

> *You and I have been subjected to authoritative teaching and undergone rote learning, geared to induce obedience, subservience and mindlessness. We are supposed to become unthinking, silent and submissive so as to be easily exploited and governable. You are not supposed to have an inquiring mind, asking too many questions and having critical thinking. You are not supposed to be*

> *opinionated, critical and forthright or oppose the authorities in any way.* (*Shadowed Country* 158)

When, as a child, Prem observes an authority figure acting corruptly, his father advises him to ignore what he sees:

> *Father and I had gone to Muang to sell mother's silk cloth so that we could buy some rice. There, we came across our Master accepting cash for the rice and powdered milk [sent to us by charitable organizations]. Young as I was then, I knew that this was the emergency food sent to starving people. Our Master had not set foot for years in a paddy-field. Yet he had bags of rice to sell. When I pointed him out, my father warned me: 'See not, hear not, speak not, and the evil won't harm you.'* (*Shadowed Country* 134-5)

Not heeding such advice carries dangers. Prem's brother, in a letter to Prem, writes:

> *It is heart-rending to see another huge hotel in our town left unfinished. What a sad state! What a waste, especially when two local schoolteachers, Tim Booning and SomjaiUtrawichian, have been murdered for exposing corruption in our province* (*Shadowed Country* 143)
> *recently an outspoken worker has disappeared without trace.* (*Shadowed Country* 146)

In Germany, Prem considers the fate of thinking Siamese who speak out:

> thinking Siamese such as writer and thinker JitPumisak had to be killed. Far-sighted leader and educator PridiPanomyong had to flee the country to die in exile in France. Intellectual and educator PueyUngpakorn had to escape to England, where he died. And writer KhamsingSrinok had to take flight across the

> Maekong River to Lao and sought asylum in Sweden, only to return to make a pact with the devil that he would be silent to stay alive. (*Shadowed Country* 192-3)

Literary Criticism

As an adult, Prem attends Oxford University, where he reads English literature. In one class, there are only two students: himself and another student named James Barnes, who, one day, has to read out an essay he wrote:

> James Barnes had been perfunctorily reading his essay, stumbling over words, uncertain of what he had to say. Barnes often paused, pretending to cough, being embarrassed at the shallowness of his opinions.
>
> But worse than reading the essay was the moment when the work had been read and an awful silence ensued as Michael Wilding, the tutor, looked into space, avoiding eye contact with them. Thus James and Prem waited. After a while, Wilding cleared his throat before asking them about the topic. Looking down at the floor the two students exhibited their uncertainty, afraid that what they said would show their failure to understand. As far as Barnes was concerned, it was more the lack of preparation than ignorance, while Surin had difficulty in forming opinions and understanding *Paradise Lost*. There were obviously worse tortures, but to call this torture, which he could see spelt out in his mind, was to trivialize the plight of those who suffered the real thing.
>
> James Barnes' face flushed, his legs twisting round each other. Stealing a look across at Wilding, the buffalo's eye could see the learned tutor in equal anguish, covering his face with his hands, his legs crossed tensely under the weight of silence. It seemed to be the silence of desperation as MW

tried to think of something to say without being dismissive, without revealing his despair at having to listen to ill-prepared work hour after hour, day after day.

There is something deeply wrong with the whole system, Prem perceived. He had resented the Siamese way, the rote learning method of teaching and a passive acceptance of the teacher's authority. But there was something not quite right with this English model in which the student's ignorant and ill-formed opinions were put forward and the tutor listened.

Suddenly it came to him, seeing the tormented tutor there, asking them questions they could not answer. He would reverse the roles by asking the questions, starting from ignorance and demanding knowledge. But then Wilding beat him to it.

"Surin! What do you think? Are you with us or off day-dreaming?"

Prem smiled winningly. "I was *thinking*, sir. If Milton was a revolutionary, why did he make Satan a rebel? Isn't it suggesting that rebellion is wicked?"

"Yes, good question! Satan, you will have noticed, is presented as a leader, a military commander. He has conducted a military revolt against God. Now in Milton's view the only monarch in the universe is God. All men were created equal. Satan, as a commander, has tried to subvert God's supreme role. He has taken monarchic status to himself quite improperly, and set up a hierarchical society. It is Milton's contention that contemporary society was corrupt as a result of rebellion against the divine. Hence, a revolution was needed to restore the true value of society."

It was obvious that MW was carried away by the enthusiasm of his commitment.

