

# THE ROLE OF THE LAYMAN *EXTRAORDINAIRE* IN NORTHERN THAI BUDDHISM

by

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In his provocative study of religion in northeast Thailand, S.J. Tambiah describes the role of several religious actors, including a priestly type, "a lay ritual officiant, a householder and a village elder, who performs auspicious rites in some ways reminiscent of the classical *brahman* priest."<sup>1</sup> This priestly functionary, identified by Tambiah as a *mō-khwan* ("spirit doctor") or *phram*<sup>2</sup> is set over against the Buddhist monk or *bhikkhu* (*phra* in Thai). Tambiah argues that in Thailand the historically antagonistic roles of these religious actors become complementary: that on the village level the *phram/mō-khwan* has invariably been a monk in his youth and is a leader of the Buddhist congregation, as well as being a practitioner of *khwan* or spirit rites.<sup>3</sup> Tambiah, being more interested in ritual reciprocity and its relationship with village social structure, does not detail the role of the priestly functionary, however. This study proposes just such an undertaking but from a different perspective. While we are in agreement with Tambiah's position that the *phram/mō-khwan* performs a ritual role roughly consonant with that of the *brahman* priest, we propose to approach that role from within the normative system of Buddhism. That is, we shall examine the role of the *phram/mō-khwan* from his status as Buddhist layman or, more aptly, lay leader *extraordinaire*. We take this approach because the principal subject of this paper, Mr. Singkha Wannasai, a Buddhist lay leader of provincial if not regional significance in the area of Lamphun, north Thailand, perceives his role in that manner and also to show how a single religious actor can synthesize both Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements. Our discussion will begin with a few general comments about the Buddhist

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1) S.J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and The Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1970, p. 254.

2) I have changed Tambiah's transliteration from, *paahm*, to *phram*.

3) S.J. Tambiah, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

layperson before proceeding to an analysis of the priestly functions of the *phram/mo-khwan* who in our study will be identified by the terms *pho-khru* ("father-teacher") and *acharn* (Sanskrit: *ācārya*) *wat* ("teacher of the temple").<sup>4</sup> Once again our choice of terms rests with designations assigned by the subject of the study and corroborated by his lay peers.

Theravāda Buddhism as a social institution has been depicted by Western historians of religion primarily as a monastic religion. While in comparison with Judaism and Christianity the way of Theravāda is singularly monastic in its orientation, the role of the layperson should not be neglected or overlooked. One has only to examine some of the following terms used to designate the Buddhist layperson in Thailand to acknowledge the major role he or she performs: 1) *upāsaka/upāsikā*. The term, *upāsaka*, is derived from the Pāli, *upāsati*, meaning to sit near, attend, serve. The *upāsaka* serves the monk (*bhikkhu*) by providing for his material needs. 2) *garāvāsa/gahaṭṭha/gihi*. The *gahaṭṭha* (Sanskrit, *grhastā*) is the Pāli term for householder. It denotes the fact that the layman, unlike the *bhikkhu* or homeless mendicant, lives in a home or permanent dwelling. 3) *Śraddhā*. *Śraddhā* (Sanskrit) or faith suggests that the Buddhist layman is defined by faith in the Three Gems—the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. 4) *Dāyaka*. The Pāli term, *dāyaka*, means giving, bestowing, providing. The function designated by the *dāyaka* is, therefore, closely related to *upāsaka*, i.e., one who attends to the needs of the *bhikkhu-Sangha*. The composite picture derived from these terms shows that the Buddhist layman is a householder who demonstrates his faith in the Buddha and the monkhood by providing material needs for the monastic community.

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4) Both Pāli and Thai terms are transliterated in the article. In those cases where the Thai term is used as a title, I have used the Thai transliteration, e.g. *acharn* rather than *ācārya*, *wat* rather than *vata*, rather than the Pāli or Sanskrit. In most other cases of choice between Thai and Pāli (or Sanskrit) transliteration I have chosen the latter on the grounds of familiarity. Pali transliteration follows the Pali Text Society *Pali-English Dictionary* and Thai transliteration follows Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *The Nature and Development of the Thai Language*, Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1971.

