

ADMINISTRATION OF THE THAI SAṄGHA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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From the time the Thai people established the kingdom of Sukhothai, the first Thai kingdom in Southeast Asia, around BE 1800 (CE 1250) most of the Thai people have upheld Buddhism as their main religion down to the present day. King Ramkhamhaeng, the third king of the Sukhothai Kingdom (reigned BE 1822–1843), invited senior Lankan monks (thera) to journey with their company from Nakhon Sri Thammarat to establish the Lankan order of Theravāda Buddhism in Sukhothai. The king appointed the Elder Mahāsāmī, the leader of the group, to the position of Supreme (ecclesiastical) Patriarch (*saṅgharāja*), with a rank higher than all other monks in the kingdom, and he supported Buddhism fully. This is why the kind of Buddhism that later became known as “Lankan Buddhism” enjoyed growth and stability in the Sukhothai kingdom. There was widespread study of the Buddha’s words (*Buddhavacana*) recorded in the Canon, which led to the arising of Thailand’s first great Buddhist scholar, King Lithai the Great, the fifth king of the Sukhothai kingdom and author of *Tebhūmikathā*, more commonly known as *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, the first research work in the history of the Thai people. For this he studied at least 30 primary and secondary texts (*pakarāṇa*) in the Pāli language.¹

Administration of the Saṅgha in the Sukhothai and Ayudhaya periods

In terms of administration, the Saṅgha in the time of Sukhothai was divided into two groups, the *gāmaṇvāsī* and the *araṇṇavāsī*. *Gāmaṇvāsī* were monks who lived in monasteries (*wat*) within the cities or in rural villages. The duties of

¹ Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya Education Council, *Buddhism in the Thai Kingdom* (Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya Press, 2515), p. 39.

these monks emphasized *ganthadhura*—study of the *Buddhavacana* and teaching the Dhamma to the people. *Araññavāsī* monks lived in forest monasteries. Their duties emphasized *vipassanādhura*, the practice of calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) meditation for attaining the transcendence of suffering. Administration of the Saṅgha in each of the city (*gāma*vāsī) and forest (*arañña*vāsī) wats was done by the abbot, just as it is now. All wats in the kingdom, regardless of whether they were *gāma*vāsī or *arañña*vāsī, were also subject to the administration of the Supreme Patriarch (*saṅgharāja*) appointed by the king.

In the Ayudhaya kingdom, the second Thai kingdom of the Indo Chinese peninsula, administration of the Saṅgha still followed the Sukhothai system. Later it was slightly adapted from that, with the Saṅgha divided into three groups as follows:

1. The “right side” *gāma*vāsī: the *gāma*vāsī monks according to the Sukhothai model.
2. The “left side” *gāma*vāsī: the monks affiliated with a group that traveled to Lanka to receive re-ordination, and when they returned to Thailand established their own group of *gāma*vāsī monks.
3. *Araññavāsī*: the monks who lived in forest monasteries, or meditation monasteries according to the model handed down from the Sukhothai period.

Administration of the Saṅgha in the Ratanakosin period

The Ratanakosin period began in BE 2325, the year in which Phra Bat Somdet Phra Phuttha Yot Fa Chula Lok Maha Rat ascended the throne as the first king of the Cakri dynasty.

During the Thonburi period, which lasted only 15 years, even though King Taksin the Great had applied himself to reforming the Buddhist religion after its period of decline following the loss of Ayudhaya to Burma, gradually bringing it back to the normalcy it enjoyed during the Ayudhayan kingdom, since his reign was so brief he was not able to do very much. The administration of the Saṅgha during the Thonburi period followed the model established in Ayudhaya. With the Ratanakosin period, Phra Bat Somdet Phra

Phuttha Yot Fa Chula Lok Maha Rat made an effort to continue the reformation process begun in Thonburi, in spite of having to engage in many battles to defend the country.

In the early Ratanakosin period the administration of the Saṅgha was no different from that of Ayudhaya and Thonburi. The Saṅgha was still divided into three groups, with only a change in terminology, the term “side” being dropped in favor of “sector,” as follows:

1. The “left side” *gāṃavāsī* became the “northern sector.”
2. The “right side” *gāṃavāsī* became the “southern sector.”
3. The *araññavāsī* remained as before.

For each of these “sectors” a high-ranking *thera* (elder) served as the head with the responsibility of overseeing the administration of all the wats and the monks under his jurisdiction. The Supreme Patriarch held the position of supreme head of all the monks in the kingdom. As for the king, not only was he the head of the kingdom, but he was also legally the highest administrator of the Saṅgha, having the power to appoint or dismiss the Supreme Patriarch as he saw fit. The king’s ecclesiastical power was clearly demonstrated when Phra Bat Somdet Phra Phuttha Yot Fa Chula Lok Maha Rat issued a ten-clause Saṅgha Decree in BE 2344 hoping to eliminate corrupt monks (*alajjī*), who transgressed the monks’ discipline (*vinaya*) and brought disgrace on the Saṅgha as a whole, by expelling them from the Order. Not long after the Saṅgha law was enacted, 128 corrupt monks and novices were expelled from the Order and sentenced to hard labor to atone for the evil deeds they had committed.²

During the Second Reign administration of the Saṅgha was the same as during the First Reign. By the Third Reign, Phra Bat Somdet Phra Nang Klao Chao Yu Hua brought together most of the royal and ordinary monasteries within the province of Bangkok (Krung Thep) as a separate group, known as the “Central Group” (*khana klang*). It was directly under the administration of

² Department of Religious Affairs, *History of Buddhism during the 200 years of the Ratanakosin Era*, Part 1 (Bangkok: Religious Affairs Press, 2525), p. 93.

