

## CHAPTER 5

### PHRA KHAMMAI'S TRANSNATIONAL BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS

Having described his life story, his teachings, and the practices of Phra Khammai in the previous two chapters, this chapter will begin by identifying the way in which Phra Khammai and his Shan *Sangha* have actively engaged in transnational movements. This Buddhist network exists across nation-states, especially being active in Shan State, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Europe. As previously mentioned, this group of international traveling monks was pioneered by Phra Khammai over two decades ago, and continues to be led by him to this day. Currently, these monks go globally as a team, embarking on their missions of education and *Dhammadūta* worldwide. The main theme of this chapter is to discuss the way in which Phra Khammai connects with international communities, such as academic institutions and Buddhist scholars, which works widely to expand his movement. It is noted here that Phra Khammai-led Buddhist movement's version of *Dhammadūta* is not modeled on that of Phra Thammathut of Thailand. Thammathut and Thammacarik programs are two missions sponsored by the Royal Thai Government and approved by the country's Supreme Sangha Council (Keyes, 1971; Kitiarsa, 2010), while Phra Khammai's *Dhammadūta* has nothing to do with the state of Myanmar. From the very outset, Phra Khammai has been clear that the purpose of his Shan Buddhist movement is uplifting education and establishing a global *Dhammadūta* mission.

This chapter discusses a form of 'global Buddhism' according to Ian Cook's terms (2012) and Phra Khammai's promotion of 'universal Buddhism' in the context of transnational Buddhist movements. Within Theravada Buddhism, what exists that can make it universal? The previous chapter demonstrated that Phra Khammai's universal teachings and activism have been well received among international communities of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Some argue that successful global/transnational Buddhist movements need to retain a kind of local essence of the place from which they originate.

## 5.1 Connecting with international communities

Since the Shan *Sangha* begun its Ceylon Journey in the early 1990s, Phra Khammai has been networking with Buddhist communities globally in his capacity as leader of the movement. While studying in Sri Lanka, he began to make connections with Burmese, Shan, and Chinese Buddhist communities, as well as among others who were originally from Myanmar and are migrants of Southeast Asian nations. Members of these communities are linked with their relatives, friends, and colleagues back home and within countries in Asia such as Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. With a group of transnational Buddhist communities in Singapore, Phra Khammai helped with the founding of the Dana Sri Lanka Association (DSLA) in 1998. This association collected funds from those transnational migrant workers from Myanmar who were working mainly in Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia, and in the UK. These funds were distributed to student monks from Myanmar according to the level of their studies. In some cases, the DSLA also matches individual donors/supporters with some monks. Indeed, the DSLA's funding and related efforts made it possible for the Shan and monks from other ethnic groups to study in Sri Lanka. These Buddhist communities were the main capital that supported Myanmar monks in Colombo.

In addition to the DSLA, whose main focus is identifying prospective donors from Southeast Asian nations, they also found further resources from the UK and Japan. In the UK, Phra Khammai has been in touch with Burmese, Thai, Laotian, Sri Lankan, and other Buddhist communities. As his popularity has also reached back to his homeland of Shan State and mainland Myanmar, some wealthy non-Shan families are also now supporting the education of Shan monks abroad. A sizable number of migrant Shans are working in Japan, and since 10 years ago they founded the Tai Association of Japan. This group also sponsors some Shan monks who study in Sri Lanka.

While studying at Oxford for his doctoral degree, Phra Khammai was thinking of setting up a Theravada Buddhist center for the *Dhammadūta* Buddhist mission. This was made possible with the support of international Buddhist communities in England inspired by his spiritual guidance and teachings.

Until the Oxford Buddha Vihara (OBV) was founded, there were only Tibetan and Mahayana Buddhist centers in Oxford. Hence, Phra Khammai wanted to establish a Theravada center, and thus his center became the first ever Theravada Buddhist center at Oxford. Before establishing the OBV, Phra Khammai witnessed in London how a Buddhist temple is established and run there. By the time of his graduation from Oxford, it would have been difficult for him to find accommodation at many temples because he had already gathered something of a following of his own and established an international profile. He would have overshadowed even the abbot of a Buddhist temple in the UK. This led him to decide to lay the foundation for the establishment of the OBV while still in his final year. He rented a house with two bedrooms for one year to collect donations so that OBV could buy its own property, which it did in October 2004, just after his graduation. Donations through fundraising efforts were also made in Bangkok with the support of the Phra Rama IX temple and Thai devotees who were well-wishers of the OBV. On one occasion, before he became the prime minister of Thailand, Aphisit Vijjajiva, as an alumni of Oxford, participated in the fundraising for the establishment of the OBV.

For his attempts to establish a center on the one hand and to obtain a Ph.D. doctorate on the other, the support of Professor Richard Gombrich, Phra Khammai's academic advisor, was very crucial. In 2004, the two together also founded an Oxford Center of Buddhist Studies (OCBS), a recognized independent center (RIC) of the University of Oxford. The OCBS promotes the academic study of Buddhist texts, societies, theories, and practices within the university. It is committed to maintaining the highest academic standards, and the supporters of the Oxford Buddha Vihara have offered much voluntary assistance to the OCBS. Along with Professor Gombrich and other high profile Buddhist scholars, Phra Khammai is a trustee and academic advisory committee member of the OCBS. The OBV and Phra Khammai play a key role in the OCBS' relations with the *Sangha* and Buddhist universities in Theravada countries across Asia.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> OCBS official website. (2015). OCBS Organizational. <http://ocbs.org/about/organizational/>. Accessed: November 2015.

