

A Comparison on the structure of Buddhist Sangha Administrative System Between Thailand and Vietnam

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Abstract

Since the first day that the “Triple Gems” of the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha had been established, the Buddha disciples’ community was recognized as the people who will perform the task of protecting and propagating the Buddha’s teachings after he passed into Nibbana. Therefore, a solid and united Saṅgha is the most important factor which may help to develop Buddhism. Here, any organization or association becomes solid when it is well-organized or it gets a good administrative system. It is also the reason why Buddhist Saṅgha needs a good and well-organized administrative system. In each Buddhist country, there are many factors that make the structure of Saṅgha administrative system different from other countries. Besides the differences, there are also some similarities even when we compare the structure of Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system between two different countries. This article is going to compare the structure of Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system between Vietnam and Thailand since their beginning until now in order to show how is different and similar on the structure of Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system between those two countries. The article focuses on sub-topics such as the different historical background of the establishment, the policies of the different government and the Saṅgha Act or Saṅgha administrative regulation, etc., which make the differences and similarities on the structure of the Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system between Thailand and Vietnam.

Keywords: Buddhist Saṅgha, structure, administrative system, Thailand, Vietnam.

Introduction

Thailand is known as a Theravāda Buddhist country with 94.6% of population are Buddhist and by 2014,¹ there are more than 21,000 temples in the country. Thailand now is becoming the center of Buddhist culture, education and the common Buddhist research center. The main cause that underlies those great results is the solid administration and the way of guiding Thai Buddhist Saṅgha. The role of Thai Buddhist Saṅgha Administrative system is very important to cause those successes. Thai Saṅgha administrative system was established very early, around 13th century, under the dynasty of Sukhothai Kingdom. As the highest Thai Buddhist leader and the head of Thai Buddhist Saṅgha administration, the Saṅgharāja and other ranks in the system have their own duties and requirement from the Saṅgha in order to protect and develop Thai Buddhist Saṅgha and Thai Buddhism as well.

Different from Thailand, Vietnam is a non-Buddhist country with a less number of the Buddhist followers among the large population, even though Buddhism had existed in Vietnam since the early history. However, Mahāyāna Buddhism is the main school that most of the Buddhist followers are practicing now in Vietnam. Vietnam Saṅgha Administrative system had been found under the reign of Tran dynasty round 13th century. The establishment of the Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha in 1981² as we known nowadays is the great result of contributions from many generations of Buddhist leaders who had re-developed Vietnam Buddhism from the weakness for many previous centuries. There are two main councils in the central administration and each of them has its own head. The lower ranks are also classified into many levels and have their own heads. Even by the time the structure in both countries have been changed for several times, some ranks and positions still remain until now.

There are so many reasons to prove that the Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system in Thai Buddhism is somehow different or similar to Vietnam. The differences and similarities may range from the way of administration or the general structure to the way of arranging the positions, which are based on the real situation of Buddhism in each country.

¹Bureau of Statistic Forecast. (2014), **The Survey on Conditions of Society Culture and Mental Health (Thai Happiness)**. Bangkok: Thai National Statistic Office, p.3.

²Nguyen Cao Thanh. (2008), **An outline of Buddhism in Viet Nam**. Ha Noi: the Religious Publishing House, p.190.

The Structure of Thai Buddhist Saṅgha Administrative System Prior Ratanakosin Period

Thai Buddhism has developed for a long period of time along with every establishment and development of Thai nation since the first Thai kingdom of Dvaravati until now. However, the development of Thai Saṅgha administration structure can be divided into two main stages: Thai Saṅgha administration prior to Ratanakosin period and Thai Saṅgha administration during Ratanakosin period. The development of Thai Saṅgha administration prior to Ratanakosin Period was again divided into three periods, which are: 1) Sukhothai period, 2) Ayutthaya period and 3) Thonburi period.

Sukhothai period: Sukhothai became the first independent Thai kingdom with the accession of Indrāditya to the throne of Sukhothai (1256 A.D.)³, which also was the first turning point in the history of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. By the reputation of Lankāvaṃsa monastic orders, King Ramkhamheang invited the Elder Mahāsāmi from Nakhon Sri Thammarat to become the Saṅgharāja and to propagate the practice of this Buddhist tradition in Sukhothai Kingdom.⁴ Sukhothai was also the first period of Thai Buddhism when the lineage of Saṅgharāja and the Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system had been mentioned clearly. The Buddhist Saṅgha in Sukhothai period was divided into two main groups: (1) the Gāmaṇvāsī and (2) Arañṇavāsī. “One was called the “city-dwellers” (Gāmaṇvāsī), which stressed the study of books and scriptures (Gantha Dhura). The other was called the “forest-dwellers” (Arañṇavāsī), which focused on meditation practices (Vipassanā Dhura)”.⁵ Each group was headed by a senior monk who had been elected by the Council of the Elders and had been appointed by the King. All temples in the Kingdom, regardless of whether they were Gāmaṇvāsī or Arañṇavāsī, were also objective to the administration of the Supreme Patriarch (Saṅgharāja) appointed by the King. Hence in Sukhothai period, Thai Saṅgha administration had two Supreme Patriarchs: The Patriarch of the Gāmaṇvāsī

³Kanai Lal Hazra. (2000), **Thailand: Political History and Buddhist Culture Influences Vol. 1**. New Delhi: Decent Books, p. 15.