Krom Somdet Phra Paramānuchit Chinoros who at the time held the rank of Krom Mun Nuchit Chinoros, the Saṅgha Director of Wat Chetuphon. There were four main administrative groups in the Saṅgha as follows:

Northern group

Southern group

Central group

Araññavāsī group

During the Fourth Reign the administration of the Saṅgha was no different from that of the Third Reign. The Dhammayuttika Nikāya, a new order which had arisen during the Third Reign, while it was clearly separated as a new *nikāya* (order) during the Fourth Reign, was nevertheless still included in the Central group, and its administration was in no way separate from that of the rest of the Saṅgha.

Administration of the Saṅgha by Royal Decree

Phra Chula Chom Klao Chao Yu Hua, the Fifth Reign of the Ratanakosin era, decreed the Characteristics of Saṅgha Administration Act, Ratanakosin Era (RE) 121 (BE 2445). This Act was used for Saṅgha administration up until the reign of Somdet Phra Chao Yu Hua Maha Ananda Mahidol, when it was annulled by the government at that time in favor of the Saṅgha Act of BE 2484 on October 14, 2484.

However, from the time the Characteristics of Saṅgha Administration Act RE 121 and later Acts were implemented, Thailand became the Theravda Buddhist country with the most systematic Saṅgha administration in the world. In the announcement for the enactment of the Characteristics of Saṅgha Administration Act RE 121, there appears in the Royal Command the following words:

“And in the Buddhist realm, the administration of the Saṅgha sphere is of great importance, both in terms of the benefit of the religion and in terms of the benefit and prosperity of the Kingdom. If administration of the Saṅgha sphere is based on an orderly plan, the religion will be prosperous, long-lasting and inspire the people to have faith in the Buddha’s teachings, to practice correctly

and study more the good teachings with the monks. [The King] wishes to support and foster the Saṅgha sphere in maintaining their qualities firmly in the religion, so His Majesty graciously ordains to herewith issue this Act....”³

This Act contains eight sections comprising 45 clauses:

Section 1 has two clauses on the name and conditions for use of the Act.

Section 2, dealing with main groups (*gaṇa*), has two clauses. Clause 3 states that this Act does not affect orders (*nikāya*) of the Saṅgha and the head (*saṅghanāyaka*) of each order may continue to stipulate that order's acts and special doctrines as before. Clause 4 stipulates that the *Rachakhana Somdets* and assistant *Chao Khana* monks for all four groups are to be Elders (*mahāthera*), consulting on religious affairs and administration of the Saṅgha sphere in general, and states that these eight Elders are to meet for consultation in the Council of Elders (*Mahāthera samāgama*) with a quorum of five. The decisions of the Council of Elders are absolute and may not be appealed or disputed.

Section 3, dealing with wats, contains five clauses, dealing with the particulars of wats, the building of wats, and application for government recognition of *sīmā* boundaries.

Section 4, dealing with abbots, contains ten clauses. Clauses 10, 11, and 12 deal with the selection and appointment of abbots for royal monasteries (*aram luang*) and ordinary monasteries (*wat rat*) in Bangkok and the provincial cities. Clause 13 lays down the duties of an abbot. Clause 14 deals with the duties of renunciants (*pabbajita*) and householders living in wats. Clause 15 states that all monks and novices are to be registered at a wat. Clause 16 deals with the duties of householders living in wats. Clause 17 lays down the powers of the abbot, while Clauses 17 and 18 deal with appeals against an abbot's orders and administration of the wat.

Section 5, dealing with district groups, contains 10 clauses.

Section 6, dealing with provincial groups, contains 5 clauses.

³ Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, *History of Administration of the Thai Saṅgha* (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya Press, 2521), p. 14.

Section 7, dealing with regional groups, contains 5 clauses.

These three sections deal with the administration of the Saṅgha. They lay down a permanent system of administration with regional, provincial, and district heads, group heads and abbots for governing the Saṅgha in towns, districts and shires, in sequential order. They contain the particulars of selecting and appointing section heads in Bangkok districts and provincial towns, district heads, regional heads, and the duties and powers of these heads in detail down to the appointment of [lesser] ecclesiastical titles by them.

Section 8 deals with powers and contains six clauses. It lays down the duties of the head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the local officials who help the section heads fulfill their duties according to the Act. They lay down the duties of monks and novices and the powers of the section heads, punishments, judgment of cases, appeals, exceptions and formulation of Acts.

The Characteristics of Saṅgha Administration Act of the Fifth Reign contains no clauses dealing with the position, powers and duties of the Supreme Patriarch because it was made at a time when no Supreme Patriarch had been appointed to replace Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja (Sa), who passed away in BE 2442. The administration of each of the sections of the Saṅgha was in the hands of the section head. The King, who was the supreme patron of the Saṅgha, himself governed the national Saṅgha body. Thus this Royal Decree lays down that section heads and assistant section heads form a Council of Elders to serve as the King's advisors on religious matters.

