DOCTORAL THESIS

Buddhist Governance and Economics: Historical and Contemporary Perspective from Cambodia and Beyond

Pisith San

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Declaration:
Hereby I declare that this doctoral thesis, my original investigation and achievement, submitted for the doctoral degree at Tallinn University of Technology, has not been submitted for a doctoral or equivalent academic degree elsewhere or previously.

Pisith San

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List of Publications

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I **San, P.,** Drechsler, W., & Shakya, S. (2023). Buddhism, Wealth, and Privilege: Ambedkar and Habermas. *Religions, 14*(8), 1057. **ETIS 1.1**

II **San, P.** (2018). Cambodian Buddhists' Response to the French Protectorate. *eJournal of Buddhist Research Studies, 4*, 64–85. **ETIS 1.2**

III **San, P.** (2024). Buddhist Governance: Navigating Today's Role of Saṅgha and Dhammarājā, with Special Reference to Cambodia. *Halduskultuur: The Estonian Journal of Administrative Culture and Digital Governance, 22*(2), 26-49. **ETIS 1.1**

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Author's Contribution to the Publications

Contribution to the papers in this thesis are:

I Paper conception, investigation, writing – original draft preparation, actual writing – review and editing, altogether 50%.

IV Paper conception and writing most of the paper, with detailed guidance and several rounds of review from the co-author, altogether 60%.

II is based on the author's Master's thesis at International Buddhist College, Thailand, but was substantially revised for publication and has in this form not been part of this or any other thesis.

Introduction

This thesis explores the connection of Buddhism, a specific form of religion, with Governance and Economics, as its title says. As a Buddhist monk pursuing doctoral studies in Estonia, a country where 71 per cent of the population identifies as atheists and only 17 per cent have any religious affiliation, I found it challenging to position my own religious status, a key paradigm for the thesis at hand, appropriately. However, the Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance created a space where I could work, conduct research, and explore this connection through the lens of the Non-Western Public Administration approach. The relationship between religion, state and society has long been a subject of profound interest and significance, as most recently emphasized by scholars like Ongaro and Tantardini (2023a, 2023b, 2024). These two spheres' interactions have shaped societies, norms, and power structures throughout history until today. And one particular religious tradition that has garnered significant attention is Buddhism. Its uniqueness as a world religion, as highlighted by Habermas (Habermas, 2019; San, Drechsler, & Shakya, 2023), extends beyond its spiritual and philosophical aspects.

Although the main objective of practicing Buddhism is to attain *nirvana* through worldly detachment, Buddhists, not even the monastic *saṅgha* community, do not entirely detach themselves from society. Despite being commonly viewed as an apolitical and introspective tradition (classically Weber, 2019), the potential value and influence of Buddhism on the public sphere, especially in governance and economics, cannot be overlooked. Buddhism in its theoretical, historical, and practical forms is always relevant to the laity's daily life, playing a crucial role in shaping various aspects of society, including politics, state policies, social norms, and ways of life. This seemingly paradoxical nature raises questions about the ways in which Buddhist ethics and institutions intersect with the mechanisms of decision-making, governance, and economics.

The primary focus and main objective of my doctoral work therefore were to explore and conceptualize Buddhist principles relevant to just governance and economics, with a notable focus on my homeland of Cambodia as a case study, where the *saṅgha* and the *dhammarājā* – the good Buddhist monarch – hold constitutional significance in the 21st century, Cambodia being, in fact, the only remaining Buddhist kingdom. Therefore, the study focuses on examining Buddhist governance within the specific context of Cambodia, considering the religious foundations and beliefs that shape it. This approach deviates from previous, more traditional, mainstream Public Administration and Social Science approaches, delving into religious sources for a comprehensive, and rooted, understanding within the broader context of Non-Western Public Administration or NWPA (Drechsler, 2013; Drechsler, 2015; Drechsler, 2019b).

Theoretically, Buddhist governance is rooted in the principles of Buddhism, notably within the monastic codes of the *saṅgha* community and the principles of the *dhammarājā* (**I**). Hence, within this framework, Buddhist governance assumes a dual role, influencing and functioning in both the spiritual and temporal worlds. In the *saṅgha* community, the practice of Buddhist governance has inherently continued from the time of the Buddha to the present day, adapting to diverse social norms and contexts of time and space. The form of Buddhist governance in the *saṅgha* community takes place in temples and among monastic peers, using a set of rules and a well-formulated code of conduct, techniques, and institutions drawn from the *vinaya* and other monastic legal texts (Jayasuriya, 2008; Schonthal, 2017). In the temporal world, the framework of

Buddhist governance is shaped by the concept of the *dhammarājā* or *chakravartin,* representing different forms of ideal kingship as outlined in various Buddhist discourses and literature (**III**). When it comes to governing the state, Buddhism diverges significantly from the previous Indian, let alone from global-Western thought. From a Buddhist point of view, aggression, war, and violence are entirely incompatible with the principles of good governance (**III**), but of course, this has very often remained an ideal.

Buddhist governance, whether in the administration of the *saṅgha* assembly or the governance of the *dhammarājā*, is designed to guide its institutions in a righteous way, based on what can be called the model of *dhammocracy* (*dhammādhippateyya* in Pali) grounded in the principles of the *dharma*, i. e. the truth or the natural law (Monychenda, 2008; Payutto, 2007, pp. 84–102; 2021, p. lx) and its pursuit. The *dhammocratic* model, as conceived by Khmer Buddhist social thinker Heng Monychenda, is considered an ideal approach to governing the state and society according to Buddhism (Monychenda, 2008, p. 314; further **III**). It revolves around the principle of *dharma,* in contrast to being grounded in majority rule (democracy) or the authority of a select few (autocracy). The duty of the *saṅgha* and the role of the *dhammarājā* is to embrace the principle of *dharma*. Traditionally, the *saṅgha* community relies on the support of lay society, and consequently, its members have the duty to guide their followers to realize the true *dharma.* Similarly, this responsibility also applies to the *dhammarājā,* as he is accountable for the well-being and happiness of his subjects, both materially and spiritually.

Realizing the true *dharma,* or the state of *nirvana,* is the main objective for the *saṅgha,* the *dhammarājā,* and their followers. The state of *nirvana* can be attained through the practice of material detachment or by following the virtue of frugality *(appicchatā).* However, it is important to note that a certain material basis is not only an acceptable part of life, for the average Buddhist outside the *saṅgha* community, participation in material reality is also considered appropriate. As Drechsler (2020b) points out, drawing from the experience of the Buddha himself, one cannot meditate with an empty stomach. Therefore, the *dhammarājā,* or the state, must create policies addressing poverty to alleviate the suffering of its subjects. Poverty, as explained in Buddhism, is a leading cause of human suffering (Long, 2019, pp. 48, 60) and drives desperate individuals to theft and violence. However, the *karmic* law is that such deeds only drive them further downwards in a seemingly never-ending spiral of suffering. Illustrated in the Cakkavatti Sutta (DN 26 – Thanissaro, 2013a; Sujato, 2018a), the discourse that discusses the qualities of a righteous ruler, and the consequences of societal decline when ethical values are neglected, poverty triggers a downwards spiral that causes whole societies to slide into a state of absolute disarray (Harris, 2013). For the deprived, material indulgence and sensual pursuits become enticements toward sinful paths.

How can we address this very contemporary issue and liberate ourselves from that seemingly never-ending spiral of suffering? Buddhism, in both its theoretical and practical forms, does provide the answer, as evident in the works of Schumacher, Payutto, Drechsler, and others on Buddhist Economics (BE). However, the definition of BE is unclear even among professionals, including the Dalai Lama, who has even called the term confusing (Dunne, 2015, p. 93). Drechsler (2019a) points out that BE is built either upon Buddhism as practiced, or from authoritative texts, which, however, rarely address economic matters directly. This, in turn, has led to text-based BE from two starting points: some extrapolate economic policy from the teachings of the Buddha (Payutto, 1994, pp. 42, 47–48; Puntasen, 2008, p. 2), while others start with existing economic positions and legitimize them backward by relating them to Buddhism, as seen in Clair Brown's

Buddhist Economics (2017) and Tomer (2017). However, in several cases, ideas seemingly based on existing positions can actually be linked back to what the Buddha taught (Drechsler, 2019a). Contrary to common Western assumptions, BE is not about extreme asceticism but rather about alleviating suffering. Buddhism offers the 'middle path', which is not a compromise but a way of finding the right balance (Payutto, 1994, pp. 18–19, 23–24, 41–42; Swearer, 2011, pp. 130–139; Daniels, 2005, p. 246).

As the focus of the thesis, the exploration delves into the integration of *'dhammarājā* and *saṅgha'* within the realm of Buddhist governance and economics, presenting a hopefully compelling alternative to the dominant global-Western paradigm. The following considerations guide this inquiry:

1. Who can ascertain what makes people happy if not they themselves?
2. How can the principles embedded in Buddhist governance and economics contribute to the creation of a path toward a better life?
3. While Buddhism offers a spiritual trajectory toward a better afterlife, its core principles extend beyond this, into the present. How does this aspect shape the framework of Buddhist governance and economics?

This introduction is structured as follows: first, in Chapter 1, I dwell on the framework of NWPA and the theoretical background concerning governance from a non-Western perspective. I also very briefly address the theoretical frameworks that deal with Buddhist governance, outlining their role in providing background for the research rather than attempting validation of the theories. Chapter 2 discusses the research-methodological approach, while Chapters 3 and 4 cover the various backgrounds of Buddhist governance and economics, respectively, in a more descriptive and theoretical way, mirroring the structure and argument of **III**. Chapter 5 discusses how the principles embedded in Buddhist governance and economics can potentially pave a path toward a better life. The introduction is then capped with short concluding remarks and indications of further research. Altogether, the introduction shadows **III** in a more comprehensive, reflected, and integrated manner, taking the other publications into detailed account.

Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya (the collection of the numerical discourses)
BE	Buddhist Economics
DN	Dīgha Nikāya (the long collection of the discourses)
Dhp	Dhammapada (the collection of sayings of the Buddha in verse form)
GNH	Gross National Happiness
NWPA	Non-Western Public Administration
PA	Public Administration
SE	Sufficiency Economy
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya (the collection of the connected discourses)

Terminologies

Buddhavacana	The teachings of the Buddha
Chakravartin/Cakkavatti	An ideal universal ruler or the Wheel-Turning Monarch
Dhamma/Dharma	The truth, the doctrine or the natural law
Dhammocracy	The *dharmic* form of Buddhist governance approach
Dhammarājā	The *dharma* king or the righteous ruler
Dhammayutikanikāya	A reformist, elite order of Theravada monks in Cambodia, Burma and Thailand
Mahānikāya	The majority order of Theravada monks in Cambodia and Thailand
Saṅgha	The Buddhist monastic community
Saṅgharājā	The Supreme Patriarch
Sutta/Sutra	The collection of the discourses on the teachings of the Buddha
Vinaya	The monastic codes or rules in the Buddhist *saṅgha* community

1 Theory of Non-Western Public Administration and Buddhist Governance

In the Western context, notable references to public administration can be found in classic texts such as Aristotle's *Politics*, Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), and German Cameralism (Reinert & Rössner, 2016). In the Eastern context, Confucian meritocracy, Hindu polity, and Buddhist social-political concepts have deep-rooted historical practices (Heine-Geldern, 1942; Drechsler, 2013, 2020a). Despite this, global academic attention has predominantly focused on the Western model, overlooking the Eastern one. However, in his studies of Non-Western Public Administration (NWPA), particularly the Confucian, Islamic, and Buddhist models, Drechsler (2013), for instance, underscores the practical and academic importance of exploring Eastern Public Administration models. He asserts that key non-Western paradigms are not only theoretically significant but also hold practical relevance today for optimizing administration in their respective regions (Drechsler, 2013, p. 3).

While the term 'governance' is often viewed as more or less neutral, the concept of 'Good Governance' is a non-neutral concept that implies a value judgment favouring reduced state involvement in favour of business standards (Drechsler, 2004, p. 388). New Public Management (NPM), while sharing aspects with Good Governance, has conceptually waned in popularity (Drechsler, 2005; Dunleavy et al., 2006). The decline of NPM and the West's diminishing influence in Public Administration (PA) and Governance have led to the emergence of alternative approaches challenging Global-Western practices (Bice & Sullivan, 2014; Drechsler, 2015).

Applying non-Western philosophies to public administration is valuable for two important reasons: providing a contextual-cultural perspective and fostering a universal understanding of public administration that may come from the application of non-Western philosophies to the field (Ongaro, 2021). Acknowledging the impact of cultural elements and traditions in PA (Peters, 2021), there are distinct paradigms in PA and Governance that may not align with the Global-Western one (Drechsler, 2015, p. 106). Despite recognizing cultural elements and the importance of traditions in PA (Peters, 2021), these paradigms operate independently of, if often in an overlapping, enmeshed modus with, the Global-Western one and may never converge due to inherent characteristics. For alternatives to be strong enough for the challenge, Drechsler (2015, p. 106) argues that they need to have:

- A large body of theoretical literature
- Centuries of practice
- Strong relevance today
- A convincing carrier country
- A largely non-derivative system

He (2015) presents examples of two such paradigms: Islamic and Confucian Public Administration, introducing a conceptual model illustrating the interrelations among these paradigms in PA and Governance (see Figure 1). According to the model, there are the following conceptual categorizations:

> (a) is what is generally assumed to be good PA, and the contextualized second nucleus, (b) is what the more sophisticated PA research supports today (although it is not the common view), but our focus is on (c), the postulated spheres of good PA with(in) a

> certain paradigm each that does not work well, nor does it have to, in any other (Drechsler, 2015, p. 110).

In non-Western contexts, elements in category (c) may be esoteric but effective. Studying paradigms, non-standard institutions, and elements faces challenges, as academic disciplines tend to be culture-bound, creating disparities between non-Western and Global-Western PA and Governance practices. Categorizations of world regions can be non-neutral, perpetuating discrimination through normative value judgments (Said, 2003). This bias has led to notions like asserting that large non-Western regions are 'ungoverned' (Brass, 2012). The presence of self-reliant communities, however, serves as an indicator of effective governance. It would be bizarre to assert that societies in the Global South did not thrive at all (Shakya, 2022, p. 12). Non-Western societies, although that is a very broad generalizations, are often recognized for having 'strong societies' capable of self-governance (Migdal, 1988).

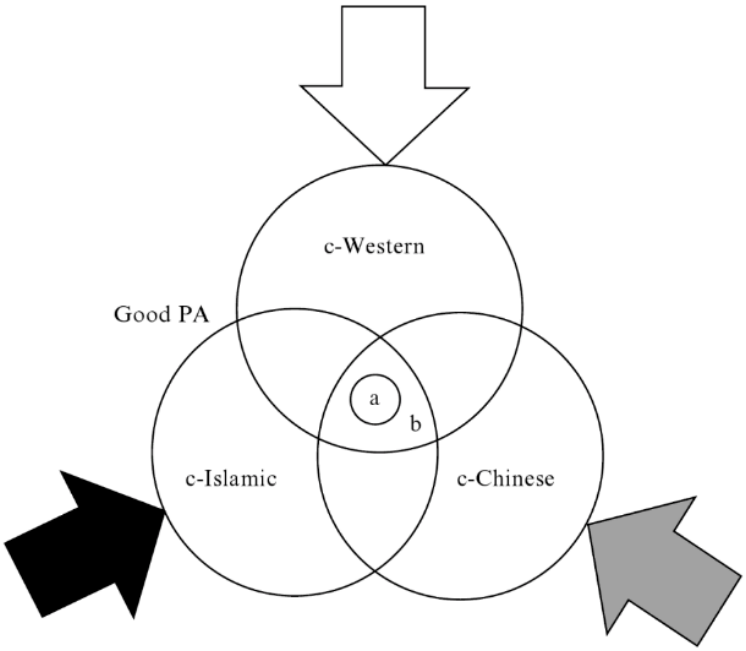

Figure 1: Three Paradigms of Public Administration and Governance (Drechsler, 2015)

The reason Buddhist PA is often not included specifically in non-Western theory, such as there is, is, as Drechsler (2019b) has explained, that certain of the elements required in the list given above are missing here – a particular problem is that there are no carrier countries, nor institutions left. One can, however, within BE systems and generally Buddhist countries, (re)construct ideal Buddhist PA, and governance, based on both theory and practice as lived (Drechsler, 2016).

Buddhist governance, particularly the governance of the *saṅgha*, can be a key example in this case. The governance of the *saṅgha* is a form of self-governance, which is grounded in a unique set of principles and rules known as the *vinaya* (**IV**). The managing and decision-making processes regarding the *saṅgha's* affairs are often based on a bottom-up approach and consensus among the community members (**III**, **IV**). The *saṅgha's* governance serves not only as a model for monastic life but also influences the broader

understanding of ethical conduct and community welfare in Buddhist societies as a whole.

Alongside the governance of the *saṅgha* is the governance of the *dhammarājā.* Diverging from the Western paradigm, particularly from Machiavelli's ruling principles (Machiavelli, 1532), Buddhism emphasizes the concept of the righteous ruler more akin to the Good Kings of the Western, Judaeo-Christian tradition (see Silk, 1984; Salaquarda, 1996), but also Islam (Parens, 2012, pp. 29–47) and Confucianism (Weiming, 1994, 2002), yet specific in its form as *dhammarājā* or *chakravartin*, designed to govern the state based on the principles of *dharma* (**III**). The *dhammarājā* plays a significant role in restoring moral deterioration and maintaining social order by upholding the principles of *dharma.* The application of *dhammarājā* has historical significance and manifests in various forms, adapting to the socio-political contexts of different regions and periods. As this is one of the main topoi of this thesis, more will be explained below.

2 Methodological Approach

This thesis represents a crafted exploration of the confluence of Buddhism, governance, economics, and the NWPA perspective. The methodological framework integrates empirical studies, theoretical analyses, canonical textual perspectives, contextual insights, personal engagement, and a nuanced exploration of NWPA approaches. Comprising four articles, the thesis delves into the relationship between Buddhism and governance, with a specific focus on the Theravada perspective within the context of Cambodia, due to the author's background, participant observation status, and language capacity, but also due to the fact that Cambodia's importance, as the only constitutional Buddhist monarchy existing at the moment, justifies this from a theoretical-methodological point of view.

The composition of the thesis is the combination of three articles in peer-reviewed journals, and one book chapter, each serving a distinct purpose, and this thesis embraces a diversity of methods, grounded in the specifics of inquiry represented by subject matter and publicative context. One article employs empirical case studies, combining fieldwork and desk research (**IV**), while others (**I, II, III**) adopt a theoretical orientation and are based on the classic approach of textual research and further theorizing, which is both an Eastern and a Western feature of scholarly inquiry. This methodological diversity aligns with the broader research stream of non-Western PA approaches, given the preponderance of methodological gatekeeping in continuing the exclusion of those perspectives (Moloney et al., 2023).

The thesis is interested in exploring individual happiness determination and the potential of the Buddhist *dhammocratic* approach. In doing so, the thesis examines the roles of the Buddhist king (*dhammarājā*), the *saṅgha*, and the laity, with an emphasis on the Theravada Buddhist perspective, as a matter of choice. The aim is to develop a governance and economics model (i. e. in emphasis rather than delineation) in roughly the (neo-)Weberian softer sense (see Bouckaert, 2022) characterized by compassion, equity, and sustainability, considering the nuances of potentiality and ideal theory, all within the broader context of NWPA.

The thesis is framed based on a keen interest in the intersection of religion and governance, concentrating specifically on Buddhism as a world religion, particularly in the global-Western context. The choice of Cambodia as a key example, the last-standing Buddhist kingdom, hopefully adds depth to the analysis, highlighting the constitutional significance of the *saṅgha* and the *dhammarājā* in the 21st century. This way of delving into religious sources, recently resurged in PA and the Social Sciences in general as mentioned (see Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023a, 2023b, 2024), should provide a comprehensive and rooted understanding within the broader context of NWPA.

The thesis relies on the canonical textual perspective, the core of monastic education and scholarship, and comparative analysis. The reliance on Buddhist Sutta and Vinaya texts, translated by various scholars, underscores the thesis' commitment to this canonical textual perspective. Methodologically, the paper argues from the Buddhist viewpoint, particularly that of a Khmer Theravada monk, with both the advantages and limitations such a perspective entails, vis-à-vis ideals of objectivity and detachedness that, however, have recently been framed, even in the Weberian context, more as a (global-Western) problem than an answer (prominently e. g. Brown, 2023).

To understand the contextual insight, the thesis also draws on several works by prominent figures and scholars in Cambodian Buddhist studies, such as Heng Monychenda,

George Cœdès, Anne Ruth Hansen, and many others. Their perspective, if to very varied degrees, advocates for the integration of Buddhism into secular affairs, emphasizing its potential role in addressing societal challenges in the Cambodian context.

Apart from that, again, the thesis is based on the author's personal engagement within the *saṅgha* community. Having been a part of this for almost twenty years provides the author with a unique opportunity to both study and practice within the institution, as well as participatorily observe how it functions and evolves to adapt to the contemporary world. Therefore, some parts of this thesis are argued from the author's personal perspective as someone who has practiced and studied within the relevant *saṅgha* tradition.

Overall, and especially how the core approach to reason and narration on the basis of texts, both canonical and scholarly, is structured and informed, the thesis adopts a classical hermeneutical approach informed by Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 1990; see Drechsler, 2016; see especially **I**), emphasizing cultural and textual context and analysis. It acknowledges the inherent tension between history and immediacy, recognizing that a scientistic self-positioning, outside the natural sciences, does not increase the truth-value of an argument or narrative (Gadamer, 1997). This acknowledgment extends to the broader context of non-Western public administration research.

Altogether, this methodological approach offers a relatively robust foundation, i. e. as robust as it can or should be under the circumstances and given the present approach to methodology, for the exploration of Buddhism and governance, weaving together diverse elements within the broader context of NWPA approaches. The integration of theoretical analyses, empirical studies, contextual insights, and personal engagement ensures a holistic and ideally well-rounded exploration of the complex relationship between Buddhism and the public sphere within the context of Cambodia, while contributing to the broader research stream of non-Western public administration generally.

3 Toward the Theory of Buddhist Governance

Buddhist governance, rooted in the teachings, practice, and historical development of Buddhism, presents a distinctive perspective on statecraft (**III**). Beyond a spiritual path, Buddhism encompasses a community and social structure. Emphasizing the ethics of compassion and non-violence, Buddhist governance as a theory seeks to foster harmonious coexistence among diverse communities while prioritizing personal well-being. Though Buddhist governance lacks a blueprint (which is both an advantage and a disadvantage), its underlying principles can guide ethical leadership and social justice. Buddhist governance is formed around the concept of the *dhammarājā* as a just ruler and the *saṅgha* as a monastic governing body (Monychenda, 2008; see further **III**). The governance of the *dhammarājā* is perceived at the state or macro level, while the *saṅgha*'s governance is seen as self-governance at the micro level or, in Elinor Ostrom's terms (see Ostrom, 2010; Nagendra & Ostrom 2012), as polycentric governance involving multiple, independent decision-making coexisting and interacting at different scales and levels (**IV**).

3.1 The Governance of the *dhammarājā*

The *dhammarājā* is a king or a ruler who governs his subjects in a righteous way based on the *dhammocratic* model *(dhammādhippateyya),* grounded in the principles of the *dharma*[1] and enabling his subjects to realize the true *dharma*. The word *dhamma* is a Pali word (*dharma* in Sanskrit). It comes from the Sanskrit root *'dhṛ,'* i. e., 'holding things together' – '*dharma* is the way in which one maintains everything' (see Rocher, 1978, and Rocher & Lariviere, 2012).

The term '*dhamma*' carries multiple meanings and interpretations, dependent on the context. It is commonly used in Hinduism and Buddhism, which can sometimes create confusion among audiences. To better understand the *dharma* in Buddhism, it requires one to look at the *dharma* in Hindu literature. According to Vedic sources, *dhamma* was a natural, eternal, and immutable law revealed by *brahma,* the self-existent being, to *manu,* a semi-divine being who is regarded as the first king of humanity and *manu,* in turn, transmitted it to the ancient sages, who made it known to mankind through abridged versions called *dhammasāstra* or treatises on *dhamma* (see Lingat, 1950, p. 10; Mérieau, 2018, pp. 285–286).

However, Buddhism does not view the concept of *dhamma* as a direct divine-given rule, as in Hinduism; instead, Buddhism regards *dhamma* as the truth and the natural law. Rahula (1974, p. 58) argues that within Buddhist terminology, there is no wider term than '*dhamma*'. He asserts there is nothing in this universe, whether it be positive or negative, conditioned or unconditioned, relative or absolute, which is not included in this term. However, in the context of this thesis, the term *dhamma* specifically refers to the principles of Buddhism, particularly to one specific part of the teachings of the Buddha *(buddhavacana)*. These teachings are categorized into two primary groups: *dharma,* representing principles or doctrine, and *vinaya,* representing discipline or the monastic code (Payutto, 2002).

According to Buddhism, when the *dharma*, the truth, or the natural law is not honoured, embraced, or upheld properly, it leads to social disorder. To address this social

[1] *Dharma*, a Sanskrit term, and *dhamma,* its Pali equivalent, are employed interchangeably and with equal significance throughout the entire thesis.

disorder, Buddhism introduces the concept of *dhammarājā* or *chakravartin*, an ideal king who governs his subjects based on the principles of *dharma* (III). Buddhism, like all religions, is, however, multifaceted, with many variations evolving over time due to changing contexts. Therefore, in this thesis, we assume that the concept of *dhammarājā* can be classified according to three contexts: theoretical context, historical context, and Khmer contemporary context.

From the theoretical perspective, the concept of ideal kingship in Buddhist literature seems to have emerged in response to the perceived decline of *dharma* and general social disorder (Hansen, 2007; **III**). In these circumstances, the king assumed the role of a mediator, facilitating the restoration of social order by reinforcing the *dharma* practice within his realm. This concept finds further elaboration in canonical texts and various other Buddhist writings, providing a comprehensive exploration of the model of just governance within Buddhism. The Aggañña Sutta (DN 27 – Rhys-Davids & Rhys-Davids, 1921; Sujato, 2018c), the discourse in which the Buddha describes the origin and evolution of the natural world, explains the historical assumed peak of social disorder, triggered by greed, resulting in the division of rice fields, theft of one another's plots, and engagement in dishonesty, censure, and punishment following the disappearance of spontaneous rice growth.

In response to this social turmoil, the Sutta describes how humans gathered together, saying, 'From our evil deeds, sirs, becoming manifest, inasmuch as stealing, censure, lying, punishment have become known, what if we were to select a certain being, who should be wrathful when indignation is right, who should censure that which should rightly be censured and should banish him who deserves to be banished? But we will give him in return a proportion of the rice' (cited according to Rhys-Davids & Rhys-Davids, 1921, p. 93). Then, they selected from among themselves the most handsome, the best-favoured, the most attractive, and the most capable individual being, and invited him to be their king with a promise of contributing a proportion of the rice (Rhys-Davids & Rhys-Davids, 1921; Sujato, 2018c).

The Sutta introduces an 'elective and contractual theory of kingship', where the people choose their king, and the king's compensation comes in the form of a rice tax. Tambiah (1976, p. 13) points out that this theory combines the notion of 'elective and contractual kingship' with the idea that the chosen king is exceptional among men – most handsome in the physical form and most perfect in conduct. The characteristics of the king, as described in the Sutta, earn him the titles *'mahā sammata'* for being 'the great elect,' *'rājā'* for 'charming others by the Norm' *(dhamma),* and *'khattiya,'* signifying the 'lord of the fields' (Rhys-Davids & Rhys-Davids, 1921; Tambiah, 1976; Sujato, 2018c). The king is, in essence, 'chosen' in two distinct senses of the word, both as an elective leader and as an exceptional individual that is recognized via the former election. This particular aspect deepens our comprehension of the moral and physical attributes tied to kingship, which are subsequently explored in greater detail in other Buddhist texts.

From a historical standpoint, the *dhammarājā* is a historical king who sought to uphold the *dharma*, prevent its decline and establish a just and harmonious society based on Buddhist principles. The concept of *dhammarājā* has been especially applied to the reign of Ashoka (c. 304–232 BCE), the most significant Indian Emperor in history, and Jayavarman VII (c. 1122–1218), the most notable ruler of the Khmer Empire (Drechsler, 2019a). Ashoka, after his conversion to Buddhism, became a paradigmatically good ruler who embraced the principles of non-violence, compassion, and moral conduct in his governance. Ashoka earned the title of a great *dhammarājā* through his commitment to

upholding the *dharma.* His contributions include the construction of 84,000 stupas dedicated to Buddhism across India, the defense of Buddhism by expelling 80,000 heretics from the monastic order, and the dissemination of the Buddha's teachings through the dispatch of missionaries to the far reaches of his empire – and beyond (Larsson, 2021).

Ashoka's state policy was perhaps originally influenced by the inherited Brahmanical *Arthasastra* of Kautilya (Kulke, 2014). In the Mahāvaṃsa, the historical chronicle of Sri Lanka, Ashoka was initially referred to as *'chandāshoka,'* meaning merciless or cruel Ashoka, due to his evil deeds during the Kalinga War. However, later in his reign, he abandoned the expansion of might via military means and instead extended the might of the *dhamma.* Just as the Buddha himself 'turned the wheel of dhamma', Ashoka, too, embraced this path, leading him to be known as *'dhammāshoka'* (Changkhwanyuen, 2003).

