The situation of Buddhists' propagation approach of Lao People's Democratic Republic

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1. Introduction

Buddhism has long been a strong force in Lao culture and remains a major influence in daily life. Buddhism defines the Laotian character. Lao Buddhists belong to the Theravada tradition, based on the earliest teachings of the Buddha Reserved in Sri Lanka after Mahayana Buddhism branched off in the second century B.C. Theravada Buddhism is also the dominant school in Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Luang Prabang in the 13th and early 14th centuries. Mähayana Buddhism may have been introduced in the 8th to 10th centuries but didn't take hold long enough to have a lasting effect. Theravada Buddhism was given a big boost when the King Fa-Ngum, the monarch who unified Laos and created the first Lao Kingdom in the mid 14" century, converted his Kingdom to Buddhism. He built Laos's first wat(temple) in A.D. 1356 to house the Phra Bang Buddha.

Buddhism took a while to be embraced by ordinary Laotians who did not want to give up their beliefs in spirits. It wasn't until Buddhist schools were established throughout Laos in the 17h century During the civil war period from 1964 to that the religion really began to take hold. 1973, the Laos issued a statement saying that it supported Buddhism and over time won the support of Buddhists and monks. Things changed when the Laos came to power in 1975. Initially Buddhism was banned in schools, people were forbidden from making offerings at temples and giving alms to monks. Monks were put to work in the fields and forced to raise animals in violation of their monastic vows. Dissatisfaction over these rules, forced the government to ease off. in 1976, the giving of alms to monks was allowed but only rice was allowed to be given. Over time other restrictions were

eased. In 1992, the hammer and sickle was replaced by drawing of the Pha That Luang on the national emblem.

2. Buddhism under the Laos' Government

The Lao PDR government's successful efforts to consolidate its authority also continue to influence Buddhism. In political seminars at all levels, the government taught that Marxism and Buddhism were basically compatible because both disciplines stated that all men are equal, and both aimed to end suffering. Political seminars further discouraged "wasteful" expenditures on religious activities of all kinds because some monks were sent to political reeducation centers and others were forbidden to preach. The renunciation of private property by the monks was seen as approaching the ideal of a future communist society. However, Buddhist principles of detachment and non-materialism are clearly at odds with the Marxist view, since they are also seen as depriving the state of resources. Thus, although overtly espousing tolerance of Buddhism, the state undercut the authority and moral standing of the Sangha by compelling monks to spread party propaganda and by keeping total monks from their traditional participation in most village decisions and activities. During the period of political consolidation, many monks left the Sangha or fled to Thailand. Other pro-Laos's monks joined the newly formed Lao United Buddhist association, which replaced the former religious hierarchy. The number of men and boys being ordained declined abruptly, and many wat(temple) fell empty. Participation at weekly and monthly religious ceremonies also dropped, as villagers were under the watchful eye of local political cadre. They were fearful of any behavior not specifically encouraged. [Source: Library of Con- gress, 1994).

3. The Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO)

Theravada Buddhism is by far the most prominent organized religion in the country, with more than 4,000 temples serving as the focus of religious practice and the center of community life in rural areas. In most lowland of Lao villages, religious tradition remains strong. Most Buddhist men spend part of their lives as monks in temples, even if only for a few days. There are approximately 20,000 monks in the country, more than

8,000 of whom have attained the rank of "senior monk," indicating years of study in temples. In addition, more than 400 nuns, many of whom are older widows, reside in temples throughout the country. The Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO) is under the direction of a supreme patriarch who resides in Vientiane and supervises the activities of the LBFO's central office, the Ho Dhammasapha. [Source: International Religious Freedom, 2009 Report on International Religious Freedom, East Asia and Pacific, Laos; U.S. State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; October 26, 2009]

Although officially incorporated into the dominant Mahanikai School of Buddhist Practice after 1975, the Dhammayudh sect of Buddhism still maintains a following in the country. Abbots and monks of several temples, particularly in Vientiane, reportedly follow the Dhammayudh School, which places greater emphasis on meditation and discipline.

There are four Mahayana Buddhist temples in Vientiane, two serving the ethnic Vietnamese community and two serving the ethnic Chinese community. Buddhist monks from Vietnam, China, and India have visited these temples freely to conduct services and minister to worshippers. There are at least four large Mahayana Buddhist pagodas in other urban centers and smaller Mahayana temples in villages near the borders of Vietnam and China.

