

Transnational Network of the Shan Sangha: A Case Study of Phra Khammai

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ในโลกแห่งโลกาภิวัตน์ การอพยพข้ามชาติเป็นปรากฏการณ์ทั่วไปที่เกิดขึ้น โดยเทคโนโลยีการขนส่งและการสื่อสารที่ทันสมัย พระสงฆ์ก็อยู่ในกลุ่มผู้อพยพที่เดินทางข้ามพรมแดนรัฐชาติเพื่อไปศึกษาต่อ หรือปฏิบัติหน้าที่ทางพุทธศาสนาประจำวัดพุทธในหลายแห่งทั่วโลก บทความชิ้นนี้นำเสนอกรณีศึกษาพระคำหมาย หรือที่รู้จักกันแพร่หลายในฉายาพระธรรมสามิซึ่งเป็นพระไทใหญ่ จากรัฐฉานของประเทศพม่า ผู้เป็นนักการศึกษาและผู้เผยแผ่ศาสนาพุทธ (ธรรมทูต) ในระดับนานาชาติ โดยสร้างเครือข่ายคณะสงฆ์ข้ามพรมแดนประเทศ ข้ามความเป็นชาติพันธุ์และนิกาย บทความนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าเครือข่ายได้ขยายตัวไปอย่างมากโดยมีการเชื่อมต่อความสัมพันธ์แบบใหม่กับคนกลุ่มใหม่ การเชื่อมต่อถูกสร้างขึ้นโดยความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบุคคลที่สังกัดกลุ่มต่างๆ ซึ่งอาจมีความแตกต่างกันในด้านอัตลักษณ์และเป้าหมาย การเชื่อมต่อใหม่ๆ ในลักษณะนี้ทำให้เครือข่ายมีความหลากหลายและมีความเป็นพลวัต

คำสำคัญ: พระสงฆ์ไทใหญ่, การอพยพข้ามชาติ, เครือข่ายศาสนา

Abstract

In this globalized world, transnational migration is a common phenomenon, which has been facilitated by the advance of technology in transportation and communication. Buddhist monks are among migrants who travel across national borders to further their Buddhist studies and to set up Buddhist centers with the purpose of serving people in different parts of the world. As a case study, this paper has chosen to investigate a Buddhist transmigrant monk, Phra Khammai, who teaches Buddhism (dhammatuta) internationally as a Shan educationist. This paper seeks to present Phra Khammai, also widely known as Venerable Dhammasami, in the way he has formed a Sangha network across national/ethnic/sectarian boundaries. This paper demonstrates how the network has been expanding as new connections have been made with new groups of people. These connections are made via interpersonal relations with many other groups, which bear different identities and goals. As a result, this new expanding network has become increasingly diverse and dynamic.

Keywords: Shan Sangha, Transnational migration, Religious network

Introduction

In this globalized world, transnational migration is a common phenomenon, which has been facilitated by the high technology in transportation and communication. Religious proponents have also joined the transnational flow and have served as migrants who travel across national borders to continue their studies or work in many places around the world. In fact, missionaries, monks or priests of many religions have travelled across national borders to spread their creeds since long time ago. However, amidst a displaced and oppressive environment, the creation of transnational religious network is now becoming more intensive in response to the growing needs for spiritual fulfillment.

This paper attempts to show how Phra Khammai, widely known as Venerable Dhammasami, has spread the words of the Buddha internationally and formed Shan Sangha Network as an educationist. He has initiated two associations of Buddhist universities and is still the central figure running them. He has said that “this is for the Buddhist world. For the Tai, my work is to inspire and build confidence among the Tai sangha so that they achieve their potentials.” Being a pioneer who first embarked on Ceylon Journey to Sri Lanka in the early 1990s, Phra Khammai obtained two master degrees and an M.Phil (Master of Philosophy) in Buddhist studies. Subsequently, he brought over two hundred monks to study abroad, particularly in Sri Lanka, Thailand, India and some other countries. This action became an inspiration, which has further spread to the Tai Sangha in Yunnan and Arunachal Pradesh in India.¹ Hence, Shan Sangha network has been expanded on the basis of education and dissemination of Buddhism worldwide.

The model of a computer network in which each node is connected to form a network can be used to describe the formation of a Sangha network

(Castells, 2000; Lin 1999, 2008). In this case, nodes are in the form of Buddhist centers founded by Phra Khammai and his disciples. In 2004, the Oxford Buddha Vihara (OBV) was established at Oxford, in the UK. Subsequently, in 2008, a branch of OBV was established in Singapore to add as a node to the original OBV. Two years later, in 2010, another branch of OBV was founded in Malaysia, which further subscribes as an additional node to the primary network. The information has thus flowed through the linkages of network activities. The network is now growing through the expansion of its nodes and the establishment of the centers in the UK as well as in other Southeast Asian countries by their supporters and well-wishers.

