



DORISEA WORKING PAPER

ISSUE 13, 2014, ISSN: 2196-6893

KHAMVONE BOULYAPHONH

**INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS
OF LAO BUDDHISM**
AS REFLECTED IN PERSONAL LETTERS
FOUND AT PHA KHAMCHAN VIRACHITTA
MAHA THELA'S ABODE (KUTI) IN VAT
SAEN SUKHARAM, LUANG PRABANG



13

DORISEA WORKING PAPER SERIES

EDITORS

Peter J. Bräunlein
Michael Dickhardt
Karin Klenke
Andrea Lauser

BMBF Competence Network “Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia” (DORISEA)

The research network “Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia” (DORISEA) is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and coordinated by the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Georg-August-University of Göttingen. Scholars from the Universities of Göttingen, Hamburg, Münster, Heidelberg and Berlin (Humboldt University) are involved in several projects that investigate the relationship between religion and modernity in Southeast Asia.

How to cite this paper: Khamvone Boulyaphonh (2014): International Connections of Lao Buddhism as Reflected in Personal Letters Found at Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela’s Abode (Kuti) in Vat Saen Sukharam, Luang Prabang. In: DORISEA Working Paper Series, No. 13.

Research Network DORISEA
Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia

Project Office
Georg-August-University Göttingen
Institut für Ethnologie
Berliner Str. 28
D - 37073 Göttingen
Germany
+49 (0)551 39 20153

dorisea@uni-goettingen.de
www.dorisea.net



FUNDED BY



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

KHAMVONE BOULYAPHONH

INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS OF LAO BUDDHISM AS REFLECTED IN PERSONAL LETTERS FOUND AT PHA KHAMCHAN VIRACHITTA MAHA THELA'S ABODE (KUTI) IN VAT SAEN SUKHARAM, LUANG PRABANG

ABSTRACT As a central figure of Lao Buddhism, Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela¹ (1920–2007), the late abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam monastery and former Chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of the province of Luang Prabang (LBFO, 1976–2007), had mail correspondence with monks, novices and lay Buddhists both inside and outside of Laos. The personal letters which the late Venerable Abbot collected at his abode over a period of seventy years reveal important and widely neglected, as well as largely unknown aspects of the history and practice of Lao Buddhism. This paper explores the international relations of both Pha Khamchan and of Lao Buddhism and the Lao Diaspora in general, as reflected in international personal letters in Pha Khamchan's collection that were sent from abroad.

This paper² explores the international relations of Lao Buddhism as reflected in international personal letters sent from abroad (or vice-versa) which the famous Lao monk Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela (1920–2007) collected in his abode (Lao: *kuti*) at the temple Vat Saen Sukharam, Luang Prabang, Laos. It focuses on four aspects, namely, (1) the international relations of Pha Khamchan, especially his journeys to study abroad; (2) monks of Luang Prabang who study Buddhism abroad; (3) a diplomatic mission of the Buddhist Sangha of Laos to other Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia; and (4) the Lao Diaspora's connections to Pha Khamchan, the Lao Sangha and Buddhism.

The author hopes to show that the personal letters are very useful and important primary sources

for researching Pha Khamchan's monastic and social roles, as well as the international relations of Lao Buddhism. Moreover, they also provide insights on Buddhist society and on Lao society in general. Since we are dealing with the letters of a specific person, this research will, to a certain extent, provide these insights from his perspective, i.e., the perspective of a highly respected monk of high status from Luang Prabang.

A large amount of the research on Lao Buddhism and society is not based on primary sources; cf. for example, Holt's inspiring work, "Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture" (Holt 2009), and Kislenko's "Culture and Customs of Laos" (Kislenko 2009), who have, among others, notably enriched my research. Partly, this was the case because of a lack of knowledge of the languages and scripts these documents were written in, and partly because many primary sources are either difficult to access (although national archives like the national library of Laos in Vientiane provide much material) or destroyed.³

¹ Also known as Sathu Nyai Khamchan Virachitto and Pha Lakkham Viravisutthikhun.

² I am very grateful to Lars Brandt and Neil Huggett for their help in polishing up my English and giving me their useful comments on the draft version of this working paper. I am also grateful to Prof. Dr. Volker Grabowsky for his comments, advice and corrections. Finally, I would very much like to thank Olivia Killias for her revision and keen comments on this paper.

³ A large number of primary sources, in personal libraries and state offices, were destroyed in the turmoil after the Lao

That makes the original personal letters found at Pha Khamchan's abode highly important sources and it is extremely fortunate for us that they were found and preserved.⁴ Those letters, now kept in the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang, amount to a total of 1,117 and cover a period of 70 years (1937–2007).⁵ They were written in various languages such as Lao, Thai, English and French, and in various scripts such as old Lao (pre-1975), modern Lao (post-1975), Lao-Tham, Thai, and Latin scripts. Some letters were collected in their envelopes. Most of them do not have postage stamps attached, which indicates that they were delivered by messengers.

This paper is based on the analysis of selected personal letters written between 1937 and 2007 and related photographs and documents (all available in the data bank of the Buddhist Archive of Photography).⁶ The selection of the personal letters discussed in this paper is based on their relevance for the research questions.

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela, the former leader of the Sangha of Luang Prabang in Northern Laos, was a prominent personality in Lao Buddhism in the second half of the twentieth century. He was active in the religious and civil society not only in Laos but also on an international level. Pha Khamchan was born into a noble family of Luang Prabang in 1920. He first ordained as a novice for two months in 1932 and in 1934 for four years. After having spent a few years as a lay man again, he ordained as a monk in 1941 and stayed in the Sangha community for the rest of his life. He later became abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam (1949) and Ecclesiastical Provincial Governor of the province of Luang Prabang (1953). For a biography of Pha Khamchan and his role in the preservation of the Lao cultural heritage please see my paper entitled "Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela and the Preservation of the Lao Cultural Heritage" which

will soon be published on the DORISEA website and the website of the Badur Foundation.⁷

PHA KHAMCHAN'S INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

This chapter analyses two letters. The first letter was written by Pha Khamchan during a very early stage of his monastic career, when he was a novice in Bangkok. This letter is an important document for the construction of his biography. The second letter was written just a few months prior to his death by a Japanese monk who visited his temple and is a good illustration of how Pha Khamchan's character was perceived by foreign visitors.

The first letter analyzed here is dated 21 October 1937 and was written in old-Lao script by the Novice Khamchan (Pha Khamchan in novitiate) in Bangkok, Thailand, where he was studying Dhamma Scripture (Lao: *Pha Pariyattitham*) at Vat Benchamabophit. This letter is considered one of the most important primary sources for reconstructing Pha Khamchan's early life. The following is a quote from this letter.

Vat Benchamabophit, Bangkok, on 21 October, 1937. Your worship my highly respected teacher. I have already received your letter [...]. I am very pleased to have received your letter. [...] After finishing the examination, I, together with Sathu [Pha] Tan, will come back home during the coming 2nd lunar month [corresponds to January 1938]. I will come on time to participate in the forest retreat. I am happy and fine and always missing home and want to come back every day.⁸



Archive Nr. B2483R, Novice Khamchan Virachit (standing behind) together with Pha Tan (front, left), another unidentified monk and the owner of the boat, standing on a boat in the port of Vientiane on their way from Vientiane to Luang Prabang in December 1937. At that time, traveling by boat was the only option available. The text on the photograph says "at the Vientiane port in 1937, [it] will float up to Luang Prabang".

revolution (1975), or because they were stored under poor conditions, and/or not considered important by the local people.

⁴ Sadly, some of these letters were destroyed by animals (e.g., termite eating) when his *kuti* had been permanently closed for two months after his demise. However, the majority of the letters are still in good condition.

⁵ Digital copies in pdf format, which were made by the team of the project "The Lao Sangha and Modernity", are available for research at the Buddhist Archives in Luang Prabang.

