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**THE LAO SANGHA OF  
LUANG PRABANG AND  
THEIR SOCIAL ROLES IN  
THE POST-1975 PERIOD**

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# **9**

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BOUNLEUTH SENGSOULIN

## THE LAO SANGHA OF LUANG PRABANG AND THEIR SOCIAL ROLES IN THE POST-1975 PERIOD

**ABSTRACT** The members of the Lao Sangha, monks as well as novices, do not only stay in their monasteries for spiritual purposes, for chanting and meditating many hours a day. In fact, they are also obliged to participate in numerous activities which connect them to the daily lives of the local laypeople on whose constant support they rely. The monasteries function as schools or centres of training and learning. The monks are teachers and instructors of young novices and devout laypeople alike. For this purpose, the members of the Lao Sangha seek for answers to a variety of social and developmental issues in the Buddhist scriptures. This paper seeks to explore how the Buddhist institutions, from the highest levels of the Sangha hierarchy to individual monasteries, have defined their social responsibilities since the founding of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) in December 1975. According to the policy of the leading Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, the multi-ethnic Lao nation has to fulfil the two main tasks of defending the country and developing it. As an inseparable part of Lao society, the Lao Sangha aims to contribute to this task in its own ways. Based on hitherto unknown primary sources recently discovered in the holdings of various monasteries in Luang Prabang, this paper intends to shed new light on the social roles of the Lao Sangha after the founding of the Lao PDR.

Luang Prabang is located in the north of Laos. This province borders on several other provinces: Phong Sali in the north, Hua Phan and the Vietnamese province of Suen La in the northeast, Xiang Khuang in the east, Vientiane in the south, Xayabouli (Xayaburi) in the west, and Oudomxay in the northwest. People of all ethnic groups from these neighbouring regions often travel to the town of Luang Prabang to conduct business activities here. Furthermore, Luang Prabang province functions as an educational centre for the northern part of Laos. Souphanouvong University, one of five universities in Laos, established in 2003, is located in this town, in order to provide higher education for students from the eight northern provinces. In addition, various monasteries in Luang Prabang offer monastic education, known as *sangha* schools (Lao: *hong hian song*-ໂຮງຮຽນສິງ), which include both primary and secondary school levels. Apart from mainly religious subjects such as *dhamma*, *vinaya*, Pāli, etc., a number of secular subjects such as mathematics, history, and literature, among others, are also mandatory for the students of these schools (cf. BAD-12-2-1984.013/14/15).

Before discussing the social role of the Lao Sangha of Luang Prabang, it may be helpful to briefly present how the Buddhist Sangha was established more than 2500 years ago, in the territory of pres-

ent-day India, and to explain which was the role of the first Sangha.

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha considered that his first five disciples (Pāli: *pañcavaggi*) – namely, Koṇḍañña, Vappa, Bhaddhiya, Mahānāma, and Ajasi – would be very suitable for listening to what he had come to know. He gave them his first sermon, the *dhammacakkappavattana sutta* (Swearer 1981, 19–20), which is generally known as *dhammacakka sutta* or the ‘Wheel of the Dhamma Discourse’. In this sermon, the Buddha discussed the Middle Way, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Four Noble Truths. By the end of the sermon, all of his former disciples had respectively gained a “*dhamma eye*”, and attained enlightenment. From this time onwards, Buddhism was propagated and spread worldwide. The Buddhist Sangha was established (Wijayaratna 1990, 1–17). In particular, the first Sangha had the mission to propagate Buddhism.

Most importantly, the Sangha mentioned above was formed by the six “Awakened Ones” (Pāli: *arahanta*), including the Buddha himself; i.e., all of them were *arahanta*. Later, the number of Buddha’s disciples sharply increased. It is said that about seven months after the first sermon was given, on Māgha Day, the full moon of the third lunar month, a total of 1,250 *arahanta*, who had received their ordina-

tions directly from the Buddha himself (Pāli: *ehibhikkhu upasampadā*), simultaneously assembled at the Buddha's place without prior appointment. This number indicates a strong increase in the number of Buddhist monks, and with it a massive growth of the Sangha, during the first year of the emergence of Buddhism. In other words, the religion of the Buddha became well established within a relatively short time (Wijayaratna 1990, 1–17).

The rapid growth of the Sangha continued. The newly-ordained monks, who were not yet fully enlightened, had to carry out two main duties: the duty of scriptural learning (Pāli: *ganthadhura*) and the duty of training in meditation (Pāli: *vipassanādhura*). To fulfil the first duty, the monks had to study the doctrine and the discipline laid down by the Buddha. Moreover, they were also given proper guidance and methodology for spiritual practice. The latter constituted the practical aspect of higher religious life. The monks were encouraged to engage in scriptural learning and meditative exercise, in order to experience the supreme happiness of *nibbāna*, which means to have gained knowledge into the true nature of things (Swearer 1981, 80).

An important turning point in the function of the Buddhist Sangha was marked by the first Council of the Buddhist Sangha (CBS)<sup>1</sup>, which was allegedly held in the year following the Buddha's Parinibbāna (Pāli: *parinibbāna*).<sup>2</sup> For the first time, the Sangha had to take responsibility for the collection and purification of the Buddha's teachings. While disputed points had been clarified by the Buddha during his

lifetime, now this task fell to the Sangha. In other words, just after the Buddha's Parinibbāna, a monk named Subhadda, who had been ordained in his old age, tried to break the Sangha's discipline by openly telling the other monks that they could just do what they wanted and did not have to do what they disliked. Upon hearing this, the chief of the Buddha's disciples, Mahākassapa, fell in deep sorrow and was very worried about the discipline in the *sangha*. As a result of his concerns, he proposed that a council of the *sangha* should be convened. This proposal was also supported by King Ajātasattu who became the patron of the council (Hazra 1982, 25–6).

The consequence of the appearance of the first Council of the Buddhist Sangha was more or less similar to the situation which occurred after the emergence of the first *sangha*. At that time, the Buddha himself had directly asked his first five disciples to go forth and teach the *dhamma*<sup>3</sup> (Lao: *thamma* - ທຳມະ) to the world (Gombrich 1988, 18–19). It is understood that the *dhamma* they preached was the same first sermon they had been given by the Buddha, i.e., the Four Noble Truths (Pāli: *cattāri ariyasaccāni*) which comprised suffering (Pāli: *dukkha*), the cause of suffering (Pāli: *samudaya*), the cessation of suffering (Pāli: *nirodha*), and the path leading to the cessation of suffering (Pāli: *magga*). The path to achieve this includes eight steps which are called The Noble Eightfold Path (Pāli: *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*). The eight parts of the Path are the following: Right Understanding (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), Right Thought (*sammā-saṅkappa*), Right Speech (*sammā-vācā*), Right Action (*sammā-kammanta*), Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), and Right Concentration (*sammā-samādhi*) (Piyadassi 1964, 77–86). Similar to the first disciples' task, after the Council had collected the Buddha's teachings, monks of all ranks were directly or indirectly asked to continue to teach the *dhamma* to all human beings, in order to propagate Buddhism.

