

# DEK WAT AND THAI EDUCATION: THE CASE OF TAMBON BAN KHEM

by

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## PREFACE

Before the introduction of the modern education system in Thailand, education, as is generally known, was conducted by the *bhikkhu* (monks) of Buddhist temples. It was customary for boys five or six years of age to enter a temple as *dek wat* (temple boys) and, while serving the monks, to be taught Buddhist morals, reading, writing, and arithmetic. The *dek wat* system was meant only for boys; girls were not afforded this type of educational opportunity.

In 1898, a state-controlled educational system was introduced, and in 1921 the Compulsory Education Act was promulgated by Rama VI. As the modern educational system was gradually consolidated, reading, writing, and arithmetic came to be taught at schools. Even after the educational reform, the *dek wat* continued to live in the temple and work for the monks; they remained indispensable in maintaining the functions of the temple. No doubt the introduction of modern school education profoundly influenced the relationship between the *dek wat* and the *bhikkhu*, even if only in the field of education. But the *dek*

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*wat* remained as important as before in linking the Buddhist order with the secular world and with the schools. It is of great significance that the temple, which has handed over its traditional right of education to the modern school system, still raises a large number of boys (*dek wat*) every year who are well acquainted with temple life and influenced by Buddhist ethics.

The number of the *dek wat* fluctuates depending upon the season, the size of the temple, and whether the temple is located in the country or in town. Usually the number seems to be a little larger than the combined number of *bhikkhu* and *nen* (monks under apprenticeship) at the temple. In temples located in farm villages, the number of the *dek wat* is about equal to, or perhaps a little larger than, the number of monks. On the other hand, at large temples in big cities such as Bangkok, there are far more *dek wat* than monks. The majority of the *dek wat* have come to the temple from other districts to enter school or to find employment. For example, at *Wat Pho* (Pho Temple) of Ban Khem Village, there were 18 *dek wat* to 21 monks in October, while in December of the same year at *Wat Pho* of Bangkok (which enjoys the highest social standing in Thailand) there were more than 1,000 registered *dek wat* (the *dek wat* in Bangkok have to be registered with the district office) to 160 *bhikkhu* and 40 *nen*. Of the 1,000 registered *dek wat*, nearly 600 lived in the monastery of *Wat Pho*; the rest lived elsewhere because of their studies or their employment. In *Wat Pho* of Bangkok at the beginning of the rainy season, about 70 to 100 government officials and military officers temporarily renounce the world and join the order, which almost doubles the number of *bhikkhu*. Since these short-term monks usually bring with them new *dek wat*, the number of *dek wat* also increases. For this reason, it is said that in the rainy season there are more than 10 *dek wat* in a *khana*, or small division (1 *khana* generally consists of 4 *bhikkhu* and 2 *nen*). Thus, although the number of *dek wat* fluctuates throughout the year, the *dek wat* system of Thailand has become a tradition which provides Thai boys with their first opportunity to become acquainted with the life of the *sangkha* (monkhood order). Since temples in Thailand number approximately 24,600, and monks approximately 280,000 (as of 1967), it can be estimated that at least 300,000 to 400,000 Thai



boys live as *dek wat* with monks in temples. Little research has been conducted concerning the *dek wat*, who are a special group among Thai boys of elementary school age. In Ban Khem Village, at the time of the author's survey, 18 *dek wat* lived at Wat Pho of Hamlet 2; 19 at Wat Kud of Hamlet 4; and 5 at Wat Mai Ban Kruoi of Hamlet 1.

This paper deals with the relationship between three parties: the temple, the *dek wat*, and the school. It cannot claim to be a comprehensive survey, but the author presents this paper as a contribution to research on the temple, education, and *dek wat* in a farm-village area.

### I. A Synopsis of Ban Khem Village

Ban Khem Village (*Tambon* Ban Khem), the place of this survey, is located in the Khaoyoi District of Phetburi Province in central Thailand. On the bus road leading south from Bangkok through Nakhon Pathom, it is about 140 kilometers from Bangkok, between the towns of Ratburi and Phetburi. By walking approximately 1.5 kilometers on a village road eastward from the bus road, one comes to Ban Khem Village, which is surrounded by a coconut grove. Ban Khem Village is the smallest of the 11 precincts (*tambon*) in the Khaoyoi District. It covers an area of 3 kilometers east to west, and 4 kilometers north to south. Since no fresh water is available from wells, rain water and pond water are the only sources of drinking water.