Several written sources offer insight into the Buddhist view of the responsibilities of the layperson. In the Pāli Suttas the *Sigālovāda-suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* details what amounts to a blueprint for the householder life. It exhorts children to support their parents and be worthy of their heritage; instructs parents to restrain their children from vice and train them in a profession; admonishes teachers to love and train their pupils and pupils to serve their teachers; and further describes the duties of husband and wife, clansman and friends, master and servant. Some of these instructions are contained in the *pāñca sīla* or the five precepts of the virtuous layman, the most widely known ethical code of Buddhism, and in the Ten Principles of Good Conduct (*kusala-kamma*): 1) refrain from taking life, 2) refrain from stealing, 3) refrain from sexual misconduct, 4) refrain from falsehood, 5) refrain from sarcastic provocation, 6) refrain from vulgar speech, 7) refrain from meaningless and nonsense talk, 8) destroy covetousness, 9) restrain feelings of resentment or revenge, 10) follow the path of Dhamma.<sup>5</sup>

Many Thai, as well as classical Buddhist sources, describe the conduct becoming to a pious Buddhist layman in more detail than such formulae as the Five Virtues and the Ten Principles of Good Conduct. On the level of popular instruction canonical and non-canonical Jātaka legends are the most widespread. Encased in the narratives associated with previous lives of the Buddha, are numerous moral and ethical teachings. Of a more discursive nature are doctrinal synopses such as that written before the turn of the century by Bhikkhu Paṇḍawongsa (1871-1956 A.D.), the founder of Wat Si Pun Yün, Lamphun, north Thailand, which contains a brief section on "Being a Buddhist Dāyaka" or lay supporter. The following is a free translation from that manuscript. "The Buddhist *dāyaka* is possessed of faith (*saddhā*), moral virtue (*sīla*), sacrificial concern (*cāgā*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Faith is respecting the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha, revering teachers and elders, and parents. Moral virtue is always keeping the Five Precepts. Sacrificial concern is shown by always giving oneself and possessions as a gift

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5) *Vajirāñṇavarorasa, Navakovāda* Bangkok : Mahā Makuta Buddhist University, 1971, pp. 67-68.

to others. Wisdom means a continuing study of the scriptures about the mind (*cit*) and mental factors (*cetasika*), good and evil, wholesome and unwholesome acts, and what is meritorious (*puñña*) and virtuous (*guṇa*), that is about the subjects of mind and body (*nāma-rūpa*), the constituents of becoming (*khandha*, *āyatana*, *dhātu*) the controlling principles (*sacca-indriya*), the supernormal powers (*bala*), the limbs of wisdom (*bojjhanga*), and the Eightfold Path (*magga*). Such are the duties of the Buddhist *dāyaka*. The person who is filled with the four qualities of faith, moral virtue, sacrificial concern, and wisdom in mind and body is a *dāyaka* who serves Buddhism and commits no wrong against the Buddha's teaching."<sup>6</sup>

The *Navakovāda*, a textbook of fundamental Buddhist teachings for monks, novices, and lay people written in 1925 by Prince Vajirañāvararasa the former Supreme Patriarch (*sangha-rāja*) of the Thai Sangha famous for establishing the modern system of monastic education, provides a more recent example of the Buddhist conception of the ideal layperson. For purposes of memorization the description of acceptable and unacceptable behavior occurs in three sets of fours, fives and, sixes. While merely listing types of behavior in prescribed numerical categories strikes the western reader as exceptionally dull and uninteresting, it should be borne in mind that when used by an able teacher they form the basis for more discursive investigation. Some of the topics outlined are: four defiling acts, four forms of vice, four actions beneficial in the present, four actions beneficial in the future, four types of false friends, four types of true friends; five unacceptable forms of commerce, five qualities of the *upāsaka*; six fundamental relationships (e.g., child-parent, teacher-pupil, husband-wife), and six causes of ruin (see Appendix A).

The opening remarks to a handbook of chants used by laymen at *wat* (temple) services offers a brief and less scholastic introduction to the conduct of the ideal Buddhist layman.<sup>7</sup> He is admonished to "do merit" (*tham puñña*) not only in terms of the customary acts of supporting

6) Bhikkhu Paṇṇawongsa, *Bhavana*. A handwritten manuscript (*samut khoi*) in the personal library of Acharn Singkha Wannasai.

7) Thawi Khu'a Kaew, *Khu Mu' Khon Non Wat* (Handbook for People Who Spend the Sabbath at the Wat), Lampang, 1971, pp. 1-9,

the Sangha but also by being pure in body, word and heart. Purity of heart is described as freedom from sensory attachment (*kilesa*), greed (*lobha*), anger (*krodha*) and degradation. Through his faith and knowledge the layman comes to realize the significance of the Three Gems—The Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha—demonstrating his loyalty to the Sangha by providing the monks with the necessities of life, by keeping the precepts, and by living up to the Ten Principles of Good Conduct. The layman is urged to visit the *wat* for the study and practice of the precepts (*sīla*), for meditation (*samādhi*), and for the attainment of true wisdom (*pañña*).

