

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This dissertation aims to understand and analyze the factors and conditions that have enabled Phra Khammai to start and expand his international Buddhist movement. It also attempts to understand the development of this transnational Buddhist movement, including its networks and identities in relation to other Shan Buddhist movements in the present time and local Shan Buddhism.

Through Phra Khammai's life story, the conditions that have enabled him to initiate and develop his international Buddhist movement are clear. He was born in 1964 in Burma's Shan State in the post-independence period, during which tensions and discontentment among the major ethnic groups were widespread throughout the country. Ethnic consciousness and ethno-nationalism grew among the ethnic groups of Burma as they aspired to gain political autonomy and to protect their cultural and ethnic identities. Burmese nation-building was the major cause of many problems in the country that led to many ethnic groups rising up against the central government to protect themselves from acculturation. Although the majority of both Shan and Burmese are Buddhists, accessibility to higher monastic education is more limited among the Shan. The fact that Buddhism in Myanmar is dominated by Burmese culture and traditions has been discussed by many Burmese studies scholars. For example, Aung Than Tun (1955: 25), as Michal Charney (1999) cites in his thesis, said, "...Burmese Buddhists in the Irrawaddy Valley maintain, via the Burman nation-state, a monopoly on published texts, historiography, and archaeological work." In addition, several other studies of contemporary Burma (Charney, 2006: 137-145; Houtman, 1999: 101-2; Sakhong, 2012; Smith, 1994; Takatani, 1998; Tucker, 2001: 11) also suggest that in the present, such forms of forced cultural assimilation are still ongoing in the country. However, Juliane Schober (1995, 2008, 2011), Ingrid Jordt (2007), Erik Braun (2013), Alicia Turner (2014), and some others have shown that in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial

periods, Buddhism has been significant and instrumental in shaping the Burmese cultural identity and political power in modern Burma. At the same time, Buddhism is viewed through the lens of homogeneity, or a ‘monolithic view,’ of mainstream Burmese Buddhism. How non-Burman ethnic peoples understand and practice Buddhism is totally neglected.

In addition, a growing awareness of the decline in interest in Shan literacy, an integral part and basis for Buddhism as practiced by Shan people, has been a motivating factor for Phra Khammai to become involved in Shan literacy movements. His efforts in this area has led him to experience confrontations with the Burmese authorities, especially in Mandalay. Two of his colleagues were arrested and jailed there without a specific charge, but likely due to their involvement with the Shan literacy movement. As a consequence, Phra Khammai was encouraged by a number of friends to flee the city out of concern for the unpredictable circumstances.

Thus, strong sentiment and ethnic consciousness arisen from the specific political situation in Myanmar has fueled Phra Khammai’s ambition to improve Shan peoples’ status in the country’s monastic system. This is clear from his explanation of why he went abroad to Oxford to continue his Buddhist studies. His simple reason and usual answer is that he was motivated by the fact that the level of quality of education and Shan literary are too low, and that he wanted to lift-up and reverse this situation.¹¹⁹ Besides, the political context in Myanmar in the early 1990s encouraged political and social activists to cross the border and travel abroad to seek opportunities for their futures.

Through Phra Khammai’s life-story, Buddhist teachings, practices, and related activities, I would put forward another three analytic conclusions. First, I would analyze Phra Khammai’s type of Buddhism as ‘Buddhism in action’ in a similar vein with Thich Nhat Hanh’s ‘engaged Buddhism,’ or ‘socially engaged Buddhism’ as explained by Sallie Krawcheck. The emphasis of this type of Buddhism is to use Buddhist principles to solve social problems which are increasingly occurring in the modern time. As has been discussed in

¹¹⁹ Ven. Khammai Dhammasami. (2014). “Boundless Love”, a *Dhamma* talk delivered to the people participating in his golden jubilee celebration in Laikha, Shan State.

chapter 1, in the Buddhist world, the Zen master Thich Naht Hanh is well-known to have founded a new form of Buddhism to meet the challenges of the modern world, in the specific time, during the Vietnamese war.

