

Knowledge Management Model of Development Monks in Northeastern Thailand*



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Abstract

This investigation uses a qualitative research methodology. The aims of the investigation are 1) to study the background of the Buddhist monks in Northeastern Thailand; 2) to study the knowledge management of Buddhist monks in Northeastern Thailand; and 3) to study a knowledge management model of development monks (monks charged with building community stability) in Northeastern Thailand. The research methods used in gathering data were interview, observation and group discussion. Data was gathered from three groups of purposively selected respondents: 20 key informants, 30 casual informants and 20 general informants. Research was conducted from August 2017 to October 2017 in five provinces, which were Nakhon Ratchasima, Roi Et, Amnat Charoen, Yasothon and Surin. The data obtained was verified by means of data triangulation. The research found there are groups of monks who work in the communities as local developers. More than half are Buddhist monks who are born and raised in the community where their temples are located. Each developer is from a moderately wealthy family in the community, has enough to eat and experiences very few personal problems in life. Most of the monks are ordained

according to the traditions observed by their parents. The results revealed that the developers use their principles to develop a stable society. They help promote peace with the use of Buddhist principles, especially the core precepts, meditation and wisdom. Their work always starts with the development of people to have the knowledge and ability to work. They aim to development villages and schools to be stable and sustainable societies. The principles of operation for the developed societies are the pursuit of knowledge, the construction of knowledge, knowledge storage and knowledge dissemination. The monks are also responsible for the restoration and preservation of the status of Buddhist institutions. The Buddhist monks can be relied on by the community because they represent the moral and ethical issues of Buddhists. These Buddhist monks are undertaking a mission to restore the social security and status of communities that have been damaged by materialism and consumerism. By incorporating local traditional knowledge into their everyday activities and teaching, they also act as agents of conservation for Thai customs and culture.

Keywords: Knowledge management, development, Buddhism, Northeastern Thailand

Introduction

Temples are the centers of Thai communities and fulfil the role of setting the foundations of prosperity for the surrounding society. They simultaneously help to reduce the problems within a community and strengthen the community. They are not only a religious hub, but also a cultural hub. Their importance to local identity is reflected in the surrounding art, literature, customs and traditions. Linked to this continuous history of involvement in community development are monks. Monks are the agents of support provided by the temples. They are leaders of the collective mentality and play a big part in ensuring community participation and cooperation in various initiatives (Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), 2000).

The role of Thai Buddhist monks includes providing aid to members of the community and promoting social harmony and cooperation, with due consideration to the circumstances of each individual case. Monks are expected to give advice to people and strengthen the individual and collective mindset, especially for those individuals who have fallen from a righteous path. There is an increasing need for this kind of intervention from monks in modern society, as foreign culture and global trends play an ever larger part in Thai society, diluting the once embedded traditional values (Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), 2000).

Not only do monks have a huge responsibility for the promotion of traditional Thai and Buddhist values, they also have a responsibility to the nation (Southard, 2016). Consequently, it is important that the national government recognizes the important role played by the monks and offers suitable, up-to-date training to enhance their effectiveness. In addition, the temples require support with budget and resources (Dhammahaas, 2014). The last twenty years of government policy has focused on improving the lives and economy of the Thai people and pushing Thailand towards a 'developed' nation status. This has been achieved using the principles of the self-sufficient economy designed by the late Thai king, Bhumibol Adulyadej. Thailand now has a much more stable economy and is able to compete on the international stage. (Jaroensettasinm 2016). Simultaneously, Western civilization has influenced Thai society through a number of media. Consequently, Thailand has developed, but not to the extent it should have due to problems with the economy, society, politics, religion

and culture. It is necessary to help develop the people of Thailand so that they may adapt and come to terms with Western influences. Buddhism is an important tool for this because it helps people respond to the intangible consequences of their material culture. The aspects of the Buddhist religion with the closest links to the laity in Thailand are the temples and monks. As temples are the centres of Thai communities, monks are the representatives of those centres in promoting the spirituality and mentality of the common people.