Descriptions of the normative lay Buddhist conduct such as those cited above do not inform us about the specific roles lay men and women play in the *wat* in relationship to monks and to other laymen. Relatively little information is available on this subject.<sup>8</sup> The casual observer of Thai Buddhism sees lay people presenting food to the monks in the morning, lay processions taking gifts to the *wat*, and laymen chanting in the *vihāra* or temple building on sabbath days. On the basis of such superficial impressions, it would seem that the laity perform roles ancillary to and in support of the monks or *bhikkhus*. One rightly assumes that the ideal layperson is to be properly devout, to lead an ethically and religiously good life as the texts admonish, and to provide material support for the monks; however, beyond these, his role as religious leader appears to be limited. As we shall see, such assessment of the place of the Buddhist layperson proves incomplete.

Even limited investigation uncovers the fact that nearly every *wat* in Thailand has a *kammakan wat*, a layperson or committee responsible for the daily management of *wat* affairs as well as for organizing and supervising ceremonies and festivals. Many *wats* sponsor lay organizations of men, women, and young people which are roughly comparable with such lay groups in the West. On the national level Thailand has

8) Anthropologists of Theravāda societies have been much more interested in this subject than more traditional historians. See, S.J. Tambiah, *op. cit.* Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, New York; Harper & Row, 1970; Jane Bunnag, *Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1973.

Buddhist Associations for both young people and adults. The Buddhist Association of Thailand, founded in 1934 now has over sixty constituent chapters. The Young Buddhist Association was formed fifteen years later and has been involved in various kinds of social welfare activities.<sup>9</sup>

Our purpose here, however, is not to study Buddhist lay activities as such but rather to investigate the role of the layperson as a religious, particularly ritual, actor. We will not focus on the average or typical layperson (a relatively indifferent species in any religious tradition!) but on the exceptional lay leader who plays an essential role in a variety of religious events. To exemplify this type of layperson our discussion will focus on the activities of Acharn Singkha Wannasai of Lamphun, north Thailand. While Acharn Singkha's role as a ritual actor is unique, it is generically akin to that of the *acharn wat* ("temple teacher"). The *acharn wat* is a traditional feature of northern Thai Buddhism in particular, although this role exists throughout the country. In terms of religious ritual he is the most important layperson with the particular responsibility of leading the laity in chanting at sabbath services and all special ceremonies.<sup>10</sup> At most *wat* celebrations, ceremonies, and services of worship, the *acharn wat* leads the congregation in *wen dāna* or *thawai dāna*. That is, he acts as the master of ceremonies representing the congregation as they transfer (*wen*) or give (*thawai*) their gifts (*dāna*) to the Sangha. Acharn Singkha functions in the capacity of an *acharn wat* but unlike the typical congregational lay leader, his role extends beyond the confines of a particular temple. The laity's respect of his wisdom and his *finesse* as a ritual celebrant leads to dozens of invitations to perform at various *wat* ceremonies through Lamphun and neighboring districts.

9) Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism Its Rites and Activities*, Bangkok: The Christian Bookstore, 1960, pp. 258-263. See also Richard A. Gard, *The Role of Thailand in World Buddhism*, Bangkok: World Fellowship of Buddhists, 1971, pp. 24ff, for a description of lay Buddhist activities on the international level.

10) Nearly all temple services begin with a chant of praise to the three gems—Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—and taking the five or eight precepts. Leading these chants is one of the responsibilities of the *acharn wat*.

The place accorded him aptly earns for him the title of *pho khru*—“father-teacher”.

What are some of the qualifications of the *pho khru* who leads in *wen dāna*? A partial list would include: a broad knowledge of Buddhism and religious matters, a long familiarity with the customs and mores of the area, background as a *bhikkhu* which provides both a knowledge of Buddhism and styles of chanting, an ability to write poetry, a good voice, an aptitude for leading public meetings, dedication, and moral earnestness. It cannot be denied that extensive experience as a monk is crucial, if not theoretically necessary, elements in the qualifications of the *pho khru*. Not only does it acquaint him with the knowledge necessary to perform the *wen dāna* role, but lends his role a sanctity derived from the institutional charisma of the monkhood.