In early 2003, during the initial stage of founding the OBV, Phra Khammai relied on the assistance of a diverse group of people, including Dr. Kyaw Thinn, a Burmese medical doctor who became the treasurer of the OBV, and his wife Nang Fong Kaew; Dr. Thet Thet New of Brunei, a core member of the DSLA; other professionals from Burma, including some Shan, such as Sai Kham Leng, an engineer in the UK; Sri Lankan-born UK resident Dr. Doreen Perera and her family; long-term supporters Mary Ng and Daw Tin Tin Myint who led the DSLA in Singapore; and several Oxford-based Thai devotees who offered food to him twice a week. Many of these early supporters eventually became the trustees and key committee members of the Oxford Buddha Vihara. Initially, Phra Khammai was the only resident monk. In due time, he began inviting a few monks from Thailand and Shan monks from Sri Lanka to help him run the center's daily activities. Currently, a holder of a Ph.D in Buddhist studies from Sri Lanka, a monk from Thailand, and a monk from Sri Lanka are serving as assistants to help run the center. As it is a transnational center, the OBV requires at least one monk who has passed the highest Buddhist scholastic examinations to be able to communicate in several languages, such as Thai, Burmese, English, and Shan.

*Tipitakadhara Sayadaw* Dr. Gandhammalankara,<sup>80</sup> a native Burmese monk, stayed with Phra Khammai at OBV for three-and-a-half years to study English. A couple of Thai monks from Phra Rama IX Temple in Bangkok also stayed at the OBV center in turn. A couple of Buddhist monks of non-Theravada traditions, notably Korean monks, are also said to have lived at the Oxford center for a few years.

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<sup>80</sup> The honorary prefix 'Tipitakadhara' means one who has memorized all the Pali texts of the three baskets of Buddhist canonical texts. This examination is by far the highest Buddhist scholastic test in Myanmar. To be qualified as the holder of the Tipitaka, one is required not only to remember over eight thousand pages of the Pali texts, but must pass oral and written examinations as well. Currently there are only 13 graduate monks in Myanmar. Ven. Dr. Gandhammalankara passed the tests with distinctions and has won the gold medal.

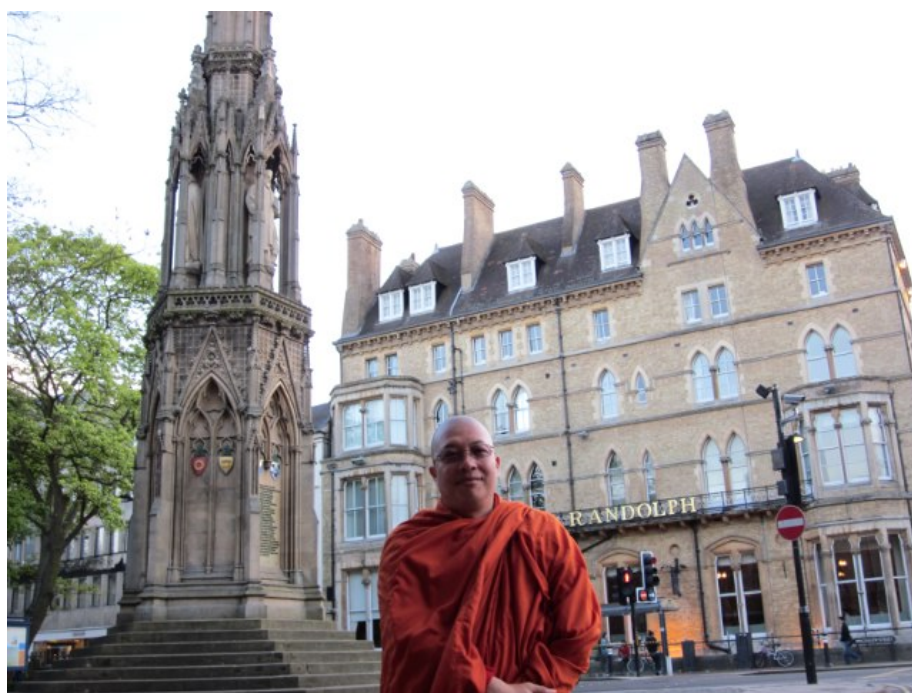


Figure 5.1 Tipitakadhara Sayadaw Dr. Gandhammalalankara.

The Oxford Buddha Vihara has now become a center for the teaching of the Buddha's messages, and as such, fully offers a program that is practical and relevant for the modern-era. Buddhist communities, regardless of their tradition and background, now benefit from the Buddha's teachings as provided by the Vihara. The Vihara has developed into a thriving community of monks and lay Buddhists from many different countries and cultures, with an emphasis on the traditions of Southeast Asia. The community includes groups of Burmese, Thai, Shan, Laotian, Singaporean, and Sri Lankan origin, as well as Buddhists from European backgrounds. In keeping with the tradition of the Southeast Asian temple, the Vihara and its monks exist through the generosity of the temple community. Supporters offer food, basic clothing, and medicines to the monks, as well as financial contributions that ensure building upkeep and the propagation of the teachings. *Songkran*, *Thingyan*, *Sangkyan*, *Avurudhu*, and other 'New Year holidays' according to the lunar calendar of south and southeast Asian nations bring all these Buddhist communities together at Vihara. Similar to other Buddhist centers in the UK, the OBV also celebrates these events for community gathering and collective merit-making.