Often, the main reason for disintegration or disappearance of resources in the surrounding environment is their misuse and mismanagement by humans. These factors can be divided into three different categories: strains felt due to population increase, expansion of communities and the effects of new technology. Economic problems are linked to the state of the surrounding environment, as well as external factors, including oil prices, economic status of trade partners and global depression. The combination causes poverty in local communities and associated lifestyle problems that the monks are entrusted to address. There are also domestic factors that cause lifestyle changes and difficulties, such as national politics, personal injury, increasing age and job loss. Some of the problems that monks are traditionally expected to deal with in communities include substance abuse, violence and truancy. These problems are particularly associated with youth. However, modern society has seen a shift so that the top five problems among young Thai people are (1) misuse of media, (2) substance abuse, (3) teenage pregnancy, (4) popular consumer culture and (5) violence.

Culture is social heritage in the form of values, trends, languages, belief systems, customs, traditions, rules and lifestyles. It is inherited from one generation to the next and is a communal treasure that has no end, thanks to human interest in learning about the past. Religion is an important aspect of this culture because when people follow the same belief system they relate to a common identity. This identity includes shared practices, knowledge and understanding. In the past, community manifestations of these shared practices, knowledge and understanding are invariably led by monks. However, modern community identity has been diluted by Western influences, especially in Northeastern Thailand. There is less community spirit, cooperation and continuity of traditions. This has had a big impact on Northeastern

Thai society, to the extent that material culture is now more advanced but ‘Thainess’ (the essence of Thai identity) is becoming more obscured (Abercrombie, 2016). Given its important function shaping the minds of local people, Buddhism has an important role to play in Northeastern Thai communities to ensure that the traditional way of life is not lost in the wake of rapid cultural changes. In light of this, the researchers were keen to investigate the knowledge management model of development monks in Northeastern Thailand.

Research Aims

There were three principal aims for this investigation:

- 1) To study the background of the Buddhist monks in Northeastern Thailand;
- 2) To study the knowledge management of Buddhist monks in Northeastern Thailand;
- 3) To study a knowledge management model of development monks charged with building community stability in Northeastern Thailand.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative investigation taking data from documentary analysis and field research. Research was conducted from August 2017 to October 2017 in five provinces, which were Nakhon Ratchasima, Roi Et, Amnat Charoen, Yasothon and Surin Provinces. These locations were purposively selected according to three criteria: 1) the local monks had won awards for their services to the community, 2) the communities actively participated in the development of society, 3) there was an established network of development monks in the area. Data was gathered from three groups of purposively selected respondents: 20 key informants, 30 casual informants and 20 general informants. Respondents were all members of the communities in the research area. Development monks chosen to provide data for the investigation were selected on the basis that they had practiced at their current community temple for over twenty years. This was to ensure respondents were able to draw on their experiences within the community and provide data concerning changes in the community attitudes

over time. In addition, the monks selected for data collection had all been recognised and awarded by the national Buddhist council for their efforts in community development. Although it could be argued that selection of respondents in this way restricted the variety of input from informants due to their very similar nature, each monk has a very specific and unique way of delivering community support, which provides the level of diversity required for this investigation. The key informant group was composed of twenty senior monks who were experts in community development. The casual informant group was composed of current development monks and their aides, totalling thirty individuals. The general informant group was composed of local residents, temple councillors and village councillors, totalling twenty individuals.

The main data collection methods were participatory and non-participatory observation, structured and unstructured interviews, and focus group discussion. Observation was conducted according to the practices outlined by Sin Panpinit (2010), whereby the researchers involved themselves in the day to day activities of the development monks to understand and record details of their work. Interviews were managed using the guidelines of Songkoon Chantachon (2006) and questions were targeted at each of the informant groups. Following interviews, the researchers drew some preliminary conclusions and presented the data for verification to focus groups of six to ten individuals. The data obtained was then validated by means of data triangulation and categorised into groups according to the three aims of the investigation (Chantavanit, 2000). The data was then analysed using typological and inductive analysis techniques. The results are presented here as a descriptive analysis.