Throughout history, several Buddhist kings in Asia projected themselves as an Ashoka-like Wheel-Turning Monarch or *'cakravartin'* (Boisselier, 1990; Lahiri, 2015, p. 5). The name of Ashoka, as Wells (1920, p. 371) states, 'shines, and shines almost alone, a star. From the Volga to Japan, his name is still honoured. China, Tibet, and even India, though it has left his doctrine, preserve the tradition of his greatness.' Tambiah (1973) points out that the Ashokan ethos emphasizes the state's commitment to welfare and prosperity as a precondition to support the monastic institutions, alleviate the suffering of his subjects, and realize the moral law *(dhamma)* in society as a whole. He argues that the Ashokan ethos continues to serve as a charter in contemporary times, stimulating and legitimizing twentieth-century politics, especially in Buddhist countries. This implies that the principles associated with Ashoka's governance have transcended time, continuing to shape political thought and actions, and reminding contemporary leaders that the legitimacy of being a great leader does not come from cruelty but from ethical and peaceful means.

Following a path similar to that of Ashoka, Jayavarman VII, the Emperor of the Khmer Empire, initially had a state ideology strongly influenced by the inherited Hindu *devarājā* cult, but after his conversion to Buddhism, Jayavarman VII applied Buddhist principles to his state policy and adopted the new concept of *buddharājā* or *bodhisattva king,* looking on himself as 'the living Buddha' or 'the Buddha-to-be' to govern the state, ultimately leading it to its pinnacle (Briggs, 1951; Cœdès, 1963; Kulke, 2014; see generally **III**).

The religious principle of Jayavarman VII is based on the spirit of benevolence in Buddhism and is expressed as benefiting others or rescuing people. As stated in the Say-Fong inscription (K. 368 – Honda, 1965, p. 410), a statement which reminds us of Ashoka's *dhamma* ethics, Jayavarma VII puts the well-being of his subjects first, '(Once) a person has a physical disease, his (i. e., king's) mental disease is far more painful. For the suffering of people, is the suffering of masters, not (only) the suffering of people (themselves).'

When considering the Buddhist influence on Jayavarman's social policy and state ideology, the most significant aspect is his construction of 123 rest houses *(dharmasālā)*[2]

[2] Regarding the rest houses, the Sanskrit inscription uses the term *'upakārya,'* which translates to 'staging posts with fire' or *'vahneḥ'* and *'vahnigṛhāṇi,'* both meaning 'house of fire' (Maxwell, 2007, p. 43). Finot (1925, pp. 421–422) interpreted these structures as *'dharmasālā,'* considering them religious hostels along pilgrimage routes due to the presence of Lokeśvara Bodhisattva, offering protection against dangers. Although the term *'dharmasālā'* does not appear in the inscription, it has become widely used to refer to these rest houses. In a first-hand account of Khmer civilization by Chou Ta-Kuan (1992, p. 65), a Chinese envoy who resided in Angkor from 1296 to 1297, the Khmer referred to these resting places along the highways as *'sen-mu'* (Khmer, *samnak*).

and 102 hospitals *(ārogyasālā)*, each meticulously documented with lists of personnel and provisions, serving the needs of pilgrims and providing medical care across the empire, as recorded in the Say-Fong inscription (K. 368 – Honda, 1965) and the Ta Prohm inscription (K. 273 – Cœdès, 1906, p. 48). Jayavarman VII built a well-supplied, country-wide hospital network that, as stated in the inscriptions, was accessible and provided without discrimination to all four castes, i. e., *brahmins* (priests, scholars, and teachers), *kshatriyas* (warriors, rulers, and administrators), *vaishyas* (merchants, farmers, and businesspeople), and *shudras* (labourers) (Chhem, 2005, p. 8; Sharrock & Jacques, 2017, pp. 226–227).

Another, globally less well-known Khmer king who followed the role of *dhammarājā* was King Ang Duong (1796–1860; see **II** in detail). Cambodians usually idealize Ang Duong's reign (1848–1860) for his efforts in revitalizing the state, protecting the kingdom from foreign invasion, promoting national unity, and initiating cultural and religious reforms. Ang Duong ascended the throne during a period of turmoil in the kingdom, marked by social disorder, poverty, and political instability caused by the increasing influence of neighbouring countries, i. e. Siam and Vietnam. The political legacy of Ang Duong appears quite modest when compared to the paradigmatic *dhammarājās* such as Emperor Ashoka and Jayavarman VII, both of whom are recognized as the greatest rulers in their respective territories; from an economic perspective, it may be more modest than that of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) of Thailand or King (Druk Gyalpo Jigme) Singye Wangchuck (the 4th King) of Bhutan (a Vajrayana country), whose economic policies, i. e. Sufficiency Economy (SE) or Gross National Happiness (GNH), have been globally discussed in the 21st century. It is understandable that Ang Duong's more limited legacy and power cause him to be less represented in scholarly discussions on the field of *dhammarājā* today.

Despite his modest political power, his *dhammarājā* role in upholding the principles of *dharma* and aiming to make his subjects realize the true *dharma* and pursue it should not be overlooked. Ang Duong apparently believed that the social disorder and political instability in Cambodia were caused by moral deterioration and a disregard for the principles of *dharma.* The movement for the recovery of the *dharma* and moral values took place during his reign (**II**).

It was King Ang Duong who took on the role of addressing the declining state of Buddhism in Cambodia by expressing concern for monastic education. He assumed a leading role in the movement to preserve and purify the religion (*sāsanā* in Pali) by recovering texts that had been lost or destroyed during the prolonged conflicts with Siam and Vietnam (Hansen, 2007). Observing the incomplete state of the Pāli canonical texts in Cambodia, he corresponded with King Mongkut (Rāma IV), a reformer of Buddhism and the education system in Siam, requesting a copy of the *tipiṭaka*, the three baskets of the Pali canon (see further **II**).

Ang Duong was also renowned for his poetic works. He composed several poems concerning ethics, social order, and the teachings of the Buddha. Many of these works remain popular in Cambodia to this day. He also authored and published classical Khmer literature and historical works. Apart from that, he translated a number of Buddhist texts and folklore. Some even jestingly suggested that his literary and poetic works are more impressive than his political work. However, educating and guiding one's subjects to realize the true *dharma* surely is part of the political work of the *dhammarājā* (II).

It is important to recognize that the concept of *dhammarājā* in Cambodia combines both the explanations provided in the text and the beliefs held by local people.

The *dhammarājā* as seen in the contemporary Khmer view could perhaps be best described as a mix of myth and reality, but of course that is hardly surprising. In Cambodia, when confronted with challenging circumstances, especially under the rule of immoral leaders, Khmer people look back to the glorious history of the Khmer Empire under the wise leadership especially of Jayavarman VII, which is also visually striking and very prominent. Within the purview of Khmer Buddhists, Jayavarman VII embodied the essence of a *dhammik* – a vernacularization of the Pali term *dhammika dhammarājā,* signifying a righteous king. The concept of *dhammika* embodies justice, benevolence, and ethical leadership, providing a model for good governance (Vijitha, 2016).

The term *dhammik* gained prominence during the late 19th century, when the nation was under French colonization (1863–1953), and the Khmer people were in search of a Messiah, to borrow a term from another religion (or two), to rescue them (see **II** & **III**). A prophetic text called *put-domneay* circulated among the Khmer commoners, predicting a decline in the *dhamma,* which was linked to an unrighteous ruler. This ruler's errors of judgment fostered the proliferation of poverty, violence, and morally problematic behaviour, ultimately reducing the average human lifespan to just a few years (**II**). The text also propagated the belief that within the midst of the social turmoil that gave rise to catastrophic death and destruction, a righteous ruler known as a *dhammik* was expected to emerge. This *dhammik* would usher in a new golden age of justice and *dharma,* thus paving the way for the arrival of the next Buddha (Hansen, 2007, pp. 55–56).

From a Khmer nationalist and more conservative perspective, the French authority transitioned from its initial role as a protectorate to a fully colonial rule, posing a potential threat to national identity and the decline of *dharma*. As argued in essay **II**, the French authority made several attempts to reform Khmer institutions and social order by using the Western system as a model for administrative purposes. Some reforms, especially in education, were partly welcomed by Khmer intellectuals, both from the monastic and secular spheres, despite the slow pace of progress and development. However, other administrative reforms, such as taxation and Westernization, evoked general disappointment among the people (**II**).

Day by day, the oppression from the colonial authority towards the locals grew stronger, stirring anger among both monastic and nationalist groups throughout the country. In this view, one can assume that the unjust ruler *(adhammika)*, as perceived by the Khmer, was closely associated with the colonial ruler. In the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, increased Buddhist movements occurred, not only in Cambodia but throughout South and Southeast Asia, responding to Western colonial authorities by employing resistance to mitigate colonial influences (Houtart, 1976; Gyallay-Pap, 2007; Ober, 2019). As articulated in various Buddhist texts concerning the role of *dhammika* kingship, this concept emerged as a pivotal factor, serving to both reinforce and legitimize the resistance movement aimed at protesting against colonial rule, restoring the social order, and safeguarding the *dharma* from decline.

One can easily assume that some politicians and rebel leaders have capitalized on this belief to enhance their influence and pursue legitimacy, with the aim of getting the power to rule the country (**III**). In the late 19th century, several Khmer rebel leaders claimed to be *neak mean bon,* people possessing great merit, or *dhammika* rulers who could save people from suffering and safeguard the *dharma* (Hansen, 2007, p. 60). And even after two centuries, the hope of encountering the 'Khmer Messiah' continues in Cambodia. A rather shrill example for utilizing this is that on 23 August 2022, Khem Veasna, a leader of the fringe League for Democracy Party (LDP), who proclaimed himself as *prom reaksa*

lok or 'The universe safeguarding *brahma*' – the highest form of life in the universe according to Hindu/Buddhist mythology – made a series of apocalyptic predictions on his Facebook page (see Sovinda et al., 2022). Veasna claimed that he could rescue those who follow him in the event of an apocalypse. Veasna's doomsday prophecy prompted his supporters to leave their everyday lives behind and travel from across the country to Siem Reap province. Some of his followers even travelled from as far as South Korea, Japan, and Thailand to seek refuge from the apocalypse (Samean, 2022), which obviously did not happen.

The basis for the Khmer ideal of the *dhammika* ruler on principles is found in various Buddhist *sutras,* particularly those in which the Buddha describes a leader's qualities, roles, and responsibilities. From the Khmer perspective, the *dhammika* is someone who adheres to the tenfold royal duties of the king[3] and possesses supernatural power to safeguard their subjects from adversaries (Monychenda, 2008, pp. 313–314). However, Monychenda (2008) argues that Khmer people focus too much on the tenfold duties of the king, which deal with the individual behaviour of the leader, and fail to look at the Buddha's teachings about the *system* of governing the state. He (1999, pp. 32–34) argues that the term *'dhammika* ruler' is essentially a title for an individual who believes in *dhammocracy,* holds respect for *dharma,* loves *dharma,* considers *dharma* the guiding principle of life, and honours *dharma* as the flagship.

Drechsler (2019a, p. 234), from a slightly different but dovetailing perspective, underlines that 'a classic role of the Buddhist king is that of the *dhammaraja,* of which one aspect of great relevance here (this is a highly complex subject both historically and theoretically) is that of facilitator of his subjects' attainment of happiness, with the optimal goal of enlightenment. The *dhammaraja* is, then, not (only) the one who rules according to the dhamma, but he who guides or enables his subjects to realize the(ir) *dhamma* – anywhere between nudging them thither or creating a space within which this is possible.'

3.2 The Governance of the *Saṅgha*

Alongside the ideal kingship of the *dhammarājā,* the *saṅgha* assembly is usually upheld as an exemplary governing body in Buddhism. The *saṅgha* is a fundamental institution in Buddhism, comprising the *bhikkhu saṅgha* (male-ordained community) and the *bhikkhuni saṅgha* (female-ordained community), who have renounced worldly attachments and committed themselves to the pursuit of spiritual awakening by living a dedicated life of spiritual practice, study, and service – and in fact, as Habermas has recently reminded us, the first monastic community ever (2019, p. 379). The term *saṅgha* refers to a collective, 'assembly', 'association', 'community', or 'order' (Buswell, 2014) that includes a minimum of four Buddhist *saṅgha* members.

As an integral part of the Buddhist tradition, the *saṅgha* plays a crucial role in preserving and propagating the teachings of the Buddha by helping the laity realize the true *dharma*. Buddhist society is therefore centred around the *saṅgha*. The *saṅgha* is

[3] The ten royal duties of a righteous king *(Dasa-rājadhamma)* are mentioned in the Nandiyamiga Jātaka (385) of Khuddaka Nikāya (Francis, & Neil, 1879). This Jātaka tale illustrates the story of the Nandiya Bodhisattva, advising the Kosala King: 'Great king, it is good for a king to rule a kingdom by forsaking the ways of wrongdoing, not offending against the ten kingly virtues and acting with just righteousness … Alms, morals, charity, justice and penitence, peace, mildness, mercy, meekness, patience.'

governed by a set of monastic rules set by the Buddha. Although the Buddha was the original lawgiver, in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta (DN 16 – Ānandajoti, 2008; Sujato, 2018g Thanissaro, 2013b; Vajira & Story, 2013), the discourse of the last day of the Buddha, he recommended the *saṅgha* adapt his teachings to changing conditions, reflecting his belief in the primacy of the law, faith in human rationality, and a pragmatic view that laws should not remain static in a changing society (Payutto, 2007, p. 78; Long, 2019, pp. 52–53). Therefore, each *saṅgha* institution might differ from one country to another due to the local culture and context. While their roles vary among Buddhist traditions, they are generally based on the principles of the *dharma.* Our current inquiry primarily focuses on the canonical context and the contemporary state of the *saṅgha* in Cambodia.

The Buddhist *saṅgha* originated during the time of the historical Buddha over 2,600 years ago. Shortly after his enlightenment, the Buddha gave his first teaching known as the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, (SN 56.11 – Ñanamoli, 2010), the discourse of setting the wheel of *dharma* in motion, to his five former fellows in the practice of asceticism and recruited them as the first five members of the *saṅgha.* During the early period of his enlightenment, the Buddha was the only one authorized to confer full ordination (Dickson, 1983, p. 33). As time passed, the membership of the *saṅgha* increased significantly. Subsequently, the Buddha decentralized his authority, allowing the *saṅgha* to autonomously govern itself. This autonomy included admitting new members, making independent decisions, organizing internal administration, and resolving conflicts within the *saṅgha*, all guided by the *vinaya* or monastic codes (see Rhys-Davids & Oldenberg, 1881; Thanissaro, 2013c; **III** & **IV** in detail).

One can assume that the governance of the *saṅgha* does not rely on a hierarchical structure or individual authority but is grounded in the principles of *dharma* and *vinaya.* Position and influence within the *saṅgha* were determined, at least in theory, by a combination of wisdom and seniority, granted through consensus rather than inherited or secured through nepotism (**III**). The Buddha called this system the *dhammādhipateyya* or, as we would designate it with Monychenda (2008, p. 314), the *dhammocratic* system. It can be argued that the Buddha introduced a revolutionary paradigm that was in direct contrast to the autocratic ruling systems then prevalent in India and different from the democratic system (elsewhere) (**III**).

Although liberating oneself from worldly attachment is a primary objective of joining the *saṅgha community*, helping others escape from miseries and bringing happiness to all sentient beings is also regarded as an ideal way the Buddha assigns to the *saṅgha* members, as focusing solely on oneself would not suffice (see **I**). After entering the *saṅgha* community, each member bears three responsibilities: a) learning the *dharma*, b) practicing the *dharma*, and c) spreading the *dharma* to the public. As stated in the mission statement of the Dutiyamārapāsa Sutta (SN 4.5, cited according to Bodhi, 2000, p. 198), the Buddha advises his *saṅgha* members to disseminate the *dharma* to the public as follows:

> Wander forth, O bhikkhus, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans. Let not two go the same way. Teach, O bhikkhus, the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing. Reveal the perfectly complete and purified holy life. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma. I too, bhikkhus, will go to Senānigama in Uruvelā in order to teach the Dhamma.

As the nature of the *saṅgha* is grounded in the principles of material detachment and a mendicant lifestyle, wandering from one place to another, its members do not, or are not supposed to, own many possessions. Each individual *saṅgha* member possesses only a small amount of private material belongings, with the majority of property held communally. The Buddhist monastery, temple, stupa, land, and various other substantial items are considered communal property, known in Buddhist terminology as *'garubhandha'*, referring to 'heavy objects' or 'expensive goods'. The concept of 'heavy objects' goes beyond their mere physical weight; it signifies the responsibility of effectively managing and allocating these communal resources, embodying principles of equity and justice (see **IV**).

Garubhandha properties are generally counted as collective assets established and maintained by the Buddhist community under the guidance of the *saṅgha,* governed by a well-defined set of rules (**IV**). Their primary purpose is to serve the common good within their respective communities. *Garubhandha* cannot be owned by any individual *saṅgha* member or given from one *saṅgha* member to another. The *garubhandha* property is designated for the *saṅgha* community, reflecting its collective ownership and responsibility. However, the *saṅgha* community may choose to temporarily loan *garubhandha* to others, ensuring its utilization benefits the wider community's welfare and needs (**IV**). But this already foreshadows the discussion of Buddhist Economics, to which we will get below.

Over time, as was intended by the Buddha and as one would expect from the outside as well, the *saṅgha* has adjusted its role to fit the evolving needs of the society in which its members are residing. In contemporary times, the *saṅgha* has divided into various schools to adapt to the environment. Since the 19th-century reforms the *saṅgha* in Cambodia has been divided into two primary groups, Mahānikāya and Dhammayuttikanikāya. The Mahānikāya represents the majority of the locally-based *saṅgha* community, while the Dhammayuttikanikāya represents a minority. The Dhammayuttikanikāya, a reformed *saṅgha* group according to the Siamese model, was first introduced into Cambodia in 1855 by King Norodom through the effort of Ven. Mahā Pan (1824–1894), the first Supreme Patriarch of the Dhammayutika Order in Cambodia (**II**). Both groups belong to the same Theravada school; however, there are slight differences between these two groups in terms of doctrine – the latter is a more elite, aristocratic reform movement with some Western impetus – and the interpretation of some elements of the monastic codes, such as how to wear robes, sandals, and carry the alms-bowl, as well as how to pronounce Pāli words and recite Suttas (Harris, 2001, p. 84; see further **II**).

Over the centuries, the Khmer *saṅgha* reformed its organization by centralizing the administration under the control of the Supreme Patriarch (*saṅgharājā*) to align with the monarchy form and contemporary administrative structure. The appointment of both Supreme Patriarchs and some senior *saṅgha* officials requires discussions or even political compromises.

Despite the centralization of *saṅgha* authority, most of the daily affairs, decision-making, and the resolution of internal issues in the *saṅgha* community continue to follow the bottom-up approach and adhere to the traditional practices that were written in the canonical texts (see **III**). Those issues include disputes over the use and distribution of *saṅgha* properties, such as land and temples; quarrels over which monks should be granted positions; controversies over the proper interpretation of Buddhist doctrine; and arguments about whether a monk has or has not violated the *saṅgha*'s monastic codes.

If those issues cannot be resolved based on the traditional procedure at the local level, they will seek assistance from the centralized *saṅgha* authority (Schonthal, 2021). However, cases like this do not happen quite often in the *saṅgha* community.

4 Buddhist Economics

With this emphasis on scepticism about worldly possessions and material success, along with its trajectory toward worldly detachment, Buddhism might create confusion or foster false assumptions about Buddhist Economics (BE), as mentioned already. BE is not about asceticism but, rather, about alleviating hunger and poverty, which, according to Buddhism, is a leading cause of human suffering (Long, 2019, pp. 48, 60). As Schumacher (1973, p. 57), points out, 'It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them.' Buddhism introduces the concept of the 'middle path', often misunderstood as a compromise from an outside perspective. In reality, it represents a way of 'getting things exactly right' (Payutto, 1994, pp. 18–19, 23–24, 41–42; Swearer, 2011, pp. 130–139; Daniels, 2005, p. 246).

In theory, BE extends beyond historical Buddhism, functioning as a modern theoretical movement and a label for the organization of inquiry for a scientific community (Drechsler, 2019a). In that role, BE has stronger roots in the West than in the Buddhist countries of the East, later taken up in Asia by those familiar with the intricacies of Buddhism (Payutto, 1994; Puntasen, 2008; Puntarigvivat, 2013). In this academic sense, the original text for contemporary BE is the short chapter on 'Buddhist Economics' in E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1974, pp. 44–51), originally published in 1966 (Schumacher, 1974, p. 25; see Drechsler, 2019a).

The work of Schumacher on BE has paved the way for others, both Buddhist scholars and social scientists, to explore the possible relationship between the teachings of the Buddha and socio-economic issues scattered throughout the Buddhist discourses. As opposed to Adam Smith, who emphasizes the role of self-interest in promoting economic growth (even if also originally with a moral impetus; Wells, 2013, pp. 281–283), as highlighted in essay **IV**, Schumacher argues that pursuing self-interest in a free-market system might lead to exploiting workers and the environment. Schumacher proposes a BE, which he argues is more ethical and sustainable. Rather than maximizing profit, he asserts that economic development should serve the needs of the people. In his view, economic development should not be driven by self-interest alone but must instead be based on ethical values and sustainable principles (1973).

Schumacher's BE essay gained widespread attention following its 1973 publication in his book *Small is Beautiful*. The book presented Schumacher's alternative economic theories that critiqued mainstream Euro-American economic thinking and proposed alternative development models for Asia and the West that emphasize human-scale technologies, decentralization, and the sustainable use of natural resources. In addition, he argued that industrial, top-down expansionist development linked to Western materialism had a negative impact on the environment and society (King, 2016). Drechsler (2019a) agrees with Schumacher that the principle of Buddhism plays an essential role in alternative approaches to mainstream economics, explicitly so in the sufficiency economy principles promoted by the former Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX; Drechsler, 2016). (It is perhaps noteworthy here that while in Thailand, and as mentioned in Bhutan, we have specific BE forms proposed by Buddhist kings, this, for various reasons, has not been the case in Cambodia.)

As pointed out in essay **IV**, Schumacher's self-interest argument is well aligned with the concept of non-self in Buddhism. Buddhism challenges the concept of self-interest because the Buddha refers to the 'self' as *anattā* **(IV)**. *Anattā*, which means non-self,

is a fundamental concept in Buddhism. In other words, it refers to the concept that no permanent, unchanging self or soul is found in any human being. In Buddhism, all phenomena, including individuals, are impermanent and constantly changing, and none possess an inherent or intrinsic self-nature (**IV**). The *anattā* principle aims to encourage Buddhist practitioners to detach themselves from the misguided clinging to what is mistakenly considered to be *self,* and through that detachment (alongside moral livelihood and meditation), the path to *nirvana* can be successfully traversed.

Since self-interest is a driving force of competition in mainstream economics, ven. Payutto (1994 p. 25; **IV**), probably the most eminent Southeast Asian BE thinker and a very senior Thai monk, views it as a natural aspect of human behaviour. He points out that when one attempts to satisfy the desire for pleasure, one will compete fiercely since one wants to get as much as possible for oneself, and there is no sense of sufficiency or fullness. However, he emphasizes that competition must not be pursued at the expense of others or environmental degradation. According to Payutto, such competition is driven by *taṇhā* (sensual desire), considered a leading cause of suffering and an unwholesome state in Buddhism. Payutto (1994 p. 57) stresses that human behaviour is also driven by *chanda,* or willingness, regarded as a wholesome state for bringing about real well-being or quality of life. He continues to address that all individuals have a moral responsibility to act in a way that does not harm others or the environment, as non-harming is an essential part of Buddhist teachings (see further **IV**).

The concept of non-self, or *anatta,* illuminates the limitations of self-interested pursuits and materialistic consumption in creating collective well-being within the economic framework. From this perspective, the path toward happiness or a better life does not depend on materialistic consumption or the pursuit of wealth through self-interest. Furthermore, this concept also reminds us that there is no self in every conditioned thing, including us as human beings, because everything is built or depends on another thing to exist. Rather than solely focusing on one's self-interested pursuit, through this lens, Buddhist Economics offers a compelling alternative that prioritizes collective well-being over individual accumulation by emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment in shaping sustainable economic systems (see **IV**).

BE, as mentioned several times now, is not about asceticism but about reducing poverty and alleviating suffering through the middle path or the right way (**I**). From a Buddhist perspective, desperation may drive individuals to resort to stealing and killing, yet the karmic law is that such deeds only drive them further downwards in a seemingly never-ending spiral of suffering. This scenario is depicted in the Cakkavatti Sutta (DN 26 – Thanissaro, 2013a; Sujato, 2018a), where poverty triggers a downward spiral causing whole societies to slide into a state of absolute disarray (Harris, 2013). For those deprived, material indulgence and sensual pursuits can lure towards sinful paths. Such a pursuit is compared to debt and the consequences of incurring a debt leading to bondage in the Ina Sutta (AN 6.45 – Thanissaro, 2010).

As highlighted in essay **I**, wealth in itself is not the sole measure or means for happiness. The standard of living, assessed by life quality, is not exclusively contingent on the quantity of wealth consumed; higher consumption does not necessarily correspond to an elevated standard of living (Zinchenko & Boichenko, 2022, p. 234). The Buddha, in various sermons, has explained the temporary nature of wealth. For instance, in the Aputtaka Sutta (SN 3.19 – Thanissaro, 2013d), the Buddha warns that wealth, if it is not put to proper use, is lost to Kings, thieves, fire, water, or hateful heirs. In the Sigālovāda Sutta (DN 31 – Narada, 2013a), the Buddha mentions six ways of squandering wealth –

addiction to strong drink, haunting the street at untimely hours, frequent theatrical attendance, gambling addiction, keeping bad company, and habitual idleness. In the Dighajanu (Vyagghapajja) Sutta (AN 8.54 – Narada, 2013b), the Buddha mentions four sources of the destruction of wealth amassed as: '(i) Debauchery, (ii) drunkenness, (iii) gambling, (iv) friendship, companionship and intimacy with evil-doers.' These teachings reinforce the Buddhist perspective that wealth is temporary and meaningful only when utilized wisely.

The status quo of this world, as argued in essay **I**, is by default polarizing and tends to lead towards immoral deeds. But the *dharma* is certainly not about apathy or indifference to the nature of the world as it is. Buddhism does not promote inaction but rather supports taking conscious action (Moad, 2004). According to the Uposattha Sutta (UD 5.5 – Ireland, 2010; Thanissaro, 2012; Sujato, 2018b), the Buddha clearly states that the path of *dharma-vinaya* is available to all human beings no matter what class they belong to, whether they are nobles, brahmans, merchants, or workers; the path to liberation is unique to each individual traveller, but the common duty is to avoid the lures of attachment. And with the accumulation of wealth also comes inequality (**I**). Those living in poverty should have at least the basic prerequisites to live a comfortable and dignified life (Payutto, 1994, p. 69), but that does not necessitate that all members in a lay society remain equal. One can put one's wealth and power into good use to help those without it (pp. 34–36; see also **I**).

As argued in essay **I**, Buddhists follow a path toward liberation from superficial wants, rather than needs. But this path is indeed not always the same, and most distinctly, the path of the monkhood involves exiting lay society as a whole, giving away one's possessions and living only with the very basic necessities (**I**). Outside the *saṅgha,* acceptance of the significance of material prosperity is appropriate and even required, even though Buddhism also points to *appicchatā* or frugality as being a virtue, not only for the members of the *saṅgha.* But even canonical texts show the Buddha encouraging accumulation of wealth and protecting it as well (Rahula, 1974), and this has been pointed out by Ambedkar (2014, p. 460) too (**I**).

Buddhism does not deny that consumption is a part of human well-being (**I**). However, Buddhism sees consumption as a means rather than an end, distinguishing it from modern Western economics that considers consumption as both an end in itself and, often enough, the goal of economic activities (Zinchenko & Boichenko, 2022, p. 233). In contrast to mainstream global-Western economics, which focuses on maximizing consumption through optimal production, BE prioritizes maximizing well-being through minimal consumption (Drechsler, 2019a). Regarding wealth, BE views it as a double-edged sword that can be both useful and harmful based on the way that people behave toward it. As Schumacher (1973, p. 57) pointed out, 'It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them.'

The attachment to material wealth will only bring suffering, and the stronger the attachment is, the greater is the suffering (Bodhi, 1984). As pointed out in essay **I**, since wealth in this world comes with its own danger, accumulating wealth, akin to the fear of losing one's beauty, increases the likelihood of straying from the path towards the *dharma,* echoing the biblical notion that it is more challenging for a rich person to enter Heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24, etc.), emphasizing the nature of wealth in this world is both ephemeral and dangerous.

5 A Balanced Path Towards a Better Life?

The discussion on Buddhist Governance and Economics offers an alternative paradigm beyond the global-Western view, and hegemony, expressed through mainstream governance and economics, which cultivates an individualistic monoculture promoting antagonistic ways of living (**IV**) – and one different from other non-Western approaches as well. In exploring the concept of Buddhist Governance and Economics to build 'A Path Towards a Better Life', the central question arises: Who holds the authority to determine what brings true happiness to individuals, if not the individuals themselves? Is true happiness defined by assuming that the social well-being depends on a growth-oriented economy, driven by self-interest, profit-maximization, and resource exploitation, in accordance with the mainstream global-Western trajectory, despite its profound consequences? These questions raise a democratic challenge, prompting an examination of how principles embedded in Buddhist governance and economics address this issue.