⁴Suthorn Na-Rangsi. (2002), **Administration of Thai Sangha: Past, Present and Future**, *The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies*. Vol. 1, No. 2 (2002), p. 59.

⁵Ame Kislenko (2004), **Culture and Customs of Thailand**. London: Green Wood Publishing Group, p. 28. The names derived from where monks of both camps went to pursue their focus: Gāmaṇvāsī to urban centers with access to libraries and other collections, and Arañṇavāsī to seclusion in rural areas where they could meditate without distraction.

section and the Patriarch of the Araññavāsī section. For the regional Saṅgha administration, each provincial was appointed by the King that ruled and ordered the monks who were under his administrative authority as the noble teacher (Phragru) and Lord Abbot of the monasteries.

Ayutthaya period: “In 1350 (B.E 1893) another Thai Kingdom called Sri Ayutthaya was founded in central Thailand by King Uthong of the Chiengrai dynasty”.⁶ By the middle of the fourteenth century, Ayutthaya was established as the second ancient kingdom of Thai at the central mainland of Southeast Asia. There was a good administration in the Saṅgha and the Saṅgharāja (Supreme Patriarch) was its head, the monks followed the rules of the Buddhist discipline faithfully. In 1422 A.D. a group of monks of this section from Chiangmai and Cambodia led a lot of monks to Lanka and got new ordination and were adapted to be in Singhala Nikāya by the great monk named Ven. Wanaratana who was their spiritual teacher in 1424 A.D. Then, they studied the doctrines and the disciplines in Lanka for several years. When they came back to Ayutthaya, they invited Lankan senior monks named Ven. Mahavikramabahu and Ven. Utamapanya to go together and propagate the Buddha’s teaching in Thailand. After arriving in Ayutthaya, they separated to spread the Buddha’s teaching until there were a lot of people who believed and had the faith in Buddhism, came to beg for the ordination and became monks. Finally, those monks separated themselves to set up a new Saṅgha named “Pakeaw Monastery Section”. Because the spiritual teacher, the Lanka monk of this section was named “Wanaratana”, which means “the glass forest”.⁷ In conclusion, the Thai Saṅgha administration in Ayutthaya period was classified into 3 sections, namely: 1) Left Gāmaṇvāsī Section, which means the Saṅgha of old Nikāya existing since the establishment of SukhoThai. 2) Araññavāsī Section, which means the section to be of successive tradition, Lankavangse in SukhoThai of which period. 3) Right Gāmaṇvāsī Section, which means the Saṅgha of old Nikāya adapted in Lanka in Ayutthaya Period and then came back to set up a new section known as “Ganapakeaw” by the common people”.⁸

⁶P.A. Payutto. (2012), **Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World**. Bangkok: Chandrapen Publishing House, p. 27.

⁷Promsuk Jerm Savatdi. (1977), **Thai Art with Indian Influences**. Bhiha: The University of Magadh, 1977), pp. 35-36.

⁸Prof. Dr. Phra Dhammakosajarn. (2011), **Regulation of Sangha Administration**. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Press, p.13.

Thonburi period: In 1767 A.D., after dominating Southeast Asia for almost 400 years, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya was destroyed. Phraya Taksin was a Chinese descent who came to Ayutthaya in order to help defend the capital for liberation against Burma and restored Thai freedom. In 1768 A.D., he was crowned king and he established Thonburi kingdom.⁹ Thai Buddhism lacked support and suffered the most during the years of the war. The structure of the Thai Saṅgha administration in Thonburi kingdom was organized under the same traditions of the Ayutthaya period.

The Structure of Thai Buddhist Saṅgha Administrative System During Ratanakosin Period

After his coronation in the year of 1782 A.D, King Rama I had done many changes for the development of the country as well as for Thai Buddhism. In the aspect of building the Saṅgha administration, the King followed the same structure of Saṅgha's administration which had been appeared in the previous dynasties. After the death of Rama I in 1809 A.D., his son King Rama II¹⁰ also followed his father to develop Thai nation by applying Buddhist teachings and, on another hand, he also had made many contributions to keep Buddhism a state religion. Hence, until the second reign of Ratanakosin, the structure of Thai Saṅgha administration was not much different from the Ayutthaya and Thonburi period. Phra Nang Klao (Rama III), the third king of the Chakri dynasty, succeeded his father (King Rama II) in B.E. 2367(1824). King Rama II also followed the Thai tradition in building his dynasty by the same way as other previous Thai Kings. The new school of Thai Buddhism – Dhammayuttika Nikāya – was founded by Phra Vajiranana Bhikkhu, who later was recognized as the Rama IV. When the new section of Dhammayuttika Nikaya was established, the name of the “Left Gāmaṇī” was changed to the “North Section” and the “Right Gāmaṇī” also was changed to the “South Section”. “Central section”, which was established by unifying the royal and some private monasteries in the Bangkok Metropolis together, also was a change in the structure of Thai Saṅgha administration under the reign of King Rama III.¹¹ Hence, because of those changes, Thai Buddhism was divided into

⁹Kanai Lal Hazra, Thailand: **Political History and Buddhist Culture Influences Vol. 1, Op.cit.**, pp. 45-46.

