Manuscripts and Education
in Northern Thailand and Laos (1569-1920)[1]

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Nissaya, *vohāra* and *nāmasadda* pedagogical genres reflect modes of thought, pedagogical techniques, and commentarial practices specific to a place and given time. These manuscripts have also influenced the way knowledge is assessed, organized, and written about in the modern period. An educational history based on methods and modal entities will emerge through a study of pedagogical manuscripts[3]. These texts cannot be placed into neat categories. They must be seen as particular moments in a history of articulations of Buddhism. They do not describe Buddhist thought systematically. They do not clearly represent a Buddhist episteme or a commentarial tradition. Instead they evince the ways local agents were reaching back and reaching towards Buddhism.

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[3] White, *Metahistory*, 1973.

Over the past six years, I have examined hundreds of *nissaya, vohāra*, and *nāmasadda* manuscripts in detail. Each manuscript I read is important not only for its content, but also as an socio-archaeological object that gives us clues to its socio-pedagogical context; namely, how it was composed, taught, copied, stored, initiated, and concluded. After reading a number of individual manuscripts I saw certain shared pedagogical methods, commentarial services and physical features. I came to see these individual texts not only important as idiosyncratic articulations, but as modal entities which help us define the content of the local curriculum and pedagogical techniques. Over time, these modal entities can be seen as defining the contours of the epistemic mode - the way this genre of texts influenced major trends in producing and teaching information. Seeing the individual text, the modal entity, and the epistemic mode together, we can trace the social history of the manuscript. This is small work. These are puzzle pieces. What do these manuscripts teach us? Simply put, they show us that Lao and Northern Thai teachers were not primarily concerned with transmitting whole canonical Pāli Buddhist texts, but drew Pāli terms and phrases from a wide selection of canonical and extra-canonical texts in order to teach their own idea of Buddhism. Instead of transmitting an integral and received tradition, they took bits and pieces of the received tradition in service of their own local rituals, ethics, and social concerns.

This selective appropriation and re-application of Pāli is characteristic of Buddhist communities across Southeast Asia. In order to understand the role of the individual intellectual agent in the region, it is necessary to understand the processes that guide, but not govern, the use of texts and language. Each teacher and student at a monastic school in seventeenth century Phrae or twenty-first century Luang Phrabang has brought his or her voice to the translocal text in hand. This detailed examination reveals what Bakhtin referred to as heteroglossia. Heteroglossia "implies dialogic interaction in which the prestige languages [Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic, Javanese, Classical Malay, Mon, Royal Thai, French, Russian, Dutch, etc.] try to extend their control and subordinated languages, try to avoid, negotiate, or subvert that control. 'Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely

and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions... expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.'" Bakhtin emphasizes that all discourse "lives on the boundary between its own context and another, alien context. Each and every time it is uttered, a word is recontextualized, pulled in a slightly different direction, imbued with a different inflection... The [classical, translocal] word enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in an out of complex inter-relationships, merges with some, recoils from others."[4]

The study of pedagogy and curricular history below reveals this process of heteroglossia. It returns history to individual teachers and students who shaped Buddhist thought and practice in constant negotiation with the confines of the languages and pedagogical methods into which they were born. Or as Ernst Gombrich put it, "the language reacts back on the speaker." Language and the modes in which it is expressed always have a "creative share" with the individual motivations of the author[5]. Studying a curriculum means studying the way inherited language, pedagogical method, and epistemological attitude play together with shifting socio-economic and political contexts and individual intentions.

Nissaya, *vohāra* and *nāmasadda* are idiosyncratic lecture and sermon notes structured around the selected translation of words and passages from individually chosen canonical and extra-canonical Pāli texts. However, these pedagogical manuscripts while reflecting idiosyncratic translations and commentaries of individually selected Pāli source texts, are preserved in monastic libraries and may have been used by multiple teachers over time. The intention of the text is not the sole property of the original composer. It is spread across all the teachers who use texts and notes over time. And since these are lecture notes based on older, mostly Pāli, texts, the intention is spread across hundreds of teachers over many centuries. It may seem strange to use someone else's individually crafted lecture or sermon notes, but in a culture that places a high value of the physical

