



The Belief and Practice of Dāna in Khmer Traditional Ceremonies

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the Belief and Practice of Dāna of Khmer People through their traditional ceremonies and to study generally the concepts and significance of Dāna of Khmer People as well as the general practice dāna of them in Chol Chnam Thmay Ceremony (Khmer New Year) and Bun Phchum Bind Saen Donta Ceremony (gratitude to ancestors), and showing about the methods practice dāna that have a lot of important benefits of Khmer people in the occasion of traditional ceremonies and relation with Theravāda Buddhism.

Keywords: Belief, Practice, Dāna

Introduction

Khmer people has Tradition the same with another nationality in Southeast Asia like Thai, Laotian and Burmese, Khmer people always celebrate their traditional ceremonies every year with the purpose to conserve the culture heritage for next generation and taking this occasion to make Dana and dedicate the merits to their ancestors follow Buddhist way. Khmer traditional culture will show evidence when The New Year of Khmer people coming they celebrate Chol Chnam Thmay “Khmer New Year”, when the middle-year or fifteen days before closing Retreat of Buddhist monks in rainy season “*vassa*” they celebrate Phchum Bun Saen Donta, it has the same meaning of Thanks Giving in Western. The Belief and Practice Dana in Khmer traditional Ceremonies as follows.

1. Chol Chnam Thmay (Khmer New Year)

Chol Chnam Thmay means entering New Year of Khmer people. It is a traditional ceremony of all Khmer people who live anyplace in the world. The Khmer New Year ceremony is celebrated to delight in the achievement of the previous year with the hope to have good means to solve any problem as well as to gain the new achievement in the next year and to perform various meritorious deeds in order to dedicate merits to their ancestors according to a Buddhist perspective. Traditionally, the Khmer New Year is celebrated in Chet month of lunar calendar which is on 13th April but sometimes it falls on 14th April. The schedule of entering New Year is based on Khmer astrology known as *Mahāsankrant* which is determined by a group of Khmer Royal Astrologer who publish and broadcast officially to the public. Usually, the Khmer New Year is celebrated for three days, generally known as *Sankrant Day*, *Vanabot Day* and *Loeng Sak Day*.

The first day of New Year is called Sankrant Day. The term Sankrant means leaving from a departed point or arrival at the departed point.¹ The first day of Sankrant means a circuit of Sun at the Aries Zodiac is marked to end of the old year and to start the New Year. Thus the time of entering the Khmer New Year is set up according to the journey of the Sun that arrives at the Aries Zodiac (Mesa Rasi) gradually.² There is an important ritual of the Khmer New Year in *Sankrant* day known as Bidhi Chol Chnam Thmay the inauguration of New Year.

¹Choun Nat, Jotaññāṇo, Somdej Breah Saṅghareaj Gaṇamahānikāya, II, op. cit., p. 1237.

²Phan Suphun Chhueng, II, op. cit., p. 233.

Traditionally, the Khmer people of each family in the Southern Vietnam of Vietnam assemble in front of the shrine of Goddess at home and wait to hear the message of Inauguration of New Year through the sound of Drum and *Guang* beaten in monasteries. As soon as they hear the sound of Drums and *Guangs*, they set up a chanting ceremony to pay homage to the Triple Gem; the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* including with some Blessing Verses recitation and observing the five precepts. This religious ritual means that the inauguration of New Year is opened. In addition, people also worship and welcome the New Goddess who comes to take care of all living beings in the whole world for the period of one year. At that time everyone prays for peace, happiness, health and luck from the New Goddess and the elders, grandparents, parents sprinkle Holy Water on everyone with the blessing words *Sua Sdey Chnam Thmey!* Happy New Year! May you all be well and happy! May the Goddess of New Year bring peace, happiness, wealth, health and luck to all living beings! In this sense, the old year is over and we enter in the New Year officially.

The second day of Khmer New Year ceremony is called *Vanabot* Day. There are two kinds of wholesome deeds that the Khmer Buddhists usually perform within *Vanabot* Day. They are visiting Venerated Person and Piling Sand Mountains. The Venerated Person in this sense is refers to grandparents, parents, Buddhist Monks, teachers, relatives and friends and so on. Traditionally, they used to offer gifts to grandparents, parents, elders, and teachers when they visit them and those venerated persons in turn, warmly welcome and give them with best wishes and various exhortations during the Khmer traditional New Year ceremony. This is a good tradition that represent the gratitude between grandparents and parents with children, between students with teachers, between juniors and so on. This is also a special occasions for the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam to enjoy their traditional New Year by traveling to different villages, different cities as well as different Khmer monasteries.

