

The Role of Sung-Sermon Practitioner Monks in The Northeast of Thailand.

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The Northeast of Thailand, commonly known as Isaan, is a culturally very rich and unique region. It is also the heartland of Buddhist meditation practice, especially of the forest tradition, that has begotten many great meditation masters whose teachings have now spread to different countries across the globe. Like in the rest of the country, monks in the Northeast have, since time immemorial, played a very influential role in the propagation of Buddhism. In order to disseminate Buddhist ethical values among the laity, monks, as spiritual leaders, have long since adopted different techniques and methods. Sermon delivery is one such method that is most commonly applied in the propagation of Buddhism. In Isaan, a special type of sermon known as *Thet Laeh*¹, literally translated into English as “sung” or “rhythmic sermon”, plays a crucial role in the propagation of such core Buddhist values as loving-kindness and compassion.

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¹ *Thet Laeh* is a form of applied sermon which can be classified into two categories – *Thet Mahachat* and Story-based sermon. The delivery of *Thet Mahachat* is restricted to the fourth lunar month, whereas, other story-based sermons can be delivered at any time throughout the year. In this paper we focus on sung-sermon in the form of *Thet Mahachat* only. Details of the origin of *Thet Laeh* can be found in the forthcoming research monograph “A critical study of the Buddhist Sung-sermon from Isaan” by the present writer.

Almost every temple in Isaan hosts the sung-sermon during the Bunphravessa ceremony² that marks the fourth lunar month. Monks, who are vocally-gifted with a voice having range and depth, train themselves to deliver the sung-sermon incorporating the story of Vessantara Jataka.³ The rhythmic style in which they narrate the story is typical of Isaan. This sung-sermon is actually a form of oral narrative that has a long tradition⁴. The most unique characteristic of this oral narration is that it is rendered in the local Isaan dialect, making Dhamma readily accessible and enjoyable to lay devotees. It can be assumed that this rhythmic oral narration has long served as a great tool in the teaching and propagation of Dhamma among lay followers. In this paper we shall discuss in brief the major roles of the sung-sermon practitioner monks. Reflecting on the roles of sung-sermon practitioner monks will help facilitate our understanding of the dhammic and cultural richness embedded in this particular form of sermon.

Propagation of Buddhism

The first important role of sung-sermon practitioner monks is the propagation of Buddhism. Since the sung-sermon delivered during the fourth lunar month is based on the Vessantara Jataka, through it the practitioner monks uphold the values of compassion and generosity – qualities that are reflected in the character of the bodhisattva in the story. Compassion is one of the four divine qualities⁵ that Buddhism emphasizes. It is believed that the Buddha himself practiced compassion and its corollary, charity to the highest possible

² In the Northeast there are twelve different ceremonies in a year, one each in every lunar month. The set of these 12 ceremonies is known as *Prapheni Heet Sibsong*. For a list of the ceremonies see Dipti Mahanta, *English Conversation for Buddhist Monks* (Khonkaen: MCU, 2004), 181-182.

³ Of the 550 Buddhist stories (Jatakas) illustrating the previous lives of the Buddha, the Vessantara Jataka known as Mahachat in Thai (meaning Great Birth) is the most popular in Thailand and has long since been delineated in both poetry and pictorial arts.

⁴ Although it is difficult to ascertain the historical origin of sung-sermon in exactitude, especially due to the lack of written historical evidence, it can be assumed that the sung-sermon has been in vogue for not less than a century now. For a detail of its evolutionary origin as accounted by the well-known sung-sermon practitioner monk, the late Ven. Thongphet Viradhammo, see *Manual for Training Sermon-delivering Monks* (Khonkaen: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2545).

⁵ The four divine or heavenly qualities (also known as Brahma Vihara) that Buddhism emphasizes are *metta* (loving-kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (empathy or sympathetic joy) and *upekkha* (equanimity).

level during his penultimate birth as the bodhisattva, before being finally born as the Buddha. Human life would not only be spiritually dull and drab, but also all too brutal, if there is absolute lack of compassion. Compassion is a great virtue, the cultivation of which helps to keep vices like greed and selfishness at bay. Such unwholesome mental states as egocentricity, egotism and megalomania can find suitable cure through the practice of compassion. When mindfully practiced to the highest level, it can purify one's body and mind leading to complete annihilation of all sorts of clinging and attachment. Only then the path of true renunciation can be treaded upon. It is compassion that gave rise to other supremely admirable qualities in the Bodhisattva (Prince Vessantara) such as: loving-kindness, generosity, charity, selflessness, self-sacrifice, honesty, endurance, patience, moral courage and determination. Corresponding to the content of the Vessantara Jataka, sung-sermon practitioner monks have improvised a unique style of rendition that renders the narration of the entire story very effective. Through their rendition the Bodhisattva, who is the epitome of moral perfections, becomes a living example and a perennial source of inspiration to lay devotees. Thus, it can be ascertained that sung-sermon practitioner monks play a significant role in propagating Buddhism amongst the laity.