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entity of a manuscript and the skill of a Pāli translator, and the relationship between student and teacher, every effort was made to preserve manuscripts. Even today in Laos and Thailand the same value of preservation and protection is seen for printed books. Children are taught from a young age in both countries that they should never place a book on a floor or physically mistreat printed material. Furthermore, in pre-modern Northern Thailand and Laos the literacy rate, especially in classical languages, was low. Therefore, manuscripts of idiosyncratic lecture notes, composed by literate monks, in a mixture of vernacular and Pāli languages were valuable because they were palm-leaf manuscripts, difficult and expensive to produce, "owned" by monks, and to many people they contained *de facto* the words of the Buddha[6]. The way manuscripts were stored, bound, titled, and anthologized shows that many monastic and lay archivists were either unable to read the script or language of the manuscripts or sometimes were concerned more with their value as objects than with their content[7]. This, of course, does not mean that content was unimportant; it just is not the only important aspect of a manuscript. The fact that there were genres of pedagogical manuscripts in both vernacular and Pāli shows a deep creative engagement with content and an understanding that individual teachers were not simply faithful stewards, but also creative interpreters, of the Buddha's words.

Describing these texts as idiosyncratic should not convey the idea that these pedagogical texts were completely individual reflections. These texts can be grouped into a genre based on certain common traits. First, because they are notes and glosses based on source texts, their authors were controlled in some ways by the source texts and languages that they drew from. While two manuscripts of a *Dhammapada Nissaya*, for example, composed by different authors can be very different, because of their shared source text, they will have certain similarities[8]. Second, the methods

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[6] *Bond, The Word of the Buddha*, 1975: 402-413.

[7] Pāli is often called a prestige language. See Reid, *Charting the Shape of Modern Southeast Asia*, 11; Lieberman, "Was the Seventeenth Century a Watershed," 242; Collins, *Nirvana*, 47; von Hinüber, *Untersuchungen zur Mündlichkeit früher mittelindischer Texte der Buddhisten*, 1994: 198-232. The importance of the exact pronunciation of Pāli in ordination ceremonies is well known, 1988.

[8] LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 1983; Todorov, Les genres du discours, 1978; Cesare Segre, *Introduction to the Analysis of the Literary Text*, translated John Meddemmen, 1988; Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre*, 1994; Duff, *Modern Genre Theory*, 2000.

of glossing and the commentarial services of nissaya, *vohāra*, and *nāmasadda* authors are similar. Third, since their function was to serve as notes to be used by a teacher or preacher, they must use common terms, tropes, and metaphors that are familiar to their respective audiences. Even though these manuscripts are an individual teacher's reflections on source texts they were also useful for other teachers and readers besides the original author (just as graduate students often use the lecture notes of their advisors when teaching a course and adapt them according to their own background and preferences). Also, lectures and sermons work because there are certain shared assumptions held by the audience and the speaker[9]. Working with these general assumptions, a later teacher could read these lecture notes and use them as a guide for composing his own. Pedagogical manuscripts are idiosyncratic, but general and useful to others besides the author or teacher.[10]

In this study "lecture" will refer to the lesson a monastic teacher delivers to monastic students in a classroom setting. "Sermons" are like lectures, but designed to be delivered to a broader audience including the laity. The differences between the terms "homily" and "sermon" are more complicated. These differences can be profitably applied to didactic traditions in Laos and Northern Thailand. In the European tradition, homilies differ from sermons in two ways. First, homilies are given in liturgical and ritual contexts, while sermons can be ad hoc, secular, and initiated without having a ritual, calendrical, festal, solemn, catechetical, or liturgical

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[9]   While some *nissayas* and *nāmasaddas*, especially narrative *nissayas*, were specific triggers to general topics for a general audience, they were most often the basic texts of the serious monastic students' curriculum. However, *vohāras* were, and are, used as sermon notes on more general topics to both lay and monastic audiences. Audiences for *vohāras* would have been (and are today) mostly serious lay audiences sitting at public sermons. *Nissaya* and *nāmasadda* audience were more likely to be monks and novices in private classes.

[10] George Steiner describes each translator as having her/his own "private thesaurus...part of his subconscious, of his memories so far as they may be verbalized, and of the singular irreducibly specific ensemble of his somatic and psychological identity." Steiner, *After Babel*, 1992: 47.

occasion.[11]   Second, homilies are exegetical, while sermons can be given without reference to a passage of holy scripture. Modern English usage of these terms erased these two distinctions beginning in the seventeenth century. The distinction between the ritual locus and exegetical function of homilies and the *ex tempore*, non-ritual, and often secular character of sermons remains today among Catholics and Protestants. While a Baptist or a Lutheran "sermon" is the primary reason for a community gathering on Sunday, the Catholic "homily" is always embedded in ritual, and is certainly secondary (it is the only major section of the Catholic mass that is optional and is often removed in daily morning masses) to the transformative function of the formulaic ritual ceremony. Protestants go to the sermon hall or church to hear a sermon. A Catholic goes to mass where they may hear a homily as one part of the formal liturgy.

