

CHAPTER 3

PHRA KHAMMAI: A LIFE STORY

In his *Venerable Dhammasami: An Appreciation*, Professor Gombrich remarks “...and no one can deny that he gives all who come into contact with him a memorable experience of Buddhism in action (Gombrich, 2014: 60).” This remark illuminates Phra Khammai’s approach to modern Buddhism, how it relates to peoples’ lives, and how it is practically useful in daily life. In this chapter, I offer Phra Khammai’s life story from the highlands of Shan State to Oxford, becoming a scholar at a world-renowned university, and his work experience as a scholar, educator, and *Dhammadūta* missionary of Buddhism to the world. ‘Buddhism in action’ has been around for some time, particularly amongst Western Buddhist practitioners. H.H. Dalai Lama, the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Han, and a few others are well regarded in the West. Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg are three American natives identified as the key “reverse messengers” (using sociologist Wendy Cadge’s expression) who established influential insight meditation practice in America (Braun, 2013: 162-3). They learned Vipassana meditations from different Burmese (Mahasi lineage and Goenka), Thai (Ajarn Chah), and Indian (Anagarika Munindra) traditions, applying Theravada Buddhist practices into action. These are a few examples of Buddhism in action in the West. Through the exemplary life story of Phra Khammai, this chapter highlights his ‘Buddhism in action’ and how he has transformed Theravada Buddhist doctrine into practice in the world.

The chapter begins with life story of a Shan Buddhist monk who sees himself as an educationist and a *Dhammadūta*, a transnational Buddhist missionary, Phra Khammai. I give special focus to his pioneering educational journeys to Sri Lanka and the UK, his global vision for *Dhammadūta* works, his establishment of the Shan *Sangha* movement, and his connections with monks and laities and so on. Thus, he is best described as a transnational *Dhammadūta* missionary, an Oxford-based educationist and Theravada Buddhist scholar from Shan State, Burma.

Similar to the approach of Erik Braun (2008), this study is not a biography in the strict sense. Rather the goal is to reveal and understand what type of Buddhism Phra Khammai practices for his ‘calling,’ his ambition to become an international Buddhist missionary monk, and his reasons for attempting to modernize monastic education in Shan State, Burma.

3.1 Phra Khammai’s early life

Born in 1964 at Wan Nawng Pang in Laikha in the central plain of Shan State to the large Shan/Tai speaking family of Loung Jang Kham O and Pa Jang Swe. He was the seventh son of nine siblings. Among them were five brothers and four sisters: Sai Khattiya, Sai Kanna, Nang Mya, Sai Sa Tun, Sai Tun Lu, Sai Oo, Sai Khammai, Nang Yen, Nang Khin Nu, and Nang Kham Noan (Herngseng, 2014). The father, Loung Jang Kham O, was a traditional physician who formulated his own herbal medicines and a Shan intellectual, a *Jare* (*Zare*), who read *Lik Long*, the poetic Shan *Dhamma* texts.

Geographically, Laikha is situated in the central division of southern Shan State, lying between 21° 16' 0" N, and 97° 39' 0" E with an area of 3711 sq km (1,433 sq miles) (Figure 3.1). It is bounded to the north by Mongkun and Mongnawng; on the east by Mongnawng and Mongnai; on the south by Mongnai, Mongsit, and Mongpawng; and on the west by Mongpawng and Lawksawk.³³ Like its neighboring towns, Laikha is a multi-cultural environment with an agrarian-based economy. Formerly known as Laikha State, it is now a township home to approximately 60,000 residents of majority Shan ethnicity, followed by Ta’ang, Pa-O, Yang, ethnic Chinese, Burmese, and various other ethnic groups.³⁴ Laikha has a long history and was one of the original 33 city-states before the British colonial period, remaining so until Burma built a nation-state after its independence in 1948. Historical records show that Laikha was known by several names as a city-state ruled by Shan *saophas*, the hereditary ruling princes. Aggasena, author of “A Brief History of Laikha State” (2008), reports that the city-state was founded in CE

³³ The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. 16, p. 117.

³⁴ According to the 2006 government census counts were 28,627 males and 26,911 females; thus, the total population of Laikha Township was 55,538. Aggasena, Sao. (2008). “A Brief History of Laikha State” (in Shan). In *Laikha Pariyatti Saddhammapala Golden Jubilee Celebration of Laikah*.

761 with the first ruler being Sao Hso Kaifah. His capital was known as Weng Kun Nua.³⁵ However, according to reports in *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Laikha State was founded in 1505 as a state subordinate to Hsenwi State which ended its principedom in 1959 after the late *saopha* relinquished his power³⁶ to join the Union of Burma. During this period, although the facts cannot be confirmed by historical sources or independently verified, it seems that Burmese influence in the area rose substantially. Aggasena is of the opinion that the name 'Laikha' derives from the Burmese *legya*, presently transliterated *lekhyā*, meaning 'parking lot for oxen-carts.'³⁷

The general character of the region is hilly and broken, with a mean altitude of a little under 3000 feet. The three main rivers running through the state are the Nam Teng, an important tributary of the Salween, and the Nam Pawn. The capital of Laikha itself is in the proximity and in the plain of the Nam Teng.³⁸ The town of Panglong, where the notable Panglong Agreement was signed, is located in the southwest of the state close to Laikha.

About seven-ninths of the land under cultivation consists of low-lying fields irrigated for wet rice cultivation. A certain amount of upland rice is also cultivated, and cotton, sugarcane, and garden produce make up the remainder. Laikha, the capital, was noted for its ironwork, with both the iron and the related implements being produced in Panglong. Ironwork and lacquerware were the chief exports, along with a considerable amount of pottery. The imports were chiefly cotton goods and salt.

The seven-year-old boy whose parents admitted him to a local monastery as a 'temple-boy' (*kappiya*) in Laikha in the early 1970s was known as 'Khammai.' Customarily, the

³⁵ The first prince who ruled the state was and his state was known as Weng Kun Nue (761-852). His successors renamed to Weng Kunhsai (852-909), Weng Wai (909-979), Weng Kham (979-1098), Weng Keng Sung (1098-1354), Weng Panya (1354-1567), Weng Leng (1567-1606) Weng Nawngkham (1606-1854), and others back and forth, time and again, but never been known as 'Laikha' until a Burmese Myosa, Maung Hla Gyi was installed to rule the capital Nawngkham in 1914. (ibid).

³⁶ *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 16, p. 118.

³⁷ Sao Aggasena. (2008). "A Brief History of Laikha State." In *Pariyattia Sadhammapala Golden Jubilee Celebration of Laikha*.

³⁸ Ibid.

Shans send their young sons to a local monastery for training and learning to read and write, and more importantly to nurture them to become ‘matured’ under the guidance of the monkhood. During the course of their time at the monastery, the boys would be religiously admitted and culturally celebrated by going through the ‘rites of passage’ of *Poi Sanglong*, during which a boy would enjoy princely-care during the religious and cultural celebration. The *Buddha-puja-vandana* (Buddhist devotional session), which is usually headed by the abbot, followed by residential monks, novices, and *kappiya* in monastic hierarchy, occurs on daily basis with both early morning and evening services. At the end of one such evening session, the abbot announced that he was planning for a *Sanglong* celebration and inquired about the names and ages of the young boys.

“Ai Yon, on what day of the week were you born?”

“Wednesday, Sir.”

“Then, your monastic name will be ‘Vijaya.’”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Ai Sar, what is yours?”

“I don’t know my birth-day of the week, Sir.”

“Didn’t your mother tell you?”

“Yes, Sir. My mother said I was born on the local market day. So, mine is ‘Market day.’”

“Ha ha ha!”

The laughter echoed throughout the whole monastery as a result of Ai Sar’s humorous response to the abbot.

“Okay, make sure to ask your mom next time!”

After asking each of the *kappiya*, finally comes the turn for the youngest boy in the group to answer. While looking at the young boy, the abbot thinks that he might not know his own birth-day because of his young age. Nevertheless, the abbot proceeded to ask him.

“Hey, *Kappiya* Khammai, what is your birth-day of the week?”

While listening to his elder brothers answer the abbot's questions, Khammai has been thinking of the answer he will give if he is asked. But his mom never told him on what day he was born and he worries that he may be humiliated if he answers that he does not know. Of the seven days, what he remembers is only 'Saturday.' He does not know the names of the other days of the week. He does not want to answer 'I don't know,' so he proudly proclaims:

"I am Saturday-born, Sir."

"Wow, really!"

"Yes, Sir."

"Great, then, your monastic name will be 'Dhammasami.'"

"Yes, Sir."³⁹

In fact, Khammai was not born on a Saturday. He knew only after becoming an adult that he was actually born on a Tuesday. Nevertheless, the name given to him by the abbot, 'Dhammasami,' indeed befits a true 'master of *Dhamma*.' Here, the naming system in Burmese culture requires some explanation to provide an idea of why one needs to know on which day he/she was born. In Burmese culture, having a surname or family name is not a common practice, and any such name is unofficial. A person may have only a personal name with which one is registered in the government home office registration system, meaning it is impossible to trace back one's lineage. Following the astrological denomination of the seven days of the week, each person's name is assigned in accordance with the group of letters in alphabetical order. The following table shows how the Burmese naming system is assigned to the alphabetical order according to astrology and numerology:

³⁹ This conversation pattern is adopted from Sao Sukham Tangyan (စဝ်ဆုခမ်းတန့်ယန်း). (2014). "တရားအရှင်သခင်" ("Master of Dhamma"). In *Golden Jubilee Celebration in Honor of Ven. Dr. Khammai Dhammasami*. Yangon: Nang Devi Sarpe. p. 131–136.