Results

From document analysis and field investigation using participatory and non-participatory observation, structured and unstructured interviews, and focus group discussion, the research team found the following results:

The management background of development by Buddhist monks in the Northeast

Buddhist monks have always played an important role in the development of

local communities in Thailand, ever since Buddhism first arrived in the country from India. However, this was arguably only first institutionalised when the government began incorporating development by local Buddhist monks into its economic and social development plans. In Northeastern Thailand, the official beginning of systematic development by the clergy was in 1963 when Mahamakut Buddhist University sent scholars under a government directive to train monks in community development. 1973-1976 was consequently a time of significant increase in the popularity of Buddhist monks committing to higher education. From 1976, that first wave of monk scholars returned back to their communities and began implementing the techniques and methods that they had learned. In 1984, the government took greater interest in community development and tried to encourage people to realise their importance to community development. At this time, they also tried to convince more monks to join government departments and work towards community development through official administrative channels. In 1986, there was a wide scale drought and many communities suffered, particularly in the conservation of local landmarks and resources. This triggered the interest of a number of concerned monks, who established the “*phra song nak anurak*” group (“The Conservationist Monks”). In 1987, there was further drought, causing the government to form the “Green Isan Project”, which was focused on helping the people of Isan through water shortages. In 1997, there was an economic crisis which required many more monks to leave their duties and work for the government on domestic issues and international diplomacy. Subsequently, in 2003, the government used monks as a tool in their war on drugs. These events highlight the increasing government involvement in monks’ community development role.

The results show that former development monks in Northeastern Thailand were Luang Bu Mun Bhuridatta, Luang Bu Chah Subhaddo, Luang Por Koon Bhurisutto and general development monks. These individuals were dedicated to study the dhamma during their ordination. From these origins, they returned to develop their hometowns and took responsibility for the administration of the local Buddhist councils. The majority of development monks held positions on the Buddhist council of Thailand as local abbots, or head of sub-district and district-level Buddhist councils. Their activities in developing society included teaching people to live a self-sufficient

lifestyle, building community relationships, conserving local traditional knowledge, conserving the local natural environment and raising health awareness.

The monks who acted as community developers first began by improving local infrastructure, especially roads to enable better cross-community communication. Over the years, monks have also been involved in water sanitation projects, community planting initiatives, traditional healing, public health, community cooperatives and community savings banks. The monks have also played a large part in education, establishing day-care centres and running a variety of camps for young people. Some of their most important work has been in the rehabilitation of drug addicts. Nowadays, the role of the monks has decreased because there is a larger number of government institutions ordered with specific directives in community development.

The results concerning the background of development monks currently operating in Northeastern Thailand indicate three common features: 1) over half of monks currently acting as community developers were born and grew up in the communities surrounding their current temples; all are from the Northeast of Thailand; 2) all of the development monks come from families with an average social standing in the local community, which means they lived sufficiently and did not experience major lifestyle problems; 3) the majority of development monks ordained according to the traditions of their respective families to make merit for their parents.

The knowledge management of Buddhist monks in the Northeast

The work of the monks for strengthening the local community and promoting peace is based on the foundations of Buddhist principles. The monks preach to the four members of the Buddhist community (*bhikkhu*, *bhikkhuni*, *upasaka* and *upasika*) to use the precepts, *samadhi* (meditative consciousness) and *panna* (insight in the true nature of reality) as the foundations for their daily lives. The monks' work begins with development of the individual's knowledge and skills in their occupation. The monks then manage the development of people so that they have knowledge and ability in the development of the temple, the community and schools. This is to ensure that society is strong and continuous.

Knowledge management of development monks in Northeastern Thailand is based on the principles of searching for knowledge, creating knowledge, managing

knowledge, analysing knowledge, disseminating knowledge and evaluating. The aim is a peaceful society founded on Buddhist dharmic principles. The monks decide the method of development and begin with development of the individual so that they have sufficient knowledge and ability to do their jobs and possess strong morals. Importantly, the monks help people develop before they are in desperate need because, in order for work to be of a high quality, people must develop their knowledge and skill, and possess strong morals and values. It is especially important that people adhere to precepts of knowledge and hold a strong work ethic. If the community values knowledge, peace will be upheld in the community through the economy, as people will enjoy a sufficient lifestyle, strong living culture and beautiful surrounding natural resources.