Preservation of indigenous Buddhist oral narrative

Closely related to the role of propagation is the role of preservation of a Buddhist oral narrative that is indigenous to the northeastern region. Oral narration has been a mode of communication since ancient times and it can be assumed that it was very much in vogue during the Buddha's lifetime. In Buddhist countries, the tradition of oral narrative has continued up to recent times. In the Northeast of Thailand, the sung-sermon is one such form. It is a tale-telling discourse serializing the story from Vessantara Jataka. The core essence of this oral narrative is revealing the selfless character of the bodhisattva, who is the epitome of compassion, charity and self-sacrifice. The sung-sermon, as a form of oral narrative, is used by practitioner monks as a tool for stimulating the mind of lay devotees to listen to the story with devotional attentiveness and then apply its moral values – loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, charity, self-sacrifice, honesty, moral courage and determination – into real life situation and practice. In order to delineate the story well and render the narration effective, practitioner monks have played a major role in devising different techniques such as stylization and improvisation. This has positively affected the

proliferation, preservation and continuation of the tradition of this oral narrative form. Practitioner monks have closely interlocked the twin features of stylization and improvisation. Stylization is discipline, but total stylization without any improvisation can be very stifling, unoriginal and most uncreative. Similarly, improvisation is freedom, but total improvisation devoid of any solid foundation on stylization might be chaotic and unproductive. The sung-sermon practitioner monks seem to maintain an even balance between these two opposing pulls. Any stylized version of Vessantara Jataka presents the essential details of the entire story in all thirteen sections; whereas, the extensions of meanings and the interpolation of didactic messages are evidence of improvisation during actual rendition of the story as when delivered in the form of sung-sermon. The stylized narrative is a minimal text especially as a backdrop of oral narration, but improvisation helps to make it suit different contexts and situations. Without the practitioner monks' wise application of the twin function of both stylization and improvisation, the story of Vessantara Jataka would have lost its original appeal and would never have been so widely known among lay devotees.

Drawing peoples' attention to indigenous Buddhist culture and tradition

The practitioner monks by keeping the tradition of sung-sermon alive have in a way contributed to the proliferation of this particular form of indigenous Buddhist culture. With the rapid nation-wide modernization and its corresponding effect on peoples' mind-set, taste, sense and sensibility that has had an eroding effect on indigenous Buddhist culture, sung-sermon practitioner monks' continuous effort to keep the tradition going is a great contribution towards preservation of this aspect of Buddhist culture in particular. With winds of change engulfing the rural social set up and cultural ambience, the possibility is that sung-sermon might appear to be too archaic to some local people who are more fascinated these days by highly augmented and upbeat kind of music. Hence, the ongoing effort – both at the personal level by individual monks and at the collective level by practitioner monks' groups – has helped to keep this form of rural culture intact in all its originality and pristine values. The effort itself can serve as a counter force to withstand intruding 'foreign' taste that has a detrimental effect on society as a whole.

Contribution towards the preservation of the Isaan language

A few of the sung-sermon practitioner monks have turned out to be versatile versifiers contributing greatly towards the preservation of the Isaan dialect in both its archaic originality and evolved contemporary usage⁶. Originally the story of Vessantara Jataka was recorded in palm leaf manuscripts. The sermon text can be regarded as a literary text that comprises of such pure literary elements as compositional form, diction and art of using language. Rhythm and words are bound together in the sermon, and the meticulously arranged sermon wordings that are soothing to the ears are conducive to the development of *bhavana* or a meditative state in the listeners. Alliterative words and phrases abound in the text and receive reinforcement because of their phonological structure. Since the Isaan language is tonal word selection is based on particular sequences of tone and are reinforcing because of their suitability to poetic structure. Common everyday spoken words and phrases that are reinforcing because of their frequency of usage are also used to render immediacy and familiarity to the content. At one level the thematic structure (13 sections and a total 1000 verses) guides the sung-sermon practitioner monks by giving them a set of rules within which they can compose. At another level the poetic structures that have been conventionally used and the ones the versifier monks are skilled at using guide them to be both spontaneously and experimentally creative. With a skillful interaction of these two levels of structure the composer monks take the literary freedom to create. Sung-sermon practitioner monks, especially those who have composed the entire 13 sections of the Vessantara Jataka in the Isaan dialect, are prolific in the use of various literary devices such as different rhyme patterns, alliteration, assonance; and various figures of speech such as: simile, metaphors, personifications, oxymoron, onomatopoeia, pathos, irony and humor.