Table 3.1 Myanmar/Pali alphabetical consonants assigned to the seven day-denomination of the week in Burmese naming culture.⁴⁰

Myanmar/Pali Consonants					Day Denominations
က k	ခ kh	ဂ g	ဃ gh	င ñ	gutturals Monday
စ c	ဆ ch	ဇ j	ဈ jh	ည/ဉ ñ	palatals Tuesday
တ t	ထ th	ဒ ḍ	ဋ ḍh	ဏ ṇ	cerebrals Saturday
တ t	ထ th	ဒ d	ဋ dh	န n	dentals Saturday
ပ p	ဖ ph	ဗ b	ဘ bh	မ m	labials Thursday
ယ y	ရ r	လ l	ဝ v	ဠ ḷ	semivowels Wednesday
ဆ s	ဟ h				Friday
အ (a) and all vowels					Sunday

This table shows how the name ‘Dhammasami’ was formed. The abbot assigned Khammai a monastic name, ‘Dhammasami,’ as its first letter (*dh*) belongs to the dentals group, the fourth role of the fourth letter in the Pali alphabetical order. It is the first letter or syllable (in this case, ‘*dh*’) that indicates on what day one was born.

⁴⁰ This table is prepared in consultation with Erik Braun (2008: x). "Myanmar and Pali Transliteration" system developed by D. Christian Lammerts and Fifty Viss (2014). "Burmese Personal Names". <https://viss.wordpress.com/2014/05/28/part-1-burmese-personal-names-primer/> Accessed: October 2015.

3.2 *Samanera*: First monastic life

At the young age of eight in his hometown, Khammai was officially ordained into the novicehood (*Samanera*) and given the monastic name ‘Dhammasami.’ Wat Sirimangala monastery where Phra Khammai ordained under the tutelage of the late Ven. Kesara belongs to the Myanmar Theravada tradition, *Shwegyin Nikaya*, a branch of Mahasi Meditation Center, the country’s largest Vipassana network. He remains affiliated to this tradition wherever he goes. As a *Samanera* for a few years at home, in 1972, Khammai and his elder brother Sai Ood joined their two elder brothers who were already at Wat Pitakat⁴¹ in Panglong. For two decades, while seeking a better place to study monastic education in Myanmar, he moved to several monasteries throughout the country, including Veluvan Monastery in Taunggyi, Kangyi Pariyatti Institute in Yawnghwe, Sasana Madaing in Pegu (now known as ‘Bago’), and Mahavisudharama and Zishin Institutes in Mandalay, for monastic training and education before he departed his country for Sri Lanka.

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⁴¹ Wat Pitakat in Panglong is where the headquarters of the Shan State Sangha Council is located. Wat Pitakatin Taunggyi is a branch of Panglong, which has the same name.



Figure 3.1 Map of Shan State and its neighbors showing key important places. [Map graphic provided by Garrett Kostin, Chiang Mai-based director of Burma Study Center; geo-data locations by the author]

In 1976, as a young novice, Khammai was transferred from his hometown monastery to Wat Pitakat in Taunggyi and after two years to Kangyi Pariyatti Institute in Yawnghwe,

a more advanced and larger monastic education center, which was then amongst the largest in Shan State. Like Laikha, Yawnghwe was also one of the 33 city-states before the British colonial period and until Burma built a nation-state after its independence in 1948. Along with Kangyi, Shweku is another monastic institution that existed there under the patronage of the ruling Shan princes. Being a principedom state, the population was large enough so that Yawnghwe was able to accommodate many learning monks and institutions. Thus, Buddhism enjoyed a higher prosperity in Yawnghwe State in comparison with others. The city is situated in the valley in which its name 'Yawnghwe' derives, approximately 30 kilometers distance from the capital Taunggyi in the high hills. In its west is the famous Inle Lake (Shan: *Nawng Haiya*), today popular with tourists. The former principedom state is populated by several ethnic groups, including Shans, Danu, Pa-O, Angsa (Burmese: *Inthar*), and Taungyo. There, it was likely that Phra Khammai enjoyed his days as young novice. In terms of monastic education, he accomplished two levels of the government-sponsored examinations, *Pathama-nge* and *Pathama-lat*, during his five years in Yawnghwe.

In 1981, when he had to suddenly leave Yawnghwe, he asked his elder brother, Sai Ood to send him to one of the top monasteries in Burma. The most highly regarded monastic institutions at that time, according to Phra Khammai, included Masoe Yein in Mandalay, Mahagandhayon in Amarapura, Nyaungdon in Yangon, and Kyakhatwaing and Sāsana Mandaing in Pegu. However, in the end, the place where Phra Khammai went to obtain his *Dhammācariya* degree was not where his elder brother intended. It so happened that one of the senior lecturers at Kangyi Pariyatti Institute, Ven. Pannyavamsa, graduated with a *Dhammācariya* degree from Sāsana Mandaing and he was willing to write a recommendation letter for the young Khammai. With that recommendation, Phra Khammai ended up studying in Pegu until he graduated with his *Dhammācariya* degree.⁴² Yawnghwe, with its beautiful environment and pious and friendly Buddhist communities,

⁴² Dhammacariya degree is an equivalent of Bachelor of Arts (B.A) or undergraduate degrees. It is the first monastic degree to be recognized and approved by the government that states equivalence of B.A degree. Many Sri Lankan universities recognized this degree as approved by the Myanmar government. With Dhammacariya that Buddhist sangha from Myanmar are admitted to a master program in Buddhist studies in Sri Lanka.

is considered one of the best places one can study monastic education in Shan State. So why did Phra Khammai have to leave Yawngghwe after all? There could have been several reasons, but information gleaned from informants suggests that an episode of conflict between young Shan and Pa-O monks took place during that time. As a novice, Khammai and his novice-friends were likely exposed to vulnerability and danger there. For their own security and safety reasons, many of them left the institute.⁴³

From Yawngghwe to Pegu was a further step on his education journey that brought him not only from highland to lowland Burma, but to a highly respected and larger monastic learning institution with a new environment and customs. Being in Pegu completely changed his outlook and confidence in his monastic training. He now started thinking that it was possible to master the subjects, the Buddhist texts, and the Pali language. This is because the Sāsana Mandaing Institute had three famous authors known nationally: the abbot Sayadaw U Pannyajota for his *Peta-vatthu* and *Guide for Preachers*; Headmaster Ven. Samvara for his work on the *Abhidhamma* commentary, and the last one who has the same name as Phra Khammai, Dhammasāmībhivamsa,⁴⁴ famous for his guides for government monastic exams and who named all his books *Kunyiiyay* (“Help”). Hence, Phra Khammai told himself, ‘I must concentrate on mastering texts and language, not only exams.’ He was actually criticized for this attitude by his seniors, such as Ven. Vayama, a *Dhammācariya* graduate who is now abbot of Wat Pitakat in Taunggyi, for paying more importance to mastering the subject rather than passing exams. Ven. Vayama told Phra Khammai that he had his priorities wrong, and they should be the other way round.

In addition, Phra Khammai met a couple of students who had come first and second in *Pathamapyan* examinations for the whole country. Phra Khammai was inspired by these two monks. He said he was really encouraged and enthusiastic to follow in their footsteps. He asked them what their secret of success was. They told him, ‘We never missed a class,

⁴³ Personal interview with informant, Chiang Mai, 2014.

⁴⁴ *Dhammasāmībhivamsa* (*Dhammasami* + *abhivamsa*). –*abhivamsa* is a title suffixed to one’s original name, to denote a monk that has completed the *Sakyasiha* examination held by the Pariyatti Sasananuggaha Foundation in Mandalay.

and we have excellent teachers here.’ Their advice rang through Phra Khammai’s heart, and he paid great attention to his teachers and what they taught. With this self-belief he worked hard, even though he received no financial support from any source. Phra Khammai recalled receiving only about two hundred and fifty *kyats*⁴⁵ from his parents for the whole year.”

An irony was that Phra Khammai failed his exam in the *Pathama-gyi*, a university entrance level, in his first year at Sāsana Mandaing in Pegu. He was very disappointed in his poor performance and he hardly spoke to anyone for about five days after the results came out. One can understand how badly he felt, as he had high hopes of securing the first place in the whole country. He failed to achieve not only his aim, but even a simple pass. Nevertheless, he was not thinking of giving up, but “what went wrong and what could he do to regain his pride.”

Then, on the fifth day, he decided to repeat the same level of exams, but in the Pali medium. He approached Ven. Dhammananda, a Pali expert, who was a middle-ranking lecturer there, to coach him in Pali. Together with him, Phra Khammai also had a colleague, a Burmese *Samanera* from Monywa in central Myanmar who was in the same situation and joined Phra Khammai for the Pali course. However, after a week, his colleague dropped out.

Firstly, the Pali expert coached them to write answers for ten questions, taken from the government’s old papers. For fifteen days, the teacher’s corrections covered his blue writing with red ink. After each class, it was a humiliation, recalls Phra Khammai. The teacher was hard to please. It was very difficult because he had to work twice as hard as other students who did the exams in the Burmese medium. He did even not rest after lunch and stayed late at night to improve his Pali skills.

⁴⁵ The currency exchange rate at that time was USD 1 to 6 MMK (*kyats*), so Phra Khammai had 250 *kyats* = \$41.60 US for his annual stipend. As this was in the early 1980s, 250 *kyats* was possibly enough because the monks would go on alms-rounds for their daily meals. Usually the student monks in monasteries would not have to spend a *kyat* in their daily life unless encountering illness or other urgent cases.

After fifteen days of ardent and hard work, Phra Khammai started getting some approval marks in his daily Pali lessons. This gave him much confidence. Besides, every week, during the mock exams when the results came out, his name was always noted with a bracket to indicate that he answered all questions in Pali. Bracketing here in the Burmese writing system does not indicate either good or bad, or exclusion as unimportant; rather it shows something unique and eye-catching. In this case, that Phra Khammai answered the exam papers in Pali was unique, as in the whole class of 54 student monks, he was the only candidate who did so in Pali. After a month or so, he started regaining his lost pride and felt some satisfaction in himself. In the following year, he even attempted to inspire Shan *Sangha* students who were there with him in the same institute to take up Pali.⁴⁶

Phra Khammai confidently claimed: “It was a sign that we Tai *Sangha*⁴⁷ could compete at the highest level. We were the majority of the Pali medium students.” That strengthened his self-confidence. It was this attitude of focusing on the quality and the Pali medium that helped Phra Khammai to obtain his *Dhammācariya* degree at 19 as a *Samanera*. He was the only *Samanera* among the 78 graduates in the whole nation to graduate as a *Dhammācariya* that year, 1985. When he said, “...Tai *Sangha* could compete at the highest level,” it sounds like a claim for the pride of Shan-ness. It was, perhaps, what aroused the emergence of a nationalistic view.

