

The Role of the Leaders of the Sangha in Preservation

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Introduction

The close relationship that pertains between lay people and the Sangha is a notable feature of Thai Buddhist culture. Monks at all levels—including assistant abbots, abbots and ecclesiastical officials at the regional level—all depend on lay people for their support, just as lay people look to the Sangha, in their capacity as advisors to, and leaders of, the local community, to discharge certain functions. In particular, they look to the Sangha to preserve the cultural heritage of Thailand, and fervently hope that the Sangha will prudently fulfill its duties, especially those involving the preservation of folk wisdom, customs and culture, ancient sites, ancient artifacts and objects of art¹ that are to be found throughout the various regions of the country.

The Duty of Sangha Ecclesiastical Officials

According to the constitution 2540BE/1997, all Thai people have an equal duty to protect the nation, the maintenance of art and culture, and folk wisdom (Article 69 and 81).² The Sangha is, in addition, governed by the Sangha Act (No. 2) of 2535BE/1992CE, which is based, in turn, on the Sangha Act of 2505BE/1962CE. The Sangha Act defines the legal framework for developing rules and regulations, and includes clear statements of essential points (c.f. Article 15.3), giving the Supreme Sangha Council the authority to define high-level policy. Ecclesiastical officials throughout the country are expected to carry out their duties in accordance with the following six areas:

1. To govern the Sangha smoothly and efficiently.
2. To support and prepare an appropriate curriculum for monks.
3. To secure and distribute funding for education.
4. To spread Buddhism, for example, by giving public Dhamma talks and publishing books.
5. Construction: the construction of permanent structures which are orderly, attractive, accurate and in keeping with Thai architectural traditions. When there is reconstruction or restoration, the work must follow the principles of academic research and avoid the destruction of old artworks.
6. Social welfare: alleviating the suffering and cultivating the well-being of people in ways that are expressed concretely, for example, by providing assistance during disasters involving floods, fire and drought.

Monks at all levels have additional duties. Besides providing spiritual leadership, they should also perform such duties as chanting, studying the Dhamma and Vinaya, and developing the mind, and should have a broad vision and up-to-date knowledge, as well as institute networks aimed at sharing knowledge and information. However, one of their major duties, and one which should be diligently pursued, is that of acting, as specified in the Sangha Act, as architect, designer, builder and conservator.

Buddhism and Preservation

The Thai word *anuraks* (preservation) appears in many places in Buddhist texts. Linguistically, it may be derived from the Sanskrit root³ *rakṣ*, plus the prefix *anu*. The root *rakṣ* means “to guard”, “to protect”, the prefix *anu* having many different senses, but, in the present context, probably that of “continuing”, or “on-going”. The term *anuraks* therefore means “to care of”, “to look after”, or “to maintain”. In its Thai usage, it similarly implies maintenance, though in the context of the Dhamma it has a broader meaning, including care and development—care for that which has arisen, and the development of that which has arisen to reach its highest capacity. Buddhism cultivates and preserves (*anuraks*) the truth, teaches the love of truth, the protection of truth, seeing everything, with a neutral mind, as it really is (*yathābhūtaṃ*).

In the context of the four right efforts (*sammāvāyāma*) of the eightfold path, the word *anurakṣ* occurs as *anurakkhaṇāpadhāna*, or “the effort to maintain”, that is, to maintain and increase wholesome states which have already arisen. When the same word is used in the context of craftsmanship, especially past creations, *anuraks* denotes caring for and increasing the worth of those creations. In summary, Buddhism advocates the care and preservation of things in accordance with the way they really are.

Preservation Requires Prior Knowledge

According to the teachings of Buddhism, there are three sources of knowledge.

Reflective knowledge: knowledge that is acquired by oneself, without the necessity of learning it from others. This is the knowledge that results from one’s own investigation of cause and effect.

Learned knowledge: knowledge gained from others, through listening to their teachings, or through tradition.

Insight knowledge: knowledge gained from experience and training, or from personal reflection, together with learning from others until one can practice.

