

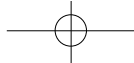
## Between cultural preservation and this-worldly commitment: **MODERNIZATION, SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND THE LAO BUDDHIST SANGHA<sup>1</sup>**

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**A**lthough the teachings of many religious traditions suggest a mythical and non-historical nature, it is apparent that they are not immune to change and indeed have to be transformed in order to remain meaningful in the every day lives of their followers. The discontinuities within society, caused for example by a rapid cultural and economic transformation and the effects of globalisation, are often the source of re-conceptualisation for religious teachings. What before has been accepted as an effective but invisible common sense norm, a fixed value system and set of practises, suddenly becomes negotiated and subject to more intense reflection. Depending on the internal structure and resources of a religious organization and the field (socio-economic, cultural and political etc.) it operates in, religious leaders and laypeople are more or less successful in adapting to new contexts, and manage to construct a coherent (usually moral and ethical) argument around new developments in society and thereby react to current discourses and shape them. The first, frequently employed, option is to accomplish this through the reinforcement of traditional teachings in order to conserve 'original' culture and thereby try to come to terms with new influences. The second preference is through an extension or modification of traditional teachings so that they become dialogic and can be applied to new areas. In a range of Theravada Buddhist cultures, very often both strategies have been employed simultaneously (Reynolds, 1990: 74f.).

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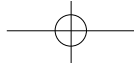
<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork in the Lao PDR was funded by the University of Cambridge and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD doctoral research grant). I would like to thank all Lao monks, nuns, novices and laypeople that were willing to share their views with me. For comments on the article and thought stimulation thanks to Boike Rehbein, Grant Evans, James Laidlaw, Alexandra Kent, Michel Lorrillard and Yves Goudineau. Any mistakes, however, are solely my responsibility. The findings presented here are primarily based on research on urban Buddhism carried out in Vientiane province in 2003-2005. When I speak of Lao Buddhism, I hence usually refer to Vientiane Buddhism. The arguments presented can only to a limited extent be applied to Buddhism in the Lao periphery or to other Buddhist groups such as the Tai Lue or Phu Noi. As the article was written in the field before the complete review of my fieldwork data, so some points may have a more provisional character, but will be discussed in more detail in Ladwig (forthcoming).



Currently the Lao Buddhist clergy (*Sangha*) has to face a situation similar to that described above: the fast cultural and economic change, primarily in urban areas such as Vientiane, has transformed the life-world of monks and laypeople alike. Less positive developments are part and parcel of this deep social change: drug addiction (mostly meta-amphetamine's), environmental degradation, prostitution, trafficking and migrant labour, plus the increasing spread of HIV/AIDS are marking the late but therefore concentrated arrival of globalized modernity in Laos. Many of the monks I have met in Vientiane are more than simply aware of these developments. The somewhat surreal speed of social change is, despite all its positive features, a cause of deep concern within the Buddhist clergy. Most of its members have the conviction that the country's modernization is largely a positive development but feel as well that the negative consequences of this process present a challenge and are sometimes even a threat to Lao society. They believe that they can influence these developments in a positive way and actually have a responsibility to do so: from a Buddhist perspective, it is the monk's duty to instruct the lay-population in Buddhist teachings and ethics, to give moral support and get engaged in activities that reduce 'suffering' (*dukkha*), one of the main objectives of Buddhism. Another important motivation for the Lao clergy becoming active can be found in the fact that there is a potential danger of secularisation, or more accurately, the ability of people to choose between different life-worlds outside the religious sphere. In an urban society, which more and more differentiates itself into increasingly detached fields, Buddhism is likely to lose some of its significance. At the fourth congress of the Lao *Sangha* in 1998, one speaker complained that the practise of monks is "set apart from the challenges of modern life" and that many people are "losing their faith in Buddhism" (IV. Congress, 1998: 57). By applying Buddhist teachings to current society, it is anticipated that Buddhism will retain its meaning for followers and sustain its significance in Lao society.

The discussions I had with monks and abbots in Vientiane monasteries revealed a strong sense of a need to reinforce and also to reinterpret Buddhist teachings (*dhamma*) so that they can comment upon current problems in society. The Buddhist term *dhamma* implies a large semantic field and can be variously translated as 'doctrine', 'teaching of the Buddha', 'law', 'nature' or 'truth' (Payutto, 1989: 329). Without intending to go into doctrinal details, it can be said that *dhamma* itself does not change in the course of time but is subject to different interpretations and understandings (Reynolds, 1990: 59f.). While discussing this topic in a Vientiane temple in 2004, the abbot of the monastery explained: "*Dhamma* is eternal, but the problems society encounters and the sources of suffering change. The sufferings in the time of the Buddha were different in nature to the ones we encounter today. Therefore it is crucial that we explain fundamental teachings again and set them in relation to the everyday lives of people so we can help them to understand *dhamma* and lead better lives". The recent social actions and projects putting this insight into practice could be described as the first steps of the Lao *Sangha* towards setting up a form of 'socially-engaged Buddhism'<sup>2</sup>.

This article sets out to explore the Lao Buddhist *Sangha's* way towards establishing a form of socially-engaged Buddhism. I will begin with a general analysis of the Buddhist clergy's position and involvement in society in the mirror of modernization and give a short historic overview of the *Sangha's* early pre-revolutionary social engagement. In this context I shall then discuss how Buddhism, through the transformations in both the pre- and post-revolutionary periods, gradually became an institution linked to a 'governmentality' that at the same time promoted and inhibited the clergy's new activism. Following this, the third section will move on to the present situation and explore the resources ('social capital') of the Lao *Sangha* and



its potential to become more directly involved. As ethnographic examples I shall here refer to some *Sangha* projects that have already been or are currently being implemented in the fields of HIV prevention, drugs and ecology. In this framework I will also present the methods and Buddhist teachings (mainly ethics) that are used to address contemporary issues in Lao society. Finally, the fourth section will discuss to what extent the institutional, socio-political context in contemporary Laos limits or enhances the clergy's ability to further promote a socially-engaged Buddhism and work in a field in which it so far has little experience.

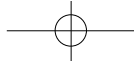
## THE CHANGING ROLES OF THE LAO SANGHA

Classical anthropological studies on Lao Buddhism rarely fail to point out the central role the Buddhist temple plays in the life of a village community. Condominas, in a study on rural Lao Buddhism in the 1950s and 1960s, alludes to the multiple functions performed by the local pagoda (*vat*):

*“Une communauté villageoise lao ne prend réellement vie comme telle que lorsqu'elle possède son propre vat, son monastère, qui porte son nom et dont elle porte le nom. Au centre de l'espace social le vat remplit des fonctions multiples, à la fois école, mairie, salles des fêtes, lieu de soin pour les malades, d'accueil pour les âmes souffrantes, abri du voyageur, terrain des cours d'amour. [...] C'est encore autour du vat que s'organisent les grandes fêtes qui ponctuent l'année de la collectivité rurale, celles du calendrier bouddhique, mais aussi d'autres qui puisent dans d'anciennes traditions locales.”*  
(Condominas 1998: 37-38)

The important role monks play in village affairs, their reputation and influence on the laypeople, and the *Sangha*'s institutional and personal network have very often been represented as one of the main features of Lao communities. The temple is also the hub of a wide-ranging ritual economy of symbolic and monetary exchanges. On a village level and in a system of mutual help, labour exchange and cooperation (Ireson, 1996a), the temple provides a space where reciprocity is dramatized and finds its expression on a socio-religious level (Evans, 1993: 139). It has been noted by many observers that substantial amounts of money and other resources flow into the temple and are redistributed on different levels (cf. Halpern, 1969: 99; Taillard, 1977: 78). Hence, as main propagators of a 'Buddhist worldview' and teachers of Buddhist ethics and morality, the participation of the Lao *Sangha* in developmental and political campaigns is regarded as vital, as monks are considered effective agents of social change. Both in Laos' past and present, various stakeholders have recognised that the clergy's involvement could be beneficial for the countries' development process, though that has sometimes led to political instrumentalisation and discussions of the adequateness of these practices.

<sup>2</sup> The term is itself perhaps a misnomer. The question whether Buddhism has ever really been 'disengaged from something' is legitimate (Brown, 1997). However, the term has come into use since the 1950s and 1960s to refer to a diverse movement within Buddhism describing the reactions and initiatives of Buddhist monks and laypeople (initially in Vietnam and Thailand) to specific developments in their society brought about by war, modernization and globalisation. Socially-engaged Buddhism was initially quite often linked to 'liberation movements' and "voluntary associations guided by exemplary leaders and a common vision of a new society (or world) based on peace, justice and freedom" (Queen & King, 1996: 10). From a general perspective one could argue that this sort of Buddhism sets its analytical focus on the institutional origins of 'evil and suffering' and shifts its practical focus directly to political, economic, and social institutions emphasizing, for example, social work and direct involvement (Mitchell, 1996). However, the field has now become quite differentiated, especially in neighbouring Thailand, where there is a variety of approaches and projects to be found embedded in a large NGO scene (cf. Walker & Udomittipong, 1999).