The village consists of four hamlets (*muban*) numbered Ban Khem 1 to Ban Khem 4. There are 179 households in Hamlet 1; 160 in Hamlet 2; 46 in Hamlet 3; and 275 in Hamlet 4. Hamlets 2 and 4 have old temples. In Hamlet 1 a new temple has been under construction for the past two years; however, this new temple has not yet been formally registered with the *sangkha* organization.

There is one elementary school in Hamlet 2 and another in Hamlet 4; the former has 443 pupils with 15 classrooms, and the latter 540 pupils with 18 classrooms. Both schools have seven-year courses of instruction. At the *tambon* level, however, school districts do not always coincide with administrative districts; the two elementary schools noted above are among nine elementary schools within a school district which contains Ban Khem Village and two adjacent villages. Within this school

district, one can go to any one of the nine elementary schools. Of these nine schools, however, only the two in Ban Khem Village have seven-year courses of instruction; the rest all have four-year courses.

Ninety percent of the Ban Khem Village residents are rice farmers. The rest are engaged in commerce, charcoal making, day labor, etc. In Hamlet 4, many merchants, most of whom are descendants of Chinese immigrants, live centered around the market place (*talat*). Besides the Chinese, there are five other minority groups in Khaoyoi District: the Lao Puan, Lao Wiang, Karen, Thai Dam, and Lao So. But, with the exception of a few Thai Dam (Black Thai), the major population of Ban Khem Village is Siamese, the dominant people of central Thailand.

## II. The Life of Dek Wat

The *dek wat's* day starts at 6 o'clock in the morning. The *dek wat* and *nen* get up together, hastily wash their faces at the bath area at the end of the monastery, and then hurry to their appointed houses with their *pinto* (nested food carriers). Since the village road is still dark, they are sometimes barked at by dogs. If by chance they are going in the same direction, they may walk with other *dek wat* and *nen*. But walking together means nothing more than that they happen to be going in the same direction. At the houses they visit, housewives, doing their cooking, are already waiting for them. The *dek wat*, after waiting for a little while, receive the food in their *pinto* and return to their temples. If a *dek wat* receives a large papaya or other fruit, or food other than cooked food, he carries it under his arm.

The *dek wat* divide their work among themselves: some collect the *pintos* and arrange breakfast for the *bhikkhu*; some fill jars in the bathing area with water; and others clean the temple. Then they change into their school uniforms, eat the food that is left by the *bhikkhu*, wash the dishes in the paddy water behind the temple, and at about 8:30 to 8:45 leave for a nearby elementary school. According to the school principals, many *dek wat* come to school late because of their miscellaneous duties at the temple. The *dek wat* usually take their lunch with them, but sometimes they return to their temple to eat. At 11:30 the *bhikkhu* usually prepare lunch for themselves, but occasionally the *dek wat* return



from school to help them; in this case, the *dek wat* return to school after washing the dishes the *bhikkhu* have used. At 3:30 school is over and the *dek wat* return to the temple. They refill the empty jars in the bathing area and clean the inside of the temple. Around this time, the *dek wat* seem to have some time to play. At 5 o'clock, all the *dek wat* gather on the wooden floor of the monastery, sit in a circle, eat dinner, and then wash the dishes. The *bhikkhu* of course do *not* eat dinner, but if they ask for water, the *dek wat* boil water and bring it to them. At 5:30 p.m., *dek wat* say their prayers. After this, most *dek wat* have free time, but one *dek wat* remains on duty to massage the chief monk. During this time, the chief monk has the *dek wat* read a passage from a Pali text, asks him various questions, or has him read from his school textbook. All the *dek wat* go to bed between 8:00 and 9:00 p.m.

As mentioned before, the number of *dek wat* at Wat Pho of Hamlet 2 varied from more than twenty during the rainy season to about ten in the dry season. Three of them began to visit us at our living quarters in the temple, and often they ate their meals with us and stayed overnight. Judging from this, it does not seem that the *dek wat* are under strict regulations. When they stayed overnight with us, like children anywhere they continued to sleep past six o'clock unless someone tried to wake them up. They jumped out of bed when called and left the room immediately; apparently at the temple they are awakened by the *bhikkhu*. They offered to massage us when we lay down at night, or to cut our nails; in this respect it can be said that they are different from other children.

