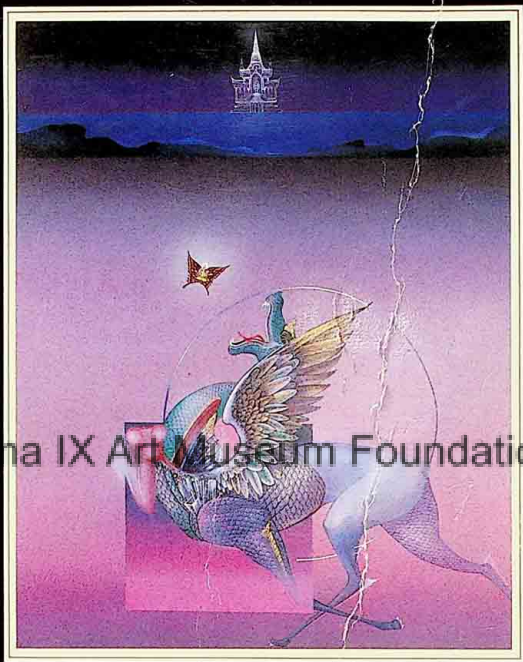




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DHAMMA VISION

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visual dhamma
44/28 Soi Asoke, Bangkok, Thailand.

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Preface

When I went to visit Thai artist Thawan to ask him for the titles of his works, he told me: "I do not want to give titles. It is for each one according to his own level of understanding." For some time I thought to omit any kind of introduction or explanations from this book, finally I was convinced that a few remarks might be necessary.

For many years I have translated books on Oriental philosophy. I thought and still believe that people in all parts of the world could greatly benefit from an understanding of Eastern wisdom. Through the experiences of living in different cultures, I began to realize the significance of religion in ordinary daily life. One of the most obvious differences between Western and Eastern cultures is the conception of death and of life after death. In most Oriental religions reincarnation is considered a fact. It can actually be experienced through deep meditation or various states of trance. Even the uneducated population in most Asian cultures can find evidence for this theory in their holy scriptures.

In Western civilization a lot of suffering has been created through the misconception of death. People tend to take their personal life too seriously, considering life a physical time-spatial entity which inevitably terminates. This conception of mortality has made people aggressive and greedy in order to get their share while they are still alive. They doubt the existence of universal life and know few techniques that will help them to transcend the frontiers of their ego territory. Fortunately, a great number of the younger generation in the West have realized the inadequacy of the Western way of life.

Another important aspect of Oriental philosophy is the concept of "Karma" or causality. Though this is a tenet in most world religions, and the foundation of morality, it is now considered idealistic or even mystical in the Western world. In the Orient, Karma is viewed as a scientific law. It defines the experiences in this life and is responsible for the direction of future incarnations. In most Eastern philosophies life is seen as a cyclic process. In Western thought it is mostly conceived as a linear event, taking place between one birth and one death. The symbol of the circle is one of the most essential ones in almost all religions of Asia. Although it was discovered quite some time ago that our planet has a spherical form, people tend to see only the flat surface. The same could be said about the concept of cyclic life.

The third main point that distinguishes Eastern and Western philosophy is the concept of liberation. According to popular Christian belief, Man has one life and is rewarded in heaven or punished in hell for its results. The results of his thought in action. In other words, he (Man) is not given a second chance or relief from his worldly actions which are committed during one given life time. This one life is his Final Judgement and his mortality (as Christian Man believes) is the terminus wherein he will be judged without hope for the future, as conceived in terms of linear time. I think that this dogma will not answer the demands of logic in this scientific age. In Eastern philosophy, heaven and hell are states of consciousness, experienced in this very life. All forms of individual life are considered incomplete, and having gone through numerous incarnations, man realizes the need for liberation. This highest aim of any living being, not to be reborn again, is called "Maksha" or "Nirvana".

Unfortunately, there are no equivalents to most of these terms in any European language. This is probably the main reason why the majority of people in the West consider this Eastern thought as rather exotic. In my career as translator of philosophical texts, I have always tried to emphasize the ideas of reincarnation, causality and liberation. But this was quite impossible without using terms from Sanskrit, Pali or other Asian languages. When I realized that even among European languages exact equivalents for certain words do not exist, I set about looking for a more direct way to express the tenets of Oriental philosophy. I found a key through a personal vision while reading a Buddhist text.