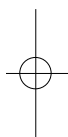
### Early Buddhist activism

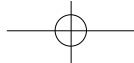
In the late '60s, in Vientiane and the western zones of Laos controlled by the Royal Lao Government (RLG), the Lao *Sangha* first became involved in projects for rural development. This step, however, was not taken without ambiguity. Zago (1973: 131) remarks that “after a long period of hesitation the monks finally tried to integrate themselves into the programmes for socio-economic development”, and from 1970 onwards participated in seminars organized by the Commission for Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Cults<sup>3</sup>. Boutsavath and Chapelier (1973: 26) state that the objective of the clergy’s participation in the programme was to “lend moral authority to the cause of development” and “contribute to shaping new ways of existing, new ways of looking at things, and new ways of doing things oriented towards the constitution of a progressive society”. The *Sangha* was supposed to act as a ‘development catalyst’, helping to inject new developments with religious signification (based on concepts such as meritorious and skilful action reducing suffering) and thereby integrate them into the villagers’ worldview. From an organizational perspective, the Buddhist *Sangha* was also an ideal agent because at that time it was virtually “the only permanent vertical functional organization which reaches into the Lao rural population” (Boutsavath & Chapelier, 1973: 15), and was therefore seen as an entry point to the largely isolated communities of Lao society.

At the same time, from the late 1950s, the monks in the liberated zones controlled by the Pathet Lao (PL) were subject to a similar analysis. Phoumi Vongvichit, one of the leading figures of the Lao revolution and later Minister of Religion and Cultural Affairs, declared that Buddhism represents the ‘village base’ and is an organized system parallel to the institutions of the state, and remarked that the monks have a “profound influence on the morality and philosophy of the peasants” (1964: 24-25). The close connection between parts of the *Sangha* and the party’s mass organization, the Lao Front for National Reconstruction (LFNR), was also established in these years. Monks that joined the PL in the heavily-bombed liberated zones of Xieng Khouang told me that their integration into political training and hard physical work were seen as normal under these rather harsh and sometimes threatening conditions. Throughout the liberated zones, monks had a very active role in disseminating the Pathet Lao’s ideas (LBFO/Vichit, 1998: 13-16). Preaching a mix of politics and Buddhism in local meetings and radio transmissions to raise the ‘revolutionary morale’ were their most frequent tasks. They also worked in the education (literacy campaigns etc.) and health sectors. The roles monks were about to fulfil some years later after the revolution, de-emphasizing their special position and focussing on their productive role in society, were already taking shape in the liberated zone.

Despite the differences in the two zones, the parallels are interesting: monks were seen as having an essential position for propagating new developments and worldviews, thereby ensuring that the ideas put forward by the centre could be disseminated in the periphery and would be more easily accepted by laypeople. The *Sangha* was perceived as a potential agent of change, spearheading ideological and technological transformations and introducing new developments by setting an example for laypeople. Perhaps because of the significance attributed to the *Sangha*, this process went hand in hand with a system of tight control of the Buddhist clergy by the governments in both RLG and PL controlled zones (Zago, 1973). The *Sangha*

<sup>3</sup> Of particular interest here is that the Lao *Sangha*’s motivation to participate in these programmes was already driven by a fear of loss of influence and secularisation: “The threat of the Buddhist clergy losing its predominant position [...] would encourage the monks to join the programme of rural development”. (Boutsavath & Chapelier, 1973: 24). This presents an interesting parallel to the current situation (*cf.* chapter 2.3).





became more and more polarised and the worldlier activism also clearly had some political significance. Chapelier (1975) for example reports that monks trained for rural development projects were afraid of being accused by the PL of actively working for the ‘imperialists’ and Thepbuali (1975: 46) mentions that these projects were originally set up by the ‘American infiltrators’ in order to spread anti-communist propaganda in the clergy and among the population.

### Towards a ‘productive’ Buddhism: changes after the Revolution

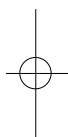
After 1975 the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO) was to become the only representation of the *Sangha* in Laos, unifying the Dhammayut and Mahanikay sects<sup>4</sup>. As in other areas of society, the *Sangha* was subject to a brain drain and most projects started under the old regime were abandoned. Parts of the *Sangha* fled to Thailand, monks disrobed, laypeople’s associations were dissolved<sup>5</sup>, and higher positions in the clerical hierarchy were taken over by monks who were already established in the LBFO of the liberated zones. From now on, monks were assigned an explicitly active role in society, as outlined by Kaysone Phomvihane in the first official party congress after the liberation:

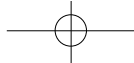
“To venerable monks, novices and other clergymen who should, in order to contribute actively to reviving the spirit of patriotic union, encourage the population to increase production and economize, help in educating people so as to raise their cultural standard, contribute to persuading, educating and correcting those who do not live virtuously or misbehave, so that they become good citizens.” (Lafont, 1982: 152)

The emphasis on national unity, rational economic behaviour, correction of the deviant and a new patriotic morality occurs in most speeches and documents related to Buddhism in this period. The traditional role of the monks as educators was meant to be put to the service of the revolution. Buddhism was assigned a decisive role in the production of hegemony and paradoxically, it was at the same time an active agent of this process while also being itself reshaped by it. The new ethics needed to build up a functioning economy and a new society were partially to be derived from a transformed Buddhism; one of the few readily available cultural resources in a period that was marked by an intense brain drain and loss of capital. Consequently, religion was perceived as a resource pool for producing economically productive and docile citizens imbued with a new moral – the new socialist man. The Venerable Thepbuali, at that time the leading ideologist of the Lao *Sangha*, made clear that monks could not pretend to practice *upekkha* (equanimity) and keep out of worldly affairs, but from now on were in society and should have a beneficial and productive role (cf. Gunn, 1982: 93). The dependency of the *Sangha* on laypeople was supposed to be stopped and transformed into a productive and beneficial relationship for the nation<sup>6</sup>. Monks got engaged in farming, gardening, literacy and hygiene campaigns and were thereby integrated into the mass mobilization. The standards with which religion was now measured were predominantly economic; not really surprising in a Marxist context.

<sup>4</sup> For the general relationship between revolution and the *Sangha*, its restructuring and accommodations to the new political context in Laos, see Stuart-Fox (1996), Gunn (1982) and Lafont (1982). The major Lao source representing the programme of blending Marxism and Buddhism in the early revolution is outlined by Thepbuali (1975; 1977). A less favourable picture of this process is presented by Zago (1978) and Noele & Sicard (1981).

<sup>5</sup> Laypeople’s associations, Buddhist Sunday schools and instruction in meditation, all of which were quite popular before the revolution in the capital and had a large following, were abolished or ‘merged’ with the LBFO. Moreover, the school subject ‘Buddhism-Lao culture’ (compulsory in all schools before the revolution) was replaced by other subjects. The curricula of Buddhist schools were reformed and became more secularized and politicized, as the subjects learnt now had to be ‘beneficial for the nation’ and of a more direct practical nature.





This attempt to transform Buddhism in order to accomplish the great leap from feudalism to communist society is an excellent example of what Michel Foucault (1979: 20) has described as an essential feature of modernizing regimes and labelled ‘governmentality’. In Foucault’s words, these strategies are representative of a “form of power, which has as its target the population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security” (1993: 20). The Buddhist clergy was supposed to become a population controller and mass educator, while at the same time being an object of surveillance itself. It was also to be a productivity enhancer that was obliged to become engaged in production itself. James Scott (1998) has described this as a feature of high-modernist regimes, that for the sake of utopian visions of efficiency and technological and bureaucratic control want to increase the ‘legitimacy’ of nature, cities and society in general. As in Adorno’s rather dark vision of modernity, it seems that his suggestion that in modernizing regimes like even “[...] those professionally concerned with things of the mind are themselves more and more turned into technicians” (1994: 34) to a certain extent also be applied to the Lao case and the *Sangha* for this period.