Apart from visiting venerated person, many Khmer people collect sand and pile it up to be sand mountains at the monastery, such as a big and higher one in the middle and four others around and lower than the middle one. These five Sand Mountains are given the special name as *Vāluka Cetiya* (sand stupas). The materials of the *Vāluka Cetiya* construction is not only collected sand, but they are also built of mountains of rice instead of sand in some Khmer monasteries. Certainly, the building these five *Vāluka Cetiya* represent the paying homage to the relics stupas of the Buddha and the great disciples of Buddha.



Prek Pin Tong Monastery in Southern Vietnam

The significance of Sand Stupas was constructed as part of Khmer traditional New Year ceremony in one of the Khmer monasteries in Southern Vietnam. They represent that the middle one is the *Sakyamuni Cetiya* in which the relics of the Buddha are enshrined, and in the four others the relics of the great disciples of the Buddha, namely venerable Elder *Sāriputta*, venerable *Mogallāna*, venerable Ananda and venerable *Mahākassapa* are enshrined.³ People attempt to build these *Vāluka Cetiya* in order to pay homage to the relics of the Buddha and his disciples with their faith to gain merits, because they are led to do it with their pure volition such as recollecting the great virtues of the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the Sangha.

The third day of Khmer New Year ceremony is called *Loeng Sak Day* which means the day of Ascending Era of the Year. Generally, Khmer people usually go to temple in the village or in the city where they live in order to perform various meritorious deeds together on the last day of the Khmer New Year celebration. They also offer food to the Buddhist monks in the morning and request the monks to dedicate these merits to their ancestors including grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters and relatives who passed away. In the

³Phan Suphun Chhueng, II, op. cit., p. 244.

afternoon, they assemble in a main hall of the monastery to set up a chanting ceremony for paying homage to the Triple Gem, observing the five precepts and then the Ascending Era of the Year ritual is declared by the abbot of the monastery.

Another special ritual celebrated on the last day of Khmer New Year is known as “*Pidhi Srong Breah*” which means giving a bath or shower to the Buddha statues, the elder monks, grandparents and parents. This ritual can be celebrated individually at home and by the general public in the monastery. Commonly, all member of a family bathe the Buddha statue with the fragrant water at their home. Following the ritual, children and grandchildren also give bath to their grandparents and parents which is an expression of gratitude to their venerated person and apologize to their grandparents and parents for whatever they did wrong either intentionally or unintentionally in the past. The grandparents and parents in turn, out of compassion forgive them, may your improper deeds become *ahosikamma-lapse* acts. By this ritual, the children also obtain best wishes and good exhortations for the rest of the year from their grandparents and parents. In the same way, the giving bath to Buddha statues ritual is also celebrated together in their monastery. Certainly this traditional ritual is not only performed in the sense of recollecting the great virtues of the Buddha and to pay gratitude to the venerated person but also to pray for blessing of longevity, lucky, happiness and prosperity in life.



This tradition is found in a religious ritual known as giving bath or shower that existed and was adopted since the reign of the Great Khmer Emperor King *Jayavarman VII* in the 12th century C.E. until present time. During the Great Angkor period, King *Jayavarman VII* used to perform a traditional religious ceremony known as *Bidhī Snāna* (giving bath) to the Buddha Statues in *Phalagun* lunar month (March or April) yearly.⁴ To that end, 122 Buddha statues were invited from all parts of the Khmer Empire to assemble at *Prasat Breah Khan* for the bathing celebration. Among of these 122 *Statues*, 25 Buddha statues named *Jaya Buddha Mahāneath* that resided in 25 different main cities were believed to have supreme power to govern the people and all living beings for happiness and prosperity. Based on such belief, the Bathing Buddha Statues Ritual is celebrated to recollect the great virtues of the Triple Gem, to pay gratitude to grandparents and parents and to pray for the power of the Triple Gem, the power virtues of the grandparents and parents and the power of all Deities in the whole world to protect all living beings for the happiness and prosperity and to be free from all kinds of dangers and dreads in the whole life.