In Asia, the OBV has three branches: one each in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and Yangon (Myanmar). Among these, the Singapore branch is the most active. When I was on fellowship for the Singapore Graduate Student Forum 2014 at the National University of Singapore, I frequently visited the OBVS. The OBVS conducts regular retreats and basic Buddhism courses, although not as intensive as its main branch in Oxford. This branch serves Buddhist communities of Shan, Burmese, and Myanmar-Chinese origin who migrated to work in Singapore. During the time of my visit, there were five monks, including three permanent residential monks and the other two visitor monks from Bodhgaya KBBT Center, India, staying there. While one of the two visitor monks was permanent resident at Bodhgaya, the other was temporarily helping the center. From Singapore he has now returned to Myanmar permanently.

The Bodhgaya KBBT centers, although not known as OBV branches, are now under the shared responsibility of the current abbot and are effectively treated as branches of OBV. On his way home to Myanmar, Phra Khammai's long-term devotee U Tin Tun donated to Phra Khammai the use of "sāsana" upon his passing the residence. This residence has been named as a branch of Oxford Buddha Vihara–Yangon (OBVY), the first-ever in Myanmar. Since it was founded in 2013, the OBVY, however, has no particular activity or role to play in terms of missionary work.

In addition, there are two new territories in European nations among the OBV network: Meditation Group Hungary and Meditation Group Siberia. According to the narratives of Dobos Andrea Beata, the Buddhist Vipassana Foundation of Hungary's meditation group, "I was very surprised to see [Phra Khammai's] direct and very open attitude, his clear, simple yet Western way of teaching... I haven't met a teacher so far who knows the resources of the soul of the Western people so well, and reflects the essence of the Buddha's teachings so precisely (Beata, 2014: 138)." This narrative relates how Phra Khammai has been able to be successful in his career as a meditation master and teacher of Buddhism among Westerners.

Klara, another member of the Buddhist Vipassana Foundation in Budapest, Hungary, told of her experience of learning *Dhamma* with Phra Khammai as follows: "...His wisdom, fascinating manner of lecturing, patience, and wonderful energy changed my life entirely.

Suddenly I could see things hidden before, which had gone unnoticed until then. ... He is an all-in-one master, a therapist and a teacher whose life is an example for those who are lucky enough to live around him.”<sup>81</sup>

Stories narrated by Sarah, Aska, and Junie from the Meditation Retreat Group in Karwica, Poland, inform us that Phra Khammai blessed the people of Poland with “*Namotassa bhagavato aharato sammā sambuddhassa* a hundred times daily.” This has created an atmosphere of importance for meditation in daily life and how one should make time for meditation each day.

Phra Khammai has been visiting the Theravadin Buddhist society, the Middle Way, in Siberia since 2010. The society had his meditation manual, *Mindfulness Meditation Made Easy*, translated in to Polish. This is one example among many of how his *Dhammāduta* mission has been successful in non-Buddhist territories in the West.

Srdan Gojkovic-Gile offers an anecdote of his experience walking with Phra Khammai through the famous forest of Kosutnjak in Belgrade, Serbia: “[It is] very rare to see a Buddhist monk in robes walking in Belgrade or anywhere in Serbia. [It was] a figure of attraction, and many people in the forest were watching ... puzzled by the scene. ... While passing a group of Gypsies, they were so interested that they approached us. The oldest of them came closer and said, ‘Hello!’ ... then he asked quite seriously: ‘Is this the Buddha?’ I must admit that the question put a smile on my face. ‘No, but you are very close. This is a Buddhist monk.’”<sup>82</sup>

## **5.2 Assuming high positions in international Buddhist forums**

With his Ph.D from a well-known university and with his increasingly active role in teaching and coordination of Buddhist activities, Phra Khammai has been invited to take top positions in several international Buddhist organizations. Back in 2004, shortly after Phra Khammai’s graduation at Oxford, Ven. Nyanissara, the founder of Sitagu International Buddhist Academy (SIBA), invited Phra Khammai to coordinate and

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<sup>81</sup> Klara. Ibid. p. 139.

<sup>82</sup> Srdan Gojkovic. Ibid. p. 150.



organize the first World Buddhist Summit in December of the same year in Yangon. Meanwhile, the UN's International Celebration of Vesak Day's (ICVD) organizing team planned to change its venue to Asia. Prior to 2004, for the past 16 years at the UN headquarters in New York, the Vesak celebration had become an annual Buddhist celebration. Nevertheless, due to travel constraints, Buddhist organizations and their respected leaders from Asia were unable to join the celebrations in New York. Therefore, the ICVD committee planned to change the venue to the UN Head Office for the Asia-Pacific region, which is based in Bangkok. Some of the ICVD celebration committee members were among the participants and distinguished guests at the World Buddhist Summit in Yangon. The members learned that Phra Khammai was taking a major responsibility for the Buddhist summit, and that he may potential be available to participate in the Vesak celebration as well.



Figure 5.2 The 12th United Nations Day of Vesak Celebration poster with the theme of 'Buddhism and World Crisis.'