⁶ The Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang, Laos, was founded in 2006 by Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela in cooperation with a German photographer and writer, Hans Georg Berger, and contains historic photographs of Theravada Buddhism, personal letters of abbots, Buddhist official documents and manuscripts. It is now situated at the Salathammavihan, Vat Suvannakhili, under the administration of the Sangha of Luang Prabang, lead by Pha One Keo Kittibhaddo/Siththivong, the chairman of the LBFO of the province of Luang Prabang. See: www.hansgeorgberger.de

⁷ The project is part of a large German research network dealing with the "Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia", DORISEA, coordinated at the University of Göttingen. See: www.dorisea.net; www.badourfoundation.org.

⁸ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1937.001, the letter of Novice Khamchan.

Based on this letter, two aspects related to Pha Khamchan's biography shall be considered. First, he had a chance to study the Buddhist scriptures in Bangkok which provided him with the systematic knowledge of the Buddhist teachings. During that time, the Buddhist studies in Luang Prabang were conducted informally in monastic schools, often with only one monk as a teacher. In 1935, for instance, before Novice Khamchan departed for his studies in Bangkok, in the morning he studied Pali grammar with his brother, Pha Achan Khamphan at Vat Pa Fang, and in the afternoon Dhamma scripture with Pha Achan Chanthi at Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram. Both monks had set up the schools for their disciples by themselves at their monasteries. Secondly, according to his biography, after he returned to Luang Prabang, the way of his life changed. He was asked by his elder sister to disrobe in order to help the family's grocery shop. This shop supported his family with over twenty people. He disrobed after participating in the retreat mentioned in the letter. These plans are not mentioned in this letter which indicates that she had not asked him at the time he wrote it. Disrobing was an important turn in his biography, because his studies in school were interrupted. He never again had a chance to study in public school. As a lay man, in late 1938, he was sent to Bangkok by himself for making purchases, because he already knew the city from his life there as a novice. The voyage by boat from Luang Prabang to northern Thailand and by train from Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai province to Bangkok took several days.

The second letter was written by a Japanese monk and sent from Nara city, Japan. It is dated 6 June 2007, only one month before Pha Khamchan's death (9 July 2007), and is typed in English. The author, Arai Saidan, traveled to Luang Prabang as a tourist and stayed with Pha Khamchan at Vat Saen Sukharam for some days in early April 2007. When he returned to Japan he wrote to Pha Khamchan, expressing his appreciation and gratitude. The following is a quote from the letter by Arai Saidan:

Venerable Sathou Khamchanh Virachitta Thero, I am a Japanese monk who stayed at your temple in the early part of this April. I thank you very much for your kindness. Owing to your kindness, I could visit Buddhist temples and sites in Luang Prabang and know the history of Laos and the Buddhism in Laos. They were very interesting to me because I visited Laos for the first time. When I saw you to ask a favor of you for my staying at your temple, I felt some memories on your face that were seen on the faces of well-practiced monks whose memories were very tender and peaceful but severe. They are those of such monks of dignity. One of them is that monk at Siemreab in Cambodia and another is my teacher [...].

*And I thought of giving you a picture of Sichi-Huku-Jin (that means seven happy gods). They are 1) Ebisu who is a god for fishing, 2) Daikokuten who is a god for food, 3) Bishamonten who is a god called Vaisravanna [warriors] in Sanskrit, 4) Benzaiten who is a god for wisdom, music and treasure, 5) Fukurokuju who is a god for happiness, 6) Juroujin who is god for long-life-span, 7) Hotei who is a Chinese Zen-Monk died in 917 and his body was fleshy with his belly always exposed out of his robe. He walked about for donation carrying a bag on his shoulder and he is called the incarnation of Maitreya Bodhisattva. And Seven Happy Gods were gathered in the middle of Edo-age (1603–1867) as a set because the number of seven is sacred and they are now very popular. [...]*⁹

In the first paragraph, he describes his deep feelings about his initial encounter with Pha Khamchan. This positive impression is similar to those of Lao Buddhists who met Pha Khamchan on different occasions. It reflects his well-trained mind and the power of his kindness. One could see those qualities in his face which still looked fresh and happy, even though he had become old. In addition, Pha Khamchan was observed and congratulated on his morality by a Mahayana monk who compared him to other well-practiced monks in Cambodia and his own teacher in Japan. The letter also indicates that monks from Mahayana Buddhism are welcomed by the Theravada Buddhist monks of Laos.

The letter reminds us of interesting similarities between Japanese and Lao Buddhism. Japanese Buddhists respect not just the Lord Buddha and believe not only in him but also in other deities who are expected to bring them prosperity, wealth and other forms of material well-being.¹⁰ This is similar to the case of Lao Buddhists who believe not only in Buddhism but also worship the spirits of their ancestors and follow a variety of animistic practices, in order to be protected from illness, disease and misfortune.¹¹ One may wonder why the Japanese

⁹ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-2007.004, the letter of the Japanese monk, Arai Saidan.

¹⁰ The belief in gods which is popular nowadays among the Japanese Buddhists, according to Monk Arai Saidan's letter, only appeared in the 17th century, even though the Mahayana Buddhism officially came to the country in A.D. 538 from Korea. See: Japanese Buddhist Federation, 2004. "A Guide to Japanese Buddhism". Ebook: www.buddhanet.net

¹¹ Since ancient times, the Lao people believed in the cults of *phī* (spirit) and sacrificed/worshiped *phī fā* (gods), *phī thean* (guardian gods), *phī phō* (spirit of father), *phī mae* (spirit of mother) and *phī dam* (ancestral spirits), until in 1359, King Fa Ngum established the *Theravadin Lankavamsa* Buddhism in the Lān Xāng Kingdom which he brought together with the revered Buddha image of Pha Bang from Cambodia (Viravong 2001, 45–6), so that the officials and the population would gather to sacrifice/worship *phī ban* (spirit of the village), *phī meuang* (spirit of the city/principality), regarded as the credulous belief from the view of devout Buddhists. But the

monk chose to send a picture of specific Japanese deities to a Lao monk. After having had the opportunity to study Lao Buddhism, the Japanese monk probably wanted to share some of his own tradition in return. However, the Japanese monk apparently believed that the picture would be of use or at least of interest to Pha Khamchan. This indicates that he might have been aware of the Lao Buddhist practice of spirit worship.¹²

LUANG PRABANG MONKS ABROAD

Since the late 1910s, monks and novices from Luang Prabang went to nearby countries for Buddhist studies, such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma.¹³ Particularly Thailand was the most interesting for them, as Lao and Thai are quite similar to each other in many aspects, such as languages, culture, the way of living and society. Especially the education system of Buddhist schools was established and developed, known as Pha Pariyatti Dhamma schools. Therefore, there were Luang Prabang monks and novices studying in Thailand more than in other countries. It is stated that in 1919, Novice Khamfan (Pha Khamfan Sirasangvara Maha Thela, 1901–1987), from Vat Suvannakhili, Luang Prabang, went to Bangkok to further his Dhamma studies and his studies of fine arts. He stayed there until 1930. After returning to Luang Prabang he was appointed abbot of Vat Suvannakhili and played a key role in the administration of the Sangha. In 1934, the novice Chanpheng Phetmeuangsa (1917–2002) from Vat Xiang Muan went to Bangkok for studies of Pha Pariyatti Dhamma at Vat Maha That Yuvarat Rangsarit and graduated with the 4th grade of Pali, receiving the title *Maha*. In the 1930s, Pha Maha Khamphan Sumanabhudo (1914–1995) from Vat Pa Fang, Pha Maha Chansuk Paññapajoto (1908–1986) from Vat Aphay and Pha Maha Uan Virasi from Vat Visunnalat went to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, for higher Buddhist studies in a students exchange project. These monks, after returning to Luang Prabang, were the teachers at the Buddhist school of Luang Prabang.