4. Buddhist Monks in Laos

Traditionally, all males are expected to spend a period as a monk or novice prior to marriage and possibly in old age, and the majority of Lao Loum men probably did so until the 1970s. Being ordained also brings great merit to one's parents. The period of ordination need not be long, it could last only for the three month Lenten retreat period, but many men spend years in the Sangha gaining both secular and religious knowledge. Study of the Pali language, In which all Theravada texts are written, is a fundamental component of the religion training. Ordination as a monk also requires a man to comply with the 227 rules of the monastic order. Novices under twenty years old, must obey seventy-five rules, and lay persons are expected to observe the five precepts. Only a few worsen, usually the elderly become

Buddhist nuns; they live a contemplative and ascetic life but do not lead religious ceremonies as do monks do. [Source: Library of Congress, 1994].

Monks are trying to develop detachment from the world and thus, may have no possessions but must rely on the generosity of people for food and clothing. These gifts provide an important opportunity for the giver to earn merit. Women are more active than men in preparing and presenting rice and other food to monks, who make their morning rounds through the town carrying a bowl to receive offerings that are their only nourishment for the day, In village where there are only few monks or novices, the women of the village often take turns bringing food to the wat(temple) each morning. Attendance at prayers held at the temple on the quarter, full, and new moon of each lunar cycle also provides a regular means of gaining merit.

Monks preside over religious ceremonies, festivals, household rituals and funerals. They are often leaders in the community, men have traditionally become Buddhist monks for at least a short period, usually (in the time) between finishing school and starting a career or getting married. Typically, they stay for about three months during the Buddhist Lent, which coincides with the rainy season.

The Sangha (monks, nuns and lay residents of monasteries) have traditionally been divided into two sects: The Mahanikai and the Dhammayudh (a minority sect based on a Mon form of monastic discipline practiced by the Thai king, King Mongkut). The Communists abolished the Dhammayudh sect and for a while any Buddhist material written in Thai, Although Thai mate- rial is now tolerated officially there is only one sect "La Sangha." which puts less emphasis on meditation than other Buddhist sects.

5. Monk Life

Monks in Laos have a shaved head, wear saffron-robes and often carry a begging bowl. It is common for villagers to give food to monks in a daily ritual. Monks do not look at the donors. Male donors remove their sandals and women kneel as monks pass by in a procession to collect food offering. In Luang Prabang people usually give an offering of sticky rice to

monks. After waking up donors sit on a mat at the foot and place a small amount of rice in special container. Monk arrives later and rice is cooped into their begging bowls.

Monk and Novices have no possessions except the few items that they carry in their bags. As Monks they study at school and learn about being Buddhist. Most young men in Laos spend time as a Monk or Novice at some point in their lives. During this time, they do not drink, smoke, eat after- noon, touch women, swear or have money or possessions. if under 20 years the boys are novices but undergo a ceremony at 20 to become fully ordain monks.

These days many monks serve any for a week or two. In some places discipline lax and it is not uncommon to see monks smoking or even drinking alcohol and doing drugs. Many males don't even bother to be ordained. All monks are supposed to undergo political indoctrination as part of their religious training.

During the early morning, collecting alms in Luang Prabang, the monks walk the streets and the people who offer food, kneel. When the monk has accepted their food they chant their thanks. Describing Luang Prabang on their morning rounds, P.F. kluge wrote in national geographic traveler: "clusters of orange-robed monks, a dozen here, a couple there begging flowing to- wards a silent procession, oldest monks in front, novices trailing behind, all of the advancing to where women kneel on the sidewalk. Barefoot, mute, monks take the lids off their alms bowls. The women reach into straw baskets for a wad of rice, which they deposit in to the monk's alms bowl. It happens every morning, this bare foot walkabout, this silent offering. Watching the orange line file back toward the temples, it's as if it strokes of orange is like the sunrise itself."