After 12 years, a group of over 5,000 delegates, including researchers, lay-devotees, and Venerable *Sangha* members from 80 countries around the world, participated in the 12<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the United Nations Day of Vesak in Bangkok. As a member of ICDV and a UNDV convener, Phra Khammai has extended his role and increased his capacity for global *Dhammadūta* mission. This celebration is one of the most fabulous of its kind and draws Buddhists from around the world regardless of whether they belong to Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana traditions. This global event of Buddhist



communities gathering together in celebration is best understood in terms of a network governed by the International Council for the Day of Vesak (ICDV). This Buddhist network, in addition, has for many years been strengthened by two Buddhist university associations known as ATBU and IABU, and in both of these networks Phra Khammai has been playing a crucial role as permanent secretary. With his leadership, many more people have come to know about ‘Vesak celebration’ or *Visakha-puja*. The celebration, according to Theravada tradition, is the commemoration of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and passing.<sup>83</sup> However, Mahayana and Vajrayana (also known as Tibetan) traditions recognize Vesak as only for the Buddha’s enlightenment, as the other two days—birth and death—occurred on different days.<sup>84</sup>

This UNDV celebration is an entry point to the larger part of Phra Khammai’s efforts in the international Buddhist world. After his graduation in 2004, he immediately shouldered the responsibility as an organizing committee member on the one hand, and a member of Theravada Buddhist groups from European nations on the other.

From December 2004 onward, Phra Khammai immediately started shouldering responsibility in the international Buddhist organizations. First, at the World Buddhist Summit in Yangon in December 2004, then in May 2005 at the United Nations Day of Vesak in Bangkok. Those are the two key events marking his entry into the international arena. The first was organized by Sitagu Sayadaw and supported by the highest *Sangha* committee in Myanmar, as well as the military government. The second was financed by the Royal Thai Government and organized by Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University under the guidance of *Mahathera Samakhom*, the Supreme Sangha Council of Thailand. By serving them, Phra Khammai received support from the two highest *Sangha* bodies of the Theravada nations. He served the *Dhamma* under their *parami* and power. This is how the Shan *Sangha* came to be recognized, at least informally, as a separate body and at the international level.

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<sup>83</sup> This view is common among the Theravada Buddhist nations.

<sup>84</sup> Personal contact with Phra Khammai through email in 2014.

Part of the Vesak celebrations includes a workshop on the Common Buddhist Text (CBT) project. CBT is a project, among many, that Phra Khammai has been active and enthusiastic about because it seeks to establish a common Buddhist text, which is the Tripitaka on the same platform among different Buddhist traditions. He initiated the CBT project while looking for common ground among the three well-known Buddhist traditions. He began contemplating this kind of project during 2006–2009, but the actual project commenced in June 2012. Therefore, CBT is a project aiming for the compilation of Buddhist teachings of the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. These teachings exist in many different countries around the world and appear in various languages, including, but not restricted to, Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan. These teachings will be translated into English in order to create a single Common Buddhist Text to be printed by Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. It will contain at least 400 pages in A4 size, according to an official statement.<sup>85</sup> According to its official website announcement, the Common

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<sup>85</sup> International Council for the Day of Vesak (ICDV). Common Buddhist Text Workshop 2015. <http://www.undv.org/vesak2015/en/cbt.php>. Accessed: August 2015.



Figure 5.3 Phra Khammai chairing the closed-door Common Buddhist Text (CBT) meeting session in Bangkok.

Buddhist Text is to be finalized in 2015. To ensure confidence in the accuracy of the compiled texts included in the CBT, closed-door meetings between invited Thai and foreign scholars was arranged during the 12<sup>th</sup> International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak 2015. The CBT text is being compiled with the following committee members: Prof. Peter Harvey, Editor; Venerable Dr. Khammai Dhammasami, Organizing Committee (Chair); Dr. Egil Lothe, Organizing Committee (Coordinator); Venerable Bhante Chao Chu, Organizing Committee (Member); along with the following CBT Compiling Committee: Dr. Baidyanath Labh, Dr. G.A. Somaratne, Dr. Premasiri Pahalawattage, Dr. Tamas Agocs, Dr. Scott Wellenbach, Venerable Prof. Dr. Jinwol Lee (Young Ho Lee), Venerable Prof. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu, Prof. Dr. Le Mahn That, Prof. Philip Stanley, Venerable Dr. Yuan Ci, David Welsh, and Most Venerable Thich Tue Sy. The full members of organizing team and compilation committee is indexed in Appendix E (p. 246).

Phra Khammai has also undertaken networking with several international Buddhist universities and institutions. Since early 2000, Phra Khammai has maintained a connection with the Thai *Sangha* in Bangkok. For example, Phra Rama IX Temple, Boronives, Venerable Phra Maha Brahmapundit, rector of the MCU University, and Dr. Anil Satya in Bangkok. Phra Khammai became regarded as an official member of the Thai *Sangha* in 2013 after he completed a certain set of examinations.



Figure 5.4 Phra Khammai (Ven. Dr. Khammai Dhammasami) receiving a Buddha statue from the Crown Prince of Thailand.

In 2009, Phra Khammai, along with Venerable Pannyananda, commonly known as Saosra Dhattaw among the Shans and the current president of the Shan State Sangha Council, and the deputy secretary of the State Sangha Mahanayaka Council were awarded honorary doctorates from Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.

### 5.3 Connecting transnational Shan monks

Buddhist networks and travelers across territories are not an exclusively modern phenomenon as records, such as Chinese Buddhist monks' travel accounts, reveal. Chinese monks journeyed through mountainous and forest regions on the so-called 'Silk

Road' across the Himalayas on pilgrimages to acquire the Buddha's relics and searching for Buddhist texts. Those monks traveled long distances beyond the Indian subcontinent, including via the sea to the Sumatra islands and Southeast Asian regions before returning back to China. During the early Tang dynasty, Chinese Buddhist monk travelers such as Faxian (c. 337?-422?), Xuanzang (c. 602-664), and Yijing (635-713) traveled to Buddhist sacred sites in India as pilgrims and scholars. They took extended periods of time for studying Buddhist texts at some monastic institutions during their stays and pilgrimage in India. Finally, they brought the Buddhist texts back home and translated them into classical Chinese, in which those texts stand out today as the most authentic Mahayana literatures. These Chinese travelers journeyed at different times and were not contemporaries, as revealed in their travel records. They spent years studying at world-famous institutions like Nalanda University and other Buddhist learning centers in ancient India.