This may be illustrated by the fact that young children, adult lay people, and accountants, for instance, all have different levels of understanding money. Small children only have knowledge from memory of immediate experience (*sanya*). They know that money is round or rectangular, whereas ordinary adults possess additional knowledge, derived from reflection and understanding (*vinyana*). The latter also know that money is a conventional representation of value in specified amounts and that it can be legally used to pay debts, but here their understanding ceases. They do not possess the deeper knowledge, derived from the details (*panya*) known to accountants and financial workers, who are fully conversant with the banking processes, and such things as international exchange rates.

Sangha Officials require all three kinds of knowledge, but it is insight knowledge (*panya*) that should, above all, be brought into play. The more experience they have, the more the work of preservation will proceed with increased efficiency and effectiveness. The preservation of any artifact calls for full knowledge of that branch of the arts to which it

belongs. When artifacts are gathered for preservation, a catalogue, together with photographs and so forth, must be kept, right from the outset, so as to built up a record of the scientific methods used in their restoration and reconstruction, which will be of assistance in their long term preservation.

Case Studies

1. Wat A. An important royal temple in Bangkok had, for example, a very old Buddha image in the Sukhothai style. Being near a strategic location, however, the wat was bombed in World War II and, except for one stupa, was severely damaged. The Buddha images that survived the bombing were relocated in nearby wats and in the provinces. When Wat A came to be rebuilt, the temple authorities did not have the right to demand the return of the ancient Buddha images to their former sites, since they had no records detailing their characteristics and documenting their ownership. The only records of the images lay in the stories handed down by the previous generation.
2. Wat B. Evidence was found, in a level 3 royal temple, of pillars marking the boundaries of a surrounding *mahāsīmā*, similar to those of the Dhammayut complete with a *nadisīmā* (moat), and thereby indicative of the fact that the high wisdom of a senior thera of the Mahanikaya had been recognized. Upon further investigation, a royal edict was found, bearing the signature of King Rama V, granting a consecrated area for the *mahāsīmā*. As a result, the wat was elevated to level 2 status, with the honorary designation of *sathit mahasimaram* appended to its name.

Having considered these cases, how might the leaders of the Sangha approach preservation? Let us survey certain things nearby. There are, for example, stupas, chedis, ancient teaching halls, footprints of the Buddha, ancient book cabinets, steles, murals, cloth banners, ancient medical texts, memorial items, ancient Buddha images, all of which have been created with the high level of craftsmanship for which Thai artisans are renowned. There may also be books which are over 50 years old and which have been neglected to the point that termites, or humidity, are destroying them. If so, what should we do about it?

Ancient Palm-leaf Manuscripts

Palm-leaf manuscripts—*samut thai* and *samut kloi* texts—together with stone inscriptions, are written in Pali, Sanskrit and Old Thai, but in ancient scripts that few can now read, such as *Devanāgarī*, *Khom*, *Mon*, *Thai Noi* or *Tua Dhamm*.

Although these palm-leaf manuscripts have great historical value, few have a useable life or more than one to three hundred years. If they are well cared for—for example in a *ho trai* (scriptorium) surrounded by water, or in an air-conditioned room—they may last a little longer, say for four or five hundred years. These often exhibit highly accomplished and beautiful calligraphy, accompanied by ornate illustrations. Although they do not last long, they have a high value and may be considered works of art. Any item which is more than one hundred years old and is classified as art, as historic, or as something which records a significant event, may be considered an antiquity.

A good example of the preservation of these manuscripts is provided by the Isan scholar named Chao Khun Phra Ariyanuwat, who resides at Wat Mahachai in the Maha Sarakham province. He has established a folk museum especially for historic palm-leaf manuscripts. His goal is to make these manuscripts available for study and for the general public. Chao Khun Phra Ariyanuwat began with the conviction that:

When the manuscripts have been gathered, we should establish a Center for the Care and Preservation of the Literature of the Northeast, as a regional and local resource for research. Once the Center becomes known, it will be easy for both domestic and international students to come and conduct research in the folk culture. The director must, without fail, transliterate the manuscripts into contemporary scripts. Otherwise the Center will be no more than a warehouse for old books.

General guidelines for the preservation of these manuscripts are that one should first collect and assemble the individual palm-leaves of each manuscript and then tie them together, in order to prevent their becoming separated again. It is quite possible that the original string on which they were threaded will have deteriorated, when it will need to be replaced, in a scientific manner, with a fresh one. This should be followed by an examination of the manuscript and the generation of an initial catalogue recording a description of the manuscript and its contents. The manuscript should then be wrapped in cloth and stored in a cabinet in a climate-controlled room. Finally, it is important that the item be registered with the Government Department of Fine Arts, or else donated to the National Library—a gesture which would be deeply appreciated.