Through the principle of *paṭiccasamuppāda,* i. e. 'interconnectedness', 'interdependence', or 'interbeing' (Hanh, 1991), Buddhism points out that nothing can stand alone. Each element mutually depends on another to survive or to form something new. Rooted in the theory of *paṭiccasamuppāda,* Buddhism teaches that all things arise in dependence upon other things; aligned with the principle of *karma,* which emphasizes that every action carries consequences (**IV**). Based on this theory, one can assume that the consequences can be either positive or negative, depending on the chosen path. Actions from the wrong path lead to negative consequences, while actions from the right path or the middle path *(majjhimāpaṭipadā)* result in positive consequences or the cessation of suffering.

The middle path in Buddhism is the balance between the two extremes: self-indulgence (hedonism or sensual indulgence) and self-mortification (asceticism or severe self-denial). As mentioned above, despite appearing as a middle ground between the two extremes, this is not a compromise but rather a way of 'getting things exactly right' (Drechsler, 2019a, p. 527) – akin in Western thought to Aristotle's concept of *mesothes*, which posits virtue between two vices, rather than framing it as the opposite of one vice (EN II:6). This is the balanced approach that Buddhism uses to remind us that everything is connected and needs to be moderated to stay on the right path. From this perspective, one could argue that in Buddhist society, the *saṅgha, dhammarājā,* and the laity are interconnected, relying on each other and reminding one another to stay on the right path (see Figure 2).

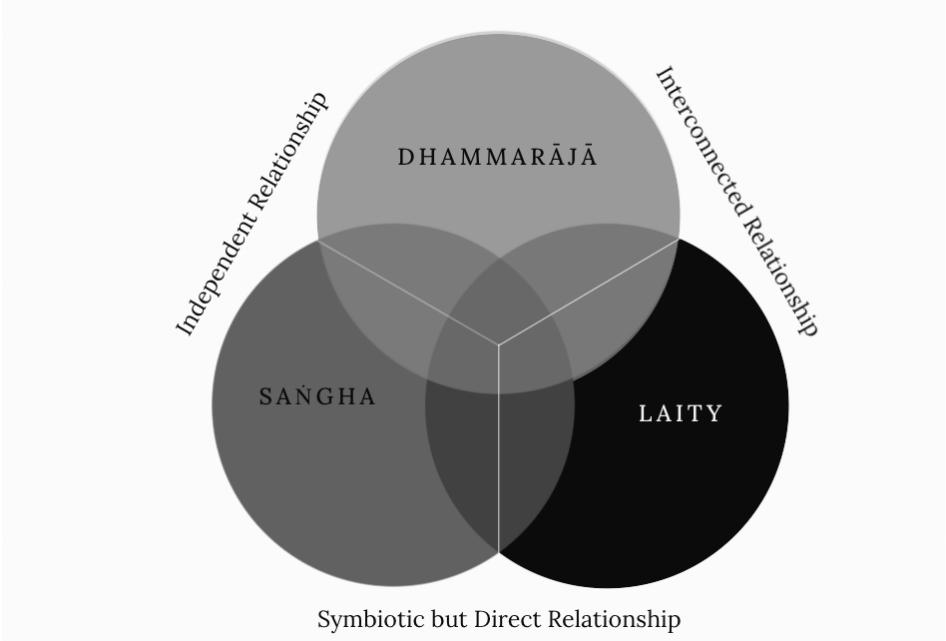

Figure 2 Three Key Relationships between the Dhammarājā, Saṅgha and Laity (Author's Conceptualization)

This parallel nature raises questions about how Buddhist principles and institutions intersect with the mechanisms of governance, economics, and decision-making in the contemporary context. From this parallel nature, three key relationships emerge:

1. the relationship between the *saṅgha* and the laity, intersected by the *dhammarājā*, who protects and spreads the *dharma*;
2. the symbiotic but direct relationship between the *saṅgha* and the laity;
3. the independent relationship between the 'Ruler' (of the citizens) and the 'Buddha' (of the *saṅgha*)

As this is to a considerable extent the result of this thesis and its parts, we will then recapitulate what has emerged:

5.1 The *Saṅgha*-Laity Relationship with an Intersection of the Role of *Dhammarājā*

The *dhammarājā* in the *saṅgha*-laity relationship acts as a guardian and promoter of *dharma*, fostering a healthy connection. Like how the Buddha guides even the most unfortunate towards the path to enlightenment, the duty of the *rājā,* the king, or more abstractly, the state, lies in providing means of sustenance and security to all its citizens, for as all monks are like sons to the Buddha, all citizens of the state are like sons to the ruler (Zimmermann, 2006). As pointed out in essay **I**, if the state fails to fulfil its responsibility of supporting the citizens, the *saṅgha,* which lives off the secular world, will also perish.

As the Buddha would show paths towards enlightenment to all beings regardless of their capacity to understand to move forward in their path, the state has to provide for

the sustenance and security of even the poorest of its citizens, showing them the path towards the upliftment of their lives (**I**). The state is primarily responsible for fulfilling the citizens' basic needs since one cannot meditate on an empty stomach (**I**). Providing this level of access to all citizens, regardless of their economic status, is the primary responsibility of the state, and it is also one of the highest implications of Buddhist thinking when it comes to economic governance (Long, 2021, pp. 39–40). People should see a path towards how a dignified life without hunger can be attained, a roof over the head, and a sense of security for the future (Long, 2021, p. 39). How the state provides this need not be the same for everyone, i. e. to each their own, not to each the same – like how the Buddha or monks use *upāya-kauśalya* to teach depending on who is on the receiving end (Keown, 1992). What the capability of the respective person is to cultivate the understanding of the *dharma* is similar to how the state must have varied provisions based on the differences and not assume equality or even aim for it. The needs of the old are different from those of the young, depending on time and space.

The role of the state has two dimensions in this Buddhist conceptualization, too, with the duty of the *rājā* not only being about the material sustenance of the subjects but also enabling his subjects to realize the *dhamma.* Even in contemporary times, Buddhist monarchies, although they have almost vanished, have shown the concept's applicability, in that those kings who have seen themselves as *dhammarājās* have certainly acknowledged both dimensions (Drechsler, 2020a).

Even with a *dhammarājā* ruling it, the idea that every state can provide equally for all its citizens or become immediately equal in economic standing to those more prosperous is more of a utopian thought than a vision with practicality; the Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan's tendency to compare itself with Switzerland and Singapore while still being a 'Least Developed Country' (see Drechsler, 2020a; Bhutan only graduated from LDC status in late 2023; UNCDF, 2024) is perhaps a point in case. Not all countries are equally able, and if one ruminates on the implications of the Buddhist law of *karmic* causality as well as of simple geospatiality, they can practically never be, and as such, neither are their goals the same, nor the means available to reach these goals. The state, then, has the responsibility to set the goals and choose the ethical means that best suit their context, not just generally but specifically concerning the groups and subgroups of its citizens.

5.2 The *Saṅgha*-Laity Symbiotic but Direct Relationship

The *saṅgha*-lay relationship is symbiotic, with the *saṅgha* assuming the roles of guides and advisors, imparting the teachings of *dharma* and guiding individuals on the path to enlightenment in the secular world (**III**). As discussed in essays **II** and **III**, in both historical and contemporary developments of Buddhism, the *saṅgha* served as literati, actively preserving a diverse body of literature, engaging in higher studies, and contributing to historical and non-religious writings. Additionally, they played a pivotal role in providing essential education to villagers (Bechert, 1973).

The *saṅgha* depends on the laity to provide the means of subsistence to the *saṅgha*. The survival of the *saṅgha* depends on the laity. Thus, the *saṅgha,* as pointed out in essay **I**, is also responsible for advising or at least well-wishing for worldly matters concerning trade, commerce, agriculture, law, and security. In Sigālovāda Sutta (DN 31 – Narada, 2013a; Sujato, 2018d), the discourse where the Buddha imparts advice to a man named Sigāla, the Buddha mentions the mutual relationship between the laity and the *saṅgha*. Based on the discourse, to promote and encourage the *dharma* practice of the *saṅgha*,

the laity should respect the *saṅgha* through kind actions, kind words, kind thoughts, keeping their houses open for them, and supporting them with basic requisites.

In encouraging the laity to respect the *saṅgha,* the Buddha refers to a society where individuals who ethically practice the way of detaching themselves from worldly attachments should be appreciated and supported by their community members. Respecting or supporting the *saṅgha* demonstrates how much ethics and *dharma*, which have been argued throughout this thesis as the means of maintaining social order, are valued and appreciated in society. This practice is viewed as a means of fostering a close bond between the laity and the *saṅgha*, providing not just physical sustenance but also mental and spiritual guidance towards the path that leads to the end of worldly suffering.

In return, the *saṅgha* should bear in mind that they have an obligation to care and show compassion to the lay people by restraining them from doing evil deeds, persuading them to perform wholesome deeds, thinking compassionately, teaching them what they have not learned, clarifying what they have already learned and showing them the path to the heavenly state (**I**).

5.3 The Independent Relationship between the 'Ruler' (of the Citizens) and the 'Leader' (of the *Saṅgha*)

As discussed in essay **III**, in the 21st century, Cambodia stands as a unique example, constitutionally recognizing Buddhism, the monarchy, and the *saṅgha*, as outlined in Cambodia's 1993 Constitution (Lawrence, 2022). The *saṅgha's* role, highlighted in various Buddhist discourses, involves aiding the *dhammarājā* in governing subjects according to *dharma* (**III**). As mentioned in the Aggañña Sutta (DN 27 – Rhys-Davids & Rhys-Davids, 1921; Sujato, 2018c), the Buddha suggests that *saṅgha* members should serve as advisors to righteous rulers. However, the Buddha also emphasizes that the *saṅgha* should abstain from direct involvement in political affairs. The Sutta also notes that the king must adhere to the moral instructions of the *dharma* to maintain legitimacy, promote peace, foster prosperity, and secure the survival of his kingdom (**III**).

The Buddha, through *upāya-kauśalya* (skilful means), teaches the *dharma* to human beings with varied capacities to understand it, showing their unique path toward enlightenment (Keown, 1992). Similarly, the *saṅgha* is also present to guide the *rājās* or the rulers of states. Kūṭadanta Sutta (DN 5 – Sujato, 2018i) and Cakkavatti Sutta (DN 26 – Thanissaro, 2013a; Sujato, 2018a) are just two of several examples where Buddhist scriptures directly address matters of the secular world, focusing on issues of poverty and crime and the need for economic uplifting (Rahula, 1974).

While the close connections between the state and the Khmer *saṅgha* may offer mutual benefits in terms of political legitimacy and security, the state's absolute authority over the *saṅgha's* leaders may raise questions about the *saṅgha's* integrity (Kent, 2008; Lawrence, 2022). It can be argued that the loss of these principles would limit the sovereignty of the *saṅgha,* making them unable to make the right decision and to fulfill their role as moral advisors and exemplars for the ruler in governing the state in accordance with the *dharma.* To ensure the *saṅgha* community remains committed to the neutrality principle and can contribute to truly good governance, the state must create a healthy environment for them. Through this, the *saṅgha* can fully embrace their role of offering moral guidance and telling what is just *(dharma)* and unjust *(adharma)* for the state.

In examining Buddhist governance in Cambodia, it is crucial to understand the theoretical and practical aspects within the societal and state structures. While the framework for Buddhist governance in Cambodia must be rooted in an understanding of local customs, beliefs, and historical trajectories, it is pivotal to emphasize the core element of the *dhammarājā,* particularly their commitment to embracing the *dhammocracy* (**III**). Given that the concept of genuinely good governance and a just ruler in Buddhism revolves around the ruler's alignment with the *dharma,* understanding what *dharma* represents in the contemporary world is a key factor for both the *saṅgha* and the *dhammarājā* in order to evaluate their actions.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has discussed the integration of *dhammarājā* and *saṅgha* within the context of Buddhist governance and economics, with a specific focus on Cambodia as the currently remaining Buddhist kingdom. At its core, we have sought to examine the essence of genuine happiness and to explore how Buddhist governance and economics could contribute to a better life, emphasizing the optimization, or at least the improvement, of the present life alongside spiritual goals. Utilizing a Non-Western Public Administration approach, the study deviates from traditional conventional social science methods, in line with current times. By delving into the theoretical foundations of Buddhist governance, emphasizing its dual role in both spiritual and temporal realms, we can gain a deeper understanding of how this system influences societal organization and political structures. The integration of theoretical analysis, historical examples, contextual insights, and personal engagement scaffolds a solid exploration of the intricate relationship between the *saṅgha* and the secular community in the form of the connection between religion and the public sphere, in Cambodia and beyond. This contribution should also add to the broader research stream of NWPA. But our discussion also extends to Buddhist Economics, challenging common Western assumptions and highlighting its focus on alleviating suffering through a middle path, enriching current narratives with a broader exploration of Buddhist principles in governance and economics.

Limits of this study are manifold and acknowledged: The inside, personal perspective, the single-country focus, and remaining in parts on the theory level may all be judged as expandable. However, it is to be hoped that, as limited as this contribution to the questions at hand is, it is still a helpful one, and we know now a little more about these important subject matters than we did before.

This also opens the path to further inquiry – outside perspectives, comparative studies, and empirical observations through surveys, interviews, or experiments are all possible and desirable. They can potentially provide a more concrete understanding of the phenomena being studied and validate or challenge the perspectives promulgated here. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies would be excellent venues for further research to investigate how these phenomena manifest themselves in different cultural contexts and to explore cultural variations in attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes.

Concretely, one of the avenues only touched upon in this thesis due to its specific nature and gestation process, but of great relevance and interest, is the explicit combination and discussion of the two areas mentioned in the title – Buddhist Governance *and* Buddhist Economics. One significantly depends on the other, and the necessarily holistic framework Buddhism suggests forces this combination to begin with. As this is of crucial relevance for administrative capacity and development, all the more in a world that is now emphasizing sustainability and has, so to say, caught up with Buddhist Economics, exploring these aspects would probably be the most interesting next step to take.

The questions asked earlier on, about the judgment of happiness, the Buddhist principles towards a better life, and the possibility of such an influence via a famously unworldly religion have, unsurprisingly given our approach and framework, to a considerable extent been answered in the figure and the teachings of the Buddha, as reflected and applied throughout the centuries by both *saṅgha* and laypeople in the

best of times – and even the worst ones – not least, for the last millennium, in the Kingdom of Cambodia and its previous Khmer Empire.

Again unsurprisingly, these answers might not convince everyone, but they line out a trajectory, a matrix, within which there is a chance to live and prosper without forgetting one's spiritual goals and their realization, and that indeed means, one's *dharma*. Life in this world does, or at least can, get better when focusing more on reality, and that is what comes after it (and after it, and after it …), and while we need to achieve what we need, if we do not cling to what we have or want, the chance to be pulled down is greater, and the less-material truth might materialize.

In the end, as the Buddha says, 'Those who fully cultivate the factors of Awakening, give up grasping, enjoy non-clinging, and have destroyed the toxins, are luminous, and completely liberated in this life' (Dhp. Cha. VI, v. 89 – Fronsdal, 2006, capitalization edited).

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Abstract

Buddhist Governance and Economics: Historical and Contemporary Perspective from Cambodia and Beyond

The relationship between religion, state, and society has always held profound interest and significance. Across history to the present day, the interplay between these spheres has shaped our ways of life, social norms, and power structures. One religious tradition that has recently recaptured considerable attention is Buddhism. With its specific uniqueness among world religions, Buddhism's appeal extends beyond its spiritual and philosophical aspects. This doctoral thesis delves into the intersection of Buddhism with governance and economics. The study aims to address the path towards a better life through governance and economics perspectives, drawing from the principles of Buddhism.

To address this issue, this thesis employs Non-Western Public Administration (NWPA) as a theoretical framework to look at Public Administration and governance beyond conventional paradigms. By relying on the NWPA framework, the thesis tries to examine the theoretical foundations of Buddhist governance and economics, focusing on its dual role in spiritual and temporal spheres. It aims to contribute to answering questions such as who can determine what brings happiness if not individuals themselves. Additionally, the thesis seeks to explore how the principles embedded in Buddhist governance and economics can pave a path towards a better life. Furthermore, it aims to investigate how Buddhism, while traditionally emphasizing a spiritual trajectory towards a better afterlife, extends its core principles into the present, and how this aspect shapes the framework of Buddhist governance and economics.

To answer these complex questions, the thesis employs a methodological approach that integrates empirical studies, canonical textual perspectives, theoretical analysis, and the author's personal engagement within the *saṅgha* community (Buddhist monastic order) in Cambodia for almost twenty years. The thesis addresses three main topics: what defines true happiness, the role of the *saṅgha* in guiding individuals to stay on the path towards a better life, and the role of the *dhammarājā* (the Buddhist king) in upholding the principle of *dharma* (the teachings of the Buddha) and making his subjects realize the true *dharma.*

Essay **I** of the thesis seeks to examine the role of wealth and privilege from a Buddhist perspective, exploring what defines true happiness and how it contributes to improving our lives. In Essay **II**, as well as partially in Essays **III** and **IV**, the thesis attempts to address the role of the Khmer *saṅgha* in guiding and reminding lay society to remain on the spiritual path, drawing from both canonical and contemporary perspectives. In Essay **III**, the thesis makes an effort to examine the concept of just governance through the role of the *dhammarājā* or *chakravartin* (ideal universally accepted ruler) as a Buddhist king, whose primary duty is to uphold the principles of *dharma* to maintain social order and make his subjects realize the true *dharma*.

By analyzing and addressing these issues, the thesis hopefully deepens our understanding of Buddhist governance and economics, serving as a reminder of their significant relevance in contemporary society. It addresses the importance of applying moral and ethical values in contemporary governance and economics to create a path towards a better life. Through insights drawn from Buddhism, with a specific focus on the context of Cambodia, this research contributes to the fields of Buddhist governance, Buddhist economics, and the study of Non-Western Public Administration.

Lühikokkuvõte

Budistlik valitsemise ja majanduse käsitlus: kaasaegsed ja ajaloolised vaated Kambodžast ja kaugemalt

Suhe religiooni, riigi ja ühiskonna vahel on alati tekitanud sügavat huvi ja omanud suurt tähtsust. Läbi ajaloo kuni tänase päevani on nende kolme omavaheline suhe kujundanud meie eluviisi, sotsiaalseid norme ja võimustruktuure. Budism kui religioone traditsioon on viimasel ajal saanud märgataval hulgal tähelepanu. Oma spetsiifilise unikaalsusega teiste religioonide kõrval, ulatub budismi veetlus kaugemale vaimsetest ja filosoofilistest aspektidest. Antud doktoritöö süveneb sellesse, kuidas ristuvad budism, valitsemine ja majandus. Töö eesmärk on käsitleda teekonda parema elu poole läbi valitsemise ja majanduse perspektiivide, lähtudes samal ajal budismi põhimõtetest.

Selle probleemi lahendamiseks kasutab käesolev lõputöö teoreetilise raamistikuna mitte-lääneliku avalikku haldust, et vaadelda avalikku haldust ja valitsemist väljastpoolt tavapäraseid paradigmasid. Tuginedes mitte-lääneliku avaliku halduse raamistikule proovib antud töö uurida budistliku valitsemise ja majanduse teoreetilisi aluseid, keskendudes budismi kahetisele rollile nii vaimses kui ka ilmalikus sfääris. Töö eesmärk on aidata vastata küsimustele nagu näiteks kes saab määrata, mis toob õnne, kui mitte üksikisikud ise. Lisaks püüab lõputöö uurida, kuidas budistlikus valitsemises ja majanduses sisalduvad põhimõtted võivad sillutada teed parema elu poole. Täiendavalt on eesmärgiks uurida kuidas budism, mis muidu traditsiooniliselt rõhutab vaimset trajektoori paremaks surmajärgseks eluks, laiendab oma põhiprintsiipe tänapäeva ning kuidas see aspekt kujundab budistliku valitsemise ja majanduse raamistikku.

Nendele keerulistele küsimustele vastamiseks rakendab antud töö metodoloogilist lähenemist, mis toob kokku empiirilised uuringud, perspektiivid kanoonilistest tekstidest, teoreetilise analüüsi ja autori isikliku pea 20 aasta pikkuse kokkupuute *saṅgha* (budistlik kogudus või kogukond) kogukonnaga Kambodžas koos sellest lähtuva kogemusega. Antud doktoritöö adresseerib kolme peamist teemat: mis määratleb tõelise õnne, *saṅgha* roll indiviidide juhatamisel jäämaks parema eluni viivale rajale ja *dhammarājā* (budistlik kuningas) roll *dharma* (Buddha õpetus) printsiipide toetamisel ning tema järgijate aitamisel mõistmaks, mis on tõeline *dharma*.

Antud doktoritöö **publikatsioon I** vaatab jõukuse ja priviligeerituse rolli budistlikust perspektiivist lähtuvalt uurides seda, mis määratleb tõelise õnne ja kuidas see panustab meie elu paremaks muutmisse. Antud doktoritöö **Publikatsioon II** ja osaliselt **publikatsioonid III** ja **IV** uurivad lähtudes kanoonilistest ja kaasaegsetest perspektiividest seda, mis rolli mängib khmeeri *saṅgha* ilmaliku ühiskonna juhatamises ja neile meelde tuletamises jääda vaimsele teele. **Publikatsioon III** uurib õiglase valitsemise konseptsiooni läbi *dhammarājā* või *chakravartini* (’rattakeerutaja kuningas’, kes on ideaalne ja üldtunnustatud) rolli budistliku kuningana, kelle peamiseks kohustuseks on toetada *dharma* printsiipe, et säilitada sotsiaalset korda ja aidata tema järgijatel mõista, mis on tõeline *dharma*.

Analüüsides ja adresseerides neid küsimusi, loodab antud doktoritöö süvendada meie teadmisi seoses budistliku valitsemise ja majandusega ning tuletada meelde nende olulisust kaasaegses ühiskonnas. Samuti adresseerib antud doktoritöö moraalsete ja eetiliste väärtuste rakendamise olulisust kaasaegses valitsemises ja majanduses, et luua

tee parema elu poole. Läbi budismist pärit arusaamade, keskendudes just spetsiifiliselt Kambodža kontekstile, panustab antud doktoritöö valdkondadesse ja uuringutesse, mis on seotud budistliku valitsemise, budistliku majanduse ja mitte-lääneliku avaliku haldusega.

Publications

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Article

Buddhism, Wealth, and Privilege: Ambedkar and Habermas

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Abstract: This essay compares key essays on Buddhism by B.R. Ambedkar and Jürgen Habermas vis-à-vis the issue of Buddhism, wealth, and privilege, and the respective statements again to what the Buddha taught, from a Theravada perspective. In doing so, it can be seen that Buddhism does not indeed endorse privilege in this world—but what seems to be privilege and inherited wealth are actual merits from a former life. Since these come with their own dangers, viz. attachment and not putting wealth to good use, wealth may be nice but not more. That someone is better than someone else because of birth and inheritance rather than action is, however, established as completely non-Buddhist, again and again, even by the Buddha himself.

Keywords: Ambedkar; Buddhism; Habermas; inequality; privilege; wealth

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1. Introduction

In the context of today's challenges faced by societies all over the globe, equality and inclusivity are often seen at the forefront of priorities. The UN Sustainable Development Goal 10 addresses the aforementioned matters[1]. But egalitarian values as priorities have not only recently emerged. Buddhism is known for its belief that all sentient beings are fundamentally equal. As a religion that emerged on the historical Indian subcontinent where prevalent beliefs included the division of people into inalienable hereditary groups or castes, Buddhism prominently entailed a reformist element which challenged the status quo. This element of Buddhism has provided the basis for several revolutionary trajectories pursued within the faith itself and beyond (Shields 2016).

The most prominent and impactful event related to Buddhism occurring in recent times was the mass conversion of Indian Dalits—the "untouchables" of yore—led by political and religious leader Bhimrao Ambedkar, himself a convert, in 1956, and the socio-political reverberations that this has had, and still has, in India and the South Asian region (Roy 2017). With half a million Dalits converting, following Ambedkar, during the event, this is likely the largest mass conversion to Buddhism in modernity, and largest in the main country of the Buddha's historical sojourn (Ambedkar and Roy 2014, p. 104).

But Ambedkar was both an activist and a thinker, and his choice of Buddhism as the best religion and indeed basic world view for the repressed Dalits in the context of Partition India of the late 1940s and early 1950s has been much debated, especially because there was a competing ideology that was particularly prominent at that time, not least in India, and very much available to Ambedkar, and that was Marxism (Chakrabarty 2014; Gupta 2006).

Ambedkar, fortunately, explicitly discussed this question himself, most prominently in a very late text, *Buddha or Karl Marx* (2014)[2]. This text is particularly relevant when discussing the pivotal question of Buddhism and privilege generally, a sub-problem of whether Buddhism's apparent renunciation of the world does not imply the endorsement of the status quo, therefore delaying necessary revolutions and perhaps even evolutions and reforms towards a more just society—a question of relevance for religion and theology well beyond Buddhism, as well. Therefore, Ambedkar's juxtaposition forces a debate that is as important today, if perhaps less prominent, as it was during his own time.

There have been many discussions both on the general question and on Ambedkar's text specifically. But when looking at this scenario, from an international perspective, there is a striking parallel that may foster some fruitful dialogue and comparison, one which has, to our knowledge, not been discussed so far. And that parallel is created by the discussion of Buddhism by one of the most eminent political philosophers alive today, some would argue: the most eminent, and that is Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 2019, vol. 1, pp. 361–82).

Habermas, now in his 94th year, published in 2019 a two-volume, 1700-page work, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, that basically deals with the relation of philosophy and religion, or religion and philosophy, in global-human history (2019). Immediately hailed as a major and indeed breath-taking achievement (see only Mendieta 2020), the sheer immensity of this work has led to a certain delay in translations, including the English one, which to date is still forthcoming with Polity Press.[3] This means that the text has so far been locked into the German language, which, given the reality of the 21st century, has led to less of a scholarly uptake of Habermas' points than, considering his eminence, one would have otherwise expected.

In light of Habermas' original background as a Frankfurt School Marxist—a background that has been much debated, and, in tension with his Kantianism, even formed the basis of many a scholarly career—and his importance for the 1968 student revolution, the intellectual Left in the West, and beyond (note his central place in the Mainland Chinese engagement with Western non-Marxist philosophy), to look at Ambedkar and Habermas together, and specifically on their almost same-sized brief texts on Buddhism from the Buddhism and privilege complex, seems therefore very promising.[4]

In this paper, the authors want to do so from the perspective of more classical, i.e., Theravada, Buddhism as the *tertium comparationis*, against which the authors want to look at both Ambedkar's and Habermas' deliberations. Habermas approaches Buddhism from the outside, as a social scientist. Ambedkar is the founder of his own kind of Buddhism, Navayana or "New Vehicle", and some of his texts are seen by its adherents as sacred scripture and therefore beyond critique. Our position is, to use a Western term, the theological one (cf. Ratzinger 2007–2012), which is informed by the basic previous decision that the Buddha did attain enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya.

In doing so, we will focus on those two texts, rather than on auxiliary or additional sources, and discuss the question of Buddhism and privilege based on these and on the canonical Buddhist texts and their uptake in the current discourse, with a Theravada perspective. Doing so has its clear limits, but we hope that it will open some potentially interesting paths of understanding in all the directions with which the paper engages. The paper will outline Habermas' position more generally, as this seems to be needed due to the reasons mentioned, whereas Ambedkar's and the scriptural perspective can be assumed to be more widely familiar.

Altogether, we have followed a classical hermeneutical approach of cultural and textual analysis for which especially Hans-Georg Gadamer's work forms the foundation (Gadamer 1990; Drechsler 2016). This includes both then that the tension between history and immediacy cannot be resolved and must therefore be borne, and that a scientistic self-positioning, outside of the natural sciences, does not increase the truth-value of an argument or narrative (Gadamer 1997).

2. Original Arguments

2.1. Habermas

In the context of a work that investigates the dialogue of philosophy and religion, Habermas (2019) explains the advent of Buddhism in—as all religions—the context of its time without historicizing it. Necessarily, given the scope, it is based on secondary literature, and as always, the point in such syntheses is to get things basically right, which is already a major feat. For the passages that concern us, Habermas' main reference is a German pop-science classic—in the best sense—on Buddhism, the Munich scholar of

religion Michael v. Brück's introduction (Brück 2007), a largely legitimate source for the purpose, as described.

Habermas' take on Buddhism as such is not especially trailblazing—again, as it is not intended to be, his *Erkenntnisinteresse* being philosophical, not religious, let alone regarding Buddhism itself. But both Habermas' intellect and stereoscopic vision, and his eminence in the public world, make his takes noteworthy, as with Ambedkar—one could say, even when he might be wrong or off, by virtue of his special status.

Focusing on the privilege aspect, Habermas starts with the Hindu antecedents and shows that in the 7th and 6th centuries BC, the Indian caste system collided so heavily with "a growing desire for justice" (Habermas 2019, vol. 1, p. 364) that the concept of the migration of the soul was a necessary and brilliant solution (appearing in the *Upanishads*) of this issue (vol. 1, pp. 362, 364). So, there is now justice, signified by the concepts of *dharma* (order) and *karma* (cosmic energy moving towards *dharma*) (vol. 1, p. 365). But this, Habermas argues, did not change anything materially in this world and even led to a certain selfish meditative practice (vol. 1, p. 366).

This is where Buddhism comes in, which "establishes the decisive cognitive turn" (vol. 1, p. 367) by the Buddha himself—for Habermas, as for almost all Western thinkers like him, Siddhartha Gautama *is* the historical Buddha, this is his religion. Indeed, as he points out, the Buddha is—something even Buddhists sometimes forget—*the* first historical, i.e., not mythical, founder of a world religion (vol. 1, p. 367). Habermas follows von Brück (2007) to some extent with a further socioeconomic explanation of Buddhism, developing from the uprootedness caused by an urbanization shift in India at that time (vol. 1, p. 368). But significantly, he does not stop there—this is only part of the narrative.