Another Buddhist activity of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, they go to the temple to offer food to Buddhist monks and listen *Dhamma* talk for three days at Khmer New Year. Traditionally, all Khmer Buddhist monks in each temple deliver *Dhamma* talk one by one with their traditional ancient style for three days of Khmer New Year.

Summary, the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam usually assemble in the monastery to perform various meritorious deeds together during three days of Chól Chnam Thmey ceremony. The significant of the Khmer New Year celebrated to delight with the achievements of the previous year and take them as experiences and lessons to apply for life in the New Year. The most important thing is that the celebration attempt to develop unity and good attitude towards each other in their community.

2. Bun Phchum Bind Saen Donta

Bun Phchum Bind Saen Donta is a ceremony of material offering and paying gratitude to ancestors of Khmer Tradition. It is usually celebrated every year one month before the monks leave their rainy retreat. It begins from the 1st to the 15th of waning moon of Bhadrápada of Lunar month (within October). This traditional ceremony is celebrated to dedicate merit to deceased relatives and pay gratitude to ancestors.

⁴Pang Khat, Viriyapandito, op. cit., p. 91.

This traditional ceremony is divided into two periods. Firstly, from the 1st to the 14th of the waning moon of Bhadrpada of lunar month is called Kan Bind Period. The ceremony is performed continuously one by one according to the turn of Buddhist group in their Buddhist community of a monastery. Secondly, on the 15th of waning moon of Bhadrpada of lunar month is the last day of Bun Phchum Bind. The ceremony is organized by the entire Buddhist group together in a monastery with its ritual of combined food, drink, fruits, desserts and many kinds of other material offerings. Because of the combination of all the meal from individual parts and from all Buddhist groups into a unique place of the Khmer Buddhist ceremony known as Wat in order to make offering to the monks and request for dedicating merits to the departed ancestors and relatives, it is called Bun Phchum Bind Saen Donta. Every evening of Kan Bind period, lay Buddhist of each monastery request the monks to recite Paritta chanting and deliver *Dhamma* Talk. The significance of *Dhamma* Talk on this occasion is to explain to people to know how to be grateful, trying to do wholesome deeds and to refrain from doing unwholesome deeds.

The *Dhamma* Talks are repeatedly delivered to people in the society with the ideas of the 12 causes of downfall found in *Parābhava Sutta* of *Sutta nipāta* of *Khuddaka Nikāya*.⁵ It is emphasized in the *Dhamma* that man who fell to be a Peta - Hungry Ghost because of committing some wrongdoing of these 12 causes of downfall. Delivering the *Dhamma* talk about these 12 causes of downfall is a contribution and part of an educational principle to prevent evil social problems among their society and help people to be shameful and fearful of wrongdoing. In addition, during 14 days of Kan Bind period, *Parābhava Sutta* is chanted every morning throughout the Khmer Buddhist monasteries in Southern Vietnam.

This ritual is regarded as a significant Khmer tradition that helps to remind and educate people in their daily lives not to do bad actions which are the causes to downfall, for example “the man who addicted to women (given to a life of debauchery), is a drunkard, a gambler and squanderer of his earning, those are the cause of his downfall”.

It is noticeable that offerings which are offered to Peta or departed one can be found in the Khmer tradition during Kan Bind period of Phchum Bind Ceremony. This offered item is generally known as Bai Bind – a lump of Rice. A large dish or a basket of Bai Bind contains a big lump of sticky-rice named Bai Pattapur (an alms-bowl which is full of rice). It is put in the middle of the dish or basket and surrounded by many pieces of

⁵Narada Mahathera, tr. *Sutta Nipāta* 1.6 of K. retrieved on November, 29th 2018, <https://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/index.html>.

small lump of sticky rice (Bai Bind) and mixed up with various kinds of dessert, pieces of fruits and whatever thing can be eaten. These baskets of Bai Bind are offered to the spirit of Hungry-Ghost at the crossroads after chanting *Parābhava Sutta*, *Tirokudda Sutta* and transferring merits in early morning. Because the Khmer People in Vietnam believe that all *Petas* may be standing or wandering around and seeking for these offerings. However, we should understand that, Buddhism rejected the idea of a direct transference and changed the medium to the Buddhist *Sangha* as the foremost field of merits. Later, as the ideas developed, it was averred that the merit generated by what is donated to the Sangha could be transferred to the dead. Presently Buddhists who are attached to this notion perform the ritual of the transference of merit after making material gift to the Sangha for the benefits of the dead.⁶