The Shan Sangha network is initially started with pilgrimage to reach an imaginative goal according to what Victor Turner (1973) described. Moreover, the transnational journeys to India and Sri Lanka in the early 1990s have sought to upgrade the quality of Buddhist education. All these centers aim to provide Theravada Buddhist teachings and Vipassana meditation retreats on a monthly or weekly basis for those who are interested. Some other centers such as Khruba Boonchum Buddhagaya Tai Temple (KBBT) located in Bodhgaya and Benares (Varanasi) in India are not initiated by Phra Khammai but they are closely related to OBV and are considered as a part of Phra Khammai's network. Although Shan Sangha in Sri Lanka does not have any official center til the present, it remains as a strong base and serves as the most important center of education and learning for the Shan monks. Through this network, they have gained social respect, prestige, acceptance and recognition. Moreover the good reputation that they have earned has been transformed as transnational social capital to further strengthen and advance the growth of their network internationally.

While topology is a structuring method of the computer network based on connectivity, transnational networking here in this research is a means to socialize and mobilize the monks across national boundaries. It is also a form of social movement that aims to upgrade the Shan Sangha's Buddhist educational level and to revitalize the Shan identity. According to Diani's definition, social movements are "networks of informal interactions, between a plurality of individuals, groups or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity" (Diani, 2003: 301).

The connection of this Shan Sangha is, among others, based on "Shan identity", especially in the revival of the Shan literacy. Many social science theories on identity have informed us that our consciousness of identity can arise out of political and cultural oppression, conflicts, issues of selfhood, and formation of nationhood. In terms of ethnicity, it is a well-documented fact that Shan identity has grown up in the war-torn region in the Shan State, which has experienced much conflicts and oppressions for many decades. Phra Khammai is among the 'oppressed', and his interaction with monks from other ethnic groups are the basis for gaining 'ethnic consciousness.' On the other hand, the authority has been portraying Burma/Myanmar as a 'melting pot' whereby all ethnic and cultural variants are assimilated (Gordon, 1964). Such propaganda has invited a strong objection from many different ethnic groups.

In the transnational network, cyber space also plays an important role as the connecting sites. Jim Taylor's (2003) study reveals that Cyber-Buddhism has arisen in response to the need for mobility of monasteries in Bangkok. It is a network in the form of rhizome-metaphor, which is contesting on the ground of religion-political institutions as well as the legitimating, normalizing power of the state.

While other scholars describe this phenomena as network society (Castells, 2000), or a form of Buddhist revivalism (Cohen, 2002) or transnational Theravada network (Panyagaew, 2010), I call this a “networking sangha”. Drawing from these scholars and others, I take particular interest in Stuart Chandler’s (2002) arguments on Master Xingyun’s positive appraisal of the religious implications of globalization. He states that in the post-modern world, people’s primary referent for communal identity may very well revert from national to religious symbols and myths increasingly. This study, on the other hand, examines the way by which Phra Khammai has initiated Shan Sangha in the early 1990s in response to the need of upgrading the Shan Sangha education and their status. This study investigates how the network is being expanded internationally through their societal roles as well as their religious and ethnic identities.

Socio-Political Context and Sangha Organization

From 1962 to late 1980s, Myanmar, then Burma was solely ruled by a single political party called the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Headed by General Ne Win, the party ruled with an iron fist and turned Burma into one of the poorest countries in the world. From a socio-political perspective, the country adopted the “Burmese way of socialism.” Gen Ne Win also carried out a reform of Buddhism (purification of Buddhism and Sangha organization) (Matthews, 1993). Under this policy, nine *nikayas* (sects) were recognized and grouped together according to their lineage and similarity in terms of practice. In Shan State, before the Sangha was organized under the term of ‘purification’, Yuan sect was one of the largest *nikaya* with concentration in the east trans-Salween region.

Prior to 1990s, the Shan Sangha was seen as non-productive group of cleric organization in the eyes of general public. The Shan monks who had completed monastic education in graduate level (BA) were only handful. Therefore, the monks were not well respected by the well-to-do people. On the other hand, the Burmese monks were more advanced in terms of monastic education. As a result, they earned more respect in comparison with the Shan monks. However, the Shan Sangha has kept on playing a crucial role in conserving Shan identity by opening classes to individuals at their monasteries in order to teach the reading and writing of Shan languages. The reason behind this was that the government had prohibited the learning of Shan languages in the public schools as they were not recognized officially.

The decline of monastic education in the Shan State was, however, based not only on the state imposing its ideology but also based on the impact that had been extended and applied to the country as a whole (Dhammasami, 2004: 1-2, 7). The specially designed monastic curriculum and the method implemented were far from the majority of the population. Therefore, secular and monastic curricula were seen as heading for a different direction. The division was so great for the monastic curriculum offered neither English nor Mathematics courses. Hence, it was useless for a monk who wanted to return to a lay life. Practically, he could not even be a teacher in a public school.

