

The Relationship between Buddhist Monks and the Lay Population of Northern Cambodia

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1. Purpose, Method and Summary

In my previous paper⁽¹⁾ from my examinations of their mental health I suggested that for Cambodian people, who continue to suffer mental trauma due to their experiences of war, massacre and memories of the brutal and systematic attempts to destroy Buddhism (through the purging of monks from their wats and abolishing Buddhist activities and other traditional cultural activities), the rich social and cultural climate which remains stems largely from Buddhism and also traditional healing methods, which have had a continuing positive therapeutic effect that has helped soothe the mental trauma of the Cambodian people. I also identified the connection between monks and lay people, and pointed out the very close relationship between the lay people's daily routines and Buddhist wats.

This paper is the result of and my conclusions are drawn from meetings and interviews with the participants when I joined Buddhist ceremonies, especially in regards to young people's motivation to become Buddhist monks, also my observations of the participation of lay people in the Buddhist wats and organizational structure and the social activities of the Buddhist monks themselves. I found this motivation is due largely to the social and moral importance of Buddhism and Buddhist monks. Interviews in October 2002 were from Wat Prea An Kor Sai and Wat Boo of Siem Reap. I interviewed each of the Buddhist monks in the responsible position of No. 2 *piko* (*bhikkhu*) in wats and the lay people who managed the Buddhist wats. I also continued inquiring through e-mail until June 2003 Buddhist lay people

who specialize in education.

From these results, I could confirm that the Buddhist wat is an indispensable part of the residents' daily life. Residents strongly believe in Buddhism. The monks themselves play an integral part in the social and moral education and support the social development of the village people of northern Cambodia.

2. The Relationship between Buddhist Believer and Buddhist Monk at the Buddhist Ceremony

At “*Pchum Benn*”, a Buddhist ceremony which in 2002 was held in October, the lay people join in the ceremony at the wat from early morning. They hold a service for the spirits of all things. After the monks finish breakfast they meet with the lay people and accept the alms offered to the wat. In most cases, the members of the monks include a blood relation of each of the families of lay people attending. In return for the alms given, the monks lead a sutra-chant, after which the monks and the lay people have a relaxed and informal conversation. The sight of many small groups scattered around the wat chatting with their monks, *tachee* and *donchee* looks so natural and relaxed.

Women believers also give offerings to the wat, often coordinating the alms giving. They also cook for the lay people attending the ceremonies at the wat. Their faces appear confident and happy, suggesting they are giving their services freely and with a sense of purpose. From observing the above I could see that the action of donating to the wat made the lay people's hearts peaceful. In addition, due in many cases to the direct family link between the lay people and the family member turned monk, I can assume that this family connection helps to promote the growth and spread of Buddhism as it is handed directly down from generation to generation.

3. Members of the Wat , their Various Ranks, Ages and Functions

At Wat Prea Ankor Sai, the forty two members of *piko* keep 227 rules of Discipline (*Vinaya Piṭaka*). All are over the age of twenty one and mostly in their twenties. *Saminee* (novices or apprentice monks) keep 10 rules. They range in age from fifteen to twenty. There are a total of thirty one *saminee*. Both the *piko* and *saminee* ranks are referred to as monks. There are one hundred and fifty children (all boys) who keep 8 rules. They receive regular religious training. Some children live in the wat, others live at home.

The *achaa* is an elderly male believer who keeps 8 rules. He has a responsible position in the wat and is in charge of miscellaneous duties which help in the day to day running of the wat. There are five male *tachee* who keep 8 rules. *Tachee* tend to matters such as cleaning, construction, disposal of the deceased, accounting, ceremonies, meditation, preaching, sutra-chanting, meetings and assisting the monks. They do not live in the wat, instead traveling from their houses when required at the wat, especially during Buddhist festivals. *Donchee* are females who keep 8 rules. They don't have to have their heads shaved. They also live at home and are free to do business. In contrast, *donchee*, who keep 10 rules are mainly middle or old aged women who do have their heads shaved and wear white clothes. They live within the grounds of the wat. Incidentally, regarding the practicing of religious ritual, lay people keep 5 rules, four times a month on Buddha's Day. In Wat Boo there are ninty *saminee* members who have lived in the wat more than four years. Recently, fifteen have become *piko*.

The Ten rules of disciplines are as follows: no killing, no stealing, no adultery, no lying, no drinking wine, no eating at the wrong time, no listening to music or watching dancing, no decorating the body or wearing ornaments, no sleeping in big or high beds, no keeping money and jewels. Following in Table 1 are the ranks, ages, and the number of rules of Discipline which they must keep.