The Characteristics of Saṅgha Administration Act was amended and added to after the change of government in BE 2475, stipulating that the Royal Granting of *sīmā* boundaries was to be issued as an Act and recorded in the Government Gazette, and in BE 2477 it was amended once more at Clause 7, stating that ownership of land belonging to a wat or the Saṅgha cannot be transferred except by the power of the law.⁴

⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

The Saṅgha Act of BE 2484

After the people's revolution and change of government to a democracy on June 24, BE 2475, Thailand used the Constitution as the highest body of law in the land. The Constitution stipulated that sovereign power comes from the Thai people. The monarch continued in his position as head of the country under the Constitution, exercising legislative power through the parliament, judicial power through the courts, and administrative power through the Cabinet. The democratic government, wishing to have the administration of the Saṅgha follow the model of national government, brought in the Saṅgha Act BE 2484 to replace the Characteristics of Saṅgha Administration Act RE 121, on 14 October, 2484, as stated in the government's announcement at the time:

“...This Saṅgha Act has been endorsed by the Saṅgha and has passed smoothly through Parliament. The importance of the Saṅgha Act is that it organizes the administration of the Saṅgha following the nation's system of government as far as could be done without infringing on the *Vinaya*....”⁵

The Saṅgha Act of BE 2484 contained 60 clauses. Four of these were general statements, one was for a specific instance, and the remaining 55 were divided into eight sections, as follows:

Section 1, The Supreme Patriarch, contained 6 clauses dealing with the appointment, the powers and duties of the Supreme Patriarch following the model of the Constitution—i.e., the Supreme Patriarch issued Saṅgha Directives (*saṅghāṇati*) on the advice of the Saṅgha Council (*saṅghasabhā*), governed the Saṅgha through the Saṅgha Cabinet [*Khana saṅghamontri*] and judged legal cases (*adhikaraṇa*) through the Vinaya Council—and with other persons acting for the Supreme Patriarch.

Section 2, The Saṅgha Council, contained 17 clauses dealing with the components of the Saṅgha Council, the members of the Saṅgha Council, the meeting of the Saṅgha Council, the issuance of Saṅgha Directives and the

⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

broadcasting of information on meetings of the Council, committees of the Saṅgha Council, the Saṅgha Cabinet and committees appointed by the Saṅgha Cabinet.

Section 3, Saṅgha Cabinet, contained 10 clauses dealing with the composition of the Saṅgha Cabinet, making the Saṅgha Chief responsible for the administration of the Saṅgha, with the organization of administration for the Saṅgha into organs of administration, education, broadcasting, and public services, with a Saṅgha Minister responsible for each of those areas, just as the Prime Minister, the ministers of individual departments and the Cabinet govern the country. This section also dealt with the forms and procedures for regional administration of the Saṅgha according to the Saṅgha Directives, executive inspectors, the appointment and removal or transfer of preceptors (*upajjhāya*) and monks of executive positions, which were to be done according to the principles and methods outlined in the Saṅgha Directives.

Section 4, Wats, contained 8 clauses, dealing with kinds of wats. The building, inauguration, combination, transference, moving, and abandoning of wats was to be in accordance with the laws of the ministry. The Royal Conference of *sīmā* boundaries, the management of monastery grounds and land belonging to the wat, the administration of wats, the duties and powers of the abbot and the registration of monks and novices.

Section 5, Property of the Religion, contained 4 clauses dealing with the organization and care of central belongings of the religion and belongings of the wat.

Section 6, The Vinaya Council, contained 3 clauses, dealing with the examination and adjudication of legal cases by the Vinaya Council.

Section 7, Penalties, contained 4 clauses, stipulating the penalties according to the Act for people disobeying the Act in relation to spreading information about the convening of the Saṅgha Council and other meetings and any actions designed to make others think one is a *bhikkhu* [monk], calumny of Thai monks and dishonest stewards (*veyyāvaccakara*).

The essence of the Saṅgha Act BE 2484 was the change from a Saṅgha administration by a Council of Elders (*Mahāthera samāgama*) that had been in use ever since the Fifth Reign to a system of administration modeled on the parliamentary system used in national government, which was democratic. According to this Act, the Supreme Patriarch, who was the head of all the Saṅgha in the kingdom, and who was known as Sakalamahāsaṅghaparināyaka, did not govern the Saṅgha directly, because in the Act it is specified that he issues Saṅgha Directives (*saṅghāṇati*: laws, administration procedures) on the advice of the Saṅgha Council, governs the Saṅgha through the Saṅgha Cabinet, and judges legal cases through the Vinaya Council, which is similar to the political administration of the country in which the King held the position of head of the country, issuing Acts on the advice of Parliament, exercising his power of rule through the Cabinet, and exercising his judicial powers through the courts of justice. The essential components of Saṅgha administration according to the Saṅgha Act BE 2484 are as follows:

1. The Saṅgha Council (*saṅghasabhā*). It was composed of no more than 45 members with the qualifications of (1) status of thera from Dhamma level upwards; (2) a first-grade section leader; (3) first-grade Pāli scholar.⁶

2. The Saṅgha Cabinet. It was composed of one Saṅgha Head (*saṅghanāyaka*) and no more than 9 Saṅgha ministers, appointed by the Supreme Patriarch, who was the supreme head of the Saṅgha (*sakalamahāsaṅghaparināyaka*).

3. Saṅgha administrative organizations, comprising:

a. Central administration, divided into four organizations:

(1) Organization for administration, with one Saṅgha minister and one deputy Saṅgha minister in charge.