After Pha Khamchan became abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam in 1949, inspired by his experience of studying in Bangkok, he supported his disciples

in higher education by sending them to Vientiane, Bangkok, and India, for their further Buddhist studies. He also supported them with some money for necessary expenses. Those student monks sent him numerous letters and photographs to inform him about their living conditions and the progress of their studies. Examples are the letters from Pha Thongsuk Sujinno,¹⁴ Pha Maha Suphat¹⁵ and Pha Maha Bunpheng Viradhammo/Khan-Amat, who studied at Vat Maha That Yuvarat Rangsarit, Bangkok, in the 1950s and 1960s. Pha Maha Bunpheng Viradhammo/Khan-Amat, after finishing his Bachelor Degree, went to India and studied at Magadh University in Bodhgaya. He returned to Luang Prabang in 1975 where he disrobed one year later. He reported about the help he got from Pha Khamchan and indicated that he, as well, received regular correspondence from him.

*Khana [section] 2, Vat Maha That [Bangkok] 7-2-67. Reverentially paying respect to you. [Your] letter dated 22 January 2509 [1967] together with chivòn [cover robe], sabong [under robe] and 100 Baht I already received. I am very happy. I am also very glad to hear about your living conditions and all relatives as well.*¹⁶

One of Pha Khamchan's personal relationships with many great Thai monks in Thailand was with Pha Bhimonladham (Art Asabha Maha Thela, 1903–1989), abbot of Vat Maha That Yuvarat Rangsarit in Bangkok. He was a well-known monk who founded the Vipassana Meditation Institute at Vat Maha That. Pha Khamchan had led three monks from Luang Prabang – Pha Bunthan Dhitapunnño (1920–1967), abbot of Vat Maha That Rajabovoravihan, Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaramuni (1888–1960s) from Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, and Pha Thongsuk Sujinno (1929–2000) from Vat Saen Sukharam – to take an intensive course in Vipassana meditation¹⁷ there.

¹⁴ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1955.009, the letter of Pha Thongsuk Sujinno.

¹⁵ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1952.001, the letter of Pha Maha Suphat.

¹⁶ Archive Nr. BAD-12-2-1967.008, the letter of Pha Maha Bunpheng Viradhammo/Khan-Amat.

¹⁷ Vipassana or insight meditation was discovered by the Lord Buddha and is considered the only path that leads the meditator with righteous practice to be gradually liberated from influence of defilements. The contemplation is to fix the mind on the phenomena arising in the time of practice, and observe them as they naturally are, with exertion, mindfulness (sati), concentration (Samadhi) and wisdom (Paññā), without state of stare, idea, thought and imagination in every single moment of practice (Sorado 2009, 21–2). The meditation is a way to train the mind to focus clearly, and can also be an effective way, wherever you so wish, to relax your body and mind (Mettanado 1991, 43). The practice can apply in the four postures which are standing, walking, sitting, and sleep; the sitting meditation is simple and popular among beginners. In Lao Buddhism, meditation is a personal, individual effort. It is the fundamental way towards awakening from the dream existence in which every human being is caught,

victory of Buddhism was not sealed until in 1504 King Vixun transferred the Pha Bang Buddha image from Viang Kham district, Vieng Chan province, to Xiang Dong Xiang Thong to serve as palladium of the dynasty, and in 1527, King Phothisarath eliminated the sacrificial rituals associated with the worship of the *phī meuang* (Stuart-Fox 1998, 50). From then onwards, Buddhism was actively promoted as the religion of the state, while in everyday life the Lao people still practice the beliefs inherited from their ancestors.

¹² At Vat Saen Sukharam is a shrine for spirit worship which the Japanese monk was probably aware of.

¹³ Pha One Keo Sitthivong and Khamvone Boulyaphonh. 2010. *Great Monks of Luang Prabang 1854–2007*, pp. 66–87.



Archive Nr. B1215R, Lao student monks posing for a portrait in front of the building of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University at Vat Maha That Yuvarat Rangsarit, Bangkok in the 1960s. There is text on the verso of this photograph "a group of Lao student monks at MCU (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University)". Pha Maha Bunpheng Viradhammo (back row, right).

A letter from Pha Bunthan Dhitapuñño sent to Pha Khamchan at Vat Saen Sukharam, dated 6 June B.E. 2498 (1955), reports the results of his practice and the situation at the training place. A part of this letter reads:

*Vihan section, at the Vipassana building, Vat Maha That, Bangkok. On 6 June B.E. 2498 [A.D. 1955]. Your Worship to Sathu Nyai Khamchan Virachitto, whom I deeply respect and miss. [...] I feel that my Vipassana meditation practice bears only small fruits. [...] At present, the people of Bangkok like the Vipassana meditation method taught by [Pha] Achan Phaeng so that he can hardly find time to rest. [...] Nowadays, the crowds coming to practice at Vat Maha That get bigger and bigger, so that its main hall and the surrounding corridor are full [of practitioners]. Even some high-ranking officials who took holidays to practice [Vipassana] meditation were there [...]*¹⁸

I also found a note of Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaramuni with a picture of him practicing Vipassana. This notebook contains 32 pages, handwritten by him. He began the notes on 27 January 1955

stumbling between the pleasure and pains of impermanence. It is open to everyone, can be practiced anywhere and in different degrees of intensity (Berger 2000).

¹⁸ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1955.002, the letter of Pha Bunthan Dhitapuñño.

when he left Luang Prabang by boat to go to Vientiane. He went with Pha Khamfan Silasangvara Maha Thela, Pha Khamchan Virachitto, and Pha Fan from Vat Saen Sukharam. On page 29, he acknowledges the role of Pha Khamchan in this matter:

*Behind the scenes of my journey to visit and see many places in Laos and Thailand, I also took a course in Vipassana meditation. [This was possible because of] Thu Nyai [Pha] Khamchan, ecclesiastical provincial governor of the province of Luang Prabang who was our leader and brought us to Chao Khun Bhimonladham¹⁹ who was a supporter of the Vipassana building at Vat Maha That.*²⁰

¹⁹ Chao Khun Bhimonladham (Thai: Chao Khun Phra Bhimoladham), his latest honorific title was "Somdet Phra Buddhacharya (Art Asabha Maha Thela). He was the Venerable Abbot of Vat Maha That Yuvarat Rangsarit, the late second president of the University Council of Maha Chulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in 1948, and the Acting Supreme Patriarch of Thailand in 1988. The revered monk, who spent all his life for Buddhist missionary work, was famous for his contributions to the revival of Vipassana in Thailand and the dissemination of Vipassana meditation abroad. See BAD-02-0325 "Somdet Phra Bhuddhachan and Vipassana Mission".

²⁰ The note of Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaramuni. Archive Nr. BAD-05-0025.



Archive Nr. H0264R, Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaharamuni from Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, Luang Prabang, posing for a portrait during his extensive course in Vipassana meditation at Vat Maha That Yuwarat Rangsarit, Bangkok, Thailand, in 1955. This photograph was attached to the note of Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaharamuni in which he commented on his vipassana practice.

LAO MONKS ON DIPLOMATIC MISSION

The 2500th anniversary of Buddhism was a very significant and auspicious occasion for Theravada Buddhist countries in Asia, such as Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia, as well as Sri Lanka, as it marks the half-time between the passing of the Buddha and the supposed end of Buddhism. According to a famous prediction of Gotama the Buddha, Buddhism will last only for 5,000 years before his teachings will be lost, until finally a fifth Buddha, Maitreya, will restore the knowledge of the Dhamma.²¹ The Buddha Jayanti celebrations were the important festivals of Theravada Buddhism, related to the enlightenment of the Buddha known in Lao as the Vesak (Visakha) day, while the term “Buddha Jayanti” itself means the victory of the Buddha in that he overcame the *mara* and the defilements. Therefore, various Theravada countries had or-

ganized special celebrations and activities for this important occasion. One of the most important activities was the review and revision of the Tipitaka which contains all of Buddha’s teachings. For example, in Burma, the Sixth Great Buddhist Assembly (chattha saṅgāyanā) was convened; in Thailand, the whole Pali canon was translated into Thai and published under the name of ‘Phra Tripidok Phāsāthai’ (Tipitaka in Thai language); and in Laos, a Lao version of parts of the Tipitaka was edited and printed in the Dhamma script. The other activities were the production of Buddha images, the production and donation of manuscripts for monastic libraries, and the publication of the Buddhist literature.