The explanation of Engaged Buddhism given by Thich Hnat Hanh is similar to Phra Khammai's teaching on *Satipatthāna* (mindfulness), that we need to ground ourselves in mindfulness for whatever we do in any moment in life. Basic teachings of *Satipatthāna* which provide the frameworks for 'Buddhism in action' are drawn from two discourses of the Buddha that appear in *Majhima-nikaya* and *Digha-nikaya*. Coupled with the *Brahmavihāra*, the 'Noble Way of Living' or the 'Four Sublime States of Mind,' Phra Khammai practices this himself in his daily life and advises others he encounters. Thich Nhat Hanh puts it in English as the 'Four Immeasurable Minds,' and uses and practices in his daily life and teaches other people who connect with him. Phra Khammai told an audience in Europe that this basic frame of core teachings was as result of reflection on his own experiences in life. He contends that this teaching has been successful in the West in a multi-national and cultural environment. As well, possibly theoretical contributions are made through the Buddhist concepts of *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *mettā*, and *upekkhā*. While he claims to be an educationist and a *Dhammadūta*, to be successful in these two roles he utilizes the Buddhist concept of *Brahmavihāra* for whatever he encounters in his daily life. In this way, it is possible for him to access resources and to bypass barriers and layers of obstructions in his path.

'Buddhism in action' today seems to be a popular phrase in the West, especially among non-Theravada Buddhists in America and those who were in attendance for a recent European Buddhist Union (EBU)¹²⁰ event in Germany show. The trend of this type of Buddhist movement is growing. The EBU is currently organizing an upcoming event in April 2016 on the theme of Buddhism in action. As noted by the US-based Nichiren Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda in his daily encouragement: "The twentieth century was a century of war and peace, a century of politics and economics. The dawning twenty-

¹²⁰ EBU is founded in 1975 as an umbrella association for existing European Buddhist organizations in response to the Cold War (after WWII–1991) between the two giant ideologies (political and military): Western Bloc (United States and NATO Pact) and Eastern Bloc (Soviet and Warsaw Pact).

first century holds the promise, however, to be a century of humanity and culture, a century of science and religion. I hope all of you will advance on this wonderful new path of humanism with pride and confidence, as gallant philosophers of action (Ikeda, 2015).” Certainly, Phra Khammai’s Buddhism in action is emerging in response to something unrighteous, unjust, or unfair within Burma.

Aspects of Buddhism in action are also seen in His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s famous practice known as ‘Compassion in action.’ “Compassion,” His Holiness explains, “requires an action,” as his famous quote shows: “It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act. There are two aspects to action. One is to overcome the distortions and afflictions of your own mind ... in terms of calming and eventually dispelling anger ... The other is more social, more public. When something needs to be done in the world to rectify the wrongs, if one is really concerned with benefiting others, it is not enough simply to be compassionate. There is no direct benefit in that. With compassion, one needs to be engaged, involved. This is action born from compassion.” (The Dalai Lama, 2008: 70).

In the West, people are now increasingly looking for religious solutions for social problems and for spiritual fulfillment. This can be seen in the many Buddhist centers that have come to be established in many Western countries with frequent organizations of meditation retreats and *Dhamma* talks/teachings. Phra Khammai is one of the Buddhist monks active in the West who has the potential to help guide people to fulfill their spiritual needs amidst increasing social crises and conflicts. With his background as a Shan from Myanmar who holds a doctorate degree from a famous university, his frequent *Dhamma* talks and his abundant articles and books explaining Buddhist principles and meditation techniques in English add to his popularity among members of diverse international communities.

My second analytic conclusion is about Phra Khammai’s Buddhist movement identity. In comparison with other Shan Buddhist monks who have led Buddhist movements in Shan State and elsewhere, such as Sao Hsintham who leads the monastic education reform group in Shan state, and the charismatic Khruba Bunchum who leads the Buddha-land reconstruction movement in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands, Phra Khammai is a

transnational and global *Dhammadūta*, a Buddhist missionary who translates Buddhist teachings to fit with needs of international communities. He is an educationist who has promoted the higher education of Buddhist study in Pali. But at the same time, his teachings and meditation practices are universal in a way that they incorporate various major Buddhist traditions. For instance, in regular *Buddha-vandana* daily services at the Oxford Buddhist Vihara (OBV), his formula has drawn from several traditions, including Mahayana, Tibetan, and of course Theravada. In other words, this shows that the OBV does not limit itself in its narrow sense to either Shan or Burmese Theravada Buddhism, but is open to inclusion of all forms of Buddhism.