Contextualization of the Jataka Story

The actual historical context of the Vessantara tale was ancient India. Practitioner monks through their creative narration of the story have merged this insurmountable spatial and temporal gap and thus have played an important role in contextualizing the entire tale within the context of the socio-religious cultural setup of Isaan society. While narrating the story they continually contextualize it by drawing the listeners' attention to the element of

⁶ Two very prominent sung-sermon practitioner monks who are also recognized for their skill in composing verses are Ven. Thongphet Viradhammo and Ven. Phrakru Sutasarapimol (Phramaha Phimpha Dhammadinno).

interiorization. In narratology, interiorization is a special technique which reveals dialectical relationship between different strands of narration. According to Ayyappa Paniker, “interiorization is the process by which a distinction, a contrast or even a contradiction is affected between the surface features of a text and its internal essence.”⁷ During an actual sung-sermon session practitioner monks indirectly draw the listeners’ attention to the fact that within the story of Vessantara is the incipient story of the Buddha as an enlightened being, and within that, is the story of Buddhahood in every person, and so on and so forth, an apparently endless process of interiorization. Besides interiorization, practitioner monks have rendered contextualization possible through elasticisation of time within the narrative frame. Narrative time in sung-sermon is more psychological in character than logical. Through focal selection, elaboration and condensation of particular sections of the entire story the temporal distance is tactfully merged between the event when it is believed to have actually occurred (in the penultimate life of the Buddha) and the present moment when the listeners internalize the event, while the story is being narrated by practitioner monks.

Uniting the village community for merit-making during Bunphravessa

Closely related to the role of contextualizing the Jataka tale is the role of practitioner monks in uniting lay Buddhists and help establish their faith firmly in the Triple Gem – the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. For Buddhists every ceremony that marks the lunar calendar is an occasion for merit-making. Therefore, the Bunphravessa

⁷ Ayyappa K. Paniker, *Indian Narratology* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 2003), 4.

⁸ The belief has arisen from the content of a non-canonical sutta called the *Phra Malai Sutta*. The content is as follows –

Thou all must inform educable beings

Whosoever desire to meet the Future Buddha (Ariya Metta)

Ought to revere the teachings

The Mahachat sermon

Be frequently organized

The 1000 verses therein be worshipped

With ritual item in a 1000 set

Listen it fully on a single day.

ceremony in which the sung-sermon is delivered draws great attention of the Buddhist community. Usually the entire village community collaborates to help arrange the ceremony. It is a common belief among lay Buddhists in Thailand that one who listens through the entire 13 sections of the Vessantara story on a single day accumulates enormous merit that ensures future birth during the time of Ariya Metta⁸ The practitioner monks who are invited by host temples to deliver the sermon not only help unite the villagers in merit-making but also open up this opportunity to lay devotees to accumulate merits for the future. The ceremony is infused with great enjoyment, merry-making, spiritualism, subliminal bliss and mental solace. Suppose the sung-sermon ceases to exist in the future due to a lack of nurturing ambience, it would inevitably lead to a hiatus in the entire corpus of Isaan twelve-month tradition known as *Prapheni Heet Sibsong* that forms the warp and woof of the Isaan way of life.

Instilling pride among local people

The village community takes great pride if a well-known practitioner monk hails from the village or resides in the village monastery. Along with individual fame and recognition a successful sung-sermon practitioner monk can bring pride to the entire community or locality. Like in all other field mastery of skill, originality, inborn talents are qualities that can transform an ordinary monk into the status of a highly acclaimed versifier and sung-sermon practitioner monk. Once the hard-won laurels of fame are attained through dedicated effort and rigorous practice, his fame easily secures him much devotion and reverential awe from hundreds of lay devotees. A sung-sermon practitioner monk's stature can be assessed from the number of invitations he receives during the Bunphravesa ceremony. For a well-recognized practitioner monk this is the busiest time of the year when he has the opportunity to display his own skill in the preaching of dhamma in a creative way that is soothing both at the aesthetic as well as spiritual level.