On the 15th waning-moon of *Bhadrabud* lunar month is the main day of Bun Pchum Bind Sen Donta, the Khmer people in the Southern Vietnam prepare a ceremony for worshiping their ancestors, grandparents, and departed relatives which is however is not a Buddhist ritual. This ritual is carried out by providing food, drink, fruits, desserts and many kinds of other material offerings at home. The parent guide children to light candles, incense sticks, and pour holy water on those offerings with a determined mind to dedicate such material worship to their ancestors, grandparents and departed relatives. At daybreak of the next morning, which is the 1st full moon day of Assuj of lunar month, they send their ancestors, grandparents and departed relatives homes or planes by preparing a boat made of banana sheath which contains many kinds of offerings and float it in a river, or lake, or a stream or a canal according to the available landscape near by the homes where they live.⁷

The Khmer people in the Southern Vietnam perform the ritual of worshiping and directly transferring merits to the spirit of ancestors, grandparents and all departed relatives regularly. This ritual is called Sen Donta. Though this Ceremony is not Buddhist ritual, but it is a Khmer custom that presents a grateful practice of the children to their deceased ancestors, grandparents and relatives.

To sum up, Bun Phchum Bind Sen Donta, holding remarkable value, is a popular Khmer custom for dedicating merits to the deceased ancestors, grandparents and relatives. Khmer people believe that departed ones surely carry his or her own good or bad result

⁶G.P. Malalasekera, and W. G. Weeraratne, op. cit., p. 559.

⁷Venerable Dr. Hok Savann, **Atthabot Breah Dhor**, Vol. III, <http://www.hoksavann.org/books/Dhamma%20teaching%20Part%20III>, retrieved in 19, November, 2018.

of *Kamma* according to his or her personal actions. However, it is found during research work in Bun Tum Neam Khmer Teang 12 Khae,⁸ this Khmer traditional ceremony is adopted from a story of King Bimbisāra who dedicated merits toward his *petas* relatives which was accounted in *Tirokudda Sutta*.⁹ The *Tirokudda Sutta* in this work of dedicating merits make the statement thus “Those who feel sympathy for their dead relatives, give timely donations for proper food and drink exquisite clean (thinking) “May this be for our relatives. May our relatives be happy” a study of the *Tirokudda Sutta* gives a clear understanding that, in the world of Peta, there are no occupations etc. the *Petas* live only on the merits transferred to them from their living relatives should accumulate merits by performing generosity, morality and develop concentration in memory of the dear departed ones. Certainly this traditional ceremony is performed to dedicate merits not only to the Peta beings, but also all deceased relatives. Khmer language gives a definition of the term *Peta* or *Pret* with two meanings. Used as an adjective, Peta or *Pret* is referred to the ones who die and depart from this world to the world beyond. So Bun Phchum Bind Sen Donta of the Khmer tradition is celebrated to dedicate merits toward both of Peta beings and the departed ones, such as ancestors, parents, grandparents and departed relatives.

Conclusion

Practicing *Dāna* that bring the full results of the action requires awareness. Buddha says that one should make in a way that person receiving the gift not feel slighted or humiliated. *Dāna* should be done with respect and awareness of the person, one should also give things that holds value to oneself and the person receiving the gift. Practicing *Dāna* is one of the basic practice of the Lays community throughout the Buddhist world. There are many ways of accumulating merit but the practice of *Dāna* is one of the best ways of making merit. Due to the difficulty in leading an ideal life while being a lay person is seen as one of the reason for focusing on the practice of merit making rather than going for full enlightenment. There is common belief as to if you wanted to serious practice Buddhism, you need to become a monk and if not, the best you could do is practice *Dāna* and make merit and hope for the better rebirth or enjoy good health, have wealth and riches in next

⁸Phan Suphan Chhueng, *Bun Tum Neam Khmer Teang 12 Khae*, Vol. II, 1st ed, (Phnom Penh: Pannasastra University, 2000), p. 347.

⁹U Ba Kyaw, tr. *Elucidation of the Intrinsic Meaning So Named, the Commentary on the Peta-Stories*, (London: PTS, 1980), p. 24.

life. If one does not practice this quality in this life, in the following life one would be poor and destitute, with no fame or respect in society. So that Khmer people usually keep practicing dana in their traditional Ceremonies every year.

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