Phra Khammai's inclusiveness or non-sectarian philosophy toward other schools of Buddhism such as *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* certainly encompasses transcendence of the binary opposition between rational/reformed and irrational/superstitious or otherwise traditional forms of Theravada Buddhism and localized Shan Buddhism. It is reasonable to draw the conclusion that his early and persistent promotion of Shan culture, literature, and *Lik Long*, as well as the evidence of popular Shan culture in the recent *Lik Long* conferences and presentations and his relationship with the charismatic 'holy man' Khruba Bunchum, suggest such a transcendence of the opposing views.

In fact, not to be bounded by one form of Buddhism, either Theravada or Mahayana, or even Vajrayana is a global form of religious transnationalism. That fits with Phra Khammai's teachings on mindfulness meditation, as the goal is to get rid of the self, or *atta* in Pali and *ātman* in Sanskrit. In other words, if we are to live up to the Buddhist concept in a strict sense, there is no 'self' as such because nothing can be identified with unchanging 'entity.' In the context of transnational space, while transcending nationalities and nations, Phra Khammai is seeking to transcend ethnic boundaries and nations to go beyond 'identities,' possible to a form of 'non-identity.'

However, although his identity as a Shan from Myanmar is not clearly expressed in Phra Khammai's teachings and practices in international Buddhist forums, his movements in Shan State show that he is seeking an equal status and footing for the Shan *Sangha* with its counterpart, the Burmese *Sangha*, in terms of education and recognition within monastic and state *Sangha* affairs. It is clear that he is trying to uplift the Buddhist

educational level of young Shan Buddhist monks by founding a Buddhist university in Shan State. Most of all, the clear Shan identity of the movement can be seen from his and his Shan colleagues' involvement in *Lik Long* (Shan literature) revitalization efforts. *Lik Long* is the core element forming Shan Buddhist and Shan cultural identity. It contains not only Buddhist *Jataka* tales and stories written in the form of vernacular scriptural language, but also information about numerous secular subjects, such as astrology, astronomy, and Shan worldviews. However, it is the Buddhist knowledge, rather than the magic or sacred components in *Lik Long*, in which Phra Khammai has a great interest. This is reflected by his involvement with the two *Lik Long* conferences, held in 2013 and 2014, and future conferences that will be held in the next two years in Lashio and Muse.

According to the *Jares* (Shan scholars) who presented their papers on *Lik Long* at the first conference in 2013, the Shan's *Lik Long* is believed to contain some treasures that are yet to be unearthed.¹²¹ The purpose of the *Lik Long* conferences is to unearth the treasures yet to be found in Shan Buddhist traditional literature. The first *Lik Long* conference in Yangon managed to bring together 43 *Lik Long* Shan scholars, mostly lay intellectuals and a few monks, presenting papers to 200 participants. Phra Khammai notes: "The *Lik Long* conference is a scholarly space for traditional Shan literature *Jares* and foreign scholars to exchange their knowledge and discussion to unearth the rich resources of Shan literatures."¹²² The conferences are part of the process of modernizing the traditional Buddhist knowledge, as seen in Phra Khammai's expression of his hope that "Shan *Lik Long* literature will reach to America and some European countries [libraries]. I am expecting that in the near future from conferences in Shan State, there will be an atmosphere leading to international gatherings."¹²³

By unearthing Shan *Lik Long* literatures, Shan traditional knowledge is expected to help the revitalization of Shan Buddhism and reconstruct the Shan cultural identities together. This is exactly how its neighboring countries Laos and Thailand have done for the modern

¹²¹ The First International Lik Long Conference, 29-31 December 2013. Recorded video file.

¹²² Tentative opening speech note for the 3rd Lik Long Conference 27-29 December 2015 with Phra Khammai's own handwriting (in Shan) obtained via my informant.