According to the tradition, the dissemination of Buddhism beyond India was initiated by the Emperor Ashoka, who ruled over almost all of the Indian Subcontinent ca. 269–232 B.C. Ashoka was the patron of the third CBS, which was convened around 250 B.C. There, the Emperor asked the Sangha to elect a number of monks who were well versed in the Buddha's teachings – who could recite the Dhamma and Vinaya by heart – to be appointed as so-called Dhammadūta. These Dhammadūta monks were sent to preach the Dhamma and establish the Sangha in nine different realms. It is said that two Dhammadūta monks, Venerable Soṇa and Venerable Uttara, were sent to the area of present-day

1 Up to now, six Councils of the Buddhist Sangha (CBS) have existed. The first CBS was convened in 544 B.C., at Sattapaṇṇa Cave in the city of Rājagaha (modern India), under the patronage of King Ajātasattu. The second CBS was convened one hundred years after the Buddha's Parinibbāna (i.e., 443 B.C.), at the city of Vesālī (modern India), under the patronage of King Kālāsoka. The third CBS was convened around 250 B.C., at Asokārāma in the city of Pāṭaliputta (modern Patna in India), under the patronage of Emperor Asoka. The fourth CBS was convened around 29 B.C., in Tambapanni of Sri Lanka, under the patronage of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi. The fifth CBS was convened in 1871 A.D., in Māndalay in Myanmar, under the patronage of King Mindon. And the sixth CBS was convened in 1954 A.D., in Kāba Aye in Yangon in Myanmar, under the patronage of the Government of Myanmar, led by Prime Minister U Nu (The Chatṭha Sangāyanā Souvenir Album, Union Buddha Sāsana Council Press, Yegu, Rangoon, Union of Myanmar, 1954).

2 Parinibbāna is a Pāli term used for the end of Lord Buddha's life. This word has been used as the name of The Mahā-parinibbāna Sutta: in English literature sometimes referred to as "The Great Passing" or "The Buddha's Last Days", which is Sutta 16 within the Dīgha Nikāya, a scripture belonging to the Sutta Pitaka of Theravada Buddhism. It concerns the end of Gautama Buddha's life and is the longest Sutta of the Pāli Canon. Because of its attention to detail, it has been resorted to as the principal source of reference in most standard accounts of the Buddha's death (Walshe 1995, 231–278). Moreover, a number of palm-leaf manuscripts found in Sathu Nyai Khamchan's abode provide us with variant titles of this Sutta: *mahamunla-nipphannasut* (BAD-13-1-0308, BAD-13-1-0310), and *munlanipphannasut* (BAD-13-1-0309).

3 Lester provides us the meaning of *dhamma*: "the *dhamma* is what the Buddha taught through his life and his words. It is not simply a system of ideas to be grasped intellectually, but a path to be taken up, a way of going, a way of moving in thought, feeling, word, and deed" (Lester 1973, 23).

Myanmar (Burma). Emperor Asoka thus caused Buddhism to flourish. Not long after the death of its founder, Buddhism had reached South and South-east Asia (Hazra 1982, 37–41, 49–78; Swearer 1995, 64–91).

The more Buddhism spread to different regions, the more the number of monks from local origins grew. When the Sangha was established in different countries, its structure and function was adapted to the local needs and circumstances. At first, the primary function of the Sangha institution was to provide newly ordained monks with an ideal setting for the practice of the Buddha's teachings, the Dhamma. Over time, the role of the *sangha* became more and more concerned with social issues. In other words, after the Second Buddhist Council (443 B.C.), the *sangha* divided into two sects, orthodox and unorthodox (Hazra 1982, 28). This may be understood as division into those monks who, at that time, practiced and followed the Buddhist teachings conscientiously, whereas some other monks might have practised the rules “insufficiently”, responding to their own communities.

The monks did not only teach the Dhamma to laypeople but also performed ceremonies for the laity, especially at important events in life (Lao: *phithikam pacham sivit* - ພິທີກຳປະຈຳຊີວິດ), such as births (Lao: *kan koet* - ການເກີດ), ordinations (Lao: *kan buat* - ການບວດ), and deaths (Lao: *kan tai* - ການຕາຍ) (Swearer 1995, 52–61; Khamphun 2011, 13, 34–40, 217–28). Furthermore, the presence of monks at the opening ceremony of a new business was (and still is) considered auspicious. These tasks of the *sangha* have remained until the present day. As we can see in numerous Buddhist countries today, they are requested, for instance, to bless new houses, new cars, or even small vehicles such as new motorbikes. The functions of monks in society often reflect the people's needs. However, the two foremost duties of Buddhist monks remain scriptural learning and meditation training.

In order to understand the role of the Lao Buddhist monks today, a brief history of the presence of Buddhism in Laos may be helpful. Present-day Laos originated from Lan Xang, a kingdom established in A.D. 1353 by Chao Fa Ngum. It is said that Buddhism was officially introduced into the Lao realm twice during the Lan Xang era. The first time, Chao Fa Ngum's queen, Pha Nang Kaeo Keng Ya, who was of Cambodian origin, was resolutely opposed to the various types of animistic practices popular in Lan Xang. In A.D. 1359, six years after the emergence of Lan Xang, she asked the king to send royal envoys to her father, Pha Chao Nakhòn Luang (a king of ancient Cambodia), to ask for the introduction of Buddhism in Lan Xang. Buddhism was introduced to Lan Xang for a second time in A.D. 1523, when King Phothisalalat sent envoys to Chiang Mai, then the capital of the kingdom Lan Na, to ask for the Tipitaka (Pāli Canon) to be given to Lan Xang. In

addition, he also made a royal decree to announce throughout Lan Xang the abolition of the old animistic beliefs (Manich 1967, 131–134; Sila 2001, 46, 63; Evans 2002, 9–10). These accounts indicate that the replacement of animism was a clear intention of the introduction of Buddhism into Lan Xang, and the outstanding role of the monks at that time was to propagate Buddhism. However, even nowadays traits of this type of belief can still be seen in the everyday lives of Lao people of all ethnicities.

As mentioned above, in the early days of Buddhism, the members of the Buddhist *sangha* were all Arahanta Bhikkhu, enlightened monks. Later, the number of Bhikkhu who were still practising to reach enlightenment steadily increased. Nowadays, other types of Buddhist disciples – i.e., novices (Pal: *sāmanera*, Lao: *samanen* - ສາມະເນນ), white-robed postulants (Pāli: *anāgarika*; Lao: *phò khao* - ພໍ່ຂາວ), and nuns (Lao: *mae khao* - ມ່າຂາວ) – are also considered members of the Buddhist *sangha*. However, when talking of the *sangha* institution, it seems that Lao people acknowledge monks and novices (Lao: *phasong samane* or *khuba aichua* - ພະສົງສາມະເນນ ຫຼື ຄູບາອ້າຍຈິວ) stronger than female *sangha* members. In this paper, the term ‘Lao *sangha*’ refers to the monks and novices of Laos, while the term ‘Lao *sangha* of Luang Prabang’ (Lao: *phasong samanem müang luang phabang* - ພະສົງສາມະເນນເມືອງຫຼວງພະບາງ) is related to the monks and novices of Luang Prabang, Laos. However, the major emphasis is put on the monks.

## LUANG PRABANG

Before the emergence of the kingdom of Lan Xang, the area of present-day Luang Prabang was the location of a settlement of an indigenous people, called Swa or Sua. Therefore, their *müang* (principality) was called Müang Swa/Sua. In A.D. 757, Chao Khun Lò of Müang Ka Long<sup>4</sup> was asked for help by a ruler of his dependent Thao Fa Huan in Müang Tum Vang to suppress the army of Khun Chüang.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he led his army to Müang Tum Vang to rescue his subordinate. On the battlefield he met and fought Khun Chüang in person. Finally, Chao Khun Lò pierced Khun Chüang and killed him on the neck of his elephant. Seeing this, Khun Chüang's forces scattered and Chao Khun Lò and his men pursued them until they reached Müang Sua, ruled by Khun Kan Hang.