(2) Organization for education, with one Saṅgha minister and one deputy Saṅgha minister in charge.

⁶ One who receives a Pāli grade between VII-IX in the classical Pāli studies. The 'first grade' denotes a set of the *highest grades-editor*.

(3) Organization for broadcasting, with one Saṅgha minister and one deputy Saṅgha minister in charge.

(4) Organization for public works, with one Saṅgha minister and one deputy Saṅgha minister in charge.

The deputy Saṅgha minister was optional, but in practice there were always deputy Saṅgha ministers in every organization.

b. Regional administration followed the stipulations of the Saṅgha Directives, administration divided into region (*phak*), province (*changwat*), district (*ampher*), shire (*tambol*) and wat. The administrators were the regional head, provincial head, district head, shire head and abbot, in that order. In addition there were section heads who were responsible for internal administration within their areas, and in each of the provinces there were provincial Saṅgha committees and district Saṅgha committees. On the regional level, each line of work was under the Saṅgha minister responsible. For example, administrative work was directly under the Saṅgha minister for administration, while educational work was directly under the Saṅgha minister for education.

The objectives of the government in drafting the Saṅgha Act of BE 2484 and abolishing the Characteristics of Saṅgha Administration Act of RE 121 (BE 2445) may be divided into two:

1. To change the administration of the Saṅgha to a democratic system, following the example of the national government.

2. To pave the way for a merging of the two main orders [*nikāya*] of the Thai Saṅgha which was divided into the *Mahānikāya* and *Dhammayuttika* orders.

As to the first objective, this can be gleaned from the government announcement of the time, a part of which reads:

“...This Saṅgha Act has been endorsed by the Saṅgha and has passed smoothly through the Parliament. The importance of the Saṅgha Act is that it

organizes the administration of the Saṅgha following the national system of government, as far as can be done without infringing on the Vinaya....”⁷

As for the second objective, it can be gleaned from a passage at the end of the same announcement, which reads:

“...What is admirable in this Act is that it paves the way for the carrying out of a major Rehearsal (*saṅgāyana*) of the Tipiṭaka, and when the Rehearsal has been completed ... to perhaps merge the Saṅgha *nikāya* into one. [Then] harmony and unity will arise for the Thai people, both in the political arena and in the religious one....”⁸

The second objective of this Saṅgha Act is an important one because in Clause 60, a special clause, there is a provision for a Rehearsal (*saṅgāyana*) of the Dhamma-Vinaya to be completed in no more than 8 years, at the completion of which the two orders of the Saṅgha, *Mahānikāya* and the *Dhammayuttika*, were to be merged.

However, events did not turn out as the government wished. Even though the government exerted some influence or power in recommending the merging of the two Thai Buddhist orders, asking, or even demanding, that *Mahānikāya* monks and *Dhammayuttika* monks live together at Wat Sri Mahādhātu, a wat newly built by the government with a *Dhammayuttika* abbot, their co-existence at that monastery was short-lived. Eventually the *Mahānikāya* monks withdrew, leaving only the *Dhammayuttika* monks, which is why Wat Sri Mahādhātu has been a *Dhammayuttika* monastery ever since.

There is a truth in regard to religion that still applies as much today as it ever did, and that is that there has never been a person or a power in this world capable of fusing two religions or two religious orders into one. Efforts to bring two religions together will lead to the creation of a new religion. Efforts to bring together two religious orders will result in the creation of a third order. The efforts of the Thai government at that time were inconsistent with

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

this truth. The result was a failure in the history of Thai Buddhism that is well worth studying.

The Saṅgha Act of BE 2484 led to many problems, which may be arranged as follows:

1. *The problem of the merging of the two nikāya.* The efforts to merge the two *nikāya*, *Dhammayuttika* and *Mahānikāya*, entailed, in BE 2486, the formulation of a *Saṅgāyanā* committee to conduct proceedings for a Rehearsal of the Dhamma-Vinaya which was to be completed in no more than 8 years. When that was completed there was to be a unification of the two orders, in accordance with the Saṅgha Act. However, it turned out that when the committee actually met, its members, coming from different orders, experienced many conflicts and found it impossible to harmonize and agree. The more they met the more conflict there was. Rather than coming together they moved further apart, so that both sides eventually became fed up with the meetings. Eventually there were no more meetings and the committee was virtually dissolved.

The reasons the *Saṅgāyanā* Committee could not fulfill the objectives of the Saṅgha Act of BE 2484 may be considered as follows:

1) Rehearsal of the Dhamma-Vinaya has already been well conducted by Theras of the past, so there was nothing of importance demanding further work or addition.

2) The reasons monks split into different orders are lack of uniformity in morality—having different levels of moral observance—and lack of uniformity in views—holding disparate views or ideas about the practice and the teachings. When there is lack of uniformity on both fronts it is impossible to reconcile two separated religious groups.