Following this lexical distinction, Lao and Northern Thai pedagogical texts, both in the pre-modern and modern periods, should properly be referred to as sermonesque. Creative didactic, often ethical, and occasionally political, sermons are common in the region. Sermons are given in a variety of contexts and styles. Most commonly a monk will offer a sermon, although this is never required as a duty, on *wan phra* (often referred to as the "Buddhist sabbath," occurring four times a month according to the phases of the moon). Here, the preacher begins by prostrating three times to

11 Cunningham, *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics* (Leiden: Brill 1998): 7-9; Jean Hamasse and X. Hermand, eds., *De l'homélie au sermon, histoire de la préducation médiévale*, in Actes du colloque international de Louvain-la-Neuve (9-11 juillet 1992) (Louvain-la-Neuve: Publications de l'Institut d'Etudes Médiévales, Textes, Etudes, Congrès, 14, 1993); Franco Mormando, *Überlieferung und Bestand des hagiographischen und homiletischen Literatur der grieschischen Kirche von den Anfangen bis zum Ebde des 16.Jahrhunderts*, 3 vols (Leipzig: Texte und Untersuchungen 50-2 (1937-52), rpr. 1999); Cynthia Polecritti *Preaching peace in Renaissance Italy* (Washington DC: Catholic University press, 2000) describe homiletic practice as limited to formal settings, most often a within a Eucharistic Liturgy at the end of the Liturgy of the Word (as distinguished from the Liturgy of the Eucharist in a standard Roman Catholic mass), and involved the exegesis of that liturgy's first (Old Testament) second (Epistle of St. Paul) and Gospel readings. This exegetical homily could be panegyric, catechetical, etymological, ethical, or even political, but was bound to the explanation, loosely referential or strictly literal, of the scripture read during the "liturgy of the word" section of the ritual mass. Today this remains the only idiosyncratic, mutable part of the Catholic mass. It is the only part of the mass, in which the priest speaks non-formulaically and can use direct speech. Furthermore, the priest has the choice of using multiple rhetorical techniques including anaphora, antithesis, repetition, diatribe, syncrisis, prosopopoeia, proem, etymology, or narrative digression. See McDaniel, "A Lao Homily?" *Etudes thématiques Lao* (forthcoming).

the image of the Buddha and to any senior monk in attendance, then gives a short benediction in Pāli of his choosing, perhaps followed by one or a selection of short Pāli and occasionally vernacular recitation, and then immediately offers a sermon that does not directly relate to any specific passage of scripture.

After the sermon, often a popular Buddhist narrative about an ethical question, or social issue, the preacher offers a short final benediction. The congregation is free to enter and leave as they please, and the preacher is not controlled by any external time restraints or ritual necessities. These sermons are not connected with the heavily ritualistic duties of the monk, such as conducting a funeral, reciting the *pātimokkha* during the *uposatha* ceremony, and morning and evening recitations (Lao: *tham vat xao, tham vat yen*). Sermons are an optional part of the monastic calendar. There are certainly formal aesthetic requirements, such as the prostration and the wearing of the saṅghāṭi (formal folded shoulder robe), but generally, the sermon is not part of standard Lao and Northern Thai Buddhist monastic rituals.

Furthermore, sermons do not need to be exegetical. The Pāli benediction and the selection of Pāli recitations chosen by the preacher are rarely mentioned or referred to in the sermon. Sermons define and explain Pāli words drawn from canonical and non-canonical texts. They also often summarize Pāli narratives and philosophical or ethical tracts found in the Pāli canon and commentaries. However, these texts do not have to be formally recited before the sermon or directly referred to in a literal and sequential manner. There is usually a disconnect between the sermon subject and the Pāli liturgy and sermons are not a part of daily Buddhist liturgies, indeed from my observations at some rural monasteries there are almost never any formal sermons today and we can assume safely that this was the case in the pre-modern period.

That said, research among the vast manuscript archives in Laos and Northern Thailand, reveals examples of that we can call "homilies." The *Nissaya*, *vohāra* and *nāmasadda* manuscripts that were based on Pāli ritual texts, like *Kammavācās, Parittas*, and even many *Abhidhamma* texts, demonstrate that there was a popular form of literature that was used as written guides to oral homilies - meaning

sermons that were given on ritual occasions and involved the exegesis and glossing of Pāli texts that related directly to the ritual in question. They work by drawing selected passages and terms from canonical and non-canonical Pāli source texts and explaining the semantic meaning, grammatical features, ethical import, and social context of the source according to their own political and social needs.