4 The exact location is unknown. However, Maha Sila Viravong's *History of Laos* (1964), translated from the Laotian by the U.S. Joint Publications Research Service, informs us that Müang Ka Long is Müang Xiang Hung of today (Jinghong, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province of China) (1964, 23).

5 According to Manich, Khun Chüang was the head of two very distinguished families ruling over the kingdom of Phayao and the kingdom of Chiang Saen (modern Phayao and Chiang Saen of Thailand), which later became known as Lan Na kingdom (Manich 1969, 40–1).

Chao Khun Lò attacked and conquered Müang Sua. He then raised Müang Sua to the status of capital city of Lan Xang and named it Müang Xiang Thòng (Manich 1969, 27–30; Sila 2001, 28); alternative names sometimes used by local people are Müang Xiang Dong or Xiang Thòng.

As mentioned before, Buddhism was introduced to Lan Xang via Cambodia in 1359. Well-educated members of the Buddhist *sangha* of the Khmer kingdom (ancient Cambodia) came and brought the Buddha image of Pha Bang. They were warmly welcomed to Xiang Thòng, the capital city of Lan Xang. Along came three unordained senior Buddhist scholars and a number of their followers (Sila 2001, 46). Much later, in A.D. 1560, Chao Sayasetthathilat, with the consent of his high-ranking officials, gave Müang Xiang Thòng to the Buddhist *sangha* (Lao: *pha sangkhachao* - ພະສັງຄະເຈົ້າ), and transferred the capital city of Lan Xang from Müang Xiang Thòng to Müang Viang Chan (present-day Vientiane). He brought Pha Kao Mòlakot (emerald Buddha image) and Pha Saek Kham with him to the new capital, but not the Pha Bang image. This might have been the case because the Pha Bang was brought to Laos about six years after the emergence of the Lan Xang kingdom and placed in the city of Xiang Thòng. Therefore, this Buddha image was also recognized as an auspicious symbol of the city. Moreover, Buddhist monks were asked to associate themselves with the administration of the old capital city. From that time onwards, Müang Xiang Thòng was called Müang Luang Prabang (Manich 1969, 140; Sila 2001, 73).

The political and religious centre of the town of Luang Prabang was the peninsula, defined by a defensive wall built from the Mekong river to the Nam Khan river (Lao: *nam kkòng kap nam khan* - ນ້ຳຂອງກັບນ້ຳຄານ). According to the local narrative, the Buddha smiled when he rested there for a day during his travels. He predicted that one day it would be the location of a rich and powerful capital city, which is expressed in Lao as follows: *chak kai pen müang hung hüang nai phai na* - ຈັກກາຍເປັນເມືອງຮຸ່ງເຮືອງໃນພາຍໜ້າ. Yet another legend ascribes the choice of the location to two hermits who, attracted by its natural beauty, gave it the above mentioned name Xiang Dong or Xiang Thòng. It was inhabited first by fifteen hybrid beings (Lao: *phanya nak sip ha to* - ພະຍານາກສິບຫ້າໂຕ) and their attendants, who became the Guardian Spirits of the city (Lao: *phi mahesak lak müang* or *phi müang* - ຜີມະເທສັກຫຼັກເມືອງ ຫຼື ຜີເມືອງ) when they died. Much later, according to the legend, human beings came and settled in this location.

Nowadays, Luang Phrabang is the capital city of the province with the same name. Luang Prabang province comprises over seven per cent (7,12%) of the nation's territory, and over seven per cent (7,19%) of the total population of Laos. The Khmu are the largest ethnic group in this province and make up the majority of the provincial population;

the number of Khmu in Laos makes up over eight per cent (8,33%) of the total population of Laos (The National Geographic Department, NGD, 2010). They belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family, one of the main language families in Laos. The Khmu – in former times known as *kha* (roughly translated as “slave”), and recognized as Lao Theung – are believed to be the original inhabitants of Laos. The Lao – the largest ethnic group in Laos, the majority of which prefer to be state-officials, and in former times were known as Lao Lum – live mostly in low-land valleys and Luang Prabang town. The Hmong – in former times known as Lao Sung – are the third largest ethnic group in the province of Luang Prabang. They reside mainly in the mountainous areas.

Luang Prabang is well-known for the preservation of the Lao PDR's cultural heritage, especially in terms of architecture. The majority of the buildings are wooden constructions, following the traditional styles, while some are built of brick in the colonial fashion. These remarkable buildings often have one or two storeys, with balconies and other decorative features made of wood. In fact, the addition of Luang Prabang town to the UNESCO's World Heritage list in 1995 indicates that Luang Prabang is recognized as an important town not only locally, but also in terms of international interest in culture.

## THE LAO SANGHA OF LUANG PRABANG

Like the Lao *sangha* throughout the country, the Lao *sangha* of Luang Prabang is a branch of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO), which was founded in the year following the national liberation in 1975. LBFO is an organization supported by the state. It has branches in every province and in the capital city. The name of a local LBFO-branch consists of the names of the provinces or the name of the capital city added to the name of the LBFO; for instance, the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of Vientiane Capital (LBFO-VC), the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of Luang Prabang province (LBFO-LP), etc. The Lao Buddhist organization of a district (*müang*) is named in the same way; for example, the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of Luang Prabang District, the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of Nam Bāk District, etc. The Lao Buddhist organization of a monastery is, however, named in a differed way: ‘the Organization System of Vat [...],’ followed by the name of the monastery. This clearly shows that the administrative system of the LBFO is similar to the secular one. It consists of similar levels of administration: the centre, the province, the district, and the monastery.

The boards of administration of the LBFO of the centre, province and the district contain a president, a vice-president, and a committee (Lao: *pathan* - ປະທານ, *hòng pathan* - ຮອງປະທານ, *khana* - ຄະນະ, or *kam-makan* - ກຳມະການ), as well as a specific number of

board members for each level. The board of administration of a monastery includes the abbot and the vice-abbot (Lao: *chao athikan vat* - ເຈົ້າອະທິການວັດ *lae hòng chao athikan vat* - ຮອງເຈົ້າອະທິການວັດ), and sometimes a committee. According to the report of the LBFO for 2007-2008 (R-LBFO07-08), the LBFO had 4,147 committee members throughout the country. The central level had 15 committee members, including 9 advisers of senior monks. The province and capital city level consisted of 106 committee members. The district level comprised 595 committee members.

In 2007/2008, the LBFO had 8,055 monks, including 1,050 newly ordained monks, and 11,740 novices, including 2,766 newly ordained novices. Furthermore, there were 4 *anagarikas* (Pāli: *anāgārika*; Lao: *phò khao* - ພໍ່ຂາວ), 410 nuns (Lao: *mae khao* - ແມ່ຂາວ), and 485 monastery boys<sup>6</sup> (Lao: *sangkali* - ສັງກະລີ). There were 4,140 monasteries (Lao: *vat* - ວັດ) registered by the LBFO in all of Laos (R-LBFO07-08).