It was Lord Buddha's flower sermon that made me realize the potentiality of wordless communication. This is the text: "The Buddha took a flower once and without a word held it up before his disciples seated in a circle about him. Each man in his turn looked at the flower,

and then explained its meaning, its form, its significance, all that it symbolized. The last man, however, seeing the flower, said nothing. He only smiled. The Buddha also smiled and, without a word, handed him the flower". The origins of Zen are said to lie in this sermon. That the man in the center happened to be the Buddha does not matter. Zen is what happens when any man, anywhere, at any time, "sees".

Having found a new motivation for my work, I began to explore the field of contemporary art. I was quite disappointed to see that, although modern art was strongly influenced by works from Asia and Africa, the spiritual aspect had never found its way into it. The interest in Eastern mysticism and philosophy was steadily growing in the West, but it did not find its expression in the visual arts.

Abdul Mati Klarwein, an American visionary, and a few of his contemporaries who were building a new foundation, were completely underrated and generally ignored. So I decided to continue my studies in the East. But the situation there was not any better. Most of the artists I met in Asia were merely aping Western styles or producing pale imitations of what had been done better in the past. There were hardly any outstanding concepts, and most of the artists were more interested in New York and Paris than in the roots of their own cultures. It seemed to me that colonialism, in all its various forms, had penetrated Asian artistic thinking and had reached a point of no return. At this time I did not realize that genuine artists are not necessarily the ones that are promoted by official administrators or academic art-circles.

In 1975 my research brought me to Thailand. The first impression was more or less the same as in other Asian countries. There were some traditional painters who imitated old masterworks, only with less skills and spirit. There was the academic art-circle, completely oriented towards pleasing the European or American art market. And there were hundreds of galleries, supplying cheap and naive folk art for tourists and souvenir-hunters. But there was also something very distinguished about this country. Through the wisdom of its ruling monarchs it had succeeded in keeping its traditions and culture alive. Thailand is the only country in this part of the world that has escaped the various threats of colonialism. Buddhism is still the state religion, and 95% of the people are Buddhists. The majority of the people still live close to nature, in a harmony that has become lost to Western civilizations. With these foundations of political independence, spiritual and religious integrity and natural environment, I sensed an opportunity for the genuine expressions of contemporary art.

Although Thailand has developed its own unmistakable culture, it has absorbed influences from almost all its neighbours. Thailand's art, culture and religion have been nourished by impulses from India, Sri Lanka, China, Burma, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. These influences, combined with the effort of modernization in the last century, have created one of the most fascinating and lively melting pots in Asia. I became very confident that the spiritual element was still alive and must have found its way into modern art.

At that time I met Pichai Nirand, a Thai artist in his forties. In him I found the first Asian artist who had accomplished the fusion of spiritual traditions with contemporary art. I felt delighted and returned to Europe to present his outstanding works with great enthusiasm. But people did not seem to be ready. Nobody had heard much about Thailand, hardly anybody could remember the artist's name and the paintings did not fit in any category. Yet I was not prepared to give up easily. I returned to Bangkok with the intention of building the required category myself. Within a few months I came in close contact with two of Thailand's most eminent artists, Pratuang Emjaroen and Thawan Duchanee. With the help and spiritual support of these artists the movement of contemporary Buddhist art came alive.

A few words have to be added here on the history of modern art in Thailand. Because Thailand warded off the spell of colonialism, it maintained its traditional arts for a long period. Traditional Thai art was purely for religious purposes, mainly in the form of mural paintings in its numerous temples. These paintings were mostly executed by Buddhist monks and served to educate and inspire the people in their religious practices. The artists, however, because of self-effacement and the subordination of ego to religion, remained anonymous and never signed their works. When Thailand opened its doors to Western influences at the turn of the 19th century, contemporary art was completely unknown. In 1924, Corrado Feroci, an artist from Florence, came to Thailand under a contract as sculptor with the Fine Arts Department. Professor Feroci became involved in all aspects of Thai art and is now revered as the Father of Modern Art in Thailand. He adopted Thailand as his home, chose the name Silpa Bhirashri and founded the first art university. He established himself as a teacher for all artists and introduced them to the grammar of modern art, from the rudiments of perspective to the more sophisticated techniques and styles of Impressionism and Surrealism. In 1959, three years before he passed away, Professor Bhirashri wrote in his book "Contemporary Art in Thailand". "Contrary to the majority, some artists attempt philosophical subjects as in the case of Pichai Nirand. This more intellectual trend is due both to western influence and to the artist's education which in

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our days is higher than that of past generations." As Silpa Bhirashri's efforts were essential for the development of Thai art, I would like to dedicate this book to him. Thawan's portrait of his revered professor has been selected as the first plate in this book.