2. *Having the administration of the Saṅgha follow the model of worldly administration.* The Saṅgha Act stipulated that the administration of the Saṅgha was to be modeled on national administration, with its parliament and power divided into three sectors: legislative power, administrative power, and judicial power. The Supreme Patriarch, the supreme head of the Saṅgha, who had previously administered the Saṅgha directly through the Council of

Elders, was reduced to merely a figurehead of power, his power being dispersed to other organizations: the power to issue Saṅgha Directives (equaling the issuing of laws by the parliament) belonged to the Saṅgha Council; the power to administer belonged to the Saṅgha Cabinet; and the power to adjudicate legal cases belonged to the Vinaya Council. This kind of Saṅgha administration was not compatible with the precedents laid out in the Buddha's Dhamma-Vinaya, which conferred power on the Saṅgha (a meeting of four or more bhikkhus) as the authority in religious activities, and decreed that monks were to respect each other on the basis of seniority [i.e., duration of service in the monk's robes]. Since it was incompatible, all kinds of difficulties arose, as observed by one contemporary of the time:

...As the preliminary difficulties began to increase, the leaders of the Dhammayuttika order (all those who were members of the Saṅgha Council) submitted a letter to the Supreme Patriarch, to be submitted to Parliament, the gist of which was that from the implementation of the Saṅgha Act of BE 2484 till the time of the letter (5 July, 2490), a time of seven years, the writers of the letter, who were involved in administration of the Saṅgha, had observed that it had had a very detrimental effect on the religion. Specifically, the principle of administration through *vinaya* had been impaired, time and effort had been wasted, and wastage had increased to no benefit, because of many flaws in the Act. For example: 1. it conflicted with the Dhamma-Vinaya; 2. it conflicted with the Constitution which granted full freedom in the matter of religious beliefs; 3. it did not bring about the result stated in the law; 4. it did not accord with the Dhamma; 5. its wording was flawed; 6. it conflicted with the Saṅgha's methods of administration.⁹

3. *Having a Saṅgha Council*. Another important flaw of this Saṅgha Act which led to problems was the provision of having a Saṅgha Council. On the surface it appeared to be a good idea, but in actual fact it was not. Nationally there are many more *Mahānikāya* monks than *Dhammayuttika* monks. Thus the number of *Mahānikāya* members of the Saṅgha Council naturally had to

⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

be greater than the number of *Dhammayuttika* monks. The practical outcome was that right from the very outset the *Dhammayuttika* monks were always the "opposition party" in the Saṅgha Council's issuing of Saṅgha Directives (as also in administration, the appointing of preceptors [*upajjhāya*] and in the Vinaya Council).¹⁰

The operation of the Saṅgha council was similar to the operation of the worldly parliament. Motions were presented, arguments given in favor and against, interjections arose and debates were given just as politicians do, and sometimes these were quite heated and more than what was appropriate for peaceful renunciants.

When the Saṅgha Council was first established, it was attended by members from both *nikāya*, but the meetings became less and less peaceful. Juniors were trying to get the better of seniors and arguments between the two orders became more and more aggressive, until eventually the monks from both sides who were more inclined to the Dhamma-Vinaya became fed up with the meetings, and no longer wished to go and become embroiled in arguments. Eventually only a minority of members continued to go to the meetings. Importantly, most of the senior elders ceased to participate. Thus the Saṅgha Directives that were issued were a result of the wishes of a minority group, who were mostly of the status of students and monks under the care of other monks.¹¹ In the Saṅgha society, the Buddha stipulated that monks respect each other on the basis of seniority, according to who was ordained first, not who was older in terms of age. Someone gone forth afterwards, even though he be older, must respect and salute a monk who went forth before him, even if that monk is young enough to be his son or grandson. The Buddha stated that monks should listen to the words of the elders, who were the Saṅgha fathers and Saṅgha leaders, and this would cause the Saṅgha to fare in prosperity and not to decline:

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

¹¹ Ibid.

As long as monks honor, respect and worship those who are Elders, *rattanñū* ("having many nights," i.e., experienced), who have long gone forth, who are the Saṅgha fathers and Saṅgha leaders, and take their words as being worthy of respect and belief, prosperity can definitely be expected, no decline.¹²

The implementation of Saṅgha administrative activities in the form of Saṅgha Directives by a Saṅgha Council in which junior monks were able to debate with senior Theras old enough to be their preceptors was against the fundamental tradition laid down by the Buddha, and this caused the senior Theras, heavily inclined toward the Dhamma-Vinaya, to become disaffected by, and no longer attend, the meetings of the Saṅgha Council. In later times the meetings of the Council tended to be attended by too few to make up a quorum. Again, it is not possible to issue just anything as a Saṅgha Directive, but only things that do not conflict with the Dhamma-Vinaya and which can be implemented in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya. Thus, throughout the 21 years in which the Saṅgha Act of BE 2484 was effective, the Saṅgha Council issued only ten Saṅgha Directives, covering only seven subjects.¹³ Once the Saṅgha Directives defined by law were all issued the Saṅgha Council no longer had any work to do. In the end all that was left of the Saṅgha Council was the formalities of an opening ceremony and a closing ceremony.¹⁴

The announcement of the Saṅgha Act BE 2484, which the government of the time expected to bring about such harmony that the two *nikāya* of the country's monks would merge into one, turned out to have the opposite effect. The longer it was used the more disharmony arose in the country's Saṅgha. The Supreme Patriarch felt that if things were left to go on as they were without any kind of remedial action even more damage would be done to the religion, so he called a meeting of the senior Elders, those who were the important cogs in the administrative process of both *nikāya*, to consult on the

¹² Syāmrattā Tipiṭaka, vol. 23, § 21, p. 22.