Generally speaking, like all Lao men throughout the country, most young men in Luang Prabang who have reached the age of twenty, traditionally become monks for a certain period of time, in order to study Theravāda Buddhism. Those under twenty can live in a monastery as novices as long as they wish and/or according to their parents' desire. Monks and novices spend their religious lives in a monastery to learn the Buddhist doctrine and practices. Moreover, they learn the artistic skills needed to preserve and maintain their monastery and its ritual objects. They are respected by people of all occupations for being knowledgeable in the Buddhist teachings and having expertise in fine arts as well. Numerous former monks and novices who trained themselves well while in the Buddhist order, have become artists, architects, local scholars, etc., after disrobing. They are considered the master builders and craftsmen of Luang Prabang town. This is because the Buddhist community of Luang Prabang profoundly values and respects the knowledge of former monks and novices. On the other hand, a former monk and novice leaving the monastery for laity-life at an old age is somewhat more challenged in finding a job. But they are also recognized as the scholars of the community.

Similar to the members of the Buddhist *sangha* throughout the country, the members of the Lao Buddhist *sangha* of Luang Prabang, especially the

senior or well-conducted monks, are the intellectual apparatus for Lao people of all ethnic groups. They teach the *dharmma* to the people and educate them, to ensure them to be good human beings with high moral standards (for those familiar with Lao Language, in order to understand this, please see the respective footnote).<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, from the time of the national liberation in 1975 onwards, the members of the Lao Buddhist *sangha* have substantially expanded their own role, both at the national and the international level. Not only do they function as social centres which integrate people of many different ethnicities, but they also cooperate with the governmental administrative organizations and the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) at all levels, in order to contribute to two main tasks, i.e., national defence and development (R-LBFO07-08). To sum up, the Lao Buddhist *sangha* has two main tasks to carry out, a religious and a secular one.

### THE SOCIAL ROLES OF THE LAO SANGHA OF LUANG PRABANG

The tasks of the Lao Buddhist *sangha* can be further divided into two main categories: obligatory tasks laid down in the *vinaya* and more secular tasks. The former is based on the tradition, whereas the latter broadly depends on the changing and complicated demands of the Buddhist community. Some monks who prefer the former always try their best to serve Buddhism and to work hard until their last breath, so great is their spirit of self-sacrifice and dedication. They are not very visible to the public, but rather keep to the tradition of silent service, quietly working for the benefit of others – i.e., the prosperity and continuity of Buddhism – instead of aiming for personal benefits and fame. In fact, they can also be recognized as contributors to the demands of the Buddhists, even if their lives are said to be separate from the community. In other words, Buddhists want to respect a monk and a novice who are good in following Lord Buddha's teachings. Monks who prefer to focus on more secular tasks have to be publicly present because their presence is believed to bring good luck and auspiciousness. Furthermore, the members of the Lao Buddhist *sangha* are required to provide guidance and leadership in a variety of fields, such as the restoration of monastic buildings, stupas or Buddha images, as well as the construction of hospitals, schools, health centres and roads, among other things (R-LBFO07-08). Sometimes the restoration and construction of monastic buildings are directly placed under certain monks' auspices (BAD-12-2-1984.007/016;

<sup>6</sup> Monastery boys are laypeople of different ages and with different objectives, who live in a monastery but are not ordained as monk or novice. In ancient times, a man who wanted to be ordained as a novice or a monk had to leave his family and reside in a monastery for a number of months or years before being admitted to the Buddhist order. In this period, he had to study the basic Buddhist texts and scripts, and show good conduct following the monastic rules. Nowadays, monasteries in big cities function as residences for many laypeople who have left their homes for receiving a higher education.

<sup>7</sup> *Pen khon di mi sintham* - ເປັນຄົນດີມີສິນທຳ, or *pen phon-lamüang di khòng sat lae pen sasanikason thi di khòng sasa-na*-ເປັນພົນລະເມືອງດີຂອງຊາດແລະເປັນສາສະນິກະຊົນທີ່ດີຂອງສາສະໜາ.

1985.006/007/009). Based on these contributions, the Lao Buddhist *sangha* constitutes a vital part of Lao society, their members' participation in social projects being very common and of inestimable value to their communities.

Insightful information about the functions of the Lao Buddhist *sangha* of Luang Prabang can be gathered from the reports of the annual meeting of the LBFO, convened in Vientiane, in late 2007. This meeting defined the orientation (Lao: *thitthang nathi* - ທິດທາງພັກທິ) of the LBFO for the following year. Special attention was drawn to a number of important tasks, such as (R-LBFO07-08):

- The administration of the *sangha*;
- The education of the *sangha*;
- The dissemination of the *dharmma* and morality codes;
- The practice of meditation;
- The management of the public utility of the *sangha*, including the raising of funds for the preservation and propagation of Buddhism and the attention to health care and traditional medicine, as well as the preservation of the environment;
- The improvement of foreign relations.

The tasks of the LBFO will be further explained in the following sections.

#### *The administration of the sangha*

After the liberation of the country in 1975, the unification of the two organizations of Lao Buddhism – i.e., the Buddhist *sangha* of the liberated zones and the *sangha* of the previous Royal Lao government – became the main priority of the Lao Buddhist *sangha*. Luang Prabang was no exception in this context. The Buddhist *sangha* had to improve and enhance its inner structure, otherwise the Lao Buddhist *sangha* would not be able to function as the centre of the intellectual apparatus of the Lao Buddhists throughout the country (Lao: *sao phut lao thua thang pathet* - ຊາວພຸດລາວທົ່ວທັງປະເທດ). Three aims shall be mentioned here: (1) to preserve Buddhism in Laos according to the *nikaya* of Lao Buddhism, which has only one sect; (2) to observe the behaviour of monks and novices in order to ensure that they follow the monastic rules; and (3) to compile a list of monks, novices, nuns, monastery boys, palm-leaf manuscripts, Buddha images, etc. (R-LBFO07-08). This indicates that some monks whose main tasks were important to the *sangha* administration may not have paid attention to their work; rather, they preferred to live in accordance to their own ways.

In Luang Prabang town, the committees of the LBFO at all levels – i.e., province, district, and monasteries – pay much attention to the administration

of the *sangha*. Not only do the committees work in their own monasteries, they are usually invited to be present at numerous religious festivals (Lao: *bun* - ບຸນ) (BAD-12-2-1977.001). Moreover, all important Buddhist festivals – e.g., for the celebration of a newly constructed monastery wall, a new *kuti* (monk's cell) or a new temple, among other festivals – would not be thriving unless a senior monk had been invited to preside over the appropriate ceremonies during the duration of such a festival. The festival for the celebration of a temple hall is very important. It is believed that a temple hall (Lao: *sim* - ສິມ) is a pillar of the monastery. A monastery without a *sim* may easily be abandoned at any time.

The document BAD-12-2-1977.001 provides plenty of important information on the Buddhist *sangha* of Luang Prabang in the 1970s. In early 1977, Pha Khamchan (Sathu Nyai Khamchan, the President of the LBFO-LP), was invited to preside over the festivals for temple hall celebrations in four villages, located in the northern part of Luang Prabang town. This might be taken as evidence that monks of the Buddhist *sangha* of Luang Prabang regularly participated in such religious festivities. Furthermore, the Buddhist laypeople who had settled in those villages were still devout. They were happy to contribute to the construction of monastic buildings like temple halls, in order to keep Buddhism flourishing in their own villages.