The majority of development monks adopt an approach that promotes community participation at both the theoretical and practical stages of problem-solving. The temples are small organisations and their planning is not complex. The individuals with the greatest power within the temple hierarchy are the abbots. Monks are then respected in order of years as a monk, with those having served for longest commanding the most respect. Planning tasks within the temple are delegated among the hierarchy of monks and include such tasks as finance, employment, activities and general management. When temple monks are in need of greater assistance with temple management, external help will be provided by development monks from outside, who then make a judgement on the need for assistance in the wider community. Any maintenance or restoration of temple architecture or artifacts must be given approval by the resident monks and community members. Any additions to the temple buildings must be in the same style as the original structure. Any maintenance to the surrounding environment must pay particular care to the local natural resources. The temple grounds are divided into zones, which include specific areas for locals to come and relax or meditate. These areas are adorned with plants and trees. There is also an education zone with a youth centre for education clinics or general use. In addition to their development of the temples, visiting development monks are expected to hold seminars or workshops to instruct locals in the desired qualities of a moral and ethical lifestyle according to the principles of the sufficiency economy. These workshops often include occupational advice for locals to best profit from their

everyday jobs. Development monks assist in the local communities by supporting local volunteers and the police in community initiatives and offer donations and resources on important holy days throughout the year. The monks also help to provide opportunities for young people to exercise, as well as offering vital support in tackling narcotics abuse and helping strengthen domestic relationships. On top of these duties, the monks also give financial support, bursaries and loans, for educational and occupational pursuits, and offer significant advice to the elderly regarding health and self-care. These services are in addition to the monks' standard duties of spreading the teachings of the Lord Buddha and promoting strong ethics and morals in society. The monks are heavily involved with the maintenance of local customs and traditions, playing a large part in community ceremonies such as the official water-pouring ceremony for the elderly during the Songkran festival. The work of the monks can thus be divided into four distinct categories: 1) planning and organisation, 2) temple and resource maintenance, 3) community support, 4) promotion of Buddhism and traditions.

A knowledge management model of development monks charged with building community stability in the Northeast

The knowledge management model of development monks for building community stability in Northeastern Thailand is composed of a model for demonstrating Buddhist sermons, management of activities for developing society and management of training projects. The objectives are to develop local communities in terms of the economy, society, traditions and culture, natural environment and safety in life and property. Locals should be able to use the knowledge gained from listening to Buddhist sermons, participating in community development activities and taking part in training projects in their everyday lives, which will make society happy and stable.

For the knowledge management model of development monks, it was found that planning by development monks should involve planning of temple administration and include the participation of all sectors within the temple community. This is to ensure that all parties have an equal stake and therefore equal motivation to fulfil planned objectives. Organisations within the temple structure should be managed clearly to ease delegation of tasks and responsibilities. The allocation of work within

the temples and employment of external experts should be according to expertise and skills. The workload within the temple should also be spread equally. If anyone is found to be shirking their responsibilities, they should be required to attend dharma camps or seminars on morality and ethics to improve their work ethic. Development monks must have knowledge about how to manage documents, especially orders and instructions within and outside the temples. The monks must know how to control their juniors within the temple and teach them to be good role models to gain the full trust of the local community.

Local traditional knowledge must be integrated into the work of the development monks. The monks must be knowledgeable in the proper maintenance and restoration of ancient buildings, artefacts and traditional culture. When undertaking permanent maintenance, the monks must consider the usage and particular value of the original ancient structure and ensure that these features are not lost with the new changes. Importantly, all people affected by the changes should have a say in any development to buildings and structures. The development monks must consider the surrounding natural environment at all times and be role models in their attitude towards nature. Development monks should implement training and seminars for the locals to understand and implement the principles of the sufficiency economy in their everyday lives. An additional function of the development monks is to support and sponsor the efforts of local volunteer projects and, importantly, raise awareness of the dangers of addictive narcotics within the community. It is the responsibility of the monks to help addicts come to terms with and subsequently beat their addictions. The monks should then provide rehabilitative support to appropriate candidates. Further to these duties, the development monks should work in cooperation with the ministry of public health and local hospitals and clinics to promote awareness of public health in the local community and organise self-care training for the elderly in the area. They should also organise workshops and projects to promote cleanliness in the temple and the community area and assist on development projects with local authorities, such as road maintenance and tourism initiatives. These duties are all in addition to the fundamental work of the development monks, which is to spread the teachings of the Lord Buddha and to promote ethical and virtuous living among local community members. They must organise and assist at events on holy days as well as carry out

their everyday tasks, such as merit-making and preaching. Moreover, the monks should help preserve the local culture and customs of Northeastern Thailand.

