



Perspectives on Lao development

Minority education, Buddhism and development, dams and gender, and local residents on tourism

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Sharing Information to Stimulate Development

The Editorial Board of *Juth Pakai* firmly believes that the objectives of alleviating poverty and stimulating development in the Lao PDR will be better pursued if information and innovative thinking are shared. The articles presented here challenge our current way of thinking and/or contain information that has not yet been published. We sincerely hope that *Juth Pakai* will stimulate an active development debate and will contribute to a better understanding of the development challenges in the Lao PDR.

Applying *Dhamma* to Contemporary Society: Socially-Engaged Buddhism and Development Work in the Lao PDR

by Patrice Ladwig

Buddhism, an inherent part of Lao culture, has not often been considered an important source for improving the development process in the Lao PDR. This article analyses what Buddhism has to offer to the development process by looking at some of its traditional and emerging roles in society. This involves a short discussion of the concept of 'social capital' in relation to Lao Buddhism, followed by consideration of three current areas of social work that the clergy is involved in. After a brief presentation of the Buddhism for Development project, the conclusion refers to the advantages of integrating Buddhism into some fields of development work, but also mentions a few inherent problems and limitations to this approach.

What do Buddhism, and religion in general, have to do with development, which is still often considered a rational social engineering activity? Some people may associate religion with tradition, ritual and the other-worldly, whilst connecting development with science, planning and this-worldly activity. Although 'culture' is widely recognised as an important part of the development process, religion, though an inherent part of culture, has surprisingly very often not been considered an important source for improving the development process. However, the idea of linking religious organisations to at least some particular parts of the development sector - and thereby moving towards a development process that includes voices and discourses from within a culture - represents a powerful option not to be neglected.

Regarding Laos, most people would agree that Buddhism plays an important role in everyday life for the majority Lao Loum people, and for some other Buddhist minorities. In order to conceptualise this importance, it is crucial to point out that Theravada Buddhism is not secluded from Lao society as a set of disconnected practices in monasteries. Rather, its values and ideas are present in society. Although many religious traditions are seemingly non-historical and mythical in nature, they are constantly being reinterpreted in order to keep them meaningful to the everyday lives of followers. Discontinuities within society, caused for example by rapid modernisation and the effects of globalisation, have often been the source of re-conceptualisation for religious teachings and have stimulated new forms of religiously inspired activism. In the case of Buddhism, this process has been labelled "socially-engaged Buddhism" (Queen & King, 1996). Prominent figures like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, or Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam represent a diversity of movements that aim at extending and reformulating Buddhism's role in modern society. They have called for a Buddhism that is rooted in tradition, but accepts the challenges of social transformation and gets more explicitly involved in social work, development issues, ecological movements and peace building, thereby contributing to the

construction of a just society. Their common denominator has been identification and implementation of teachings, practices and institutions that are applicable and potentially beneficial for development work in the broadest sense. This movement is perhaps most advanced in Thailand, where there is a quite diverse array of ‘development monks’.

In Laos there have been some previous efforts to integrate Buddhist monks into development work, but in a less systematic and organised way. However, the recent activism of a minority in the *Sangha* (Buddhist clergy) can be seen as an emerging socially-engaged Buddhism that is primarily driven by the rapid modernisation of the country. Although the Lao *Sangha* has for some time been involved in activities that could be labelled socially-engaged (Bousavath & Chapelier, 1973; Vichit, 2003), new initiatives are arising that aim to keep up with contemporary changes in Lao society: drug addiction, environmental degradation, prostitution, trafficking and migrant labour, and the increasing spread of HIV/AIDS are marking the late but intense arrival of modernity and globalisation in Laos. Most members of the Buddhist clergy have the conviction that the country’s modernisation is largely a positive development but also feel that the negative consequences present a challenge and sometimes 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 monks’ duty to instruct the lay-population in Buddhist teachings and ethics, to give moral support and become engaged in activities that reduce *dukkha* (suffering). While discussing this topic in 2004, the abbot of a Vientiane monastery explained, “*dhamma* [doctrine, teaching of the Buddha, law, nature or truth] 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” (personal communication, November 2004).