After Professor Bhirashri's death, the artists began to search for their own individualistic style. I had the privilege of opening a gallery with three of the most successful pioneers of this first generation, Thawan, Pichai, and Pratuang. In the beginning, we applied the name of contemporary Buddhist art. Finally it was decided to call the group of artists as well as the gallery, visual dhamma. "Dhamma" is the Pali equivalent to the Sanskrit word "Dharma". It also corresponds with the Chinese "Tao". Though these terms are the essence of Oriental philosophies, they have no exact equivalent in English. It could be roughly translated as "universal law" or "truth." This book is meant to set the reader on his own path to discover the meaning of the Dhamma.

I was very glad when I discovered that at the same time as I began to search with this pioneer group, quite a few young Thai artists continued to work in this tradition. Three of the most promising artists are included in this book. But there remains a wealth of talent yet to be discovered.

For a better understanding of the background of this book and of the artists represented in it, there is included a selected bibliography. I am very well aware that I can hardly reveal the surface with this brief introduction, which is mainly a report of my personal experiences. I hope that the interested reader will find sufficient material to explore the essence of Buddhism and other Oriental religions, and provide the reader with an insight into Thailand and its rich cultural background.

For the future, I hope this theme of visual dhamma, or contemporary spiritual art, will continue and prove inexhaustible. Recently, I met many artists in all parts of the world who show great interest in the Dharma, and I hope that art will act once again as a messenger for spiritual values. Dhamma art does not necessarily mean the representation of religious symbols or mythologies. Rather, it means that art which springs from a certain state of mind on the part of the artist. This is the meditative state, an attitude of directness, in one's creative work.

With this book I would like to introduce a vision. This vision is the expression of Buddhist thought in the works of six Thai artists. Emphasis has been laid on the artists' interpretation of

the Dhamma, and very little can be said about the artists and their stylistic approaches. I hope future publications will concentrate on an analysis of each individual artist. This book seeks to present some rare pictures which have been created by outstanding people belonging to a very peculiar and unknown culture. This introduction can only give a glimpse of Thailand's cultural wealth and a few basic remarks. You might have noticed that the artists are always referred to by their first names. This is a custom of Thai language, for unlike the West where family names are used to identify individuals, given names (used by Thai nationals) could cause confusion for Western readers. But for Thai usage, first names are generally always used, and their practise is upheld in this book.

Thawan is the first Thai artist in the country's history who has won individual recognition in the international art market. His paintings can be seen in numerous museums abroad. Many books have been published on the man and his work and for many years he has acted as an ambassador of Thai culture in various parts of the world. After launching an international career, he returned to his birthplace Chiang Rai, in Northern Thailand where he built his own spirit village. Thawan has studied for many years in Europe and has travelled extensively all over the world. Besides his knowledge of Western art history, he is an expert in the arts and religions of Asia. His work is often misunderstood, and some of his paintings have been slashed by students in a Bangkok exhibition because they considered his works sacrilegious. In all his works, Thawan stressed strength and willpower. He has absorbed influences from various religious traditions, and he even reverts to animism and other forms of animist religions. He is fascinated by wildlife and is one of the great experts in animal behaviourism and anatomy. The animals in his drawings are a reflection of the animal nature in man. He believes that the tendencies of greed, hate and delusion have to be overcome by each individual through his own efforts. Thawan is also obsessed by architecture, and the houses he lives in have become extensions of his art. A thoughtful and detailed study of Thawan's life and work can be found in Professor Wenk's book "The Ten Last Lives of Buddha". In this text, Thawan is referred to as "one of the most revolutionary artists in the History of Buddhist art." He is a man of intriguing contradictions and cannot be summarized in this brief introduction: he is both a Buddhist scholar and a hunter at the same time. Thawan has lectured in many universities around the world, and he lives as a shaman in the jungles of Northern Thailand. But above all, he has achieved a synthesis of East and West that inspires most of the artists in his country and, hopefully, future generations of artists in the West.

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Pratuang is the only artist in this book who is completely self-taught. With little formal education he became one of the leading artists and poets of his country. Pratuang started his career as a painter of movie billboards in Bangkok. One day he saw the movie "Lust for Life", a biopic (film biography) of the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh. This led to a decision to concentrate solely on becoming an artist. Without a traditional background invested in contemporary art, his initial years as an artist were spent struggling against almost insurmountable odds to express his vision. But by living a simple life close to nature and through his firm belief in the value of art, he eventually became a renowned artist and poet, as well as a symbol of strength for the younger artists. The nucleus of Pratuang's work is nature. Most of his paintings, drawings and poems are a homage to nature. He currently lives with his family in a quiet coconut grove. His respect for nature has inspired him to paint frequently outside of a four walled house, sometimes in the piercing light of the midday sun. He considers nature his best teacher. Pratuang rarely applies the traditional symbolism of Thai Buddhism. He is not concerned with Thai ornaments and the forms of temple architecture. His compositions are taken directly from nature, and his approach has probably more in common with Zen paintings. He considers simplicity, sincerity, and spontaneity most important for his work. Pratuang loves to paint directly from nature, but his visions embrace the microcosm and the macrocosm, and there is a strong cosmic and visionary side to his work.