¹²³ Ibid.

and pre-modern monastic educations in both countries. Justin McDaniel (2009) reports how pedagogical techniques found in pre-modern palm-leaf manuscripts are pervasive in modern education. Donald Swearer notes: “*Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words* is a gold mine of descriptive information, analysis, and informed speculative inference. It will add substantially to our knowledge of Buddhism in northern Thailand and Laos, monastic education, the relationship between canon and commentary, and, I hope, will promote the study of pedagogical intertextuality, which is at the heart of McDaniel’s project” (McDaniel, 2009). Certainly, Shan vernacular literature may rhetorically sound the same tone, and is nothing less than the goldmine Swearer describes—that as the Phra Khammai-led Shan *Sangha* and lay-intellectuals attempt to unearth the ‘gems’ of *Lik Long*, the ways in which they envision to enrich the treasury of Shan Buddhism and their culture will become clear. ‘Gems’ here suggests the treasures of *Lik Long*, including somatic (magical) elements, a non-Buddhist component of Shan literature.

Lastly, the final analytic conclusion for this dissertation is in regards to the characteristics of Phra Khammai’s transnational and local network, which helps to expand Phra Khammai’s movement and its achievement.

Phra Khammai’s life story shows that he works in multicultural environments, under different types of authorities, and stays engaged in several activities to bring Buddhism in action to an international audience. His fellow monks and lay people, some of whom are his former students, now live in Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Bangkok, in the UK, and beyond. People in his network are from various occupations and statuses, being monks both senior and junior, professors from many well-known universities, business people, etc. They are also from many ethnic backgrounds: Shan, Burmese, Thai, and other nationalities from USA, Europe, and Asia. The expansion of Phra Khammai’s network is also due to his universal teaching, as reflected in the words of Arjia Rinpoche of the Tibetan Center for Compassion and Wisdom, USA: “... because of the cultural background of our three different traditions ... and because of the transportations and communication limitations in the past, often we have had little understanding of each other. As a result, we have been distant with each other, clinging to our own ways, ignoring the rich contributions of others. In contrast to this narrow view, Ven.

Dhammasami is very open-minded, a quality that provides a wide window for compassion, understanding, and sincere hospitality (Rinpoche, 2014: 96).”

Phra Khammai’s educational achievements and religious activities worldwide have brought him an admirable reputation. He has been entrusted with high-ranking positions in transnational Buddhist communities. He is permanently appointed as the secretary of the organizing team for the celebrations of the United Nations Day of Vesak (UNDV) in Bangkok. On the other hand, he represents as a leading team member of the European Buddhist communities while participating in the UNDV events. In the UK, the Burmese Buddhist community is much larger, ranging in professions from specialists such as engineers, medical doctors, surgical specialist, programmers, journalists, and so on. They are well-to-do compared to the handful of Shans living in the UK. Being a transnational monk, being acquainted with some members of the Thai Buddhist community there is also an important source of capital. The Thai communities were crucial to financing the establishment and founding of the OBV in 2003, as well as while it was under mortgage. Phra Khammai’s close Thai friend and Ph.D fellow who has maintained a strong connection with the Phra Rama IX Temple in Bangkok helped for fundraising to pay back the mortgage within a few years. The OBV has now owned the building outright since 2009. The *Thammayut nikaya*, one of the most important *Sangha* sects in Thailand, recognizes him as one of its members. To be formally recognized and accepted as a member of the *Thammayut*, one is required to go for examination and ‘re-ordination’ under the preceptorship of the sect, which Phra Khammai did in 2011.¹²⁴

The reputation and resources Phra Khammai has gained from his transnational Buddhist activities also help in connecting people back in Myanmar and Shan state. This dissertation demonstrates that he has broad connections with high-ranking and academic monks in Myanmar. This has led to the success in his establishment of the Shan State Buddhist University and his launch of academic activities, including the *Lik Long* revitalization and conferences. To finally conclude, there is a dialectic relation between being a transnational/international Buddhist monk scholar and being a Burmese Shan

¹²⁴ My informant in 2011 and personal contact with Phra Khammai in 2013.

ethnic monk. The more Phra Khammai becomes famous and recognized internationally with many high-level positions, the more he can mobilize resources from international communities to be used for his Buddhist activities in Shan State. Moreover, as he becomes increasingly recognized by national and regional *Sangha*, all the more effectively will he be able to fulfill his goal of improving Buddhist education among the Shan.



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