6. Daily life of a Laos's monk

A young man who became a monk in April 2009 wrote: "My name is Khen and I am 20 and I am a monk in Laos, I was a novice when my father joined the temple when my mother died. When I came to live in the temple I was 12 years old. At 12 years old I was a novice (monk in training)

and could not be a monk until I was 20 years. [helping hands. Millpointrotacyclub]

"Every day I got up early at 4 am I meditated and then all the monks and the novices walk through the streets to collect alms (food). The people wait by the road- side and give us food and this is our food for the day. I eat breakfast and lunch but the monk does not eat after lunch until the next day. There are a number of special days in Buddhist Wat (temple). At the Laos New year in April elders tie white ties for the all monk and novices at the temple. The wrist ties are tied for long Life and good luck. The Wat is the place where I come to meditate with Buddha statues. I sleep with the other monks in the bedrooms. I have a bag which has my things and I carry the bag with me. I learn Dhamma and Pali. There are lots the Buddha statues in the Wat and the monks spent many hours meditating. The ring of the bell summons the monks and novices in the compound to the Wat to meditate. Village people bring food to the temple as a sign of respect. During July the monks spend their entire month in the temple meditating

7. Buddhist Customs

Major religious festivals occur several times a year. The beginning and end of the Lenten retreat period at the full moon of the eighth and eleventh months are of casinos for special offering of robes and religious articles to the monks During the Buddhist Lent, both monks and laity attempt to observe Buddhist precepts more closely. Monk must sleep at their own temple every night rather than being free to travel and are expected to spend more time in meditation. Offerings to monk and attendance at full-moon prayers are also greater than at other times. Visakha Puja, which celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha at the full moon of the sixth month usually corresponds with rocket festival (boun bang fai), with heralds the start of the rain, The date of Boun Phavet, which commemorates the charity and detachment of Prince Vessantara, and earlier incarnation of the Buddha, varies within the dry season, and, aside from its religious orientation, serves as an important opportunity for a village to host its neighbors. That Luang, a Laos- style stupa, is the most sacred Buddhist monument in Laos the location of the nationally important festival and fair in November. [Source: Library of Congress, 1994)

Buddhist ceremonies generally do not make event in a life cycle, with the death. Funerals may be quite elaborate if the family can afford it but rather simple. In rural settings, the body lies in a coffin at home for several days, during which time monks pay their respects to the family and share food and drink. After this period, the body is taken from the coffin to a cremation ground and burned, again attended by monks the ashes are then interred in a small shine on the wat's ground.

8. Conclusion

Under these circumstances, the Lao clergy will primarily have to rely on its own capacities, which, as mentioned above, are still rather limited and are needed to secure its own infrastructure. The upgrading of educational facilities for monks and novices, improved training of monks in their trade the start of the rain, The date of Boun Phavet, which commemorates the charity and detachment of Prince Vessantara, and earlier incarnation of the Buddha, varies within the dry season, and, aside from its religious orientation, serves as an important opportunity for a village to host its neighbors. That Luang, a Laos- style stupa, is the most sacred Buddhist monument in Laos the location of the nationally important festival and fair in November. [Source: Library of Congress, 1994) Buddhist ceremonies generally do not make event in a life cycle, with the death. Funerals may be quite elaborate if the family can afford it but rather simple. In rural settings, the body lies in a coffin at home for several days, during which time monks pay their respects to the family and share food and drink. After this period, the body is taken from the coffin to a cremation ground and burned, again attended by monks the ashes are then interred in a small shine on the wat's ground. 8. Conclusion Under these circumstances, the Lao clergy will primarily have to rely on its own capacities, which, as mentioned above, are still rather limited and are needed to secure its own infrastructure. The upgrading of educational facilities for monks and novices, improved training of monks in their traditional tasks, the revitalization of meditation practices and the up-keep of its internal administrative structure are huge tasks which already reach the limits of its re- sources. The skepticism of some leading monks regarding the expansion of social activism is also an intelligible argument: the primary task of the Sangha should be assuring the perpetuation of the traditional teachings which are the roots of a socially-

engaged Buddhism, and the lay population expects the Sangha to continue to fulfill this role. Moreover, in Theravada Buddhism the authority of the clergy is based in its continuity and partial immunity to the changes happening around it On the other hand, the difficult circumstances under which the discussed projects emerged and the enthusiasm of younger monks are also signs of a strong commitment that could perhaps have a synergetic effect in the future and slowly lead to a re-orientation within the clergy and the formulation of a more coherent approach. The latter point, however, also very much depends on the willingness of the Lao government to leave religious organizations and particularly the LBFO enough room for determining its own course. A potential problem here is the fact that many movements subsumed under the term "socially-engaged Buddhism" often have a quite critical stance towards the government and its institutions. Personally,