¹⁰Davit K. Wyatt. (2003), **Thailand A Short History**, (USA: Yale University Press, p. 145.

¹¹Geo B. Bacon. (2000), **Intineraria Asiatica: Siam-The Land of the White Elephant. As it was and is**. Bangkok: Orchid Press, pp. 34-35.

four main sections: (1) Northern Section, (2) Southern Section, (3) Central Section, and (4) Araññavāsī section. Other difference in the Saṅgha administration between the 3rd reign of Ratanakosin with the previous dynasties was the limitation and the cancelation of Araññavāsī section. Therefore, for Araññavāsī section, only the position of the Ecclesiastical Chief superintendent was left, and there were no monasteries under the command. The structure of the previous Saṅgha administration under the reign of King Rama III still remained to apply in this IV of Ratanakosin period. King Rama IV passed away in the year of 1868 A.D., his son prince Chulalongkorn succeeded him and continued the Ratanakosin with the fifth generation of monarch. King Rama V was well known for the modernization of the country. Under his long reign (1868-1910 A.D.), there was a great reform of the Saṅgha in order to unify the Saṅgha and to systematize its administration. Another big change in this reign was the establishment of a Department of Religious Affairs on April 5th, 1889 A.D. under the auspices of the new Minister of education.¹² That are the reasons why there were a lot of changes in the management of the Saṅgha in the 5th reign. Until this period of Chakri kingdom, Thai Saṅgha administration kept the three main section of North, South and Central, but the Araññavāsī section was replaced by the new section of Dhammayuttikaya-Nikāya section, which was under the control of Central section before. For the provincial administration, there were sub-lower levels of the structure under the control of the Chief of the provincial council. Before 1889 A. D., the provincial Saṅgha as well as the civil administration were divided into clusters of five or six provinces (monthon), subdivided into districts (amphoe), sub-districts (tambon), and communities (ban).¹³ After the Act of Saṅgha Administration issued in the year of 1902 A.D., the provincial Order council accepted the same structure as before, but the ecclesiastical district chief directly ruled over abbots of the local monasteries. King Rama V died in 1910 A.D. and was succeeded by his son, King Wachirawut (Rama VI), who ruled the kingdom between 1910 A.D. and 1925 A.D. He developed a sense of nationhood composed of Nation (Jāti), Religion (Sāsana), and Monarchy (Phra Mahakasat). King Rama VI passed away in 1925 A.D. and his brother, King Prajadhipok, continued the Chakri Dynasty with the seventh, 7-years long reign from 1925 A.D. to 1932 A.D. For the Saṅgha administration, under this reign Thailand still applied the

¹² Somboon Suksamran. (1993), **Buddhism and Political Legitimacy**. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, p. 51.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

previous Saṅgha Act of 1902 A.D. to manage the Saṅgha monasteries and Buddhist Orders. Therefore, there was not much change in the Saṅgha administrative system or the Saṅgha at this period since they had the same structure as in the reign of King Rama V.

His Majesty King Ananda Mahidol, who succeeded the Rama VII, sat on the throne as the 8th King (Rama VIII) of Ratanakosin period in B.E. (1934 A.D.), and his reign is also regraded as the beginning for the public administration's change from absolute monarchy towards a system of democratic administration, which became more popular. The change of the government system affected the Saṅgha management, and the administrative system of Thai Saṅgha during this time was altered in compliance with that of the state, so that there were influences of the Ecclesiastical minister and prime minister on the Saṅgha administration. The result of the change of the civil government was the creation of the new Saṅgha Act in the year of 1941 A.D. According to the content of the Saṅgha Act B.E. 2484 (from Articles 28-37), the structure of the Saṅgha Administrative system was divided into three main sections, which are under the rank of the Saṅgharāja. The first section of Ecclesiastical Assembly (Gana Saṅghasabha) was composed of not over than 45 members, the second section of the Ecclesiastical Cabinet (Gana Saṅghamontri) consisted of Ecclesiastical Prime Minister and other Ecclesiastical Ministers of not more than 9 monks; this section had 10 members in totally. There were departments under the control of the second section of Ecclesiastical Cabinet, four such department were: (1) Department of Administration, (2) Department of Education, (3) Department of Ecclesiastical Propagation, and (4) Department of Ecclesiastical Public Affairs.¹⁴ The lower ranks are classified from province to sub-district levels, which are similar to the previous period.