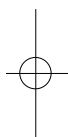
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As an outcome of this, many tasks traditionally carried out by monks, such as the performance of rituals, praying and meditation were now regarded as secondary. This went hand in hand with a stronger emphasis on rationality and ethics, but also a rejection of parts of the traditional Buddhist cosmology and values<sup>7</sup> (the latter only being perpetuated when considered to be ‘good traditions’); Laos developed its own form of what has been labelled “protestant Buddhism” (Gombrich, 1988: 196f.). This rapid and forced transformation was on the surface one which emphasized this-worldly social commitment and could be interpreted as pushing towards a more socially-engaged Buddhism. However, it was rarely combined with a deeper reflection on traditional teachings. Sometimes they were merged in a somewhat unsophisticated manner<sup>8</sup> and it seems that there was no real growing discourse in the *Sangha* about these changes, but rather just an unprepared massive thrust into this new field. The years after 1975 were not really the best time for experiments into new ways of combining Buddhism and social activism. The government of the Lao PDR, now

<sup>6</sup> In Theravada-Buddhism the Buddhist clergy is dependent on gifts from the laity and giving is the major means of merit making for laypeople. For a short period after the revolution, the government tried to control the ritual economy, discouraged giving and instead tried to redirect the flow of gifts. The socialist state in this sense acted as a totalizing maelstrom: a planned economy tried to suck up all exchanges, be they more commoditized or ritualized ones. It is remarkable that the idiom of sacrifice and generosity is very much part of the early revolutionary vocabulary. In official propaganda and state-concerted art this is a reoccurring topic. In Outhine Bounyavong’s (1999) collection of Lao short stories the subject of giving and sacrificing – for the sake of the revolution and the liberation of course – are dominant topics.

<sup>7</sup> These tendencies, however, were already apparent in the Royal Lao Government Zone much earlier. Souvannavong (1961) pleaded for a form of Buddhism rooted in ‘materialism’ and rejected most of the traditional folk beliefs. Concerning the party’s constant emphasis on Buddhist ethics, it is interesting to remark that despite the completely different historical and social context, the remarkable reduction of religion to ethics also occurred in Europe and can perhaps be seen as a common attribute of modernizing regimes. De Certeau (1988: 148) remarks for the European context: “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a rift between religion and morals was produced – and then declared – which made their distinction effective and their subsequent connection quite problematic. The rift changed the experience and the conceptions that Western societies had of them. For the system that made belief the frame of reference for practices, a social ethic was substituted, formulating an order of social practices and relativising religious beliefs as an ‘object’ to be out to use.” In post-liberation Laos, there was an effort to transform Buddhism from a ritualistic folk-religion into a ‘modern’ system of ideas and values primarily defined in ethical terms that served the modernization process. Although I would not suggest a deep rift between religion and morals, the main focus on Buddhist ethics and morality represents at least a tendency pointing in this direction.

<sup>8</sup> Educational tasks were still located in the traditional field of Buddhist activism, but work on farms could; for example, present some obstacles. Some monks still had bad memories of this mobilisation period when I interviewed them. One monk told me that he refused to participate in cattle-raising programmes as these only raised animals for slaughter and meat production. Monks protested against these practices and referred to the precepts and the 227 rules for monks, which prohibit these activities.





explicitly a multi-ethnic but nationwide monolithic state, centralised all development policies, leaving little room for development approaches that were really suitable for the clergy and would have entailed more sophisticated discussions of the topic.

### Gradual institutional secularization and the Sangha as cultural preserver

Most of the stricter limitations could not be implanted in the long term and the grip on Buddhism became significantly less tight after the early 1980s. Although there have been subsequent attempts to integrate monks into the modernization process, it can be claimed that these efforts could not countervail the partial institutional decline of Buddhism. Seen from a historical perspective in the *longue durée*, and taking into account the intensified transformations since the opening of the country in the early 1990s, it can be recognised that some of the central roles once occupied by the temple have been taken over by other institutions in the course of the successive expansion of the modern nation-state: schooling, healthcare and administration, but also the composition and transmission of art (literature, fine arts etc.), are today not exclusively limited to the religious sphere as they often were in the past. Although many novices from rural backgrounds still learn at temples and use them to become upwardly mobile, the school state system has largely taken over. The same can be said with regard to healthcare: the medical knowledge of monks still survives as folklore, but hospitals and healthcare centres are obviously much more appreciated. Koret (1996: 112) mentions that in the past Buddhist monks and their exegesis of texts also formed a basis for taking decisions in legal cases. Oral and village law may still be informed by this but a state law system is now implemented. The temple as the main meeting place for villagers has sometimes been replaced by other buildings (for example the village administration office) and Ireson (1996: 42), witnessing a villagers-officials meeting at the beginning of the 1990's, concludes that there was an intentional separation between the religious and the more secular and political sphere.

Although in some areas the *Sangha* continues to play an active and socially-engaged role (cf. Vichit, 2003: 38-39), the effects of this institutional secularization are clearly visible and were especially been mentioned by older Lao monks I interviewed. Institutional secularization refers to the transfer of activities from religious to secular institutions (Sommerville, 1998). It can also be connected to a loss of authority in some areas (Chaves, 1994), but does not imply a total and encompassing loss of significance. Buddhism and its institutions in Laos are now mainly perpetuate culture and transmit moral values, while other areas of involvement have largely been transferred to the state and its institutions. Whereas in countries like Thailand this process of religious change was simultaneously accompanied by an emerging culture of socially-engaged Buddhism, the Lao Buddhist clergy did not really have many options to develop new approaches except those set out by the government. Outside of this tight framework, it was more or less doomed to remain and fulfil the prescribed functions. Serious limitations, including poor infrastructure, low educational standards, little international cooperation, government suspicion of new projects, the generally strict grip on religious affairs and the recent tendency to confine religious discourse exclusively to the field of pure belief, contributed. What more, radical activists may term as Lao Buddhism's 'disengaged' from society it is perhaps the result of this institutional secularization and the missing possibilities to compensate for those developments through new engagements.

Most monks are aware of the fact that Buddhism's role in society has undergone some deep changes. In the face of these developments, the threat of Buddhism



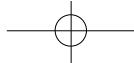
becoming only a ritualistic machine fulfilling the desires of the charitable merit-maker<sup>9</sup> (or even worse, secularisation) is internally, and sometimes even publicly, admitted. According a high-ranking monk of the LBFO, “Lao society is abandoning Buddhism” and for the younger generation, the temple has become an empty place where just rituals are performed, but not more than that” (Vilaychakre, 2002). The author of a lay-handbook on The Lord Buddha’s *Dhamma* and Livelihood-Earning, insists that studying of *dhamma* is beneficial for everyone, but complains that today “most Lao people see the temple as a place for old men and women who have no work to do and a lot of free time” (2004: V). A Lao development expert cooperating with the *Sangha* in a project told me in an interview: “The Buddhist monks in Laos have lost their leading position in society. There is a gap of thirty years or more, which we now have to compensate for so that Buddhism can again contribute positively to society”. At the same time the Lao *Sangha* itself has become an object of criticism. I heard many complaints that monks are unable to explain the fundamental teachings of Buddhism and many people suggest that there is a steady decline in belief. Even from inside the *Sangha* the same critique can be heard. Both points were explicitly mentioned and elaborated in a speech at the 1998 congress of the LBFO (IV Congress, 1998: 58). These statements from laypeople and members of the LBFO regarding the condition of Buddhism might on some level be discursive discontent talk, and indeed the constant concern about the purity of the *Sangha*, the correct practice according to the *vinaya* rules and the correct interpretation of *dhamma* are inherent parts of Theravada philosophy. Curious, however, is the contrast between these critical statements. Buddhism’s now crucial place in the politics of identity, its important share in the efforts to define the essence of Lao culture in a country more and more exposed to the forces of globalization are obvious, but these critical statements also somewhat relativize the observations of Grant Evans (1998: 67f.) and others, who have spoken of a Re-Buddhisiation of Lao society<sup>10</sup>.

Consequently, in 1998 the Fourth Congress of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization re-outlined the role of Buddhism in Laos’ future, calling for emphasis to be placed on the dissemination of Buddhist teachings and morality, the expansion of religious education and the maintenance of discipline (*vinay*) within the *Sangha*. Mass education, health care and environmental issues (what could be called elements of social activism) are classified as secondary now (Morev, 2002: 399). The *Sangha* itself seems to be caught up in a process of establishing its new role in society and has to deal with a

<sup>9</sup> Generosity and the giving of offerings is seen as one of the main strategies in cultivating one’s faith (*satta*) and publicly display this is seen as one of the most important connections between the lay-community and the *Sangha*. Some laypeople and monks, however, mentioned to me that in the currently evolving ‘materialistic culture’ (*vatthanatam thaang vathu*) these acts of charity increasingly tend to emphasize the conspicuous display of wealth and less the (idealized) cultivation of faith through self less generosity.