One important issue related to the administration of the *sangha* is the census of monastic members. Monks, novices, nuns, and monastery boys have to be re-listed every year (BAD-12-2-1984.006, BAD-12-2-1984.009, BAD-12-2-1984.011, BAD-12-2-1988.005). These lists provide us with data on the number of members of the monastic order and its composition. Catalogued were, for instance, their names, surnames and age, the number of years since their ordination, their educational, social, and ethnic backgrounds, the number of their obligations, among other aspects. Furthermore, all members of the LBFO have to live according to the Buddhist rules (Pāli: *vinaya*; Lao: *vinai* - ວິໄນ), as well as the additional rules of their monastery (BAD-12-2-1981.006). In order to strengthen the *sangha*, the committees of the LBFO at all levels have to be elected by the monks (BAD-12-2-1982.002). The LBFO has to meet regularly, presiding over all matters which concern the *sangha* and to solve occurring problems (BAD-12-2-1987.010). Whenever people, both from Laos and abroad, face serious problems in their lives, especially when caused by natural disasters, the LBFO helps them with generous donations. The LBFO organisations of Luang Prabang can be considered representative for the LBFO organisations in all of Laos (BAD-12-2-1986.003).



### The sangha education

The LBFO committees of all levels are to devote themselves as prominent administrators and educators to serve the education of the *sangha*. They have to ensure that the monks and novices under their supervision learn to preach and chant (Lao: *hian thet hian sut* - ສຽນເທດສຽນສູດ) (R-LBF007-08). For instance, monks and novices of all ages, including newly-ordained ones, have to be able to read palm-leaf manuscripts, and to give laypeople blessings (Lao: *nyatha sapphi dai* - ຍະຖາສັບພິໄດ້). Somlith has pointed out that one obligation of the young monks and novices is to study; they have to learn lessons aloud until late at night (Somlith 1955, 76). These are the basic requirements. Monks and novices who cannot accomplish these basic tasks will not be considered respectful Sangha members.

Nowadays, the Buddhist community and the Lao society as a whole have more demands on the Sangha than in the past. Monks and novices are no longer just required to be experts in Buddhist teachings and to have a good conduct, they are authoritatively asked also to study numerous secular subjects. In fact, a number of subjects not included in the curriculum of Buddhist teaching – i.e., architecture, medicine, magic, etc. – have been familiar to monks and novices since ancient times (this aspect will be discussed later in the sections d), f), and g). Ladwig (2011, 204) has demonstrated that the subjects taught in the monastery were, in our modern sense, not only religious. This is strongly supported by the [Board of] Buddhist Advisors' discussion – held in Vientiane in 1961 – which concluded that the curriculum of the *sangha* school had to improve similar to that of the secular one (BAD-12-2-1961.035). Following this, in May 1968, the seminar of the Lao *sangha* of the North, *kan sammāna song phak nūa*, convened at the monastery of Siphutthabat Luang Prabang, where numerous papers were presented in relation to various secular topics (BAD-01-0014)<sup>8</sup>. This was a response to the fact that monks and novices are increasingly required to have more knowledge of secular subjects. Thus, two *sangha* colleges and a number of *sangha* schools were

8 According to Phamaha Sukan Thammarangsi's paper "the benefits of the religious education" (Lao: *payot khòng khan sūksa thang tham*), nine subjects were taught at the *sangha* primary school. The subjects were 1) theology and morality; 2) sanitation; 3) Lao language; 4) arithmetic; 5) history; 6) geography; 7) science; 8) French; and 9) Pāli. The curriculum of the *sangha* secondary school comprised 1) theology; 2) Lao language; 3) Pāli; 4) French; 5) English; 6) technology; 7) geography and history; and 8) pedagogy. Presented by Phamaha Sukan were only the names of the subjects taught at the *sangha* school, not the whole numbers of learning and teaching hours of each subject. However, he told us that a number of secular subjects was taught at the *sangha* school on both primary and secondary school levels. This account strongly indicates that the Lao *sangha* school has – officially – developed its curriculum similar to that of the secular schools since the 1960s.

founded, all run by the LBFO. Monks and novices who have completed their studies at *sangha* colleges or *sangha* teacher training schools will be sent to work and serve Buddhism throughout the country (BAD-12-2-1985.02).

It might seem as if the Lao Buddhist *sangha* pays much more attention to teaching the basics of pedagogy than secular schools. All final-year-students of the *sangha* Higher Secondary School have to complete at least one course on pedagogical subjects, which shall enable them to conduct educational work and serve as propagators of Buddhism. In addition, they have to take either a meditation training course or study meditation subjects for at least one week (R-LBF007-08). This may also be one of the various answers to the question why numerous former monks and novices who graduated from higher secondary schools and teacher training schools – this educational background is remarkable – are generally considered as being ready to become teachers. Ladwig indicates that in the 1950s and 1960s, novices and children in the Vientiane area were often taught together in the temple by a monk working as a teacher (Ladwig 2011, 197). Furthermore, the senior monks' main responsibility was teaching, and former monks could be recruited as teachers, even if they were probably not specialists in any particular subject (Somlith 1955, 76, 79–80). At present, it is also not unusual that monks and novices run their own private courses, or teach various subjects at monasteries.

In 1984, Sathu Nyai<sup>9</sup> Khamchan, who also held the position of Head of the *sangha* Educational Board of Luang Prabang, organized a professional training course for teachers of the *sangha* primary schools in the province (BAD-12-2-1984.014). During this twenty-two-days training period, the train-

9 According to the tradition of the people of Luang Prabang, Sathu – derived from Pāli *sadhu* (good; virtuous; profitable) – is used as a title/prefix, placed before the name of a royal lineage or a monk. While this word is used before the name of a monk who has already received an anointment, the other word, Mòm, is used for the newly-ordained monk, or for the one who has not yet received an anointment. In other words, the Buddhists of Luang Prabang do not prefer 'Phra' to place before the monk's name, they rather adopt 'Sathu' instead. When a monk has lived in a monastery for more than twenty Buddhist years, or *phansa*, Sathu can – traditionally – be followed by Nyai. The word 'Nyai' itself means 'big; senior; important'. The traditional rule is that to be called Sathu Nyai the monk is not only required to remain in monkhood for at least twenty years, he must also be good in following the Buddhist teachings. Sathu Nyai literally means senior monk. In this paper, Sathu Nyai Khamchan is used to represent Venerable Phra Khamchan Virachitto.

In practice, both Sathu and Mòm can be used as personal pronouns. They represent the first personal pronoun (I/me) if the speakers are monks; they are used as the second personal pronoun (you) if the monks are spoken to; and they are used as the third personal pronoun (he/him) if the monk is being referred to. This should be considered, as the Buddhists of Luang Prabang have their own tradition in addressing themselves and each other.

ees improved their knowledge of the following four subjects: *vinaya*, *dhamma*, school management, and the writing of official documents (BAD-12-2-1984.013). From this list of subjects we can conclude that the trainees were required to thoroughly know and understand the meaning and contents of the subjects they would teach. Otherwise, they would not be able to pass on the Buddhist teachings to their students. This might also indicate that the LBFO committee of Luang Prabang was more concerned about the teachers' understanding of Buddhist teachings than about their pedagogical abilities. Furthermore, it may demonstrate that the traditional way of teaching, used and transmitted over many generations, is still sufficient for the contemporary monastic education, which includes numerous secular subjects<sup>10</sup>. However, other subjects related to specific teaching skills – such as the writing of papers, making use of a variety of teaching aids, knowing how to further develop the students' skills and evaluate their knowledge – would also be among the subjects taught during the training period. In fact, the course was supported by a secular government organisation. The head of the provincial education division of Luang Prabang gave his support to the training which enabled Sathu Nyai Khamchan to receive funds from the government (BAD-12-2-1984.014).