My argument is that the *pho khru* in northern Thai Buddhism has a religious position which accords him a unique place, *vis à vis* both monk and layperson, and that his various roles include priestly-like functions not ordinarily performed by the monk (*bhikkhu*). These roles may be delineated as follows: (1) a ritual role on occasions of “doing merit” (*tham puñña*) complementing the role of the *bhikkhu* where the *pho khru* acts as the intermediary between the *bhikkhu-sangha* and the laity; (2) a ritual role on spirit-calling (*riag khwan*) occasions with priestly-shamanic characteristics, a role the monk customarily does not fill; (3) a role of sage or wise man as a consequence of personal attributes and knowledge. This last role is also played by a *bhikkhu* but by virtue of his personal rather than institutional qualifications. Thus, only some monks in Thailand are revered for their spiritual insight and holiness. Such special reverence is not rendered to all *bhikkhus*.<sup>11</sup>

11) The *bhikkhu-sangha* is revered for its special status as a source of merit; however, within the *bhikkhu-sangha* some monks are more respected than others for reasons of moral and spiritual qualifications. In Lamphun the abbot of Wat Phra Bāt Tāk Phā was the most respected monk in the province for his qualities of holiness. His reputation hinged on such factors as the long period of time he spent in eremitic practice (*dhutānga*), his ascetic life-style, his daily meditation practice, strict adherence to *vinaya* rules, and his calm demeanor. See Jane Bunnag, *op. cit.* for a discussion of differing lay attitudes towards individual monks in Ayuthia Province.

In combining these functions the *pho khru* is able to meet a wider range of religious needs than the *bhikkhu* who is more bound by institutional and symbolic structures. That is, the lay religious leader *extraordinaire* is not bound by either the *bhikkhu's* monastic regulations (*vinaya*), nor the symbolic limits inherent in the monk's role. A *pho khru* like Acharn Singkha, a layperson with extraordinary religious qualifications, is an important religious actor in his own right and also functions as a mediator between *bhikkhu* and laypersons. This revered position stems from his personal qualities or charisma as well as his association with but not identification with the institutional charisma of the monk. This association results from his previous extensive experience as a monk as well as the mediatorial place he fills between monk and layperson. As we shall see, this intermediary role finds particular ritual specification; however, more informally Acharn Singkha as a lay leader may occasionally be "deputized" by the laity to place a particular concern before the *Sangha*.

The remainder of this paper will describe and analyze the lay leader *extraordinaire* in northern Thai Buddhism, the type identified as the *acharn wat* and more particularly as the *pho khru*. While this type of lay religious actor is found throughout Thailand, his place or status is of special significance in the north. My own area of investigation focused in the provinces of Lamphun and Chiangmai and utilized Acharn Singkha Wannasai as the exemplification of this special type of lay leader. It is hoped that this effort will serve both to compensate for what I believe to be the inadequate characterization of the monastic dominance of institutional Theravāda Buddhism, and to illustrate a particular dimension of the interrelationship of diverse religious elements within the Buddhist cultural system in northern Thailand. This latter issue has been addressed by a number of anthropologists working in the Theravāda cultures of Thailand, Burma, and Ceylon<sup>12</sup> giving this paper a timeliness in both historical and anthropological fields of Buddhist studies. Before

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12) In addition to references in note #8, see articles by Gananath Obeyesekere and Michael M. Ames in *Anthropological Studies in Theravāda Buddhism*, ed. Manning Nash, Cultural Report Series No. 13, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1966.

investigating the three roles delineated above filled by the layperson *extraordinaire*, a few biographical remarks are called for in order to understand the kinds of qualifications a religious actor like Acharn Singkha brings to his special role.

Acharn Singkha was born in B.E. 2463 (1920 A.D.) into a farming family residing in Amphur Lamphun, the eldest son of three surviving children. With the exception of his first three years of public school the remainder of his primary and secondary education was in *wat* schools, principally at Wat Phra Dhatu Haripuñjaya in Lamphun. He was ordained a novice (*samañera*) at the age of twelve, a bhikkhu at twenty-one, and left the monkhood at age twenty-five for a total of thirteen years in the Sangha. While ordained he passed all three levels of doctrine examinations (*nāga dhamma*) and level five of the Pāli language and Buddhist literature examinations. As a monk he taught a number of subjects including Thai and third level Pāli studies at Wat Phra Dhatu Haripuñjaya, and the highest level of Dhamma studies at other *wats* in Lamphun. On his own initiative he studied Lānna Thai, homiletics and preaching styles, the method of *wen dāna* referred to above, and northern and central Thai poetry with monks learned in these subjects in the Lamphun area. In short, by Thai monastic standards Singkha was an exceptional *bhikkhu*. These studies were continued even after Acharn Singkha left the monkhood. He has, consequently, gained a wide regional reputation for his knowledge of languages and literature, northern Thai Buddhist history and doctrine, and as a preacher and poet.