Since Burma's liberation from the British rule in 1948, the country has been plagued with civil wars in many different ethnic states, such as Shan, Karen, Kachin, Kayah and Arakan. The situation in many parts of the Shan State, especially in the central and eastern regions, was dubbed as "black region." This was due to the civil wars or fighting between the government army and Shan army. Many armed groups or Shan liberation movements

were also recruiting fighter soldiers from time to time and many of the young men fled to the cities. In order to avoid recruitment as Shan soldiers, many young boys joined the monastic order. However, due to a lack of the aforementioned education provided in monasteries, many of them ended up in either disrobing or migrating to work as waging labors in Thailand for their survival.

Mathew Walton has argued that Burman-ness as a privileged identity, comprising language, cultural and religious aspects, has resulted in Burman dominance and institutionalization of Burman privileges (Walton, 2013). Ethnic people are conscious about their 'races' as they feel intimidated when their identities are exposed. In the eyes of historians and students of culture, language has served as a major building block of nations (Safron, 1999). Language alone does not give rise to nationalism. In elaboration, Safron opined that if language was the sufficient ingredient of nationalism (defined as a politically mobilizing and state-seeking ideology), then there would be several thousand sovereign states instead of the existing two hundred.

Phra Khammai's Life Story

Phra Khammai is a native of Laikha, which was a former principedom city state but it is now under the administration of southern Shan State, Myanmar. He was ordained as a young novice in his hometown at Sri Mangala Monastery, a branch of Yangon based Mahasi Meditation Center. Before he was an ordained novice, he was known as Khammai. He was educated in leading Buddhist institutes in Burma, such as Kangyi Pariyatti Institute, Yawnghwe, Shan State and Sasana Mandaing Pali University, Pegu. He speaks many languages such as Shan, Burmese, Thai, Sinhalese, English and Pali.

According to a close friend of Phra Khammai who was a fellow young novice studying at Yawnghwe in Shan State in the early 1980s, he said: "We

had to run for our life as the fight broke out between Shan and Pa-O monks. One day in the early morning before dawn, it was our turn to cook the food for all monks in the temple; we were stoned by the Pa-O monks. So, we had to run for our safety, and next day we departed from Yawnghwe. I myself returned to Mong Yang, my hometown, and then settled in Thailand. Phra Khammai not giving up monastic education then went to Mandalay to further his study.”

This close-friend of Phra Khammai also reveals that Phra Khammai has good attitude and capacity for he is smart in learning Buddhist scriptures and is knowledgeable in many other fields. While running for safety, Phra Khammai took the opportunity to learn Thai and English at the border town of Thai-Shan. He was also very good at interpersonal communication. The three friends went to Bangkok in search of opportunity to study. While staying at Wat Mai in Yanawa district, Bangkok, Phra Khammai met Ven. Saosra Dhammaratana from Taunggyi, Shan State who was on a visit to Thailand. Phra Khammai was offered the position of a future abbot of Dhammaratana temple but this did not materialize as he faced very strong objection from other monks.

In late 1980s as a novice, Phra Khammai graduated Dhammacariya level in monastic education, a university degree equivalent to a bachelor's. Shortly after graduation, Phra Khammai was more involved in Shan literature movement in Mandalay. At one point, he was even accused of supporting the Shan armed movements and his activism was seen to be politically motivated by the Burmese intelligent agency and authority. Some of his colleagues residing in Yangon were arrested, but Phra Khammai managed to escape to Piang Luang on a Thai-Shan border. At that place, he had the chance to study both Thai and English languages. It was only when the case

was closed and Myanmar government allowed citizens to go abroad that Phra Khammai managed to embark on a journey to Sri Lanka after receiving a passport from Yangon.

Although some Shan monks had been recorded to have visited and done some studies in the island in mid-18th century, Phra Khammai's journey to Sri Lanka could be considered as a pioneering feat for the Shan Buddhist Sangha. In the late 1990s, he sojourned to the West and based himself in the UK, where he later obtained his Ph. D at St. Anne's College, Oxford University in 2004.

During his early days in Sri Lanka in 1990s, Phra Khammai was the only Shan among many Burmese and Mon monks. He was almost the youngest but he spoke English better than any one of them. An Aggamaha-pandita title holder Burmese *Sayadaw* who was then the abbot of the Makutaramaya, a Burmese temple in Colombo, sensed Phra Khammai's potential to lead the Sangha in the future. He offered Phra Khammai a future-abbot position. But this offer has stirred controversies and has caused disappointments among the nationalist Burmese monks in Colombo.