Table 1

<i>piko</i>	more than 21 years male	227 rules
<i>saminee</i>	15-20 old years male	10 rules
<i>achaa</i>	middle aged or elderly male	8 rules
<i>tachee</i>	middle aged or elderly male	8 rules
<i>donchee</i>	middle aged or elderly female	8 or 10 rules
children	boys	8 rules

Monks (*piko* and *saminee*) who keep 10 rules according to Discipline cannot eat meals except some permitted drinks in the afternoon (drinks such as milk, oil, honey bee, sugar, tea, coffee, candy are acceptable however monks cannot drink coconut juice and fruit juice). In contrast, children living in the wat are permitted to eat supper and snacks in the afternoon. I think this is reasonable because children who are growing require a lot of nourishing food.

4. Pre-requisites to be Eligible and Reasons to Want to Become a *Piko*

To be eligible to become a *piko* applicants must meet the following pre-requisites: (1) they must be over twenty one years old. (2) they must have attended educational institutions including Buddhism High School. (3) they must have the ability to integrate residents into the development of the region (mostly the village community). (4) they must be able to provide educational tuition (at school) and generally within the local region. (5) they must attend a ceremony of ordination, where they receive the *upasampadā*.

The following reasons for becoming a monk are extracted from the interviews with responsible monks in their twenties (*pikos*) and early thirties from two different wats and also another person (37 years old) who is now an NGO specialist and formerly a monk. According to these men, the reasons for becoming a monk include: to deepen their faith, to study Buddhist customs and ritual, for self-improvement, to benefit their family, to allow themselves to continue educational study, to withdraw from their worldly life, because

they wish to live peacefully, to follow the wishes of their family, to form a stronger connection with Buddhism, to help reduce their family's economic problems, so they can receive free education, because they want to study foreign languages without charge, to achieve their dream, to conform to the wishes of their family (for example: regarding the Buddhist custom of shaving the head of a boy who is elected by relatives before cremation), etc.

From the above, I can see that for the lay persons, becoming a *saminee* has practical benefits in regards to education and daily living costs. Also, I could see welfare considerations, such as orphan aid administered by the wat. From the point of view of the monks I interviewed, the reasons for *saminee* becoming *piko* were: their age and the will to become a *piko*.

5. Community Activities, Services and Functions of the Buddhist Wat

Services provided for the community by the wat include Buddhist ceremonies, meditation, counseling, chanting of sutra and preaching at the lay person's house, burials and burial services, etc. The monks are also invited to lay people's houses to celebrate happy events and also in times of trouble. When believers offer alms to them, the monk or *achaa* will chant for the believer to promote happiness, prosperity, success, good health, etc. For the dying, monks offer consolation, reminding them that the body is needless, also that it does not belong to the dying person, and helping them to concentrate on *Bodhi* theory. In regards to "traditional healing", elderly monks tend to the sick using herbal medicine, magic, sorcery and administering "*Bali* blow"—blowing on the patient.

Through the following activities, services and functions of the Buddhist wat is connected strongly and inseparably to the local community. Specifically: working to revive and develop the local economy (through farming, etc), enlightenment education (fostering human respect etc.) to improve moral education, foreign language education and management of primary schools and both middle and high schools. The wat also makes

dormitories for children, particularly orphans, and also temporary dormitories for lay people, sanitariums for the sick, libraries, storage for cultural heritage items and provide consultation on disputes and petty legal matters.

6. The Levels of Administration Governing Wats

The wat's management organization is incorporated into the administration of the province and the country. The top monk of Siem Reap province is appointed by the country's Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs and the provincial governor. Under the top monk there are six responsible monks. Namely: (1) the person responsible for managing and leader of the monks. (2) the person responsible for the laws governing monks. (3) the person responsible for spreading Buddhism, Buddhist education and ruling over instances of breaches of rules of Disciplines. (4) the assistant to the head responsible monk. (5) the person responsible for management, documentation, etc. (6) the secretary for the top monk.

7. Enlightenment of Residents, Particularly in Regards to the Instruction of Morals

Following are parts of the introduction from the guidelines on moral instruction that are used by Maha Phathaka Phathako at Prea Ankor Sai. The guidelines map out the duties that people have as humans: Duties as parents, children, teachers and students, and as husbands and wives. Also, the duties of a close friend, an employer and employee, etc. It also lists prohibited and evil acts. Specifically: drinking alcohol, going out at night, walking for leisure, gambling, fighting, insulting someone, etc. It gives clear and unbending rules of conduct for the local residents and the community. The monk speaks on the radio every morning extolling moral virtues.

