

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela¹ and the Preservation of the Lao Cultural Heritage

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Biography of Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela – also known as Sathu Nyai Khamchan, Sathu Nyai² Vat Saen or Pha Khamchan – was born under the name of Khamchan Virachit on 23 September 1920 (BE 2463) at Ban Lakkham village (present-day Ban Vat Saen village) in Luang Prabang, Laos. He came from a noble family of devout Buddhists. His grandfather, Achan Thongdi (1862–1926) had the rank of Chao Phaya Luang Mueangchan³ and was a privy counselor at the royal court. At that time, Somdet Pha Chao Sisavang Vong (1885–1959) was king of the Lao Kingdom of Luang Prabang, which had been a French protectorate since 1893.

Khamchan Virachit was the youngest of five children of Mr. Thit Khamtan (*Phia Muexa*) from Ban Aphay and Mrs. Khamonsi (1890–1925) from Ban Lakkham village. Unfortunately, his mother died when he was only four years old. In 1927, at the age of seven, he entered primary school in Luang Prabang where he was educated bilingually in Lao and French. During school vacations, his grandmother, Mrs. Khamsuk (1863–1943), sent him to Vat Saen Sukharam, the monastery of their city quarter, as a temple boy. Thus he became a disciple of Pha Kaenchan Katchayana (Kaccāñāna) Maha Thela (1893–1943), abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam. From him he learned the traditional Lao Buddhist and monastic ways of life. He served his master, Pha Kaenchan Katchayana Maha Thela, by boiling water for drinking and by cleaning his abode (Lao: *kuti*) and other places in the monastery. He also learned to read and write the Tham-Lao script (Lao: *tua aksòn tham lao*) from his master and from his brother, Khamphan Virachit (1914–1995), who was a novice at Vat Pa Fang. Thus, he was able to read and write the Tham-Lao script from an early age on. Since he was a clever and serious boy, his master loved him as his foster

¹ Note: In Lao (as well as in Thai and Cambodian) Buddhism, honorific titles are used for monks, such as *pha* and *thela*. *Pha* derives from *brah*, which is pronounced *phra* in Thai and derives from Pali: *vara* (meaning “supreme, splendid”). *Thela*, pronounced “*thera*” in Thai, derives from Pali: *thera* (meaning “elder”), whereas Thai, at least in its written form, preserves the consonant /r/ and the consonant cluster /phr/. In Lao /r/ is transformed into /l/ in all Pali and Sanskrit derived words, while the consonant cluster /phr/ is reduced to /ph/. This phonetic feature of modern Lao explains the spelling and pronunciation of the two terms discussed above.

² *Sathu* (Pali: *sādhū*: good, good man, holy man), local honorary title used to refer to or address a Buddhist monk who has once passed the *thelaphisek* ceremony. Before passing the *thelaphisek*, he is commonly called *chao mom* or *pha*. The title *nyai* (Lao: *nyai*: great, big) is an honorary title awarded to monks ordained for over twenty years. Therefore, the title *sathu nyai* is used for a senior monk who has been a monk for more than twenty years. *Thelaphisek* (Pali *therabhiseka*) come from the combination of two terms: *Thela* (Pali: *thera*) means elder, is generally used for a monk who has ordained more than ten years (Lao: *phansa*); *Abhiseka* means “anointing, consecration, or inauguration” of sacred persons and objects, comparable to *puja*, *yagya* and *arati* which denote a devotional activity, an enacted prayer, a rite of passage and/or a religious rite or ritual. A *thelaphisek* ceremony is a devotional ceremony particular to Luang Prabang, where lustral water is poured over the honored monk, and subsequently, offering him new robes. This ceremony is conducted by Buddhists to honour monks they consider especially worthy of respect. In ancient Lao tradition, this ceremony was also held for a monk who received an advanced monk’s title. The six ranks are: Pha Samdet, Pha Xa (Sa), Pha Khu, Pha Lak Kham, Pha Luk Kaeo, and Pha Yòt Kaeo (the title for the Supreme Patriarch).

³ Chao Phaya Luang Müang Chan was the rank title of the “left chief official” in the civilian rule of the Kingdom of Laos. It was appointed by the king. The Chao Phaya Luang Müang Chan was in charge of the country’s military. This position had been established in the seventeenth century during the reign of King Suriyavongsa Dhammikarat (Buisisavat 1993) and existed until the Kingdom of Laos formed its government in 1945. The title *chao phaya* (dignity) was used for state officials from the royal family. Even though he was a commoner, this title was awarded to him.

child. In 1932, he was ordained as a novice at Vat Saen Sukharam for two and a half months during his school vacations.

In 1934, he was again ordained as a novice at Vat Saen Sukharam in a ceremony presided over by his master, Pha Kaenchan Katchayana Maha Thela. He stayed there for some time and then moved to Vat Pa Fang where his brother was, novice Khamphan. There he studied the Dhamma, i.e., the teachings of the Buddha, and Pali, the sacred language of the Theravada Buddhist canon. In 1936, he was sent to Vat Benchamabòphit in Bangkok, Thailand, to study *pha pariyattitham* (the Buddhist scriptures based on the Dhamma). He finished *nak tham tho* (the second of three levels of the Dhamma studies) and Pali grammar (the second of nine levels of Pali studies). In 1937, he returned to Luang Prabang where he disrobed to work in his family's business.