Conclusion

Valuable items are no different to things kept in a warehouse, so long as we remain ignorant of their true value. The leaders of the Sangha must play an important role in the preservation of the Thai national heritage. As the National Education Act of 2542 BE/2000 CE specifies, all education, whether within the system, outside the system, or self-directed, should become a lifelong process for each person. The Sangha should prepare itself so as to enable itself to carry out its role in accordance with the articles concerning the duties of religious institutions⁵. We may no longer ignore this.

The preservation of historic artifacts can also contribute to education. The Japan, England, America-Australia, Thailand and Holland War Museum (The JEATH Museum) at Wat Chaichumphon Chanasongkhram in Kanchanaburi province, has, for example, has a collection of weapons, and other materials, from World War II, which are displayed to demonstrate the hatefulness of war. The wat receives income from the Westerners, Japanese and others who visit the museum. A Thai entrepreneur in the private sector has since copied the idea. This provides a good example of how we could promote tourist interest in Buddhist culture and, at the same time, generate a moderate but sufficient income for its preservation.

Another good example is in Suphan Buri, Phra Thammamahawiranuwat, Advisor to Ecclesiastical Governor of Suphan Buri, has had the idea of preserving ancient sites, objects and artworks. This is something concrete that can be done in a set time-frame.

However, not all preservation work proceeds smoothly and free of obstacles. The preservation and restoration of local tradition, from *phleng isao*, *phleng choi*, *phleng prob Kai*, *phleng phuangmalay*, *ramthon* through to making a sand *chedi* and telling the *Vessantara* story—thus encouraging the people to return to an interest in their former customs and traditions—is another matter. In the midst of the torrent of Western culture that is inundating the best of what we once had, the state, on its own, does not have sufficient resources or energy to support the work of the preservation of folk traditions. The preservation of local customs therefore requires the cooperative support of both the state and the private sector, if these are to be maintained and made available to a wider audience, thus lessening the gap between home and wat.

The task challenging the Sangha is therefore that of providing monks with training and education in order to provide them with a proper understanding of all matters associated with the job of preservation. This will then enable them to communicate this throughout all regions of society, resulting in people gaining a deeper appreciation of the value of things around them. It is vital that the Department of Fine Arts works in cooperation with the Sangha, thereby creating an opportunity for the monks, who imbue such Buddhist artifacts with the highest value, to become the vanguard in a return to a shared desire for the protection and preservation of Thai heritage, thus setting a good example for generations to come.

¹ An object, or work, of art is defined as a thing of high artistic value skillfully produced through craftsmanship.

² Article 69: “Individuals have the duty of protecting the country by serving as soldiers, of paying taxes, of supporting the government, of becoming educated, of guarding, protecting and preserving national art, culture and folk wisdom, and of preserving natural resources and the environment, as defined by law.”

Article 81: “The state shall establish educational facilities, and support the establishment of private educational facilities for the increase of knowledge and virtue, shall pass laws pertaining to national education and the adjustment of education to the changing realities of economy and society, shall build and cultivate knowledge, an appropriate political conscience for participating in a democratic society with a monarch as head of state, supporting research in the arts and sciences, expediting the development of science and technology for the development of the country, the advancement of the teaching profession, and promote the folk wisdom, art and culture of the country.

³ According to the Sanskritist, Professor Choosak Thipkesorn, based on his studies of ancient steles and palm-leaf documents, about 40 per cent of Thai words are derived from Sanskrit, and about 15 per cent from Pali.

⁴ Estimated by Professor Choosak Thipkesorn, Sanscritist regarding the influence of Pali and Sanscrit on Thai, based on his studies of ancient steles and palm leaf documents.

⁵ National Education Act of 2542 BE/1999 CE concerning religious institutions. For example, Article 9 concerns structure, Article 12 the right to establish educational facilities, Article 14 the right to state funding, Article 18 primary education, Article 23 emphasises knowledge with virtue, Article 27 applies to folk wisdom, Article 58 to funding from multiple sources, and Article 61 to the allocation of funds.