His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej succeeded his older brother King Ananda Mahidol to the throne on June 9, 1946, as the ninth ruler of the Chakri dynasty. The Saṅgha Act of B.E. 2484 remained for 21 years, until the government enacted the Saṅgha Act of B.E. 2505 (1962 A.D.). According to this Saṅgha Act (from Article 7 to Article 19), the Supreme Patriarch (Somdej Phra Saṅgharāja), who was appointed by the King himself, also was a head of all Orders in the Kingdom. The Patriarch was “ex-officio” President of the Council of the Elders (Mahātherasamakom). There were also eight members with the title of Phraraja Gana in the Supreme Council. In addition, the Director-General of the Department

¹⁴ **Acts on the Administration of the Buddhist Order of Sangha of Thailand-B.E. 2445, B.E. 2484, B.E. 2505**, Thailand: Mahamakuta Educational Council, pp. 26-28.

of Religious Affairs was “ex-officio” Secretary-General of the Supreme Council and the office of this Department would be the office of the Supreme Council.¹⁵

The Structure of the Regional Saṅgha Administration and Provincial Saṅgha Administration

The Regional Saṅgha Administration in this reign has a similar to the previous reign structure with ranks such as: Regional Ecclesiastical Governor (Chao Gana Pak), Provincial Ecclesiastical Governor (Chao Gana Changwat), District Ecclesiastical Governor (Chao Gana Amphoe), and Sub-District Ecclesiastical Governor (Chao Gana Tambon). The lowest organization of whole structure of the Saṅgha administration was the monastic organization.¹⁶ The new Saṅgha Act of B.E. 2535 (1992 A.D.) for the purpose of repealing some old provisions, changed the provision in some Articles and added new provisions in some Articles for their completeness. It can be seen as an amendment of the Saṅgha Act of 1962 in 1992 A.D. Hence, when the Saṅgha Act of B.E. 2535 was enacted, it can be said that Thai Saṅgha had two Saṅgha Acts being used together. According to the Saṅgha Act of B.E. 2535 (1992 A.D.) (from Article 3 to Article 9), there is also a rank of the Supreme Patriarch, and under his rank is also the Supreme Council of Elders with members appointed by the Supreme Patriarch whether they come from Mahānikāya or Dhammayuttika-Nikāya. In the Central Saṅgha Administration, there are four ranks of Chief Superintendent of the Northern zone, Southern Zone, Central zone, and the Dhammayuttika section, which was created by the Act of the Saṅgha Administration of Ratanakosin Era 121. On the other hand, all of them together with the new branch of the East zone totally make five branches in the Central Saṅgha Administration.¹⁷

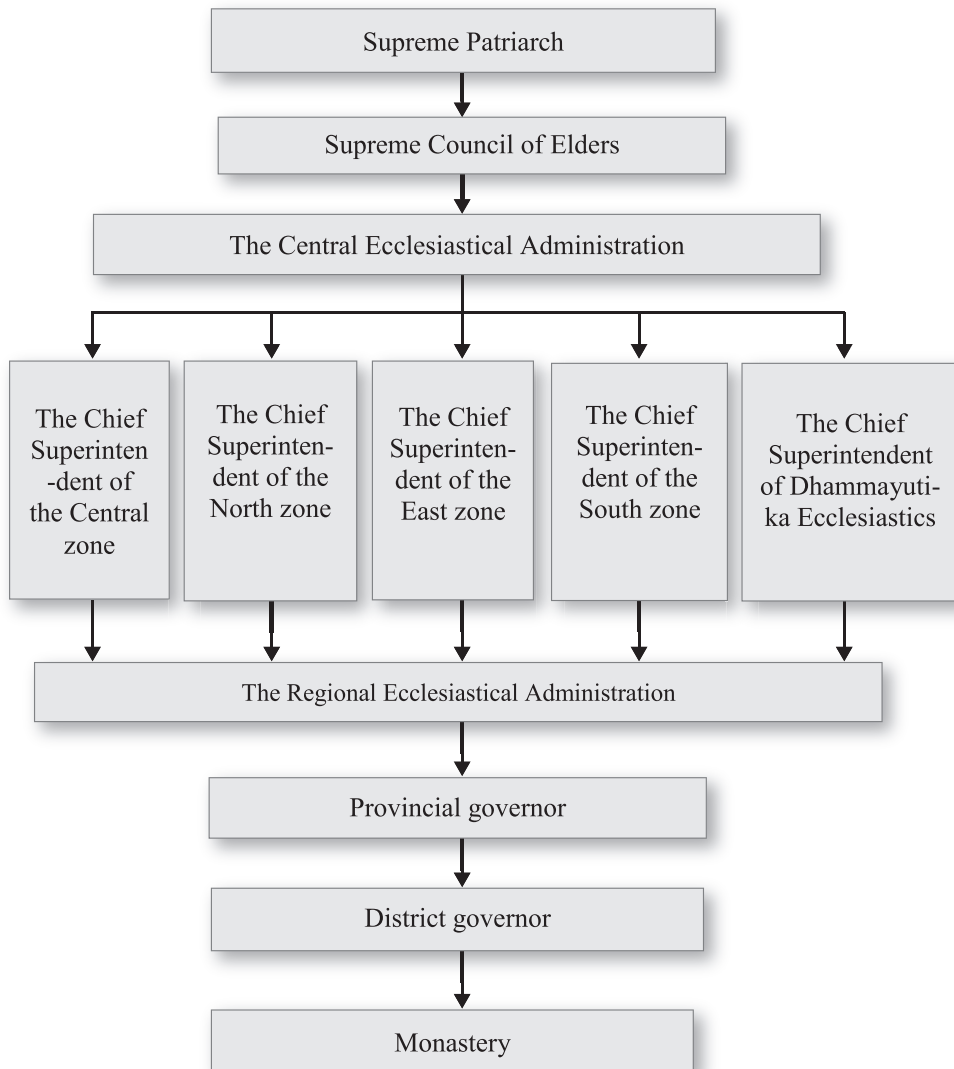
According to this Saṅgha Act and Article 22 in particular, the arrangement of the regional Saṅgha administration followed the same structure under the Act of Saṅgha of B.E. 2505. There are also the same ranks of The Regional Ecclesiastical Governor (Chao Gana Pak), Provincial Ecclesiastical Governor (Chao Gana Changwat), District Ecclesiastical Governor (Chao Gana Amphoe), Sub-District Ecclesiastical Governor (Chao