For this significant event and to strengthen the relationship between the Buddhist countries, both the governments of Laos and Sri Lanka and the Sangha developed a good connection. Through the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Lao: *kaxuang tham-makān*) of Laos, the Lao Sangha was invited by the Sangha of Sri Lanka, backed by its government, to participate in the celebrations in their country. Pha Khamchan was part of a group of five senior monks led by the Supreme Patriarch – most of them were from Luang Prabang – selected by the Lao government to be representatives of the Lao Sangha. After their stay in Sri Lanka, they continued their travels to visit three more Buddhist countries, namely India, Nepal, and Burma, on a Buddhist pilgrimage. To my knowledge, this trip was the first time the Buddhist lineages of Sri Lanka and Laos officially met and started to develop a relationship. The visit was organized with governmental support from both countries. Therefore, it not only started the relation between the two Buddhist lineages, but also strengthened the diplomatic relations. The countries use the fact that the majority of their population is Theravada Buddhist for diplomatic purposes.

The 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations in Sri Lanka were held throughout the country during the second half of December 1956. Especially the festivals which were celebrated in Kurunegala, where the Lao Sangha had attended, were official and great events. For example, the Ridi Vihara monastery, a large marquee 10 meters wide and 50 meters long, was full of monks and lay people. On 17 December 1956, the ceremony started at 9.30 a.m., with pupils singing the Sri Lankan national song and chanting *Bahum Sutta* (the victory of Lord Buddha), followed by a speech of the master of the ceremony. Then, Somdet Pha Sanghalat Dhammañāna Maha Thela, the Supreme Patriarch of Laos, gave a speech in Lao which was translated into English by a Lao student monk, Pha Maha Chansuk, and into Sinhalese by an officer from the department of religious affairs, Mr. Siri Sayasingha, followed by an oral speech of H.E. U

²¹ This belief is widely reflected in scribal colophons of manuscripts bearing Buddhist texts and in inscriptions of Buddha images. The scribes and/or sponsors and donors usually express their desire that their meritorious deed of sponsoring the copying of a manuscript or donating a Buddha image will be a support (*khamxu*) for the Teachings of Buddha (*sāsana*) to stay until its completion of 5,000 years, counted from Buddha’s *parinibbāna*. This basic purpose is grounded in the widespread belief among the Tai and Lao that the complete degeneration of Buddha’s Teachings will be reached after 5,000 years. See Grabowsky and Apiradee 2013. See also Veidlinger 2006, 164–166.

Nu,²² the first Prime Minister of Burma, and other speeches by important figures from Sri Lanka.²³

Coming from Sri Lanka, Theravada Buddhism was introduced into Laos via Cambodia by the King Fa Ngum, known as *Theravadin Lankavamsa* Buddhism (Ven 2012), and Luang Prabang is especially connected via the famous Buddha statue Pha Bang, after which Luang Prabang was named. The statue was made in Sri Lanka in 101 B.C. It was sent to Cambodia in 857 A.D., before it was finally sent to Luang Prabang, then still called Xiang Dong Xiang Thong, in 1359 (Berger 2013, 30). In 1560, the name of the city was changed to Luang Prabang.²⁴ The Sangha of Laos made a replica of this Buddha statue which was presented to the Sangha of Sri Lanka during the visit. It is to be understood as representing a historical link between the two Buddhist lineages.



Archive Nr. B4854R, Six senior monks and one state officer, as the representatives of the Lao Sangha, posing for a portrait at the

²² He was one of the most important Buddhist leaders who played various important roles in the field of Buddhism in Burma; particularly, in 1950, he created the Buddhist Sana-na Council whose purpose was to propagate Buddhism and supervise the monks (Swearer 2010, 111). His great contribution to the Buddhist revival in Burma was the holding of the Chattha Sangayana (the Sixth Great Buddhist Council) in 1954-1956 (P.A. Payutto 2000, 96), and of the 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations in May 1956.

²³ The information about the celebrations came from a note by Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaramuni, one of the Lao Sangha who participated in the ceremony, Archive Nr. BAD-05-0023.

²⁴ In Maha Sila Viravong's work "*Pavatsāt Lao Tae Būhān Thoen* 1946 (History of Laos since ancient time until 1946)", he describes that "in 1560, The King Saysethathirāt considered that Nakon Xiang Dong Xiang Thong was a small city and its location was also within the range of the Burmese army which was an adversary of Xiang Dong Xiang Thong, and Viang Chan was a large city with a large space for the livelihood of its populations. [...] Therefore, he assigned the Xiang Dong Xiang Thong city and the Buddha image of Pha Bang to the Sangha to protect. He, together with his ministers, and the Buddha images of Pha Kao Mòrakot (Emerald Buddha) and Pha Xaekkham, moved to Viang Chan and named it "Phranakhon Chanthaburi Sisattana Khanahut Uttamarāxathāni", and Nakon Xiang Dong Xiang Thong was called "Nakhon Luang Prabang" [or Luang Prabang] since then" (Viravong 2001, 72-3). The move of the King Saysethathirāt to Viang Chan is also mentioned in Stuart-Fox's work, *The Lao Kingdom of Lān Xāng: Rise and Decline*, 79-80.

veranda of the building of the department of Religious Affairs in Vientiane before leaving for Sri Lanka in December 1956, led by Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammañāna Maha Thela, the Supreme Patriarch of Laos.

Front row, l-r: Somdet Pha Lukkaeo Silasangvaro, Pha Khamfan Silasangvara Maha Thela (1901-1987) from Vat Suvannakhili, Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammañāna Maha Thela (1892-1984), the Supreme Patriarch of Laos from Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, and Pha Lakkham Viravisutthikhun (Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela, 1920-2007), abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam. Back row, l-r: Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaramuni (1888-1960s) from Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, Pha Fan Dissavañso (1925-1993) from Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, Achan Maha Chanpeng Phetmūang-sua (1917-2002), state officer from the department of religious affairs (Lao: hòngkān Thammakān), Luang Prabang, and Pha Maha Samrān Kittīñāno (unidentified dates) from Vat Ongtue Mahavihān, Vientiane. The auspicious objects placed in front of them are five silver bowls (Lao: khan gnuen) and the replica of the Pha Bang statue as offerings to the Sangha of Sri Lanka. The text on the photograph reads: "commemorated on traveling to the celebration of Buddha Jayanti in Sri Lanka B.E. 2500"

There are two original drafts of letters which Pha Khamchan wrote during this trip. They were sent to a Thai senior monk in Bangkok whom he called "Phradet Phrakhun Somdet."²⁵ He wrote the first letter, dated 24 December B.E. 2499 (A.D. 1956), at Vat Wajirayan, Colombo, Sri Lanka.²⁶ The following passages are excerpts from both letters:

Vat Wajiraram temple, Colombo, 24 December B.E. 2499. Your worship Phradet Phrakhun Somdet. I myself [and] our group left [from Bangkok] [and] after around five and a half hours [on board] we arrived in Ratmalana airport, Colombo. Lao, Thai, Vietnamese student monks and Sri Lankan monks together with the officials of the Ministry of Culture were waiting to receive us at the airport. Arriving in Colombo, they brought us to stay at Thammathut Vidyalaya. [...] On the 16th [December 1956] they took us to Kurunegala where the celebrations of Buddha Jayanti were held. We stayed there for three days and [then went] to Matale [and] Anuradhapura [...].