3.3 *Upasampada* ordination and cross-border journey

After his *Dhammācariya* graduation, he became a lecturer at the Sāsana Mandaing Institute for a year, and during this time he received *Upasampada*, higher ordination, a fully ordained monk status. With the approval of his elder sister, Daw Yi proposed that the family wanted to provide patronage for Phra Khammai’s *Upasampada* (Burmese:

⁴⁶ Some Shan *Sangha* students who were there with Phra Khammai may remember that he actually inspired at least four of them to take up Pali as the medium for their examinations. They are: (1) Sao Nandamedha (Intermediate Level/*Pathamalat*), who did not complete the whole year, but reversed to the Myanmar medium; (2) Sao Vannasiri, now an abbot in Mongsu, in the Junior level/*Pathama-gne*; (3) Sao Vilasa (later *Dhammacariya*), also Intermediate Level; and (4) Sao Mandana, now an abbot in Mong Nang, at the Primary level/*Akyepyu-mula*.

⁴⁷ Tai versus Shan: In this dissertation, I prefer to use ‘Shan’ to refer to the movement of Shan monks led by Phra Khammai and Shan people. However, within this group of monks, sometimes, they prefer to use ‘Tai’ to refer to themselves, as well as to the people of Shan State as ‘Tai people.’

Pazin khan). He readily accepted. When he was asked at which temple he would like to congregate for the *Upasampada* ceremony, he told his patron that he would choose Taung Pauk Monastery because the abbot *Sayadaw* was one of the key figures in the *Sudhammacara* examination advisory board. That was the reason of choosing Taung Pauk. However, the time for his higher ordination was when the Taung Pauk *Sayadaw* was away in Inle Lake, Shan State, to administer a temple that also belonged to him. Therefore, they chose the Vejayanta monastery instead. Later, his patron reported the matter to the Taung Pauk *Sayadaw*. He was surprised to hear this and immediately replied, ‘Oh...such as a *kataññuta katavedi* ones! If the young monk is on a visit to Moulmein, please do let me know.’⁴⁸ When Phra Khammai eventually visited there, the abbot offered his temple to him, ‘As I am getting old, for the future of our temple’s development and for the sake of *Buddha-sāsana*, please do accept my offer. This temple [Taung Pauk] is yours.’ Phra Khammai responded that he was honored to receive the offer, but as he was still young and would like to study more, he felt compelled to decline. But during his visit to the abbot again in 1995, after his master’s graduation from Sri Lanka, the abbot, while on his hospital-bed, told him to accept the temple officially as his health was rapidly deteriorating (Vicittābhipala, 2014). Although Phra Khammai himself has never taken up an abbot position at Taung Pauk, now the monastery is in the second generation of abbotship in his lineage. Venerable Vicittābhipāla is the current abbot, also from Laikha and graduated with *Dhammācariya* in Burma and a master from Sri Lanka. The first generation abbot was Venerable Vayama from Tangyan, Shan State, who administered as abbot until his death in 2009.

Thus, Phra Khammai’s *Upasampada* ordination took place in 1987 at the age of 20-years-old in Moulmein (Mawlamyaing), the capital of Mon State. Under the preceptorship (*Upajjhaya*) of one of the most learned monks, the late Most Ven. Abhidhaja-

⁴⁸ *Kataññuta katavedi* = *Kataññuta*, knowing and acknowledging with gratitude the debt one has to others, and placing them above oneself. *Katavedita*, the effort to repay the debt. The ones who know what has been done for them are called *kataññu*, and those who return the favor gratefully are called *katavedi*. *Kataññu-katavedita*: acknowledging the debt we owe to others and paying it back with acts of gratitude are spiritual qualities which protect the world from harm, help society to function, and lead to peace and happiness. (Luang Por Liam, translated by Ajahn Siripañño, *The Buddhist Channel*, Nov 17, 2009. <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=6,8710,0,0,1,0#.VkPZnivuNRo>. Accessed: November 2015.)

maharatthaguru Nagasenābhivamsa, widely known as ‘Taung Lay Lone *Sayadaw*,’ Dhammasami was formally ordained as a *Bhikkhu* at the Vejayanta Monastery’s *simā* (boundary) with the assembled members of *Sangha* according to the Theravada tradition. The Vejayanta monastery is where the patron family usually goes for making merit, performing religious acts, and learning Buddhist teachings on a regular basis, as well as on special occasions.

Phra Khammai was already familiar with the Mon capital long before his higher ordination. Burma has a long tradition of ‘nationalist examinations’ culture, and as described earlier, Phra Khammai was one of the many monks who sought to contest in such examinations as much as possible. The Mawlamyaing *Sudhammacara* examination is one of the most widely accepted and recognized within the country.

Word of Phra Khammai’s *Dhammācariya* graduation at Pegu spread, even among his devotees and the communities that supported the monks’ daily meals, alms, and other utensils. Every morning, the monks go on alms-rounds to collect food from those devotees. One of his devotees, known as Daw Thi, was a trader from Mawlamyaing who frequently visited her elder sister in Pegu. Phra Khammai was one of the prudent monks who performed well in studies among the 700-strong *Sangha* at the Sāsana Mandaing Institute, catching the attention of Daw Thi.

The year 1987 was a great turning point that influenced Phra Khammai’s career until the present. As I have mentioned, Phra Khammai left Pegu in 1986 for Mandalay to do the *Sakyasiha Dhammācariya*, dubbed the ‘man-killer examination’ and commonly known as the ‘nationalist examination.’ And I have also mentioned that he failed in his first attempt, but was determined to repeat it. However, he could not do so because a certain reason arose in that particular period; therefore, he had to give up his hope and dream altogether. His passion for Shan literature was expressed through his writings and poems. His performance was good not only in the Pali examinations, but also as a poet and writer in Shan with the penname ‘Khursai Laikha.’ While he was in Pegu, along with some friends he started producing their own journal, authored by themselves, self-esteemed ‘lovers of literature.’ Certainly their label expresses a form of nationalist sentiment. Their journal was not printed media as found today in the markets, but hand-written using

waxed paper stencils and produced using a mimeograph machine to duplicate copies. While he was in Mandalay, with their own connections, they continued to produce such journals. In the same year, university, college, and high school students started a political movement and demonstrations that took place here and there in major cities like Mandalay, Rangoon, Pegu, and elsewhere. Media outlets in Burma have a long history of government control. When the events of the student uprising began to make headway for their demands and protests, the government-controlled media was tightened and restricted even further, and more severe punishments were given to those found guilty of unlicensed printing or any form of public circulation. Such kinds of media distribution would have been readily categorized under the name of 'political literature.' Thus, possession of this kind of literature means one would be subject to detention or trial in case of arrest.

After the *Dhammācariya* graduation, certainly Phra Khammai was looking to achieve more than Buddhist education in Burma had to offer. He was aiming higher than the abbots of his hometown, Laikha, had encouraged him a decade earlier. He decided to go for the *Sakyasiha* examinations⁴⁹ in Mandalay. Hence, after a year serving as a lecturer at Sāsana Mandaing in Pegu or Hamsavati, as it was known in Burmese history and as Thais still know it today, Phra Khammai moved to Mandalay in 1986 to prepare for the *Sakyasiha*. He failed in his first attempt due to the hardship of the place and that of the exams. According to him, in that year, there was only three *Bhikkhus* who passed among the 130 examinees. Even so, Phra Khammai was determined to repeat the exams. Obviously, he wanted to achieve high prestige and esteem by completing three monastic bachelor degrees, although he has had to be contented with only the government-sponsored *Dhammācariya* degree due to various reasons. The political situation was getting worse in 1987 with the government cancelling many of its own currency notes,

⁴⁹ Among monastic national examinations designated for *Bhikkhu* or fully ordained monks are *Jetiyangana* and *Sakyasiha*. One should have completed these examinations before the age of 27 years. A monk who has graduated *Sakyasiha* is honored with 'Abhivamsa,' a title with special honor extended to their names. (Cf: Note 2). They are known to have existed before the colonial period; however, during the British rule they became better known as nationalist examinations. These two examinations were named after the two famous *stupas* in the country: one from Jetiyangana on the premises of Shwedagon in Yangon, and Sakyasiha in Sakyasiha Pagoda in Mandalay, as the exams were held on the premises of those *stupas*. The latter is also nicknamed 'luthat sarmebwe' (men-killer examination) for its exceeding difficulty.

such as the 25, 35, and 75 denominations, in addition to the cancellation of the 100 *kyats* banknote a year earlier.⁵⁰ The resulting economic hardship brought about widespread demonstrations as people became confused and concerned as to where Burma was heading. Nevertheless, Phra Khammai was not involved personally in the political movement. As the situation did not allow him to remain in Mandalay, he was forced to give up his dream of becoming a *Sakyasiha* graduate.

According to Herngseng's account, Phra Khammai left for Thailand the same year that the uprising started and just before the political turmoil reached its peak (Herngseng, 2014). While in Thailand teaching young monks at Wat Phra Wiang Inn, Wiang Haeng, in Chiang Mai province, he also had the opportunity to learn some English with Maesra Mary in Piang Luang. Connecting with two colleague friends, the trio left for Bangkok to study more advanced English. While staying in a temple in Bangkok, he met several Shan people traveling back-and-forth from abroad. There he got to know some important people and connections. He had been thinking of continuing his studies somewhere in a foreign country. In 1989, he left Thailand for Yangon to apply for travel documents, and as it was the first phase of opening the opportunity for citizens of the country, the process was unnecessarily delayed and inconvenient, taking him eight months to complete.