The *bhikkhu* keep quite busy, as they are frequently invited by villagers not only of Ban Khem Village but also of neighboring villages to their ceremonies of coming of age, marriage, funeral rites, etc. On days when there is no school, they are always accompanied by some *dek wat*. Also, at such ceremonies as the New Year's Ceremony, Songkran Ceremony, and Loi Krathong Ceremony, *dek wat* are very busy assisting the monks. Since *dek wat* are not members of the *sangkha*, they can cook food for monks if necessary. Thus, it is impossible to think of a *bhikkhu's* life without *dek wat*.

### III. The Attributes of Dek Wat

#### 1. Family environment

Generally speaking, the *dek wat* come from families that are poor, have only one parent, or have many children. Also, it is said that many families who live far away from a school entrust their children to a temple and have them commute to school from there. Tables 1, 2, and 3, however, do not seem to show this tendency clearly. In the case of the *dek wat* in the three temples of Wat Pho, Wat Kud, and Wat Mai Ban Kruoi, some lived in the temple for a long time and commuted to school; others who came with short-term *bhikkhu* for the rainy season left the temple when the *bhikkhu* returned to secular life. If the short-term *dek wat* were excluded, an analysis might well show that many of the *dek wat* were from families who lived far from the school or who had many children. These characteristics are not clearly revealed in the tables, though, because of the limited duration of our survey. The data collected during the dry season showed that one-sixth of the *dek wat* at Wat Pho and Wat Mai Ban Kruoi were from families with a single parent. The average number of children in the families the *dek wat* came from was 5 to 6, which is certainly not a very large number for a Thai farm village family. In the case of Wat Pho, for example, the most striking figures were: 4 *dek wat* were from families with 6 children, another 4 were from families with 7 children, and 2 were from families with 8 children. In regard to the occupations of their parents, many were, naturally, in agriculture, but the high proportion of parents engaged in commerce is worth noting.

TABLE 1  
OCCUPATION OF PARENTS OF *DEK WAT*

	Farmers	Trades- men	Fruit Growers	Carpenters	Teachers	Charcoal Sellers	UKN.	Total
Wat Pho	9	3	2				4	18
Wat Kud	8	6		1	1	2	1	19
Wat M.B.K.	5							5
Total	22	9	2	1	1	2	5	42



TABLE 2  
STATUS OF PARENTS

	Both Parents	Only one	UKN.	Total
Wat Pho	12	3	3	18
Wat Kud	17	1	1	19
Wat M.B.K.	4	1		5
Total	33	5	4	42

TABLE 3  
NUMBER OF SIBLINGS

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	UKN.	Total
Wat Pho	1	1	2		3	4	4	2			18
Wat Kud				4	6	2	1	2		3	19
Wat M.B.K.				1	1	2			1		5
Total	1	1	2	5	10	8	5	4	1	3	42

## 2. The ages and the school years of the dek wat

The ages of the *dek wat* ranged from 15 at the oldest to 6 at the youngest. Of all 42 *dek wat*, 10 were 11 years of age; 6 were 10 years; 5 were 14; 5 were 13; and 5 were 12. Three were in the first year of middle school (*Matthyom Su'ksa 1*); 7 were in the seventh year of elementary school (*Prathom*), 4 in the sixth, 10 in the fifth, 8 in the fourth. There were few *dek wat* in the first and second years of elementary school.

Therefore, it is concluded that the majority of the *dek wat* are eleven to fourteen years of age and in the fourth to sixth year of elementary school. In many cases, in the agricultural areas of Thailand, the ages of elementary-school pupils do not agree with their school years. At Ban Khem Village, pupils in the fourth year of the elementary school were usually 9 to 10, but there was one case of a pupil of 15 years who was in the fourth year. As for the duration of a *dek wat*'s stay in the temple, the longest was 6 years and the shortest 2 months. As a general tendency, there are two types of *dek wat*: those who leave the temple after 1 to 3 months and those who reside for a few years. There is a clear contrast between the *dek wat* who enter the temple with a temporary monk and the *dek wat* who reside in the temple for a long period of time.