In modern times, the number of traveling Buddhist monks is greater than in the past as means of travel are being facilitated by modern technologies and as they become more accessible. The purpose of their travels vary, ranging from pilgrimages, studies, and missionary works. The Shan *Sangha* movement is just one example of Buddhist networks around the world that travels across transnational nation-states. These days, Buddhist networks are global, unlike in the old days when they were limited to their own regions. Buddhist travelers today are found not only in the West, but as far as Africa and South America. Nevertheless, similar to the old days, the main foci of the Shan *Sangha* movement's travels are based on pilgrimage, education, and missionary work. Some of the modern *Sangha* networks include: Fogaungshan, a Taiwan-based Buddhist network; exiled Tibetan Buddhist movements; and Santi Asoke of Thailand, including the Mahasi Vipassana Center and Mogok Vipassana Center, two major meditation networks in the country. While the latter is focused within the country, the former has established some branches in the West. The Mumbai-based Goenka's World Vipassana Institute has been a very successful meditation center of the Burmese tradition. Its network has expanded with branches across the globe.



Being in Sri Lanka was an eye-opener, as loads of study opportunities were opened to Phra Khammai. In December 1991, Phra Khammai became the fourth *Sangha* member from Myanmar to receive a master's degree in Buddhist studies,<sup>86</sup> and he was the first Shan monk to have done so. The fact that all four of the Burmese monks sat the same MA exams in that year with Phra Khammai convinced him even further that "I could do it." Next, Phra Khammai went for a second master's degree at a different university. During this time, he also expended time and energy trying to convince and bring more Shan *Sangha* members to Sri Lanka to become more confident and take the same course.

The pioneering Ceylon Journey was a combined effort of the OBV and its associate networks for academic education and KBBT *Dhammadūta* and meditation. More than 25 years later, there have been slightly more than two hundred monks who have followed Phra Khammai to Sri Lanka, and in one way or another with some kind of connection or indirect link to Phra Khammai, a similar number of monks have reached universities in Thailand. A handful monks have made it to the UK, one has graduated from China, and at least three have graduated with Ph.Ds from India.

### 5.3.1 Shan *Sangha* in Europe

Following Phra Khammai's pioneering journey, the Shan *Sangha* has seen an expansion its movement in a few other countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and back to Shan State, Myanmar. Apart from a few physical establishments in Asia, its primary *Dhammadūta* work is taking its shape and planting its roots in Europe. For instance, Phra Khammai holds regular meditation retreats in Spain, Serbia, Belgium, and in the UK. The Shan *Sangha* movement is a non-homogeneous network without top-down control. Its individual members are free to choose their own missions once they finish their studies abroad. Some of its members have now established their own colleges or monastic schools in their hometowns. So far, two colleges have been founded and led by individual members—one of the colleges is in Muse, a town on the Sino-Myanmar border, while the other is in Xishaungbanna (Sipsongpanna) in southern China, led by a group of Tai Lue

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<sup>86</sup> The other three monks from Myanmar who obtained an MA before Phra Khammai were: Ven. Kosalla (Mon), Ven. Nandamalabhivamsa, now ITBMU Rector (Burmese), and Ven. Nandapala, now with Ph.D from Sunderland University (Mon).

monks who joined the Ceylon Journey. The founding of monastic colleges may be seen as what Phra Khammai suggests the Shan monks should do, but on the other hand, the founding of a new Buddhist movement such as Khun Sam Law was perhaps never considered as necessary for the Shan *Sangha*. (Details of the Khun Sam Law movement appear in Chapter 6.) The Phra Khammai-led Shan *Sangha* movement has led to something more than homogeneous integration, as diversities within Shan ethnicities and geopolitical locations are distinct and respected.

### 5.3.2 Ceylon Journey's Shan *Sangha* students

The Ceylon Journey (CJ) is an excursion for academic studies embarked upon by members of the Shan *Sangha* since early 1990s, including monks from Shan State, Xishuangbanna in China's Yunnan Province, Thailand, and elsewhere in the world. The name itself is related to the past history of cultural relationships between the Shan *Sangha* and Sri Lanka, and also that of the present day Phra Khammai-led movement. Thus, the interdependent nature of this process can be illustrated by the following.



Figure 5.5 At the Overseas Dhammadūta Bhikkhus Class XXI (March 2015), Vice-Rector for Foreign Affairs of MCU and Ven. Prof. Dr. Khammai Dhammasami shared his experiences as a missionary both in theory and practice with Dhammathut students at the Mahachulalongkorn.