When Phra Khammai continuously invited his friends and other Shan monks to join the journey, many Burmese monks in Colombo began to see him as a 'nationalist Shan monk' who bolstered more mistrust and threatened the unity among the fellow monks in the Sangha organization. Tension was even higher when Shan monks were meeting or gathering together more frequently. That indeed heightened the sense of insecurity and suspicion among the Burmese monks. Amidst such tension, the Shan monks clothed themselves with apolitical motives or as part of the brotherhood with other ethnic communities by meeting less frequently but regularly. When other

monks came to study, Phra Khammai helped not only the Shan but also the Burmese or anyone who might ask him for help.

Phra Khammai is well respected and accepted in many communities, especially among the Burmese, Shan, Sri Lankan, Thai and Buddhist scholars around the world. He is famous for being a scholar of Theravada Buddhism, who has involved himself in teaching and research in Buddhist Studies at University of Oxford where he received his doctorate in Buddhist Studies. At the OBV, from 2009 onward, Phra Khammai has been conducting courses on Buddhism at different levels such as basic, and advanced courses as well as courses based on age difference. From time to time, he also gives public talks or dhamma-talks. While opening OBV branches in Singapore and Malaysia, he is even more socially engaged with people from different walks of life. He also teaches Pali and meditation at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London where he is a research associate. Outside Britain, he holds professorship in International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU), Yangon, Myanmar, and is Distinguished Professor at the Postgraduate Institute for Pali and Buddhist Studies (PIGPBS), University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. He is also a visiting scholar in Indonesia, India and Thailand. Apart from his university teaching, Phra Khammai also offers Buddhist teaching and *vipassana* ('insight') meditation regularly to the public since 1993 in Sri Lanka, Britain, Canada, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, Korea, Hungary, Spain and Thailand. After the founding of OBV in Great Britain, he set up two branch temples, one in Singapore and another in Malaysia.

Phra Khammai, however, always prioritizes education and upholds that education is most important to develop ones' spirituality as well as potential. Knowledge is not only for oneself but also for educating others. His frequent

message goes like this: “If we were to improve or uplift the quality of life either for ourselves or for the people in the Shan State, we should establish ourselves well on education. People in the Shan State are less fortunate than us, so we must do our best to educate ourselves and return to the Shan State.”

According to the tradition, Phra Khammai was ordained as a novice from his hometown Laikha, and he belonged to Sudhamma-nikaya. However, throughout his cleric career, he had grown up and educated among Shwegyin nikaya tradition. Having lived in the UK for over a decade, he may not identify himself as belonging to a particular nikaya, but as a Buddhist monk from a Theravada tradition. It is a common belief that Theravada form of Buddhism is known to have been practiced in Sri Lanka Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos since early times. Today, in a world of globalization, people from these countries have migrated across the different parts of the world. Thus, Theravada Buddhism has transformed itself and has been practiced beyond Asia.

Although most of the time Phra Khammai has dedicated himself to education and academic activities (ganthadura), he still finds time to meditate and gives spiritual guidance to others (vipassanadura). At the Oxford center, Phra Khammai conducts meditation courses on regular basis and also meditation for special events. He also paid a visit to other parts of Europe where some Buddhist communities were waiting to receive his spiritual guidance. From time to time, Phra Khammai would lead a group of devotees or delegates, for a pilgrimage to Buddhist holy places in India, Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

Two decades have passed, the journey which has begun with a pilgrim, has now turned into ‘Ceylon Journey’ (CJ), education and dhammatuta journeys. Phra Khammai, as the pioneer of CJ, is still very influential over the

Shan Sangha. He has always been thinking of uplifting the status and prestige of the Shan Sangha by supporting Shan monks to get higher education, internationally. “We need to internationalize our activities, either education or social and cultural ones, in order that we are able to perpetuate and conserve our customs and traditions. We cannot just remain in the Shan State or within Burma to be recognized,” said Phra Khammai. Furthermore, “We need also to transcend cultural boundaries to be accepted by the international Buddhist communities, such as Sri Lankan, Thai, Burmese, Shan or European.” In the midst of his tight schedules, he constantly makes effort to write articles and books in Shan, Burmese and English for different communities and followers. Due to his strenuous efforts, there are now over 150 monks who have completed their studies at different levels. All these monks have come from different parts of the Shan States and some of them are even from Kachin or Kayah State. They speak different dialects although they call themselves “Shan”.

Phra Khammai’s International Network

“Network has to be built internationally; we need to have more OBV centers around the world, if we are to sustain and maintain good connection with growth,” said Phra Khammai. In his website (oxfordbuddhavihara.org.uk), Phra Khammai has also explicitly mentioned: “We are a truly international *Vihara* and welcome visitors from all over the world, including countries both Buddhist and otherwise. While this means that we come from a wide variety of traditions and cultures, we find that we get along in harmony as we act in the spirit of tolerance and goodwill that the Buddha taught so well.”² This network indeed can be understood in terms of ‘Global Networks’ (Holton 2008) which corresponds to the analysis of many network theorists (Castells, 2000: 168). Global advocacy network was proposed by Keck and Sikkink

(1998). This global network was defined as 'sets of interconnected nodes.' Networks are a very old form of human practice, but they have taken on a new life in our time by becoming information networks, powered by the Internet (Castells, 2001).