With primary and secondary teaching certificates in hand, Acharn Singkha became a teacher upon leaving the monkhood. During his secular teaching career he was an examiner in Lamphun, and an assistant to the education minister in Ban Hong, Amphur Lamphun. His last position was that of Head Teacher at the Dumbon Rimping, Amphur Lamphun, school. He has authored and edited teaching manuals, a history of Lamphun, a history of Wat Phra Dhatu Haripuñjaya, numerous poems, and four Jātaka tales from the Thai Yai and Paññasa-jātaka tradition of northern Thailand. Since his recent retirement at age fifty, Acharn Singkha has devoted all his energies to his own work in northern

Thai Buddhism and northern Thai literature. This has included private tutoring, compiling a Lānna Thai dictionary, working on a history of northern Thai Buddhism, editing a new edition of the Lānna Thai Tipiṭaka, translating Lānna Thai texts into central Thai, acting as a master of ceremonies at festivals and celebrations (*phithī kamma*), leading *wen dāna* of about one hundred times per year, doing about thirty *riak khwan* ceremonies annually at weddings, ordinations, and other appropriate occasions, lecturing on Buddhist subjects about thirty times per year, acting as a consultant to men's, women's, and youth groups at *wats*, and providing the services of counselor to those with problems who seek his help and advice.

As the above brief biographical sketch indicates, Acharn Singkha's status as a religious actor depends in part on his years in the Sangha, his training in Pāli and Buddhist studies, and his own studies in the traditions, customs and teachings of northern Thai. Other qualities necessary to his role will be emphasized as we turn now to an examination of the three major ritual roles he performs which were summarized earlier.

The first ritual role of the *pho khru*, that of *wen dāna* or *thawai dāna*, is acted out on merit-making occasions. Merit-making (*tham puñña*) is the most important arena of religious behavior for most Buddhist laypersons. Basically it is the performance of an act aimed primarily at benefiting the Buddhist Sangha. As such it is a meritorious act. That is, *tham puñña* is a holy act charged with power. Such deeds bear significant consequences in any religious tradition. In Buddhism doing meritorious action is thought to affect the status or station one holds in life, the present as well as the future. Since the performance of meritorious acts is the most important arena of lay religious activity, their correct supervision is a weighty responsibility. Such responsibility falls on the shoulders of the *acharn wat* or the *pho khru*. It is he who directs the proper procedures and who says the proper words at the proper times. He is, in short, the master of ceremonies when meritorious occasions of giving to the Sangha (*wen dāna* or *thawai dāna*) occur either inside or outside of the *wat*.

These occasions may be analyzed in a variety of ways. Generally *dāna* is directed either toward the Sangha or toward the laity. The former is the most meritorious because, ideally, it represents giving without the expectation of an immediate material return. True *dāna*, according to Buddhist norms, does not aim at any reward; it is done simply because the character of the Buddhist life should be one of sacrificial giving.

A more precise classification of meritorious gift-giving is: 1) dedicating buildings to the *wat*, 2) dedicating useful articles to the monks, e.g. soap, wash basins, money for *wat* operating expenses, 3) ceremonies outside the *wat* in which some gift-giving to monks is involved, e.g., opening a new home (*phithī khu'n bān mai*). I prefer a similar classification as follows: 1) *wat* ceremonies in which the primary event is the presentation of gifts to the Sangha, e.g., the presentation of new robes (*kathin*) at the end of the Rain's Retreat (*pansa*), or auspicious occasions (*ngan chalong*) such as the dedication of a new *vihāra*; 2) *wat* ceremonies in which the primary event is not the presentation of gifts to the Sangha, e.g., a funeral; 3) ceremonies outside the *wat* such as the dedication of a new house where giving gifts to the Sangha is a secondary part of the occasion. In all kinds of meritorious gift-giving affairs, the *acharn wat* or *pho khru* is the chief officiant acting as mediator between monk and laity. Furthermore, as the master of ceremonies, the quality of the occasion depends largely on his ability as a leader and public speaker.