<sup>10</sup> As for secularization, this process has to be analyzed on various levels and simply speaking of secularization or Re-Buddhisiation is not sufficient. I think there are two processes at work here that are inherently interconnected, depending if one sees religion as pure lay-practice or religion in its institutionalised form. In reference to the first, and in contrast to the period from 1975 to the mid 1980s, one can for sure speak of a Re-Buddhisiation, as more government officials started attending Buddhist festivals. Buddhist symbols such as the That Luang replaced older state iconography, the lay-practice of giving started flourishing again and more money for the restoration of temples became available. However, after having a detailed look at the inner structure of the *Sangha*, its perceived role and assumed expansion of its responsibilities in society, it becomes clear that the apparent visible revitalisation does not really match a development within the Buddhist clergy. In my opinion there is mostly, despite all the *Sangha*’s attempts, stagnation and an effort to secure the current *status quo*; but no real noticeable expansion of activities. Compared to the almost thriving scene before the revolution with an *abhidhamma* school in Vat Sok Pa Luang, a relatively lively publication output (partially financed by US AID money), regular Buddhist Sunday schools and instruction in lay-meditation, the activities today are often of a quite modest quality, especially considering the recent pace of development in Vientiane, which seemingly passing by most Buddhist institutions. It remains to be seen whether further (political) changes will enhance the *Sangha*’s capacity to catch up with these developments.





number of challenges including the improvement of schooling for novices and monks, the reintroduction of previously disapproved meditation-practices (*vipassana*), the maintenance of the religious knowledge and the seemingly never-ending fight against spirit-worship in order to ‘purify’ Buddhism. The Buddhist clergy is facing the dilemma of carrying a double burden: on one side it has to focus on the maintenance of its own resources and reintroduction of traditional Buddhist teachings, and additionally, the Lao government has assigned it a role as a curator of Lao culture.

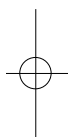
At the same time, however, laypeople expect monks to give them orientation and ethical guidelines concerning problems in contemporary Lao society, which to some degree cannot be so easily integrated into the traditional teachings and forms of action. While traditional teachings and commentary upon current social problems do not exclude each other, a process of adapting and experimenting, in which the Lao clergy has little experience, is required. A small minority within the *Sangha* now deems it necessary to recognise what Buddhism has, besides being relevant for ‘pure religious’ reasons, to offer for contemporary Lao society. Some of the projects discussed below are to be perceived as a conscious effort to expand Buddhism’s role in society and find new ways of applying Buddhist teachings in a more appropriate way in order to counter secularization tendencies and iniquitous developments, and to ideally contribute to the construction of a righteous society.

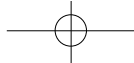
### EXPLORING NEW WAYS OF ENGAGEMENT: THREE PROJECT EXAMPLES

Despite the effects of institutional secularization and the recent trend of seeing Buddhism simply as a preserver of Lao culture, some members of the Lao clergy are investigating the potentials of Buddhist involvement and are applying Buddhist teachings to current Lao society in order to develop ways of social activism. Some monks have taken an active stance and, in the light of the limited resources they have, they typically make use of Buddhist ethics and moral teachings and merge these with new discourses. The goal is, as one monk put it in a conversation, to show that “Buddhism is not only about giving blessings and delivering sermons, but about real life in the here and now”. In this chapter, I shall first outline some of the potentials the Buddhist clergy has by referring to the concept of social capital. I shall then show how these are implemented in different ways in the projects I have researched.

#### The Sangha’ s social capital

Monks are ascribed a special position in society, which bestows them with authority. They are highly respected members of their communities, clearly distinguished by life-style and everyday behaviour. They have the reputation of having acquired a knowledge that is often beyond that of the normal villager. People often consult monks in moments of crisis and family problems. Morality and Buddhist ethics are taught in the temple on Buddhist holy days (*van sin*) and the village community regularly meets in the temple for Buddhist festivals of the yearly ritual cycle (*hid sip soong*). Buddhism has a very strong notion of social ethics, both for the order of monks and laypeople (Rajavaramuni, 1990: 29ff.). Preaching *dhamma* is seen as an obligatory and meritorious act for monks. Laypeople listening to it also gain merit, while speeches, books and other discourses that are related to *dhamma* are conceptualised as a gift of truth. In regard to practice monks should be an example for laypeople. The monks’ ideal life-style, regulated by the *vinay* (rules of discipline), is an exemplary one based on right moral conduct, purity, and compassion towards all beings. While the *vinay* is of a more fixed nature, the teachings for laypeople are largely left open for temporal regulation to suit the specific time and place. Concerning laypeople, the reception of the





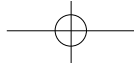
five precepts is a crucial part of many rituals and is practised regularly on Buddhist holy days. Guidelines for householder-morale are still important orientation points, at least in the lives of practising Buddhists. Other applicable Buddhist teachings of ethics are the noble eightfold path (*makamiong phaed*), the ten perfections (*sip paramii*), the four sublime states of mind (*promavihaan*), and the avoiding of defilements (*giled*). All these teachings bear a relation to the amount of merit and status of karma earned by an individual, and can be seen as giving laypeople a range of options for cultivating virtue. In this sense they have a similar function to Michel Foucault's idea of the "technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conducts, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection [...]" (1997: 225). It is crucial to point out that Theravada Buddhism does not exist secluded from society in monasteries as a set of disconnected practises; its values and ideas are present in society, whatever form that may take in the course of time<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, from a general perspective, the Buddhist *Sangha* – with its wide-reaching network in the villages, its close connection with the lay-community and its strong voice in the communities – has much that development specialists and anthropologists have labelled 'social capital'<sup>12</sup>.

Recently the LBFO has set up a new administrative section which is called 'committee for the spreading of *dhamma* and *vipassana*-meditation'? This primarily makes use of these forms of social capital. The projects carried out are supposed to spread Buddhist teachings and meditation more widely among the population. An important part of its agenda is, for example, sending monks to schools where they teach about *dhamma*, Buddhist ethics and morality. This is now quite common in urban areas and in my own experience, these teachings are very much focused on traditional Buddhist topics (learning to pray, respect for elders and teachers, value of education and Lao culture etc.), although they are sometimes connected with other topics such as the environment, drug prevention and so on. The activities are sometimes centrally organized by the LBFO in cooperation with local schools, but largely take place in the context of local personal networks between monks and teachers.

Articulating current social problems like HIV/AIDS, drug addiction and environmental degradation in the above-mentioned frame of Buddhist ethics presents an effective means of commenting on them because it is possible to use a discourse-framework and a vocabulary that is sufficiently familiar to laypeople and monks. At the same time it leaves room for integrating new developments in society. The following three projects have a focus on contemporary social problems (or as some Lao monks

<sup>11</sup> Whether these guidelines are actually 'obeyed' is another question, which could be asked for every system of ethics. To what extent the subtle elaborations of doctrinal Buddhism really inform practices and vice-versa is highly context-dependent. For Howell (1997: 4), the connection between "values derived from a larger metaphysical whole and actual behaviour and practices" is one of the main problems when talking about ethics in an anthropological framework. Despite their profound influence on Lao Buddhists, it would be a mistake to conceptualise these teachings as the only guidelines for the lives of believers. Buddhist ethics are less deontological (i.e. rooting morality on a specific, foundational principal of obligations) and more situationalist and virtue-oriented (Keown, 1993: 193-227; 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Putnam (2000), following a more functionalist and integrative approach, defines social capital as a multi-dimensional concept composed of a set of trust, social norms, networks and organizations that influence relations among people and are an asset for the individual and collective production of well-being. In this view, conflicts, which are an inherent part of networks, are neglected and the emphasis is on stable relationships that can also be found in religious communities (cf. Greely, 2001). In contrast, Bourdieu (1991a: 241-255) defines social capital as the "aggregate of the actual potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition", but, by focussing on individual actors and their strategies, also sees forms of competition and the reproduction of domination at work here. For diverse interpretations and a comparative critique of the two approaches see Sisiäinen (2000).



would put it ‘sources of suffering’) and, each in a different way, make use of this or another form of social capital and are intended to appeal to basic Buddhist values, stimulate reflection on these problems, and finally, change people’s behaviour and attitudes. Some of the activities are still limited to the Vientiane area, while others are intended for implementation across the country. The way they are organized and implemented, and their scope, is very different, but they all involve Lao Buddhist monks (and sometimes nuns and laypeople) as the main agents and are geared towards the needs of a lay population that is confronted with these problems.