The Napotian sat back. He had found a way to learn, to steer the long-suffering tutor into delivering informed monologues. It was better for them to end the torture that way. Suddenly he began to understand the system, making him look forward to the moment when it would be his turn to read an essay the following week.

In the week that followed, Surin delivered his work, pronouncing each word punctiliously, with a touch of sentiment, while Wilding looked into space towards the ceiling. At the end, the students expected the usual long pause and the characteristic *hm! hm!* But to their surprise MW leaned forward, clasping his hands as if he had come suddenly to life: "You say in your essay that you find Satan a very impressive figure. I don't care whether you find him impressive or unimpressive. What I care about is why you find him impressive. You need to give your reasons. You need to quote from the text to prove your point."

"But that's what I thought," Prem argued, and was surprised that he had raised his voice.

"You can think whatever you like as long as you can give reasons or as long as you can give evidence."

"Evidence?"Prem was puzzled. His undeveloped mind had to work fast.

"The important thing is to give your reasons so that we can see why you say it. It doesn't matter to me what you believe."

The student was shocked. It seemed like a dismissal; it sounded so bald, so brusque. And it showed on his face. Then the tutor took pity on him, toning down his voice: "English isn't like mathematics, you know. There aren't any right answers. It's not a subject in which there is one right answer and the rest are wrong. There are countless interpretations of a text. There are hundreds of different opinions about a

> literary work. The point is not the answer, but how you argue your case. The case you make doesn't matter. It's how you argue it."
>
> "So I could *argue* anything?" Prem sounded as if he had just discovered the eighth wonder of the world.
>
> "As long as the arguments are good."
>
> "Then I could say Satan is heroic."
>
> "It is often said. As long as you point out that the description of his shield is that it is like Achilles' shield and how his speeches are in the tradition of other heroic speeches in literature. You might want to ask whether military heroes are good or not. You might be able to find evidence of what Milton thought about them."
>
> "So I'm free to say anything at Oxford."
>
> The tutor looked bemused.
>
> "In principle," Wilding punctuated though he should have continued thus: *And as long as you don't extend your criticism too far into society because even in England some things are just not said. You are expected to know them.* (*Shadowed Country* 620-3)

Extending your criticism too far into society may disrupt the spirits.

Turning to Karma

1. In a 2008 interview, Sudham said: 'Buddhism is a vein that runs through all my writings as much as the belief in karma does' ('In Conversation with Stephen Conlon' 101). In this statement, he may be using 'Buddhism' in a narrow sense of 'Buddhist practices' rather than in a more general sense of 'Buddhist beliefs' (which would include 'the belief in karma').
2. In Thailand, according to Rajadhon, animism and Buddhism 'are two strata of beliefs' that 'among the mass of the Thai people

> have become intermingled in an inextricable degree' (*Essays on Thai Folklore* 48-9).

The remaining of this discussion looks at: representations of karma in *Shadowed Country*; a reference to *The Dhammapada* in *Shadowed Country*; and an experience that Prem undergoes as a monk in *Shadowed Country*.

Karma as Retribution

After a member of the village, Tongdum (Toon's husband), is seen talking with a man branded as a communist recruiter, the headman and his cohorts enter Toon's house and kill her father who, 'in his drunken state, raised his hand to strike the intruders' (*Shadowed Country* 361). Later, when the headman sets up an agency offering work to villagers in foreign countries, Tongdum and Kiang apply for work (*Shadowed Country* 343). In order to secure their passports, they are required to pay a 100,000 baht fee up front; in order to raise the money, they borrow money from loan sharks using their land title deeds as collateral (*Shadowed Country* 343). About six months later, the headman tells everyone that the agency in Bangkok has taken their money without providing the passports, the air tickets or the jobs for the applicants (*Shadowed Country* 343). As a result: 'Kiang and Tongdum […] had lost not only their rice fields, the title-deeds of which had been used as collateral to secure loans, but also their livelihood' (*Shadowed Country* 343); they disappear into the forest one night and join a band of insurgents called '*K-Force*'.

> A few months later, when the insurgents had attacked KhamnanChid's house, it was Tongdum's cry that was heard on top of the gunfire: 'He's for me! The *khamnan's* head is for me!' so that Kiang stepped aside to give the crier the chance to pierce the wicked man's heart several times, crying: "For the life of

> Grandpa Sa. My knife for their bullets!" (*Shadowed Country* 343)

What is being outlined in this sequence of events is a process of retribution, which Sudham, in several places in the novel, understands as a manifestation of the force of karma (*Shadowed Country* 31, 155, 234, 361, 645).