The network can be classified into many groups, each of which is interpersonally connected via Phra Khammai or other people. The first line of network is the connection between him and Shan monks, novices and lay people in the Shan State of Myanmar and elsewhere. With a few resources available to him, Phra Khammai settled himself in Colombo and sought for educational opportunities. Once he established himself there, he began to invite as many colleagues and friends as possible to join the journey to Colombo. Presently the tradition is very much alive with over 200 Shan monks across the Shan State who have followed him. Before Phra Khammai ventured into his educational journey to Sri Lanka, it was not known if there were any Shan monks who went abroad for similar purpose. After graduation, the monks who were Phra Khammai's colleagues, friends or disciples, have returned to Shan State or migrated to live or engage themselves in social works or continue their education, like myself.

I consider myself as a member of the journey. In 1995, I was encouraged by Phra Khammai to go to Sri Lanka on the 'Ceylon Journey' with other Shan monks. At that time, I have not met him in person yet. However, I came to know him when I got the news from him that he would like to invite anyone who wanted to study abroad and had some competency in English to join the 'Ceylon journey.' This caught my interest and with his guidance for Buddhist education in Colombo, I enrolled myself in the Buddhist and Pali University. In early 1999, I graduated with B.A. Honors and I continued to further my studies for a master's degree in 2000. By that time, Phra Khammai has already

left for the UK. In 2003, while I was looking forward for an M. Phil, Phra Khammai invited me to visit him in the UK to learn more English. Thereafter, I gained experience in the west and helped him teach the Sunday Dhamma School in London. Not long after returning to Colombo from London during the same year in July, an opportunity to go to Hong Kong became open for me. Then, I planned to go there without informing Phra Khammai about the move. Just a few weeks before I left, however, he learned of my movement through some of the professors in Colombo. During my stay in Hong Kong, I contacted him a few times. After my graduation in 2006, I also visited Korea briefly to help the abbot of Myanmar Buddhist Temple in Seoul while he was away in the UK. In early 2007, while I was on a visit to Hong Kong for a graduation ceremony, I planned to come to Chiang Mai. Again, I did not mention to Phra Khammai of my whereabouts. It is only a few years later, after I had been admitted to the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University that Phra Khammai learnt through friends that I had commenced my doctorate degree.

Occasionally, Phra Khammai has somewhat maintained relationships with other Shan monks who had studied and returned to Shan State. Some of them have started their own schools and teachings, e.g., Hsipaw Life-long Learning School in Hsipaw. The school head monk once told me, “Since 2000 when I returned to Hsipaw, this is the first time for me to travel abroad. In 2012, when Phra Khammai visited Hsipaw, I arranged for him to deliver dhamma-talk to the audience. That was the only occasion I met him since I returned to Shan State.” He also pointed out, “The reason for the failure of the project is the lack of appropriate funding.”

I was fortunate enough to have a chance of joining the network of the Shan Sangha’s ‘Ceylon Journey’. With this background, I not only had the

experience of being a monk, but I also had acquainted myself with the monk's life. I have also acquired knowledge about Theravada Buddhism in particular and Mahayana in general. I think, in fact, the expansion of religious network has its root in the Buddha teachings, as the Buddha once said, "*Go forth, bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness of gods and men. Let not two go by the same way,*"³ This message was believed to be given to the very first community of monks when the Sangha reached sixty in number 2500 years ago, which gave birth to the idea of the 'Sangha networking.' The message was loud and clear that being a *bhikkhu*, one is required to travel to spread the message, which is beneficial and fruitful to the well-being of the people. Therefore, the idea of the 'Sangha network' is not a new phenomenon. However, the form of network has been transforming with high technology of communication, which allows expansion of the network around the globe. Phra Khammai, in a similar fashion, carries the advice of the Buddha to spread his message far and wide across the transnational boundaries. Similarly, he also encourages his fellow monks and friends to be competent and spread the message of Buddha to the world for the sake of harmony, peace and happiness of the people.

Obviously, from this Buddhist literature, we come to understand that the very nature of Buddhism is 'transnational movement' which is bounded not only to a particular nation or state but also to all others. However, with the advancement of modern technologies, the way people communicate, interact, travel and/or the way the people do things are never like the past; the idea of time and space has been drastically changed. The concepts, 'global network' by Robert Holton (2008) and 'technoscapes' from Appadurai (1996) have become a most essential and useful tool in many ways. The idea of global network helps an organization to expand internationally and the

technoscapes create a scenario for the networkable construction and communication possible among the members of the Shan Sangha. According to George Simmel (1950, 1971), the interest of networks as a distinct social form has been long-standing. Frisby (1992: 14) and Holton (2008: 29) have described it as a micro-level investigation of the ‘delicate invisible threads’ of interaction between individuals that give society a web-like structure.