At this point, I would like to summarize the life story of Phra Khammai extracted from "Sao *Dhamma* Whom I Know" written in Shan by Saosra Mongkut (2014). Mongkut recalls their third meeting at a Shan monastery at Paukmyaning Institute in Mandalay. This was after the *Vassa* season, so many Shan monks would come for a visit in Mandalay. Phra Khammai was organizing *Wan Khumaw Tai* (Shan Scholars' Day) and a Shan Literature debate competition entitled "Pen versus Sword, which is 'sharper?' or, which is 'painful?'" The competition was divided in two groups: each group with three monks and one of the groups representing 'the pen' headed by Sao Nandhamedha (Kengtung) and the other 'the sword,' led by Sao Nandavama (Langkhur). At the same time, outside of Burma, in the Middle East, the decade-long Iran-Iraq war was going on. 'That war represents the sword, which provides no sight of an end to the conflicts, while

⁵⁰ This political uprising reached its peak in 1988 and is most well-known as the four 8s or 8888 Movement, resulting in a coup by the military.

the pen represents ‘peace’, the only solution that could prevail,’ the pen group argued. The debate made everyone excited about the theme of Wan Khumaw Tai.

The next day, Mongkut Sao Devin visited Dhammanada, the Tripitaka Text Studies Institute located on the other shore of the Irrawaddy River in Mingun. On their way back to the monastery in Mandalay, they saw a woven bag with the Shan national flag hanging on one of the monastery posts with a notepad and a box of biscuits inside. The bag, as it was learned later, belonged to Sao Kawnyo, who had just arrived from Rangoon. Seeing no one inside the monastery, he left the bag hanging and went out. On his return, Phra Khammai had also just arrived from Mahavisudharama where he was studying for the *Sakyasiha* Pali examination. They had a conversation just outside the temple. Then in the evening, the monk who came from Rangoon talked to Sao Devin, who was a resident of the place. The conversation point was about the government agents who were searching for Shan monks who might be involved in political movements, and some who had been arrested already. Then, Saosra Mongkut advised him to move away all the documents, booklets, or journals that might be deemed illegal.

“What are the illegal materials?” Sao Devin asked.

“‘Illegal documents or materials’ means journals or booklets printed for circulation without permission or unlicensed,” responded Saosra Mongkut. As it was already 11 p.m., Mongkut went to bed. At midnight when he woke up, Sao Devin was still collecting those ‘illegal documents.’ Then Mongkut asked:

“Still not yet finished?”

“One of the copies was not found,” replied Sao Devin.

“Okay, find them all. Don’t let anything remain,” commanded Saosra Mongkut before returning to sleep. In the morning, he asked again to make sure the copies had been found.

“Did you find that copy?”

“No, Sir!” answered Sao Devin.

The missing copy was known as *Hseu Mawng Khio* (“Bright Hopes Green”) Journal produced by Shan youth from Mongkut (Mogok), 202 kilometers from Mandalay and well-known for ruby mining. That was one of the examples, a journal or booklet produced using waxed paper stencils and a mimeograph machine. The contents of the *Hseu Mawng Khio*, in fact, were nothing about politics, the military, language, or even religious beliefs, but largely love stories and poems. However, it had been produced by the Shan Literature and Cultural Society in Mongkut. As it was produced during the time that students’ political movements were on the rise and the journal had not been registered, it was deemed illegal. The missing copy of that journal was later learned to have been taken by a lady whom they suspected of being an agent.

The next morning, a group of four intelligence officers in plain-clothes arrived at the monastery premises. They were met by Sao Devin. He was told that they wanted to search around his sleeping room. There they found several personal correspondence letters, and some of them were taken by the agents. At his bed they also found a master copy of the waxed paper stencil used to produce *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*, the Shan language version of the discourse on the first sermon of the Buddha. He was told to accompany the agents to their office. No one knows what exactly the charge was, but Sao Devin was jailed for two years. The following day, the agents arrived at the temple premises again and took another monk, imprisoning him for the same period as the first.

The production of Shan literature journals was among the blacklisted public media. Along with his colleagues and friends, Phra Khammai escaped to Mongkut by bus. They all were relaxed and enjoyed their time in Mongkut as if nothing had happened in the past few days. Following the event in Mandalay, a few days later Mr. A arrived from Mandalay, while Phra Khammai and friends were doing physical exercises and enjoying their time. Mr. A told them that, ‘... even here, it is not safe,’ and that they should leave soon. Then they dispersed and began to arrange their journey. They journeyed on foot from Mongkut to Kyaukme via Mong Long, a distance of 120 kilometers taking five days. From Kyaukme to Lashio they journeyed by bus. In this way, they made several stops, passing several villages and towns through Shan State from Mandalay to Wiang Haeng, which took them several weeks to reach northern Thailand. Saosra Mongkut recalls: “No one

actually knows the reasons why Phra Khammai and colleagues had to escape. Even today it is still a mystery. It may be his pen-works, or maybe he was mistakenly accused as being active in politics, or maybe someone deliberately accused him” (Saosra Mongkut, 2014: 165).

While in Wiang Haeng, he became close to Kawn Jerng, then the Mong Tai Army (MTA) military chief-of-staff, and began teaching some young students in their camps while also studying English himself. Two friends whom I call Mr. A and Mr. B were with him at that time, and Mr. A had just escaped from Insein Prison when riots rose up within the cells. He faced similar charges to those Phra Khammai had just narrowly escaped. He had spent a total of 10 months in the notorious Insein Prison. The three friends had in fact known each other since staying together in Yawnghwe. Not knowing each other’s news, the three amazingly met again at Wat Papao in Chiang Mai in 1987, recalled Mr. A, who is currently living in Chiang Mai. From there, the three friends proceeded to Wiang Haeng to start a new life. Both Mr. A and Mr. B later learned that Phra Khammai was so close to the MTA’s chief-of-staff’s family that they treated him like their own son. He began to show the signs of family bonds and life seemed to be easy-going and satisfying. However, Mr. A and Mr. B made a quick decision to rescue him from a comfortable trap, reasoning that Phra Khammai was intelligent and capable of learning things quickly, unlike themselves. He should not stop at this point of his journey. With this reasoning, the two friends took Phra Khammai to Bangkok without giving much explanation. There in Bangkok, Phra Khammai had a chance to learn English at a well-regarded language school through the support of several devotees. While in Bangkok, Phra Khammai was fortunate to meet many Shans who were well-to-do. Some of them promised to support him if he were to continue his studies abroad. This kind of promise energetically encouraged Phra Khammai to dream of achieving higher foreign degrees. After the military coup in Burma on September 18, 1988, all forms of political movements in the country were subdued, the movement’s leaders and key activists were imprisoned, and all the state mechanisms fell under the military’s control. Phra Khammai decided to return to Burma to apply for a passport and then leave the country again for his studies.

3.4 Missions in foreign countries

*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...*⁵¹

This message was, perhaps, the first ever the Buddha communicated with the very first community of monks immediately after the number of *Sangha* members reached sixty 2,500 years ago. The message was clear that as a *Bhikkhu*, one is required to travel to spread the message of the Buddha, which is beneficial and fruitful to the well-being of all people. In modern times this tradition is very much alive regardless of the tradition or school of Buddhist monks. Monks from Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand, Laos, and Burma, as well as Sri Lanka, are constantly traveling globally today, although with different purposes. Pattana Kitiarsa describes the nature of the Thai *Sangha*'s journey abroad as "missionary intent." However, he argues that the transnationalization of Thai Buddhism since the late twentieth century has emerged out of global cultural junctures, where missionary intent and monastic networks have joined forces. The Thai *Sangha*'s mission is to serve three purposes: 1) the growth of Thai migrant communities abroad; 2) the Buddhist missionization abroad policy sponsored by the *Sangha* and the Thai government through the Ministry of Education and the Office of National Buddhism under the Ministry of Culture; and 3) the growing global interest in Buddhism in international communities (Kitiarsa, 2010). Likewise, it becomes clearer when Phra Khammai conducts meditation retreats, Vipassana sessions, Buddhist lectures, and *Dhamma*-talks worldwide, that his intention is for *Dhammadūta*, a global missionary orientation. He conducts these services not only at his own OBV center at Oxford, but also in several European countries, such as Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Spain, and North American countries such as Canada and the United States. Phra Khammai's time spent in the West is partly for Buddhist missionary purposes and partly for education.

⁵¹ *Caratha bhikkhave cārikaṃ bahujaṇahitāya bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāya, atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ...* Vin I.20; DN II_utf8; PTS p. 046.

Yet, for the Thai *Sangha* abroad whose primary task is to commission Thai Buddhism, its efforts are not only to spread the Buddha's teachings, but to promote the Thai national culture in the host country. This mission is of the *Sangha* and state-sponsored for the promotion of Thai Buddhism abroad (Kitiarsa, 2010). Phra Khammai's mission on the other hand, is self-sponsored as he has neither state nor Myanmar *Sangha* support for his foreign mission. It was a long journey, however, before he reached the level of 'missionary,' teaching meditation and Buddhism in the West. The following is how and where he started his foreign journeys.

Phra Khammai seems to pay more attention to the lesser-known existence of Theravada Buddhist practice in some European countries such as Hungary, Serbia, and Poland. He helped residents there translate Buddhist books such as *Dhammapada* and *Suttas* into their native language, and even bore the financial burden for the publications. This is one form of '*Dhamma* investment' in the West. As Nancy Eberhardt remarks:

"... With one foot planted firmly in his rural Shan homeland and the other now in Oxford, England, he embodies struggles, challenges and opportunities that characterize contemporary Buddhist teachings and practice. Through his remarkable life experiences, he has forged a unique perspective that has positioned him to serve as a bridge for a new generation of Buddhism—Asian and European, Theravadin and others who turn to him for help in finding out what it means to be a Buddhist in a rapidly changing global context. For his tireless efforts in this regard, we can all be grateful." (Eberhardt, 2014: 47)

To what extent that Phra Khammai has his feet planted firmly in his rural Shan homeland is yet to be established, although we do know that he has grounded himself well at Oxford by establishing the OBV center. If 'rural Shan homeland' refers to local people in remote Shan State, the claim has to be independently verified. I suggest here that it is still very early to reach a conclusion of how firmly his efforts are grounded in Shan State. His sermons or *Dhamma* talks delivered in the West in Western languages are perhaps comfortable for him, yet not necessarily understood in the same way by Shans. During his *Dhamma* tours across Shan State prior to his 50th birthday in 2014, Phra Khammai

admitted that “he has been abroad for over 30 years, more than half of his life spent in Shan State and Burma proper combined, so that some of his *Dhamma* sermons could have been delivered in Shan for the first time.”⁵² Therefore, his *Dhamma* sermons delivered in the West may be well understood by Western people, but when it comes to Shan State, perhaps local people have difficulty to understanding him. Promoting *Lik Long* Shan literature is one way of establishing himself among the local people. However, this influence would largely be limited to Shan intellectuals. The founding of the Shan State Buddhist University is a symbol of international intellectuals and academics, and of course a landmark of education for the people in Shan State. It will certainly take time for him to adjust and establish himself among the rural local people in Shan State.