Habermas is particularly strong regarding the connection between apparently disparate aspects of Buddhism—of the street level as practiced and the sophisticated theory; of world rejection and social engagement; of apolitical and political. It is indeed helpful, both socio-historically and theologically, that Habermas interprets the Buddha's awakening or enlightenment as "emancipating" (vol. 1, p. 369). It is important to recognize this as one of the keywords of Enlightenment and what social justice can only mean—getting rid of false certainties that may look like reality but distinctly are the very opposite.

Habermas establishes the connection between renunciation and engagement within Buddhism as follows:

> In our context, it is crucial that the life of the Buddha, which has been transformed into a hagiography . . ., embodies the ethical foundation of a highly complex doctrine in the form of a universalist ethos of selfless compassion and empathy towards all living beings. Believers from all walks of life were recommended to emulate this model. This life represents an exoterically comprehensible connection between the moderate renunciation of the world of the reflective inward-looking epistemic approach to salvation and the path of a universalistic ethic of compassion shaped by gentleness and reverence for life. (vol. 1, p. 369; see also p. 370)

This brings the *life* of the Buddha to the center of the religion, something that adds to his centrality but that many Buddhist theologians, although almost no non-*Sangha* practitioners (especially in Theravada), would have issues with. It is the bridge from the highly complex doctrine tied to narratives of what the Buddha taught to street-level Buddhism as practiced, the philological and the scriptural approach (see Coedès 1990, *3–4)—*Buddhism*, and that is of utmost importance in our context as well as generally, *is exoterically comprehensible*. Buddhism, it is true, and Habermas underlines this, has been and is often the philosophers' favorite religion, and the religion had a philosophical structure right away (vol. 1, pp. 371, 379). But that does not mean that this is, on the flip side, a religion for people with a PhD, as has been quipped about Bultmannian Protestantism (see Drechsler 2010).

This dovetails with the radical equality argument that was pivotal for Ambedkar. But does the existence of the *Sangha* alone not split the faithful into two, monks and laypeople?

As Habermas reminds us, Buddhism established both monkhood and monasteries (vol. 1, p. 370). But even if the *Sangha* is special, and is a counter-picture to the hierarchical society, the border between *Sangha* and laity is nonetheless fluid (vol. 1, p. 379):

> The generous ethos of kindness and compassion in Buddhism shows all believers the same path to salvation. Unlike Greek philosophy, Buddhism lacks any elitist feature of a privileged access to truth reserved only for a select few. (vol. 1, p. 370)

There is no place for the only-me in a religion that doubts the integrity of the soul, even negates it; in Buddhism, even meditation is also for the others (vol. 1, pp. 372–73) and prayers should embrace the welfare of all sentient beings.

But this is especially so in a larger spiritual sense. Habermas basically follows the *Weltabgewandheit* thesis regarding Buddhism, and with good reason, as "all experience *in this world* reveal themselves as illusion" (vol. 1, p. 374). Referring to Max Weber (without reference, vol. 1, p. 375), Habermas points out that:

> In Buddhism, the life world does not appear as the "mundane realm" marked by political violence and oppression, which will eventually undergo a revolutionary transformation. Rather, it is seen as the bleak site of suffering for a tormented and restless soul, bound to matter through organic embodiment.

This would open the floor for the debate with Engaged Buddhism as such, which is not our point here, but it does bring the focus closer to it. Contrary to most more-recent scholarship, Habermas negates the political dimension of Buddhism as such, even when it becomes a state religion (vol. 1, pp. 378, 388), with which, again, it is easy to disagree. But he does acknowledge the critical perspective Buddhism supplies, and this is especially important for our context, thus:

> Through its trenchant critique of the social quietism of the Brahmins, [Buddhism] deprived the stark social discrimination of individuals of its religious basis. While the doctrine of rebirth justifies a kind of natural social inequality for the Buddhist, social hierarchy fades into a merely virtual reality in the light of an egalitarian promise of redemption, and it does not justify the moral unequal treatment of individuals, each of whom deserves the same attention. (vol. 1, p. 378–79)

In other words, it is not the abolition of social hierarchy in this world that, for Habermas, is the goal of Buddhism—and that, arguably, has never been achieved anywhere where human beings live, probably least of all in the *nomenklatura* realm of real-existing professed followers of Marx. But where the mild and friendly, meaning truly human and humanistic, world view of Buddhism breaks with the hierarchy-endorsing religions at the time of the Buddha and beyond is the recognition that social hierarchies are illusions in an illusionary world upon which no unequal treatment of real people can be *religiously* based. That, of course, was one of Ambedkar's main issues, and is often interpreted as the main one at all, as will be elucidated further.

2.2. Ambedkar

Buddha or Karl Marx is based on three typescripts that were found after Ambedkar's death, two of which had corrections made in his own handwriting (see Ambedkar 2014a, p. 439). In addition to the published text, the same topic, and even title, is also carried by a speech Ambedkar delivered in 1956 at the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kathmandu, less than a month before his death (Ambedkar 2014b), when he was already very ill. In the Nepal speech, he noted that he was not "on the spur of the moment prepared to deal with such a large, enormous . . . massive subject . . . which has had half the world in grips" (Ambedkar 2014b, p. 550). It is therefore a text which is less polished and redacted than Habermas', but the Ambedkar legacy, and being likely one of two of his last pieces along with *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Ambedkar 2014d), makes it very significant, beyond any possible lapses.

Living in a society where the caste system was considered a divinely-given order, and the representative of the one large group suffering the most from it (and for no rational reason), Ambedkar fought as his life mission against this very arrangement, and to this end, he converted to—and, as stated above, recommended that to all Dalits, with tremendous success—Buddhism.

Buddha or Karl Marx and also the speech of 1956 are premised on the popularity of Communism (or Marxism or Socialism) that had made its way into South Asia around that time, an alternative that also Ambedkar had strongly considered. Nepal, where the speech was delivered, was going through a short stint of democracy, with the Communist Party of Nepal also playing an important role (Whelpton 2005, pp. 72, 88). Ambedkar even felt that "if the younger generations . . . are not able to appreciate that Buddhism supplied a way which is better than what is supplied by the Communist way of life, Buddhism is doomed" (Ambedkar 2014b, p. 550).

As mentioned, Ambedkar's takes on Buddhism were unconventional, and in fact, he created his own, "Ambedkar Buddhism" (Meshram 2019, p. 181). He was no fan of the real-existing *Sangha*, stating that Asian youth see "a large part of the Buddhist priesthood as nothing but the yellow peril" (Ambedkar 2014b, p. 550; Mahadevan 2018, p. 116)—seeing how integral the monk body is to Buddhism, this is a surprising claim. His original approach to Buddhism was not different from that to any other religion. For Ambedkar, religion should affect every individual's character, actions, reactions, likes, and dislikes (Meshram 2019). M. Shah has eloquently outlined Ambedkar's genuine spirituality and his argument for the need of an "inner transformation" (Shah 2019). Sangharakshita (1986) classically refers to Ambedkar's lifelong engagement with the Buddhist faith; Skaria (2015) stresses a special kind of secularism.

Towards Hinduism, however, Ambedkar was especially critical. Having experienced the caste system of Hindu society, he viewed Hinduism as oppressive and in denial of equal rights. As he famously stated in his 1935 conversion speech at the Bombay Presidency Depressed Classes Conference: "I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power" (Zelliot 1992, p. 206). The main legacy of Ambedkar for modern-day India is perhaps this development of a radical critique of the hierarchy-endorsing nature of Hinduism, more specifically Brahminism, a legacy that his followers have kept alive (Roy 2017, p. 32). In Ambedkar's view, religion serves as a social force in constructing a moral community through shared religious identification. Ambedkar's outlook towards the idea of religion was precisely political, in that he stresses that "those who deny the importance of religion, fail to realize how great is the potency and sanction that lies behind a religious ideal as compound with that of a purely secular ideal" (Ambedkar 2014c, p. 23).

In the *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argues that a true casteless society can only be achieved by destroying the sanctity of the Hindu *Shastras* (Brahmanical Hinduism based on scriptures with elite access to only Brahmins) and denying their authority (Ambedkar and Roy 2014, p. 20). In order to do so, rather than follow (atheist) Communism, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism as a religious solution and a peaceful means to achieve genuine social equality. In an explanation of why he rejected Islam and Christianity, he stated:

> What the consequences of conversion will be to the country as a whole is well worth bearing in mind. Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the Depressed Classes. If they go to Islam, the number of Muslims will be doubled ... and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go to Christianity . . . it will strengthen the hold of Britain on the country. (quoted in Ramteke 1983, p. 127)

One of the advantages of Buddhism for Ambedkar was that it seems to agree with Marxism in some helpful areas, and the proposition of Communism on class struggle and private property seemed basically right for him (Ambedkar 2014a, p. 444). Through scriptural evidence, he argues for a "Communism" propounded by Buddhists which still adheres to the "residual remains" of Marxism (p. 444).

However, Ambedkar does not agree with the means utilized by Marxism. According to him, Communists would resort to any means to achieve a proletarian revolution, including violence, while he preferred democratic and peaceful approaches. For Ambedkar, the primary feature of Buddhism is *Ahimsā* (non-violence) (Ambedkar 2014a, p. 441); this is the first point of departure of Buddhism from Communism. Though he is clear that *Ahimsā* for Buddhism is not absolute as in contrast to Jainism (p. 451), despite his advocacy of peaceful means, the Buddha also points out that offenders should be punished. When justice required it, he permitted the use of force. Ambedkar cites the dialogue that the Buddha has with Sinha Senapati, the Commander-in-Chief of Vaishali where the emphasis put by the Buddha is ultimately on the ends once "all the means of maintaining peace have failed" (p. 451).

While at first Ambedkar emphasizes the similarities of Buddhism and Communism, especially regarding the abolishment of private property, he quickly defends Buddhism against the Communist critique of religion, especially Christianity, that religion "sublimates poverty and weakness." Rather, Ambedkar holds that the Buddhist teaching is to "acquire wealth" (Ambedkar 2014a, p. 460). At the same time, he goes against the notion that materiality is all there is and emphasizes that "man must grow materially as well as spiritually."

In sum, for Ambedkar, Buddhism was the path forward. But the Buddhism that he advocated for was distinctive. Unlike Habermas, Ambedkar's approach was, rather than seeing the connectedness between the disparate aspects of Buddhism, to filter out the aspects that he did not want to adhere to. His "Navayana" was what he thought was appropriate for twentieth-century communities (Ambedkar and Roy 2014, p. 104). Ambedkar's New Vehicle of Buddhism was, for him and his followers, a "religious revolution," designed to address inequalities in caste relations.

3. Argument Reconstruction: The Buddha

Both Habermas' and Ambedkar's work lead to a fundamental question in our context: in regard to privilege, social justice, democracy, and so on, do we start with them and then look to whether Buddhism is compatible with, or even promoting, them, or *vice versa*? In other words, there is the danger that the start is not what the Buddha taught and/or stands for, but begins with certain world-view ideas and then either judges Buddhism's compatibility with them or constructs such a compatibility. Typical examples for the latter are, e.g., the critique by McCargo of Buddhism holding Thai development back (McCargo 2004; see Supsin and Suktam 2017 generally), or Clair Brown on and in *Buddhist Economics* (Brown 2017), beginning with a kind of desirable economics and then constructing a form of Buddhism to support it (Drechsler 2020).[5]

As said, the authors' approach tries to start from not debating the premise of Buddhism. Habermas and Ambedkar do not, or not *only*, start with what the Buddha taught or stands for (and again, Habermas importantly underlines that it is the life of the Buddha that fuses scriptural and lived Buddhism into a Coedèsian totality), but in different ways: Habermas empirically and Ambedkar normatively. Habermas' empiricism does judge, to some considerable extent, all religions over time *vis-à-vis* his (Western) perspective, but he confirms Buddhism's religious–theoretical abolition of caste and indeed elite. Ambedkar quite clearly and openly finally chose Buddhism because it seemed to him that this is the religion that is the most useful for his Dalit emancipation project—even to the extent that it often may seem that this project came first for him, Buddhism second. Nonetheless, the case can be made that a genuine spiritual turn of the world and specifically Buddhism as a religion deeply mattered to him all his life (Shah 2019).

This pushes the question, what did the Buddha say about privilege and inequality?

3.1. The "Privilege" of Good Karma: Are Not All Equal?

In "The Crime of the Communist", one of G.K. Chesterton's *Father Brown* stories, which are to a large extent Catholic morality lessons disguised as detective fiction, the following scene can be found:

> "The Class War," mused the Master, with a sort of distaste mellowed by distance; for he had known William Morris long ago . . . "I never can understand all this about the Class War. When I was young, Socialism was supposed to mean saying that there are no classes". (Chesterton 1981, p. 663)

This is what one gets if one fails to follow the Buddha—being upset at everyone not being equal socio-economically, while we *are all equal*. As Habermas points out, if this is not displayed in current reality, this is (a) just obscuring the *real* reality of Buddhism in which we are all equal indeed, while (b) the Buddhist scriptures suggest even a further step, in that what looks privileged in the world of appearances is actually a disadvantage. If to start from Buddhism, not from the need for a social revolution, this is how one needs to proceed.

Namely thus: even though all human beings could attain enlightenment, they are not equally equipped to do so, as they have not fully accomplished their own *pārami*, or the steps towards enlightenment (Dhammapala 1996). The Buddha saw suffering, injustice, and inequality, and sought a path to liberation from this. Buddhism teaches that everyone can attain liberation through practicing *dharma*, regardless of their class, social status, or economic circumstances (Long 2021, pp. 36–37). But what Buddhism instructs as what one should do is an ideal that is not easy to achieve. As long as one tries, Buddhism expounds that progress is (eventually) reachable for all equally; only at the level of progression already achieved can there be difference, since karmic law does not discriminate like man-made laws (Krishan 1986).

Looking into scriptures, there are several examples of *Suttas* that clearly represent the negative Buddhist view towards social hierarchies and caste—all the more important because the Buddha was a prince and most of his followers from high-ranking origins in the world of appearances (Dhammika 2005). In the *Assalāyana Sutta* (MN 93)[6], the Buddha rejects the idea of anyone being higher or superior based on social class (*vaṇṇa*). The Buddha, as stated in the *Madhura Sutta* (MN 84), regards all four castes as equal (*ime cattāro vaṇṇā samasamā honti*). In the same discourse, he considers the *brāhmaṇas*' claim of being better or superior to other castes as an empty boast (*ghosa*). For the Buddha, *brāhmaṇas* may be superior or pure not because of their lineage, but because of their own actions. In the *Vāsetha Sutta* (MN II 98), the Buddha says, "I call no one a *brāhmaṇa* from parentage; the man who has nothing, no possessions, who is free from grasping or covetousness, I call him a *brāhmaṇa*. He who cuts fetters, is free from thirst and fear, is a *brāhmaṇa*".

However, the effects of *karma*, and levels of attainment of *pārami*, are evaluated not in one life but many. So, an obvious question is whether privilege in this life equates to good *karma* from past lives? The term privilege itself does not fit well into the concept of good *karma* in Buddhism. Privilege, if used as a class concept, is derived from the Latin words *privus* (singular, special) and *lex* (law); it is something that is exactly neither universal nor common; it is granted rather than earned or brought into existence through individual effort or talent; it is an entitlement associated with preferred status, which is exercised exclusively for the benefit of the recipient, excluding others from its benefits (McIntosh 1992; Black and Stone 2005).

Privilege, if taken as being above the law, cannot be based on good *karma* because in Buddhism, "privileged" people do deserve these advantages, albeit based on their deeds of their past lives. Due to this, Buddhism views being born into a noble family as a reward that one receives in the present life for previous good *karma*, not an accident of birth itself (Krishan 1986). In the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta* (MN 135), the Buddha emphasizes that it is *karma* that causes the contrasts in the lives of the people, explaining the disparity in various aspects of our lives—the length of life, health, wealth, and physical appearance.

Buddhism sees existence as, by default, polarizing—a person who sins gets reborn into the lower realms where they are subjected to suffering and are susceptible to more sin, while those who have earned *puñña* have the ladders to rise higher (*Assalāyana Sutta*, MN 93). But despite recognizing the birth distinction, the Buddha explicitly distinguishes between being born into a noble family and being noble. As mentioned in the *Esukāri Sutta*, the Buddha responds to a *brahmin* named Esukāri, "For, as to this, *brahman*, someone from a high-class family makes onslaught on creatures, takes what has not been given, wrongly enjoys pleasures of the senses, is a liar, of slanderous speech, of harsh speech, a gossip, covetous, malevolent in mind, of wrong view. Therefore, I do not speak of 'better' because of birth in a high-class family" (MN 96–Horner 1954).[7] As a result of doing good deeds in a previous life, one may gain an advantage in this life, but that advantage has nothing to do with one's moral quality, either being evil or noble. Being wealthy and having good physical features does not necessarily reflect any individual's nobility.

3.2. The Wheel of Suffering and Stepping Off

As polarizing as the nature of existence is, destitution and deprivation are a reality. Poverty, as explained in Buddhism, is a leading cause of human suffering (Long 2019, pp. 48, 60). Those desperate will resort to stealing and killing, but the karmic law is that such deeds only drive them further downwards in a seemingly never-ending spiral of suffering. As in a scenario depicted in the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* in Digha Nikaya (the first collection of the long discourses of Buddhist Scriptures in Sutta Pitaka), poverty triggers a spiral that causes whole societies to slide into a state of absolute disarray (DN 26, Harris 1994). For those deprived, material indulgence and sensual pursuits are lures towards sinful paths. Such a pursuit is compared to debt and the consequences of incurring a debt leading to bondage in the *Ina Sutta* (AN 6.45).

Wealth in itself is not the measure or the means for happiness (Long 2019, pp. 28–31). Buddhism emphasizes that the standard of living (in the sense of life quality) is not determined by the quantity of wealth consumption. Thus, people who consume more do not necessarily have a higher standard of living than those who consume less (Zinchenko and Boichenko 2022, p. 234). In more than one sermon, the Buddha has explained the temporary nature of wealth. In the *Aputtaka Sutta* (SN 3.19), he mentions that if wealth is not put to proper use, it is lost to Kings, thieves, fire, water, or hateful heirs. In the *Sigālovāda Sutta* (DN 31), the Buddha mentions six ways of squandering wealth—addiction to strong drink, haunting the street at untimely hours, frequent theatrical attendance, gambling addiction, keeping bad company, and habitual idleness. In the *Dighajanu (Vyagghapajja) Sutta* (AN 8.54—Narada 1997), the Buddha mentions four sources of destruction of wealth amassed as: "(i) Debauchery, (ii) drunkenness, (iii) gambling, (iv) friendship, companionship and intimacy with evil-doers." Based on these sutras, it is clear that the Buddhist view towards wealth is that it is temporary and inconsequential if not put to good use.

The *status quo* of this world is, by default, polarizing and leads towards immoral deeds. But the *dharma* is certainly not about apathy or indifference to the nature of the world as it is. Buddhism does not promote inaction but rather supports taking conscious action (Moad 2004). According to the *Uposattha Sutta*, the Buddha clearly states that the path of *dharma-vinaya* is available to all human beings no matter what class they belong to, whether they are nobles, brahmans, merchants, or workers; the path to liberation is unique to each individual traveler, but the common duty is to avoid the lures of attachment (UD 5.5—Ireland 2010). And with the accumulation of wealth also comes inequality. Those living in poverty should have at least the basic prerequisites to live a comfortable and dignified life (Payutto 1994, p. 69), but that does not necessitate that all members in a lay society remain equal. One can put one's wealth and power into good use to help those without it (pp. 34–36).

The path of a Buddhist is towards liberation from superficial wants, rather than needs. But this path is indeed not always the same, and most distinctly, the path of the monkhood involves exiting lay society as a whole, giving away one's possessions and living

only with the very basic necessities. Outside the *Sangha*, acceptance of the significance of material prosperity is appropriate and even required, even though Buddhism also points to *appicchatā* or frugality as being a virtue, not only for the members of the *Sangha*. But even canonical texts show the Buddha encouraging accumulation of wealth and protecting it as well (Rahula 1959), and this has been pointed out by Ambedkar (2014a, p. 460) too.

Buddhism does not deny that consumption is a part of human well-being. However, Buddhism sees consumption as a means rather than an end, distinguishing it from modern Western economics that considers consumption as both an end in itself and, often enough, the goal of economic activities (Zinchenko and Boichenko 2022, p. 233). In contrast to Western economics, which focuses on maximizing consumption through optimal production, Buddhist economics prioritizes maximizing well-being through minimal consumption (Drechsler 2019). Regarding wealth, Buddhist economics views it as a double-edged sword that can be both useful and harmful based on the way that people behave toward it. As Schumacher (1973, p. 57) pointed out, "It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them."

The *attachment* to material wealth will only bring suffering, and the stronger the attachment is, the greater is the suffering (Bodhi 1984). Since this is more likely the wealthier one is (same with the fear of losing one's beauty, for instance), wealth in this world comes with its own danger, in that it makes it more likely to lose one's path towards the *dharma*—echoing the Christian, indeed Christ's, saying that it is harder for a rich person to go to Heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24 etc.). And even if this refers to a particularly narrow gate in Jerusalem, i.e., it is difficult but not impossible, the fact remains that wealth in this world is both ephemeral and dangerous.

4. Summary and Conclusions

Buddhism is about gaining enlightenment, which means emancipation from the constrictions of this world, but the ultimate liberation lies well beyond the boundaries of the latter. It can be seen that in this world, some are born rich and remain so, and some are poor and suffer. The Buddha, as Habermas points out, links this to karmic attainments in a former life, so that what may seem unjust to us is actually not. But this—not a privilege, but merit—comes with great danger attached, as wealth, which must be put to good use, easily leads to attachment, and attachment is what pulls one off the path to one's *dharma* and keeps one even further away from gaining liberation. In turn, this leads to the maintenance of a balance of sorts, as all people are truly the same; even in their paths towards enlightenment, they are just at different points on the way thereto.

Equality is in truth the essence of the Buddhist path, but it is a radical equality that lies in another realm, not in the destruction of current hierarchies within societies of this world (something that may be explained through *karma*), which however in turn delegitimizes the latter religiously. Ambedkar was right in seeing in Buddhism a religion that profoundly establishes this point and delegitimizes the caste system—there is nothing implied here, as the Buddha says it outright, again and again. Again, however, as can be remembered from reading Habermas, this cannot be a clarion call for social revolution, as this world is still not reality, and in true reality, all are already equal. If one starts with the assumption that a revolution is desirable, then Buddhism is not a good handmaiden for such an enterprise. If one starts, to the contrary, from what the Buddha taught, and what his life may teach, then the result might not tally with what one thought was desirable in this world. But arguably, that is the point, or at least one point, of Buddhism.

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Notes

1 SDG 10 prioritizes reduction of income inequality and its targets also address inclusivity regarding race, gender, origin, ethnicity, and others. See https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/ (accessed on 12 March 2023).

2 There are several published versions of the text which was written in 1956 but remained unpublished. We follow Ambedkar (2014a, 2014b).

3 https://www.suhrkamp.de/rights/book/juergen-habermas-this-too-a-history-of-philosophy-fr-9783518587348 (accessed on 12 March 2023).

4 Kanchana Mahadevan is perhaps the most prominent scholar who has also worked on Ambedkar and Habermas (Mahadevan 2018), but at least until now, her respective work seems to be from a time before the Buddhism text.

5 A good non-Buddhist example is Confucianism, which an entire cottage industry of scholars tries to make compatible—or declare incompatible—with democracy, rather than checking Democracy's validity from the Confucian perspective (see only Gao and Walayat 2021; Fukuyama 1995; He 2016).

6 All sutta references follow, as is by now standard, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ (accessed on 12 March 2023). When applicable, the name of the translator is also provided, along with the text reference number.

7 The source for this translation is https://obo.genaud.net/dhamma-vinaya/pts/mn/mn.096.horn.pts.htm (accessed on 12 March 2023).

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Cambodian Buddhists' Response to the French Protectorate

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Introduction

Under the French colonialism of nearly one hundred years (1854-1953), Buddhism in Cambodia was dramatically changed. The French protectorate transformed several administrative systems in Cambodia, affecting the daily life of Khmer Buddhists both negatively and positively. The conservative groups viewed the French reforms at the time were too dangerous to their ancient civilizations. Nevertheless, the modernist factions viewed the policy of the French Protectorate had the potential to bring prosperous development to Cambodia.

The Modernization of the Monastic Education

Since the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, Buddhism had received a remarkable attention from the western world. In the eyes of the western scholars, the authenticity of Buddhism had been weakened due to a mixture of Buddhist teachings and local traditions, i.e., superstitious beliefs, folk religion and miraculous elements. To modernize Buddhist studies in Cambodia, the protectorate official organized an administration of French-patronized Buddhist education in Cambodia. The primary purpose of the administration was to reduce mythology which was popularly practiced in Khmer Buddhist community and to translate the authentic texts into local language in order to express Buddhism in scientific terms and to emphasize the origin of Buddhism in the Indian cultural context. In addition, the French protectorate also wanted to stop the cultural influence of Thailand over Khmer Buddhism through their successful reformed movement of monastic education.

Three western scholars who worked for the French School of the Far East or the École Française d'Extrême-Orien (Henceforth EFEO)[1] were seen to work closely with Khmer modernist group and they played major roles in this modernizing work. They were Louis Finot (1864–1935), George Coedes (1886–1969), and Suzanne Karpeles (c. 1890–1969).[2] These Three EFEO scholars impressed Khmer Buddhist scholars a lot with their marvelous knowledge of Buddhism as well as Southeast Asian cultures, languages, and history.[3]

As a matter of fact, before the French protectorate, the movement of Buddhist reformation has already taken place since the beginning of the reign of King Ang Duong. As a Buddhist king, Ang Duong had a moral responsibility to uphold and purify the *Sāsanā* or religion by re-collecting the texts which had been lost or destroyed during the war with Siam and Vietnam.[4] It was his duty to show his concerning behavior towards the monastic education of the Saṅgha and to save the declining Dhamma texts. Having seen the obscure and feeble situation of Buddhism in Cambodia, King Ang Duong is said to have written to King Mongkut (Rāma IV), a successful pioneer and reformer of Siamese education system, requesting a copy of the Tipiṭaka because at that time the Pāli canonical texts in Cambodia was incomplete.

Because of facing the war crisis for many years, the Buddhist library collections of King Ang Duong was still not enough to meet the needs of the Khmer monks who wanted to re-establish Buddhist learning. Most Khmer monks travelled to Thailand to collect the religious texts and to

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[1] The EFEO was founded in 1900 to initiate a comprehensive program of research concerning the history of religion, archaeology, philology and political system in Asian countries.

[2] Anne Hansen. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity.* 125.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Anne Hansen. "Modernist Reform in Khmer Buddhist History." *Siksacakr: The Journal of the Center for Khmer Studies*. 154–174.

advance their further education there for years. Several Buddhist monks went to continue their higher education and returned to Cambodia carrying with them numeral religious texts, commentaries *(Maṅgaladīpanī, Sāratthasaṅgaha),* several *Jātakas* and a number of manuals on meditation practice.[5] The tradition of acquiring religious texts and pursuing higher education in Siam continued from the reign of King Ang Duong to the early twentieth century.

Having seen the difficulty of Khmer Buddhist monks in looking for higher education in their neighboring country, in 1909, the first director of the EFEO Louis Finot helped Saṅghareach Tieng (the Supreme Patriarch of the Saṅgha) to establish the *Écoles Supérieures de Théologie Bouddhique* (Henceforth ESTB), the Advanced School of Buddhist Theology in Siam Reap, the old capital city of the Angkor empire. The ESTB has played a major part in standardizing the higher monastic education in a more academic way than in the past and stemming the Siamese influences over Khmer monks who went to Siam at the time.[6] A few years later, Khmer monks had been prohibited from going to study in foreign countries especially in Siam.

The new establishment of the ESTB tells us about the highest interest of western scholars and Khmer modernist group in purifying and modernizing Buddhist education by developing the knowledge of ancient sacred language, Pāli and Sanskrit in order to trace back to the authenticity of Early Buddhism. The ESTB, however, faced serious problems due to some constraints, i.e., lack of financial support, poor recruitment, and geographical inaccessibility, causing students and teachers who felt reluctant to isolate themselves from the city.[7] Therefore, the ESTB survived only two years in its former glorious Angkor land. In 1911, it was finally shifted to Phnom Penh and

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

changed its name to the Advanced Pāli School or the École Supérieure de Pāli (Henceforth ESP).[8] Under the leadership of Ven. Mahā Vimaladhamma Thong, the first director of the ESP and a leading monastic reformer, the higher Buddhist learning center was more successful after moving to Phnom Penh. Saṅghareach Tieng and Ven. Mahā Vimaladhamma Thong put their efforts in promoting a reformed Buddhist education in Cambodia. As a leading reformist monk, Ven. Mahā Vimaladhamma Thong "advocated pedagogical methods"[9] such as the grammatical study of Pāli texts and translation of *Tipitaka* texts. The ESP had produced significant nationalists and scholars such as Ven. Chuon Nath and Ven. Huot Tath, who were regarded as the most outstanding figures in the modern Dhamma movement.

To assist the study of Cambodian people, in 1912, EFEO scholar George Coedes together with Khmer intellectual group is said to have a discussion concerning the possibility of the establishment of the Khmer national library. The report of George Coedes commented that "the inventory of pagodas that I have made during my recent visit to Cambodia has convinced me that this country possesses as much richness as its neighbors and it would require only a minor effort to constitute a library capable of rivaling the Bernard Free Library of Rangoon or the Vajirañāṇa [Library] of Bangkok."[10] In 1921, the National Library was established, and it has been renamed the Royal Library (Henceforth RL) in 1925 and was officially inaugurated by King Sisowath, a son of King Ang Duong and a half-brother of King Norodom. Suzanne Karpelès was chosen as the first curator of the RL.[11]

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[8] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 128.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Hansen. "Modernist Reform in Khmer Buddhist History." *Siksacakr.* 33-4. Print.