Another outstanding senior monk who has dealt with the dissemination of Buddhism and the sangha education in Luang Prabang and thus should be respectfully presented here is Sathu Nyai One Keo Kittiphattho-Sitthivong. He is currently elected President of the LBFO committee of Luang Prabang province and has built and developed the forest monastery of Pha O, located in Ban Pha O. The monastery is open to the ordination of young boys from all ethnic groups whose residences are far away from the town and who have difficulties in gaining accesses to higher education. A number of monks and a much greater number of novices, attending primary or secondary education, reside there. Furthermore, at a corner of this monastery a school building is under construction. In the near future, this school might become a centre for higher education, or maybe the sangha college for the northern part of Laos. The temple is to become a centre for meditation training.

#### *Dhamma dissemination*

Talking about the dissemination of the *dhamma* and morality codes in Laos means talking about the preaching (Lao: *kan thet*-ການເທດ), which takes place during various types of festivals and special ceremonies. Many laypeople, especially those who

are devout but lack a deeper understanding of Buddhism, think that they can gain merit (Lao: *dai bun* - ໄດ້ບຸນ) by just hearing a sermon. Consequently, they do not pay much attention to the contents of the sermon but rather enjoy the pleasant sound and the personalities of the preachers. This can be clearly seen during the Vessantara Festival<sup>11</sup> (VF) (Lao: *bun phavet* - ບຸນພະເຫວດ). Not only is the perfection of the charity (Pāli: *dānapāramī*; Lao: *thanapalami* - ທານະປາລະມີ) of the Bodhisatta (Pāli: *bodhisatta*; Lao: *phaphothisat* - ພະໂພທິສັດ) honoured during the celebration of the Vessantara Festival, the VF is also famous for the cheerful performances of laypeople.

A very popular traditional way to propagate Buddhism is the compilation and copying of Buddhist texts. Among the members of the Buddhist community this work is known under the term *sang nangsu* (ສ້າງໜັງສື), which refers to the compilation, copying, or donation of a written work, generally transmitted in manuscript-form. The compiler, copyst, or donor is sometimes a monk or novice (BAD-13-1-0128, BAD-13-1-0055), but usually a devout layperson (BAD-13-1-0309, BAD-13-1-0099). Most manuscripts sponsored by laypeople are usually donated to the *sangha*. By compiling or copying religious texts, the Buddhist teachings have been preserved and spread directly and continuously. In the case of Lao Buddhism of Luang Prabang, Sathu Nyai Khamchan is one of the monks involved in this

11 It is said that a long time ago Pha Malai traveled to Heaven and talked to the *bodhisatta* god who will come down to be born as the next Lord Buddha. The god told him that the one thing that should be done by a human being who wishes to be born within his age was to complete listening to the story of Vessantara in one day (BAD-13-1-0109/0110). Thus, devout Buddhists follow this story and together celebrate the Vessantara Festival, up to the present day. The VF is recognized as one of main Buddhist festivals in Laos. Usually it is held between the fourth and the sixth lunar month and lasts three days. On the last day, the story of Vessantara is preached. This story is very long and takes many hours to preach. Therefore, it is divided into many parts and preached by different monks and novices according to their experience.

Some central episodes of the story of Vessantara shall be presented here. Vessantara was the crown prince of King Sonxai and Queen Phutsadi. He had been giving alms since he was young. He married princess Mathi, and they got two children, Kanha and Chali. One day, prince Vessantara donated the auspicious elephant to the eight Brahmins of the other *müang*, and this action angered the people of his *müang*. Thus, they asked King Sonxai to punish prince Vessantara by exiling him out of the city. So Vessantara, including Mathi and their children headed toward the mountain of Vongkot to go into a retreat. Four of them became hermits.

During the period of being a hermit, Vessantara donated both Mathi and their children to Brahmins. But Mathi was returned to him and their children were taken to the Kingdom of Sonxai. The king redeemed his grandchildren and gave the Brahman a big ransom. Then, he ordered his high-ranking officials and people to go in procession to invite Vessantara to return to the city. Later on, prince Vessantara succeeded his father, and the people of his *müang* were happy because he ruled the *müang* by following the Ten Duties of a King (Pāli: *dasa-rājadhamma*).

10 For more details about the monastic education in Laos today, especially higher education, cf. McDaniel 2009, 64–8.

work. Not only does he himself compile and copy religious writings, he is also often asked to be the receiver of manuscripts (Lao: *sang thwai sathu nyai khamchan* - ສ້າງຖວາຍສາທຸໄທຍ໌ຄຳຈັນ) (BAD-13-1-0107, BAD-13-1-0206).

### *Construction of monastic buildings*

It is very interesting to see what qualifications the lay community demands from a monk. They pay less attention to the monks' religious qualifications, but show more interest in the construction of the local monasteries instead. This tendency is stronger in remote villages than in cities. This is reflected in the Lao proverb '*buat bò sang bò sa chak si buat pai het nyang!*' (ບວດບໍ່ສ້າງບໍ່ສາຈັກຊິບວດໄປເຮັດຫຍັງ!). Literal translation: 'You should leave the monkhood, if you do not build your own monastery!' This demonstrates that a monk who is not good at teaching the Dhamma but knows how to lead laypeople in erecting their own monastery is honoured and respected.

Traditionally, the construction of monastic buildings is practised via the cooperation of a monastery and a village, i.e., of the monks and novices and the laypeople. This is a challenging work for the community because it needs firm solidarity and sufficient funds. Sometimes, the work is stopped for a period of time due to financial problems. The fact that some necessary materials might not be available on the local market further complicates the construction of monastic buildings. In 1985, a number of roof tiles for a monastic building in Luang Prabang, ordered from Vientiane, were transported by boat over a distance of 430 km (BAD-12-2-1985.007). This shows that also at that time the construction work was by no means an easy undertaking.

Just like the construction of new buildings, the restoration of monastic buildings is also under the direct responsibility of the *sangha*. In fact, monks and novices learn craftsmanship from one another, and pass their skills on from one generation to the next. "Learning by doing" (Lao: *hian pai nam het pai nam/thang hian thang het* - ຮຽນໄປນຳເຮັດໄປນຳ/ທັງເຮັດທັງຮຽນ), is one of the methodologies they practise. Consequently, they are able to repair their monastic buildings themselves. Up to the present day, monks and novices in Luang Prabang town and in all of Laos take part in both the construction and the repairing of monastic buildings.

Apart from the above mentioned, numerous monks and novices complete their training by learning with their teachers (Lao: *hian nam phò kò nam khu* - ຮຽນນຳພໍ່ກໍ່ນຳຄູ, literal translation: "learn with the father, build with [the help of] the teacher"). Sathu Nyai Khamfan Silasangvara, former honorary president of the LBFO and former abbot of Vat Khili of Luang Prabang, can be mentioned in this context as a monk with various artistic skills. He studied mod-

elling, sculpturing and painting for six years. As an abbot, he led monks and novices under his responsibility to complete the restoration work of the temple hall and other buildings at Vat Khili. Furthermore, Buddha images cast by him can be admired in a number of monasteries in Luang Prabang town (BAD-12-2-1987.002).