3.4.1 Ceylon Journey

After an eight-month wait, Phra Khammai received a Burmese passport and planned his trip agenda, which included the first stop in Bangkok. This was a typical duration in Burma in those days, and of course the situation today is much more efficient. At that time, the Myanmar government had an official currency exchange rate of USD1 = MMK 6; everyone who has been approved to travel abroad within Asia was permitted to exchange the equivalent of USD \$61.⁵³ While stranded in Bangkok for a couple of weeks, he was still wondering where to embark on his education journey with only \$61 in his pocket. He recalled counting his dollars time and time again; at last he was lucky enough to find someone to offer to sponsor him with an air ticket to a destination where he could go to study. Not knowing a destination where he could settle for higher Buddhist study abroad, Phra Khammai, pioneered the Ceylon Journey all alone to Sri Lanka in the early 1990s. According to him, at that point, he knew no one who could lead or help him to get into a university for higher Buddhist studies abroad. He even had no idea which country to travel to, as he had no contacts with any Buddhist institutions. It was, however, not the end of the world for Phra Khammai, for the determined young Shan Buddhist monk wanted to discover and pioneer an educational journey overseas. Unsurprisingly, just a

⁵² Phra Khammai’s dhamma-talk delivered in Hsenwi, Shan State in 2014.

⁵³ MMK = Myanmar *kyat*; USD = United States dollar

few weeks after his arrival in Sri Lanka,⁵⁴ he said that he was very clear about what he wanted to do and what he should be looking for: his goal was to establish a successful Buddhist university for the Shan *Sangha* back home in Shan State, and this goal has remained unchanged.

The year 1988 marked a turning point in Burma's history as a political movement swept across the country in a democratic uprising known as '8-8-88' or the 'Four 8s Movement.' The uprising aimed to unseat the three-decades-long dictatorship of General Ne Win and triggered a series of events that eventually led to a coup on 18 September 1988. Following the long period of political uncertainty, universities and high schools across the country were closed and monastic institutions skipped their examinations, leading Phra Khammai to decide to postpone his studies. In the end, he decided to continue studying English, for which he spent about six months in Rangoon and a year in northern Thailand. In 1989, in the wake of an ease of restrictions against traveling abroad by the government, he applied for a passport. That is, in short, how Phra Khammai pioneered the first Ceylon Journey to Sri Lanka in the early 1990s and then to Oxford in early 2000s. At the same time, the Myanmar Buddhist *Sangha* began taking notice of monks attempting to go abroad for studies, pilgrimages, or missionary work. However, all forms of such travel by monks were individual-based with no state sponsorship forthcoming. I joined the Ceylon Journey with Phra Khammai in 1994 as part of the third group of Shan monks to travel to Sri Lanka. Our group of three members made a total of nine Shan monks altogether in Colombo.

His teenage friend recalls: "When he [Phra Khammai] was a young novice ... he was kind of cute and loved by many. Even while he was growing up, whichever monastery he went to for studies, he was cared for and loved by several devotees. He was not short of supporters financially. So, I don't think throughout his monastic career had he lived a hardship life, although he had to struggle for who he is now."⁵⁵ Certainly, Phra Khammai enjoyed his teenage years as a monastic learner.

⁵⁴ Phra Khammai arrived in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on 20 March 1990.

⁵⁵ Informant, personal interview, August 2015.

Since his time as a novice student at Kangyi Institute in Yawnghwe, Phra Khammai was known to have led elders and *Bhikkhus* as a team (Tangyan, 2014). This indicates he was unusually gifted with leadership skills from an early age. As described earlier, after five years at Yawnghwe, he moved to Sāsana Mandaing in Pegu. It is said that before him, there was no Shan monk from highland Shan State to have studied there. He was the pioneer, and later many novices and monks from Shan State followed him. Likewise, in the early 1990s, he pioneered the Ceylon Journey that has now brought as many as 200 Shan monks to study in Sri Lanka and as well. He has not only taken his fellow monks to Sri Lanka, but also to the West, to entirely new territories in non-Buddhist countries. There he leads them as an exemplary monk, remaining a guiding light to his fellow brothers. He has such a large following among Shan Buddhists that Eberhardt (2014) has accorded him status “akin to a rock star.”

Phra Khammai’s inspired goal of creating a Shan Buddhist university had not been realized until recently. The establishment of Shan State Buddhist University was officially announced on 22 November 2014 during his 50th birthday celebrations. Phra Kammai notes that the Shan *Sangha* has made other tangible forms of progress, including with the *Lik Long* (Great Texts), the traditional Shan scholastic works. Progress here means that the Conference on *Lik Long* has been held twice: once in 2013 and again in 2014. In addition to this, the First International Pali Conference was held in December 2014, marking his 50th birthday in a most striking and prestigious manner. The Pali Conference clearly demonstrated that Shan monks are academically competent and ready to shoulder responsibility, while the two *Lik Long* conferences brought together educated monks and lay scholars to hold a Shan-speaking conference of international standard.

Phra Khammai’s works and his international experience serve to inspire and build confidence among the Shan *Sangha* so that they can achieve their full potential. While more than 200 monks have studied as part of the Ceylon Journey together with a similar number in Thailand, three have studied or are studying in the UK. Two monks have obtained their Ph.Ds in India. This inspiration has spread to the Shan *Sangha* in China’s Yunnan province, as well as in Arunachal Pradesh in India. A few Shan monastic students are working toward their Ph.Ds at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU),

Mahamakut Buddhist University (MBU), and Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand. Among them, monks who are originally from Shan State but from different lineages and backgrounds have subsumed themselves under the pioneering leadership of Phra Khammai. Monks from Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) in southern China, on the other hand, have no direct access to such leadership but through the links of monks such as Kang Nan Shan, a Ph.D graduate from the USA. Likewise, Shan monks who study in Thailand arrive by various means; some may come as part of a group, while others are individuals with their own connections. For many of them, Phra Khammai may not have a direct influence as their leader.

The educational journey known as the Ceylon Journey currently has 54 Shan student monks studying in Sri Lanka. Throughout the 25 years of the Ceylon Journey, the graduates have achieved bachelor, master, and doctorate degrees from Sri Lankan universities. Over the years, there have been a similar number of Shan monks who have come to study in Thailand at various universities as well. According to Phra Khammai, now some members of the Shan *Sangha* are very confident of their capacity and potential today. We have witnessed some of them having founded their own private monastic schools at temples, and some have even set up colleges. The Sariputta College, founded in 2013 in Muse on the Sino-Burmese border, is one of the best examples. The Theravada College in Kunming, China, and another one in Mong Mao, Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna), China, are some of the results of their abilities and the Shan *Sangha* network's dream. The monks who have successfully set up two Buddhist colleges in China were those who have joined the Ceylon Journey with Shan monks from Shan State in recent years. They are a minority of the monks practicing Theravada Buddhist traditions in China today.

3.4.2 Journey to the west: An exploration

For Phra Khammai, going to the West seems to have been only a matter of time, as he has well prepared himself to offer religious services to the people there. While studying in Sri Lanka, the Thai, Burmese, and Sri Lankan monks who came to know him hinted at possible forthcoming invitations to the West. A Burmese monk from California actually promised Phra Khammai such an invitation, but upon meeting a monk of Burman origin,

he rescinded his promise. That was when Phra Khammai decided to take the offer from a Sri Lankan temple in London to go and run a weekly meditation class in the English medium and help their Sunday school. This was Saddhatissa International Buddhist Centre (SIBC) at Kingsbury in London. He was indeed very grateful for the opportunity offered to him, even leaving his Ph.D studies in Sri Lanka halfway to help the SIBC. They appreciated his contribution and asked him to stay beyond the year of their original invitation.

Even before he went to England, Phra Khammai already had the experience of teaching in English at the Young Men's Buddhist Association's (YMBA) headquarters in Colombo for four years. He taught the YMBA syllabus and more, such as the Buddhist *suttas* (discourses) from the *Majjhima-nikaya* (Middle Length Discourses), the *Anguttara-nikaya*, and some *Vinaya* (monastic discipline). All of the students were English speakers who missed out on Buddhist Sunday school in their youth because they attended convent schools. Such teaching experience prepared him well for his work in England. Those Sri Lankan professionals and members of the middle class he taught were some of the most Westernized Buddhists he would come across.

Phra Khammai eventually chose a comparative study of the history of monastic education in Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka for his Ph.D research. Although the topic was approved and he was admitted for doctoral study at Oxford in October 2000, a year later, he found the workload was too intense, and at the recommendation of Prof. Richard Gombrich, he limited his study to Thai and Burmese education. He was encouraged to attend and participate in academic conferences, which he did. His first paper was delivered at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University in 2002 at the International Association of Buddhist Studies (IABS)'s conference, and was titled "The *Sangha* in Burma and Thailand, 1826–1880: A Review of Factors Leading to the Emergence of Contemporary *Nikayas*."