TABLE 4  
AGES OF *DEK WAT*

	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Total
Wat Pho	1	1		2	3	4	2	2	3		18
Wat Kud		2	1		1	5	3	3	2	2	19
Wat M.B.K.			1	1	2	1					5
Total	1	3	2	3	6	10	5	5	5	2	42

TABLE 5  
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF *DEK WAT*

	P. 1	P. 2	P. 3	P. 4	P. 5	P. 6	P. 7	M.S. 1	Total
Wat Pho	1		3	4	4	2	2	2	18
Wat Kud	3		1	2	5	2	5	1	19
Wat M.B.K.		1	1	2	1				5
Total	4	1	5	8	10	4	7	3	42



### 3. *The places of origin of the dek wat*

Generally speaking, many *dek wat* come from the same hamlet in which the *wat* (temple) is located, but the number of such *dek wat* is not always the largest; a large proportion of the children may come from adjacent hamlets without a temple. For example, in the case of Wat Pho, four children were from Ban Khem 2, while five were from Ban Khem 3, which is 2 kilometers east of Ban Khem 2 and does not have a temple, and there were three from Chumphon Village, which is north of Ban Khem 2. In the case of Wat Kud, four were from Chumphon Village, which is to the west across the bus road. In view of the fact that there is a temple in Chumphon Village, the proportion of the four *dek wat* from that village is quite high as compared with the seven *dek wat* from Ban Khem 4 where Wat Kud is located. Also, in the case of Wat Kud, one *dek wat* was from Bangkok, which is 140 kilometers away and two were from Ratburi, which is 30 kilometers away. There are two main reasons why *dek wat* come from such distant areas: one is that families who live in a hamlet without a temple entrust their sons to the temple for the convenience of commuting to school; the other is that *dek wat* are admitted to the temple through their kinship with one of the monks. In the case of the *dek wat* from distant cities such as Bangkok and Ratburi, their parents were either on familiar terms with or related to one of the monks of the temple. There are also many cases in which a *bhikkhu* looks after a *dek wat* as his adopted son. In the case of large temples in Bangkok, *dek wat* from other districts are related to or personally acquainted with or have been introduced to a monk in the temple. In many cases, parents in a farm village or in a small district town send their sons as *dek wat* to a large temple in Bangkok, not because of poverty or distance, but as a means for having them enter a good school and go on to a good university in Bangkok. In such cases, the parents are not necessarily poor.

TABLE 6  
HOME AREAS OF *DEK WAT*

	M. 1	M. 2	M. 3	M. 4	Chumphon	Bangkok	Ratburi	Other	Total
Wat Pho	1	4	5	2	3			3	18
Wat Kud		2		7	4	1	2	3	19
Wat M.B.K.	4							1	5
Total	5	6	5	9	7	1	2	7	42

#### 4. Relationship to monks

In the majority of cases in this study, as shown in Table 7, the monks and *dek wat* were not related. But it is noteworthy that 18 out of 39 (with 3 excluded because their relationship to the monks was not clear) were somehow related to the monks. Generally, when a Thai man twenty years of age or older joins the order for a short period during the rainy season, he will take with him as his *dek wat* a younger brother, if he is of a suitable age, or, if he is not, a nephew. The parents of the *dek wat* who accompanies his elder brother or uncle regard it as an honor and as a great virtue for the family. In this case, the *dek wat* sometimes transfers to a school close to the temple for that period. He ceases to be a *dek wat* at the time the monk returns to secular life a few weeks or a few months later. The author's survey was conducted at Ban Khem Village during the dry season from October to January when most of such short-term monks and *dek wat* had left the temple; a survey conducted during the rainy season would have revealed more cases of kinship between monks and *dek wat*.



TABLE 7  
RELATIONSHIP OF *DEK WAT* TO *BHIKKHU*

	Non-Related	Brother	Nephew	Adopted	Other	UKN.	Total
Wat Pho	7		4		5	3	18
Wat Kud	10	2	3	1	2		19
Wat M.B.K.	4				1		5
Total	21	2	7	1	8	3	42

#### IV. Summary

In the preceding sections, some attempts have been made to analyze the *dek wat* at Wat Pho, Wat Kud, and Wat Mai Ban Kruoi. Based upon the materials cited above, and the results of the author's interviews and surveys, the following is presented in summary and conclusion.