¹⁵ **Acts on the Administration of the Buddhist Order of Sangha of Thailand-B.E. 2445, B.E. 2484, B.E. 2505, Op.cit.**, pp. 37-40.

¹⁶ **Ibid.**, pp. 40-41.

¹⁷ **Ibid.**, pp. 78-79.

Gana Tambon); the lowest level is the monastic organization.¹⁸ Therefore, the present Thai Sangha administrative system can be shown as follows:



¹⁸ Acts on the Administration of the Buddhist Order of Sangha of Thailand-B.E. 2445, B.E. 2484, B.E. 2505., Op.cit., p. 41.

The Structure of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha Administrative System Prior to the Recovery of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20th Century

Before the recovery of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20th century, Buddhism used to be the state religion for many years under several monarchy governments. There are many arguments about the introduction of Buddhism in ancient Vietnam, but the most valid and reliable one is the analysis of Nguyen Lang (Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh). According to him, Vietnamese Buddhism was first introduced into Vietnam around the first up to the second century of C.E.¹⁹ Several dynasties before the Tran dynasty (1225-1400 A.D.) also followed Buddhism; the kings of those kingdoms always appointed one respected senior monk for many honor and important in positions. Like other previous kings, several kings of the Tran dynasty also appointed monks for important positions in the Buddhist Saṅgha. Until the reign of King Tran Anh Tong (1293-1314 A.D.), the king not only appointed the Supreme Patriarch, but also appointed one senior monk to be the head of national Buddhist Saṅgha office. Ven Phap Loa (1284-1330 A.D.) was the first person who was appointed by the King Tran Anh Tong in the year of 1313 A.D. as the Head of National Saṅgha office. The office of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha at that time was located at Vinh Nghiem temple (present-day in the Northern Vietnam).²⁰ This was also the first time when Vietnamese monks got a monkhood certificate in order to be recognized as legal monks. The Supreme Patriarch and the Head of the National Buddhist Saṅgha office are under the management of the king and his royal monarchy government. The Head of National Saṅgha office is the Central Saṅgha administration in the structure of Vietnamese Buddhist Saṅgha administration and the Head of National Buddhist Saṅgha office directly govern all of the temples and all of the Buddhist monks in the country.

In 1400 A.D., the Tran dynasty collapsed and was replaced by Ho dynasty until Vietnam became a colony of the Minh dynasty of China.²¹ Moreover, they applied their own culture and their own religion of Confucianism in Vietnam for the purpose of making

¹⁹Nguyen Lang. (2000), **Essays on The History of Vietnamese Buddhism vol I, II, III**. Ha Noi: Literature Publishing House, pp. 15-16.

²⁰**Ibid.**, p. 306.

²¹Tran Quang Thuan. (2014), **Vietnamese Buddhism in the Modern Era, Facing with the Challenges of the Modern Civilization**. Hanoi: Hong Duc Publishing House, pp. 747-749.

Vietnamese become Chinese.²² Therefore, Buddhism didn't had any change to develop, and Buddhist monks and followers had to face many difficulties in order to practice and propagate Buddhism in Vietnam at this period.²³ Le Loi (1428-1433 A.D.) was a national hero who escaped Vietnam from the control of the Chinese at that time (Minh dynasty). He sat on throne in 1428 A.D. and started to restore both the nation and Buddhism.²⁴ However, the kings and the people who did not possess "right view" followed Buddhism in the wrong way and believed that monks are the masters of spiritual activities who's only tasks are performing spiritual activities and praying for happiness. Because of the abovementioned reasons, the scope of Buddhist organizations was limited to temples, sub-school, sects and lineages. The abbots were in task of governing their Saṅgha and preserving the Vietnamese Buddhism continuously. Since the early 16th century to the early 18th century, the Buddhist Saṅgha administration mostly was based on the lineage of the tradition or the sub-sects or sub-schools of Vietnamese Buddhism. Specially, the organization of Vietnamese Buddhism is the administration of the monastery scope.

The Structure of Vietnamese Saṅgha Administrative System after the Recovery of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20th Century

There was a recovery of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20th century, which restored the Buddhism and formed a solid structure of Vietnamese Buddhist Saṅgha administration. Before the recovery, Vietnamese Buddhism had been destroyed for many reasons under the French colonialism. When the recovery happened, the Vietnamese Buddhism was restored and got a clear Saṅgha administrative system. By the early 20th century, there were a few national liberation movements of bourgeois orientation. A significant event in Vietnamese history in the 20th century was the birth of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1930 A.D. Vietnamese Buddhism fell into decline since the Le dynasty and it continued as in the past time. Before 1945 A.D., under the control of France, Vietnamese Buddhism had fell into a terrible situation; Buddhist Saṅgha organization was forced to dissolve, monks were not allowed to perform any monastic activities, monks were compelled to disrobe and join

²² Thich Tam Hai. (2003), **Basic Buddhism**, ed. *The Central Board of Dhamma Propagation*. Ho Chi Minh city: The Religious Press, p. 32ff.