During the next two years, Phra Khammai also presented a paper in New York at the Institute of Advanced Advertising Studies (IAAS) conference titled "Ecclesiastical Examinations: Their Origin and Impact on the *Sangha* in Burma and Thailand"; at SOAS in 2003 at the UK Association for Buddhist Studies (UKABS) conference, titled:

“Swimming against the Tide: A Brief Introduction to the Life and Thought of Two Leading Monastic Educationists in Burma and Thailand”; at New Castle in 2003, at the Modern Sanskrit Conference, titled: “Secularising the Monasteries: The Role of Formal Examinations in Ecclesiastical Pedagogy in Burma and Thailand”; and in 2004 at the Conference on Burmese Buddhism and the Spirit Cult Revisited at Stanford University, USA, he read “Idealism and Pragmatism: A Dilemma in the Current Monastic Education Systems of Burma and Thailand.” At the Buddhist Studies Conference at Balliol College, Oxford University, in 2004, as he was nearing to graduate, he presented the same paper that he previously shared at Stanford. At the time, Phra Khammai said, “We are usually not confident enough to give a paper at Oxford, so we normally start giving it elsewhere.” His experiences at international academic conferences further convinced him that the Shan *Sangha* could achieve its goal.

3.4.3 Study in Oxford

Phra Khammai decided to go to Oxford for his Buddhist higher education, seeking a Doctor of Philosophy (D.Phil) in October 2000. While studying, he also managed to establish a Theravada Buddhist center at Oxford named the Oxford Buddha Vihara (OBV), which became the first such center among non-Theravada Buddhist nations. It is worthwhile to discuss the reasons Phra Khammai chose Oxford not only for his higher education, but also as the base for his *Dhammadūta* center. Certainly, being in London gave him the opportunity to broaden his horizons further. He visited several universities and observed British and immigrant communities. In 1997, his second year in England, Phra Khammai applied to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, to study for a Ph.D. He passed the interview and was admitted for the degree program but he did not have enough money to take up the offer. His intended topic for the Ph.D program was “Buddhist Attitudes Towards Poverty.”

Instead of feeling depressed due to his financial situation, he took to heart the positive point that he was considered qualified to enter the University of London. The following year, he applied to do his Ph.D at Trinity College, Cambridge University. This time he planned to do a Buddhist textual study, to edit an *Abhidhamma* sub-commentary written in the 15th century in Burma. However, two conditions prevented him from taking up the

offer from Cambridge: lack of funding and lack of a supervisor. Phra Khammai revealed that Prof. R. Norman had just retired and Dr. Margret Cone, another Pali scholar at Cambridge, was planning on taking a sabbatical leave. When Dr. Irvine Carr, the Sankritist there, said he was not competent in the subject, Phra Khammai was ready to decide to postpone his ambition again.

Nevertheless, they all advised and encouraged him to apply to Oxford. Hence, in 2000 he applied to Oxford and was interviewed by Prof. Richard Gombrich for an hour at the Oriental Institute. At the end of the interview, Prof. Gombrich gave him an application form to complete. Before the interview, Phra Khammai had already sent him a proposal, the one that he had already used to apply to SOAS. But Prof. Gombrich rejected this, and during the interview he tried to discover Phra Khammai's true interest. At the end of the interview, he suggested two choices: "a topic related to the *Vinaya*, which he thought Phra Khammai to have a real interest in, or something related to education."⁵⁶

In the past, monks often traveled to Bodhgaya, to the birthplace of the Buddha, and to Buddhist-related historical sites in various countries such as India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and other Southeast Asian countries considered to be the 'Buddha's lands' for pilgrimages and to acquire Buddhist texts. But why do monks travel today? Why do monks in this modern time still travel, and in fact travel beyond Buddhist lands?

Sao Sukham, one of Phra Khammai's colleagues and a well-respected mobile *Dhamma* preacher and Vipassana teacher monk in Shan State, obtained a master's degree in Buddhist studies at the PGIPBS, University of Kelaniya, in Sri Lanka, and in 2001 he became the abbot of Wat Loi Tein Kham in Muse, a town on the Sino-Burmese border. Phra Khammai, on the other hand, went to Oxford for his higher education. Phra Khammai felt that to do a *Dhamma* mission internationally, Sri Lanka is only a first step; therefore, he took his second step to London to further explore the West. He has always admired international Buddhist scholars for their intellectual and insightful spirituality, and he also does not neglect to examine, critique, and evaluate himself on his ability to be mindful. He was disciplined with a self-imposed determination to one day become a

⁵⁶ Personal contact and interview with Phra Khammai in 2014.

Buddhist scholar like those he so admired. Phra Khammai used to say, “If one wants to be successful, one needs a good supporter. With a good supporter, one will reach his destination and his dreams will come true. Take, for instance, Gaya. Gaya is a city in Bihar State in central India. The city itself may have never become famous if the Gautama had not become enlightened under a Bo tree and become a Buddha there. Afterwards, the city Gaya became associated with ‘Buddha,’ which became ‘Buddha-Gaya,’ and is today widely known as ‘Bodhgaya’ all over the world.” Phra Khammai is one who has always highly valued education. And when he arrived in Europe, he tried to reach Oxford where education, scholars, and intellectuals are highly valued, to obtain a Ph.D at one of the highest and most prestigious institution in the world (Tangyan, 2014).

Sao Sukham’s writing explains one aspect of the story how Oxford came to be chosen as a center for education and a *Dhammadūta* mission by Phra Khammai. Oxford may not be ranked as the best university in the world, but is always listed among the best of world-class educational institutions.

Phra Khammai arrived in Colombo in early 1993 on a pilgrimage. During that time, it was still uncommon for monks from Myanmar to travel abroad for education. Therefore, foreign travel by normal channels such as social visits or business were not applicable, and nearly all the monks obtained their passports on the basis of religious pilgrimages with a validity of as long as one year. In the course of time, only when the monks managed to study abroad by their own means and Myanmar diplomatic circles began to notice what was happening and were recognized, did monks’ travel documents come to be approved for longer periods of three to five years.

3.4.4 *Dhammadūta* mission

Phra Khammai has revealed that his travels abroad were motivated by two factors: enthusiasm for higher education and *Dhammadūta*, or Buddhist missionary activism. He wanted to teach *Dhamma* in foreign lands as a *Dhammadūta*. He has long cherished the dream to teach the Buddha’s *Dhamma* overseas since he was about twelve years old. One day, he returned to Laikha, his hometown in southern Shan State, during a holiday from Ywaghwe where he was studying. One morning, while cleaning the table of his abbot in

Laikha, he saw a book with a yellow cover. He tried to read the name, but it appeared too unfamiliar and he could not pronounce it properly. However, he knew it was about the *Dhamma* and written by a foreigner. Now he recalls that the author was Mahapundit Bhikkhu Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963) of India. However, he cannot remember the title of the book. As he did not read it, he is unable to discuss its contents. Nevertheless, since that experience, he has unconsciously developed a desire to teach the *Dhamma* abroad, embarking on a *Dhammadūta* journey.

About a year later, Phra Khammai's abbot in Laikha might have observed something in him. Hence, the abbot told him that he should get a *Dhammacariya* degree, the government-sponsored monastic degree, and thereafter study English and obtain a bachelor's degree from a government university. With that education, the abbot said, he would be able to get training at the Mahasi meditation center,⁵⁷ of which the monastery where Phra Khammai originates in Laikha is a branch, and travel around the world like Mahasi Sayadaw to teach the *Dhamma* in Europe and America. At that point, Phra Khammai was unable to distinguish between Europe and America. Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) was spoken of as an inspiring figure due to his founding of the Mahasi meditation center and his teaching of meditation during his first European tour in 1979. The words of Phra Khammai's abbot stayed with him and inspired him to dream and become a *Dhammadūta* missionary.

In practice, while he was still pursuing Buddhist studies in Sri Lanka, Phra Khammai had already begun his *Dhammadūta* mission. He taught for four years in Colombo with YMBA students, and now has been 18 years in the UK with various groups of students ranging from Sunday schools to university lectures. He has expanded his teaching to annual retreats in Hungary for the last seven years, Serbia for the last three years, Spain for the last two, and Poland since last year. There are hardly any Theravada Buddhist temples in these countries. Hence, he rightly considers himself as a *Dhammadūta* pioneer. He does not choose the easy path of the traditional Theravada Buddhist monks who have

⁵⁷ Mahasi Vipassana Centre (known in Burmese as *Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha*) is the largest meditation network in the country. It has over 332 branches in the country (Jordt, 2007) and a few dozen abroad. It is from this center that the Mahasi Vipassana tradition has spread throughout the West and East.

been to the West. The difference is that majority of them who follow the traditional *Dhammadūta* mission are among their own people, whether Thai, Lao, Sri Lankan, or Burmese. On the contrary, Phra Khammai attempts to go beyond the usual Buddhist missions among non-Buddhist Europeans. This indicates that he chooses to go for challenges by exploring Buddhist missions in new territories among non-Buddhists. Apart from teaching and leading Vipassana meditation retreats, he has been helping Western Buddhist intellectuals to publish books in their languages.

Phra Khammai has said:

“Without good *Dhammadūta* work, the [members of the] *Tai Sangha* cannot establish themselves internationally. We have done so because we shoulder the responsibility in: (1) Buddhist academia worldwide, (2) Theravada *Dhammadūta* work in the UK and central Europe, (3) encouraging our younger ones to go to universities in Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Myanmar, China, Singapore, and the UK.

“We have convinced the Tai people that a university education is possible for them and that there is an opportunity beyond oppression by the Burmese.

“As *Bhikkhus*, we serve all: Burmese, Thai, European, or Tai.

“We worked hard to get recognition from both the Burmese and *Tai Sangha*. To do so, we started from Sri Lanka and then Britain. Now we are even helping the Burmese *Sangha* in some cases, for example at Sitagu and other *Sangha* universities. We are also part of the *Tai Sangha*. I am a *Dhammayuttika-nikaya* member now and have access to both MCU and MBU at the highest level. We also know the Sri Lankan *Sangha* and Buddhist scholars, which gives us an advantage over our Burmese and *Tai Sangha* brothers because they hardly pay attention to such an important network. The *Tai Sangha* becomes international by knowing the Sri Lankan, Burmese, and *Tai Sanghas* well. We also try to get and then remain connected with their universities.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ My personal contact, information exchanged through emails with Phra Khammai in 2014.

Phra Khammai is certainly proud of himself for his ability to inspire some members of the Shan *Sangha*. He claims to now have some senior assistants who are acquainted with international scholars and institutions. That means they now are ready to set up their own an institution or university back home. His dream of establishing a university back home is his goal, his vision, and his tireless work, coupled with his faith in the *Dhamma* and in the capacity of the Shan *Sangha* to become international.