***Sangha* Social Capital and Development Potential**

Classical anthropological studies on Lao Buddhism rarely fail to point out the central role that the Buddhist temple plays in a village community. The important role monks play in village affairs, their influence on the lay people, and the *Sangha*’s institutional and personal network have often been represented as one of the main features of Lao communities. Condominas (1998), in a study on rural Lao Buddhism in the 1950s and 1960s, alludes to the multiple functions performed by the local pagoda (*vat*). Besides being a locus for religious rites, it can simultaneously act as a school, the village administration, local law court, feast hall, traditional hospital, guest house, counselling service, and general meeting place for the rural community. The temple is also the hub of a wide-ranging ritual economy of symbolic and monetary exchange. The *vat* can also be seen as linked to ‘distributive justice’ (Rawls, 1971) because of the collective investment of the lay-community in temple funds, used for example to educate novices from poor families. This embodies what many Lao people describe as *khwamsamakhi* (solidarity).

Official Lao sources often speak of the intrinsic value of Buddhism beyond the pure spiritual and emphasise its ‘productive’ role in society (Phomvihane 1992; Vannasopha, 2003). While many of the

temple's traditional tasks have been taken over by more specialised state institutions, thus redefining the role of Buddhism through 'institutional secularisation', in some areas the *Sangha* continues to play an active and socially-engaged role (Vichit, 2003). Socially-engaged monks now deem it necessary to recognise what Buddhism could contribute to the development of contemporary Lao society. Hence, some members of the clergy are investigating the potential of Buddhist involvement and teachings to develop ways of social activism.

Buddhism has very strong notions of social ethics, both for monks and lay people (Rajavaramuni, 1990). Concepts such as responsibility, care, and striving for goodness are not only relevant for individuals but also for communities. The temple is still a centre of social activity where morality and Buddhist ethics are taught on holy days and where the village community meets for festivals. Monks have a particular significance in this context: with a duty to explain *dhamma* to lay people and care for their needs, they are ascribed a special position in society and bestowed with authority. Monks are highly respected members of their communities, clearly distinguished by lifestyle and everyday behaviour. They are regarded as having acquired knowledge that is beyond that of the normal villager and people often consult monks in moments of crisis and family problems. The practice of monks visiting schools and teaching about *dhamma*, Buddhist ethics and morality is now quite common in urban areas. These teachings are very much focused on traditional Buddhist topics (learning to pray, respect for elders and teachers, value of education and Lao culture), but are nowadays becoming increasingly connected with topics such as the environment and drug prevention.

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teachings that can be applied to ideas
of sustainable development*

The preaching of *dhamma* is an asset that, when employed in a new context and geared towards problems of contemporary society, can also influence people's attitudes. Explaining *dhamma* is seen as an obligatory and meritorious act for monks. Lay people listening to it also gain merit, while speeches, books and other discourses related to *dhamma* are a 'gift of truth'. In regard to moral behaviour, monks should be an example for lay people. The monks' ideal life-style, regulated by the *vinai* (rules of discipline), is an exemplary one based on moral conduct, purity, and compassion towards all beings. For lay people there are other Buddhist teachings like the noble eight-fold path (*makkhamiongphaed*), the ten perfections (*sip pharamii*), the four sublime states of mind (*phromavihaan*), and the avoiding of defilements (*kbiled*). All these teachings bear a relation to the amount of merit earned by an individual and can be seen as giving lay people a range of options to cultivate 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, and perfection" (1997). In addition to these hands-on

teachings, there is also a wide range of more elaborate Buddhist doctrines that can be applied to ideas of sustainable development, for example environmental protection (Harris, 1995).

If these teachings and networks can be linked to current society and monks are capable of re-interpreting topics like HIV, drugs, and environmental protection in the framework of traditional *dhamma*, there is a significant opportunity to influence people's behaviour and attitudes. The Buddhist *Sangha*, with its wide-reaching network and strong voice in the villages, has much that development specialists and anthropologists have labelled 'social capital'. Putnam (2000) defines social capital as a multi-dimensional concept composed of a set of trust, social norms, networks and organisations that influence relations among people and are an asset for the individual and collective production of well-being.