Responding to Karma

As a child, Prem:

> walked past the new headman who replaced KhamnanTongdee. The new *khamnan* picked up a stone and threw it at the seeing boy, hitting his forehead. (*Shadowed Country* 47).

He is a 'seeing boy' because he sees the new headman as he really is (*Shadowed Country* 47-8). When his sister sees his forehead and asks him what happened, Prem:

> recoiled into his old shell and became once more The Mute, as voiceless as a tree or rice field. (*Shadowed Country* 47).

He refuses to curse the headman (*Shadowed Country* 48), remembering some advice the village soothsayer gave to him:

> I've asked you not to put curses on anyone, no matter how much they hurt you. Cursing is not good. It creates a chain reaction. (*Shadowed Country* 45)

Further advice from the soothsayer is to:

> Go through the pain and the misfortune you may have while keeping your adversaries' bad *karma* done to you within you. Make it end with you. (*Shadowed Country* 430-1)

As an adult, Prem tells himself: '*And I do believe in the ancient seer of Napo and obey him to this day*' (*Shadowed Country* 431; see also 155).

With the Protection of a Spirit

When he is young, Prem falls into a lotus pond and almost drowns. While he is still unconscious, the village soothsayer says:

> "Should he die now or shortly after, he will not complete the course of retribution. He has yet to finish paying for his *karma* from the past life in this life. If not, he has to be reborn to suffer more, much more through to the end. And so in the next rebirth, he might not be back as human; he might return to our world as a hideous creature, a spider or a centipede, a snake or a mouse. Not so nice, eh? No one likes these creatures. As Lord Buddha says: *To be born human is a foremost fortune*. I know what to do. We will wholeheartedly offer him to *pramae*, the goddess mother, so that the adopted one will be protected until the end of his long, tortuous life. How about that? Kum and Liang, will you agree?" (*Shadowed Country* 42)

Kum and Liang (his parents) agree – and the ceremony which follows makes Prem into 'a *luke-pi*, son of the sacred spirit known as *pipramae*, the spirit of the mother goddess' (*Shadowed Country* 43). In Prem's village, some villagers believe that *pipramae* watches over Prem:

> Some people, especially children, became afraid of Luke-pi when they heard a rumour that dogs howled whenever the son of the spirit walked by. They feared that wherever Luke-pi went, *pipramae* was by his side.
>
> "Watch out for that boy. Those who do him harm have it all coming to them in time. *Pramae* told me so," warned the wise clairvoyant who had instigated the adoption.
>
> "I know," agreed a mother whose son had just died. "My son, Ton, hit him and kicked him, and now Ton is dead. But while he was bedridden with a sudden illness he had hallucinations, screaming from time to time: 'Don't hit me!

> Don't kick me!' I think it must be his *karma* for doing harm to Luke-pi." (*Shadowed Country* 43)

In *Shadowed Country*: (1) karma is understood as 'retribution'; (2) the village soothsayer advises Prem not to retaliate or get angry when experiencing bad karma (*Shadowed Country* 45); (3) a belief in karma engages with a belief in spirits.

Reference to *The Dhammapada*

As a university student, Prem wins a scholarship to study in London. One summer, he writes a letter to a monk in Bangkok, which includes references to *The Dhammapada* (a collection of verses by the Buddha) and to the 'book' Prem is carrying around in his head:

> *I remember well the Words of Truth which you quoted from The Dhammapada: 'He abused me; he beat me; he defeated me; he robbed me; he cheated me; he exploited me; he took advantage of me – the hatred of those who harbor such thoughts is not appeased. For hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased by love.'*
>
> *My Venerable Brother, should I obey this eternal law, I would never want to write a single line of my book, which has been conceived and carried in my head. I would not have the craving to produce a book of poetry and a book of prose for I would be pacified and content.* (*Shadowed Country* 215)

In his letter, Prem refers to two verses from *The Dhammapada*, which Wannapok translates from Pali into 'English free verse' (Tambiah 11) as follows:

> 'He abused me, he beat me,
> He defeated me, he robbed me';
> In those who harbor such thoughts
> Hatred never ceases. (Verse 3 'The Pairs' [p.5])

> At any time in this world,
> Hatred never ceases by hatred,
> But through non-hatred it ceases.
> This is an eternal law. (Verse 5 'The Pairs' [p.7])

Take note that in addition to the four painful processes mentioned in Verse 3 of 'The Pairs', Prem adds three more:

> *He abused me; he beat me; he defeated me; he robbed me;* ***he cheated me; he exploited me; he took advantage of me*** (*Shadowed Country* 215; emphasis added)

Prem is misremembering Verse 3 of 'The Pairs'. Perhaps, his memory of Verse 3 is intermingling with other memories of his, such as when he and his father were cheated, exploited and taken advantage of by a trader when he was a child (*Shadowed Country* 64-7).