however I can hardly imagine monks, for example, publicly talking about some of the more direct government-induced reasons for the disappearance of forests in Laos, as monks have done in Thailand. Perhaps a small proportion of monks will at least be able to initiate moves towards this direction and develop appropriate concepts and practices. These will probably be inspired by the example set by Thai Buddhism and other transnational Buddhist networks, but in the end will have to be adapted to the specific context in Laos. Otherwise it could be possible that some of the rather liberal ideas occasionally employed will contravene the line of the government, or not appeal. to the laity.

Recently the LBFO has set up a new administrative section which is called "committee for the spreading of Dhamma and Vipassana-meditation". This primarily makes use of these forms of social capital. The projects carried Quit are supposed to spread Buddhist teachings and meditation more widely among the population. An important part of its agenda is, for example, sending monks to schools where they teach about Dhamma, Buddhist ethics and morality. This is now quite common in urban areas and in my own experience, these teachings are very much focused on traditional Buddhist topics (learning to pray, respect for elders and teachers, value of education and Lao

culture etc.), although they are sometimes connected with other topics such as the environment, drug prevention and so on. The activities are sometimes centrally organized by the LBFO in cooperation with local schools, but largely take place in the context of local personal networks between monks and teachers.

Most monks are aware of the fact that Buddhism's role in society has under- gone some deep changes. In the face of these developments, the threat of Buddhism becoming only a ritualistic machine fulfilling the desires of the charitable merit- maker (or even worse, secularization) is internally, and sometimes even publicly, admitted. According a high-ranking monk of the LBFO, "Lao society is abandoning Buddhism" rituals are performed, but not more than that. The author of a lay handbook on the Lord Buddha's Dharmma and Livelihood- Earning, insists that studying of Dhamma is beneficial for everyone, but complains that today "most Lao people see the temple as a place for old men and women who have no work to de and a lot of free time". A Lao development expert cooperating with the Sangha in a project told me in an interview: "The Buddhist monks in Laos have lost their leading position in society. There is a gap of thirty years or more, which we now have to compensate for, so that Buddhism can again contribute positively to society". At the same time the Lao Sangha itself has be- come an object of criticism, I heard many complaints that monks are unable to ex- plain the fundamental teachings of Buddhism and many people suggest that there is a steady decline in belief. Even for inside the Sangha the same critique can be heard. Both points were explicitly mentioned and elaborated in speech at the 1998 congress of the LBFO. These statements from lay people and members of the LBFO regarding the condition of Buddhism might on some level be discursive discontent talk, and in- deed the constant concern about the purity of the Sangha, the correct practice ac- cording to the Vinaya rules and the correct interpretation of Dhamma are inherent parts of Theravada philosophy. Curious, however, is the contrast between these critical statements. Buddhism's now crucial place in the politics of identity, its important share in the efforts to define the essence of Lao culture in a country more and more exposed to the forces of globalization are obvious, but these critical statement also somewhat relatives the

observations of Grant Evans (1998:67f.) and others, who have spoken of a Re-Buddhism of Lao Society.

Monks are the main religious practitioners among Laotians, and youngest men are expected to become a monk or a short period to prepare them for marriage. This practice is also crucial for the transference of merit from son to mother and is the source of a special bond between them. After 1975, entry into the temples was discouraged, but the practice is flourishing again. Most men enter the temple for not more than a month. Young men who stay longer are from poor families and they receive an education; eventually, stay for life. Older men sometimes retreat into the temple, as do a few older women. The monks not only are in charge of Buddhist religious ceremonies but function as dream Interpreters, traditional medical practitioners, and counselors. Other religious practitioners include spirit mediums and shamans most of whom are women, Shamans and mediums also are found among all the minorities. A ubiquitous ritual is the soul khouan or baci, which is a spirit-calling ceremony used at rites of passage and other threshold occasions. In Lao the person who officiate this ceremony is usually an ex- monk who has attained considerable esoteric knowledge of the ritual language of the ceremony. Among non-Lao these ceremonies draw less on such Indic referents.

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