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Social capital is also embedded into social structure, for example in the form of kinship, work groups and the associated mutual obligations. It can also be found in religious communities and institutions (Greely, 2001). In Laos this is visible in collective temple investments, temple committees and the activities of lay people and monks to maintain and improve temple buildings. Monks, due to their authority and wide networks, are in a unique position to articulate current social problems in the above-mentioned frame of Buddhist ethics. The use of Buddhist ethics presents an effective means of commenting upon issues like drug use and HIV because the monks can use an authoritative discourse-framework and a vocabulary that is sufficiently familiar to lay people, but at the same time leave room for integrating new developments in society.

***Sangha* Involvement: Three Examples**

The following activities have a focus on contemporary social problems, or as some Lao monks would put it, 'sources of suffering'. In different ways, each activity makes use of this or another form of social capital in an attempt to appeal to basic Buddhist values, stimulate reflection on these problems, and finally, change people's behaviour and attitudes. Some of the activities are limited to the Vientiane area, while others are to be implemented across the country. Their scope and the way they are organised are very different; but they all involve monks (and sometimes nuns) as the main agents and are geared towards the needs of a lay population that is directly or indirectly confronted with these problems.

The Metta-Tham HIV/AIDS Project

Although the official figures concerning HIV/AIDS prevalence are low in the Lao PDR – in 2005 there were 1,827 reported HIV cases, 1,065 AIDS cases and 637 deaths from AIDS (Centre for HIV/AIDS/STIs, December 2005) – growth in cross-border trade and the number of migrant workers means the

chances of a future epidemic are growing. One of the biggest challenges to preventing this 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 HIV-care and prevention at the community level. The programme is sponsored by Unicef and is carried out on a low-cost basis. Activities include HIV-prevention seminars and talks, spiritual counselling for infected people, and provision of daily necessities for those with the disease who are no longer able to earn their own living (Unicef, 2003). The infrastructure used is the one already established by the *Sangha* – a network of nuns, monks, temples and committees all over the country.

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 Organisation (LBFO), an orientation training workshop for 80 monks and nuns, followed by introduction 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 base out of which the concepts and actions for the programme arise are firmly rooted in Buddhist *dhamma*. Buddhist ethics and teachings like the five precepts, and values like moderation, self-discipline and compassion are evoked when conveying the messages to lay people. The concrete objectives of the programme include:

- Reducing the level of discrimination experienced by people living with HIV. If infected people are isolated in their communities, monks should adapt key Buddhist teachings such as compassion (*metta*), kindness (*khalunaa*) and equanimity (*upekkha*) to undermine discriminatory behaviour 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 make 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 AIDS get a full Buddhist funeral.
- Community HIV-prevention education delivered by the local *Sangha*. Monks should incorporate HIV education messages in temple teachings and sermons. They are also supposed to visit local schools and give simple explanations on social issues including HIV and drug abuse, and should reiterate relevant basic Buddhist teachings such as the precepts as often as possible.

Currently monks primarily focus on prevention and fighting discrimination. The project is currently active in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champassak, Luang Prabang and Bokeo provinces. In the other provinces monks still lack training and experience. From a general perspective it must be said that a project on this scale is challenging for both monks and lay people, as it is supposed to combine modified traditional teachings with concrete actions. Some of the problems that came up during implementation will be discussed in the final chapter.

Drug Prevention and Social Work

Drug abuse among teenagers is a growing problem, mainly in urban areas of Laos. Besides legal drugs such as alcohol and cigarettes, the major concern is the use of meta-amphetamines (*ya ba*). The *Sangha* has become active in prevention campaigns in connection with a nationwide campaign against drug abuse. Activities include going into schools and talking about *dbamma*, lifestyle, and the harmful effects of drugs on mind and body. The author observed monks using lively and inclusive teaching methods that differed from the usual top-down approach. Frequent reference was made to the fifth precept, “refrain from intoxicants causing carelessness”, and the problems and reasons that lead to taking drugs were discussed.

*In a society in which much knowledge is
transferred through story telling, sermons are
very effective in spreading information*

Warnings against drugs are sometimes mentioned in sermons on festival days. For a society in which a lot of knowledge transfer still occurs through the medium of story telling, these are a very effective means of spreading information. Besides offering good entertainment and occasions for making merit, temple festivals are also opportunities to spread messages and to engage people in awareness raising and prevention work by stimulating discourse and reflection. The functions that narrative performances can have tend to be underestimated by outside observers: in Lao and Buddhist notions of language, the meritorious acts of listening and preaching form a highly educative ethical activity (Hallisey & Hansen, 1996). For the message to be understood however, a precondition is that the preacher's style is understandable to lay people and avoids excessive use of specialist Pali vocabulary. Many monks now emphasise this.