²³ Tran Quang Thuan, **Op.cit.**, pp. 749-750.

²⁴ Nguyen Khuong Dan. (2008), **The Recovery of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20th Century**, M.A Thesis. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, p. 31.

into the French Army, etc.²⁵ The movement to ameliorate Vietnamese Buddhism began in Sai Gon city and some southern provinces in 1920 A.D., with the participation of several current famous masters. The movement lasted until the middle of 1950 A.D. and made some important achievements. The result of this revolution in Vietnam was the establishment of many new Buddhist organizations, Buddhist schools, and Buddhist learning centers around the country, which are the main elements of the movement to restore Vietnamese Buddhism. In March 1958 A.D., a new Buddhist association names Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Association was established as the main Buddhist Saṅgha organization of the Northern Vietnamese Buddhism.²⁶ Since 1951 A.D., the Southern Buddhist Saṅgha was established in the south of Vietnam and existed until the Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation was established as the main Southern Buddhist Saṅgha organization by unifying other eleven Buddhist organizations in 1963 A.D. In 1963 A.D., there was “Southern Buddhist movement”, which was known as “Vietnamese Dhamma disaster”.²⁷ There was a “cold war” or “internal war” between North Government and South Government of Vietnam since 1955 A.D. to 1975 A.D.

Finally, in 1975 A.D. Vietnamese North Government totally achieved success and from now on Vietnam was an interdependent country.²⁸ The country was unified, and there was only one country known as “Social Republic of Vietnam”, which follows the political view of Communism. For the purpose of developing Vietnamese Buddhism in the modern time since Vietnam became interdependent, the first thing is the way of building a new solid Saṅgha Administration system, which is the “body” of the Buddhism. After some years of preparation, the Conference of Presentative for Buddhist Unification was organized in Quan Su temple, Hanoi, on 4th to 7th November 1981 A.D. with the presentative members from nine different Buddhist denominations: 1) The Southern Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation with 22 delegates, 2) The Northern United Vietnamese Buddhist Association with 23 delegates, 3) Vietnamese Traditional Buddhist Congregation with 12 delegates, 4) Ho Chi Minh city Buddhist Liaison Committee with 10 delegates, 5) The Vietnamese Theravāda

²⁵ Le Cung. (2008), **The Souhthern Vietnam Buddhism's movement in 1963**. Hue: Thuan Hoa Publishing House, pp. 27-30.

²⁶ Nguyen Cao Thanh, **Op.cit.**, p. 185.

²⁷ Thich Duc Nghiep. (1995), **Buddhism in Vietnam**. Ho Chi Minh city: Ho Chi Minh city Buddhist Saṅgha Council Press, p. 192.

²⁸ Tran Quang Thuan., **Op.cit.**, pp. 821-823.

Saṅgha Congregation with 7 delegates, 6) Western South Vietnam Association for Solidarity of Patriotic Monastic with 8 delegates, 7) The Vietnamese Mendicant Saṅgha Congregation with 6 delegates, 8) The T'ien-T'ai teaching and Meditation Sect with 5 delegates, 9) The Vietnamese Buddhist Studies Association with 6 delegates.²⁹

The unification of Vietnam Buddhist associations was a very important event in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism. The Congregation unanimously agreed to established a National Buddhist Saṅgha administration with the name “Vietnamese Buddhist Saṅgha”. Moreover, Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha is the only Buddhist Saṅgha association which was recognized legally by the current Vietnamese government and it is a member of Vietnamese Fatherland Front.³⁰ This meeting also marked that this was the First Congress of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha. The number of delegates from nine denominations and congregation was 165 and represented all four kinds of the Buddha's disciples: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.³¹ In addition, the most important part of this meeting was the establishment of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha's Charter 1981 A.D. and the current Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system has been formed since this meeting based on the Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha Charter, which consists of 11 chapters and 46 articles. According to the Article 9 of the charter, the administrative system of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha was divided into two main parts: Central administration and Regional administration. The Central Saṅgha administration consists of two main departments: The Supreme Saṅgha Council and The Executive Committee. In addition, Regional administration consists of Provincial administration and District administration. However, according to the article no. 18, there were six main Buddhist departments of the Executive Council also known as the Central Departments, which distinguish it from those department of the provincial level. The six departments were: (1) department of Saṅgha Affairs, (2) department of Education, (3) department of Buddhist Laity, (4) department of Propagation, (5) department of Culture, and (6) department of Ritual.

²⁹Nguyen Cao Thanh, **Op.cit**, pp. 191-192.

³⁰**Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ed. 2013, Chapter I, Article 9.** The Vietnamese Fatherland Front is a political alliance and a voluntary union of political organizations, socio-political organizations, social organizations and individuals representing their social classes and strata, ethnicities, religions, and overseas Vietnamese.