¹³ Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya Press, *History of Administration of the Thai Saṅgha*, Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya Press, 2521, p. 22.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

matter at the Jewel Cottage in Wat Bovoranives, on 12 July, 2494, at which the following three points were agreed upon:

1. Central administration would still be conducted by the Saṅgha Council, but implementation of that administration would be carried out according to *nikāya*.

2. Regional administration was to be done according to *nikāya*.

3. Other particulars were to be consulted on later.

The government and the Saṅgha Cabinet passed a resolution upholding these points (Cabinet Resolution no. 11/2494, dated 21 September, 2494).¹⁵

Throughout the time the Saṅgha Act BE 2484 had been in effect there had been two Saṅgha ministers for each organization, one *Mahānikāya* Elder and one *Dhammayuttika* Elder. Thus, once these three new agreements had been adopted, the *Mahānikāya* Saṅgha Minister could only administer the *Mahānikāya* sector, while the *Dhammayuttika* Saṅgha Minister could likewise only administer the *Dhammayuttika* sector. The three points of agreement have been in use from that time till the present. Each province, for example, has two provincial heads, one *Mahānikāya* and one *Dhammayuttika*. Each of these provincial heads oversees the administration of monks and novices belonging to his respective order, and this has effectively caused the friction and conflict that arose during the Saṅgha Act of BE 2484 to disappear.

Since this Saṅgha Act was one that led to so many problems, the revolutionary government of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, with the endorsement and agreement of the Saṅgha, announced its annulment and the implementation of a new Saṅgha Act, BE 2505 in its place, on 25 December, BE 2505. The Saṅgha Act was announced in the government gazette, volume 79, Section 115, on 31 December BE 2505, effective from 1 January, 2506.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

Administration of the Saṅgha at present

a. *The Saṅgha Act BE 2505*

The Saṅgha Act BE 2505, announced to replace the annulled Saṅgha Act of BE 2484, contains 46 clauses, not including general passages and time-specific clauses. They are divided into eight sections:

Section 1, concerning the Supreme Patriarch, contains five clauses dealing with the appointment, powers and duties of the Supreme Patriarch, the naming of persons empowered to act on his behalf, and the termination of a Supreme Patriarch's office.

Section 2, concerning the Council of Elders, contains 8 clauses dealing with the quorum of the Council, appointment of secretary to the Council, termination of the position, and the powers and duties of the committee of the Council of Elders.

Section 3, concerning administration of the Saṅgha, contains 4 clauses dealing with the organization of Saṅgha administration, regional Saṅgha administration, appointment and revocation of preceptor-ship (*upajjhāya*) according to the standards and methods designated by the Council of Elders.

Section 4, concerning *niggaha-kamma* (censure) and defrocking, contains 7 clauses, dealing with monks deserving of *niggaha-kamma* when they transgress the Dhamma-Vinaya and definition of standards and procedures for imposing *niggaha-kamma* in different cases.

Section 5, concerning wats, contains 9 clauses, dealing with kinds of wat, the building, establishment, moving, and abandoning of wats, application for government recognition of *sīmā* boundaries, abbots and the appointment of deputy abbots.

Section 6, concerning belongings of the religion, contains 2 clauses dealing with the kinds of care and maintenance of belongings of the religion.

Section 7, concerning determining of punishments, contains 3 clauses dealing with punishments for those who refuse to comply when given *niggaha-kamma* and those who falsely accuse Saṅgha members.

Section 8, a miscellaneous section, contains 2 clauses, dealing with monks appointed to administrative positions within the Saṅgha and stewards (*veyyā-*

vacakara) as staff as defined by the Criminal Code and the administration of Saṅghas other than the Thai Saṅgha in conformity with the Ministry's laws.

b. *The gist of the Saṅgha Act BE 2505*

According to the Saṅgha Act BE 2505:

The King appoints the Supreme Patriarch (Clause 7).

The Supreme Patriarch holds the position of supreme head of the Saṅgha. He holds authority over the Saṅgha and issues the Supreme Patriarch's Decrees which do not conflict with or infringe on the laws, the Dhamma-Vinaya or the rulings of the Saṅgha Council (Clause 8). He holds the position of Chairman of the Council of Elders (Clause 9).

The Council of Elders is made up of the Supreme Patriarch, who automatically holds the position of Chairman of the Council, all ecclesiastical heads of the Somdet rank, who automatically hold the position of members of the Council, and other ecclesiastic heads appointed by the Supreme Patriarch, of which there are no less than 4 and no more than 8 (Clause 12). Members of the Council of Elders appointed by the Supreme Patriarch hold their positions for two years at a time and may be re-appointed (Clause 14).

The Director-General of the Department of Religious Affairs is the secretary to the Council of Elders and the Department of Religious Affairs performs the duty of office to the secretary of the Council of Elders (Clause 13).

The Council of Elders has the authority and the duty to govern the Saṅgha and keep it running smoothly. To this end it has the power to issue Decrees of the Saṅgha Council and regulations, lay down procedures or give commands, as long as they do not conflict with or infringe on the law and the Dhamma-Vinaya.

From the provisions given here, the Supreme Patriarch commands the Saṅgha and administers the Saṅgha via the Council of Elders, of which he himself is the chairman. It is administration of the whole sphere of Saṅgha from one central authority, a system which more easily creates harmony and unity than other forms of administration.

According to the Council of Elders Regulations, Volume 4 (BE 2506) dealing with procedures for Saṅgha administration, all levels and sectors of Saṅgha administration are to have ecclesiastical heads of both Mahānikāya and Dhammayuttika affiliation governing the wats, monks and novices of each of those nikāya (Clause 4).