Figure 5.6 Shan Sangha students posing for a group photo after a graduation ceremony in front of BIMCH convocation hall, Colombo, 2013. [photo: Ceylon Tai Sangha]

According to the *History of Theravada Buddhism in South-East Asia* (Hazra, 1996:49), the eleventh century ACE is an important landmark in the history of both Ceylon and Burma. There is evidence to show that in this century, close cultural and religious ties existed between the two countries. Several Buddhist monks from Burma visited Ceylon to study the sacred texts and to receive academic education. Thus, the eleventh century ACE is significant in the religious and cultural history of Southeast Asia. From this period onwards, Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia came into close contact with Ceylon, which played an important role in the establishment and development of the Theravada form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

According to Phra Khammai's speaking in reference to unwritten history, in the period dating back to the time of Hso Khanpha (1311–1365), some Shan Buddhist monks visited Ceylon for their studies. It is said that Sao Jarng Khun Aik, a brother of King Hso Khanpha, was the first of them. He conducted his academic studies in the field of Buddhist Philosophy in Ceylon for many years. Having left Ceylon, he joined his brother King Hso Khanpha and propagated the teachings to the best of his ability. There is no doubt that King Hso Khanpha received aid from his brother Sao Jarng Khun Aik in the propagation of *Buddha-sāsana*, even though the historical records still remain to be studied.

The second monk from Shan State to study in Ceylon was the first head of the Shan *Sangha* community, the most Venerable Pannyabhoga of Monghsu (1892–1971) in central Shan State.<sup>87</sup> He traveled to India and Ceylon 15 years after his higher ordination in 1930. In Ceylon, he studied languages, including Pali, Sanskrit, Hindi, as well as Buddhist texts (Khun Maha, 1986). He remained in Sri Lanka until 1933, and thus he is considered the first among the Shan *Sangha* to have studied abroad (Shan State Sangha Council, 2014). After returning from Ceylon, he organized all the *Sangha* members in Shan State to translate the Tripitaka (canonical texts) into Shan with the patronage of the first president of Burma, Sao Shwe Theik (r. 1948–52). The translation project was started in Buddhist Era 2501 (Myanmar era 1319, or 1957 CE), at the SSSC headquarters based in Panglong. The next monks to arrive on the island were Venerable Muninda of Lashio and Venerable Narinda of Tangyang in northern Shan State. They visited Ceylon as individuals, but it is unknown if they brought friends or disciples to study along with them. Perhaps that could be the case, but little is known of them among the Shan people.

Unlike any other of his predecessors, in 1991, Phra Khammai demonstrated gifted leadership and was the first to bring many young monks with him for their modern Buddhist education. This has given birth to the present journey, which is the journey of academic studies in Buddhist or religious studies in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the world. Phra Khammai is widely known all over Shan State, across the Union of Myanmar, and in other parts of the world where the existence of the Shan *Sangha* can be seen.

The chief aim of those who embark on the Ceylon Journey is to acquire the knowledge of academic studies on Buddhist and other religious studies. This is believed to prepare them to be of service to society for peace and prosperity. From 1991 to the present, we have witnessed the number of Shan monks to have graduated in Buddhist studies with different levels and degrees in Sri Lanka to have increased to over 200 individuals, and the number continues to rise. As expected, some of them have already returned to their

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<sup>87</sup> Venerable Pannyabhoga of Monghsu, who lived in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, is regarded as one of the nine Great Scholars among the Shan intellectuals.

homes in Shan State or Sipsongpanna and established their own Buddhist colleges or monastic educations.

In short, the Ceylon Journey is the journey of students and Buddhist scholars from Shan State and other places where Theravada Buddhism flourishes who embrace monastic education in Theravada Buddhist Studies on the island of Ceylon, Sri Lanka. The CJ has now become a network of its own, and the tradition of monks from the above said regions/territories are continuously following the journey for their academic and religious studies in Sri Lanka. It was from here that Phra Khammai took a further step to European sois for the sake of propagating Buddhasāsana. As of mid-August 2015, the number of Shan monks studying in Sri Lanka was more than 50; their study-level in Buddhist studies ranged from bachelor and master to Ph.D.<sup>88</sup>

### **5.3.3 Khuva Boonchum Buddhagaya Tai Temple (Bodhgaya)<sup>89</sup>**

If the Ceylon Journey is the first Shan Sangha movement, then the Khuva Boonchum Buddhagaya Tai Temple (KBBT) is the first-ever attempted to establish its base network outside of Shan State. While CJ is based in Sri Lanka for academic studies, the KBBT is settled at the heart of the Buddhist holy land of Bodhgaya in India. The KBBT has now become one of the busiest centers, especially during the peak travel seasons. The center is often crowded with pilgrims from Shan State and people from Thailand during peak seasons. The resident monks at the center act as travel guides, providing their services almost like a travel agency, and during travels from one site to another, the guiding monk will use a microphone to make announcements or explain facts and figures of the sites. During the pilgrim seasons, like any other Buddhist temples and centers in India, the KBBT runs a short-term guesthouse and restaurant for the pilgrims' convenience. This is partly because most travelers from Thailand or Myanmar cannot appreciate the Indian

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<sup>88</sup> Informant, personal interview in Chiang Mai, August 2015.

<sup>89</sup> With respect to the original naming and spelling, I prefer to adhere to that used by the people concerned, whether referring to this temple or personal name of the venerable monk. However, apart from this, I will continue using 'Khruba' instead of 'Khuva' and 'Bunchum' instead of 'Boonchum.' My own usage is the same as other scholar's adaptations, including Paul Cohen and Amporn Jirattikorn.

foods. Therefore, the temple where they stay becomes not only a lodge, but also a full-time restaurant.

My visit to Bodhgaya in August 2012 occurred in the middle of summer, outside of the pilgrimage season, and the number of pilgrims and residential monks at KBBT was not many. Due to the nature of the center being for pilgrims, monks there are unable to make study a priority. Spirituality and meditation practice have become more important for pilgrims and visitors.