Discussion

Monks are responsible for the restoration and preservation of the status of Buddhist institutions, as well as their participation in community development activities (Phongphit, 1988). Clearly, one of the key duties of Buddhist monks in Thailand is to spread the teachings of the Lord Buddha and the principles of dharma (Veidlinger, 2006). However, monks are increasingly required to help maintain the importance of Buddhism in an increasingly connected and politicized rural society (Swearer, 1999). Monks now have an increased responsibility towards the national Thai government, which is reflected in the work of development monks to improve local lifestyle in rural societies. As Dylan Southard observed, “with the creation of the ‘People’s Constitution’ and the passage of the National Decentralization Act in the late 1990s, the Thai government began adopting the symbols of localism in its own development strategies...This has resulted in the ‘channeling’ of monastic development practice into state-initiated projects.” Of particular importance to the government is the philosophy of Buddhism concerning the natural environment and teaching people to respect and nurture their surroundings. The principles fit particularly harmoniously with the government mantra of the ‘sufficiency economy’, an economic philosophy developed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej and subsequently adopted by successive Thai governments as policy (Southard, 2014). Development monks adhere to the fundamental concept of living within one’s means and in their everyday community work act as proxies to the government, as well as messengers for the Lord Buddha (Sponsel and Sponsel, 1995).

Communities can depend on monks, just as they can continue to adopt the temple as their centre. Temples have traditionally been the hubs of Thai communities and over the years have been used as institutions for education, culture and health, as well as religion. In recent years, the use of local temples has declined. As society has grown, more specialised institutions have emerged and the importance of temples as multipurpose buildings has declined. Although the purpose of temple construction in

Thailand has changed little over the course of two-hundred years, there has been a marked change in social perceptions of the temple due to a decline in people entering the monkhood and a decrease in central budget. Also cited as causing transformation of the temple from the centre of society to an ordinary member have been Western lifestyle influences, decrease in agricultural occupations, increased communication with external communities, increased external control and less dependence on nature (Nakthong, Jumpadaeng and Phothisane, 2014). Monks are helping to restore the temple to its place of importance at the centre of the community and they are undertaking a mission to prevent the deterioration of religious values in the face of materialism and consumerism (Lapthananon, 2012).

Buddhist ethics and values are being modernised and, as a result, Buddhist manners and the role of Buddhists are changing. Local residents are living further from the temples and are not interested in visiting the temples to maintain their own personal values and observe the precepts (Hughes, 2014). Unless they need to go for an important ceremony, people do not think of temples or monks. It is the job of the development monks to ensure Buddhist values remain at the forefront of the minds of the people and that the status of Buddhist institutions remains strong and stable. The knowledge management model investigated during this study clearly shows that monks are involved in a huge variety of initiatives across local communities. This prevalence in all aspects of society will not only lead to greater consistency in development initiatives, but also lead to more stable, secure and prosperous communities.

Suggestions

Following the outcomes of this investigation, the researchers wish to make a number of recommendations. Firstly, development monks and senior members of local temples should use the model as a set of guidelines for their development practice. At every opportunity, local knowledge must be integrated into the work of the development monks and local people should participate in any initiatives so that their expertise and familiarity with the local context can be used. The surrounding environment and its preservation must be the basis of all development. Consequently, the government, who benefit immeasurably from the work of the development monks,

should allocate additional resources and organise training for monks regarding the use and maintenance of the surrounding natural environment. Similarly, development monks should implement training and seminars for local people to understand and implement the principles of the sufficiency economy in their everyday lives.

Concerning further investigation, the researchers recommend that similar investigations are conducted into the knowledge management models of development monks across the country, so that similarities, differences and best practices can be identified. In addition, the impact of development monks in local communities should be analysed to single out areas in which developments have been more or less successful. Finally, the researchers wish to recommend further research into the factors compelling local residents to participate in development projects so that more can be done to motivate locals to support their communities.

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