3.5 Visions and challenges

In the early October 2014, while Saosra Mongkut was writing a memoir in honor of Phra Khammai's golden jubilee celebration, he sent a message to him asking if he wanted to say something in the book. Phra Khammai replied that he had nothing special to say, but he just only wants "to upgrade Shan *Sangha* education" (Saosra Mongkut, 2014). Since 1995, Phra Khammai has been talking about establishing a university in his homeland of Shan State. He has been able to keep his determination alive and strong, as he said a decade ago. As my conversation reveals, Saosra Mongkut, however, does not see eye-to-eye with Phra Khammai in the case of establishing a university. He thinks that Phra Khammai has been too far ahead, while his disciples/followers have been left behind. He is not confident that Phra Khammai's disciples in the *Sangha* are academically competent enough.⁵⁹ However, according to Phra Khammai, the people of Shan State—including Shan politicians and many high-ranking members of the Shan *Sangha*—do not have any doubt that they all together have the capacity to run a university.

To accomplish the missions of *Dhammadūta* and education, according to Phra Khammai, there are four situations that must be achieved in any given space and time: 1) self-confidence (*haeng jai*), 2) academic competence (*haeng pannya*), 3) financial resources (*haeng nger*), and 4) favorable political environment (*haeng karn mong*) for aspects of the Shan *Sangha*'s missions.⁶⁰ Without these four, Phra Khammai believes that anyone

⁵⁹ Saosra Mongkut, personal interview, August 2015.

⁶⁰ Personal correspondence, via email, with Phra Khammai in 2014.

or any organization, individually or collectively, cannot move forwards. These visions are key concepts and guidelines for the group's movement.

Self-confidence (*haeng jai*)

Phra Khammai recalls that in the early 1990s, he initiated the Ceylon Journey all alone with only one resource: *haeng jai*, strong conviction or self-confidence in the ability to achieve a goal. Among Buddhist parables, the ten *Jataka* stories are well-known; of them, *Maha Janaka* is Phra Khammai's favorite. According to Phra Khammai, His majesty the King of Thailand was reported to favor the story, and thus the *Maha Janaka* story was illustrated as a cartoon. The meaning of the *Maha Janaka* story can be summed up as the Bodhisattva uses only self-confidence, or the power of the mind, to solve the problem of crossing the vast ocean. The story of the *Maha Janaka* (*Maha Janok* in Thai) in the Thai context, however, speaks more about 'perseverance.' When a ship is rocked and destroyed in the middle of the ocean, one cannot rely on other sources of power such as intellect, money, or politics, but solely on confidence, the will to swim for survival.

Looking back to early 1990s, it is clear that with only self-confidence, a major resource of capital, Phra Khammai began his exploration of the Ceylon Journey, and now his fellow-monks have gone beyond Sri Lanka far across the globe. Phra Khammai recounted the opinions of members of the Shan *Sangha* in particular and Shan people in general with regard to the creation of a university since he had the idea in the 1990s. The following is the story retold by Phra Khammai:

"In the 1990s, even those Tai *Sangha* members studying in Sri Lanka did not have a belief that we could set up our own university. The junior ones voiced their doubt behind my back. Among the seniors, Saosra Mongkut, a *Dhammacariya*, a master's graduate, and the current leader of the Tai Tripitaka translation, thought it was too high a goal for us and we should focus on a school for training abbots. Saosra Visuddha, also a master's graduate, said that even if I could set it up, Tai

Sangha members would not qualify as university students, so the efforts would benefit only others, not the Tai people.”⁶¹

Today, regarding to the establishment of a university in Shan State, Phra Khammai says: “Nearly two decades on, now none of them has any doubt any more that we can do it.” Certainly, Phra Khammai had to work hard over time to convince people, especially his colleagues and intellectuals, that the Shans could achieve the creation of the university. An informal interview with a senior Shan *Sangha* member, however, offers a difference in opinion on whether the establishment of a university is currently possible. It is not that he is against Phra Khammai’s dream, nor that the Shans are incapable of having one, but he feels that it is “not the right time for Shans to have a university yet.”⁶²

Phra Khammai has managed to make Shan monks confident of their ability to set up and run a university. First of all, by working with international scholars and setting up two Buddhist university associations, ATBU and IABU. As a member of both associations, the ITBMU awarded Phra Khammai a professorship in 2006. He has always asked some members of the Shan *Sangha* to help him whenever he worked at universities in Thailand, Burma, India, or Sri Lanka. “This experience has given them self-confidence,” said Phra Khammai. The executive committees, chairmen, and members of the ATBU and IABU are indexed in Appendices C (p. 240) and D (p. 244) respectively.

Phra Khammai got the idea of founding a collective organization such as IABU and ATBU while organizing the United Nations Day of *Vesak* (UNDV) as an assistant director and in 2008 as a secretary. While serving as a secretary for UNDV, he had to communicate with many international participants for the organization of the annual conference. During the conference, scholars, researchers, and experts in the field delivered their papers. Unfortunately, Phra Khammai felt that they all disappeared at the end of conference sessions. It seemed to him that the resources spent were not very effective. What came to his mind is that he wanted to have an organization that sustained

⁶¹ Personal interview with Phra Khammai via email, 2014.

⁶² A senior Shan monk, personal interview, January 2015.

a permanent connection, a long-term relationship with open communication among Theravada Buddhists.

At the same time, Phra Khammai also made a consultation among the Shan lay intellectuals since 1994, including Khun Htun Oo, a Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) leader, who always believed from the very beginning that Shans could successfully establish a Buddhist university in Shan State. Likewise, Sai Fah, another top SNLD leader and a veteran who raised awareness of Shan literature across Shan State and elsewhere in mainland Burma where Shan people live, also believed that the Shan could have their own university. In the 1990s, however, both of them expressed major doubts about the political environment if a university were set up.

For his mission for education and *Dhammadūta* to be successful, Phra Khammai always believes that one needs the support or help of someone who has capability and power (Tangyan, 2014: 131-136). Members of the Burmese *Sangha*, such as Rector Sayadaw of ITBMU and Ven. Prof. Dr. Nandamala Abhivamsa, a senior contemporary to Phra Khammai in Sri Lanka, have always encouraged him to set up a Buddhist university of their own. Ven. Nandamala also helped set up two Buddhist universities: Sitagu International Buddhist Academy and Abhidhamma Institute, and is currently a rector of the ITBMU. According to Phra Khammai, every time they met, he was always encouraged to set up a university, as the Shan *Sangha* was seen to have enough university-level educated monks.

After two decades on, while continuing to educate themselves and gain experience, as for the Shan *Sangha* now, there is hardly any voice of doubt about their ability. “This is an achievement in self-confidence,” said Phra Khammai, and he termed this in Shan as ‘*haeng jai*’ (mind power). Looking from a different perspective, it could be that some have complaints about the long time it has taken to start setting up a university in Shan State. Is that these people do not have enough confidence, or lack it altogether?

Academic competence (*haeng panya*, or ‘intellectual power’)

Phra Khammai has since acknowledged academic competency as a more significant challenge to the Shan *Sangha* in becoming ready to stand among international scholars.

Once the Shan State Buddhist University (SSBU) is established and running, it will be in need of scholars who know the subjects well and are competent in critical research and English language. In recent times, the Shan *Sangha* has progressed in terms of academic competency, as evidenced by the increasing number of members presenting papers at academic conferences in several countries. It seems that they may have the capacity to facilitate academic conversations at an international level.

As has been said, there are some senior Shan monks who do not feel convinced that they are academically competent. However, Phra Khammai still contends that in comparison with many existing Buddhist universities around the world, this challenge should be put into perspective. He believes that Buddhist universities, such as MCU, MBU, Sitagu, and BPU, are not terribly far ahead of SSBU in academic competence. “That is not something that comes in a ‘ready-made’ package, but something requiring us to keep working and accumulating in the right direction,” said Phra Khammai.⁶³

Financial resources (*heng ngern*, or ‘money power’)

A good education requires a good investment of time, while capital accumulation requires good investment of money as well. Phra Khammai understands that founding a university requires a large amount of financial capital. But he believes that the financial resources (*haeng ngern*) are actually obtainable if the sources are identified from various sources. That may partly be true, based on the example of how he has convinced and enabled many monks to go abroad for studies. During the first decade of the Ceylon Journey, there was little support from organized donors. Nevertheless, he still managed to help many of monks to study in Sri Lanka. Currently, the Oxford Buddha Vihara (OBV) has established two branches in Asia: one in Singapore (OBVS) and the other in Malaysia (OBVM). The OBVS is relatively successful, drawing some members of the Shan, Burmese, and Chinese Buddhist communities to temple weekly. Phra Khammai said, “The purpose of having many temples abroad is to partially financially support our university and to keep

⁶³ Personal contact with Phra Khammai, September 2014.

alive our contact with institutions overseas. By this I mean we do not aim to burden the Tai people in the long run with our university.”⁶⁴

Many *Sangha* universities, such as the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) with its campus in Yangon and the State Sāsana Pariyatti University (SSPU) with campuses in Yangon and Mandalay, in Myanmar are state-sponsored to a large extent, while the remaining support comes from the public. Although the Shan State Buddhist University (SSBU) may not receive financial support from the state, Phra Khammai contends that after all, only a tiny portion of universities around the world are able to feel financially secure. Many of them must work hard to stay sustainable. Also, as most people in Myanmar know, back in the 1980s when the State Sangha Mahanayaka Council and the then-ruling government agreed upon the establishment of *Sangha* universities, cash donations were collected from the people throughout all states and regions of the country. Most of the construction costs were completed with the funds raised, and daily meals for the *Sangha*, the student monks, and the lecturers were provided by the people, either individual devotees or organizations. A similar situation could work for the SSBU as well, but in different forms. Phra Khammai opposes the collection of cash donations door-to-door, but will announce and publicize the collection of voluntary donations through the media and while on *Dhāmmaduta* journeys through major cities. When he announced in October 2014 that the Shan State Buddhist University was established in Taunggyi, billions of *kyats* in donations for the construction of buildings were received. It was known that these donations came mainly from the rich in the country, as well as some Thai devotees from Bangkok. Sponsorship of certain buildings and halls as promised by individual donors. For instance, lecture halls and a conference building were sponsored by the Shan State government, a convocation hall by Kanbawza Bank, and a dining hall and library by the CB Bank.