[11] Dr. Khing Hoc Dy. "Suzanne Karpeles and the Buddhist Institute." *Siksacakr: The Journal of the Center for Khmer Studies*. 55.

The establishment of the RL was very beneficial for the process of the educational reform movement at that time since the main purpose of the RL was to conserve manuscripts, collect printed books, publish the texts in Khmer and French related to the history, religion, literature, art, politic.[12] In order to expand the scope of the its new publications, two popular Buddhist journals viz *Kambujasuriyā* and *Gandhamālā* was introduced in 1926 and 1927.[13] These two journals had slightly different missions, i.e. the *Gandhamālā* primarily intended to promote the new critical writings of students and professors at the ESP while the *Kambujasuriyā* generally focused on the publishing works of religious works, classical literatures, folktales, and novels. *Kambujasuriyā* was considered as a forum of serious scholarship in Cambodia as well.[14] The habit of reading and writing of well-educated Buddhists was tremendously changed since these journals were introduced in Cambodian society.

As a curator of the RL, Suzanne Karpelès suggested a register at the library to ask the monks and other visitors leave a record of their names and the tittles of any books, scriptures, texts that they wished to read.[15] The increasing demand of readers encouraged new publications of printed books and translations of the Pāli texts into Khmer language. The number of readers was increased from year to year. In 1926, the library had a total of 3,382 readers; in 1927 there were 4,371 readers; in 1930, there 5,437 readers, "who borrowed 334 manuscripts and 1,1118 printed books and reviews."[16] Book selling also increased in Cambodia. In 1926, several thousand volumes of the

[12] Hansen. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity.* 144. Print

[13] Ibid.

[14] David A. Smyth. "Khmer Literature." *Encyclopædia Britannica.* Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 30 Nov. 2014. Web. 01 Mar. 2018.

[15] Hansen. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity.* 144.

[16] Ibid. 144-5.

Gihipaṭipatti, a book written by Chuon Nath on lay Buddhists' conduct and the other printed books on similar themes had been sold.[17]

More importantly, the presence of the RL was regarded as a contributing factor in the establishment of the Buddhist Institute in 1930. Suzanne Karpelès visited a number of Khmer Buddhist communities and temples while she was on a mission to Cochinchina in 1929. Her visit to Cochinchina may have caused her to make a proposal to the colonial authority to establish the Buddhist Institute to respond to the needs of the ESP, museums, libraries as well as to promote and study Theravāda Buddhism.[18] In addition, the founding of the Buddhist Institute was to reduce the influence of Thai Buddhism (Dhammayutika Nikāya) on Cambodian monks at that time as well. The institute has gained great popularity among Khmer Buddhists through its important works, such as overseeing the work of editing, translating, and organizing the "Tipiṭaka Commission" to translate the entire Pāli canonical text into Khmer language.[19] The "Tipiṭaka Commission" was led by prominent modernist monks viz., Lvī-Em, Uṃ-Sūr, Chuon Nath, and Huot Tath.[20] The project of producing and printing the entire Pāli-Khmer Tipiṭaka took more than forty years to complete.[21] The establishment of advanced learning centers and mission of translating the Pāli canonical text into Khmer language was a tremendous step for Khmer Buddhism to move from its traditional way to a modern, rationalistic, and authentic form of Buddhism.

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Hoc Dy. "Suzanne Karpelès and the Buddhist Institute." *Siksacakr...*55.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Hansen. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity.* 145.

[21] Ibid.

The Involvement of Cambodian Saṅgha in the Nationalist Movement

Although the main purpose of the Buddhist monks is to dedicate their lives to the spiritual practice in order to attain the highest fruit of *Nibbāna* and to liberate themselves from the cycle of existence, it is very difficult for them to completely cut off their relationship from the worldly society. Their daily lives are more or less involved in the social environment, political revolution or nationalist movement. Since the early nineteenth to twentieth century, we have witnessed the nationalist sentiment emerging in the community of the Saṅgha in Cambodia against the invasion and colonialism of foreign countries especially Annam and the French authority. As a matter of fact, during the colonialism, there were different forms of nationalist movements arising from both religious and secular sectors, but only the Buddhist-based nationalist movement will be explained here.

When the nation fell into any crisis, besides preaching religious sermons and performing ritual acts, Buddhist monks were also viewed as custodians of Khmer tradition, literature and identity. They actively challenged any foreign ideologies which attempted to eliminate the Khmer culture. For instance, in 1820, a monk named Kai led a nationalist movement against the Vietnamese authorities who tried to eliminate Khmer cultures by forcing the Khmer kings, ministers and people to follow Vietnamese customs. Kai was popularly believed to have magical powers to free the Khmer nation from the influence of Vietnam. To persuade people to join his movement, Kai who also practiced the Buddhist rituals proclaimed himself as a *Neak Sel* (a person possessing magical powers) and followed *Vethamon* (the traditional Mon-Khmer occult practice). He had *Yantra* tattooing (mystic diagram) on his body and wore a *Katha* (a protective amulet) in

order to achieve strength, invulnerability, and invincibility.[22] The tradition of ritual *Katha* and *Yantra* had a long history in Cambodia. It originated from an ancient culture of the people of the Khmer Empire. Evidently, a mystic diagram of *Yantra* engraved on the foundation stone of the Bat Chum temple dates from the middle of the tenth century. Another evidence was found in the late thirteenth century account of the Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan who visited Cambodia and described the Khmer king as wearing a magical *Katha* (a protective amulet) to protect himself from arrows, swords, and other weapons.[23] This culture is not only popular in Khmer society, but it also spreads to neighboring countries such as Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. The *Katha* and *Yantra* is designed by a sage, ritual practitioner, and Buddhist monk who is believed to have magical powers. The Khmer script is regarded as a sacred language for writing on the *Katha* and tattooing a mystical *Yantra* on the skin.

Another renown nationalist movement was led by a former monk named Po Kambo against the oppressive taxation policy of King Norodom and his French protector in 1865-1867.[24] Po Kambo led the people to rebel against King Norodom, accusing him of being an *Adhammikarājā* (an unrighteous King), because he was incapable of leading his own country, and he brought France to colonize the Khmer. Considering Khmer society was in social catastrophe, Po Kambo used the millenarianism method to draw people to join his movement to oppose the king and the French authority. The Khmer millenarianism basically depended on the Buddhist cosmological idea relating to the degeneration and regeneration of the Dhamma, and emphasized the importance

[22] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 133.

[23] Ibid. 60.

[24] Hansen. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity.* 59.

of the individual purification and, in particular, the king who did not follow the *Dasavidha-rājadhamma.*[25].

The movement coincided with the rise of *Buddha-daṃnāy* (a prophecy of the Buddha) in the mid-to late nineteenth century.[26] The *Buddha-daṃnāy* was originally introduced by an anonymous nineteenth century sage who prophesized that a man with magical powers *(Dhammikarāja)* will come to rescue the people of Cambodia from the political turmoil and moral disorder. Some Cambodians even accepted it as the prediction of the Buddha and it was spread by that sage.[27] The movement and the prophesy inspired people to believe in the arrival of the Metteya (the future Buddha) or *Dhammikarājā* (a righteous King) as savior-ruler figure after a period of social chaos "in which only a few people would be saved because of their good actions, but many more would be lost because of their immorality."[28] Gradually, the followers of Po Kambo regarded him as *Neak Mean Puṇya* (a person possessing merit) and *Dhammikarāja* who came to restore Cambodia from chaotic situation. Even though the movement was entirely unsuccessful and Po Kambo was finally arrested and executed, it provided a breeding ground for the other Khmer nationalists who were dissatisfied with the policy of the French colonialism.

Another historic movement of the Khmer nationalist group against the policy of the French colonialism was known as the "Umbrella War," a demonstration led by several thousand monks and lay people in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia to protest against the misbehavior of the

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[25] *Dasavidha-rājadhamma* (tenfold virtue of the ruler): 1. *Dāna* (charity), 2. *Sīla* (morality) 3. *Pariccāga* (munificence), 4. *Ājjava* (straightforwardness), 5. *Maddava* (gentleness), 6. *Tapa* (restraint), 7. *Akkodha* (non-anger), 8. *Avihimsa* (non-violence), 9. *Khanti* (forbearance), and 10. *Avirodhana* (uprightness). [Khud., Jātaka V, 378]

[26] Hansen. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity.* 60.

[27] Carol A. Mortland. *Cambodian Buddhism in the United States*. 23-4.

[28] Hansen. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity*. 59.

French authorities towards Buddhist monks and to call for the release of Venerable Hem Chieu (1898 – 1943).[29] Venerable Hem Chieu was a professor at the ESP and an outstanding nationalist figure during the French colonial period. He worked closely with other renowned nationalist activists, viz., Son Ngoc Thanh (1908 – 1977), and Pach Chheoun (1896 – 1971) etc., to raise the awareness of the value of Khmer nationalism. Venerable Hem Chieu was known as one of the most prominent activists who strongly opposed the French colonial policy which attempted to Romanize the Khmer writing system. He viewed the replacing of the Khmer traditional writing with the Romanized system as "an attack on both traditional learning and the status of traditional monastic educators."[30]

To inspire the nationalist movement in Khmer society, Venerable Hem Chieu widely travelled to deliver anti-French colonial sermon to the people of Cambodia. On July 18, 1942 Venerable Hem Chieu and a number of other monks were arrested, defrocked and imprisoned for their anti-colonial sentiment.[31] Having seen the misbehavior of the French authorities who forcibly defrock the Buddhist monks, several thousand Buddhists monks and lay followers organized a peaceful demonstration to demand the release of Venerable Hem Chieu and his colleagues. The protest was generally known as the "Umbrella War" because the demonstrators especially Buddhist monks carried umbrellas. Nonetheless, the demonstration was unsuccessful and severely suppressed by the authorities. Many demonstrators and authorities were injured in the event and some were arrested. Finally, Venerable Hem Chieu was transferred to the Koh Tralach[32] or Poulo

[29] Penny Edwards. *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945.* 6.

[30] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 139.

[31] John A. Tully. *A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival*. 108.

[32] Koh Tralach was a former island of the Khmer Empire. It was settle by Vietnamese in the seventeenth century and changed its name to Côn Đảo Island. During the French colonial era, the island was known as

Condor island—a high security prison of the French colonial authorities. The prison was infamous for its penal facilities and the notorious tiger cages. Several Cambodian and Vietnamese nationalist activists were put in there to serve their sentences for the anti-colonial movement. Venerable Hem Chieu was severely tortured and finally died there in 1943.[33] His ashes were brought back to Cambodia in July 1972, the thirtieth anniversary of his arrest, by order of Lon Nol, the Commander-in-Chief of the Khmer National Armed Forces and the president of Cambodia. Although the revolutionary struggle of Venerable Hem Chieu was entirely unsuccessful, it provided a breeding ground and modern form of movement for the other nationalists who sought for the full independence of the Khmer nation. His heroic effort is usually taken to remind the Khmer people about the primary responsibility of citizens for their nation and to promote the sentimental value of nationalism.

The Controversy between the Traditionalists and the Reformists

The community of Saṅgha in Cambodia is mainly separated into two groups (Nikāya), viz., Dhammayuttika Nikāya (adhere to the Dhamma) and Mahānikāya (Larger Group). There is slight differences between these two groups in terms of doctrine, and interpretation of some elements of the monastic disciplines, i.e., how to wear robes, how to wear sandals, how to carry alms-bowl, and how to pronounce the Pāli terms and to recite Suttas.[34]

Poulo-Condore. Many Cambodian and Vietnamese nationalists were sent there to serve their sentences for raising the awareness of anti-colonial sentiment.

[33] Charles F. Keyes. "Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia." Ed. Laurel Kendall, Helen Hardacre, and Charles F. Keyes. *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia* 54.2 (1994): 50-1.

[34] Ian Charles Harris. "Buddhist Saṅgha Groupings in Cambodia." Ed. Russell Webb, Bhikkhu Pāsādika, and Sara Boin Webb. *Buddhist Studies Review* 18.1 (2010): 84.

Dhammayuttika Nikāya was firstly introduced into Cambodia in 1855 by King Norodom through the agency of Venerable Mahā Pan (1824–1894).[35] Before ascending the throne, King Norodom spent a length of time in Thailand as a hostage.[36] It is stated that while he was spending his time in Thailand, he had previously been a monk at Wat Bowonnivet, the headquarter of Dhammayuttika Nikāya in Bangkok. Therefore, it is no doubt that the influence of Thai Dhammayuttika Nikāya flourished in Cambodia under the patronage of the King and the collaborative effort of some learned monks especially Mahā Pan who had spent so many years in Thailand studying newly reformed Buddhism of King Mongkut. Pan was a native of Battambang, a north western province of Cambodia. He left home to take the monastic life in Bangkok at the age of twelve. He seems to have been ordained in 1849, first in the Mahānikāya Wat Saket but a little later at the Thommayut Wat Bowonnivet. Pan returned home with a delegation of eight monks representing the Dhammayuttika of King Mongkut bringing bundles of some eighty sacred writings. A Cambodian branch of the Thommayuttika was firstly established at Wat Neak Tā Soeng[37] under royal patronage, probably around 1855. Mahā Pan became its first leader. King Norodom latter erected Wat Bodum Vaddey specifically for Dhammayuttika orders and then he appointed Mahā Pan as the first Saṅghareach, the Supreme Patriarch of Dhammayuttitka orders. Based on some scholars, the impartation of the new form of Dhammyuttika Nikāya in Cambodia signified the extent of the religious domination as well as the political ascendancy of Siam at the time.[38]

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[35] Ibid. 83.

[36] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 105.

[37] Neak Tā Soeng temple may have been subsequently re-named Wat Sugndh Mean Bon in honor of Mahā Pan.

[38] Thompson. "Buddhism in Cambodia: The Rupture and the Continuity." *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives.* Ed. Stephen C. Berkwitz. 135.

Even though Dhammayuttika monks had a close relationship with the monarchy and enjoyed considerable advantages from them, they still received little popularity from the common people because their religious activities were often less engaged in the real situation of Cambodian society compared to the existing Mahānikāya orders, who represented the majority of the monastic Saṅgha at that time. On the other hand, most of Cambodian Buddhists viewed that Dhammayuttika Nikāya had strong allegiance to the Thai court.[39]

Under the leadership of Mahā Pan, the Supreme Patriarch of Dhammayuttika Nikāya, a number of sacred writings were brought from Thailand to Cambodia. Apart from sacred writings, the Visākha Būjā (Pūjā), the triple celebration of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha was also introduced to Cambodia by Mahā Pan in 1855. The Visākha Būja firstly instituted in Thailand around 1817 under King Rāma II.[40] The reform of Dhammayuttika faction also had some visible influences on some young members of the Mahānikāya groups as well. Some Mahānikāya monks started to adopt the manners and customs of the Dhammayuttika particularly the pronunciation of Pāli and the style of wearing monastic robes.[41]

The cultural influences of Thai Buddhism on Cambodia raised a serious concern over the unity of the Khmer national religion. Some members of the conservative Mahānikāya regarded the new introduction of Thai Buddhist traditions by the newly established Dhammayuttika order as a damaging factor, which could cause the internal conflict in the Khmer national as well as the monastic community. The conservative group did whatever they possibly could to prevent the import of Thai Buddhist cultures.

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 107.

[41] Ibid.

The controversy did not just arise between the newly formed Dhammyuttika and the existing Mahānikāya, but also it happened between the traditional and modernist Mahānikāya as well. Since the early twentieth century, the modernizing and rationalizing movement was arisen within the monastic members of the Mahānikāya. The movement was known as Dhammakāya or "New Mahānikāya." Ven. Mahā Vimaladhamma Thong (1862–1927), the director of the ESP, was generally regarded as the founder of this newly modernist movement.[42] Several prominent scholar monks such Ven. Chuon Nath (1883–1969; Saṅghareach 1948–1969) and Ven. Huot Tath (1891–1975; Saṅghareach 1969–1975) were included in this movement. Ven. Chuon Nath and Ven. Huot Tath had studied critical scholarship in Saigon[43] (1922–3), the capital of the French colony of Cochinchina under Louis Finot, Director of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), and Victor Goloubew.[44]

Ven. Chuon Nath and Ven. Huot Tath had played a very significant role in modernizing and rationalizing the monastic education in Cambodia. Nevertheless, their works were not warmly welcomed by the traditionalist side. For instance, in 1916, Ven. Chuon Nath, Ven. Huot Tatha, and Ven. Ūṃ Sūr[45] were selected, to deliver a sermon to the royal family, by Rev. Ker Ouk,[46] the Acting Patriarch of the Mahānikāya faction. Their preaching particularly stressed on the

[42] Ibid. 115.

[43] Saigon was a former name of Ho Chi Minh City. It is also known as Prey Nokor, "Forest City" or Preah Reach Nokor which according to Khmer chronicle meant "Royal City." Prey Nokor was former city of Cambodia, but it was annexed by Vietnam in the seventeenth century.

[44] Harris. "Buddhist Saṅgha Groupings in Cambodia." 78. Print.

[45] Ūṃ Sūr (1880-1939) had been considered as one of the prominent scholar monks at that period.

[46] After the death of Saṅghareach Tieng, the Supreme Patriarch of Mahānikāya group in 1914, eventually King Sisowath appointed Dhammalikhit Ker Ouk as the head of Mahānikāya order; however, the official title Saṅghareach was never awarded to Ker Ouk because he was regarded as an ill-educated monk by the modernist side. Ker Ouk was included in the conservative order, who strongly opposed to any reformed movement in the monastic Saṅgha. Finally, Ker Ouk died in 1936 without receiving the official title Saṅghareach.

misinterpretation of the monastic discipline by some traditionalists. In addition, they also argued that many traditional texts had been corrupted by later monks that could not be regarded as the real words of the Buddha.[47] As a result of doing this, stones were thrown at Ven. Chuon Nath and Ven. Huot Tath by their rival group.[48]

In response to the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the traditionalist monks, Ven. Chuon Nath composed a number of works on the monastic discipline and modern idea of rationalism in order to discourage the recitation of mantras, practice of magic, water sprinkling, and healing. In his work, *My Spiritual Friend (Kalyāṇa Mitta Robos Khñuṃ),* Huoth Tath described how the older, higher-ranking order forbidding young monks from coming to listen or study the monastic discipline with his group. The conservative monks criticized the teaching of monastic discipline of young scholar monks as a deviation from the traditional practice of Buddhism.[49] To promote the demythologized and rationalized Buddhism, Chuon Nath, Huot Tath, and Ūṃ Sūr organized a group to edit and translate new version of the monastic disciplines and secretly circulated them. Huot Tath wrote:

> The three of us [Chuon Nath, Huot Tath, and Ūṃ Sūr] united together to lead all the other Bhikkhus, urging them to try and make the effort to read the Buddhist scriptures, commentaries and manuals on conduct [*Gambhiīr-ṭīkā-kpuon-cpāp*] and to extract the exact meanings, which before this time, monks often did not understand, or if they did, only in a superficial or faltering way…

[47] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 117. Print.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Huot Tath. *Kalyāṇa Mitta Robos Khñuṃ [My Spiritual Friend]* (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1993) 9.

> We carried out this work at night, from 8:00 to midnight, in Brah Grū Saṇghastthā Chuon Nath's *Kuṭi,* along with Brah Grū Vimalapaññā Ūṃ-Sūr, who met with us to help with this work…
>
> At that time, nearly all of the monks and novices at Vatt Uṇṇālom had experienced awakening. They wanted to know right and wrong, and we could not remain quiet and unresponsive any longer. Even some monks and novices associated with monasteries where all of the [other] monks belonged to the faction that remained hard-hearted toward the *Dharm-vināy* studied secretly, to gain competence in *Dharm-vināy* in order to gain knowledge along with all the rest of us.[50]

It appeared to be very difficult for them to publish their works because any work relating to Buddhism was required the permission from both Supreme Patriarchs: Dhammayuttika and Mahānikāya. On the other hand, the works of Ven. Chuon Nath seemed consequently affected the majority of the traditionalist Mahānikāya as well as Dhammayuttika camp. Furthermore, the traditionalist monks opposed to the modern printing works "on the grounds that they undermined the magico-religious character embodied in palm-leaf texts."[51] Sooner or later, the group of high-ranking monks from traditionalist camp lobbied King Sisovath to issue an ordinance specifically referring to the split between modernists and traditionalists forbidding teaching reforms or spreading among the faithful modern ideas which cause conflict with traditional religion.[52]

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[50] Hansen. "Modernist Reform in Khmer Buddhist History." *Siksacakr: The Journal of the Center for Khmer Studies*, Edited by Michel Rethy Antelme. 37.

[51] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 118.

[52] Harris. "Buddhist Saṅgha Groupings in Cambodia." 78.

Therefore, Ven. Chuon Nath apparently encountered many obstacles to obtain an authorization from the both Supreme Patriarchs to publish his works.

Notwithstanding the opposition from the conservative members of Saṅgha, his works particularly *Samaṇeravinaya,* a critical article "of some of the noncanonical accretions that had grown up in the life of the order"[53] was broadly circularized in the form of underground press. The author of the book was summoned by the Minister of Cults and Religious Affair for serval times on the account of the publication without authorization. Nonetheless, his unauthorized publication had received remarkable admiration from both monastic proponent and aristocratic families. Finally, Oknya Khet gained a permission from the *résident supérieur* to have five hundred copies of the book printed in order to dedicate the meritorious deed to his recently deceased parents.

When the book was finally released in 1920, the name of Huot Tath and Ūṃ Sūr were also put alongside with its actual author Ven. Chuon Nath on the cover of the book as an act of solidarity. The Mahānikāya Supreme Patriarch tried to impose his authority by arguing that the whole work was a violation of the Royal Ordinance No. 71. Therefore, he sought the permission from the King to expel all the three young monks from Wat Uṇṇālom, the headquarters of the Mahānikāya order.[54] The intervention from the Supreme Patriarch was entirely unsuccessful since the critical works of the young monks quite impressed King Sisowath and his son Sisowath Monivong, the future king. After having his work published, Ven. Chuon Nath was publicly known

[53] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 118.

[54] Ibid.

as a rising star of the modernizing group. His reformist movement had a great influence on many young monks during the early twentieth century.[55]

To preserve Khmer language and identity, King Sisowath founded the Kingdom's Royal Committee in September 1915. Eleven senior monks such as Ven. Ker Ouk, Ven. Thong, Achar Ind and several others were appointed by the King to work on a definitive Cambodian dictionary; however, the progress was quite slow because of the dispute that broke out between some members of the commission and the Council of Ministers. Having seen the work of the committee was not progressive, King Sisowath reactivated the commission again in July 1926. Some new members were added to the new commission, and Ven. Chuon Nath was amongst them. Gradually, Chuon Nath took all the responsibility to prepare the first Khmer Modern Dictionary (*Vacanānukram* Khmer). His first edition of the Khmer dictionary finally appeared in two volumes and published by the Buddhist Institute in 1938 and 1943.[56] Through his considerable effort to compile the Khmer Dictionary, Ven. Chuon Nath is regarded as the Father of the Khmer Language and the Khmer Dictionary is generally known as *Vacanānukram Samdech Chuon Nath* or 'Chuon Nath's Dictionary.'

Another major accomplishment of the modernist monks was the translations of the Buddhist texts. Under the presidency of Suzanne Karpelès, the Buddhist Institute had played a very significant role in promoting the works of the modernist group. Numerous Buddhist texts mostly concerning with conduct and behavior had been translated by the reformist monks, i.e., *Pātimokkha* (Disciplinary Code of the Monastic Saṅgha), *Kaṭhinakhandhaka* (Chapter Concerning

[55] Stuart Alan Becker. "Chuon Nath: Guardian of Cambodian Culture." *Phnom Penh Post*. Post Media Co Ltd 888 Building H, 8th Floor Phnom Penh Center Corner Sothearos & Sihanouk Blvd Sangkat Tonle Bassac120101 Phnom Penh Cambodia, 08 Apr. 2011. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

[56] Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice.* 19.

the Making of Robes), *Gahipaṭipatti* (Conduct for Lay People), *Gahivinaya* (Vinaya for Lay People) etc.[57] The remarkable achievement of the modernist group was the translation of the whole Pāli Tipiṭaka. In order to purify, rationalize and to trace back to the authentic Buddhism, the Cambodian Tipiṭaka Commission was established in 1929 and the first volume of *Vinaya Piṭaka* was published by the Buddhist Institute in 1931.[58] After the publishing of the edition of *Vinaya Piṭaka* that had caused a controversy from the conservative group, they argued that the publication of the Tipiṭaka in Pāli-Khmer version could deteriorate the original teachings of the Buddha. Traditionally, the conservative group considered the Pāli text as a holy script or even as magical *mantra* which contains a miraculous power within it. Besides such criticism from the traditionalists, the Tipiṭaka Commission successfully completed their entire Pāli Canon translation in 1968, and 110 volumes of the Tipiṭaka in Pāli-Khmer version was finally published by the Buddhist Institute at the end of that year.[59] Until April 1st, 1969, the official inauguration of the Tipiṭaka in Pāli-Khmer version was held in all monasteries throughout the Kingdom of Cambodia.[60]

With the support of the Royal Library, Buddhist Institute, the Ecole Supérieur de Pāli, the reformist movement of the modernist monks seemed to reach their highest achievement in rationalizing and purifying the traditional form of Buddhism in Cambodia. In addition, the presence of great scholar monks such as Ven. Chuon Nath, Ven. Huot That, Ven. Ūṃ Sūr and

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[57] Hansen. "Modernist Reform in Khmer Buddhist History." *Siksacakr: The Journal of the Center for Khmer Studies*, Edited by Michel Rethy Antelme. 37-8.

[58] Khing Hoc Dy. "Suzanne Karpeles and the Buddhist Institute." *Siksacakr: The Journal of the Center for Khmer Studies.* 56.

[59] Chhat Sreang, Yin Sambor, Seng Hoc Meng, and Soum Surasey. *Pravatti Saṅkhep Buddhasāsanapaṇḍitya [A Short History of the Buddhist Institute]*. Ed. Penny Edwards (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2005) 39-40.

[60] Ibid.

others provided the conservative group as well as the newly established Dhammayuttika Nikāya a difficult situation to compete with the reformist movement.

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Buddhist Governance: Navigating Today's Role of Saṅgha and Dhammarājā, with Special Reference to Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the monastic *saṅgha* and the Buddhist king as the *dhammarājā* in the context of good governance in the contemporary world, with a specific focus on the Cambodian perspective. Through an examination of the historical and philosophical foundations of Buddhist governance, it argues for the enduring relevance and applicability of these principles in today's diverse societies. A second line of argument explores how the *saṅgha* assembly, as a collective entity, contributes to the establishment of a just and harmonious society.

Keywords: Buddhist governance, *Saṅgha, Dhammarājā,* Dhammādhippateyya, Dhammocracy, Pāramī, Cambodia

1. Introduction

Buddhist governance, rooted in the teachings, values, and historical development of Buddhism, presents a distinctive perspective on statecraft. Beyond a spiritual path, Buddhism encompasses a community and social structure. Emphasizing the ethics of compassion and non-violence, Buddhist governance as a theory seeks to foster harmonious coexistence among diverse communities while prioritizing personal well-being. Though Buddhist governance lacks a blueprint (which is both an advantage and a disadvantage), its underlying principles can guide ethical leadership and social justice.

Buddhist governance is historically formed around the concept of a just ruler or *dhammarājā*. The *dhammarājā* is a king or a ruler who governs his subjects in a righteous way, based on the model of *dhammocracy* grounded in the principles of the *dharma*[1] and its pursuit. The term "dhammocracy" was first introduced and translated from the Pali term "dhammāthippateyya" by Monychenda to distinguish the model of Buddhist governance from the concept of democracy. The *dhammocratic* model is considered an ideal approach to governing the state and society according to Buddhism. It revolves around the principle of *dharma,* in contrast to being grounded in majority rule (democracy) or the authority of a select few (autocracy). The main role of *dhammarājā* is to embrace the principle of *dharma* and to guide his subjects

1 *Dharma*, a Sanskrit term, and *Dhamma,* its Pali equivalent, are employed interchangeably and with equal significance throughout the entire article.

to realize the true *dharma* as he is responsible for their well-being and happiness, both materially and spiritually.

The word *dhamma* is a Pali word (*dharma* in Sanskrit). It comes from the Sanskrit root "*dhr*", i.e., "holding things together" – "*dharma* is the way in which one maintains everything" (see Rocher 1978 and Rocher and Lariviere 2012). The term *dhamma* carries multiple meanings and interpretations, dependent on the context.[2] Rahula (1974, 58) points out that, "there is no term in Buddhist terminology wider than *dhamma* … there is nothing in this universe or outside, good or bad, conditioned or non-conditioned, relative or absolute, which is not included in this term." However, in the context of this paper, the term *dhamma* specifically refers to the principles of Buddhism, particularly to the teachings of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*). The teachings of the Buddha are categorized into two primary groups: *dhamma*, signifying doctrine, and *vinaya*, signifying discipline (Payutto 2002). *Dhamma* and *vinaya* are regarded as the core of Buddhism. Prior to his passing, the Buddha made it clear to his attendant, Venerable Ānanda, in Mahāparinibbāna Sutta: The Discourse about the Great Emancipation (DN 16 – Bhikkhu Thanissaro 2013b), "Whatever *Dhamma* & *Vinaya* I have pointed out & formulated for you, that will be your Teacher when I am gone."