### The Metta–Thamma HIV/AIDS project

Although the official figures for HIV/AIDS prevalence are low in Laos (in April 2003 a c. counted survey. a 1,000 people with HIV and 600 with AIDS), with growing cross-border trade and more migrant workers the chances of a future-epidemic are growing. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of knowledge among the Lao population: in 2001 about one-third of Lao women had never heard of HIV/AIDS. The ‘Buddhist Leadership Initiative’ is an alliance of nuns and monks who have established a network in various Southeast Asian countries in order to take a leading role in HIVcare and prevention at the community level. The programme is sponsored by UNICEF and carried out on a low-cost basis with activities including from HIV-prevention seminars and talks, spiritual counselling for infected people, and provision of daily necessities those with of the disease who are no longer able to earn their own living (UNICEF, 2003a). The infrastructure used is the one already established by the *Sangha* – a network of nuns, monks, temples and committees all over the country. The implementation strategy of the programme is supposed to be adapted to the needs and cultural context of each country, but is explicitly an international network in which experiences should be shared.

The Lao *Sangha* joined the programme in September 2001 and held, together with representatives of the Religious Affairs Department of the Lao National Front for Reconstruction and leading monks of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization, an orientation training workshop for 80 monks and nuns at a forest-retreat during Buddhist Lent, followed by introductory training for pupils from the Buddhist College at Vat Ong Tu. The project now has a permanent office in Vientiane and a few monks are professionally participating on a long-term basis. The concepts and actions for the programme are rooted in Buddhist *dhamma*. Buddhist teachings like the five precepts, and values like moderation, self-discipline and compassion are evoked when conveying the messages to laypeople. The concrete objectives of the programme include:

- reducing the level of discrimination experienced by people living with HIV. When HIV-infected people are isolated in their communities, monks should fight discrimination by referring and adapting key Buddhist teachings such as compassion (*metta*), kindness (*galunaa*) and equanimity (*upekka*) and use these to undermine discriminatory behaviour from lay-people towards infected people. They should also point out that discriminatory and excluding behaviour creates considerable negative karma (*baab*), while showing compassion and helping are wholesome and meritorious actions (*boun*).

- Encouraging monks to get into direct contact with HIV-infected people. In order to show leadership in non-discrimination, monks should make regular visits to families of HIV-infected people. Monks can also offer counselling services, pre-death counselling, meditation instruction, protection threads or blessing rituals for the well-being of infected people. It should also be ensured that people who die from HIV get a full Buddhist funeral.

- Community HIV-prevention education delivered by the local *Sangha*. Monks incorporate HIV education messages in temple teachings and sermons. They are also



supposed to visit local schools, giving simple explanations on social issues including HIV and drug abuse, and should reiterating relevant basic Buddhist teachings such as the precepts as often as possible.

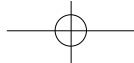
– Making the temple, where possible, a place where HIV-infected people can meet and have a chance to discuss their daily life, their problems and their feelings with other infected people and the monks. When people are too weak to earn their own livelihood and have no family to care for them, monks could offer surplus food collected during the daily alms round. Some temples have also started to take in HIV-orphans, although the extended family is a better place to care for them. The temple should only present a last opportunity if there is nothing else available (cf. UNICEF, 2003: 11-24).

The project is just in its initial phase in Laos and the monks are primarily focussing on prevention and fighting discrimination. It is currently active only in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champassak, Luang Prabang and Bokeo provinces. In the other provinces monks still lack training and experience, as one of the involved monks told me. From a general perspective it must be said that a project on this scale is challenging for both Lao monks and laypeople, as it is supposed to combine modified traditional teachings with concrete actions and implementation. Despite the enthusiasm shown primarily by younger monks, there is often simply a lack of experience in these matters. I had the impression that most people attending the training sessions and the laypeople in the affected villages showed very positive reactions; but a minority of laypeople and some of the more conservative senior monks aired criticism and were pessimistic about the clergy's involvement. In their view, it was deviating from traditional tasks. There was especially a fear that the topic of sexuality could be problematic in relationship to the code of discipline of monks<sup>13</sup>. Other senior figures in the Lao *Sangha* acknowledged that they have a lack of experience in reacting to the regional HIV/AIDS crisis and felt that they were not aware of all the options this work could involve and were lacking the organizational skills to carry out some of the proposed actions. In response to this, UNICEF evaluated the achievements after the first year and then made suggestions on how the efficacy of the programme could be enhanced (UNICEF, 2003)<sup>14</sup>.

### Drug prevention and Buddhist sermons

Drug abuse among teenagers has been growing predominantly, but not exclusively, in urban areas of Laos. Besides legal drugs such as alcohol, Vientiane teenagers currently favour meta-amphetamines (*yaa baa*). Available cheaply, easy to smuggle and with a long lasting kick, these pills are the new drug of choice for youngsters. A peak was reached in 2003, when drug-screening tests in schools were carried out in Vientiane because many senior officials felt that the situation was getting out of control. In connection with a nationwide campaign against drug abuse, the Lao *Sangha* has also become active in prevention campaigns. These activities include going into schools and talking about *dhamma* and good lifestyle, the harmful effects of drugs for mind and body, and explaining what these drugs are and what dangers they present. Visiting one school with the monks, I was surprised by vivid and interactive teaching methods – very different from the traditional hierarchical approach. Usually reference was made to the fifth precept ('to refrain from toxicants causing carelessness') and the problems and reasons for taking drugs were discussed. Some monks from the Buddhism for Development Project (see below for more information on this group) also regularly visit

<sup>13</sup> The monks do not directly address this topic, but work together with laypeople (mainly urban youth associated with the LFNR) that beforehand talk about the more explicit matters involved. Monks 'talk around' sexuality in a Buddhist way. They focus more on the preventive component and evoke Buddhist values that are supposed to give rise to reflection on HIV-related issues.



the drug rehabilitation centre in Vientiane where mostly teenagers and younger adults are 'de-toxified' and 're-educated'. There they offer general advice, counselling services, teach about good stylelife and reasons and solutions concerning drug addiction. Recently they have also started collecting books and have become involved in teaching reading and writing to many of the still illiterate drug addicts. I have also witnessed a few sermons on festival days where drugs were mentioned and warned against in passing.

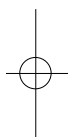
I am going to present here a sermon that was given in a temple in central Vientiane in October 2004. The preaching was not exclusively about drugs, but also about other developments in current Lao society. The festival was not part of the annual ritual cycle, but a sort of special performance of a new style of preaching, as the attending people told me. In aesthetics, it was similar to the performance of the *Vessantara-Jataka*. Approximately 300 laypeople attended the festival, with the audience changing throughout the day and a significant proportion of younger people. The latter fact being in this case more the exception than the general rule. The day began with an alms-giving ceremony and various prayers. After the meal, taken at noon, the stage was prepared for the recitation. Three preaching chairs were installed and the abbot, an energetic and outspoken man of about 40 with a degree from a Thai university, gave an introduction to the story and the event. He explained the meritorious nature of sermons, referring to some technical Pali terms, which he explained very well in a way clearly understandable by all. He then spoke about the nature of Buddhist ethics and their significance in contemporary society and set this in relation to a story.

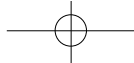
The recitation of this story took two and a half hours with three monks performing (representing the mother and the two children) by taking turns in chanting, with short narrative interludes to explain the setting of the story. All this was presented in poetic, but, easily understandable language even for little-educated laypeople. The narrative was primarily about family problems, drug abuse and ways of out this dilemma. Here is a rough outline of the story: a family in the Lao countryside splits up because some of the children go to seek work in the city. One of the children cannot deal with the new situation and becomes a drug addict. Despite the rift in the family (caused by excessive demand for money by the son to buy more drugs), the family keeps contact with the lost child and helps in moments of crisis. After a whole range of dramatic ups and downs finally the drug-addicted son is cured and the family is united. The morale presented in the final part largely dwelled on the meaning of solidarity (*khwamsamakhi*) and its persisting value in modern urban society.