Buddhism and Ecology: the Buddhism for Development Project

In addition to the project carried out with an international agency (Unicef) and the drug prevention work, which is often an ad hoc initiative by individual temples, there is also now a small group of Buddhist monks and lay people aiming to give socially-engaged Buddhism in Laos an organisational and institutional structure. The government (in the form of the LBFO and the Lao National Front for Reconstruction) has approved the establishment of the ‘Buddhism for Development Project’ (BFD). For a few years now this group has been mainly engaged in ecological preservation work, but also in a wide range of other aspects of socially-engaged Buddhism, sometimes in cooperation with the Lao Participatory Development Training Centre, PADETC. Projects include the establishment of tree nurseries, campaigns against harmful chemical fertilisers, and production of a booklet on the disappearance of wildlife, in cooperation with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS, 2004). Together with a British secular organisation, the Alliance for Religion and Conservation (ARC), the group recently compiled an *Environmental Handbook for Monks Teaching in Primary Schools* to combine traditional Buddhist

teachings with environmental awareness. The monks involved regularly visit local schools to promote environmental education. BFD also plans to turn some forest temples into ecologically protected areas and to generally promote a way of 'Buddhist agriculture' (*phuthakbased*).

Most of these activities are part of a larger LBFO three-year training programme that involves a core group of more than 60 monks from all provinces in Laos. Besides instruction in traditional tasks such as meditation and *dbamma* studies, the objective is to train both monks and lay people to become 'community development leaders'. Its goal is to "incorporate Buddhist wisdom with social work, especially at the grassroots level" (BFD, 2004). One of the training modules lists the following objectives:

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

BFD representatives are just beginning to develop a specific Lao approach to socially-engaged Buddhism. The group's leading monk, the Venerable *Achan* Sali Kantasilo explained that the group is in the early stages of its development and that a sustainable group structure is still in the process of evolving (personal communication, May 2005). It will take another few years before the efficiency of the training and the implementation of the strategies learnt can be evaluated. Its success will also depend on how these new ideas will be received in the Lao context and how they can really be linked to *dbamma* as it is understood by a laity that until now had little or no exposure to these ideas. One of the great assets of the group is that it aims at developing a coherent approach to development issues, training monks in relevant subjects and thereby giving them a firm grounding. The focus on the grassroots level and the plan to spread these ideas in the provinces once the monks have completed their training is also important. The project has so far been on a very small scale, but it could have a synergetic effect as it is based on low-cost sustainability, direct involvement of focal temples, and the integration of young lay people into the programme.

Limitations and Caveats

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 *dbamma*, but is also attempting to contribute to solving predicaments in Lao society. The way these projects will initiate other activities and will further social development is very much dependent on the internal structure and capacities of the *Sangha* and the wider field it operates in.

The present involvement of monks is primarily based on their general authority and influence in their communities and among lay people. The social capital monks have is an excellent resource that can be tapped to disseminate information and carry out prevention work on a whole range of development issues. A substantial number of Lao monks are aware of current problems in society and are keen to perform duties that could include activities rooted in Buddhist teachings, but which 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 and experience to carry out training and neither the Lao government nor most international organisations (except Unicef, ARC, and WCS) have shown much interest in enhancing these capacities. Within the Lao clergy, only BFD has a more multifaceted plan (but not really the funds) to build up these capacities. The Buddhist College at Vat Ong Tu would be a place where topics like social development and social work could be taught, but at the moment it has neither the funds nor the experience to expand its programme and include modules on these subjects in its curricula.

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It must also be mentioned that not all monks or lay people are really convinced that these new roles are part of clerical 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. When monks get involved in ‘worldly’ projects there is always a fear that they might lose their detachment and so violate the monastic code of discipline. Orthodox opponents of socially-engaged Buddhism in Thailand have used this argument to strictly demarcate Buddhism’s role in society and call for a return to an ‘original’ Buddhism that keeps a distance from worldly affairs. In the Lao HIV-prevention project, there was a fear that the topic could be problematic in relationship to the code of discipline. A compromise was found: monks do not directly address the topic of HIV, but work together with lay people (mainly urban youth volunteers from the Lao National Front for Reconstruction) who talk about the more explicit matters involved. The monks focus on the Buddhist values that are supposed to give rise to reflection on HIV-related topics. In this case, it is more a problem of finding the right framework for the reinterpretation of Buddhist teachings, rather than being a ‘yes or no’ situation. The special rules of behaviour for monks, which are the source of their authority, can in most cases be negotiated and contextualised and therefore made applicable to development work. Nevertheless, the involvement of monks demands a careful and reflective planning process.