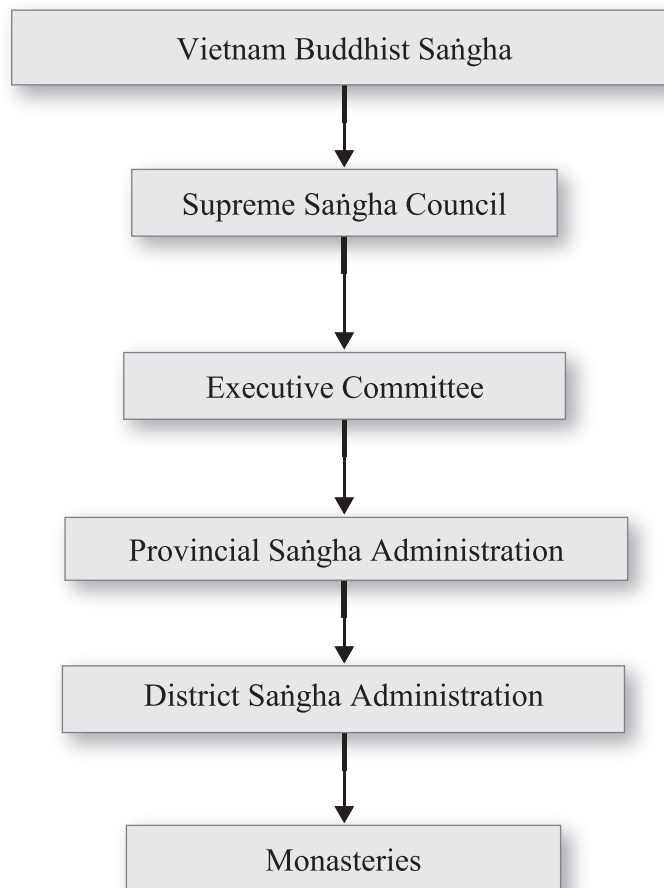
³¹Nguyen Cao Thanh, **Op.cit**, 193.

Since the year of 1981 A.D until now, 7 congresses and various yearly and quarterly meetings were organized by the Vietnamese Saṅgha. At the second Congress of the Saṅgha, which took place on 28th to 29th October 1987 A.D., three more departments were established: (1) the Financial Department, (2) Vietnam Buddhist Research Institute and (3) the Social Charity Department. On 3rd to 4th November 1992 A.D., the third congress of Vietnamese Saṅgha was organized; this congress decided to establish the new department of the Foreign Buddhist Affairs. In a likewise manner, the nearest Vietnamese Saṅgha Congress VII has taken place on November 23rd, 2012 in Hanoi with more than one thousand delegates and observers from Vietnamese Saṅgha and other oversea Buddhist Saṅgha communities. The Saṅgha charter was again edited; now it consisted of 13 chapters and 71 articles. Three new departments were established and replaced the positions of two members as the Saṅgha comptrollers. They were: The Department of Saṅgha Comptrollers, the Department of Legal Affair Department, and the Information and Communication. Finally, all of the sixty-three provinces had already established the provincial Saṅgha administrations after this congress and under these five-years office period of the Saṅgha.³² After the organization of the seventh Saṅgha Congress and until 2017 – the final year of this five-year period – the Vietnamese Saṅgha Administration still follows the same structure from the first Congress. More official departments were established at each level of the structure. There were 13 Buddhist official departments³³ established through seven Saṅgha Congresses. Even though the name and the number of each position in the Saṅgha had been changed several times, in fact according to their duties the positions and their names may be same with the first Congress. There are two offices of the Central Saṅgha Administration in Hanoi capital and Ho Chi Minh city.

The present Vietnamese Saṅgha Administrative System can be described in the following chart:

³² Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha-Executive Council. (2012), **The Resolution of the 7th Congress of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha**. Hanoi: Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha.

³³ 13 Buddhist official departments which have mentioned above, summarized as: (1) Saṅgha Affair, (2) Buddhist Education, (3) Buddhist Laity, (4) Buddhism Propagation, (5) Buddhist Culture, (6) Ritual, (7) Economy-Financial, (8) Vietnam Buddhist Research Institute, (9) Social Charity, (10) Saṅgha Comptrollers, (11) Legal Affair, (12) Foreign Buddhist Affair, (13) Information and Communication.



Similarities of the Structure of Buddhist Sangha Administrative System between Thailand and Vietnam

Both of the two Sangha administrations were found under the monarchy government and at the time that Buddhism was a state religion in both of the countries. The Sangha administrations totally depended on the support of the royal kingdom and the monarchy rulers at the beginning. In general, the structure of both Sangha administrations is similar in the way of having two main administrations: Central Sangha administration and Regional Sangha administration. The contents of Thai Sangha act and Vietnam Buddhist Sangha Charter mention the same major items, which are the required regulations to establish and manage a whole Buddhist Sangha administrative system, its institutes and official departments. All of the regulations must be suitable and based on the Buddha's Dhamma, the monastic discipline, and the current state law system as well. The contents of the Sangha Act and the Charter

of the Buddhist Saṅgha of Vietnam stipulate the following main contents: 1) specification of the common terms of the Saṅgha and the regulations, 2) classification of the ranks in the system, 3) the charter of activities, appointments, and responsibilities for each position in central and local administration, and 4) rewards and punishment.