Pichai is an artist who is strongly rooted in the Theravada tradition. He was one of the first artists in Thailand to experiment with the fusion of religion and contemporary art. Widely recognized in the Sixties, when he won numerous awards in Thailand, he fell into oblivion for a while, but continued his religious work and did not surrender to fashionable trends. This dedication was rewarded twenty years later, when he became a key figure in the movement of the Dhamma art. Pichai's symbolism goes back to the beginnings of Buddhist art. At this time the Buddha was never presented in his personal form. Popular symbols to depict the Buddha's presence were his footprints, the wheel of doctrine, the tree of life and the lotus flower. Pichai applies this symbolism of early Buddhist art probably in an attempt to revitalize the original tenets of his religion. Pichai has also developed his own technique of sand painting, in which he puts on layers of sand with the help of a syringe needle. The primary themes of Pichai's work are the continuity of the birth-death cycle and the path that leads to final liberation and enlightenment. Recently Pichai made his first important journey abroad. For a few months he went on an exhibition tour to the United States where he saw many international masterpieces for the first time, and came in close touch with various contem-

porary artists. The results of these strong impressions should become manifest in his future paintings, but certainly again in the form of Buddhist symbolism.

Panya belongs to a generation that is about twenty years younger than the artists discussed above. He was born in the seaside village of Prachuab Khirikhan, south of Bangkok. His first influences were colourful movie posters, and he eventually studied in Bangkok with little knowledge of modern art. From the beginning his work was concerned with religious symbolism. He turned to tempera painting and simultaneously was strongly influenced by traditional mural paintings. Panya's paintings always express struggle, a struggle between Good and Evil, within and without. Later he incorporated more surrealist influences and began to work with brighter colours in acrylic. His approach is one of discrimination between chaos and cruelty and tries to clarify the path that leads out of it: to resolve the problem of disorder and inhumanitarianism, with religion the all-powerful referee imposing its own decision. At present, Panya is studying printmaking in London on a British Council art scholarship. In England he has been confronted with the major movements of contemporary art in Europe. These experiences will certainly stimulate his work, but I am sure he will continue to build on the foundations of his own sound culture.

Surasit belongs to the group of Northern Artists. Like Panya and Chalermchai (see below) he won national acclaim at an early age. He is the only artist represented in this book who lives in the northern capital of Chiang Mai. He studied at Silpakorn University and made a name for himself in art circles by winning numerous national art competitions. What he aims to accomplish in his work is the feeling of serenity. And for Surasit serenity is still to be found in the temple grounds. He is fascinated by Thai architecture and obsessed by the interplay of light and shade. Though he comes close to being a super realist, atmosphere and a touch of magic are closer to him. Surasit also expresses this serenity in his personal life. City people are specially touched by his paintings, and I feel that his serenity - more akin to a becalmed inner peace - might be the right antidote for people who are confronted with urban anarchy and rush hours.

Chalermchai is an important force in the revival of traditional Thai art. He is also an artist from the north, and his desire is to represent northern life in his work. But even at his young age he has gone through different periods. His early paintings look very similar to two-

dimensional mural paintings. He wanted to paint ordinary people and their religion. Gradually he began to paint temples and took in influences from Thai architecture. During one period he became concerned solely with the clerical aspect of Buddhism. In this period he concerned himself with painting monks and nuns. After studies in Sri Lanka, England and Germany, Chalermchai returned to Thailand. After living for some time in a northern temple, where the artist was searching for inner guidance, he exhibited a number of drawings. This exhibition has been documented in Ulrich Zagorski's book "Dhamma". Chalermchai always wants to express the virtue of purity. His celestial architecture had a strong influence on the course of contemporary Thai art, and much more is to be expected from this young artist in the future. In the meantime, he is one of the artists who opens the eyes of the viewer to the richness existing in Thai art.

What follows now is the Vision. I have selected some of the representative works from each artist, but I want to say once again that this was not done to demonstrate the full potential of each artist, but rather to weave the common thread of religion and culture constituting each of their works. The Vision is complete in itself, it contains the message of this book.

November 1983
Visual Dhamma, Bangkok

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Alfred Pawlin

The Artists