I and the other group members are all fine and we will leave Colombo for Bombay by airplane on the night of the 26th [December 1956] at 9:30 pm. After our pilgrimage to the memorial places of the Buddha [in India] we will take an airplane at Kolkata to Rangoon. At the Buddha Jayanti celebrations in Kurunegala we met U Nu [1907-1995] and told him that we will drop by in Burma. He

²⁵ Regularly used for a high-ranking senior monk with the honorific title of "Somdet or Somdech: His Holiness" in Thailand. I believe that he wrote to Somdet Pha Vannarat (Plot Kittisobhano [1889-1962]), abbot of Vat Benchamabophit, who later became the fourteenth Supreme Patriarch of the Kingdom of Thailand, bearing the official honorific title Somdet Phra Ariyawongsakhatayan. I make this assumption because Vat Benchamabophit was the place where they stopped during their journey in Bangkok (BAD-05-0023, 5). Another reason is that Pha Khamchan had stayed and studied in this monastery when he was a novice for two years (1936-1937); which means he was a disciple of the Somdet Pha Vannarat.

²⁶ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1956.014.

said that if he hears that we are there he will take us around. We think that when we arrive in Mandalay we will stay there for two weeks and then return to Thailand. Finally, I hope you and your disciples are fine.²⁷



Archive Nr. B3079R. The Lao Sangha from Laos together with Lao student monks in Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan monks, and state officers from Sri Lanka, posing for a portrait at Wajirayan temple, Colombo, where they stayed after their first arrival on 24 December 1956.

This letter provides us with information about their traveling to Sri Lanka, the places where they stayed, where they went for visits, and what would be going on there. But what is interesting is that they accidentally met H.E. U Nu, who was attending the celebrations of Buddha Jayanti there. They just informed him that they would drop by in Burma on their way from India to Thailand. The Prime Minister acknowledged this and said that as soon as he knows when they are in Burma he will organize the tours for them. When the Lao Sangha arrived in Burma, the government of Burma received them as an official visit, as is stated in Pha Khamchan's second letter.



Archive Nr. C1657R. His Excellency U Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma giving an oral speech in Burmese at the celebration of the 2500th Anniversary of Buddha Jayanti in Kurunegala on 17 December 1956. The master of the ceremony stands next to His Excellency U Nu, and translates the speech into Sinhalese. The Supreme Patriarch of Laos is sitting in the middle as the honorary chairman of the ceremony.

²⁷ Archive Nr. BAD-12-2-1956.014, the first letter of Pha Khamchan sent from Sri Lanka to a Thai senior monk in Bangkok.



Archive Nr. C1679R, they are posing for a portrait in front of the Taj Mahal during a pilgrimage to India on 1st January 1957. Sitting from left to right: Somet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammañāna Maha Thela and Pha Khamfan Silasangvara Maha Thela. Standing from left to right: Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattharamuni, Pha Fan Dhissavañso, Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela, Pha Maha Samrān Kittīñāno, and Pha Maha Chantao, a Lao student monk in India who was their guide.

Pha Khamchan wrote the second letter at the Somphuthip building, Kabar Aye, Rangoon, to the same senior Thai monk.

Somphuthip building, Kabar Aye, Rangoon, 20 January B.E. 2499. Your worship Phadet Phakhum Somdet. As I have already informed you one time, I and my group have left Colombo for Bombay by airplane TWA. [From Bombay] we traveled by train to Delhi. There, Lao student monks and Lao officials from the Lao embassy received us. During our stay in Delhi, many officials from the Thai embassy visited us and offered us lunch. We stayed there for three days and started traveling to pay homage to the various Buddhist pilgrimage sites [such as] Sangkassa, Savatthi, Kusinara, Lumphini, Sarnath, Buddhagaya, Rajgir, and then we went to stay at the Bodhi Association in Kolkata for one night.

On 14 January [1957] we took an airplane to Rangoon [where we] stayed at Kabar Aye. After a visit of U Nu to us on one day, his officials took us to visit various memorial sites and monasteries in Rangoon. Today [20.01.1957] the president²⁸ invites all of us to have lunch at the government house together with 9 Burmese monks, 15 monks in total. Then, they also organize an official tour program for us to visit Mandalay and Sakai and Bagan, as well. Tomorrow we will leave for Mandalay in the early morning at 5:00 am and will return to Rangoon on 31 [January 1957]. According to the schedule they invite us to stay here until the 2 [February 1957] in order to participate in an official ceremony for awarding the honorary title "Abhidhaja Maharattakuru"²⁹ [to Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammañāna Maha Thela, Supreme

²⁸ Sao Shwe Thaik Ba U.

²⁹ Literal meaning: "person who is the great flag of the great city".

Patriarch of Laos] and then we expect to arrive on Tuesday 5th in [Bangkok] Thailand. I and my group are fine. I hope you and your disciples are also fine.³⁰



Archive Nr. H0304R, Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammañāna Maha Thela, the Supreme Patriarch of Laos, together with other Lao senior monks, is received by the Sangha and state officials of Burma in Rangoon during their visit in Burma between 15 January and 4 February 1957.

From the first one of these two letters of Pha Khamchan we learn that the 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations in Sri Lanka were held in December B.E. 2499. In Sri Lanka and Burma the Buddhist Era is counted differently than in other Theravada countries in South-East Asia such as Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. Pha Khamchan told me the reason why when I interviewed him in February 2007; he explained that in Sri Lanka the year of the death of the Buddha is counted as Buddhist Era 1st; while other countries counted it as Buddhist Era 0.

Related to this trip I also found two travelogues:³¹ one of Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaramuni, and another one of Pha Khamfan Silasangvara Maha Thela, and many photographs³² of their travels in the collections of Pha Khamfan Silasangvara Maha Thela at Vat Suvannakhili, of Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela at Vat Saen Sukharam, and of Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammañāna Maha Thela at Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram. From photographs and notes we can identify the names of the monks and know what objects they prepared for souvenir

offerings. The souvenirs consisted of three images of Pha Bang, one set of yellow robes, one alms-bowl with a beautiful silk-embroidery cover and sash, and seven silver bowls, all to be presented to the host. This trip took two months and twenty-five days (23.11.1956–14.02.1957). They visited five countries – Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Burma – as Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaramuni wrote in his notes.

THE LAO DIASPORA

After the Lao revolution in 1975, notably in the period 1975–1985, more than 300,000 Lao, including many inhabitants of Luang Prabang and Buddhist monks as well, fled to foreign countries around the world.³³ It is very interesting to see how many of them kept contact with Pha Khamchan, whom they respected as their spiritual leader even over large distances. A large number of the letters from abroad reveal interesting facts about the refugees' living conditions. Letters from the Lao diaspora that we found came from various capitalist countries such as Thailand, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, England, and France. They mostly reported to him about their living conditions, their new community and society, and also sent him money as a donation for supporting the construction of monasteries in Luang Prabang. They avoided commenting on any political matters because they knew well that this would cause problems for him. As he was a monk who strictly followed the monastic disciplines (*Vinaya*) he did not take part in any political games, nor was he member of any political faction. In Laos, some monks were involved in political movements. Pha Khamchan, however, was of the opinion that politics should only be a matter of the secular society, and not an appropriate activity for Buddhist monks (Lao: *kit khòng song*). A letter from Ieng Soudachanh sent from the refugee camp in Nong Khai province, dated 8 August 1978, touches on this issue:

*What I told you here is [about] my family and friends. It is not [about] national politics. I think that [news about national politics] will have no impact on you, right?*³⁴

³⁰ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1956.002, the second letter of Pha Khamchan sent from Burma to a Thai senior monk in Bangkok.