Procedures for central Saṅgha administration stipulate methods for ensuring order and harmony, methods for religious instruction and educational welfare, methods for spreading the Buddhist teachings, methods for implementing public services and public welfare concerning the Saṅgha and the religion, to be conducted according to the procedures of the Council of Elders (Clause 5). For the purpose of Saṅgha administration in all sectors and levels and in order to reduce the burden on the Council of Elders, ecclesiastical heads are to perform the duties of their respective nikāya in the following administrative sectors:

(1) Central sector head carries out administrative duties for regions 1, 2, 3, 13, 14 and 15.

(2) Northern sector head carries out administrative duties for regions 4, 5, 6 and 7.

(3) Eastern sector head carries out administrative duties for regions 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12.

(4) Southern sector head carries out administrative duties for regions 16, 17 and 18.

(5) Dhammayuttika sector head carries out administrative duties for Dhammayuttika order in all regions.

The Supreme Patriarch appoints these sector heads and gives them their duties, to be in conformity with the motions of the Council of Elders (Clause 6).

According to the Saṅgha Act BE 2505 regional administration of the Saṅgha is divided into regions [*phak*], provinces [*changwat*], districts [*ampher*] and shires [*tambol*] (Clause 21). There are 18 Saṅgha regions, each made up of a number of provincial sectors according to the Council of Elders regulations 3 (BE 2505) and the addenda. The number of provincial, district, and shire

administrative sectors is to be in accordance with the national administration sectors for provinces, districts and shires, although special cases can be made through a ruling from the Council of Elders.

For regional administration of the Saṅgha, monks are to be appointed to administer in order thus: *chao khana phak* [regional ecclesiastical head], *chao khana changwat* [provincial ecclesiastical head], *chao khana ampher* [district ecclesiastical head] and *chao khana tambol* [shire ecclesiastical head]. If the Council of Elders sees fit, an assistant *chao khana* for province, *ampher* or *tambol* can be appointed (Clause 22). The appointment or revocation of the positions of preceptor, abbot, assistant abbot, other administrative positions of the Saṅgha and steward is to follow the principles and procedures defined by the regulations of the Council of Elders.

According to the Council of Elders Regulations Volume 4 (BE 2506), dealing with administrative procedures of the Saṅgha, the *chao khana phak* has the following powers and duties:

(1) To carry out administration of the Saṅgha so that it is in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya, law, regulations of the Council of Elders and rulings or procedures of the Council of Elders, decrees from the Council of Elders and Commands of the Supreme Patriarch.

(2) To control and see that order, virtue, religious study, educational welfare, propagation of Buddhist teachings, public services and public welfare fare smoothly.

(3) To examine the imposing of *niggaha-kamma*, and examine appeals, orders or judgments on the provincial level.

(4) To rightly redress obstacles of the provincial head.

(5) To control and command ecclesiastical heads, abbots and monks and novices within his jurisdiction or within his area of administration, and inspect and advise on performance of duties of those within his jurisdiction.

The provincial head has the same duties of administering the monks within the boundaries of his province as the regional head has for his region. In (1), it is added that he carries out the administration of the Saṅgha according to the directives of his superior. Point (3) reads that he examines the imposition of

niggaha-kamma, and any appeals, orders, or judgments of the district head. Point (4) states that he rightly redresses obstacles of the district head.

The district head has the same duties in administering the monks with his district as the provincial head and regional head. (3) He examines appeals, orders, or judgments of heads of shires. (4) He rightly redresses obstacles of the shire head.

The shire head has the same duties in administering the Saṅgha within his shire as the provincial head and regional head. (3) He examines appeals, orders, and judgments of abbots. (4) He rightfully redresses obstacles of abbots. (5) He controls and commands abbots and monks and novices.

In Clause 37 of the Saṅgha Act BE 2505, the Abbot has the following duties:

(1) To care for and maintain the wat, and organize the activities and possessions of the wat.

(2) To administer and see that the renunciants [*pabbajita*] and householders within or living in the wat practice according to the Dhamma-Vinaya, the laws of the Council of Elders, and the laws, regulations, procedures or directives of the Council of Elders.

(3) To take on the responsibility for the education, practice, and teaching of the Dhamma-Vinaya to renunciants and householders.

(4) To facilitate the cultivation of goodness (*kusala*).

In Clause 38, the Abbot has the following powers:

(1) To forbid any renunciant or householder who has not received permission from staying in the wat.

(2) To expel from the wat any renunciants or householders who do not obey the Abbot.

(3) To order renunciants or householders living within the wat to do work within the wat or to make a promise of good behavior or to make an apology when that renunciant or householder within the wat disobeys any orders of the Abbot which are in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya, the regulations or the Council of Elders, and the rules, procedures and directives of the Council of Elders.

In addition, there are Regulations of the Council of Elders Volume 5 (BE 2506) dealing with the appointment and dismissal of abbots, Volume 7 (BE 2506) dealing with the appointment and dismissal of preceptors, Volume 8 (BE 2506) dealing with the appointment and dismissal of stewards, Volume 9 (BE 2506) dealing with the imposing of *niggaha-kamma* on monks, and Volume 10 (BE 2513) dealing with the appointment of acting abbots and also the procedures and directives of the Council of Elders for the administration of the Saṅgha in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya and the laws.