I have observed the role of the *pho khru* in the three types of ceremonies outlined in the preferential classification mentioned above. In the *kathin* ceremony after the end of the Rain's Retreat where the principal event is the presentation of gifts of robes to the monks and money gifts for either *wat* maintenance or new buildings, the role of *bhikkhu* is essentially that of passive recipient. In the *kathin* ceremony I observed, the monks chanted briefly on two occasions, once the abbot by himself, a second time all the assembled monks and novices. Otherwise the ceremony was dominated by festivities outside of the *wat* and lay activities which included a procession through the streets of Lamphun and dancing (*fōn lep*) in the *wat* compound, the public announcement of donations for the construction of a new *vihāra* by the lay administrator

of the *wat* (*kammakan wat*), and the speech of the *pho khru* dedicating and presenting the gifts to the Sangha. This last event was the longest sustained part of the entire affair and the focal point of the celebration.

In the *kathin* the *pho khru's* principal function is to represent the laity in the presentation of gifts to the monks and to instruct the laity about the meaning of the ceremony. Acharn Singkha spoke to the assembled congregation in general terms about the meaning of sacrificial giving and more particularly about the significance of the temple for which funds were being raised. While the speeches given by the *pho khru* vary in content according to the occasion, Acharn Singkha contends that every *wen dāna* address should aim at producing a peaceful state of mind by the elimination of distracting thoughts and by concentrating on the gifts being presented. Consequently, the words of *wen dāna* become the means by which the givers (the laity) participate in the gifts. The words of the *pho khru* literally become the medium (*sai klang*) through which intention and act become consubstantiated in one meritorious event. The *pho khru*, as the fulcrum of the event, acts as the medium through which the mutual transfer of gift and merit is allowed to take place. He mediates the spiritual power of the Sangha to the laity and the material gifts of the laity to the Sangha.

In both the funeral and house dedication, gift-giving is secondary part of the event. Consequently, the *wen dāna* was much more sermonic, hortatory and, in the case of the funeral, consoling than in the *kathin* ceremony I observed. In both cases the speech by the *pho khru* was once again the focal event. In the house dedication, the *wen dāna* was preceded by a brief sermon given by the ecclesiastical head of the district at the performance of the (*su'pchātā*) ceremony.<sup>13</sup> At its conclusion

13) The *su'pchātā* ceremony is typically northern Thai or Thai Yuan although it evidences Brahmanical roots (cf. Sanguan Chotisukharat, *Prapheni Thai Phak Nu'a* (The Customs of Northern Thailand), Bangkok: Oadian Bookstore, 1969, pp. 53-61.) The details of the ceremony are beyond the scope of this paper; however, its intent is to guarantee good luck, well-being, and long-life on auspicious occasions such as occupying a new home, being elevated to a new status, or celebrating a significant birthday (viz. the beginning of each new cycle of twelve years).

Acharn Singkha tied the wrists of the family members with a sacred white thread (*sāi sin*)<sup>14</sup> and then presented the *wen dāna* address. Afterwards food was given to the monks followed by gifts of useful articles. Acharn Singkha then faced the family and offered them words of advice. The occasion was completed when the ecclesiastical head of the district put protective marks (*yan*) over the door of the room in which the ceremony had been held and then over the entrance to the lower floor. Acharn Singkha's *wen dāna* dealt with the history of the owner of the house, its construction, and the responsibilities of a Buddhist householder.

The funeral was held in a *wat* and lasted for approximately one and a half hours. Like the new house dedication, it began with a short sermon by an important *bhikkhu*, in this case the ecclesiastical head of the northern region. The *wen dāna* followed the sermon and lasted for approximately forty minutes. During the *bhikkhu's* sermon the attention of the layperson seemed to be elsewhere, perhaps because it was delivered in a rather dry style. By way of contrast, the *wen dāna* was delivered in a forceful, dynamic manner (*siang yai*) and the background noise of conversation stopped entirely. After the monks received their gifts and chanted (*suat bangsukun*), Acharn Singkha turned to the family, as he had done in the dedication of the new house, offering words of consolation and strength from the perspective of the Buddhist Dhamma. The *wen dāna* itself dealt with the personal history of the deceased, the

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14) The sacred white thread (*sāi sin*), an integral element of many Buddhist ceremonies, also has Brahmanical roots. Symbolically it serves to set off the given area it surrounds as holy and to charge it with sacred power. The source of this magical power is usually the Buddha in the form of a Buddha image and the vehicle for engendering or effecting the power is the chanting by the monks. My point in regard to Acharn Singkha's role in the *su'pcháta* ceremony is that symbolically he mediates the power of the Buddha and the Sangha by performing the role of tying the wrists of the recipient of the ceremony with the sacred thread. He plays a similar role in a marriage ceremony even though on that occasion other respected lay persons would also tie the wrists of the newly weds with the *sāi sin*. Nevertheless, I would argue that Acharn Singkha's precedence in this act is not without significance.

circumstances of the accident, and the good the deceased had done in his life.