#### 5.3.4 Shan *Sangha* students in Thailand

Thailand has been a connection-point and point of departure since the early 1990s when Phra Khammai began his CJ. In 1989, before he could journey to Sri Lanka, he managed to study English in Bangkok, and later found his way to Colombo. During his time living in the UK, he would visit Thailand frequently, such as for conferences, the United Nations Day of Vesak, or to deliver *Dhamma* talks in Bangkok. “Is it Sinful to be Rich?” given at the Thai Stock Exchange in Bangkok, is well-known among these.<sup>90</sup> Among his several visits, the year 2010 marked a crucial point in the history of the Shan *Sangha* movement for its academic studies and missionary works. Mahachulalongkorn-rajavidyalaya University (MCU) in Wang Noi, Ayutthaya, Thailand, honored the two individual Shan monks, Venerable Dr. Khammai Dhammasami and the Most Venerable Pannyananda, the president of the Shan State Sangha Council, who had contributed much to the promotion of *Buddha-sāsana* with the degree of Honorary Doctorate.

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<sup>90</sup> Phra Khammai [Ven. Dr. Khammai Dhammasami]. (2012). “Is it Sinful to be Rich?”. A Dhamma-talk / discussion on the Buddhist concept of economics video clip available on Public Internet domain: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZInm\\_kdzJs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZInm_kdzJs). Accessed: August 2015.



Figure 5.7 Phra Khammai and Ven. Pannyananda receiving Honorary Doctorates at Mahachulalongkorn-rajavidyalaya University, Bangkok.

Since a few years before the honor was bestowed, Phra Khammai was already working with MCU. He installed two Shan monks who graduated from Sri Lanka to work for the MCU Foreign Relations Office. In this way, the relationship between the Shan *Sangha* movement and the Thai *Sangha* of the MCU became established on mutual interest and respect. Since then, a number of Shan monks have enrolled for graduate and post-graduate study programs at MCU annually. The MCU is, however, not only the place that Shan monks go for studies; Mahidol, Mahamakut, Assumption, and some other universities are also known to accept Shan monks.

The travels of Shan monks to Thailand for academic and religious studies have a long history, especially among the Shan Tai Khun *Sangha* from Kengtung in eastern Shan State, as they have remained well-connected historically and politically with the Lanna Kingdom. The cultural and religious interrelationship is still very much alive in this modern day, such that Khun monks from Kengtung find Chiang Mai in northern Thailand to be more accommodating and comfortable than any other parts of the region. Historical

evidence shows Chiang Mai's influence over Kengtung, as two of the most famous monastic institutions, Suan Dok and Padaeng, were established in both ancient cities. Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai is one of the monastic institutions that members of the Shan Tai Khun *Sangha* often choose for their studies.

#### **5.4 Supporting the Shan cultural movement in the UK**

The Shan *Sangha* cultural movement in the UK began in 2005 when a group of Shan youth from Myanmar, including Jotika Khur-Year, a Ph.D graduate from SOAS, got together at Oxford Buddha Vihara (OBV) in Oxford to form a cultural association. The Shan Cultural Association (SCA) aims solely to promote Shan culture and identity in the multi-cultural United Kingdom. It also aims to become a hub of communication for Shan people who reside in the UK. According to its website announcement, it is also welcomes non-Shan people who empathize with the main aims of SCA-UK, promoting Shan culture and identity.

SCA-UK has created opportunities for Shan students who are not monks to study in the UK. The number has gradually grown, and the SCA-UK had adapted to facilitate the growing number of Shan students in the UK. SCA, a non-profit, is the first-ever cultural association formed by young Shan people who study or work in the United Kingdom. The association maintains and promotes Shan cultural identities through the celebration of cultural events and shares their culture and values with Shan and non-Shan who are interested in Shan culture. Members of the SCA organize commemorations of Shan cultural events, such as Shan National Day and Shan New Year, and also participate in cultural events organized by other cultural associations in the UK. Thus, it has become part of the Shan transnational cultural movement.

In Shan State and in Thailand, these forms of cultural association are very often associated with the Shan literacy movement. However in the UK, it is likely that they do not have enough people or the need to promote Shan literature as yet.

At the first meeting, Phra Khammai from OBV was nominated as the chair of the SCA-UK, and other executive committee (EC) members bearing different responsibilities were also allocated. Presently, he still serves as chairman of the association. After a series of





Figure 5.8 All participants appreciating and sharing joyful moments during the Shan New Year event in 2010 at Kennedy Lecture Theatre, University College London.

meetings both at OBV in Oxford and in London, the constitution of the SCA-UK was produced and with all exerted efforts from dedicated current EC members, initial funds were raised through generous support and donations from contributors. “It was like the dream of our members turned into reality. The next step of the SCA-UK is to become a registered charitable organization in the United Kingdom in the very near future. Most of the EC members are Shan students studying at London Universities,” explained an EC member.