Also in the Metta-Tham project, it became clear that despite the enthusiasm shown primarily by younger monks, there is often simply a lack of experience in how to approach a new engagement. Most people attending the training sessions in the affected villages showed very positive reactions; but a minority of

lay people and some of the more conservative senior monks aired criticism and were pessimistic about the clergy's involvement. Most senior figures of the *Sangha* were enthusiastic, but acknowledged that they have a lack of experience in responding to HIV/AIDS. They felt that they were not aware of all the options this work could involve and lacked the organisational skills to carry out some of the proposed actions. In response to this, Unicef evaluated the achievements after the first year and then suggested how the programme could be enhanced (Unicef, 2003a). Some of the points mentioned in the report are exemplary for working with a *Sangha* that has little experience with social activism and direct engagement. Monks initially focused on preaching and did not really establish contact with infected people. While younger monks were really enthusiastic, older monks and abbots sometimes showed little or no interest in the new activities. In many cases it was observed there was no real understanding of how and why monks should get involved in social work (ibid). Reaching the target audience was also a problem. Most people attending temple festivals are over 50 years of age. To counter this development, the LBFO has set up an 'Ordination Project' that organises temporary one-week ordinations for boys and girls in the Vientiane area, combined with training in Buddhist values and ethics and including HIV- and drug-prevention.

*The Lao Sangha chronically lacks
funds and training opportunities*

The age, experience and suitability of the Lao *Sangha* for this kind of work is another important factor that limits its potential. The clergy is largely composed of novices and monks who leave the temple after completing their 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 not have. Monks stay an average of about four years in the *Sangha*. As a consequence, professional monks over 30 years old (about 5%-7% of the *Sangha*) have a long-term and administrative workload that is sometimes pressing. They have to fulfil the traditional ritual duties of monks towards lay people, administer pagodas, and care for a large number of novices. The time left for exploring new fields and learning new methods is limited. It would be desirable to give training in social work and development to at least a few monks, who in turn could then pass on that knowledge to other interested monks. The ethnic composition of Laos also has to be taken into account: according to unofficial estimates about 30-40% of the population are not Buddhist. Gender awareness is another issue to be considered. Very few nuns are involved in the projects and it would be desirable to increase their number and thereby enhance gender awareness, as well as outreach capacity and the efficacy of the projects.

Conclusion

The involvement of Buddhist monks is certainly not a universal option that can be applied to all fields of the development sector. The Lao clergy's involvement in the country's development must be set in relation to the order's social capital. Prevention, education and information campaigns are appropriate, while concrete areas of social work in relation to drug-abuse, ecology, the general health sector and

HIV/AIDS can also work because Buddhist teachings can easily be applied to specific cases within these fields. Further options for involving the *Sangha* have hardly been considered for several reasons. There is first the problem of the definition of the clergy's responsibilities in society. What is perhaps necessary is that the Lao *Sangha* opens a wider discussion about its general role in society, the significance of social or development work, and its relation to Buddhist *dhamma*. Secondly, the *Sangha* has limited facilities and there is a need to first secure a certain level of knowledge of traditional teachings in the clergy before spreading out into new fields. The *Sangha*, like many other institutions in Laos, chronically lacks funds and training opportunities and an involvement in development work can only be considered useful when the traditional tasks of monks can already be fulfilled.

On the other hand, the difficult circumstances under which the discussed projects emerged, their success, and the enthusiasm of younger monks are all signs of a strong commitment. This commitment could perhaps have a synergetic effect in the future and slowly lead to the establishment of a small proportion of 'professional development monks' with a more coherent approach. Knowledge exchange with Thailand and other Buddhist countries could help achieve this, but international community and Lao government initiatives in providing funds, training and opportunities in appropriate projects are also crucial.

About the Author

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