In this study, the terms "translation" or "gloss" are also troublesome. *Nissaya*, *vohāra* and *nāmasadda* lie somewhere between vernacular and classical texts. The authors of these pedagogical texts took Pāli source texts (although occasionally the source is locally produced), either physically present or in mind, and drew words and passages from the source for glossing. Sometimes these glosses are expansive and the author comments on the grammar, secondary and tertiary meanings of the term, or compares them to other known Pāli terms. *Nissayas*, etc., are rarely, if ever, close/literal translations of the classical source. They also do not translate the entire source. Most often, only selected words and short passages are selected and others are ignored. In this way, "invocation" is a better term in these instances than "translate." The vernacular and the Pāli play together on the leaves of a *nissaya* manuscript. Often vernacular words are glossed with Pāli terms not found in the invoked classical source. Like Dante's notion of Italian as the *vulgari eloquentia* that was more *illustris* (in the sense of illuminating) as a language for communicating with the masses, pedagogical manuscripts break down the notion of translation from classical into vernacular and undermine the inviolability and supremacy of Pāli.[12] The vernacular and the classical may better be seen as two octaves in the same musical score than a source text in a classical language and a secondary (i.e. once removed and less accurate and valid than the source) vernacular translation.

It would be prudent to elaborate on the way these authors understood language in general. *Nissaya, vohāra, and nāmasadda* authors could be classed as modist linguists or modistae. The modistae was a school of twelfth-to fourteenth-century European linguists who held the notion that "a word, once it has been imposed to

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[12] Eco, Serendipities, 2002: 30-31.

signify, carries with it all of its syntactical modes, or possible combinations with other words...words themselves are the product of a primary act of imposition by which a particular utterance is connected with some thing or property of a thing"... the word carries its *modi significanti* through a second act of imposition encoding all of the general syntactical roles it can play in connection with other words and expressions." There seems to be no question in the minds of Lao and Northern Thai authors that it was possible to gloss Pāli words and that there was a universal grammar that existed between the two languages. The source was open to manipulation, alteration, insertion, and expansion.[13] Everything that could be said in Pāli could be rendered in Lao or Northern Thai. This should not suggest that Pāli was or is seen as identical in status to the vernacular. In fact, the mere knowledge of Pāli terms and the ability to memorize, translate, and explain Pāli words is a mark of great prestige in the region. Pāli is understood locally as the language of the Buddha himself and holds certain powers in magical rites and religious rituals. Moreover, despite the fact that authors of pedagogical manuscripts believed that they could directly translate Pāli words without loss of meaning, some Pāli terms were given much more than a direct gloss. The expanded glosses and comments edified the audience, displayed the skill of the author, and provided a platform from which to offer a lecture on more general subjects. However, at the most basic level, our authors saw languages as translatable and understandable across grammatical and geographical barriers.

Nissaya, *vohāra* and *nāmasadda* reveal a tendency to invoke the whole of Buddhist source texts, but they only teach individual parts. Often, the source text is reduced to a title, like *Sattaparitta, Mūlakaccāyana, Mahāvagga*, etc., and a few passages or terms. The source text is not present in the *nissaya*, *nāmasadda*, or *vohāra*, it is neither accurately conveyed nor systematically addressed. The idea of the whole source text is invoked, but only a few of its parts are translated and taught. For Lao and Northern Thai monks Pāli texts were often things of reverence, prestige, wisdom, and beauty. The composers cite the first line of a source (often inaccurately, according to scholarly critical editions, which themselves are often inaccurate) and then move on to focus on

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[13] Ibid., *introduction*.

individual terms or phrases from one part of the source. These were triggers to help the audience and the teacher either remember parts of the text or to usher in a certain explanation based on the definition and commentary on that particular word or phrase. The idea of the whole text was invoked by these triggers and sustained by a selection of terms according to the needs of the teacher. However, the whole was rarely translated. The *nissayas*, *vohāras*, and *nāmasaddas* served as a detailed outline to a lecture or a sermon expanded upon in performance. Understanding they way these pedagogical genres work forces us to see vernaculars, not as a linear descendent of the classical, but hybrids that, in Bahktin's words, "interanimate" each other.[14] This approach will hopefully breathe new life into the lumbering debate between those who see the cultures of Buddhist Southeast Asia as either inextricably "Indianized" or deceptively autonomous.

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14 As cited in Allen White, Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing: collected essays and autobiography, 145.

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