### *High religious life: Vipassanā*

As mentioned above, the main tasks which the members of the Buddhist *sangha* have always carried out are the study of the Buddhist scriptures and meditation practice. The members of the Buddhist *sangha* of Luang Prabang town, especially the senior monks, take these tasks very seriously. However, the daily life in a monastery usually does not support meditation practice for one or more of the following reasons: the monastery is located in a village, crowded, full of visitors; monastic buildings are under construction or repair, and other distracting factors.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, many monks and novices who live in a large monastery do not gain much result from their meditation. However, they know the correct way to practise it from their study of the scriptures.

One of the best ways of learning how to meditate is to find a person who has experience in this matter. Mettananda (1999, 25) clearly stated, "Then he should search for his dear good friend (kalyāṇamitta), who he should venerate with respectful words and should render him all services, ... He should as well ask for meditation instruction until he understands it thoroughly. Then he should choose a specific meditation techniques that suits his own temperament (carita), before he proceeds to find a proper place for his own seclusion." This indicates that practising meditation strongly requires proper guidance. For the beginner, it is useful to follow Vajirañāṇa's work (1962, 57) "In the very beginning therefore it is essential to focus the attention upon an object (ārammaṇa) entirely dissociated from the passions, in order to draw a pure mental picture. This picture the meditator retains as his ideal, and trains his mind to concentrate upon it. The mind becomes pure or impure, not through its own nature, but through the arising of pure or impure thoughts."

Whenever the conditions for staying in a quiet place are satisfactory, especially in the dry season, place and time for the meditation practice would be scheduled. Monks and novices then have the opportunity to apply the theory they have learnt at their monastery to the actual meditation training. This usually takes place once a year, and is known in Lao

12 For more details see Buddhaghosa 1929, *The Path of Purity: Being a Translation of Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga by Pe Muang Tin*. Part II: Of Concentration, Pāli Text Society, Great Britain: Billing and Sons, Ltd., Guilford and Esher, 138-43.

by the term *khao vipatsana* (ເຂົ້າວິປັດສະນາ) or *khao thudong* (ເຂົ້າທູດົງ). The monks and novices leave their own monastery and stay at a forest monastery or in the jungle. Usually they stay at such places for about one month. During this time, they concentrate on meditation in order to attain spiritual insights. Meditation-practices can also be studied from the palm-leaf manuscripts of Dhutangavatta (Lao: *thutanghavat* - ທູຕັງຄະວັດ) (BAD-13-1-0058, BAD-13-1-0059). As Sathu Nyai Khamchan stored some palm-leaf manuscripts of Dhutangavatta in his *monk-cell* it can be said that he himself had actively practised meditation.

### *Monks and Health Service*

Traditionally, a number of Lao Buddhist *sangha* members are very skilled in the use of various types of Lao traditional medicines. In ancient times, people who were confronted with health problems or diseases of their relatives turned to monks for helps. Monks were the medical experts, performing all kinds of treatment. Furthermore, Buddhist monks – including Lord Buddha himself – have had experience in healing since Lord Buddha's lifetime. Following Birnbaum, what the Buddhist texts say on healing can be discussed from three points of view: (1) the cure of disease through healing agents (herbs and foods), surgery, and other physical means; (2) spiritual causes and the cure of diseases; and (3) the healing process as a metaphor for spiritual growth, with the Buddha named as Supreme Physician and the Buddhist teachings termed the King of Medicines (Birnbaum 1997, 1).

Many supernatural beliefs are part of Lao traditional medicine. The reason why monks are believed to have better medical skills than laypeople can be found in some of these beliefs. One example is the common belief in the healing powers of loving kindness (Pāli: *mettā*). Morality (Pāli: *sīla*) and concentration (Pāli: *samādhi*) are prerequisites for the development of *mettā*. Furthermore, the purer the mind, the easier it is to develop *metta*. Monks who follow strict moral rules, laid down in the *vinaya*, and consistently purify their mind by developing concentration, are therefore believed to have much more *mettā* than ordinary people. It is believed that *mettā* can be projected to other beings. This helps in the healing of various diseases – especially psychosomatic sicknesses – and strengthens the body in general. Therefore, monks would treat their patients with both, medicines and *mettā* (BAD-13-2-048). The Lao word *mettatham* (ເມດຕາທຳ) was selected to name a project which was launched in late 2001: the Metta Dhamma Project, supported by UNICEF. This project aims at training Lao monks, novices and nuns in the use of herbal medicines for the treatment of HIV/AIDS. For this project, a variety of plants used to produce medicinal substances

or herbal medicines have been planted on monastic grounds (R-LBF007-08).

Many monks who are believed to be experts in traditional treatment do not have any medicines in stock. Whenever a sick person or their relatives ask them for medicine, the monks would go and provide them with fresh medicinal substances. It is believed that each plant has specific parts – i.e., root (Lao: *hak*-ຮາກ), bark (Lao: *püak*-ເປືອກ), leaf (Lao: *bai*-ໃບ), flower (Lao: *dòk*-ດອກ), fruit (Lao: *mak*-ໝາກ), seed (Lao: *met*-ເມັດ), etc. – that can be used for the creation of medicinal substances. These substances are believed to have no effect unless the plants have been picked at an auspicious moment. In other words, the time and means for picking the substances considerably influence their behaviour. Tomecko (2009, 21) states that:

*Great care goes into selection of the ingredients and the recipes are frequently kept secret. [...] Harvesting must also be timed precisely. For example, the moon is said to have an effect on the medicinal potency of plants and the quality of their essential oils, so certain phases of the moon are selected for harvesting.*

Some monks are unable to remember all plants and substances used for medical purposes. In response to this, a number of palm-leaf and paper manuscripts about the medical use of different herbs, plants and substances have been written and are kept in monastic manuscript collections. Some were found in Sathu Nyai Khamchan's *monks-cell* (BAD-13-1-0056, BAD-13-2-002, BAD-13-2-005). This may indicate that Sathu Nyai Khamchan was interested in traditional medicine. At least it provides circumstantial evidence for the engagement of the Lao Buddhist *sangha* in health service. In fact, a number of Lao monks and nuns – especially those who regularly reside in forest monasteries – have been called *mò ya*, medicinal doctor. Tomecko undoubtedly states that “forest monasteries frequently have a resident monk doctor who is responsible for the preparation of pills and other traditional medications. He might also include psychological counseling or the use of sacred Buddhist chants to heal the sick” (Tomecko 2009, 11).

Most importantly, a common local belief says that a practitioner of traditional medicine cannot apply his knowledge unless he has performed the ceremony of paying respect to his teacher (Lao: *tang khai hian ao* - ຕັ້ງຄາຍຮຽນເອົາ). Objects or offerings for worship would be used in this ceremony depending on the type of medicine needed to apply. In other words, a lay person may know many types of medicinal herbs from books or other sources, but without the proper performance of the ceremony of paying respect to one's teacher (Lao: *bò tang khai hian ao* - ບໍ່ຕັ້ງຄາຍຮຽນເອົາ), all medicine provided by this person would have no effect. Psychologically, a practitioner

providing medicine without worship offerings (Lao: *khai* - ຄາຍ) would not be accepted by the patient. It is customary that the sick person provides the practitioner with some objects used for the ceremony of paying respect to the practitioner's teacher (Lao: *busa khu* - ບູຊາຄູ), at least one pair of flowers and candles (Lao: *dòk mai thian khu* - ດອກໄມ້ທຽນຄູ). If not, the medicine he or she takes might not prove to be as powerful as expected and the state of his or her illness would therefore not improve.