The second line of the network is the connection Phra Khammai has with the Shan and Burmese Sangha of other different traditions in Shan State and other states in Myanmar. Although Phra Khammai and other Shan and Burmese monks may not share the same idea and way of Buddhist practices, they can connect through some common features, such as being Shan, being Buddhist, etc. One such connection was made when he was a student at the Sasana Mandaing Pali University in Pegu.⁴ This was before Phra Khammai went to Sri Lanka where many of them were friends or acquaintances. I was told by friends that Phra Khammai was almost the first Shan monk to study at that university. Gradually through connection, many monks had also joined him to study there. Nowadays, the tradition of the Shan monks going to study at the center is continuing. When I was with Phra Khammai in 2003 in the UK, he once told me that he was fond of Sasana Mandaing and he wanted to go and give a lecture to the monk students there.

Saosra Mongkut, widely known as Shan literature scholar, is among many of Phra Khammai’s colleagues and close associates from Shan Sangha in the Shan State. Saosra Mongkut is one of few Shan monks who has mastered the Shan literature: poetic and prose. He is the abbot of two temples: one in his hometown Kehsi in southern Shan State and another in Yangon. In 1995-6 Saosra Mongkut joined ‘Ceylon Journey’ and obtained master degree in Buddhist studies at Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. Today,

Saosra Mongkut is leading a group of Pali-Shan Tipitaka translation at Executive Council of the Shan Sangha (ECSS) in Panglong, 20-mile distance from capital Taunggyi, Shan State. The seminar on Shan Buddhist texts held in Yangon in December, 2013 was well-participated by all the leading Shan monks and scholars. All of these events were either co-organized or participated by Phra Khammai, Saosra Mongkut, and other Shan monks.

The connection with Khruba Boonchum network is another example of Phra Khammai's network where shared common identity is not a necessity. Khruba Boonchum is known in the golden triangle region as a spiritual forest meditation practitioner, who has followed the line of Khruba tradition in northern Thailand (Kwanchewan, 1988). He has been living in the Mongphong center, Tachileik for over decades, but was forced to abandon his monastery during 2003-2013. Only recently in the mid of December 2013, Khruba has returned to his base as the Burmese authority has given him the green light.

Khruba Boonchum's method of chanting (Buddhist devotional chanting)⁵ has seemed to inspire the Shan populace in Shan State for it has been adopted and chanted by monks and lay people alike throughout the Shan State. During 2011-2013, he had conducted meditation alone inside the cave in Lampang Province, Northern Thailand. This action has earned him the reputation of a charismatic monk from not only among the Shan people in Thailand and Myanmar but also among the Thai middle- and high-class people from Central Thailand. This is evident when he has come out of the cave to meet the public for the first time since three years ago, a huge crowd from many ethnic and national backgrounds has gathered to worship him (Khamindra, 2013).

How could Phra Khammai, the scholarly Buddhist monk, connect with Khruba Boonchum, the charismatic forest monk? As it turns out, during 1995-

2000, an educated monk, who was a native of Kengtung was also studying in Sri Lanka under the patronage of Phra Khammai. At some point, he is acting as assistant to Khruba Boonchum. He was the acting chief of Sangha Maha-nayaka for the Shwegyin-nikaya chapter in Tachileik, and assisted in mediating and communicating between devotees and Khruba Boonchum during the latter's year-long retreats in the cave. From time to time, this monk would receive hand-written messages from Khruba which were left at the entrance to the cave. He also helped devotees who would like to donate dhamma distributions, like dhamma booklets, DVDs and VCDs. He communicated with some donors to support DVD creation or booklet printing and then distributed to the general public. If Khruba had any message to be passed to Phra Khammai, or vice versa, he would act as a messenger. In the past, he also transcribed some of Phra Khammai's dhamma-talks into Shan script and then printed it in the form of a booklet.

Within the Shan community in Shan State and elsewhere, Phra Khammai and Khruba Boonchum are highly venerated and well respected along with Saosra Sukham. They are known as *Mo Sam Luang* (the Triple Lotus) or *Bua Sam Dok* in Thai, which is a comparison of the trio to 'lotus,' which symbolizes the 'sacred' in Buddhism.⁶ The trio are identical in age and leverage while Saosra Sukham is the eldest, and Phra Khammai the youngest. Phra Khammai will be celebrating his golden jubilee in the coming November 2014; Khruba celebrated on the fifth of January the same year; and Saosra Sukham already observed his 50th anniversary 2 years ago.