In terms of the structure of the constituent parts of the three ceremonies mentioned, the *wen dāna* is the primary and single most time consuming event. It forms the most essential part of each ceremony and not only allows for the transfer of both gift and merit as mentioned earlier, but gives cognitive meaning to the occasion. The *wen dāna* combines narrative, hortatory and didactic elements, and lifts the event from the perfunctory to the extraordinary. The *pho khru* functions not only as the master of ceremony in the sense of ritual specialist but also as the mediator between the monk and layperson. As symbolized in the house dedication, for example, the sacred thread (*sāi sin*) acts as a conduit of power that flows from the Buddha, to the monks, so the *pho khru* who then ties it to the wrists of the family members at the conclusion of the *su'pachātā* ceremony. In Acharn Singkha's own words, he functions as half monk, half layperson. Or, we might observe that the *pho khru* has a quasi-priestly function relative to but distinct from the *bhikkhu* and in terms of the ritual structure, intermediary between the laity and the symbols of Buddhism, i.e., the Buddha and the Sangha.

The second ritual role played by Acharn Singkha is the performing of *riag khwan* or spirit calling ceremonies at weddings, ordinations, ecclesiastical installations, and occasionally at times of serious illness.<sup>15</sup> Although the *riag khwan* may be performed prior to ordination and monks may be present at the wedding ceremony in which the central event is the calling of the spirits of the bride and the groom, there is no necessary connection between it and Buddhism. Weddings may be performed without the presence of *bhikkhus*, and ordinations may be held without a prior *riag khwan* ceremony. The *riag khwan* is obviously of animistic origin and consists of "calling" the *khwan* or spirits of the

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15) S.J. Tambiah, *op. cit.* has an extended discussion of the *khwan* and *khwan* rites. A useful descriptive treatment is, Satién Koset (Phya Anuman Rajadhon), *Khwan Lae Prapheni Kan Tham Khwan* (Spirits and Customs of Spirit Rites) Bangkok: Kāw Nā, 1963. It is interesting to observe that *riag khwan* ceremonies are not held in conjunction with birth, puberty, or death rites even though these, too, are major points of passage or crisis in the life cycle.

parties involved in crisis or semi-crisis situations. The event has been Buddhicized in that it is said each individual is composed of thirty-two *khwan*, one for each of the thirty-two constituent parts of the body as classified in the Indian Buddhist tradition.

The *acharn* who performs the *riag khwan* is literally a practitioner in spirits and, consequently, plays a role not unlike that of a shaman. However, unlike the shaman who becomes a medium of the spirit by becoming possessed by it, a *pho khru* like Acharn Singkha entices the entry of the spirit by the power and beauty of his words. Whereas in the *wen dāna* the sermonic style of *siang yai* is used, in the *riag khwan* a more mysterious, indeed, supernatural or para-natural voice (*siang noi*) is employed. While it is not the special power of the *pho khru* which brings the *khwan* into one's presence, the knowledge of the right words and the ability to say them well is essential. In other words, whereas a *pho khru* like Acharn Singkha disclaims special powers for himself, he believes that the right words and a proper voice do have an influence (*ithiphon*) on the *khwan*. Preparation for this role, therefore, is bolstered by monastic tenure since the *siang noi* style is mastered for preaching parts, the *Vessantara Jātaka*. Proper knowledge is also important and this is acquired through a study of manuals (*tamrā*) found in many *wat* libraries.

A typical northern Thai wedding is fundamentally a *riag khwan* ceremony. A special offering bowl (*khwan pai si*) is prepared to entice the spirit. At the wedding I observed, it contained two eggs, two bananas, two small packets of sticky rice, and two small glasses of water. The role of the monks present at the wedding was minimal. With the exception of the opening of the ceremony with the receiving of the *pañca sīla* and presenting the monks with food and gifts at the conclusion they seemed to be there merely as an official Buddhist presence. Acharn Singkha spoke for approximately twenty minutes in a highly charged, openly charismatic manner. He implored the *khwan* of the bride and groom to be present and to give up any previous romantic attachments. The ceremony was concluded with Acharn Singkha tying the sacred thread (*sāi sin*) to the wrists of the bride and

groom for the spirit to enter (left wrist) and to stay (right wrist). The parents of the bride and groom then did the same and were followed suit by the most honored guests. Finally, Acharn Singkha led the couple into the bedroom where he cut the strings that had bound their wrists, after some further instruction.