³¹ Archive Nr. BAD-01-0224, the note of Pha Khamfan, titled "Note report on traveling to celebrate the Buddha Jayanti in Sri Lanka", dated 23 November 1956, is typed on A4 paper in old-Lao script; unfortunately, it is incomplete. It contains the cover page, pages 1 to 35 and 46 to 48, a total of 38 pages, and Archive Nr. BAD-05-0023, the note of Pha Phò Phatthaman in its complete version bears the title "Traveling to participate in the celebrations of Buddha Jayanti in Sri Lanka of Somdet Phra Sangkharat". It was composed by Pha Phò Phatthaman Phattaramuni, and revised by Pha Khamchan. It contains 59 pages including front and back cover pages; the body text is typed in old-Lao script.

³² Archive Nr. C1612R - C1620R and C1627R - C1721R.

³³ Concerning the exodus of the Lao people cf Evens' work which provides the number of the Lao refugees. Evens notes that "in general, the former elite headed for France, while many members of the army, officers and soldiers alike, went to the USA. Ultimately close to 50,000 went to France and 225,000 to the USA, and small refugee populations to Australia and New Zealand" (Evans 2000, 231).

³⁴ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1978.003, the letter from Ieng Soudachanh.

Why did they send letters to Pha Khamchan? We have to take various aspects into account. Most people who wrote him were close or distant relatives who wanted to send news to their relatives back in Laos. Some Lao, whose parents and relatives resided in remote rural villages, could not send their letters directly because of the poor roads and communication system. Instead, they sent their letters to Pha Khamchan. Keo Watcharine, for instance, was helped by Pha Khamchan when he tried to contact his parents who lived in a remote village, Ban Pak Chaek, Pak Ou district in the northern Luang Prabang province, fifty kilometers from the city. He left the country after the revolution as a monk and disrobed afterwards; he now lives in Michigan, USA. For over twenty years, since he had fled Laos, his parents did not get any sign of life from him. They had tried to contact him but did not know where he was. Sometimes they thought he might be dead, because from 1975 to the 1980s, it was quite often heard that Lao refugees were shot or died when boats drowned while crossing the Mekong from Laos to Thailand. Keo Watcharine's parents came to visit Pha Khamchan at Vat Saen Sukharam several times and asked him for help in the search for their son. One day in the late 1990s, Pha Khamchan forwarded them a letter from their son and up to this day they have been in touch. Keo Watcharine later wrote to Pha Khamchan to thank him for his great and kind help in reuniting him with his parents. His letter was sent from 14287 Carl St, Holland; MI, USA, to Pha Khamchan at Vat Saen Sukharam, Luang Prabang. This following is a quote of one part of the letter by Keo Watcharine:

The 21st October 1998. Your worship Sathu Nyai Khamchan Virachitta Thera. I have already received your letter. Therefore, this letter from me is to present my thanks for your generous mind to help me according to my request. I do not have anything in return [for your generous help] besides that I dedicate myself to become your disciple and do good and useful things for the benefit of the society in accordance with the teachings of Buddhism. After you gave my letter to my parents, they contacted me regularly which makes me extremely happy [...].³⁵

In addition, Keo Watcharine enclosed a money order of 300 US\$ on the name of Sathu Nyai Khamchan and asked him to divide it into three amounts of cash. The first 100 US\$ he offered to Sathu Nyai for the 78th anniversary of his birthday celebration. 100 US\$ were for his mother, Mrs. Nang Chanda, and another 100 US\$ for his father, Mr. Mai Tan. "I regret that I did not get to know you earlier on, but I have heard of your reputation ever since I ordained

as a novice. You are a senior monk who is spreading the teachings of Buddhism and one who is highly respected by the Buddhists of Luang Prabang and Buddhists in general", he wrote.

In some of their letters to Pha Khamchan, the authors wrote about their impression of him and expressed their gratefulness for the replies they received. Pha Khamlor Rattanañano, for example, wrote the following in one of his letters sent from a Lao temple in Auckland, New Zealand:

Wat Lao Auckland. 11.9.87. With high respect to Sathu Nyai. I have already received your letter with all the pictures. [...] One thing which I will never forget is the kindness you have always shown to me and I always pray to Sathu Nyai [for all sorts of kind help] like to a deity which helps human beings that need a refuge [...].³⁶

Pha Khamlor Rattanañano was a senior Lao monk from Luang Prabang who left the country in the early 1980s. He did not emigrate for political reasons, but to further his studies and to achieve a higher living standard. First, he moved to New Zealand and finished his bachelor degree there. He was the first Lao Buddhist monk who established Lao Buddhism in New Zealand and founded a Lao Buddhist temple there at 7 Pershore Place, Mangere, Auckland. Then he moved to Australia and lived there for several years. He disrobed in Australia in the late 1990s and then moved to the United States where he now lives in Texas and has obtained the degree of Doctor of Chiropractic from Parker College of Chiropractic in Dallas, Texas.

BUDDHISTS TRANSFERRED THEIR ESTATE TO THE MONASTERY

Not only did Lao Buddhism play an important part in the life of the Lao Diaspora, but the Lao Diaspora also played a role for Lao Buddhism within Laos, e.g., by supporting Lao monasteries through donations.

One letter of a Lao from northern Thailand is quite different from the others, although of special importance. It is a document offering the right of ownership of a piece of land to Pha Khamchan as abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam. It was written in modern Lao and Thai scripts in Chiang Saen³⁷ district,

³⁶ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1987.017, the letter from the former Pha Khamlor Rattanañano.

³⁷ Concerning the Lao people who live in Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai province, a special mulberry paper manuscript is found in the collection of Pha Khamchan at Vat Saen Sukharam. This manuscript is 62 cm long and 23 cm wide and contains lists of more than 1.300 words. It is unclear where and by whom it was produced, as it does not have a colophon. It may have been brought to Luang Prabang by the Lao diaspora. Given

³⁵ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1998.021, the letter from Keo Watcharine.

Chiang Rai province, northern Thailand, and is dated 15 March 1983. Its text says:

Chiang Saen, on 15 March 1983. We, Nai [Mr.] Phieo and Nang [Mrs.] Thongsamut together with our descendants would like to donate a land which belongs to our personal estate which is located next to the southern wall of Vat Saen, Luang Prabang, to Sathu [Pha] Khamchan who is the president [abbot] of Vat Saen to merge it with the land of the Sangha [so that it] belongs to Vat Saen forever. I would like to dedicate the merit deriving from this offering, to those who were our benefactors, such as our parents who already passed away, and to all those to whom we have a karmic debt. Please give up retributions to each other. May we be rid of any maladies, perils, and be of strong health. May we develop our morality and give offerings for all time. Nibbāna paccayo hotu no [May this be a disposition to reach Nibbana]. [signed] Mr. Phieo Phongsavan, [signed] Thongsamut [This signature is written in Thai script].³⁸

This document is an important piece of evidence for the boundary of Vat Saen Sukharam in the period of Pha Khamchan and provides information regarding the wishes of Buddhists who performed acts of merit, even from abroad.

LAO OVERSEAS IN THE UNITED STATES

It has become clear that Lao Buddhism played an important role in the life of the Lao Diaspora. They

the close relations between Luang Prabang and Chiang Tung, especially via the flow of monks in both directions, it could also be possible that a Tai Khün monk from Chiang Tung came to Luang Prabang to help compiling this glossary. Cf. Archive Nr. BAD-13-2-063, the mulberry paper manuscript of Tai Khün.