Phra Khammai also has a strong connection with KBBT, Bodhgaya, India. Initially Phra Khammai had no direct involvement with the founding of the Shan Buddhist Center in India, which was initiated by Khruba Boonchum in collaboration with three other monks. The first of the three monks is now

the abbot of the KBBT Center, the second one has migrated to live in the USA and the third is the abbot of Meditation centers in Kengtung and Tachileik. With Khruba Boonchum at Bodhgaya, in March 2014, Phra Khammai ceremonially founded another branch of OBV, which is to be known as “Khruba Boonchum Meditation Centre.” Therefore, there are currently two branches of nodes linking with the OBV in Oxford at Bodhgaya.

The third line of Phra Khammai’s connection is with the Thai Sangha. He has long associated individually with the Thai Sangha since he was studying in Sri Lanka. In the UK, Phra Khammai has had more connection with the Thai Buddhist Order since the beginning of the Oxford Buddha Vihara establishment. Phra Khammai is, often times, considered as “Thai monk” by some Thai Sangha and devotees. And the OBV has been recognized by some Thai devotees in the UK as Thai religious center in Oxford. For instance, Wat Bovoranives and Wat Phra Rama IX in Bangkok have had close relationship with Phra Khammai since the latter established the OBV. However, the founding of OBV was concerned not only with Thai Buddhists but also international Buddhist communities and well-wishers, such as the Burmese, Shan, Thai, Sri Lankan and some others. In addition, the founding of the temple was also supported by many Thai devotees, and funds were also raised in Bangkok in order to pay the landlord in Oxford.

The connection with the Thai Sangha is also made through Dr. Phra Anil Sakya, a Nepalese Buddhist monk who teaches at Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University in Wat Mahathat and at Mahamakut Buddhist University in Wat Bovoranives Vihara, Bangkok. Besides, Phra Anil Sakya is an Assistant Secretary to the late Supreme Patriarch (H.H. Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara) of Thailand, and a Deputy Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences of Mahamakut Buddhist University. Although from a Nepalese origin, he was hierarchically

promoted to the Thai Sangha hierarchical rank as “Phra Sakyavisuddhiwong” (Rajagana title in ordinary level) right after the passing away of the Supreme Patriarch. This is due to the extended period he has received education in Thai monastic system at Wat Bovoranives Vihara ever since he was a young novice under the patronage of Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara. In fact, Phra Sakyavisuddhiwong became Phra Khammai’s close associate when the latter was working on his doctorate degree in Oxford during 2000-2004. At the same time, Phra Anil Sakya was also studying at Cambridge. From time to time they met with each other in Buddhist festivals, religious functions and activities or at academic seminars and conferences somewhere in the UK. Justin Thomas Daniel (2009: 258) in his *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words*’ concluding remarks noted a special reference to the relationship between Phra Khammai and Dr. Anil describing monastic education transformation from tradition to adaptation of new technology.

Apart from his connection with the Thai Sangha and devotees, Phra Khammai is also actively engaged with many international Buddhist communities and academics alike. With OBV center, it is closely connected with the Oxford Center of Buddhist Studies (OCBS)⁷ which was founded in 2004. The OCBS is a recognized independent centre (RIC) of the University of Oxford to promote the academic study within the University of Buddhist texts, societies, theories and practices. It is committed to maintain the highest academic standards. The OCBS also aims to promote the understanding of the importance of Buddhist insights across a wide range of academic disciplines, and to work in partnership with leading institutions to apply approaches derived from studying Buddhism to contemporary issues.

Phra Khammai is currently the holder of Executive Secretary with the two organizations: Association of International Theravada Buddhist Universities

(ATBU) and International Association of Buddhist Universities (IABU).⁸ The ATBU is an inclusive global network, which unites the people, knowledge and skills of every Institution of Higher Education with a specific mission to educate students to understand and practice the Buddha's Dhamma as found in the Pali Canon. The ATBU provides a framework within which Theravada Buddhist Universities can better understand each other's policies and activities and be better understood regionally and internationally. They can also collaborate in administration, teaching, research and outreach; and recognize each other's qualifications. The ATBU supports its Member institutions and facilitates collaboration and cross-fertilization between them, so that all can benefit from the richness and varieties of the multinational Theravada tradition. In this way, it will stimulate and focus all the efforts to build on the great Theravada heritage of higher education so as to promote the *Buddha-Sāsana*.

As for the IABU, it is an international forum for institutes of Buddhist higher education to network, understand, and benefit from the richness and variety of the multinational Buddhist tradition. The IABU acknowledges that while there are already excellent international organizations which bring Buddhist scholars together, these organizations merely deal with scholars at the individual level. The IABU claims the first global forum and aims to bring entire institutions together. As such, it provides new challenges as well as opportunities to those involved. The IABU, which was formed on May 28th, 2007, culminated the first ever symposium of Buddhist Universities held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok, Thailand. The symposium was a part of the celebrations at the United Nations Day of Vesak (Thai, *Visakhabucha*), which was organized by Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University (MCRU) and sponsored by the Royal Government of Thailand. Phra Khammai holds the secretary position for the annual celebration of International Vesak Day in

Bangkok and, at the same time, he is the representative for Theravada Buddhist delegates from Europe.