Alongside the ideal kingship of the *dhammarājā,* the *saṅgha* community is upheld as an exemplary governing body within Buddhism. The *saṅgha* community is a fundamentally Buddhist institution comprising ordained monks and nuns who dedicate their lives to spiritual practice, study, and service – and in fact, as Habermas has recently reminded us, the first monastic community ever (2019, 379). As an integral part of the Buddhist tradition, the *saṅgha* plays a crucial role in preserving and propagating the teachings of the Buddha. Buddhist society is therefore centered around the *saṅgha*.

This paper focuses on who can determine what brings happiness to individuals if not themselves and how the Buddhist model of a dhammocratic approach can enable this. It therefore looks at the role of the Buddhist king as the dhammarājā – who creates a space in which his subjects can understand the true dharma. Additionally, the study investigates the contemporary relationship between the *saṅgha* and the *dhammarājā,* specifically emphasizing that the Buddhism practiced in Cambodia is mainly Theravada, thus making the Cambodian case an example of a Theravada case. By examining Buddhist governance, the aspiration is to develop a more compassionate, equitable, and sustainable approach to governance, always realizing the aspects of potentiality and ideal theory that such a venture must necessarily possess.

This paper analyzes the intersection of religion and governance, which has recently been made prominent again (Ongaro and Tantardini 2023a, 2023b), focusing specifically on Buddhism as a world religion (Habermas 2019) and its relevance in and for secular contexts, especially in the global-Western world. The paper aims to conceptualize Buddhist principles relevant to modern governance, with a notable focus on Cambodia as a case study, where the saṅgha and the *dhammarājā* hold constitutional significance in the 21st century – being, in fact, the only remaining Buddhist kingdom. Therefore, the study focuses on examining

2 According to Vedic literature, *dhamma* was a natural, eternal, and immutable law revealed by *brahma,* the self-existent being, to *manu,* a semi-divine being who is regarded as the first king of humanity, and *manu,* in turn, transmitted it to the ancient Sages, who made it known to mankind through abridged versions called *dhammasāstra* or treatises on *dhamma* (see Lingat 1950, 10 and Mérieau 2018, 285-286). Buddhism does not view the concept of *dhamma* as a direct divine-given rule, as in Hinduism; instead, Buddhism regards *dhamma* as the truth and the natural law.

Buddhist governance within the specific context of Cambodia, considering the religious foundations and beliefs that shape it. This approach deviates from recent more traditional Public Administration and Social Science approaches, delving into religious sources for a comprehensive, internal understanding.

To gain insight into the context of Khmer *saṅgha* and Buddhist kingship, parts of this paper draw upon the works of Hansen (2007), Harris (2001a, 2001b, 2005), Kent (2006, 2008), and particularly the approach of Monychenda (1998, 1999, 2008, 2022), widely recognized as a leader in Cambodia's socially engaged Buddhist movement and one of the leading Khmer Buddhist scholars – some would argue the leading one. From 1985 to 1992, Monychenda directed the Khmer Buddhist Research Center at Site Two Refugee Camp on the Thai-Khmer border, exploring the role of Buddhism in Khmer society and its potential to prevent further tragedies in Cambodia such as the Khmer Rouge regime. In 1990, he founded Buddhism for Development (BFD), promoting socially engaged Buddhism in Cambodia. His socially engaged Buddhist movement reflects his perspective that Buddhism should not be limited or separated from secular affairs. He acknowledges the potential role of Buddhism in Khmer society, particularly within the *saṅgha,* in keeping people informed about the social, political, and economic circumstances, and in making efforts to restore the deteriorating social order by teaching people and leaders how to apply the *dhamma* to their daily lives. Monychenda (1999, 2008) recognizes the significance of the *dhammika* ruler in contemporary Khmer development and suggests that if each person were to emulate this idea, politics could be re-enchanted like the Khmer Empire under the leadership of Jayavarman VII.

To delve into the question of Buddhism and governance from a canonical textual perspective, the paper relies on the Sutta and Vinaya texts, which were initially translated from the Pali texts by Francis and Neil (1879), Rhys Davids and Oldenberg (1881), Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids (1921), Bhikkhu Ānandajoti (2008a, 2008b), Bhikkhu Narada (2013), Bhikkhu Thanissaro (2013a, 2013b, 2013c), Vajira and Story (2013), and Bhikkhu Sujato (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f, 2018g, 2018h). Methodologically, this paper argues from the Buddhist perspective, specifically that of a Khmer Theravada monk, while recognizing the imperatives of religious studies and social science. It places a clear emphasis on its own positionality. Since the paper is built on the argument regarding the role of the Theravada *saṅgha* institution in the Cambodian context, it provides the author with the strength to delve deeply into the argument from an insider's perspective. However, the author's affiliation with the Theravada *saṅgha* institution might limit his ability to critically examine it from an outsider's perspective.

2. Theory: The Synergy between Saṅgha Governance and the Dhammarājā in Buddhist Societies

In Southeast Asian culture, the power of the *saṅgha* is closely tied to politics, creating a merger of the monastic *saṅgha* community, kingship, and polity (Edwards 2007). This merger centers around the three jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, Dhamma, and *saṅgha*. The king, as *dhammarājā,* safeguards the *dharma* and monastic *saṅgha,* symbolizing their interdependence (Edwards 2007). The king mediates between the worldly realm and an ordered society, while monks mediate between the world and liberation or emancipation from delusions and earthly desires that lead to the attainment of freedom.

In Khmer society, traditionally, the saṅgha and dhammarājā concepts play integral roles in shaping the social and political landscape. The interactions between these two aspects create a unique synergy that ideally contributes to the establishment of just and compassionate governance based on Buddhist principles.

At its core, the *saṅgha* represents the institutional structure that governs the monastic community within Buddhism. The *saṅgha,* comprising both the *bhikkhu* (male ordained-order) and *bhikkhuni* (female ordained-order) communities, plays a crucial role in preserving and propagating the teachings of the Buddha. Both *saṅghas'* members dedicate themselves to studying, interpreting, and disseminating Buddhist scriptures, philosophy, and traditions, ensuring the continuity of the *dharma* across generations.

The governance of the *saṅgha* is guided by a set of rules and a well-formulated code of conduct known as the *vinaya,* which provides ethical and disciplinary frameworks for the monastic community (Jayasuriya 2008). In principle, there is no formal hierarchy or favoritism in the *saṅgha* community, but there is the characteristic of seniority of a monk, determined by the date of ordination, that guides interpersonal relations within the community (Jayasuriya 2008). The decision-making process within the *saṅgha* community is theoretically characterized by a consensus-based approach, where decisions are made collectively through open discussions and, when necessary, majority voting. This participatory approach ensures that all members have a voice and are actively involved in the governance process (Moore 2016).

Parallel to *saṅgha* governance, the concept of dhammarājā emerges as an ideal kingship model that governs society in accordance with the principles of *dharma.* Monychenda (2008, 314), the director of Cambodia's non-governmental organization "Buddhism for Development", coined the term "dhammocracy" to convey his compelling argument that today's leaders must dutifully adhere to the moral teachings of the Buddha. He observes that Cambodians nurture the hope of security through the governance of virtuous and just rulers, commonly referred to as *dhammarājā* or *dhammik*. Dhammik is a vernacularization of the Pali phrase *dhammika dhammarājā*, meaning a righteous king. It has been argued in Khmer Buddhist society that *dhammik* would usher in a new golden age of justice and *dharma,* paving the way for the arrival of the next Buddha (Hansen 2007, 56).

Drechsler (2016, 5) points out that the role of the *dhammarājā* extends beyond being a just ruler in alignment with the *dharma.* Instead, the *dhammarājā* assumes the vital responsibility of guiding and empowering his subjects to realize their *dharma.* The dhammarājā embodies justice, benevolence, and ethical leadership and is responsible for the well-being and happiness of the people, both materially and spiritually. While historically associated with ancient Buddhist kingdoms, the idea of dhammarājā remains relevant in contemporary discussions on responsible governance, because it emphasizes the importance of moral integrity, compassion, and the pursuit of social welfare in political leadership that arguably are never out of date, and certainly not today.

The synergy between saṅgha and dhammarājā kingship becomes manifest in their (partial) shared principles and objectives. Both aim to promote the well-being and happiness of individuals and society as a whole. The saṅgha, through its dedicated study, practice, and service, seeks the liberation of all sentient beings from suffering and supports the dissemination of the dharma to the public. The dhammarājā, on the other hand, governs with wisdom and

compassion, upholding the principles of justice, equality, and ethical conduct, providing the framework within which the *dharma* can be pursued and liberation ideally reached.

The *saṅgha* community and the *dhammarājā* are therefore interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The *saṅgha,* as the custodian of Buddhist teachings and values, provides moral guidance and support to the *dhammarājā* in governing the country. The monastic *saṅgha* community actively engages with the laypeople, including the rulers, through spiritual counseling, rituals, and education, influencing their decision-making processes and fostering ethical leadership.

Simultaneously, the *dhammarājā* looks to the *saṅgha* as a moral authority and guidance source. The monastic community exemplifies the ideals of renunciation, self-discipline, and service to others, serving as a moral compass for the ruler. The *dhammarājā,* inspired by the *saṅgha*'s commitment to the pursuit of truth and liberation from suffering, should govern with compassion, empathy, and a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings.

This possible synergy between *saṅgha* and dhammarājā contributes to establishing a just and compassionate society rooted in Buddhist values. By incorporating the teachings of the Buddha into governance practices, leaders can create an environment that fosters social harmony, equality, and the well-being of all individuals.

2.1 Saṅgha governing body

The *saṅgha* is a fundamental institution within Buddhism, comprising *bhikkhu saṅgha* (male-ordained community) and *bhikkhuni saṅgha* (female-ordained community) who have renounced worldly attachments and committed themselves to the pursuit of spiritual awakening by living a dedicated life of spiritual practice, study, and service. The term "*saṅgha*" is a Pali word meaning an "assembly", "association", "community" or "order" and is most commonly used to refer to an order of Buddhist monks or nuns (Buswell 2014).

The *saṅgha* originated during the time of the historical Gautama Buddha over 2,600 years ago. Shortly after his enlightenment, the Buddha established the system of governance among the *saṅgha,* introducing a revolutionary paradigm that was in direct contrast to the autocratic ruling systems then prevalent in India (and elsewhere). The *saṅgha* is governed by a set of rules and guidelines known as the *vinaya*, which provides ethical and disciplinary guidelines for the monastic community. While these rules differ slightly from one Buddhist tradition and school to the next, they are generally based on the principles of the *dharma*. During the early period of his enlightenment, the Buddha was the only one who could confer full ordination; however, due to the increasing numbers of people who wanted to join the *saṅgha* community, the Buddha decentralized his authority to an *upajjhāya,* a spiritual preceptor who has been ordained as a monk (*bhikkhu*) for at least ten years.

The primary objective of entering the *saṅgha* community is to liberate oneself from worldly dissatisfaction, which can be achieved through the pursuit of either *vipassanādhura*, which involves the practice of meditation, or *gandhadhura*, which entails the study of scriptures. However, the newly ordained monks must adhere to their spiritual guidance for a minimum of five years before embarking on their own journeys elsewhere, as in principle, the *upajjhāya* occupies the highest position in the monastic community.

Although the *upajjhāya* holds the highest position, there is no absolute power over the decision-making process in the saṅgha community. The decision-making process must be open to all *saṅgha* members regardless of their seniority. Recruiting or giving a higher ordination (*upasampadā*) to a new *saṅgha* member requires no less than ten *saṅgha* members, with the exception of bordering regions (*paccanta-gāma*), where the Buddha allows the higher ordination to be held in the meeting of four *saṅgha* members (Dutt 1924, 147; Dickson 1963, 14). If one *saṅgha* member is very sick and unable to join the meeting in person, he must remain outside the boundary of the monastery, or he may send his consent through another, which is called *chanda*, as a sign of pre-agreement with the decision made by the monastic community. Any decision made without even one monk's presence is invalid (Dutt 1924, 146). In response to the severity of a given issue in the *saṅgha* community, the decision-making process needs to be held through the proper performance of *saṅgha-kamma* (the *saṅgha's* formal act). *saṅgha-kamma* is employed for various purposes, such as reaching agreements, making decisions, or taking actions within the *saṅgha* assembly, which comprises the following prerequisites (Dutt 1924, 125):

1. The presence of the proper number of competent *saṅgha* members (*sammagga saṅgha*)
2. The conveyance of all absentee ballots (*chanda*)
3. The motion being proposed (*ñatti*)
4. The proper proclamation of the proposed act (*kammavācā*)

In the recruitment of any new members, the *saṅgha* community embraces the bottom-up approach that is contrary to top-down or authoritarian approaches; it therefore works toward inclusivity through consensus decision-making (Dutt 1924; Jinananda 1961; Prebish 2018; Monychenda 2022). In the process of joining the *saṅgha* community, the candidate seeks the approval of the chief of the *saṅgha* community. Subsequently, two mentors are appointed by the *upajjhāya* to assess the candidate's background. Once the investigation is completed, the mentors verbally propose the candidate's ordination three times to the assembly of *saṅgha*. In the absence of objections, silence is expected from all present. However, if an objection arises, it necessitates a vocal expression, and the process will be repeated until a consensus is reached. Likewise, appointing individuals to positions of responsibility, such as inventory manager, requires the endorsement of the members residing in the temple. Moreover, these appointments are bound by a stringent legal process, as stipulated in the sacred scriptures (Monychenda 1998, 10).

Although liberating oneself from worldly attachment is a primary objective of joining the saṅgha community, helping others escape from miseries and bringing happiness to all sentient beings is also regarded as an ideal way the Buddha assigns to the saṅgha members, as focusing solely on oneself would not suffice. After entering the saṅgha community, each member bears three responsibilities: a) learning the dharma, b) practicing the dharma, and c) spreading the dharma to the public. As stated in the mission statement of the Dutiyamārapāsa Sutta (SN 4.5 – Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000), the Buddha advises his saṅgha members to disseminate the dharma to the public as follows:

> Wander forth, O bhikkhus, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans. Let not two go the same way. Teach, O bhikkhus, the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing. Reveal the perfectly complete and purified holy life. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma. I too, bhikkhus, will go to Senanigama in Uruvela in order to teach the Dhamma.

Monastic life is set up as a ruling system in which leaders are chosen for their qualities and with the approval of the *saṅgha* assembly. Each *saṅgha* member is required to participate in maintaining the stability of the rule of law of the monastery, i.e., participating every two weeks in a ceremony known as *uposatha* (bi-weekly meeting) in the monastery to review compliance with the *pātimokkha* (monastic code). In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16 – Bhikkhu Thanissaro 2013b), the Buddha lists seven conditions that will maintain the unity and solidarity of the *saṅgha* community. The first two are these: "(1) As long as the bhikkhus meet often, meet a great deal, their growth can be expected, not their decline. (2) As long as the bhikkhus meet in unity, adjourn from their meetings in unity, and conduct Community business in unity, their growth can be expected, not their decline."

The *uposatha* observance was formulated to fulfill these purposes, serving as a bi-weekly opportunity for the *saṅgha* assembly to gather, update their membership rolls, address issues, and reaffirm their common adherence to *vinaya* rules (Bhikkhu Thanissaro 2013c, 1098). Performing *uposatha* with an incomplete or divided *saṅgha* assembly is regarded as an offense of wrong-doing according to the *vinaya* rules. Therefore, the first duty is to convey consent and purity, known as *chandapārisuddhi*, on behalf of a *saṅgha* member who cannot attend the *uposatha* observance. In the Mahāvagga (Rhys Davids and Oldenberg 1881, 274-275), the Buddha instructed that a sick *saṅgha* member, unable to participate in the uposatha ceremony, should convey his consent and purity through another bhikkhu to those attending the *uposatha.* In the Suddhika-pācittiya: Requiring of a transgression for purification, any *saṅgha* member who witnesses another member's transgression but fails to report it to the *saṅgha* community is likewise considered to be committing an offense *(pācittiya)* (Rhys Davids and Oldenberg 1881, 33; Bhikkhu Ñāṇatusita 2014, 174).

The purity of the *saṅgha* assembly is considered a key factor in conducting the *uposatha* ceremony. As mentioned in the Uposatha Sutta (Ud 5.5 – Bhikkhu Thanissaro 2012), when Venerable Ānanda requested the Buddha to recite the *pātimokkha* to the *saṅgha* assembly on the Uposatha Day, the Buddha refused because the gathering was not pure (Bhikkhu Ānandajot 2008b). To ensure the assembly was pure enough to conduct the formal ceremony, there was a specific intention during the ceremony to provide a platform for a guilty monk to confess his offense. The process of confession can be undertaken in two ways: either by following the *pārisuddhi uposatha,* a brief ceremony of confession without recitation of the whole *pātimokkha* rules, or by following the *sutt-uddesa uposatha,* a ceremony for confession that includes the recitation of the entire *pātimokkha* rules (see Bhikkhu Ariyesako and Bhikkhu Nirodho 2003, 21-25; Dhammasami 2019, 60). This practice is essential because the ceremony obligates each monk to inform the community if they are unable to adhere to the rules, which in turn leads to subsequent actions taken by the *saṅgha* community (Dutt 1924).

In sum, the *saṅgha* in Buddhism lives together as a community, pursuing liberation by adhering to the rules and regulations set forth by the Buddha to maintain continuity and unity within the *saṅgha* assembly. Unity, purity, and integrity are regarded as key factors in preserving the *saṅgha* institution. Democracy or a consensus-based approach is used to make decisions, reach agreements, and act within the *saṅgha* assembly through *saṅghakamma* performances. While the primary purpose of joining the *saṅgha* is to liberate oneself from worldly attachments, the *saṅgha* typically remains connected to lay society because their daily basic needs rely on it, and they also have duties as *dhammadūta,* the *dhamma* messengers, to disseminate and teach the principles of *dhamma* to lay society.

2.2 The *Dhammarājā*

Dhammarājā is often portrayed as a cosmic and ethical king, embodying the principles of righteousness and moral governance. Rooted in Buddhist texts, this perspective envisions *dhammarājā* as a virtuous ruler whose reign is characterized by justice, compassion, and adherence to the *dhamma*. However, the concept of *dhammarājā,* with its multifaceted implications, resonates differently across various perspectives. There are at least three distinct viewpoints regarding the *dhammarājā*: the concept of *dhammarājā* from the Pali text perspective, the historical perspective, and the contemporary perspective.

2.2.1 The *Dhammarājā* from the Pali Literature Perspective

The concept of the ideal kingship in Buddhist literature emerged in response to the perceived decline of *dharma* and general social disorder. In these circumstances, the king assumed the role of a mediator, facilitating the restoration of social order by reinforcing the *dharma* practice within his realm. This concept finds further elaboration in canonical texts and various other Buddhist writings, providing a comprehensive exploration of the model of just governance within Buddhism. The Aggañña Sutta (DN 27 – Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1921; Bhikkhu Sujato 2018c), a discourse in which the Buddha explains the origin and evolution of human beings, illustrates a peak of social disorder triggered by greed. This disorder results in the division of rice fields, theft of one another's plots, and engagement in dishonesty, censure, and punishment following the disappearance of spontaneous rice growth.

In response to this social turmoil, the Sutta describes how humans gathered together, saying, "From our evil deeds, sirs, becoming manifest, inasmuch as stealing, censure, lying, punishment have become known, what if we were to select a certain being, who should be wrathful when indignation is right, who should censure that which should rightly be censured and should banish him who deserves to be banished? But we will give him in return a proportion of the rice" (Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1921, 93). Then they selected from among themselves "the handsomest, the best favoured, the most attractive, the most capable" individual being and invited him to be their king with a promise of contributing a proportion of the rice (Rhys Davids and Rhys David 1921; Bhikkhu Sujato 2018c).

The Sutta introduces an "elective and contractual theory of kingship", where the people choose their king, and the king's compensation comes in the form of a rice tax. Tambiah (1976, 13) points out that this theory combines the notion of "elective and contractual kingship" with

the idea that the chosen king is exceptional among men – most handsome in the physical form and most perfect in conduct. The characteristics of the king, as described in the Sutta, earn him the titles "*mahā sammata*" for being "the great elect", "*rājā*" for "charming others by the Norm" (*dhamma*), and "*khattiya*", signifying the "lord of the fields" (Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1921; Tambiah 1976; Bhikkhu Sujato 2018c). The king is, in essence, "chosen" in two distinct senses of the word, both as an elective leader and as an exceptional individual that is recognized via the former election. This particular aspect deepens our comprehension of the moral and physical attributes tied to kingship, which are subsequently explored in greater detail in other Buddhist texts.

Among the many qualities of the leader described in the Sutta, "*rājā*", or the ability to "charm others by the Norm" (*dharma*), is the key quality that highlights the role of the king in making his subjects happy by guiding the principle of the *dharma* back to the right trajectory. In this context, it can be argued that the concept of "*rājā*" of the "*dhamma*" or "*dhammarājā*", a righteous or just king who rules in accordance with the principles of *dharma*, emerged as a response to the urgent need to apply the principle of *dharma* in governing the state.

Regarding governing the state, Buddhism diverges significantly from the previous Indian Kautilyan, let alone from, shall we say, global-Western Machiavellian thoughts. From a Buddhist standpoint, aggression, war, and violence are entirely incompatible with the principles of good governance (Vijitha 2016). Buddhism introduces the concept of the "*cakkavattin*" (*cakravartin* in Sanskrit), often referred to as the "Wheel-Turning Monarch", alongside the term "*dhammarājā*", as they represent the epitome of just and righteous governance (*rājā cakkavattī dhammiko dhammarājā*), embodying the pinnacle of moral virtue within the Buddhist ethos as further aspects of the good monarch. Nivat (1947) has argued that the Buddhist ideal of the Wheel-Turning Monarch is to be detected even in many Hindu court ceremonies, which are essentially (and until today) Brahmanic. However, when we look into both Pali texts, Dhammarājā Sutta (AN 5.133 – Bhikkhu Sujato 2018e) and Cakkavatti Sutta (DN 26 – Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012), the Buddha describes the role and principle of *dhammarājā* and *cakkavattin* kingship in the same manner:

> Here, bhikkhu, a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king who rules by the Dhamma, relying just on the Dhamma, honoring, respecting, and venerating the Dhamma, taking the Dhamma as his standard, banner, and authority, provides righteous protection, shelter, and guard for the people in his court. Again, a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king who rules by the Dhamma, relying just on the Dhamma, honoring, respecting, and venerating the Dhamma, taking the Dhamma as his standard, banner, and authority, provides righteous protection, shelter, and guard for his khattiya vassals, his army, brahmins and householders, the people of town and countryside, ascetics and brahmins, and the animals and birds. Having provided such righteous protection, shelter, and guard for all these beings, that wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king who rules by the Dhamma, turns the wheel solely through the Dhamma, a wheel that cannot be turned back by any hostile human being.

The Buddha strongly stresses that social disorder and natural disasters will be caused by a ruler who does not rule in accordance with the principles of *dhamma.* As mentioned in the Adhammika Sutta (AN 4.70 – Bhikkhu Sujato 2018f), the Buddha explains how the bad example set by unrighteous rulers can influence their governance, ministers, *brahmins*, householders, and their subjects as a whole, ultimately leading to social disorder and natural disasters.

Regarding the social order, the Buddha described three governing models: autocracy (*attādhipateyya*), democracy (*lokādhipateyya*), and *dhammocracy* (*dhammādhippateyya*) (Monychenda 2008, 314). Among the three models, the Buddha embraced the model of dhammādhippateyya – a form of governance centered on the *dharma*. "*Dharma*" has, as we saw already, many meanings, but in this context, it refers to the teachings of the Buddha, which are presented as universal or natural laws. These laws were not created by Buddha, they function independently with or without his presence, but the Buddha revealed these laws and recommended that we examine them and act accordingly – not relying on blind faith but guided by a process of rational human assessment (Long 2021, 36).

The system of governing the state based on the *dharma* begins with the establishment of the righteous state, ruled by the consent of the governed with policy consistent with the *dharma* (Long 2021, 44). Long (2021) asserts that a political system structured in harmony with these core truths holds the potential to minimize the manifest forms of suffering experienced by all members of society. This effect would be most pronounced among the least fortunate, whose visible sufferings are most acute, and simultaneously foster a constructive role in an individual's pursuit of higher forms of well-being.

2.2.2 The *Dhammarājā* from a Historical Perspective

From a historical standpoint, *Dhammarājā* is seen as a historical king who sought to uphold the *dharma*, prevent its decline and establish a just and harmonious society based on Buddhist principles. The concept of dhammarājā has been applied to view the reign of Ashoka (c. 304-232 BCE), the most significant Indian Emperor in history, and Jayavarman VII (c. 1122-1218), the most notable ruler of the Khmer Empire (Drechsler 2019). Ashoka, after his conversion to Buddhism, became a paradigmatic ruler who embraced the principles of non-violence, compassion, and moral conduct in his governance. Ashoka earned the title of a great *dhammarājā* through his commitment to upholding the *dharma.* His contributions include the construction of 84,000 stupas dedicated to Buddhism across India, the defense of Buddhism by expelling 80,000 heretics from the monastic order, and the dissemination of the Buddha's teachings through the dispatch of missionaries to the far reaches of his empire – and beyond (Larsson 2021). Ashoka's state policy was influenced by the inherited Brahmanical Arthasastra of Kautilya (Kulke 2014). In the Mahāvaṃsa, the historical chronicle of Sri Lanka, Ashoka was called *chandāshoka* in ancient times due to his evil deeds during the Kalinga War, but later, he gave up the expansion of might via military means and expanded the might of the *dhamma,* just as the Buddha himself "turned the wheel of *dhamma*", and as a result, he came to be known as *dhammāshoka* (Changkhwanyuen 2003).

Throughout history, several Buddhist kings in Asia projected themselves as an Ashoka-like Wheel-Turning Monarch or "*cakravartin*" (Boisselier 1990; Lahiri 2015, 5). The name of Ashoka, as Wells (1920, 371) states, "shines, and shines almost alone, a star. From the Volga to Japan, his name is still honoured. China, Tibet, and even India, though it has left his doctrine, preserve the tradition of his greatness." Tambiah (1973) points out that the Ashokan ethos emphasizes the state's commitment to welfare and prosperity as a precondition to support the monastic institutions, alleviate the suffering of his subjects, and realize the moral law *(dhamma)* in society as a whole. He argues that the Ashokan ethos continues to serve as a charter in

contemporary times, stimulating and legitimizing twentieth-century politics, especially in Buddhist countries. This implies that the principles associated with Ashoka's governance have transcended time, continuing to shape political thought and actions, and reminding contemporary leaders that the legitimacy of being a great leader does not come from cruelty but from ethical and peaceful means.

Following a path similar to that of Ashoka, Jayavarman VII, the Emperor of the Khmer Empire, initially had a state ideology strongly influenced by the inherited Hindu *Devarājā* cult, but after his conversion to Buddhism, Jayavarman VII applied Buddhist principles to his state policy and adopted the new concept of *Buddharājā* or *Bodhisattva,* looking on himself as "the living Buddha" or "the Buddha-to-be" to govern the state, ultimately leading it to its pinnacle (Briggs 1951; Cœdès 1963; Kulke 2014).

The religious principle of Jayavarman VII is based on the spirit of benevolence in Buddhism and is expressed as benefiting others or rescuing people. As stated in the Say-Fong inscription (K. 368 – Honda 1965, 410), a statement which reminds us of Ashoka's *dhamma* ethics, Jayavarma VII puts the well-being of his subjects first, "(Once) a person has a physical disease, his (i.e., king's) mental disease is far more painful. For the suffering of people, is the suffering of masters, not (only) the suffering of people (themselves)."

When considering the Buddhist influence on Jayavarman's social policy and state ideology, the most significant aspect is his construction of 123 rest houses (Dharmasālā)[3] and 102 hospitals (Ārogyasālā), each meticulously documented with lists of personnel and provisions, serving the needs of pilgrims and providing medical care across the empire, as recorded in the Say-Fong inscription (K. 368 – Honda 1965) and the Ta Prohm inscription (K. 273 – Cœdès 1906). Jayavarman VII built a well-supplied, country-wide hospital network that, as stated in the inscriptions, was accessible and provided without discrimination to all four castes, i.e., Brahmin (priest), Kshatryia (king), Vaishya (merchants), Sudra (commoners or peasants) (Chhem 2005; Sharrock and Jacques 2017).

2.2.3 The *Dhammarājā* from the contemporary Khmer view

The *dhammarājā* from the contemporary Khmer view is a mix of myth and reality. In Cambodia, when confronted with challenging circumstances, especially under the rule of immoral leaders, Khmer people look back to the glorious history of the Khmer Empire under the wise leadership especially of Jayavarman VII. Within the purview of the Khmer Buddhists, Jayavarman VII embodied the essence of a *dhammika* – a vernacularization of the Pali term *dhammika dhammarājā,* signifying a righteous king. The concept of *dhammika* embodies justice, benevolence, and ethical leadership, providing a model for good governance (Vijitha 2016).

The term *dhammik* gained prominence during the late nineteenth century when the nation was under French colonization (1863-1953), and the Khmer people were in search of a

3 Regarding the rest houses, the Sanskrit inscription uses the term "*upakārya*", which translates to "staging posts with fire" or "*vahneḥ*" and "*vahnigṛhāṇi*", both meaning "house of fire" (Maxwell 2007, 43). Finot (1925, 421-422) interpreted these structures as "*dharmasālā*", considering them religious hostels along pilgrimage routes due to the presence of Lokeśvara Bodhisattva, offering protection against dangers. Although the term "*dharmasālā*" does not appear in the inscription, it has become widely used to refer to these rest houses. In a first-hand account of Khmer civilization by Chou Ta-Kuan (1992, p. 65), a Chinese envoy who resided in Angkor from 1296 to 1297, the Khmer referred to these resting places along the highways as "*sen-mu*" (Khmer, *samnak*).