Differences of the Structure of Buddhist Saṅgha Administrative System between Thailand and Vietnam

In Thailand, the historical evidence mentioned that King Ram Khamheang the great had built a monastery as a gift to the Mahathera Saṅgharāja, who was wiser than any other monk in the Kingdom in 1291 A.D.³⁴ The Thai Saṅgha administrative system has existed without interruption since Sukhothai dynasty through other two later dynasties of Ayutthaya and Thonburi until the present dynasty of Ratanakosin. Totally, it developed for almost eight hundred years. Only one Theravada Saṅgha administration as the main structure of Thai Saṅgha administration had been found and remained until now. The first Vietnam Saṅgha administration had been found under the Tran dynasty by the event that King Tran Anh Tong appointed Venerable Phap Loa of the Mahāyāna Truc Lam Zen Saṅgha council as the Head of the Vietnam Saṅgha at that time.³⁵ After the cessation of Tran dynasty in 1400 A.D, there was a big black gap in the development of Vietnamese Buddhism. Buddhism had faced many problems and there wasn't any Saṅgha administrative system for that long period of time. Until the establishment of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha in 1981 A.D, which is the former Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system, it was five hundred years that Vietnam Saṅgha didn't have a Saṅgha administrative system. From the beginning, Thai Saṅgha administration is Theravadin Saṅgha administration, but Vietnam Saṅgha administration is a Mahāyāna Saṅgha administration.

Saṅgharāja is the head of Thai Saṅgha, and holds the highest position in the structure. The second level is the Supreme Saṅgha Council, which is the central Saṅgha administration. Under the Supreme Saṅgha Council, by the way of Buddhist Saṅgha management, there are four chief superintendents of main zones of Central, South, North, East and one chief superintendent of Dhammayutika Ecclesiastics. Lower than the Central Saṅgha administration

³⁴ Yoneo Ishii. (1986), (tr). Peter Hawkes, **Saṅgha, Stage and Society: Thai Buddhism in History**. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, p.60.

³⁵ Nguyen Lang, **Op. cit.**, p. 306.

is the Saṅgha administration of the regions. In this sense, Thai Buddhism is divided into 18 regional, 77 provincial, many district, and sub-district administrations. In the current Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha, Supreme Saṅgha council is the highest level of administration, which includes the position of Supreme Patriarch. Another council is the Executive Council, both councils belong to the Central Buddhist Saṅgha administration in Vietnam. Furthermore, the management of the Saṅgha is exercised directly from the Central council to the province and district council; there are no zones or regional Saṅgha administration. According to the article 4, chapter I of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha Charter, the central office of Central Vietnam Buddhist administration, which consists of Supreme Saṅgha Council and Executive Committee, is at Quan Su Temple in Hanoi capital city as the main office and at Quang Duc Zen monastery in Ho Chi Minh city as the southern standing office of Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha.³⁶

In the historical development of Thai Saṅgha administration, the Saṅgha Act is an important text for building the Thai Saṅgha administration. The first Saṅgha Act had been enacted in the year of 1902 A.D under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Later on, Thai Saṅgha Act had been edited for several times; the first edit happened in 2484 B.E. (1941 A.D.)³⁷. The contents of the Saṅgha Act were changed again in 1962 A.D. and came into force on January 1, 1963 A.D.³⁸ The newest version of the Thai Saṅgha Act was enacted in 1992 A.D. The present Thai Saṅgha Act is the edited version of the Saṅgha Act 1962 A.D., which consists of 8 chapters and 46 articles. In Vietnam, the legal Saṅgha administrative rules and regulations are compiled as one Saṅgha Charter, which was issued at the first Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha Council. The Saṅgha Charter was compiled by the standing council of Executive Committee and counter-signed by the President of the Committee. In addition, it was approved by the Supreme Saṅgha Council and the Prime Minister. Since 1981 A.D. until 2012 A.D., the Vietnam Saṅgha charter has been edited for five times throughout seven Vietnam Saṅgha Congresses. The present Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha Charter consists of 13 chapters and 71 articles.

³⁶ Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha. (2012), **Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha Charter ed. V.** Ho Chi Minh city: Religious Publishing House, p.4.

³⁷ Sunthorn Na-rangsi, **Op.cit.**, p.7.

³⁸ Yoneo Ishii, (tr). Peter Hawkes, **Op.cit.**, pp. 115-116.

Conclusion

As we known, the existence of Buddhism is totally based on the development of the Saṅgha, in which the monks are the main factor that directly determines the cessation and the development of the Saṅgha. In the modern Era, the Buddhist monks are not only requested to study, follow the discipline and the Dhamma deeply. In both Vietnam and Thailand, the structure of Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system undergone continuous development since the early 13th century until now. Even though Buddhism in both countries had to face many difficulties, it survived and became more developed now. There are many differences between organization and management in these two Saṅgha administrative systems, but they have the same purpose of building a solid Buddhist Saṅgha administrative system in order to protect and propagate Buddhism for later generations.

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