The story is not only about drug-addiction, but is also situated in the whole context of modernization and some of the social changes that brings: rural exodus, alienation, the break up of families, generation conflicts and the need to keep together despite all

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<sup>14</sup> This evaluation document also contains some outspoken criticism. Some of the points are exemplary for the work of a *Sangha* that has little experience with social activism and direct engagement: "Monks have primarily focused on preaching and until now have not really established contact with infected people; Counselling was more an exception, and when it happened it was performed in a typical one-way manner with the laity listening or pretending to listen and understand; Some infected people stated that the counselling very often only referred 'to suffering and death' and was 'too morbid to be of any real help'" (UNICEF, 2003: 6). While younger monks were really enthusiastic, older monks and abbots sometimes showed little or no interest in the new activities. In many cases, not only in Laos, it was observed there was no real understanding of how and why monks should get involved in social work (ibid.: 24). Reaching the target audience was also a problem. The largest proportion of laypeople attending temple festivals is over 50 years of age. Currently, the *Sangha* seems to have little appeal to younger people and there are only a few activities for integrating them. Now, monks in Vientiane pay regular visits to schools and try to reach the target audience this way. The LBFO is also becoming active in this area: the 'Ordination Project' organizes temporary ordinations (one week) for boys and girls in the Vientiane area combined with training in Buddhist values and ethics, including HIV and drug prevention (Vat Ong Tu & Vat Nong Boon Project, 2001).





this. The reaction of the audience towards the sermon-performance, with its hyperbolic drama and artistic presentation, was remarkable. People listened closely<sup>15</sup> and in the middle of the presentation some women were in tears and ran out of the hall. During the performance I talked to a few people taking a rest outside the temple hall, and asked them how they liked the story. Most of them agreed that the inclusion of features of life in current Lao society into the plot was a good idea, but were at the same time fond of the artistic qualities of the performers, which they labelled as traditional.

Concerning the efficacy of the recitation, one has to stress that in Lao society a lot of teaching and knowledge transfer occurs through the medium of story telling. In this case, the moral message the story contained was well understood, which is not always the case in sermons delivered by monks. The functions that narrative performances like these can have tend to be underestimated by outside observers: in Lao and Buddhist notions of language, the meritorious act of listening and preaching should be conceptualised as a highly educative ethical activity. Language and discourses involving monks are loaded with authority and are representative of their symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991). Recent works in literary studies (Gibson, 1999; Nussbaum, 1990) and Buddhist studies (Hallisey & Hansen, 1996) emphasize the moral aspects of narratives and the ethical encounter between reader and text, rooting ethics and morality in narrative practice instead of in abstract moral systems. The recitation of a narrative is not only a mimetic practice, and its reception by the audience is not simply passive: through its hyperbolic and emotionally loaded aesthetics, ritual and narrative also create a field of discourse that articulates and dramatizes conflicts. In this sense, narrative can facilitate an imaginative confrontation with other life-worlds and have a cathartic effect. This confrontation disturbs the readers'/listeners' self-assertiveness. Narrative also has a "consoling function", as Eco (1994: 87) puts it. Problems of current society and ethical guidelines to handle these are in many senses very much about articulating them to show ways out of dilemmas. In that sense, sermons of this kind can have prototype-capacities and are, besides being good entertainment and occasions for making merit, places to spread messages and get engaged in prevention work by stimulating discourse and creating spaces of reflection.

### Buddhism and ecology: The Buddhism for development group

There is also now a small group of Buddhist monks and laypeople that aimsto give socially-engaged Buddhism in Laos an organizational and institutional structure. The government (in the form of the LBFO and the LFNR) has approved the establishment of the 'Buddhism for Development Project' (BFD) and its activities. Most of the laypeople engaged in this group are volunteers, which has to some extent reduced its capacity to build up a coherent network because people drop out regularly. However, while discussing this point, one of the monks supervising the project told me, "It is important for us to be independent and carry out the activities on a sustainable basis. The activities and engagement of the people should be driven by faith, not the need for money and career ambitions".

<sup>15</sup> Some observers have remarked that the attention laypeople pay over and above the merit accrued through the act of listening is debatable and depends on the performance context. For a recent example see Koret (1996: 113; 121-122). Often the sacredness (*saksit*) of the words is not only linked to an active understanding of a text. For Western observers it is rather irritating that in this conception of language the semantics are actually rooted in phonetics, i.e. the meaning and the efficaciousness of the sermon is more in its sounds, not always in its literal 'understanding'.



For a few years now this group has mainly been engaged in ecological preservation work, but also in a wide range of other aspects of socially-engaged Buddhism, sometimes in cooperation with the Lao organization PADETC. Some projects include the establishment of tree nurseries, but BFD has also been busy producing a booklet in cooperation with the Wildlife Conservation Society on the disappearance of wildlife and the treatment of animals in Laos (WCS, 2004). In cooperation with a British secular organization, the group recently compiled an 'Environmental Handbook for Monks Teaching in Primary Schools' (funded by the World Bank's small grants programme) which is supposed to combine traditional Buddhist teachings with environmental awareness raising by using positive Buddhist values that deal with nature and its relation to mankind. Also in cooperation with an international NGO, there is a plan for turning some forest temples into ecologically protected areas. Representatives also regularly visit schools to promote environmental education, like for example on international tree planting day. As in the biological farming programme ('Buddhist agriculture'), the focus of BFD is on very practical activities and in close contact with the grassroots level. Currently this project focusses primarily on the spreading of information on the risks of using chemical fertilizers and pesticides. As many people are not yet aware of the side-effects of these products and do not know how to use them appropriately, monks – with the help of laypeople – invite farmers from nearby villages and hold workshops in village temples to talk about Buddhist concepts of good lifestyle in relation to agriculture. Local youth are also often involved and there are now also some focal schools that the monks regularly visit in order to teach about Buddhist ethics and environmental issues.

The members are concerned that the rapid development of the Lao economy presents a threat to the ecological balance of the country's environment and are developing a specific Buddhist response to some of the problems encountered. The way the group uses Buddhist teachings and ethics has up to now focused largely on practice and dissemination and less on finding appropriate sources regarding Buddhist concepts of 'nature' or sustainability to back up their actions. The way Buddhist values are employed is less precise and refined, but the need to change attitudes and disseminate information and techniques for the better is the primary driving force for action. Most of these activities are part of a larger three-year training programme of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization involving a core group of more than 60 monks from all provinces in Laos. Besides learning traditional tasks such as meditation and dhamma-studies, the objective is to train the monks and involved laypeople to become 'community development leaders'. Its goal is to "incorporate Buddhist wisdom with social work especially at the grassroots level" (BFD, 2004). The preparation workshop I visited gave trainer of trainers teaching for monks and younger adults, employing quite up-to-date methods like small group work-units, role plays, and collective analysis of problems and strategies for further action. For one of the several-months-long training modules the following objectives are listed:

- Understand complex contemporary social issues locally, regionally and globally;
- Give a sustainable perspective on community development;
- Ensure cultural integrity of communities;
- Learn how to apply Buddhist values in sustainable development;
- Develop necessary skills in community organization for empowerment;
- Train local resource people for community action with a Buddhist approach.

The concrete training modules include topics such as 'Globalisation, Mass Media and Consumerism', 'Buddhist Social Analysis' and 'Gender Awareness' (BFD, 2004). It will take another few years before the efficiency of the training and the



implementation of the strategies and lessons learnt there can be evaluated. The group intends first to build up human resources and aims to train the analytical capacities of monks and laypeople, which can then be applied to a variety of cases. Because of the focus on long-term planning, the more analytical approach to countering social problems and seeing them in a larger context (e.g. globalisation, the market economy), and government recognition, the programme could have a lasting impact. The critical question, however, with such an overtly liberal grounding of the training largely modelled on Thai examples, is to what extent these very new ideas will be received in the Lao context and whether they can really be linked to *dhamma* as it is understood by a laity that until now had little or no exposure to these ideas. The danger I see here is in importing Thai (and Western) concepts of socially-engaged Buddhism and just implementing them in a Lao context without adjusting them to specific needs<sup>16</sup>.

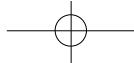
The three examples presented here are very heterogeneous in nature and each project draws on different resources and organizational structures. The Metta-Thamma HIV/AIDS project is a result of international cooperation with UNICEF and has the objective of establishing a *Sangha* network in different Southeast Asian countries. Training and the sharing of experience are carried out on a national and international level. The project is focused on one specific problem of current society, and employs Buddhist social ethics in a quite elaborate manner. It builds on traditional Buddhist teachings but also reinterprets these and applies them to a new framework. It has the advantage (in the short term) of receiving funding and human-resource training from international donors. The second example, drug prevention and sermon-making, represents an *ad hoc* and rather spontaneous project which is entirely the work of some engaged monks and has no substantial assistance from other organizations or donors. This form of disseminating information is very traditional (preaching and temple-festivals), although there is a real effort to make the stories more accessible for the lay-audience by having an introductory speech and less specialist Pali vocabulary. Its effectiveness is grounded in Lao concepts of the authority of language, the aesthetics of speech and the moral content of narratives. Finally the third project, which is perhaps closest to what is usually understood as socially-engaged Buddhism, is an example of a more encompassing idea of a Buddhist development approach with an organizational structure at its base. Presently focusing on only a few core projects, the plan is to expand and enable monks and laypeople to analyze the problems of contemporary Lao society in a global context and apply the results at grassroots level.