Talking about the ceremony of paying respect to the teacher, an important information on the third page of a leporello manuscript found in Sathu Nyai Khamchan's abode, BAD-13-2-005, clearly shows that the practitioner did not forget to note the date of the performance and his teacher's name. It reads *van 1 haem 13 kham dūan 6 pi tao si [...] tang khai sit ao ya viset nam hua phò thit [...] ban lak kham vai pen mung khun [...]* “ວັນ ໑ ແຮມ ໑໓ ຄໍ້າ ເດືອນ ໖ ປີເຕົ້າສີ [...] ຕັ້ງຄາຍສິດເອົາຢາວິເສດນໍາຫົວພໍ່ທິດ [...] ບ້ານຫຼັກຄໍາໄວ້ເປັນມຸງຄຸນ [...]”. This literally translates to: ‘On Sunday, the thirteenth waning day of the sixth lunar month, the year of *Tao Si*, [...] performed the ceremony of paying respect to Teacher Hua Phò Thit [...] of Ban Lak Kham (a village of Lak Kham), [in order to be allowed to] learn with him magical medicines, [and carry them on] as auspicious things [...]’. This can be understood to indicate that the student (Lao: *phu hian* - ຜູ້ຮຽນ) did not only learn about medicines from his teacher, but he might have also learned secret words and/or magic. We can make this assumption because many traditional medicines have often been used alongside with secret words. It is also said that medicine cannot be fully effective unless the practitioner speaks an incantation on it (Lao: *pao mon sai* - ເປົ່າມົນໃສ່). This is another reason why monks are believed to be better suited for applying Lao traditional medicine than laypeople as they have developed a particularly strong mind through their meditation practice. The magical words uttered by them are therefore also considered as more powerful (BAD-13-1-0080, BAD-13-1-0330).

Apart from what has been discussed above, the use of a variety of herbs should be presented in more detail. It is said that not every part of a plant, i.e., flower, fruit, seed etc., can be used as a medicinal component. For instance, the information on the fifty-first pages of BAD-13-2-005 provides us with a detailed description of how to use a ripe coconut as a medicine. It reads *mak phao hao tat thòng ao thòng hua thim thòng kon khut laeo khua sai [...]* *kin* “ພາກພ້າວຫ້າວຕັດຕ່ອງ ເອົາຕ່ອງຫົວຖິ້ມຕ່ອງກິ້ນ ຊູດແລ້ວຂົ້ວໃສ່ [...] ກິນ”. Literal translation: ‘A ripe coconut [has to be] cut into two parts. Take the top part and throw away the bottom part, scrape the nut [from its shell and] fry [it] with [...] then,] eat [it]’. According to this information, only one half of the whole ripe coconut can be used to produce medicine, whereas the rest of the nut can be used as food. In other words, the top part of a ripe coconut has effects different

from the bottom part. This may relate to psychological and ideological aspects of curing because of the meaning of the Lao words *hua* (head; top) and *kon* (bottom). This aspect, however, may be left for further studies.

### Monks and native beliefs

As mentioned above, Lao Buddhism has existed side-by-side with pre-Buddhist animism and Brahmanic practices. Most Lao people of all ethnic groups, whether or not they claim to be Buddhists, believe in a rich supernatural world. When encountering serious problems in their lives, they may ask for the aid of a spiritual practitioner who is believed to be able to protect them from many kinds of harm. Some senior monks, being respected because of their seniority and devotion to the Buddhist teachings, are believed to have supernatural powers. Thus, it is not unusual that monks with good behaviour and knowledge of the Buddhist teachings are believed to have the spiritual power to eliminate all kinds of evil (Lao: *kamchat patpao sing bò di* - ກໍາຈັດປັດເປົ່າສິ່ງບໍ່ດີ).

Of the various non-Buddhist practices which are deemed appropriate for monks to perform, we have to mention magic (Lao: *khatha akhom* - ຄາຖາອາຄົມ), the removal of misfortune (Lao: *kan sia khò sadò nam* - ການເສຍເຄາະສະເດາະນາມ), the calculation of auspicious moments (Lao: *kan lai lük lai nyam* - ການໄລ່ລືກໄລ່ຍາມ), and predictions (Lao: *kan thamnai* - ການທໍານາຍ). A number of palm-leaf and paper manuscripts found in Sathu Nyai Khamchan's cell are relevant to these aspects (BAD-13-1-0057, BAD-13-1-0062, BAD-13-1-0079, BAD-13-1-0081, BAD-13-2-047, BAD-13-2-056, BAD-13-2-057, BAD-13-2-058, BAD-13-2-069, etc.). All these manuscripts, whether or not they were used by Sathu Nyai, should be recognised as beneficial sources for further study.

## CONCLUSION

Buddhism was introduced into the Lao community many centuries ago and played an important role in the unification of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang. Buddhism then became very useful for the preservation and development of Lao culture. A monastery has always been an institution that provides the community with basic as well as vocational education; a place to educate people to ensure that they live in accordance to their moral obligations (Lao: *mi sin tham* - ມີສິນທໍາ), are kind-hearted and generous (Lao: *mi metta kaluna lae üafüa phüaphae* - ມີເມຕຕາກະລຸນາແລະເອື້ອ ເພື່ອເຜື້ອແຜ່), and keep away from a variety of evil deeds (Lao: *lik ven chak kan katham bap* - ຫຼີກເວັ້ນຈາກການກະທໍາບາບ).

In Laos, two types of the Buddha's disciples have existed and lived alongside each other, i.e., monks,

novices and nuns live in a monastery, whereas the laypeople reside in their own homes. They live in the same community or village (Ban). The former provide the latter with moral guidance. In turn, the latter provide the former with food, clothes and residence. The more a community develops, the more new demands of the community become increasingly challenging. The basic tasks of all disciples, laid down a long time ago, do not cover all these new demands. Consequently, the monastic community and the lay community aim to understand and help each other, in order to preserve and propagate Buddhism, to keep the religion flourishing. In addition, the main task of the Buddhist monastic community is to preserve and practise Lord Buddha's teachings. It is said that the Buddha himself had indicated that the survival of the teachings depended upon the existence of the monastic community.

The monastic community of Luang Prabang – similar to that of other regions in Laos – still has an important contribution to make to the welfare of the lay community and the society as a whole. For

this, one of the obvious tasks of the monastic members is that they help to solve the problems of the lay people through counselling. Tambiah (1970, 135) furthermore states that “while the monastic membership and the village households are two distinct communities, they are formally linked through the *vat* committee for the facilitation and regulation of their reciprocal communication.”

In fact, the Buddhist monks of Luang Prabang and of Laos as a whole also help to provide various social services for the lay community. The Buddhist monasteries have an important role to play in the education of the young and even today there are Buddhist schools functioning alongside state schools. In addition, Buddhist monks and nuns help in the running of free clinics, orphanages, homes for the aged and the sick, and other welfare organisations.

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