Diversification of creative monastic roles

Engagement with the sung-sermon delivery has led to the diversification of monastic roles of some monks along the creative path. This role becomes evident when we pay attention to the different rhythms that have evolved over the time. The most common style of rhythm used in the delivery of sung-sermon is “*Thamnong-nai-phuk-nai-mud*”,

literally translated into English as “tying-wrapping rhythm”. It is the principal rhythm used by monks while chanting from manuscripts. It has the compositional characteristic of *Rai*, a traditional form of Isaan verse. It is probable that this original rhythm has branched off with subtle variations at different localities throughout the northeastern region. A practitioner monk may master any one of the following three styles or all three depending on the locale, individual choice, ability and training. i) *Thamnong Lomphad Phrao* a rhythm that resembles the drifting of coconut palm fronds in the breeze. It is a slow kind of rhythm requiring alternate strong and weak or mild voice modulation similar to the effect of wind on the coconut palm fronds. This rhythm is typical of Ubonratchathani province. ii) *Thamnong Chang Thiem Mae* a rhythm that resembles the movement of the elephant calf along the side of its mother. In this rhythm the voice is alternately pressed and released but without complete release; sung at alternately high and low pitch but without producing the sound “eei-eei”. This rhythm is typical of Khonkaen and Chaiyaphum. iii) *Thamnong Kaa Taen Kon* a rhythm that resembles the movement of a crow along lumps of clay. In this rhythm the voice is rendered as slow and fast alternately similar to a crow’s to and fro jumping, flying off, and landing movement around lumps of mud in the paddy field. This rhythm is typical of Roi-et province. Since it originated in Suwanaphum district, this rhythm is also known as Suwanaphum rhythm.⁹

Most monks who take up the task of delivering the sung-sermon have to prepare themselves very well about such things like – when and how to modulate their voice, when to interject new but relevant ideas, and how to make the session interesting with an

⁹ For details about the different types of rhythm (in Thai) see Jaruwan Thammawat, *Characteristics of Isaan Literature* (Mahasarakham: Srinakharinvirot University, 2521).

¹⁰ Out of all the thirteen sections, the ninth section entitled “Princess Matsi” is the most pathetic and sorrowful in which the princess fails to overcome various circumstantial hindrances that obstruct her and eventually fails to prevent her husband, Prince Vessantara (The Bodhisattva) from giving away their children, Chali and Kanha to the glutton, Chuchok. Her despair at losing her children and her longing for them is a climactic moment in the entire tale which an expert sung-sermon practitioner monk can render to a heartbreak level.

occasional touch of humour to sustain the listeners' attention. They have to take into full consideration and pay careful attention to their listeners. As for instance, if a majority of the listeners are women they have to improvise and prolong the part of the story dealing with the female protagonist, Matsu¹⁰. As a whole, this rhythmic sermon is a great form of oral narration that demands not just mechanical skill – a naturally good voice – but also creativity, spontaneity, psychological prowess, imagination, improvisation skills, rigorous practice and last but not the least, mindfulness so as not to deviate from the path of proper use of the rhythm and abstinence from over-indulgence in voice modulation technique.

In view of the above discussed roles it is rather parochial to draw hasty conclusions as to monks violating monastic rule by shaping their career as sung-sermon practitioner monks. The sung-sermon has to be understood in the broader context of applicability of diverse tools and techniques for dhamma propagation at a grassroot level with focus on infusion and mindful assimilation of indigenous cultural elements. Although the present writer does not hesitate to use the word 'sung' much against the disagreement with a few experts in the field, it has to be understood that this particular sermon is definitely not pure singing and is not comparable to some other religions' musical rendition of psalms and devotional songs, such as the Hindu Bhajans, Sikh Kirtans, etc. Moreover, there is no musical accompaniment to sung-sermon. But the reason why we call it sung is to emphasize its difference from other forms of general sermon which are delivered in a plain style. It has to be acknowledged that in the sung-sermon a minimal voice modulation and a harmonious rendition of high and low pitch is maintained in order to correspond to certain elements in the Vessantara Jataka story such as – pathos, humor, sarcasm, irony, etc. To a puritan, if monks using rhythm in sermon delivery is still a violation of monastic disciplinary code, then it would be rather wise to draw our attention to the point that it is mentioned in the Tripitaka that the Buddha once heard that a lute's string should not be stretched too tight or too loose, but just right – and this led him to strive towards enlightenment. Likewise, if a sung-sermon practitioner monk's mindful use of rhythm awakens the minds of lay listeners and fills their hearts with subliminal joy and motivation towards compassionate actions in day to day life, the purpose of the sermon can be said to have very well fulfilled.

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