There can be no doubt that the *riag khwan* is of non-Buddhist origin and basically retains its non-Buddhist character. However, in the hands of a *pho khru* like Acharn Singkha it is given a Buddhist legitimation. In his instruction to the bride and groom, the appeal to the virtues to be practiced in the wedded state was basically a lesson in Buddhist ethics. It can be argued, therefore, that in assimilating the *riag khwan* into the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in northern Thailand its meaning has been raised. That is, the didactic part of the ceremony is based fundamentally on Buddhist teachings. Its cognitive value is partly if not largely Buddhist. As a consequence, in a ceremony like a wedding, the *pho khru* combines the role of shamanic priest *vis à vis* the structure of the event and the role of *bhikkhu vis à vis* the ceremony's instructional or didactic level. Meanwhile, the monk, if he is even present, seems to be a mere backdrop to the ritual drama being performed.

Finally, a few words must be said about the third religious role of the *pho khru* as sage and wise man. There are basically two aspects to this role, one quantitative, the other qualitative. A *pho khru* like Acharn Singkha is wise in the sense that he has knowledge of many different subjects, e.g., Pāli and Buddhist teachings, northern Thai language and literature, and the customs and traditions of northern Thailand especially as they relate to religion. Thus, Acharn Singkha possesses a fund of knowledge the average layperson lacks. More important than this quantitative dimension of the role of wise man is the qualitative. The *pho khru* is respected because of his moral uprightness. He has an intellectual wisdom as well as a wisdom gained through experience. Consequently, he is consulted not only on questions of the technicalities of religious ceremonies but also on the substance of the religious life. For example, my language lessons with Acharn Singkha were frequently interrupted by people seeking his advice on matters of both a personal and public nature:

The Buddhist layperson who acts as a *pho khru* as we have described it performs a unique religious role in three areas: monk-layperson interaction focusing on the mutual exchange of gift and merit; aspects of the religious life syncretistically related to the formal teachings and organization of Theravāda Buddhism, and, as advisor and counselor on a wide range of both religious and secular issues. The *pho khru's* role is made sacred in part by his prior training in and close association with the Sangha, yet as a layperson he has a greater flexibility than the monk and is able to perform priestly-type roles officially forbidden to the *bhikkhu*. Above all, it is his personal charisma rather than his relationship to the Sangha as a holy institution which charges his role with power. While he does not symbolize a source of merit in the same way as the *bhikkhu-sangha*, he is highly respected for the role he plays as intermediary between the Sangha and the laity, and between the world of the spirits and the world of men. He illustrates, perhaps better than any single religious actor, the dynamics of the interaction among varying religious elements distinctively united in the system of Buddhism practiced in northern Thailand. Certainly, the predominant role of the *pho khru/acharn wat* in northern Thailand contrasts with other sections of that country and may, at some future point, help provide an insight into questions of the historical development of religion in peninsular Southeast Asia.

## APPENDIX A

Listed below are some selections adapted from the *gihī paṭipatti* (lay person's practice) section of the *Navakovāda* :

*Kammakilesa* (four defiling actions)

*pāṇātipāta*—bringing about the termination of the life of beings

*adinnādāna*—taking things which the owner has not given

*kāmesu micchācāra*—wrong behavior in regard to sex

*musāvāda*—false speech

*Diṭṭhadhammikathapayojana* (four actions beneficial in the present)

*uṭṭhānasampadā*—to be endowed with energy and industry in whatever may be one's duty and business

*ārakkhasampadā*—to be endowed with carefulness in one's work so as not to let it deteriorate and go to ruin

*kalyāṇamittatā*—to have friends who are good people

*samajīvitā*—to live in a way appropriate to one's income, being neither miserly, nor a spendthrift

The Five Qualities of the *upāsaka*

Imbued with faith (*saddhā*)

The purity of moral virtue (*sīla*)

Belief in *kamma* and not omens and prognostications

Sees only the *Buddha-dhamma* as worthy of offerings

Makes merit (*puñña*) in accordance with the Teaching of the Buddha

The Six *apayamukha* (causes of ruin)

Drinking intoxicating liquors

Wandering abroad at night

Going around watching shows

Gambling

Having bad people as friends and intimates

Being lazy in doing work