As for the family environment of the *dek wat*, there was nothing unusual about their parents' occupations. It is interesting to note that the proportion of parents engaged in agriculture was low for a farm village. Families with a single parent were not as numerous as expected. There was a tendency, however, for poor families with many children to send their sons to the temple.

As for the *dek wat*'s ages, the majority were between 10 and 14 years, i.e., between the third and seventh year of elementary school. There was also a tendency for boys of families who lived far from an elementary school to become *dek wat*.

As for the relationship between the monks and *dek wat*, in many cases the monk and *dek wat* were not related, but in almost half of the cases there was a kinship relationship, mainly of brother-brother or uncle-nephew. If a *dek wat* was not related to any of the monks in the temple, in most cases he was admitted to the temple upon the request of his mother who personally knew a monk in the temple. It is interesting to note that there were few cases in which fathers made such a request. In any case, the relationship between monks and *dek wat* is often based upon kinship, friendship, or acquaintance. The fact that monks are frequently invited by villagers to various ceremonies also testifies to the above. It is not considered advisable for a villager to invite only the particular *bhikkhu* who is his relative or friend, but actually this practice is dominant, and it is especially notable where there is a kinship relationship between the monk and the *dek wat*.

The existence of the *dek wat* is indispensable to Thai Buddhism in maintaining the *sangkha* order, but the *dek wat* system is not without its problems. Before the modern educational system was introduced, the temple was the only place where boys could receive lessons in reading and writing, and it carried such weight that, once shut out of the temple, one was deprived of the path to becoming a respectable adult. Hence monks were able to impose strict discipline and education on the *dek wat*. But according to the *bhikkhu* of Wat Pho, *dek wat* of the present time soon leave the temple if they are put under strict discipline. Since reading, writing and arithmetic can be learned in school, the great influence and authority that the monks previously exerted over the *dek wat* have greatly diminished.

As for the parents that the author interviewed, the point of view of many, with the exception of the ardent Buddhists, was that they did not want to send their sons to the temple as *dek wat*. Many of them said that they would feel sorry for their children who would have to work early in the morning if they became *dek wat*, and that they would miss their sons whom they could not visit freely.



What did the *dek wat* themselves think of their life? As far as the author heard, they did not particularly dislike temple life, but when asked if they wanted to remain in the temple to become *nen* and then *bhikkhu*, almost all of them answered in the negative. Only two out of 42 *dek wat* wanted to become *bhikkhu* in the future. The reason the majority of them gave was that, if they became *bhikkhu*, they could not play freely. Since this was a response from playful children of elementary school age, it is rash to regard it as their attitude toward Theravāda Buddhism, but it is interesting to note that their answer "cannot play" clearly reflects their image of the monks.

As mentioned in the beginning, it is significant that hundreds of thousands of Thai boys live in the temple from a few months to a few years as *dek wat*, live with the monks, and are directly in contact with life within the Buddhist order.

It is said that many district officials, such as the *nai amphoe* (district chiefs), and officers of the Army and Air Force in present-day Thailand have experienced the *dek wat*'s life. The *nai amphoe* (district chief) of Khaoyoi District was an ardent Buddhist and was also quite well acquainted with Brahmanical rites. As an orphan he had been adopted by a high monk in Bangkok, and while serving as a *dek wat*, learned the Brahmanical rites as a matter of course. As has already been mentioned, hundreds of *dek wat* live in Wat Pho of Bangkok, and more than 200 students commute to universities from there. A pattern seems to have been established in which people from outside districts who do not have a suitable place in Bangkok, use their influences to send their sons as *dek wat* to Wat Pho, where they are provided with food and a place to live and from which they can commute to good schools. For these parents, it appears to be far more desirable for them to have their sons live under the guidance of the *bhikkhu* in a monastery of high social status than to have them live in dormitories of the university or high school or in private lodgings.

Just as the *dek wat* in Ban Khem Village make use of the temple for commuting to school while helping the monks, *dek wat* in Bangkok make use of the temple as a reliable dormitory which guarantees them food and residence in exchange for their helping monks with secular affairs such as cleaning the temple and purchasing food to supplement the insufficient amount acquired by begging.

Systematic research on the relationship between the temple, the *dek wat*, and the Thai school will bring interesting aspects of Thai education into light.