Favorable political environment

“Politics is one of the things that is unpredictable, let alone if its environment could be considered favorable,” Phra Khammai has said. He has been waiting for many years for

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

a favorable political environment to indicate the right time to establish a Buddhist university. This is, perhaps, the challenge one has the least control over, looking back at the uncertain political situation in the country for many decades. Nevertheless, political changes have taken its shape in the country since Thein Sein's government came to power in 2011. Some noticeable changes in the politics of the country include the abolishing of government censorship, which had been in place since the time of General Ne Win's rule. As such, the country has recently begun to enjoy freedom of expression to a certain extent. "This is a good sign for the education sector and for the Shan *Sangha*, that they can set up a Buddhist university," said Phra Khammai. According to his analysis, the most favorable political environment he and his colleagues have ever encountered has been in 2015. His analysis takes into account the country's second vice president, Dr. Sai Mauk Kham, being Shan and having considerable influence in the current government. While construction on the university is ongoing, other preparations in such sectors as administration and management, teaching staff recruitment, and curriculum design are also taking place.

A few private Buddhist universities have sprung up in Myanmar in the last 15 years. Some of those universities include Buddhist University (with campuses in Yangon and Mandalay) established by Prof. Myint Swe; Sitagu International Buddhist Academy (campuses in Sagaing, Yangon, and Mandalay); and Buddhist College (in Konechankone, teaching in the English medium). The Mon *Sangha* is also currently establishing a university in Mawlamyaing (Moulmein), the capital of Mon State. Apart from Buddhists, the Catholics continue to run an older university in Insein, Yangon Region, which offers education up to the master's level.

Considering the above non-state sponsored universities by non-Burmans and non-Buddhists, it appears likely that the Shans can achieve their goal of having their own. In terms of the law, the government has started decentralizing universities and their administration since January 2014. More private universities are expected to emerge in time. For the time being, there are no laws regarding the approval or rejection of private universities. Regarding this point, Phra Khammai said, "I can only see things getting better politically, especially for the education environment." While the state realizes that

the quality of Myanmar education has deteriorated over the decades since the political uprisings in 1988, the country now seeks to upgrade it. Phra Khammai may be right that the policies for the education sector will continue to improve over time. This is evidenced by, for example, the new generation of Myanmar *Sangha* last August coming together to discuss the revivalism of monastic education. Phra Khammai addressed the need to change and revive monastic education in Burma to keep pace with the modernized education system. “The time to change is now,” Sao Hsintham reiterated.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, whether the current government is ready to improve or make some necessary amendments to the policies on the education system is uncertain. Since early February 2015, the Myanmar student movement, starting in Mandalay, demanded the government to amend the current policy on the education bill to allow greater freedom and academic independence (Tun, 2015). Unfortunately, the country saw a brutal crackdown on the movement in March 2015 just as the public began getting more awareness and offering support to the students’ cause. The student movement was forced to disperse without their demands being met, indicating that the government is not yet ready to make education policy changes any time soon. However, we are fully aware that now is a transitional period, therefore the government policy on education cannot be independently confirmed.

After a few years of his *Dhammāduta* journey and earning a doctorate at Oxford, Phra Khammai began to gain popularity both in his homeland and abroad. While offering more *Dhamma* services and spiritual guidance to the people, he is becoming more successful and recognized. Phra Khammai explores the *Dhammāduta* mission and Buddhist studies in convergence with the Western education system and modernism. His fellow Shan monks, with common identities and goals, are getting educated—they are now capable of forming a network to promote a more educated Shan *Sangha*.

The Shan *Sangha* and the people of Shan State saw the traditional approach to monastic education and its *Dhammāduta* works as unrealistic. For instance, the methods and the contents the monks use to teach or preach in their sermons are not actually understood by

⁶⁵ Sao Hsintham, personal interview, September 2015.

the majority of Buddhists. Partly, monastic education in Shan State was left behind and monks did not receive proper monastic training. “This is why there is a need to modernize and re-emphasize our focus,” said Phra Khammai. Modernizing here means upgrading the standard of current Buddhist education to another level, to be able to favorably compare with Buddhist studies in other countries at the university level.

3.6 Recent activities in Myanmar

In late July 2015 with a special invitation from a Myanmar-Chinese family to deliver a *Dhamma* blessing for the memorial of their late mother’s anniversary, Khruba Bunchum arrived in Singapore for the first time. His visit also coincided with the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Singapore. The OBV Singapore Centre took this opportunity to bring Phra Khammai all the way from Oxford to deliver several *Dhamma* talks and participate in several blessing ceremonies. Phra Khammai himself also delivered the *Dhamma* talks independently. His main talk was “The Buddhist Way of Eating That is Not Toxic,” delivered on 25 July 2015. In this talk, Phra Khammai discusses an eating method that is conducive for healthy living.⁶⁶ At one point, he offers an analogy that the mouth is the most dangerous cemetery for many land and sea animals that have been slaughtered to be buried there. The animals died simply to serve human pleasure. To my interpretation, this is symbolically telling people to stop eating animals. This is comparable to Ledi Sayadaw’s *Nwa-mettā-cā* (“beef-abstention letter”), a work written in 1885, shortly after the British annexed Burma to its British-India empire. Encountering with foreign rule, he suggests not to make direct confrontation with the British. Instead, Ledi told the Burmese to change their own behavior rather than attempting to change the colonizers. Erik Braun writes, “... Ledi presented the true enemy as within the mind: the misconceptions that prompt wrongdoing. In the *Sammādiṭṭhidīpanī*, he argues that all wrong action comes from *attadiṭṭhi*, the view of an enduring sense of self, which all beings carry with them as they wander through *samsāra*” (Braun, 2008: 177). In line with this, Phra Khammai suggests that people eat less meat in the case that they cannot totally give it up altogether. Being vegetarian is good for health. In a symbolic sense, Phra

⁶⁶ Video clip of this *Dhamma* talk is available on the Internet in the public domain, including on YouTube.

Khammai reveals that his works for his Buddhist mission is to offer the world more peace, loving-kindness, and environmental health.

The Khruba Bunchum's *Dhamma* talks and blessings delivered to the Buddhist communities—especially the Burmese, Shan, ethnic Chinese and some others from Myanmar—in Singapore was a new form of presenting Buddhism. Like any other occasion of usual *Dhamma* talks, Khruba Bunchum's talks in Singapore were preceded by chanting, blessings, and *metta-bhāvanā* (brief meditations), followed by *Dhamma* talks in Thai, Shan, Burmese, Tibetan, and Chinese. My observation of these religious practices were made possible through video clips uploaded to social media.

Phra Khammai associates himself with Khruba Bunchum by referring to him with the utmost possible respect with *Dhamma*'s 'father' status, "*Sao paw hsintham vunchum*" ("morally excellent father") in his own words. He is authenticating Khruba Bunchum's charisma and strengthening the power of each other's *pāramī*. Each of them have their own followings in different aspects. While the former has many academic followers who desire to gain knowledge and highest possible prestige in their own terms, the latter has a spiritual following. However, the latter's following begs the question as to what kind of spirituality it is. In all the *Dhamma* talk events held in Singapore, both venerable monks were together, and at the end of Khruba Bunchum's talks, Phra Khammai translated the talks into English and Burmese, while a young monk from Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) translated into Chinese.

At the Oxford Centre, Buddhism in everyday life or its religious experience can be observed in person by participation in the temple's many activities. However, those who are not in Oxford can observe the activities through its official website, Facebook page, and other social media networks. This enables learning of how Phra Khammai's Buddhism in action is taking place. As I was unable to observe all of the events in person, I relied largely on digital anthropology to collect the data and perform the analysis. All OBV activities are announced on its website or posted on social networks regularly. The center's activities range from general religious observations, such as group discussions, meditations, long retreats, and cultural festivities, to special lectures, seminars, and educational orientations.

Phra Khammai's educational movement, academic activities, and global religious mission have all possibly become resources leading to the founding of a new institution known as Shan State Buddhist University (SSBU). According to my informant in Mandalay, Phra Khammai delivered *Dhamma* talks at Chinese Buddhist community temples in September 2015. His main theme was on bringing together different branches of Buddhism—Mahayana, Tantrayana (today popularly known as Vajrayana), and Theravada. Chinese Buddhist communities in Mandalay were quite convinced that they have a role to play in the establishment of the new SSBU. My informant told me that several wealthy Chinese made large cash donations for the construction of the SSBU.⁶⁷

3.7 Summary

Through this narration of Phra Khammai's life story, we have learned of his experiences as a Shan novice and monk in a Burmese-dominated monastic education system. His aspiration for *Dhammāduta* and lifting-up of monastic education in Shan State have been generated by many factors. As this chapter has shown, he was inspired by the fact that education in Shan State was at a low level compared to its Burmese counterpart. As an educationist, he has committed himself to revitalize and modernize the monastic education system—not only in Shan State, but in Burma as a whole. His aspirations have materialized through his opportunities to travel to Thailand and to go further to foreign countries to study and to conduct his *Dhammāduta* mission. His success in the mission is due to the fact that his *Dhamma* teachings and instructions go beyond those of his Theravada Buddhists and appeal to followers of several traditions. He is remarkably gifted with leadership skills, as this chapter has shown. Since he was a novice monk, Phra Khammai has been capable of leading even *Bhikkhus*. When he was appointed as a lecturer at the Sasana Mandaing in Pegu, where he graduated with a *Dhammacariya* Degree, he was still a novice monk. In addition, Phra Khammai is a master of Pali and Buddhist literature in its original form, but is also able to use Western education methods in his teachings. It is clear that his educational achievements and his success in foreign missions have led to his admirable reputation, which has led to recognition back in Burma

⁶⁷ Informant, personal interview, September 2015.

and especially in Shan State, where his aim to create the Shan State Buddhist University is starting to be realized.



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