Messiah, to borrow a term from another religion (or two), to rescue them. A prophetic text called *put-domneay* circulated among the Khmer commoners, predicting a decline in the *dhamma,* which was linked to an unrighteous ruler. This ruler's errors of judgment fostered the proliferation of poverty, violence, and immoral behavior, ultimately reducing the average human lifespan to just a few years. The text also propagated the belief that within the midst of the social turmoil that gave rise to catastrophic death and destruction, a righteous ruler known as a *dhammik* was expected to emerge. This *dhammik* would usher in a new golden age of justice and *dharma,* thus paving the way for the arrival of the next Buddha (Hansen 2007, 55-56).

One can assume that some politicians and rebel leaders have capitalized on this belief to enhance their influence and pursue legitimacy, with the aim of getting the power to rule the country. In the late nineteenth century, several Khmer rebel leaders claimed to be *neak mean bon,* people possessing great merit, or *dhammika* rulers who could save people from suffering and safeguard the *dharma* (Hansen 2007, 60). Even after two centuries, the hope of encountering the "Khmer Messiah" continues in Cambodia. A rather shrill example for utilizing this is that on 23 August 2022, Khem Veasna, a leader of the fringe League for Democracy Party (LDP), who self-proclaimed himself as *prom reaksa lok* or "The universe safeguarding *brahma*" – the highest form of life in the universe according to Hindu/Buddhist mythology – made a series of apocalyptic predictions on his Facebook page (Sovinda et al. 2022). Veasna claimed that he could rescue those who follow him in the event of an apocalypse. Veasna's doomsday prophecy prompted his supporters to leave their everyday lives behind and travel from across the country to Siem Reap province, northwestern Cambodia. Some of his followers even traveled from as far as South Korea, Japan, and Thailand to seek refuge from the apocalypse (Samean 2022), which obviously did not take place.

The basis for the Khmer ideal of the *dhammika* ruler on principles is found in various Buddhist *sutras,* particularly those in which the Buddha discussed a leader's qualities, roles, and responsibilities. From the Khmer perspective, the *dhammika* is someone who adheres to the tenfold royal duties of the king[4] and possesses supernatural power to safeguard their subjects from adversaries (Monychenda 2008, 313-314). However, Monychenda (2008) argues that Khmer people focus too much on the tenfold duties of the king, which deal with the individual behavior of the leader, and fail to look at the Buddha's teachings about the *system* of governing the state. He (1999, 32-34) argues that the term "*dhammika* ruler" is essentially a title for an individual who believes in *dhammocracy,* holds respect for *dharma,* loves *dharma,* considers *dharma* as the guiding principle of life, and honors *dharma* as the "flagship".

Drechsler (2019, 234) asserts that "a classic role of the Buddhist king is that of the *dhammarājā,* of which one aspect of great relevance here (this is a highly complex subject both historically and theoretically) is that of facilitator of his subjects' attainment of happiness, with the optimal goal of enlightenment. The *dhammarājā* is, then, not (only) the one who rules according to the dhamma, but he who guides or enables his subjects to realize the(ir) *dhamma* – anywhere between nudging them thither or creating a space within which this is possible."

4 The ten royal duties of a righteous king *(Dasa-rājadhamma)*, is mentioned in the Nandiyamiga Jātaka (385) of Khuddaka Nikāya, translated from the Pali text by Francis and Neil (1879). This Jātaka tale illustrates the story of the Nandiya Bodhisattva, advising the Kosala King: "Great king, it is good for a king to rule a kingdom by forsaking the ways of wrongdoing, not offending against the ten kingly virtues and acting with just righteousness … Alms, morals, charity, justice and penitence, peace, mildness, mercy, meekness, patience."

3. The Interplay of Religion, Power, and Legitimacy in Cambodia

Like many other countries around the world, Cambodia has been a place where religion has been morally positioned as a *buddhacakr* (the wheel of *dharma*), symbolizing spiritual power, alongside *āṇācakr* (the wheel of authority), representing temporal power (Harris 2001a). Cambodians regard these two powers as a pair of chariot wheels propelling the nation forward (Kent 2006). It can be argued that from the Khmer point of view, if the charioteer (*sārathi*) or the ruler (*dhammarājā*) fails to maintain a balance between the wheels, allowing one to move faster than the other, the chariot will malfunction, or the nation will be destabilized.

Traditionally, temporal power resides in the *veang* (royal palace), while spiritual power is stored in the *wat* (Buddhist temple). Monychenda (2008) argues that the *veang* embodies worldly power for the king, royal family, and ruling class, believed to be the reincarnations of *deva* (gods/angels) or individuals with great past merit, responsible for governing and alleviating the people's suffering. In contrast, the *wat* is where the *saṅgha* preserves ethical teachings, guiding people morally and leading them to liberation from worldly suffering (saṃsāra). Monychenda (2008) has claimed that in some respects, the *veang* represents city-based power and wealth, while the *wat* symbolizes village prosperity. As Harris (2001b) argues, the two strongest institutions in Cambodia have traditionally been the saṅgha and the monarchy; these two institutions always relied on each other either for political or religious survival.

The *saṅgha* and the monarchy effectively legitimize the traditional concept of a "righteous ruler". Following the Khmer reformed constitution of 1993, the monarchy is elective, and the succession is determined by the Royal Council of the Throne (Bektimirova 2002). This council comprises the president of the National Assembly (who, in the king's absence, assumes the role of head of state), the prime minister, the supreme patriarch of both Khmer *saṅgha* orders[5], and the first and second vice-presidents of the National Assembly (Frost 1994, 88). The reinstatement of the monarchy after the fall of the Khmer Rouge terror regime that had dissolved it, itself indirectly attests to the distinct value of Buddhism deeply rooted in Khmer political tradition. The monarchical principle remains inherently entwined with the Buddhist worldview, wherein, as we have argued, the notion of the "*dhammika* ruler" holds significant importance (Bektimirova 2002).

While King Norodom Sihamoni's role is largely ceremonial, given the constitutional quality of the Buddhist monarchy, he still plays a vital part in the construction of Khmer national identity (Chachavalpongpun 2013). Some would argue that his role is somehow overshadowed by the absolute power of Samdech Hun Sen, the former Prime Minister of Cambodia, who occasionally acted as the guardian of the monarchy, suggesting the duty of the king to remain above politics and not intervene to mediate a political solution (Norén-Nilsson 2016).

As mentioned earlier, in the Khmer context, some part of power is perceived as residing in religious institutions, and gaining access to this power is essential for political survival. From

5 The Khmer Theravadin *saṅgha* orders are divided into two groups: Mahānikāya Order, which represents the local majority of *saṅgha,* and Dhammayuttikanikāya Order, a minority group of *saṅgha,* influenced by the reformed Dhammayut Order of King Mongkut (1804–1868) of Siam (see Promta 1999 and Na-Rangsi 2002). Dhammayuttika Order was first introduced into Cambodia in 1855 by King Norodom through the efforts of Venerable Mahā Pan (1824–1894), the first Supreme Patriarch of the Dhammayut order in Cambodia, who had spent several years in Thailand studying the newly reformed Buddhism of King Mongkut (San 2018). Each group is governed by its respective Supreme Patriarch (see Jotañṅāno 1961, 41-42; Harris 2005, 236-238; Lawrence 2022, 220-221).

a long historical point of view, Khmer rulers have actively patronized and embraced either Brahmanism or Buddhism to legitimize their authority. The concept of an ideal kingship, such as devarāja, buddharāja and dhammarājā is connected or derived from Hinduism and Buddhism, showing how religious institutions play a significant role in shaping state policies by reminding or expecting the state rulers to fulfill their duties as ruling monarch by adhering to ethical principles (see Cœdès 1975, 175; Goss 2017, 6).

King Jayavarman II (c. 770-850), the founder of the Khmer Empire, established the *devarāja* cult, translating to "god-king" (Mabbett 1969). In ancient Cambodia, the King was closely associated with Hindu gods, either Shiva or Vishnu, embodied by the *siva-liṅga* statue. Harihara, a concept merging Vishnu and Shiva, emerged in Indian and Khmer art, symbolizing divine attributes on either side (Lavy 2003). This fusion aimed to connect the divine and human realms (Wales 1995, 29). The debate arises on whether *devarāja* deifies the King as a god or metaphorically illustrates divine qualities. Filliozat (1966, 102) argues against *devarāja* identifying the King as a god, asserting it designates Siva himself.

Saveros (1998, 663), an expert in Khmer linguistics and civilization, further argues that the term devarāja has never been a part of the Khmer vocabulary. She points out that the term appears once in the renowned Sdok Kak Thom inscription (K. 235), which sparked speculations on divine kingship in Cambodia. She addresses that instead of identifying the Khmer king as the god-king, the inscription stipulates the king's duty to worship the kamrateṅ jagat ta rāja, translated into Sanskrit as devarāja.

While Cambodia has assimilated various Sanskrit terms such as rāja, adhirāja, mahārāja, rājasiṅha, and rājādhirāja to designate her chief, ruler, or king, Saveros (1998, 657-659) states that ancient Khmer epigraphy offers three distinct terms referring to these individuals:

1. Sdac, derived from "*dac*", meaning "to detach from a whole, to separate from it, to be superior".
2. Kamrateṅ, derived from "*teṅ*" meaning "manifest, most prominent, best".
3. Kuruṅ, derived from "*ruṅ*" meaning "large, broad, tall, high", and applied to a "chief or king."

Among these three terms, she highlights *kamrateṅ*[6] as a sacred term employed in Khmer society to refer to both "the god" and "the king," with two different suffixes: *jagat* (cosmos/world) and *phdai krom* (below/under/earth). *Kamrateṅ jagat* is a hybrid compound, combining Khmer and Sanskrit, literally meaning "the lord of the heavenly kingdom". At this point, one cannot help but compare it with *kamrateṅ phdai krom*, which means "the lord of the earthly kingdom", because they are almost superimposed. In other words, kamrateṅ jagat is perceived as the ruler of the macrocosm in Khmer belief, while *kamrateṅ phdai krom* symbolizes the ruler of the microcosm. These terms embody the dual facets of the entire universe, distinct yet complementary.

6 The term "Kamrateṅ" is also used to refer to a highly respected Buddhist monk. For instance, inscription (K. 177) at Angkor, dated 1437 A.D., provides information about a prominent monk named Brah Kamrateṅ Añ Laṅkā, who came from Chanbori, which was part of the Khmer territory. He pursued studies in grammar and dhamma at Angkor, eventually attaining the position of Mahādhammakathika, denoting a Great Lecturer in Buddhism and a distinguished royal scholar. He then received an invitation from a king to deliver Buddhist sermons to princes and princesses at the royal palace (Saveros 1981).

With the transition from Hinduism to Buddhism, particularly in Theravada Buddhism, deities and Hindu gods were not recognized and were reduced to the status of spirits serving the Buddha or demi-gods governing inferior heavens (Wales 1995, 31). The perception of an ideal king under Buddhism is evident in the fact that he is considered a *bodhisattva*, *cakravartin*, or *dhammarājā* (Wales 1995; Vijitha 2016; Moore 2016). Most post-Angkorean kings and rulers chose to spend time as monks to establish their legitimacy as ideal Buddhist rulers. This practice aimed to fulfill the ten perfections (*pārami*), granting them the ability to tap into spiritual power and showcase their influence and merit through the prosperity of the pagodas they endorsed (Guthrie 2002).

In social science literature, scholars have employed Weber's concept of charisma (Weber 1988) to elucidate diverse social movements led by charismatic figures. Similarly, within the study of Buddhist movements guided by charismatic leaders, the term "charisma" is often equated with "*pārami*", despite the absence of a direct Pali term or Buddhist equivalent for the Greek term "charisma" as it is employed in Christian contexts or contemporary sociology (Pisith 2018, 204).

However, having a claim to power does not automatically grant them moral legitimacy. To establish moral legitimacy, one must exercise power in a manner aligned with Khmer religious concepts of righteousness and proper worldviews (Kent 2006, 350-351). In Buddhism, *pārami* is regarded as a sacred force involving the cultivation of virtues to a state of sublime perfection. This process fosters a pathway of purification that ultimately aligns with the pursuit of enlightenment. Acquiring *pāramī* involves engaging in virtuous acts, such as donating to pagodas or offering the monastic *saṅgha* community alms. Contemporary politicians also seek to align themselves with the members of the monastic *saṅgha* due to the trust people have in them (Monychenda 2008, 312).

This practice is regarded as crucial for attaining the status of being a good king, a respected member of the royal family, or a capable leader. It is worth noting that the current king of Cambodia was ordained twice in Paris; Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the first Prime Minister of Cambodia from 1993 to 1997, was ordained for one week in India; and Sam Rainsy, a leader of the main opposition party in Cambodia, had at least a one-week ordination stint in Cambodia. Hun Sen, Cambodia's current Prime Minister's direct predecessor, on the other hand, has never been a monk, but he frequently referred to his past as a temple boy (Monychenda 2008, 312). His son and successor, Samdech Hun Manet, spent a brief period of time as a monk to honor his late grandmother, following the Khmer Buddhist tradition of paying respects to deceased family members (Kamnottra 2020).

Despite facing criticism of the election and doubts about the legitimacy of Manet's candidacy for premiership from the Western world, Manet received support from China, which stated that the election was free and fair (Strangio 2023). Alongside this, various institutions and prominent figures aligned with the ruling party publicly endorsed Manet's candidacy. Notably, the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council of Cambodia, traditionally expected to maintain neutrality, also joined this wave of support, issuing an endorsement for Manet's premiership candidacy (Sirivadh 2021). Some would argue that the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council has a strong association with the ruling party or is controlled by them. However, the endorsement from the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council shows how the integration of the *saṅgha* into the political structure and the

recognition of Buddhism as the state religion play significant roles in granting the state the authority to limit the sovereignty of the *saṅgha* by positioning its role as the protector of the Buddha's *dharma* (Bechert 1973).

4. A Normative Discussion: The Buddha and His Teachings Again

The relationship between religion and governance has long been a subject of profound interest and significance, as noted by scholars like Ongaro and Tantardini (2023a, 2023b) within the realm of Public Administration. These two spheres' interaction has shaped societies, norms, and power structures throughout history. One particular religious tradition that has garnered significant attention is Buddhism. Its uniqueness as a world religion, as highlighted by Habermas (Habermas 2019; Foshay 2009; San et al. 2023), extends beyond its spiritual and philosophical aspects. Buddhism's global reach and emergence as a prominent faith within predominantly secular societies, such as the Western world, adds to its intrigue (McMahan 2020).

While Buddhism is commonly viewed as an apolitical and introspective tradition (Weber 1988), its potential influence on society, particularly on governance, cannot be overlooked. The apparent detachment from political matters, particularly in the contemporary context, has led to uncertainties regarding the role of Buddhism in governance. This paradoxical nature raises questions about the ways in which Buddhist principles and institutions intersect with the mechanisms of political control and decision-making. Within Buddhism, three key relationships take center stage:

4.1 The *Saṅgha*-Laity Relationship with an Intersection of the Role of *Dhammarājā* as a Dharma Protector and Promoter

In the *saṅgha*-laity relationship, the *dhammarājā* assumes the role of *dharma* protector and promoter, creating a conducive environment to foster a healthy and mutually beneficial connection between the two parties. Acting as the protector and promoter of the *dharma,* the *dhammarājā* serves to unify and facilitate these two integral components. Like how the Buddha guides even the most unfortunate towards the path to enlightenment, the duty of the rājā, the king, or more abstractly, the state, lies in providing means of sustenance and security to all its citizens, for as all monks are like sons to the Buddha, all citizens of the state are like sons to the ruler (Zimmermann 2006). Without the state's role in providing for the citizens, the saṅgha, which lives off the secular world, also perishes.

As the Buddha would show paths towards enlightenment to all beings regardless of their capacity to understand to move forward on their path, the state has to provide for the sustenance and security of even the poorest of its citizens, showing them the path towards the upliftment of their lives. The state is primarily responsible for fulfilling the citizens' basic needs since one cannot meditate on an empty stomach. Providing this level of access to all citizens, regardless of their economic status, is the primary responsibility of the state, and it is also one of the highest implications of Buddhist thinking when it comes to economic governance (Long 2021, 39-40). People should see a path towards how a dignified life without

hunger can be attained, a roof over the head, and a sense of security for the future (Long 2021, 39). How the state provides need not be in unison for everyone – like how the Buddha or monks use upāya-kauśalya to teach depending on who is on the receiving end (Keown 1992). What the capability of the respective person is to cultivate the understanding of the dharma is similar to how the state must have varied provisions based on the differences and not assume equality or even aim for it. The needs of the old are different from those of the young, and women may require different priorities compared to men, depending on space and time.

The role of the state has two dimensions, too, with the duty of the rāja not only being about the material sustenance of the subjects but also enabling his subjects to realize the dhamma. Even in contemporary times, Buddhist monarchies, although they have almost vanished, have shown the concept's applicability (Drechsler 2020).

Even with a dhammarājā ruling it, the idea that every state can provide equally for all its citizens or become immediately equal in economic standing to those more prosperous is more of a utopian thought than a vision with practicality; the classically Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan's tendency to compare itself with Switzerland and Singapore while still being a "Least Developed Country" (see Drechsler 2020) is a point in case. Not all countries are equally able, and if one ruminates on the implications of the Buddhist law of karmic causality as well as of simple geospatiality, they can practically never be, and as such, nor are their goals the same, nor the means available to reach these goals. The state, then, has the responsibility to set the goals and choose the ethical means that best suit their context, not just generally but specifically concerning the groups and subgroups of its citizens.

4.2 The *Saṅgha*-Laity Symbiotic but Direct Relationship

The relationship between the saṅgha and the laity is symbiotic. The role of the saṅgha to the secular world is that of a guide or an advisor to teach them the dharma and guide them toward the path of enlightenment. In the context of its historical development and contemporary practice, Buddhism is primarily based on the activities of the *saṅgha*, who functioned as literati, preserving a substantial body of literature and higher studies, including historical and other non-religious writings, and also played a crucial role in providing fundamental education to villagers (Bechert 1973).

The saṅgha depends on the laity to provide the means of subsistence to the saṅgha. The survival of the saṅgha depends on the laity. Thus, the saṅgha is also responsible for advising or at least well-wishing for worldly matters concerning trade, commerce, agriculture, law, and security. In Sigālovāda Sutta, (DN 31 – Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1921; Bhikkhu Narada 2013; Bhikkhu Sujato 2018d), a discourse that discusses the advice of the Buddha to Sigāla, the Buddha mentions the mutual relationship between the laity and the saṅgha. Based on the discourse, to promote and encourage the dharma practice of the saṅgha, the laity should respect the saṅgha through kind actions, kind words, kind thoughts, keeping their houses open for them, and supporting them with basic requisites.

In return, the saṅgha should bear in mind that they have an obligation to care and show compassion to the lay people by restraining them from doing evil deeds, persuading them

to perform wholesome deeds, thinking compassionately, teaching them what they have not learned, clarifying what they have already learned and showing them the path to the heavenly state.

4.3 The Independent Relationship between the "Ruler" of the Citizens and the "Leader" of the *Saṅgha* members

In the context of the 21st century, it is noteworthy that Cambodia stands as a unique example where Buddhism, the monarchy, and the *saṅgha* have been constitutionally recognized, as stated in Cambodia's 1993 Constitution (Lawrence 2022). In several Buddhist discourses, the *saṅgha* plays a significant role in helping the *dhammarājā* govern his subjects in accordance with the principle of *dharma.* As mentioned in the Aggañña Sutta (DN 27 – Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids 1921; Bhikku Sujato 2018c), the Buddha suggests that *saṅgha* members should serve as advisors to righteous rulers. However, the Buddha also emphasizes that the *saṅgha* should abstain from direct involvement in political affairs. The *sutta* also notes that the king must adhere to the moral instructions of the *dharma* to maintain legitimacy, promote peace, foster prosperity, and secure the survival of his kingdom.

The Buddha, through upāya-kauśalya (skillful means), teaches the dharma to beings with varied capacities to understand it, showing their unique path toward enlightenment (Keown 1992). Similarly, the saṅgha is also present to guide the rājas or the rulers of states. Kūṭadanta Sutta (DN 5) and Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta (DN 26) are just two of several examples where Buddhist scriptures directly address matters of the secular world, focusing on issues of poverty and crime and the need for economic upliftment (Rahula 1974).

While the close connections between the state and the Khmer *saṅgha* may offer mutual benefits in terms of political legitimacy and security, the state's absolute authority over the *saṅgha's* leaders may raise questions about the *saṅgha's* integrity (Kent 2008; Lawrence 2022). It can be argued that the loss of these principles would limit the sovereignty of the *saṅgha,* making them unable to make the right decision and to fulfill their role as moral advisors and exemplars for the ruler in governing the state in accordance with the *dharma.* To ensure the *saṅgha* community remains committed to the neutrality principle and can contribute to truly good governance, the state must create a healthy environment for them. Through this, the *saṅgha* can fully embrace their role of offering moral guidance and telling what is just *(dharma)* and unjust *(adharma)* for the state.

Turning the focus again to the Cambodian context, the endeavor must be to comprehend what Buddhist governance in the key Khmer example would look like. This exploration delves into theoretical constructs and the practical manifestations of these ideas within Cambodia's societal and state structures. While the framework for Buddhist governance in Cambodia must be rooted in an understanding of local customs, beliefs, and historical trajectories, it is crucial to emphasize the core element of the *dhammarājā,* particularly their commitment to embracing the *dhammocracy* (*dhammādhipateyya*). Given that the concept of genuinely good governance and a just ruler in Buddhism revolves around the ruler's alignment with the *dharma*, understanding what *dharma* represents in the contemporary world is a key factor for both the *saṅgha* and the *dhammarājā* in order to evaluate their actions.

5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to explore the relationship between the *saṅgha* and the *dhammarājā* in contemporary governance, with special reference to Cambodia. It has discussed the multifaceted responsibilities of the *dhammarājā* and examined various aspects of Buddhist governance. The emphasis of the *saṅgha* on communal living, ethical conduct, and *dhammocratic* principles indeed offers valuable insights for effective leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution. Additionally, the notion of *dhammarājā* as a ruler guided by Buddhist principles serves as a model for responsible governance, prioritizing social welfare, equality, and human rights, even well beyond a monarchical system. By incorporating Buddhist values into governance, leaders can ideally better navigate challenges, foster social cohesion, and promote a just society. Ultimately, the teachings of the *saṅgha* and the ideals of the *dhammarājā* provide valuable guidance for ethical leadership, community building, and the pursuit of a fair, inclusive, and compassionate society.

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ETIS 3.1

A Look at the Commons through the Lens of Buddhist Ethics

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the commons through the lens of Theravada Buddhism and reflects on their relation regarding ethics and practice. First, we introduce the commons as a social system of self-organization and governance and as a way of sustainable living observed in both traditional and contemporary contexts. Simultaneously, informed by practiced examples of Buddhist commons from Cambodia, we highlight how the commons find culture-specific expressions and are compatible with the Buddhist tradition. Specifically, focusing on the Right Livelihood *(sammā-ājīva)* from the Noble Eightfold Path of the Pali Canon, we discuss how Buddhist ethics – i.e., interconnectedness, moderation, compassion, and generosity – align with the collaborative nature of the commons. Through the comparative understanding of the Buddhist and Commons' perspectives, we aim to contribute to the relevant literature that challenges the unilateral, violent, and unsustainable global-Western paradigm.

Keywords: Commons; Self-interest; *Saṅgha*; Interconnectedness; Buddhist Economics.

Introduction

The dominant institutions encompassing the mainstream approaches to governance and economics are premised on the Western worldview, imposed across the globe through colonization, modernization, and globalization. However, an evolving discourse highlighting the global-Western trajectory's defects calls for alternative pathways toward more sustainable and just futures. The commons play an important role in this discourse. Another notable perspective is related to Buddhism. Attention on Buddhist governance and economics relates to the re-popularized intersection of religion and governance (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023a; 2023b), focusing on Buddhism as a world religion (Habermas, 2019) and its relevance in and for secular contexts. Additionally, the Buddhist approach is popular within the critical discourse on sustainable

development, economics and politics for its potential to challenge established institutions (Drechsler, 2019; King, 2016; Long, 2019; 2021; Verma, 2017).

Recognizing the growing interest in these two branches of the aforementioned discourse, this chapter explores the relationship between the commons and the Buddhist approach to governance and economics, tracing similarities in their ethical and organizational aspects. We consider these similarities pivotal in discussing non-Western alternatives for more equitable and sustainable futures, transcending the individualistic and growth-oriented Western trajectory.

This chapter approaches the commons as a system of collective self-organization for managing and producing shared resources through commoning practices (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019), motivated by radically different incentives from self-interest and profit maximization. Recognizing the inherent interconnectedness of social and living systems, the commons approach is premised on ethics of care for ecological stability and the well-being of present and future generations on a planetary level. In a similar vein, key elements of Buddhist ethics, rooted in the teachings of the Buddha (c. 480-400 BCE), include interdependence, compassion, mindfulness, non-violence, and profound respect for all living beings and the environment (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2016). Buddhism emphasizes the interdependent nature of our world and stresses the need for compassion and non-violence in our dealings with shared resources (Brown, 2017; Ng, 2020). Furthermore, mindfulness, a cornerstone of Buddhist practice, encourages conscious decision-making and an increased awareness of the consequences of our actions on the common resources. More importantly, Buddhism advocates for equity and justice, as seen in the principles of fairness and the alleviation of suffering (Jayasuriya, 2008; San, Drechsler, & Shakya, 2023). In this light, we posit that the commons resonates with the core Buddhist principles from an ethical perspective.

Furthermore, the commons is viewed as a context-adaptive system, a pattern or template for organization and governance, that manifests in various ways within different local realities and cultural contexts (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). These variations, however, share the same ethical foundation. There are no universal models that define exactly how ventures based on the commons should be created and operated; each example is unique (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). Similarly, there is no blueprint on how the Buddhist canon should be implemented and institutionalized, resulting in a variety of religious customs, practices and adaptations in governance systems in Buddhist countries, according to different local and socio-historical contexts (Drechsler, 2020; Jayasuriya, 2008; Koeuth, 2016). Hence, from an organizational perspective, both the commons and Buddhism may be viewed as context-adaptive systems that retain a solid ethical foundation. The adaptability of commons and Buddhist

institutions and similarities regarding their ethical core led us to discuss their intersection as a contribution to the relevant discourse.

Additionally, although the commons as institutions of collective governance have had a significant presence throughout human history, the domination of the Western worldview has marginalized this social practice. The culture of the commons and our collective memory of it have been supplanted by the Western monoculture (Bollier, 2014), promoting individualism, imposition on nature, and a specific interpretation of progress and growth. There are cases, however, where the commons still manifests in social and everyday affairs. We argue that this holds true for Cambodia, where the Theravada Buddhist canon continues to be fundamental to society, notwithstanding Western influence. In this direction, we focus on the Cambodian context, discussing three examples that describe how the community organizes and manages shared resources to cover spiritual and everyday needs. We approach these examples as commons-based institutions and thus refer to them as cases of 'Buddhist commons'.

The methodology involves a two-fold approach. First, we reviewed existing literature on the commons and Buddhist approaches to investigate their intersection. To delve deeper into the question of Buddhist ethics and governance, the chapter relied on the Sutta and Vinaya texts, which were initially translated from the Pali texts by T. W. Rhys Davids & Oldenberg (1881), T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys Davids (1921), Ānandajoti (2008), Thanissaro (2013), Vajira and Story (2013), and Sujato (2018). Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Khmer *saṅgha* members, abbots, *sālā-samnak* representatives, scholars, and experts in Khmer Buddhism and tradition in three provinces/capitals: Battambang, Siem Reap, and Phnom Penh. The selection of interviewees, comprising 20 individuals, was based on their involvement in Buddhist studies and engagement in the field of Buddhist studies. During these interviews, questions were asked concerning the significant roles of "*sālā-punya/dhamma-sālā*, its foundational principles, and the decision-making process within the engaged activities of *sālā-punya/dhamma-sālā,* etc." We then employed a discourse analysis approach to analyze the interviews and derive insights into the practices and perceptions surrounding Buddhist commons practice in Cambodia. This comprehensive methodology enabled us to better understand how Buddhist commons function in the Cambodian case, gaining insights for the broader discussion on alternative pathways of governance and economics focusing on the commons' potential.

The View of the Commons from Buddhism to the Contemporary World

Buddhism began on the Indian subcontinent in the fifth century BC as a small religious community that developed a certain distance, both self-perceived and realization, from other contemporary religious communities of the time (Reynolds and Hallisey, 1987). From the earliest date, there were signs of an emerging Buddhist commons among the practice and the adherents of a *saṅgha* community. Open participation, shared purposes and resources, mutuality, and fairness characterized the *saṅgha* community. The main goal of joining the *saṅgha* community is to liberate oneself from worldly attachment and to pursue awakening by living a dedicated life of spiritual practice.

The goal of the *saṅgha* community often leads to its characterization as an 'otherworldly' religion with a gnostic aversion to worldly matters, sparking debates about its level of social engagement (Harris1989b). In Max Weber's 1916 analysis of the comparative sociology of Indian religions, he denied the relationship between early Indian Buddhist traditions and social-economic engagement. Weber portrayed the belief systems in India, including Buddhism, as 'otherworldly' religions that emphasize individual salvation over social responsibility.