³⁸ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1983.004. A story of this letter: this letter was given to Pha Khamchan by the author, Mr. Phieo Phongsavan, when he went to Chiang Saen for a visit to his relatives in 1983. After he returned to Luang Prabang, he gave it to Mrs. Chansuk who was his supporter and lived in the house in front of Vat Saen Sukharam and asked for her help to present this document to Mrs. Alin, who was a younger sister of Mr. Phieo Phongsavan and lived in a house next to the land, for her approval and agreement. Mrs. Alin did not agree, got very angry and accused Pha Khamchan of being a robber and confiscated this document. Pha Khamchan did not do or say anything but let the issue take its own course. In 1998, when Mrs. Alin was very old and became deaf and sightless, she believed that her bad health was a result of bad karma she made when she spoke badly of Pha Khamchan, a monk who strictly observes the 227 precepts. She repented her actions, stated that she agreed to transfer the land to Pha Khamchan without any conditions and asked Mrs. Chansuk to bring him the document. Later, this land was included in Vat Saen Sukharam's boundaries and Pha Khamchan built three adjunctive abodes (*kuti*) there in 2003. (Interview with Mr. Khampom Phongsavan on 20 September 2013, who was one of Pha Khamchan's attendants).

not only kept contact with the Buddhist monks in Laos, but also set up monasteries in their new countries. A letter from Pha Maha Padit Bhuddhagosako, sent via airmail from Vat Phouthapathane Lao, 15547 Temple Eve. La Puente, California, to Pha Khamchan at Vat Saen Sukharam Luang Prabang, Laos, reports on the religious practices of the Lao diaspora in California. Its report on the situation of the Lao diaspora and Lao monks in the United States is most revealing:

Vat Phutthapathān Lao temple, the United States of America, 23 December 1987. Sathu Nyai Lakham Viravisutthikhun, my dear friend whom I am missing, [I have already] received your letter dated 23 August 1987 [...] The behavior of Lao Buddhists is still as it was [in Laos], it did not change; they play, they eat, they have entertainment and they spend money just like before. [...] Some bought their own houses. [But] some have [financial] difficulties just like when they lived in their own country [in Laos]. [...] More people of the Lao diaspora live in California and Texas than in other states and I think the Lao diaspora lives in all fifty states. [...] There are more Lao monks living in California than in other states and there are nine Lao Buddhist temples in this state. [...] All in all, about fifty Lao monks live in America. The Lao monks ordained either in Laos, in Thailand or in the United States, in both the Mahanikaya and the Thammayut sect. [...] Nearly all monks [in America] (except myself) wear trousers and shirts inside and cover them with their robes, drive, wear hats, socks etc. They cook their own food (except when they are invited)[...].³⁹

According to Theravada Buddhist rules, which are very strictly interpreted in the local traditions of Laos and Thailand, practices such as wearing shirts and trousers, cooking and so on are prohibited in both countries. But overseas, Lao monks said they had to wear shirts because the weather was too cold; they legitimized the act of cooking by saying that lay people did not have time to serve meals to monks during the day as they had to work. Monks drove themselves for the same reason.⁴⁰ This contradicts the statement that “the behavior of Lao Buddhists is still as it was” and “did not change”, as the monks have significantly altered their behavior in a way which would be unacceptable in Laos. They justify these changes with the need to adapt to their new American culture. Another explanation might be that their standards of practice declined because they no longer live in a society that demands a strict adherence to the Vinaya. This would mean that

³⁹ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1987.030, the letter of Pha Maha Padit Bhuddhagosako.

⁴⁰ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1987.030, the letter of Pha Maha Padit Bhuddhagosako.

the society has an influence on the adherence (or non-adherence) of Buddhist monks to the Vinaya.

PHA KHAMCHAN TRAVELING TO VISIT THE LAO DIASPORA

In addition to his written correspondence with the Lao diaspora overseas, Pha Khamchan was invited by his relatives and Lao Buddhists who lived in foreign countries, including the United States, Canada, France, England, Germany, Australia and Thailand. In 1982, he was invited to visit France for six months and Australia for two months. Lao Buddhists in these countries collected 6,500 US dollars in cash and offered them to him as a donation for supporting the construction of monastic buildings in Laos. Pha Khamchan gave this money to Pha Say-samut Jotika Maha Thela (1927–1992), abbot of Vat Pa Phon Phao who was constructing a stupa on the mountain of the Phao forest known as *Santi Jedi* at Vat Pa Phon Phao (Viradhammo/Boulyaphonh 2004, 7).



Archive Nr. A1753R, Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela together with another Lao monk, chanting at a family house of the Lao diaspora in France in 1982. Chanting and having meals at private homes were his main activities during his visit to France and other European countries.

In 1997, he was invited to visit the Lao diaspora in the United States and Europe for four months. I found many photographs in the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang, letters from the Lao diaspora, a letter from Pha Khamchan and a note by Mr. Somnuek Thongphanit and his wife, Mrs. Kongkham Thongphanit, who were Pha Khamchan's followers, relating to this trip. Their letter was sent from Vientiane to Pha Khamchan at Vat Saen Sukharam after their return to Laos.

Vientiane, 10.7.97. Your Worship Sathu Nyai. Both of us who have had the good fortune to follow you on your traveling around the world from 13.3.97 to 7.7.97, for nearly four months, and [I] think that the time was sufficient for our visits to the USA, Canada, France, Allemagne [Germany], Belgique [Belgium], Italy and special states, such as Hawaii and Monaco. Sometimes we traveled safely by air-

plane and sometimes by cars, sometimes we spent our own money and sometimes it was supported by Buddhist laypersons. The most striking point is that a high percentage of the [Lao] people outside (of Laos) still have faith in Buddhism and due to your high morality you were able to cure a mad person to be a good person again, in San Diego (USA).⁴¹

Mr. Somnuek Thongphanit made a note about this event during their stay in San Jose, California. It is very interesting how Pha Khamchan cured a woman of a mental disorder by chanting. The text of the note is as follows:

In San Jose, there was a family with two children, the wife was a lunatic. They tried to have her cured in [many places in the United States, but] she did not get well. Their money was also used up. When her husband heard that a Buddhist monk came from Laos, [he] tried to find and meet him to ask him to spread loving kindness to his lunatic wife. When he found him, he explained the situation to [Pha Khamchan] who then agreed to spread loving kindness to her. Then he brought his wife to meet [Pha Khamchan]. When they met for the first time, she trembled and ran away to hide in the toilet. Mrs. Kongkham [the wife of Mr. Somnuek] soothed her and asked her to enter Buddhism, [Mrs. Kongkham soothed her for] at least 25' [minutes]. The lunatic person then came out of the toilet and paid respect to the monk [Pha Khamchan], she bended her head and then began to slowly look up to him. As long as Sathu Nyai had been chanting, she bended. Her face began to look refreshed. Sathu Nyai gave me [Somnuek] white cotton strings to tie to her hands. [He], then, advised the couple to believe in Buddhist moral [and] not to believe in any spirit or ghost; he also gave each of them a Buddha image [as an amulet] to hang around their necks. Thereafter, her husband sent me a letter saying that her lunacy has completely stopped.⁴²

The incident described in the letter shows that Pha Khamchan was able to perform deeds that would be understood as a magical healing by many Lao Buddhists. However, Pha Khamchan was not famous for having magical powers or healing abilities and tried to avoid revealing them. It is believed that a strong, well-trained mind and outstanding conduct would be necessary to perform such deeds. After chanting, Pha Khamchan gave the couple amulets. They were to encourage the couple to lead a

⁴¹ Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1997.012, the letter of Mr. Somnuek.

⁴² Archive Nr. BAD-02-0107, the note of Mr. Somnuek Thongphanit. In this note, Mr. Somnuek writes that Pha Khamchan had cured the lunatic woman in San Jose, while in the letter cited earlier (Archive Nr. BAD-12-1-1997.012) he recalls the event to have taken place in San Diego.

moral life. Lao people believe that they also provide a magical protection against accidents and misfortune.



Archive Nr. A1877R, Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela and his followers, the couple Mr. Somnuek and Mrs. Kongkham Thongphanit, in Hawaii, United States of America, during their first stop on 19 March 1997.