## THE SANGHA'S INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF INVOLVEMENT

The three above-mentioned projects show that a minority within the Lao *Sangha* is taking an active stance in relation to current social problems. It is making an effort to practise a kind of Buddhism rooted in traditional *dhamma*, but is also attempting to contribute to solving current predicaments in society and thereby expand Buddhism's role. The projects can be seen as experiments in a Lao version of socially-engaged

<sup>16</sup> The connection to Thai Buddhism is crucial in this respect. Because of the close linguistic and cultural affinity and the number of Lao monks going to study in Thailand, middle-aged and younger monks that are interested in these kinds of activities very often receive their training in Bangkok or at least read Thai books on the topic. There are also regular excursions by Lao Buddhist monks to Thailand. The writings of Buddhist activists such as Buddhadasa Bikkhu and Sulak Siwaraksa are currently not very well known among Lao Buddhists, but with an increasing cross-border stream of intellectual and human resources this will probably change very fast. Thai Buddhist activists already now sponsor some of these new activities of the Lao *Sangha*, especially organizations like the 'Spirit in Education Movement' that is linked to Sulak Siwaraksa.





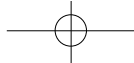
Buddhism in an urban context, but the way these projects will initiate other activities and will further develop is very much dependent on the internal structure and capacities of the *Sangha* and the wider socio-political field it operates in.

The present involvement of monks is primarily based on their general authority and influence in communities and among laypeople. The social capital monks have is an excellent resource for projects related to the dissemination of information and prevention work. The generation and perpetuation of social capital is, however, dependent on the way projects are received, supported or blocked by other organizations and the state. Some theorists, like Putnam (2000), insist that the main source of social capital resides in the realm of civil society, largely disconnected from the state, while others emphasize the role of the state and its institutions and the framework it establishes for this (cf. Rothstein & Stolle, 2002). In the Lao case, it has to be remarked that beyond the ways of using the social capital of monks presented here, there has been no real attempt to establish a regular and more sophisticated programme of involvement and the government has shown little interest in supporting the Buddhist *Sangha* in this field<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, the Lao Buddhist clergy is subject to a range of limitations and obstacles, which I will now briefly discuss.

Within the Lao clergy there is a substantial number of younger monks who are keen to perform duties that include activities which are rooted in Buddhist teachings, but involve an expansion of their traditional role. However, the creation of human resources within the *Sangha* is problematic, as basic skills like writing proposals, planning, implementation and monitoring are largely absent. The *Sangha* does not have the resources or experience to carry out training and neither the Lao government nor most of the international organizations (except UNICEF) have yet shown an interest in enhancing these capacities. Of the three Lao clergy projects presented, only the third (ecology and Buddhism) attempts to build up these capacities. Moreover, the Buddhist College at Vat Ong Tu, which is trying to train monks in some of these areas, is more focused on spreading traditional teachings in schools (presentation skills, etc). The college has neither the funds nor the experience to expand its programme and include modules on development or Buddhist social work in its curricula. The few monks who had the opportunity to study at monasteries and universities abroad (mainly in Thailand, but also in Burma and India) usually study traditional subjects like higher degrees in Pali, which is necessary as the Lao *Sangha* needs these resources to maintain a level of traditional teaching. They learn little about new methods of applying *dhamma* or concepts of social work, but after their return are very motivated and bring back a lot of productive ideas regarding Buddhism's role in contemporary society.

The inner composition of the Lao *Sangha* – as regards age, experience and suitability for this kind of work – is another important factor limiting its potential. Boutsavath and Chapelier (1973; see also Chapelier, 1975), in their study on development

<sup>17</sup> A typical example of how monks' involvement is actually seen by government development workers came up in a meeting in 2004 between a group of monks involved in environmental protection and the newly established Poverty Reduction Fund (PRF). After a fancy presentation of the objectives of the PRF, one monk asked about a potential role of the *Sangha* in the zones where the fund is active. The speaker, himself a high-ranking member of the fund, referred to an example he encountered in one of the development zones: a villager, whose house was built on a plot of land that was supposed to be used for road construction, was not willing to sell the land and move somewhere else. In this case, the monks could appeal to the proprietor's sense of 'compassion' (*galunaa*) and convince him that selling his house would be a meritorious activity for the benefit of the whole community. Going beyond this purely pragmatic and instrumental use of Buddhist teachings is rarely seen in Lao (or foreign) development discourse. Development is often seen as a mere technical and social engineering activity, which has little or no connection to a cultural or social component of development (cf. Whitingon, forthcoming).



programmes involving monks, estimated that less than 5% of the *Sangha* are actually suited to becoming more professionally involved in development or social welfare projects, because the *Sangha* is largely composed of novices and monks who leave the temple<sup>18</sup> after the completion of their education. The situation is perhaps even more difficult today. Morev (2002: 398) estimates, based on rather sketchy statistics, that with a total number of Lao monks and novices of approximately 18,000-20,000, the annual turnover is thousand and monks stay an average of about four years in the *Sangha*. My own observations and surveys in some central Vientiane temples seem to confirm this. There is also a quite striking generation gap in the clergy<sup>19</sup>. As a consequence of this, the long-term administrative workload of monks over 30 years old is sometimes pressing. They have to fulfil the traditional ritual duties of monks towards laypeople, administer pagodas, and care for a large number of novices. The time left for exploring new fields of involvement and acquiring knowledge of new methods is limited.

It must also be mentioned that not all in the *Sangha* or all laypeople are really convinced that these new roles are part of monks' duties. A minority would prefer the *Sangha* to stay in its original field and not take on tasks that could be linked to social work or any other more active involvement in society. This attitude reflects not only a problem of the definition of the clergy's responsibilities in society, but also the limited facilities and need to first secure a certain level of knowledge of traditional teachings in the clergy before spreading out into new fields. The partially assigned and partially self-chosen role as a preserver of Lao culture is an additional task the *Sangha* has to fulfil. Problems brought about social change are sometimes met by withdrawal and a solitary emphasis on reification of traditional teachings. This is because the problems encountered are very new and neither monks or laypeople can sometimes decide what form Buddhism's involvement should take in each case. For example, in a workshop that I attended for monks on environmental protection, it was easy for the monks to identify current ecological issues in Laos, but surprisingly they were almost completely unable to connect these with relevant Buddhist teachings. This is also connected to a lack of awareness of the *Sangha*'s social role outside of the purely religious realm. Older monks, who according to their seniority are in positions of power and as abbots exercise considerable influence on younger monks, are sometimes reluctant to adapt new methods of teaching or to help younger monks put their ideas into practice. Symptomatic of this is the fact that some of the few monks who received training via UNICEF, for example, returned with many ideas and were enthusiastic, but lacked support from the abbot and finally abandoned their engagement (UNICEF, 2003: 6). What is perhaps necessary is that the *Sangha* has an open and wider discussion about its general role in society, the significance of social work, and new forms of involvement<sup>20</sup>.

Discussion about Buddhism's role in society, and its capacity to substantially contribute to and shape the modernization process, is largely determined (or inhibited) by the political and institutional contexts it operates in. The Ministry of Information

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<sup>18</sup> Many western observers are disappointed to learn that by far the largest proportion of *Sangha* members are only temporarily ordained and that a large number of novices and monks just get an education and afterwards leave the monk-hood. Wherever this disappointment may derive from (orientalist fantasies of life-long ascetics etc.), it is a fact that Buddhism continues to play a very positive role in education. As a 'religious boarding-school' it gives a lot of young males from the countryside the chance to obtain a higher education; an opportunity they would otherwise perhaps not have.