As students, they are committed to their studies, but the EC members still find spare time to consistently work together to progress the SCA-UK with invaluable advice and guidance from its Chair Phra Khammai. Within 10 months’ time from its birth, the SCA-UK organized to celebrate the welcoming of the 2100<sup>th</sup> Shan New Year on Sunday 18 December 2005 at OBV. It was a small event with about 50 or more guests at this successful event. The SCA reports: “The elders and seniors showed their interest, support and courage, which made the members feel so honorable. A highly regarded senior Shan delivered a short speech and shared his old time experiences with later generations, and



one could see a wave of nostalgia ripple within each and every participant. The majority of participants, the youths, expressed their enthusiasm in preserving Shan traditional events. It gave the same atmosphere as the traditional New Year celebration back home.”<sup>91</sup>

As part of essential cultural materials, members have worked on obtaining a set of percussion musical instruments and some dance costumes. SCA-UK members have greatly appreciated the help of their chairman, Phra Khammai, who put an effort to have those instruments donated by his devotees during his short visit in Myanmar. The order placing and the shipment costs were kindly contributed by the family of Nang Zun Pan Aye, one of the History and Cultural officers on the SCA-UK executive committee. Soon after the arrival of the musical instruments on 28 March 2006, SCA-UK was invited to take part in a celebration at Wimbledon on 18 June 2006, which commemorated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of His Majesty the King of Thailand’s accession to the throne.<sup>92</sup> In this way, while celebrating their cultural identities, attempts are also made to associate themselves with Thailand.

According to an EC member, the SCA received huge cheers from the audience for its very first performance with its unique traditional dance and music. It was also such a privilege for the SCA-UK to have it mentioned in a national Thai newspaper. At this event, SCA-UK successfully raised its profile among multinational communities whilst fulfilling its main aim to promote its culture and share it with others, according to the SCA website.<sup>93</sup>

SCA-UK has also taken other available opportunities to participate in cultural events to fulfill its main aim to promote and cherish Shan culture and share it with other people from different cultural backgrounds in the UK. This year, the members organized a bigger New Year celebration than last year with more guests from many different cultures to

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<sup>91</sup> SCA-UK. (2012). “About Us”. Shan Cultural Association – UK. <http://www.sca-uk.org.uk/?about-us>. Accessed: November 2015.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

welcome the 2101<sup>st</sup> Shan New Year at a much larger venue, the University Colleges London (UCL) main building.

## 5.5 Summary

This chapter outlines highlights of the Shan *Sangha*'s transnational activities abroad. Under his leadership and guidance, the Phra Khammai-led Shan *Sangha* movement has been successful with numerous and varied achievements during the past two-and-a-half decades. In terms of education, there have been more than 100 bachelor's and master's graduates, and nearly a dozen Ph.D graduates. Four OBV centers (in Oxford, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Yangon) and two KBBT centers in Bodhgaya have been established. Back in Shan State, it deserves mentioning that a few monastic schools and two Buddhist colleges have been established on the Sino-Myanmar border. The traditions which brought *Sangha* members together on the Ceylon Journey are still very much alive, as Shan monks continue to mobilize their human resources for education in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

The success of Shan *Sangha*'s movement has been facilitated by its core networking connectivity and decentralized activities around the world. The OBV now often hosts visiting scholars from Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhist schools at its Oxford center. The OBV activities do not focus only among its immediate branch networks, but also organize annual meditation retreats at the KBBT center and participate in Buddhist Tripitaka chanting at Bodhgaya, organize Buddhist conferences in partnership with the Myanmar *Sangha* in the country, and some international events such as the United Nations Day of Vesak celebration in Bangkok via a crucial connection with MCU.

It is clear that the success of the Shan *Sangha* movement for education and missionary work is due to its members becoming capable of footing themselves on the platform of networking through transnational space. This concept has been strongly applied to the movement through every single activity. Shan monks in this group have networked with Shans not only in Shan State, Myanmar, and Thailand, but also the rest of the world. MCU is one of the Buddhist institutions in Thailand that the Shan monks have become

well connected with. Since 2004, Phra Khammai has installed two-to-three Shan monks to be working with MCU as staff members. Two Shan monks are currently serving in the MCU's Foreign Relations Office. They are in charge of the foreign relations department because they speak English and are capable of communicating with foreigners; some may offer assistance for teaching courses as well. At the same time, Phra Khammai also occasionally invites monks from Phra Rama IX Temple to stay at the OBV center for a certain period of time for a kind of exchange program. Thus, it is seen how Phra Khammai's Buddhist movement operates and functions in Burma and its homeland Shan State, and how it cooperates with the Myanmar *Sangha* and authorities to meet their achievements.

Buddhist networks and travelers in the present times are part of a continuation from the past several hundred years ago, as far as Buddhist sources are concerned. However, they are also different in the present. In the old days, before the emergence of nation-states, there were no border-crossing problems, and people at that time had no firm concept of nationalism. Chinese Buddhist travelers journeyed to India to acquire texts, study them, and have them translated into their native language. When Ceylon was under foreign rule, Buddhism was on decline, such that in 1070, King Vijayabahu (*r.* 1055–1110) requested Anawratha of Pagan (*r.* 1044–1077) to send monks to re-establish the pure ordination of the Sinhala *Sangha*. Likewise, when Buddhist monks from the Lanna Kingdom (1257 CE) and Burmese *Sangha* (early 14<sup>th</sup> CE) required the purification of their respective *Sangha* orders, they went to Sri Lanka to receive valid or authentic *Bhikkhu* ordinations and Theravada Buddhist texts.

Unlike in the old days, modern networks, movements, and travels are more efficiently facilitated by communication technologies and high-speed transportation. Things may now happen at the speed of thought. Therefore, modern movements can offer their thoughts, ideologies, teachings, and guidance from a long distance; they even can convene activities online without the need to travel. This is the most significant change from the past. Thus, modern Buddhist movements have become networked and transnational—even transcontinental—in many cases in this interconnected world.