According to Lao tradition, a man who has completed the age of twenty should be ordained as a Buddhist monk and stay in the monastery for some time to learn and practice the Buddhist teachings and Lao traditions. Monkhood is believed to be an expression of gratitude to his parents, particularly to the monk's mother who gave birth to him and nourished him. Lao tradition regards a man who was ordained as a monk as a *khon suk* (trained person), while a man who never ordained is referred to as a *khon dip* (untrained person).⁴ Khamchan Virachit was ordained as a monk at the age of twenty-one on 9 June 1941 at Vat Saen Sukharam, together with his cousin, Khamphay Buppha (1917–2009), who became a deputy Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lao PDR after the Lao revolution (1975) and held this position until 1982. They were ordained by Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Thammayana (Dhammañana) Maha Thela (Bunthan Bupphalat, 1892–1984), the Supreme Patriarch of Laos, from Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, who was also his preceptor (Pali: *upajjhāya*). Khamchan Virachit was bestowed with the Buddhist epithet “*virachitto* (*vīracitto*)”, which literally means “a person whose mind is full of perseverance and courage”. After ordaining he stayed with his master at Vat Saen Sukharam for some time before moving to Vat Pa Fang to join his brother in furthering his studies in the Buddhist discipline, the *sutta*, the *pātimokkha*, and the chanting of the Vessantara Jataka.

Initially, he thought that he would live as a monk for just one year, and then disrobe to work in his family's business which was going very well. However, when he studied and practiced the Buddhist teachings and followed his preceptor, the Supreme Patriarch, to practice Vipassana meditation in forest retreats and participated in the Sangha's activities, he abandoned the idea of disrobing. He moved back to Vat Saen Sukharam after his early Buddhist master, Pha Kaenchan Katchayana Maha Thela, had passed away in 1943 and was appointed as abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam in 1949. In 1954, he was appointed as ecclesiastical provincial head of Luang Prabang by King Sisavang Vong. Thereafter, he played a key role in the Sangha administration of Luang Prabang by re-establishing the monastic routines (Pali: *kiccāvata*) which the monks and novices must follow, and by developing the Buddhist education of the province by setting up Pali schools in the remote rural districts surrounding Luang Prabang, such as Müang Xiang Ngoen, Müang Nan, Müang Hun and Müang Xay (Udomxay). He participated in the proceedings of the second session of the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana (the Sixth Great Buddhist Council) and the Third Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and in Rangoon, Burma, in 1954, and the celebrations of the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in 1956. As head of the Sangha of Luang Prabang province, in 1957, he was strongly involved in the publication of parts of the Pali canon (Tipitaka) in the Lao variant of the Dhamma script (Tham-Lao). In 1959, he received the honorary title “Pha

⁴ *Khon*: man, person; *dip*: raw; and *suk*: ripe. *Khon suk* stands for a man who is trained in Buddhist teachings and learned monastic Lao traditions. It is believed that a *khon suk* can distinguish between good and bad. He is said to be docile and is compared to a piece of clay which can be molded into any form.

Lakkham Viravisutthikhun”⁵ from the king, and in 2002 he was bestowed the honorary title “Agga Māha Sat Dhamma Joti-kadhaja”⁶ by the Sangha and government of the Union of Myanmar (Burma). This title is only offered to senior monks who are considered outstanding in religious practices and Buddhist studies.

After the Lao revolution of 1975, the administrative system of the Lao Sangha was automatically abolished along with the royalist regime. In 1976, the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO) was established in Vientiane; Pha Khamchan was elected by the provincial Sangha of Luang Prabang as their leader and appointed chairman of the LBFO of Luang Prabang province, a position he maintained until his death on 9 July 2007. Since the 1990s, the country has been opened to the outside world, and in 1995, Luang Prabang was named world heritage site by the UNESCO. Pha Khamchan was a central figure in the organization of the related Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. He not only lead the Sangha and lay community in the organization of these events, but also counseled state officials seeking advice on the organization of Lao festivals in accordance with ancient Lao tradition, because he was often the only person with knowledge of certain traditions.

After his death, the large collections of manuscripts, photographs, documents and art objects which Pha Khamchan had assembled and kept in his monastic abode were protected and registered by the provincial government and the Sangha of Luang Prabang. Two committees were set up for taking care of them. The first committee is called Committee for Checking Money, Gold and Valuable Objects of Pha Khamchan (Governor of Luang Prabang 2007a). This committee was established one month after his death to sift through and register his collections. The second committee is called Committee for Safeguarding and Protecting Money, Gold and Valuable Objects of Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela, Vat Saen Sukharam (Governor of Luang Prabang 2007b). This committee is presided over by the chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of Luang Prabang province and is still active.

⁵ *Lakkham* means “gold post”, but in this context was the title for a monk who was the ecclesiastical provincial head. *Viravisutthikhun* means “a person whose mind is full of goodness, purity and courage”.

⁶ Literal meaning: “person who greatly displays the prosperity of the *saddhamma* (true doctrine)”. In 2014, the Burmese Sangha offered this honorary title to another Lao senior monk, Pha Achan Vet Masenai, abbot of Vat Sisaket, a deputy chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization in Vientiane.