Prem also refers to *The Dhammapada* on two other occasions, when he is thinking back to the events in which his friend Rit lost his life, on October 14, 1973. The first occasion is when he is attending the interview for the scholarship to study overseas (*Shadowed Country* 125); the second is when he returns to Siam and visits the temple where he and Rit both used to live as acolytes (*Shadowed Country* 255). To be sure, when he returns to the temple where he and Rit used to live as acolytes, he recalls Verse 3 of *The Dhammapada* correctly (*Shadowed Country* 255).

A Buddhist Influence?

After returning to Siam, Prem spends several years as a monk in his home village in Esarn. As a monk, he recalls the words of the Buddha (*Shadowed Country* 341), goes out begging for alms in the morning (*Shadowed Country* 339-40), follows a monk's precepts (*Shadowed Country* 357, 368, 429), and observes the changes taking place around him (*Shadowed Country* 360, 364). However,

he still on occasion experiences anger in his heart: after guiding a platoon of soldiers towards Srisurachwood, he stops at a razed village, which he believes was burnt to the ground by government soldiers, perhaps the same soldiers he is guiding; he observes the major who is in command of the platoon, and thinks:

> *If I were not a true follower of Lord Buddha as well as obeying absolutely the request of the late seer TatipHenkai, I would have cursed the beast. Prem sensed his rearing anger while contemplating the remorseless officer. But if I had done such, I would have departed from one of the True Paths shown by the Enlightened One. Ah, my heart harbours so much anger still. The ordination has not completely cleansed it.* (*Shadowed Country* 429)

The following morning, as they are preparing to enter the forest, where the soldiers hope to negotiate the surrender of a group of rebels, Prem tells the major that he and his men 'must not carry hand guns, grenades or rucksacks' (*Shadowed Country* 431). The major, amazed by Prem's request, addresses him respectfully as 'Honourable Brother' before asking a negative question to check his understanding of what Prem has just requested:

> "With respect, Honourable Brother, you don't expect us to go into the forest empty handed?" asked the major in amazement.
>
> "Yes, I do. All holiness and Lord Buddha's teaching, the *dhama*, and my yellow robe may protect you," the priest assured them, standing absolutely still as if to channel and intensify his assurance to become more powerful than a laser beam in order to overcome the major's doubt and anxiety. Then he calmly continued: "Do you expect them, some of whom have been fighting and living perilously in the woods for ten years, to abandon the fight by force? You go to them unarmed, and they will give their arms to you."

> Even the crudest and most brutal men could detect the sheer power in the seemingly gentle voice of the Buddha's delicate disciple. (*Shadowed Country* 431)

Prem's gentle voice has power in it, his assurance seeming more powerful than a laser beam. Lord Buddha's teaching and Prem's yellow robe are protective. His gentleness and calmness bear positive results. The major agrees to Prem's request, and the soldiers enter the forest behind Prem, unarmed. When they meet the insurgents, the ones from Prem's village give up their arms peacefully (*Shadowed Country* 435); however, other of the insurgents, *Chin Haws* from the north, start firing shots, and a gun battle ensues (*Shadowed Country* 436). Using the holiness of the Buddha and the merit gained from his priesthood and the power of his mother goddess, Prem protects the soldiers and the insurgents who have already surrendered:

> The monk alone remained standing to shield all from the bullets with the holiness of the Lord and the merit gained from his priesthood and the protective power of *pramae*, his mother goddess. (*Shadowed Country* 436)

When the shooting dies down, he lowers himself to an injured man, gripping his bony fingers 'to pass on inner strength and to apply mental healing power that derived from a source provided by *pramae*' (*Shadowed Country* 436). In *Shadowed Country* (as Rajadhon noted for Thailand), animism and Buddhism have become intermingled.

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