When we look at the above list, a few are from Buddhist doctrine,

however we can surmise that they are in line with accepted moral codes for social behavior and based on accepted societal standards for behavior of residents within the local community. The altruistic base of the abovementioned guidelines and list—doing the good and right thing during one's daily life and fulfilling one's role in society, appears to be synonymous with Buddhist thinking and lifestyle.

Five roles of the Buddha's lay disciples are as follows. (1) Buddha's lay disciples should know that you must have merciful physical act. (2) Buddha's lay disciples—must have merciful verbal act. (3) Buddha's lay disciples—must have merciful mental act. (4) Buddha's lay disciples—must not close the door, you must receive virtuous persons. (5) Buddha's lay disciples—must support the four requisites in Buddhism. Six roles of the brahman priest are: (1) Brahman priest should know that you must forbid family members from doing bad deeds. (2) Brahman priest—must guide the family members into doing good deeds. (3) Brahman priest—must be kind to family members. (4) Brahman priest—must encourage family members to listen to the Dharma. (5) Brahman priest—must enlighten listeners to the meaning of Dharma. (6) Brahman priest—must show the good way to the nirvana. (These were written by the monk of Prea An Kor Sai.)

8. Considerations and Conclusions

Continuing on from research for previous papers I have written, I have observed and learned about the societal work of wats, and the daily routine of monks. Also I have seen the respect given to wats and monks by the lay people and their heartfelt offerings to the wats and monks. I conducted interviews to find the reasons for the popularity of the Buddhist monk's lifestyle with the younger generations, some of whom choose to become monks themselves. From these interviews I found that in addition to spiritual and lifestyle reasons, young people join the wat for practical reasons as well, such as access to basic education, and higher education, welfare and support

in their daily life. This information I see as evidence of Buddhism substantially supporting social morals as well as being inseparably linked with the daily workings of the local community's economy rather than simply the Buddhist wat existing to spout dogma alone.

Next, I will try to briefly compare this "hands on" style to Japanese Buddhism. Prior to the Meiji Period and before the "modernization" of Japan, social development, education, welfare, moral guidance and medical treatment were often handled by the temples. However, in the current "modern" Japan, except in a few cases, active participation in the community is limited to sutra-chanting at funerals or memorial services. This appears to be one of the symptoms of the modernization. However, I have no time in this paper to delve deeply into the history and Buddhism in Japan. There are many schools and welfare groups managed by religious bodies, but it is not so easy to see directly their connection with Buddhism because of their complex administration according to Japanese law. Japanese organization of society itself into a modernized, urbanized and industrialized and westernized form occurred from the Meiji period onward. In addition to business being heavily influenced by western culture, Japanese thinking has also changed due to outside contact, particularly since the Second World War to today. After the war, the democratic constitution imposed on Japan prohibited religion within the education system. This was as a reaction to the nationalized religious organization that existed prior to the war. The separation of religion from the education system has had an effect on the modern perception of religion. However, I believe that there has been little or no change within the deeper Japanese mentality⁽²⁾.

In contrast to modern Japan, in the north part of Cambodia, at Siem Reap's wats, activities are closely connected with residents' daily life from birth to death. This is a traditionally social culture, whose heart is Buddhism. It all but stopped beating under the Pol Pot regime's ruthless suppression of Buddhism, but has since been revived and revitalized. I pointed out earlier the rigid rules relating to the education of morality, some of which are taken

directly from Buddhist doctrine. However, most are practical guides for living considerately and morally within the modern, yet traditional village community. There are some western students who consider that the societal works of southern Buddhism are new actions by socially engaged Buddhism⁽³⁾. Rather, I consider that engaged Buddhism is an extension of social activities that Buddhism has continued since the period before modernization. Buddhism has a history of always finding new ways.

In south-eastern Asia's underdeveloped and poverty stricken countries, there has been a wave of cultural globalism. However, including Japan, almost nothing will change the fundamental base of the historical cultural climate^{(2),(4)}. I recommend that if we don't respect and take into consideration Cambodian traditional culture, which has as its center Buddhism, any economic or welfare support by developed countries will not bear fruit.

Acknowledgement

During my interviewing with monks and others, Mr. Van Kamol, a Cambodian specialist translated my English into Khmer. Moreover, according to my inquiries he has continued interviewing monks up to and including now. Without his assistance this research could not have been accomplished.

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