The view of Buddhism as 'otherworldly' leaves its social role, economic engagement, and organization largely unexplored (Atwood, 1996; Hamilton, 1998). In theory and practice, Buddhism is widely seen as an essential source of non-profit activity and social welfare. The end goal of Buddhism is, of course, to achieve *nirvana,* a state of liberation from worldly attachment, however, the *saṅgha* community does not entirely detach themselves from worldly matters. The principles, practice, and governance of the Buddhist community especially the *saṅgha* are firmly rooted in open participation, shared purposes and resources, mutuality, and fairness which can be viewed as a sign of social engagement or the commons.

The ways of living and governing society have evolved from generation to generation and vary from place to place. Machiavelli (1469–1527), an Italian philosopher, writer, and politician, emphasized a way of leading society that differs from that of Buddha and pointed out the importance of identifying one's other weaknesses and vulnerabilities and how one can exploit them and use them to one's advantage. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1532, p. 91) warns that evil prevails even when someone wishes to adhere solely to virtuous principles.

In a similar argument, Smith (1723-1790), a Scottish philosopher and economist, asserts that human action and decisions are driven by self-interest because most people strive to maximize their happiness, well-being, or success, even at the expense of others. According to Smith, the individualistic nature of humans fosters competition, motivating producers to reduce prices and improve the quality of their products by increasing efficiency and innovation, contributing to economic growth; thus benefiting all members of society, including the poorest.

Like Smith, Hardin (1915–2003), an American ecologist, argues that humans are inherently self-interested, and that this self-interest drives much of their behavior. Particularly, in situations where a resource is held in common and there are no clear rules or regulations for its use, self-interest urges people to exploit the resource until it is exhausted. In *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Hardin (1968, p. 1244) argues that individuals benefit personally from their ability to ignore the truth, even though it may harm society as a whole. Ultimately, this behavior results in the collapse and tragedy of the commons. As Hardin suggests, a solution to this problem is the enclosure of resources through government regulation and private ownership. Enclosure, he argues, could prevent the depletion and overuse of resources by creating individual incentives to conserve them.

Premised upon such assumptions is the dominant global-Western trajectory, according to which economic growth is a prerequisite for the social prosperity (Pansera & Fressoli, 2021). Typical mechanisms to achieve economic growth include the enclosure, privatization, commercialization, and central governance of common resources; efficiency-oriented industrial production; and unilateral technological progress. These mechanisms prioritize monetary profit maximization and have profound consequences related to social inequalities, the environmental crisis, and the extinction of cultural diversity. Despite the acknowledged defects currently posing an existential threat to humans and non-humans alike, the Western trajectory continues to prevail as the only alternative. Nevertheless, adherence to the homogenizing and fragmentary logic of this trajectory has long been a subject of controversy.

A notable critique towards the mainstream perspectives is Schumacher’s work on Buddhist Economics, which gained widespread attention following the publication of his book *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* in 1973. The book presented Schumacher's alternative economic theories that critiqued mainstream Euro-American economic thinking and proposed alternative development models for Asia and the West. Schumacher’s theories emphasize human-scale technologies, decentralization, and the sustainable use of natural resources aligned with the Buddhist perspective, shedding light onto the social, political and economic aspects of Buddhism. As opposed to Adam

Smith, who emphasizes the role of self-interest in promoting economic growth, Schumacher argues that pursuing self-interest in a free-market system might lead to exploiting workers and the environment. Rather than maximizing profit, Schumacher claims that economic development should not be driven by self-interest alone but instead be based on ethical values and sustainable principles to serve the needs of the people.

Schumacher's self-interest argument is well aligned with the concept of *anattā*, meaning non-self in Buddhism, referring to the concept that no permanent, unchanging self or soul is found in any human being. In Buddhism, all phenomena, including individuals, are impermanent and constantly changing, and none possess an inherent or intrinsic self-nature. The *anattā* principle aims to encourage Buddhist practitioners to detach themselves from the misguided clinging to what is mistakenly considered to be *self,* and through that detachment (alongside moral livelihood and meditation), the path to *nirvana* – a state of liberation from the cycle of suffering – can be successfully traversed.

From a different viewpoint, Payutto (1992, p. 25), a well-known scholar in Buddhist Economics, views self-interest as a natural aspect of human behavior, and thus the driving force of competition in mainstream economics. However, Payutto emphasizes that competition must not be pursued at the expense of others or environmental degradation. According to Payutto, such competition is driven by *taṇhā* (sensual desire), considered a leading cause of suffering and an unwholesome state in Buddhism. Therefore, Payutto (1992, p. 57) stresses that human behavior is also driven by *chanda,* or willingness, regarded as a wholesome state for bringing about real well-being or quality of life. He continues to address that all individuals have a moral responsibility to act in a way that does not harm others or the environment; since non-harming and the idea that moral actions have consequences *(karma)* over human existence are essential aspects of Buddhist teachings (Payutto, 1994; Keown, 1996).

Based on the doctrine of *karma,* one of the central teachings in Buddhism, every action has consequences (Rahula, 1959; Harvey, 2000). According to Buddhism, *karma* is not just an inheritance from a past life that determines and dictates one's fate. Buddhism points out that *karma* originates from the threefold nature of one's daily activities: bodily action, verbal action, and mental action, accompanied by the pulling feeling of volition (Ghose, 2007). Therefore, Buddhism emphasizes that moral actions have consequences, affecting individuals and the states of affairs brought into being through moral acts (Keown, 1996).

Rooted in the theory of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, more precisely translated as "dependent origination" or "dependent co-arising," all things arise in

dependence upon other things,[1] meaning that nothing can stand on its own (see Payutto, 1994; Keefe, 1997; Thanissaro, 2013). According to this theory, Buddhism views the world as a vast interconnected web of events, where each phenomenon constitutes and reflects other phenomena. The *paṭiccasamuppāda* theory provides an idea with powerful ethical and political implications: "If we are all part of a vast, interdependent network of being, what we do can have profound effects on others as our actions reverberate throughout this network" (McMahan, 2008, p. 132). The doctrine demonstrates that every action has its consequences. These consequences first affect the individual who performed the action and then extend to the people around them and society as a whole. The interconnected nature of reality, means that '[o]ur ethics—and the behaviour that naturally flows from our ethics—contribute to the causes and conditions that determine who we are, the kind of society we live in and the condition of our environment' (Payutto, 1994). To understand connectedness is the key to imagine a different vision for politics (Long, 2021).

Known for her research on Collective Action and Common-pool Resources (CPRs), Ostrom challenges the conventional view that individuals are always motivated by self-interest and that common-pool resources (such as fisheries, forests, and irrigation systems) are destined to be overused and depleted without centralized government regulation or privatization. Ostrom argues that Hardin's perspective is oversimplified and fails to consider the complexity of human behavior and social systems. Despite potential conflicts of interest and the possibility for opportunistic behaviors to arise within commons-based institutions, Ostrom's work, informed by hundreds of cases from around the world, asserts that individuals can act in the interest of the group or community, self-organize their own systems of commons-based governance, and develop a cooperative ethic to manage shared resources and achieve shared goals (Ostrom, 2015). Similarly, Benkler (2006; 2011), referring to cases of Commons-Based Peer-Production (CBPP), such as Wikipedia or Free/Libre and Open-source-software (FLOSS), explains that people have a natural inclination towards collaboration, which can counteract individualistic and self-interested behavior. Evolutionary scientists also support this tendency (Bollier, 2014).

To address the ambiguity of the term (Hess, 2008), this chapter defines the commons as a social system whereby a community self-organises and co-devises protocols, values, and norms to manage and maintain shared goods and resources; or collectively produce goods and services. These encompass natural resources and a wide array of tangible and intangible human creations (e.g.,

[1] See *Vera Sutta: Animosity (AN 10.92),* translated from the Pali text by Thanissaro (2013), available online at www.accesstoinsight.org

data, software, archives, techniques, knowledge, and cultural heritage) (Bauwens et al., 2019; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Hess, 2008; Lekakis, 2020). The commons ensures equitable access to these resources, goods and services, and to infrastructures and decisions. This approach stands in stark contrast to exclusive control, whether by private entities or the state, where access can be potentially excluded (particularly considering that the presence of influential economic interests in the public sphere further complicates the idea of public ownership).

The commons is framed by values radically different from those of the market economy, promoting ethics of sufficiency economy, stewardship and knowledge sovereignty (Bollier, 2014; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Kostakis & Pazaitis, 2020), and caring for the community needs, future generations, ecological stability, and individual and collective growth (Bollier, 2014; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). Beyond monetary thinking and exchange value, trust, reciprocity, and relationality are put forward (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). At its core, the commons logic recognizes our corporeal vulnerability, and our dependence on each other and nature; while stressing the need to acknowledge that building our lives upon the destruction of ecosystems, the exploitation of resources, and the suffering of others, will only keep things on the same damaging track they currently are (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). Put differently, the commons emphasizes interconnectedness, and calls for taking responsibility of our actions. As Bollier (2014) explains, in its deepest reaches, the commons extends beyond economics, public policy, or politics, indicating a distinct mode of human existence (ontology) compared to those we are accustomed to.

Despite that, according to mainstream approaches, Buddhism is primarily discussed as a set of ethical guidelines on how to lead one's life towards liberation (Koeuth, 2016) and the commons as a mode of organization and governance (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020), both expand to ontological and political spheres. There are no rigid rules on how to implement and institutionalize the Buddhist canon, nor a blueprint of how commons ventures should emerge. Both cases, however, are strongly tied to a solid ethical core that emphasizes the notion of interdependence point towards justice, sustainability, and human flourishing. The soft adaptable character of commons- and Buddhism-based institutions anchored in similar ethics for socio-ecological prosperity, has allowed a variety of renderings and ventures to emerge in compliance with local and cultural contexts, community needs, and visions.

Next we explore three examples of institutions from Cambodia, where Theravada Buddhism is integral to society and everyday life. These examples describe how the religious community self-organizes and manages shared

resources to cover spiritual and everyday needs. On one hand, these examples of Buddhist institutions comprise a context-specific implementation of the Buddhist canon. On the other hand, they demonstrate a way of governance that resonates with the organizational aspect of the commons. In this light, we look into these institutions through the lens of the commons, understanding them as secular, context-specific adaptations of commons-based organisation, and thus refer to them as 'Buddhist commons'.

The *Saṅgha* Community

The *saṅgha* community is a fundamental institution in Buddhism, comprising male-ordained and female-ordained communities, who renounced worldly attachments, and committed themselves to the pursuit of spiritual awakening by living a dedicated life of spiritual practice, study, and service. The term *'saṅgha'* is a Pali term meaning an 'assembly,' 'association,' 'community,' or 'order' and is most commonly used to refer to an order of Buddhist monks or nuns (De L, 1970; Buswell et al., 2014; Borchert, 2017).

The *saṅgha* originated during the time of the historical Buddha over 2,600 years ago. Shortly after his enlightenment, the Buddha established and revolutionized the system of governance among the *saṅgha,* introducing a paradigm that was in direct contrast to the autocratic ruling systems prevalent in India. The *saṅgha* is governed by a set of monastic rules and guidelines, which provide ethical and disciplinary guidelines for the *saṅgha* community. While these rules differ slightly from one Buddhist tradition and school to the next, they are generally based on the principles of *dharma*.

In principle, the *upajjhāya,* a spiritual preceptor, occupies the highest position in the monastic community, as any *saṅgha* member ordained by them must adhere to their spiritual guidance for a minimum of four to five years before embarking on their own journeys elsewhere. Although the spiritual preceptor holds the highest position, there is no absolute power over the decision-making process in the *saṅgha* community. The decision-making process must be open to all *saṅgha* members regardless of their seniority. Recruiting or giving a higher ordination to a new *saṅgha* member requires not less than ten *saṅgha* members, with the exception of bordering regions*,* where the Buddha allows the higher ordination to be held in the meeting of four *saṅgha* members (Dutt, 1924, p. 147; Dickson, 1963, p. 14).

If one *saṅgha* member is very sick and unable to join the meeting in person, he must remain outside the boundary of the monastery, or he may send his consent through the other, which is called *chanda* as a sign of pre-agreement with the decision made by the monastic community. Any decision made without even

one monk's presence is invalid (Dutt, 1924, p. 146). In response to the severity of a given issue in the *saṅgha* community, the decision-making process needs to be held through the proper performance of *saṅgha-kamma* (the *saṅgha's* formal act). *Saṅgha-kamma* is employed for various purposes, such as reaching agreements, making decisions, or taking actions within the *saṅgha* assembly, which comprises the following requisites (Dutt, 1924, p. 125):

1. The presence of the proper number of competent *saṅgha* members
2. The conveyance of all absentee ballots
3. The motion being proposed
4. The proper proclamation of the proposed act.

In the recruitment of any new members, the *saṅgha* community embraces the bottom-up approach that is contrary to top-down or authoritarian approaches; it therefore works toward inclusivity through consensus decision-making (Dutt, 1924; Jinananda, 1961; Prebish, 2018; Monychenda, 2022). In the process of joining the *saṅgha* community, the candidate seeks the approval of the chief of the *saṅgha* community. Subsequently, two mentors are appointed by the spiritual preceptor to assess the candidate's background. Once the investigation is completed, the mentors verbally propose the candidate's ordination three times to the assembly of *saṅgha*. In the absence of objections, silence is expected from all present. However, if an objection arises, it necessitates a vocal expression, and the process will be repeated until a consensus is reached. Likewise, appointing individuals to positions of responsibility, such as inventory manager, requires the endorsement of the members residing in the temple. Moreover, these appointments are bound by a stringent legal process, as stipulated in the sacred scriptures (Monychenda, 1998, p. 10).

Monastic life is set up as a ruling system in which leaders are chosen by their qualities and with the approval of the *saṅgha* assembly. Each *saṅgha* member is required to participate in maintaining the stability of the rule of law of the monastery, i.e., participating every two weeks in a ceremony known as *uposatha* (bi-weekly meeting) in the monastery to review compliance with the monastic code. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16),[2] the Buddha lists seven conditions that will maintain the unity and solidarity of the *saṅgha* community. The first two are these: "(1) As long as the bhikkhus meet often, meet a great deal, their growth can be expected, not their decline. (2) As long as the bhikkhus meet in

[2] Mahāparinibbāna Sutta: The Discourse about the Great Emancipation (DN 16), translated from the Dīgha Nikāya Pali by Bhikkhu Ānandajoti (2008), Bhikkhu Thanisssaro (2013b), Vajira & Story (2013), Bhikkhu Sujato (2018b).

unity, adjourn from their meetings in unity, and conduct Community business in unity, their growth can be expected, not their decline."[3]

The *uposatha* observance was formulated to fulfill these purposes, serving as a bi-weekly opportunity for the *saṅgha* assembly to gather, update their membership rolls, address issues, and reaffirm their common adherence to the monastic code (Thanissaro, 2013c, p. 1098). Performing *uposatha* with an incomplete or divided *saṅgha* assembly is regarded as an offense of wrong-doing according to the monastic code. Therefore, the first duty is to convey consent and purity on behalf of a *saṅgha* member who cannot attend the *uposatha* observance. In the Mahāvagga,[4] the Buddha instructed that a sick *saṅgha* member, unable to participate in the *uposatha,* should communicate his consent and purity through another *saṅgha* member to those attending the *uposatha*. According to the monastic code,[5] any *saṅgha* member who witnesses another monk's transgression but fails to report it to the *saṅgha* assembly is also considered to be committing an offense (T. W. & Oldenberg, 1881, p. 33; Ñāṇatusita, 2014, p. 174)

In sum, the *saṅgha* in Buddhism lives together as a community, pursuing liberation by adhering to the rules and regulations set forth by the Buddha to maintain continuity and unity within the *saṅgha* assembly. Unity, purity, and integrity are regarded as key factors in preserving the *saṅgha* institution. Democracy or a consensus-based approach is used to make decisions, reach agreements, and act within the *saṅgha* assembly through *saṅgha-kamma* performances. While the primary purpose of joining the *saṅgha* is to liberate oneself from worldly attachments, the *saṅgha* typically remains connected to lay society because their daily basic needs rely on it, and they also have duties as the *dharma* messengers, to disseminate and teach the principles of *dhamma* to lay society.

The Buddhist Temple *(Wat)*

In Khmer Buddhist community, the term *wat* refers to a monastery, pagoda, or temple. A *wat* serves as a residence for the *saṅgha* members and, at the same time, also functions as a center for spiritual practice, cultural heritage, and community activities. If we were to ask whether a Buddhist temple belongs to someone, undoubtedly, no one would dare claim ownership of a Buddhist

[3] The quote according to Bhikkhu Thanissaro's (2013b) translation.
[4] Mahāvagga, Khandhaka II, Chapter 22, translated from the Pali text by T. W. & Oldenberg (1881, pp. 274-5).
[5] In the Suddhika-pācittiya: Requiring of a Transgression for Purification

temple in Cambodia. According to a report released by the Ministry of Cults and Religions in 2022, there are 5,104 Buddhist temples in Cambodia (FreshNews, 2022). Of the 5,104 temples, some are newly established, while others proudly bear a history of four to five centuries.

Buddhist Temple is regarded as common property, generally recognized as collective assets established and maintained by the Buddhist community under the guidance of the *saṅgha* community and the temple committee. Their primary purpose is to serve the common good within their respective communities. This characteristic may account for the prevailing sentiment among the public that the temple is akin to an integral part of their home and enhances a sense of community belonging, even though they do not reside there directly.

The *saṅgha* community relies on donations from the laity. Alongside meditation and virtuous practices, donating land or other material necessities to the *saṅgha* community is an act of accumulating merit in Theravada Buddhism. Furthermore, donation is also viewed as a form of renunciation within the Buddhist belief, signifying a virtuous act—a means to sever one's attachments to worldly possessions and to be free from greed (Falk, 2007, p. 140). When understood in this light, *saṅgha* members are not expected to reciprocate in any manner. Tambiah (1970, p. 213) referred to this as 'a double negation of reciprocity': on the one hand, the donor can liberate themselves from worldly attachments, and on the other, the recipient is not obliged to 'repay' following the customary logic of gift exchange, as described by Mauss ([1925] 1990), or adhere to the *quid pro quo* principle found in commercial transactions.

Building upon Tambiah's concept of the 'double negation of reciprocity' (1970, p. 213), Strenski (1983) elaborates that as the *saṅgha* community receives productive lands and durable items, it manages these assets to 'enrich society at large.' Consequently, the *saṅgha* community doesn't directly reciprocate the donors but indirectly benefits a third party, eventually returning benefits to the original donor (Strenski, 1983, p. 473). Strenski's 'circle of giving' concept provides a lens for understanding how Buddhist temples function as a commons.

All donations received by the *saṅgha* community from the laity are considered common property, meant to be shared and accessible to all members of the community. These objects are known as *garubhandha,* meaning 'heavy objects' or 'expensive goods.' This pedagogical term encompasses a diverse array of equipment and donations generously offered by lay followers to the *saṅgha* community in the temple. The concept of 'heavy objects' goes beyond their mere physical weight; it also signifies the substantial responsibility of effectively managing and judiciously allocating these communal resources, embodying principles of equity and justice.

Garubhandha cannot be owned by any individual *saṅgha* member or given from one *saṅgha* member to another. The *garubhandha* property is designated for the *saṅgha* community, reflecting its collective ownership and responsibility. However, the *saṅgha* community may choose to temporarily loan *garubhandha* to others, ensuring its utilization benefits the wider community's welfare and needs. Through this thoughtful management of shared assets, the *saṅgha* community upholds the values of compassion and interconnectedness, reflecting the teachings of the Buddha.

The Buddha enacted many relevant laws to avoid exploiting common property to serve personal interests. For instance, the *saṅgha* members are prohibited from treating common property as their personal property. Instead, if a monk requires the use of such belongings, they may borrow or exchange them for items of equal value with the consent of the *saṅgha* community. Moreover, any *saṅgha* member who dares to hand over this common property to another individual, be it a fellow *saṅgha* member or a devotee of the temple, without the consent of the *saṅgha* community will be fined as prescribed by the rules and regulations outlined in the books of discipline.

The *Sālā-Samnak*

Beyond the *saṅgha* community, other expressions of the commons are observed within the lay Buddhist community. *Sālā-samnak* is a gathering place for lay Buddhists to engage in various activities, such as doing charity, community meetings, hosting festivals, and organizing ceremonies. *Sālā-samnak* means a rest house in Cambodian, traditionally built by villagers on the roadside as a rest stop for travelers and passersby. S*ālā-samnak* is normally found on either side of the road but never far from the village.

The construction of *sālā-samnak* is an old tradition in Cambodia. This tradition became even more important when King Jayavarma VII (c. 1122–1218) came to power. According to one of our interviewees, Ang Choulean, a Khmer anthropologist and a professor of historical anthropology at the Royal University of Fine Arts based in Phnom Penh, the idea of building a resting house in the Khmer Empire might have existed even before the reign of King Jayavarma VII; however, its implementation was scattered and unsystematic. King Jayavarma VII was the one who put it into state policy and made it more systematic based on the principles of Buddhism. From the verses 122-126 of the inscriptions on Preah Khan stele dated from 1191 CE, we learn that the King built 121 *sālā-samnaks* on the main roads leading from the Angkor capital, Yasodharapura, to distant areas. There were 57 rest houses with fire as staging posts along the road from Yasodharapura to the city of Campā, which is now located in Vietnam; and

17 rest houses along the road from Yasodharapura to Vimāyapura, which is now located in north-east Thailand (Maxwell, 2007, pp. 84-5).

Finot (1925, pp. 421-2) used another Sanskrit word, 'dharmasālā,' to interpret these structures since he considered the highways as pilgrimage routes and the buildings beside them as religious hostels. He noted that the reason for considering them *dharmasālās* is the presence of Lokeśvara Bodhisattva, which offers protection against dangers such as brigands, elephants, snakes, and wild beasts. Although the term 'dharmasālā' doesn't appear in the Preah Khan inscription, it has since become widely used to refer to these rest houses. In a first-hand account of Khmer civilization written by a Chinese envoy who resided in Angkor for a year between 1296-1297, the Khmer referred to these resting places as *'sen-mu'* (Khmer, *samnak)* (Chou, 1992, p. 65).

In the practice of performing generosity, providing a free *sālā-samnak* to travelers and passersby is an expression of collective hospitality and generosity. More importantly, this is a grassroots initiative by the people to give back to the community. In some cases, *sālā-samnak* is interchangeably called *sālā-bun* (a merit-making hall) for a slightly additional function and purpose.

The main purpose of *sālā-bun* is to offer a nearby location for the elderly members to conduct meritorious activities in their Buddhist communities. Apart from merit-making activities, *sālā-bun* serves as a community gathering place for traditional festivals, especially for the 'village festival' that takes place after the harvest. Although *sālā-bun* is primarily a Buddhist ceremonial place, it also offers a free resting place for travelers and passersby. Due to this, *sālā-bun* is sometimes referred to as *sālā-chortean,* which means the hall where six items are donated. The *sālā-chortean* contains six items that travelers and passerby can use for free: a sleeping place, a water jar, a toilet, a mosquito net with mattress, pillows, and traditional medicine.

In most cases, *sālā-buns* are built for those who live far from Buddhist temples to make it easier for them to visit and perform meritorious deeds in their community. In the community, whenever there is a Buddhist festival, the monks in the nearby pagodas are always invited to participate. Building *sālā-bun* in the communities has made it easier for the elderly, most of whom find it difficult to travel to the temples.

We interviewed Ian Oeun, 76, who donated his land to build a *sālā-bun* in Moung Russey District, Battambang Province, Cambodia. He explained that since the Buddhist temple was too far from where he lived, making it difficult for the elderly to perform traditional Buddhist ceremonies, he and the people in his community decided to build a *sālā-bun*. He explained that he was inspired to donate his land for the benefit of his community after listening to a Buddhist

monk preaching about charitable acts; particularly the Jataka story of a man named Magha performing public services by constructing roads and rest houses for the public. Oeun emphasizes that even though he is the land donor for the *sālā-bun,* all community members financially contributed to its construction. Therefore, he states that this *sālā-bun* is not exclusively his property but belongs to the community. Community members have an equal right to manage and use it according to their needs.

According to one of our interviewees, Venerable Nhory San, the abbot of Wat Chork Thom monastery in Moung Ruessei District, Battambang Province, Cambodia, the *sālā-bun* has played a significant role in serving the public interest in the Buddhist community. He explains that the *sālā-bun* has made it possible for the elderly to perform charitable activities without traveling long distances to the pagoda. He also noted that the role of the *sālā-bun* has changed significantly over time, with fewer travelers and passersby nowadays. However, it has become a place for offering alms and performing meritorious deeds following Buddhism.

In other communities, the *sālā-bun* serves not only as a place for Buddhist ceremonies but also as a means to reduce poverty. In our interview with Tung Da, a representative of the *sālā-bun* in the Chork Thom community in Moung Russey district, he told us that the *sālā-bun* in his community had established a fund to support the elderly, including paying for medical treatment and providing loans at a low-interest rate to its members. Most of the fund's income comes from renting community equipment at the lowest possible prices and partly from fundraising. All funds derived from equipment leasing and fundraising are managed directly by community members without interference from public or private institutions.

Discussion

The relationship between religion and society has long been a subject of profound interest and significance, as noted by scholars like Ongaro and Tantardini (2023a, 2023b). The influence of religion in the public realm has shaped societies, norms, and power structures throughout history. One particular religious tradition that has gathered significant attention is Buddhism. Its uniqueness as a world religion, as highlighted by Habermas (Habermas, 2019; Foshay, 2009; San, Drechsler, & Shakya, 2023), extends beyond the spiritual and philosophical aspects.

Buddhism refers to how one should lead their life, avoiding causing harm to oneself, those around them, and society at large. The fundamental principles of interconnectedness, compassion, moderation, and simplicity, believed to be the

pathway towards a rightful and sustainable life, are incorporated into the public sphere and people's daily lives. Hence, this ethical approach also reflects in the ways the Buddhist community organises, makes decisions and manages resources.

Informed by the case of Cambodia, this interaction between religion and society is manifested through the relationship between the *saṅgha* and the lay community in their daily practices. The *wat* and *sālā-samnak* serve as platforms to facilitate these interactions. The *saṅgha* as an institution and its symbiotic relationship with the laity, the *wat* as a communal space dedicated to spiritual activities, and the *sālā-samnak* as a community space for secular activities, are primarily purposed to serve the common good anchored in Buddhist ethics.

From a different perspective, the aforementioned examples demonstrate how religion and spirituality manifest within the public realm as a commons, given that equity, inclusion, reciprocity and sharing are essential to their operation and sustenance. Furthermore, considering the ontological dimension of the commons as a mode of human existence that is mindful of individual, collective and planetary well-being, the emergence of Buddhist commons is a natural outcome. Put differently, Buddhist commons illustrate how Buddhism and the commons align, both from an organizational and ontological point of view, premised upon a mutual ethical framework and purpose.

The discussion on Buddhist commons is an opportunity to challenge the hegemony of the Western worldview; as it is boldly expressed through mainstream economics and the cultivation of a global monoculture promoting individualistic and antagonistic ways of living. Contrastingly, Buddhist commons demonstrates the dynamic character of the commons as a living system that can adapt in diverse contexts, not tied to a unilateral one-size-fits-all model. Moreover, shows an effective and timeless alternative of a socio-economic paradigm in practice.

Despite living in a society dominated by the market economy, Buddhist communities are still able to organize their institutions in a commons-based manner, framed by principles that transcend individualistic self-interest. These principles have served the needs of local people and kept their institutions functioning for centuries. Therefore, assuming that prerequisite of the social well-being is a growth-oriented economy driven by self-interest, profit-maximization and resource exploitation, in accordance with the global-Western trajectory, despite its deep consequences, is debatable.

On the contrary, the core idea of interconnectedness, interdependence, or "interbeing" (Hanh, 1991), as it pertains to both Buddhism and the commons, addresses the vulnerability of human existence and how much we depend on

each other and nature. Rooted in the theory of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, i.e., "dependent origination" or "dependent co-arising", Buddhism teaches that all things arise in dependence upon other things; aligned with the principle of *karma*, which emphasizes that every action carries consequences. The idea of interbeing emphasizes that building our lives on ecosystem destruction and the suffering of others will only cause further suffering. But, also brings forward the potential of collective action and compassion towards all things for leading a healthy life, serving the common good and building sustainable futures.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we explored the relationship between Buddhism and the commons, informed by examples of the practices of the Buddhist *saṅgha* and lay community in Cambodia. The inquiry delved into the influence of Buddhism in public affairs, despite the common perception of it as an apolitical tradition (Weber, 1988). In this direction, we explored its influence on society, governance mechanisms, and resource management, looking beyond its spiritual and philosophical dimensions. Additionally, we underscored the ontological dimension of the commons, transcending the realms of politics, economics, and public policy.

Through the discussion on Buddhist commons, we emphasised the contextuality and adaptability of the commons as a social system of governance and co-management of resources. Furthermore, we pointed out that its ethical foundations are grounded in the ethos of interconnectedness, aiming for human and non-human well-being on individual, collective and planetary levels. In this sense, we posed that the commons is compatible with the fundamental Buddhist principles, and, hence, has naturally emerged within the Buddhist society.

Overall, Buddhist commons exemplify the conjunction between the spiritual and the secular in the public realm. Moreover, they provide a unique and practiced alternative of a socio-economic trajectory, challenging the ontological foundations of the dominant global-Western paradigm. Ultimately, Buddhist commons demonstrate the timeless potential of the commons to foster social and planetary harmony.

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