Archive Nr. A2041R; during his stay in Washington, D.C., Pha Khamchan visited the Lao family of Mrs. Chanmaly on 7 May 1997. Mrs. Chanmaly came from Ban Phonheuung village which is close to Vat Saen Sukharam; the members of her family are devout Buddhists, they highly respected Pha Khamchan and regularly offered him food.

Many members of the Lao diaspora invited Pha Khamchan to their houses to perform Buddhist ceremonies. They asked him for Buddhist chanting, sermons and blessings, and then offered him food for breakfast or lunch. During the day, they also invited their friends to join the ceremonies and ate together; the events were very much like the ones they had always performed in their home country, Laos. Many took portraits with Pha Khamchan on

such auspicious occasions and sent him copies; many of these can be found in the collection of Pha Khamchan in the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang.

CONCLUSION

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela was a central figure in connecting the Lao Sangha with the world. This began during his time as a novice, when he spent time in Thailand, studying and practicing, and continued throughout his life, be it through his support for young monks who wanted to study abroad, his work for the Lao Diaspora, his official visits to other Buddhist countries, or his hospitality towards foreign monks who visited his temple.

Lao monks and novices often went to study at famous monasteries in other countries, with the encouragement and support of their abbots. Others went to learn Vipassana practice with Thai meditation masters. This shows that the Lao Sangha was open to the outside world, especially Thailand, and many monks enjoyed a quite international education. After their return to Laos, many of them started their own Buddhist schools and developed the Buddhist education system in Laos. In the wake of the 2500th Buddha Jayanti, the Lao Buddhist Sangha began to develop friendships with other Theravada Buddhist countries. The delegation of the Lao Sangha practiced cultural diplomacy. They presented Lao Buddhism to Sri Lanka, India, and Burma. The visits improved the opportunities for Lao monks to study abroad. But there may have been also a political dimension to these visits, which is shown by the fact that the travels were conducted in cooperation with representatives from the respective states. The invitation of the delegation to Burma was even made by the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu himself, who also met them in Burma. Not only did the delegation go on an official visit to another Sangha, they also went on an official visit to another state.

A great number of Lao people who have migrated to foreign countries still believe in Buddhism, even if they live in non-Buddhist countries with a completely different society and culture. The Lao Sangha abroad still fulfills its duty to teach Lao people in Buddhism and Lao customs and culture. Even more importantly, they establish temples where a high number of Lao migrants live, thereby bringing Lao Buddhism to the outside world. The fact that many Lao people abroad were very eager to have Pha Khamchan visit their new countries does not mean that they do not respect the Lao monks abroad or that these monks were not able to fulfill their religious needs. The travels of Pha Khamchan to the Lao diaspora were very important to them, as they gave them the opportunity to make merit with a highly respected monk, which was a sort of con-

firmation for them that they continued to preserve their culture. Pha Khamchan was a monk they had already known and respected before they had left Laos.

In Laos, Pha Khamchan functioned as an interface between the Lao diaspora and their home country. It was only through him that many people were able to keep in contact with family they left behind. This is a very important social role Pha Khamchan fulfilled. Furthermore, he provided Lao people abroad with an opportunity to make merit, even if they did not have a Buddhist temple near their new home.

The personal letters provide an insight of the Lao Sangha and its international relationships. They expand the body of knowledge about Lao Buddhism in the form of primary sources which have not been used previously.

KHAMVONE BOULYAPHONH, M.A., is a researcher at the project “Lao Sangha and Modernity” which is part of DORISEA network, and PhD candidate at the Asia-Africa Institute (Prof. Dr. Volker Grabowsky), at Hamburg University in Hamburg. During 1999-2005, he, as a Buddhist monk and disciple of Pha Khamchan, studied Buddhism at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, and Business Administration at Krirk University, Bangkok, Thailand. He worked with Hans Georg Berger, a German photographer and writer, as researcher and project manager at the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang, Laos from 2006 to 2011, and with Hans Georg Berger and Dr. Wibke Lobo, Head of the South and South East Asia collections, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin at the Museum of Buddhist Arts and List of Endangered Art Objects in Monasteries in Luang Prabang from 2009 to 2011.

CONTACT khamvone.boulyaphonh@gmail.com

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Berger, Hans Georg. 2000. *Het Bun Dai Bun: Laos-Sacred Rituals of Luang Prabang*. London: Westzone.
- Berger, Hans Georg, and Boulyaphonh, Khamvone. 2013. *Khop chai thi liao boeng* [Thank you for looking]. Bangkok: Anantha Publishing.
- Brahmagunabhorn, Phra (P.A. Payutto). 2012. *Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World*. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.
- Brahmagunabhorn, Phra (P.A. Payutto). B.E. 2557 (2014). *Dictionary of Buddhism*. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.
- Evans, Grant. 2002. *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between*. Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books.
- Grabowsky, Volker, and Apiradee Techasiriwan. 2013. “Tai Lue Identities in the Upper Mekong valley: Glimpses From Mulberry Paper Manuscripts.” *Aséanie* 31.
- Holt, John Clifford. 2009. *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Japanese Buddhist Federation. 2004. “A Guide to Japanese Buddhism”. Accessed September, 2014. http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/guide-japanbuddhism6.pdf
- Kislenko, Arne. 2009. *Culture and Customs of Laos*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.
- Mettanando Bhikku Ven. 1991. *Meditator’s handbook*. Bangkok: The Dhammakaya Foundation.
- Pha One Keo Sitthivong, and Khamvone Boulyaphonh. 2010. *Great Monks of Luang Prabang 1854 to 2007*. New York and Luang Prabang: Anantha Publishing.
- Phra Athikan Somsack Sorado. 2009. “Handbook Vipassana Meditation for Beginners.” Bangkok: Print SMK Printing. Accessed September 2014. <http://www.justbegood.net/Downloads/e-books/vipassana-meditation-handbook.pdf>
- Sila Viravong. 2001. *Pavatsāt Lao Tae Būhān Thoen 1946 (History of Laos since ancient time until 1946)*. Vientiane: Manthatulat Printing.
- Stuart-Fox, Martin. 1998. *The Lao Kingdom of Lān Xāng: Rise and Decline*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Swearer, Donald K. 2010. *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*. Second edition. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press

The Publicity Sub-Committee of Chattha Sangayana and 2500th Buddhist Jayanti Celebrations Central Committee. 1956. *Chattha Sangayana 2500th Buddhist Jayanti Celebrations*. Rangoon.

Veidlinger, Daniel M. 2006. *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing, Orality, and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silk-worm Books.

Ven, Sayadej Vongsopha. 2013. "The Links between the Buddhism in Laos and Sri Lanka". The Paper presented at the International Conference on the 260th Anniversary of Establishment of Siam Nikaya in Sri Lanka. Accessed September 2014: <http://devaking.com/2013/08/12/the-links-between-the-buddhism-in-laos-and-sri-lanka>

Viradhammo/Khamvone Boulyaphonh. Pha. 2004. *Pha Lakkham Viravisutthikhun (Sathu Khamchan Virachitta Thera)*. Bangkok: October Printing.

BUDDHIST ARCHIVE OF PHOTOGRAPH IN LUANG PRABANG:

Photographs: A0856R; A2041R; B0313R; B0550R; B0703R; B1215R, B2483R; B1695R; B3079R; B3887; B4854R; C1612R - C1620R; C1657R; C1679R; C1627R - C1721R; H0264R; H0304.

Personal letters: BAD-12-1-1937.001; BAD-12-1-1952.001; BAD-12-1-1955.009; BAD-12-1-1967.008; BAD-12-1-1983.004; BAD-12-1-1987.017; BAD-12-1-1987.030; BAD-12-1-1997.010; BAD-12-1-1997.012; BAD-12-1-1998.021; BAD-12-1-2007.004; BAD-13-2-063.

Notes: BAD-01-0224; BAD-02-0002; BAD-02-0038; BAD-02-0107; BAD-05-0023; BAD-05-0023.