<sup>19</sup> The generation gap within the *Sangha*, i.e. the relative number of young novices and monks to the very small number of monks between 30 and 50, can perhaps be explained by the circumstances under which they were ordained. In the early years after 1975 many young men perhaps preferred not to be ordained as the general political climate and position of Buddhism was not really favourable for this. Many of those would today be at an age where they would usually take on higher responsibilities. In some provinces, this shortage of experienced monks is already a major problem.



and Culture and especially the religious branch of the LFNR are involved in almost all LBFO decisions and projects and keep a close watch on monks. In a paper on “Religious Affairs in Lao PDR: Policies and Tasks” religion as a whole, and also Buddhism, are described as “a major concern of conflict”. The paper states that religions could potentially be exploited “for political and economic interests” and admits that “religious problems are more delicate and complex” than visible at first hand (Vannasopha, 2003: 2-3)<sup>21</sup>. Any expansion of religious and Buddhist activities beyond traditional roles is therefore viewed with suspicion and at first classified as potentially disturbing. Pholsena (2001: 216) has recently stated that the LFNR’s loss of influence in government circles is perhaps one of the strongest signs of the end of the socialist project. Although this might be true for other government circles, it seems to me that in the religious field the grip of the LFNR is still quite firm and that there are no signs of a loss of influence: most of the bigger rituals and other official occasions I have attended involved at least one participant from the LFNR and all applications for *Sangha* projects pass through its officials<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, there is for each level of the LBFO administration a parallel level of the LFNR. To some it may seem paradoxical that the official support Buddhism once again receives does not really translate into evident expansion into the fields discussed. Younger monks with serious inner-clergy career ambitions have noticed the same and mentioned to me that the current support from the government is generally a positive phenomenon, but is only given half-heartedly and in carefully-selected areas. This is also a reason for considerable frustration among potential future *Sangha* leaders who look across the border to Thailand and see the manifold options there, but very few in Laos.

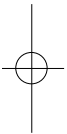
In conversations with some senior Lao monks it became clear that cooperation with international NGOs and expansion into similar projects had been taken into consideration and even wished for, but was considered too problematic to be carried out under these circumstances. Others openly rejected such an option: while chatting with a monk with high administrative duties in the LBFO, I mentioned that I liked the new *Sangha* projects, and especially the BFD initiatives. He became somewhat sulky, and accused the BFD of contravening government politics and said: “This is an NGO, but there shouldn’t be any NGOs in Laos. Once the monks currently protecting the BFD are gone, we will take care of that”. Despite this, it could be said that the strict policies of the Lao government, with its clear assignments for the role of the Buddhist *Sangha*, are an asset: the focus on the teaching and spreading of Buddhist morality and ethics gives the clergy a clearly defined zone for action. Some monks, inside or outside the context of projects, have successfully capitalized on that and have found fields for their actions, however limited these may be.

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<sup>20</sup> There are now some efforts to do this. In November 2001 a small meeting was held in Vientiane to explore the role of Buddhist teachings in contemporary Lao society. Occasional newspaper articles in *Pasason and Vientiane Mai* also pick up on topics like ‘The significance of Buddhist *dharmma* in a technological age’, but these are far from in-depth discussions.

<sup>21</sup> Besides a general desire for control by the Lao state, this anxiety has to be seen in the context of Laos’s multi-ethnic composition and the endless calls for unity within the population, the party and all organizations. Recently, some rather fundamentalist Christian sects have been involved in aggressive missionary activities under the camouflage of development work. This has led to more intensive checks of religious organizations. Despite Buddhism’s special position as a majority religion, the LBFO is still subject to surveillance and control. Moreover, some high-ranking members of the LBFO are also members of the LFNR.

<sup>22</sup> Permission for the *Sangha* to get involved in new projects depends very much on the LFNR. As in other areas of Lao development, approval is given very slowly and only with a lot of concessions. Fields of engagement are chosen very carefully and it has to be ascertained that there are no features of the project that could contravene government politics. The second criterion is whether the project is actually ‘suitable’ for monks: in a recent project related to HIV prevention and the use of condoms, LFNR officials were very concerned about the overlapping of sexual topics and the monks’ traditional role. Although the *Sangha* is itself probably more aware of its limitations, the LFNR continues to supervise the clergy.



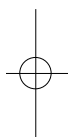


From a general perspective it must be noted that civil society, as a field in which a reflection of Buddhism's role in modern society could be performed and re-conceptualised, is even in its "rudiments barely existent" (Stuart-Fox, 2004: 21) in Laos. A clergy that is experienced in social work and environmental issues (as in Thailand or Cambodia) probably has to go through a lot of internal and public discussions before establishing itself in these areas of work. Under present circumstances, this is hardly possible. Furthermore, as Queen (1998) has shown, monks and people at the basis of socially-engaged Buddhist movements in Thailand, Burma and Vietnam reacted to a crisis in their societies and were very often in open opposition to mainstream discourses in politics and within the Buddhist clergy. A fragmentation of the *Sangha*, or the emergence of new, independent Buddhist movements as in Thailand (cf. Taylor, 1990) is probably not in the interest of the *Sangha* or the Lao government.

## CONCLUSION

A minority within the Lao Buddhist *Sangha* is already adapting Buddhist teachings and is attempting to actively influence developments in contemporary Lao society. These monks (sometimes in connection with laypeople) are trying to explore new ways of reinterpreting *dharmma* and applying it to current social problems. Most of the projects make use of the small amount of resources available to the *Sangha* and move in the fields of activity that have been assigned to the Lao clergy, namely the spreading of Buddhist teachings, morality and ethics. A very small group of monks has a more far-reaching vision of Buddhism's role in society, but is just starting its activities. It has to battle with financial difficulties and a lack of human resources, and the outcome of its training programme is still somewhat uncertain. The lack of wider and open discussion about the *Sangha*'s involvement and the tight control of the state are factors that inhibit the process of formulating a coherent discourse on the contribution of Buddhism to contemporary Lao society extra to the role of perpetuating 'fine traditions'.

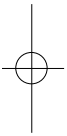
Under these circumstances, the Lao clergy will primarily have to rely on its own capacities, which, as mentioned above, are still rather limited and are needed to secure its own infrastructure. The upgrading of educational facilities for monks and novices improved training of monks in their traditional tasks, the revitalization of meditation practices and the up-keep of its internal administrative structure are huge tasks which already reach the limits of its resources. The scepticism of some leading monks regarding the expansion of social activism is also an intelligible argument: the primary task of the *Sangha* should be assuring the perpetuation of the traditional teachings which are the roots of a socially-engaged Buddhism, and the lay population expects the *Sangha* to continue to fulfil this role. Moreover, in Theravada Buddhism the authority of the clergy is based in its continuity and partial immunity to the changes happening around it. On the other hand, the difficult circumstances under which the discussed projects emerged and the enthusiasm of younger monks are also signs of a strong commitment that could perhaps have a synergetic effect in the future and slowly lead to a re-orientation within the clergy and the formulation of a more coherent approach. The latter point, however, also very much depends on the willingness of the Lao government to leave religious organizations – and particularly the LBFO – enough room for determining its own course. A potential problem here is the fact that many movements subsumed under the term 'socially-engaged Buddhism' often have a quite critical stance towards the government and its institutions. Personally, however I can hardly imagine monks, for example, publicly talking about some of the more direct government – induced reasons for the disappearance of forests in Laos, as monks have

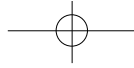




done in Thailand. Perhaps a small proportion of monks will at least be able initiate moves towards this direction and develop appropriate concepts and practices. These will probably be inspired by the example set by Thai Buddhism and other transnational Buddhist networks, but in the end will have to be adapted to the specific context in Laos. Otherwise it could be possible that some of the rather liberal ideas occasionally employed will contravene the line of the government, or not appeal to the laity.

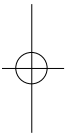
The progressing differentiation and institutional secularisation of urban Lao society, has ambivalent implications for the *Sangha*. On one hand, the Buddhist clergy has the role of cultural protector, and is trying to intensify this cultural role or even reconstruct it. Buddhism is now seen as a resource pool for defining 'Laoness' and is supposed to help to ward off the dangers of globalisation and cultural hybridisation. On the other hand, recent developments in society lead laypeople to search for orientation in Buddhist teachings, which will have to address these issues in a manner beyond the traditional way of instruction. Abortion, medical ethics and other topics are not yet relevant in Laos, but it seems that the clergy will be very busy in trying to catch up with these and in finding appropriate positions. To a certain extent, the Lao *Sangha* has already been successful in applying new methods and adapting teachings but it is still far away from actually defining a new potential role. Young urban people in particular admitted, when I talked to them, that Buddhism has very little appeal for them because the traditional topics which are frequently discussed in temple sermons and the way monks teach, hold little or no meaning for them. A reiteration and preservation of traditional teachings may serve as an anchor and orientation for a certain part of the population, but this may conversely also alienate other lay-followers and lead them to search for orientation in more secular or other religiously-inspired value systems.





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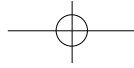
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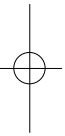
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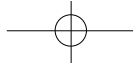
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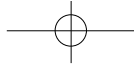
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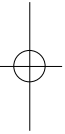
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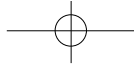
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