The IABU functions mainly through its Executive Council and International Secretariat. Phra Khammai is Executive Secretary while IABU is in the process of organizing the Secretariat to be based at MCRU and in the process of consolidating networks. In the near future, the IABU expects to develop a variety of collaborative efforts including members' recognition of each other's qualifications as well as exchanges in administration, teaching, research and outreach.

Presently, Phra Khammai lives in the UK at his OBV center, and at the same time, he is also a trustee and fellow from Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, and Buddhist Chaplain to University of Oxford. While being engaged in several academic networks abroad, Phra Khammai has also been honored a professorship in 2005 by the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Yangon, Myanmar. He is advising some Ph.D. students and, from time to time, he acts as a visiting professor at the ITBMU. Phra Khammai is also Abbot for all the Oxford Buddha Vihara for the UK, Singapore and Malaysia. To link many centers together, OBV website plays an important role. The website (oxfordbuddhavihara.org.uk) reaches out to a wider audience informing the public about the upcoming events, such as dhamma classes, courses or special lectures and religious activities or cultural events at the respective centers. Its main branch OBVS in Singapore also runs its own website independently (oxfordbuddhaviharasin.org).

Conclusion

The Ceylon Journey for higher education of the Shan Sangha pioneered by Phra Khammai since its early days in 1990s has continued till the present where the Shan monks travel to Sri Lanka and other countries to further their Buddhist studies. The Shan Sangha network has expanded internationally as the Shan monks living abroad have made connections with the Shan monks who have returned to the Shan State of Burma after graduation. The network is also expanded to link with the Sangha of other nations and also religious academic institutions in many countries. We can say that Phra Khammai plays an important role in creating and expanding the network by his personal contacts, his positions in various international organizations, his journeys to meet other monks and lay people and to participate in activities organized internationally. His high qualification as Buddhist scholarly monk and his promotion of meditation has earned him the reputation which facilitates the expansion of network, especially among educated monks and religious institutions. Finally, in light of an increasing spiritual need amongst people in the modern society, Phra Khammai's Buddhist technique and discussion has helped to fill the spiritual vacuum of many Buddhist communities from many ethnic backgrounds, including the westerners.

However, the network is also expanding horizontally. Phra Khammai's disciple or a Buddhist center in many countries serves as nodes in making connections with other people and organizations. As it is found, other Sangha organizations or religious institutions that are connected with Phra Khammai's group do not necessarily have the common goal. They do not follow the same form of religious practices although they do share similar goals and identities. Connections can be made through a common platform one or the combination of the following identities: the Shan identity, Buddhist education, meditation

practice, etc. An example of the connection with Khruba Boonchum network has clearly shown that the two groups have connections despite having different beliefs and ways of practices. Such connection is based on the Shan identity and has been made through Phra Khammai's disciples who have admired and assisted Khruba Boonchum during the latter's practice of religious activities in the same area.

The network is neither static nor fixed. It can be changed. As time passed, tension may arise among members of the network. As the network keeps on growing, the Shan monks who have joined the journey can constitute a huge community where one can become unknown to others.

The idea of joining the journey begins to divert. Among them, some may choose to become a teacher, meditation master, preacher (public dhamma-talk), and writer while others might simply choose a different direction. Very often, they do clash ideologically with different goals, strategies and forms of practice. In some cases, disagreement between locals may occur. Consequently, old networks may be broken and new ones will arise.

Endnotes

- 1 Quoting Phra Khammai's interview through email.
- 2 OBV webpage: oxfordbuddhavihara.org.uk, accessed: March 2014.
- 3 The Pali phrase reference from the Vin I 20: *Carathabhikkhavecārikambahujanahitāyabahujanasukhāyalokānukampāya, atthāyahitāyasukhāyadevamanussānam. Māekenadveagamittha. Desethabhikkhave.*
- 4 Pali University was founded during the U Nu's government administration. Although the premier Nu proposed that Buddhist Sangha should have its own university system. The idea has never been realized as many then orthodox monks and lay people alike opposed the idea. U Tin Pe, then a cabinet member criticized Premier Nu saying that his projects on the convening of the Sangayana, the Sixth Buddhist Council (Buddhist Synod) in 1954-1957 and planning of Buddhist University system are of wasting public money.
- 5 Oxford Buddha Vihara, Devotional verses.
- 6 The Triple Lotus is a booklet, a collection of articles in Shan, Thai, English and Burmese with anonymous author; no date and publisher are mentioned, in honor of venerable Shan Buddhist bhikkhus: Khruba Boonchum, Sao Sukham and Phra Khammai Dhammasami.
- 7 <http://www.ocbs.org/about-us-ocbsmain-122>. Accessed: March 25, 2014.
- 8 <http://www.iabu.org/About>. Accessed: March 25, 2014.

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