It can be seen from the nature of Saṅgha administration according to the Saṅgha Act BE 2505 that the highest organ of administration is the Council of Elders, comprising the Supreme Patriarch as Chairman and a number of elders as members of the Council of Elders. The Saṅgha Directives, laws, procedures and motions on the administration of the Saṅgha issued or determined by the Council of Elders are put down in print in a letter of announcements of the Council of Elders, which is similar to the Government Gazette in worldly government, but the letter of announcements of the Council of Elders is not issued on a regular basis. If there are no announcements to be made there may be a long gap between such letters of announcements.

The future: how will future administration of the Saṅgha be?

When we examine the form Saṅgha administration in Thailand has taken so far, from the past to the present, it may be said that administration by a Council of Elders may be the most suitable form of administration according to the Dhamma-Vinaya, in which the Buddha made the Saṅgha the highest authority in all religious activities and had the monks revere and obey the *theras*, the elders, who were of greater experience, the fathers and leaders of the Saṅgha, by stating that as long as the monks respected and obeyed the words of the elders prosperity and not decline would be assured for the Saṅgha.

However, while the administration of the Saṅgha via a Council of Elders is appropriate, the Saṅgha Act of BE 2505 now in use does have a number of weak points which require correction. These may be examined as follows:

1. *The Council of Elders is an organ on the level of policy making more than on the level of practical operation.*

One fact that needs to be considered and acknowledged is that the members of the Council of Elders are entirely Mahāthera aged 60 years and over. In a worldly government they would all have been retired and relieved of their duties on account of age. But according to the Saṅgha Act of BE 2505 they must continue to work even though many of the elders are almost 80 years of age, or even more. Some of them are even 90 years old. All these elders are certainly endowed with much wisdom and experience—as we would say in Buddhism, they are *rattaññū*: they have passed many nights. In ordinary terms they have much experience because they have been ordained many years and seen a lot in their time. They are elders of the status of *garuṭṭhāniyapuggala*: people who should be revered and believed as Saṅgha fathers and Saṅgha leaders according to the Buddhist custom.

However, considered in terms of the natural facts of human beings, people of such an age are classed as elderly people. They are old. It is appropriate to have these great theras as members of the Council of Elders, the highest administrative body according to Thai system of Saṅgha administration, but the work these elders have to do should be purely in a policy making, advisory, and judiciary capacity at the highest level, not work on the level of practical operation requiring examination and seeking out suitable ways or methods to carry out the administration of the Saṅgha, as it is at present. Work on the operational level should be the responsibility of subsidiary organizations which can use their manpower and time to finish the work of examining and sifting through before submitting matters to the Council of Elders for their approval as the final stage in the process. But according to the Saṅgha Act BE 2505 there are no such subsidiary organs. The Council of Elders must examine and adjudicate every matter brought before it, from

minor matters to national concerns. Thus it may be valid to call the Saṅgha Act BE 2505 “an Act for torturing old people.”

2. *There is no initiation of new work or projects for keeping propagational organs and methods in step with changing times.*

The administration of the Saṅgha on the highest level, which is the Council of Elders, and on the lower levels, divided into sectors [*hon*], regions [*phak*], provinces [*changwat*], districts [*ampher*] and shires [*tambol*], is still the same today as it was 30 years ago. While there has not been any regression, there has not been any progress. Thus it is merely preserving an established tradition of administration. But if we consider the changing times and the age of globalization, the unmoving administration of the Saṅgha which has initiated no new projects or developed in different areas, has caused operations, be they of administration, education, propagation or public services, to become obsolete and old fashioned.

3. *There are no secondary organs below the Council of Elders to take long-term responsibility for various activities of the religion.*

As already stated, the elders who form the members of the Council of Elders, while learned, experienced and worthy of reverence and faith, are nevertheless aged. Some of them are so aged they can hardly get up and walk. They are not of an age in which they can do the heavy work of administering many complicated religious matters which require a great deal of physical and intellectual expenditure. In terms of their age, if we were to compare it with a fire, it would be a fire that has passed the stage of brilliance and is in the process of dying and turning to ashes and charcoal. Thus it is not realistic to expect those elders to consistently work efficiently, speedily, and energetically, to come up with new projects and ideas, as we would expect from those still of working age, and such expectation conflicts with the teaching on the *sappurisa-dhamma*.

For these reasons, the work of administering the religion in its various areas, such as administration, education, propagation, and public services, which require continuous and applied work, and may require new ideas and projects in order to benefit Buddhism, the Thai society and worldly beings as a

whole, should be the responsibility of a secondary organ, run by elders possessed of learning and experience and who are still of working age. Their operation should be in the form of a committee. The Council of Elders should only have the responsibility of defining and controlling policy, being available for consultation or advice to the secondary organ, and passing motions adopting, rejecting or giving final judgment on the matters proposed to them by the secondary organ. If it is possible to do this, prosperity and growth for Buddhism, and progress in Buddhist activities, can be certainly expected.

Suggestions

In order to reduce the burden on the Council of Elders and to bring about a stable growth of Buddhism in this global age, four secondary organs should be established, as follows:

1. Office of the committee for Saṅgha administration

This office will have the responsibility of taking the policies of Saṅgha administration determined by the Council of Elders and putting them into real, effective practice. In addition, the central committee of the office will also have the duty of drafting regulations necessary for the peace, order and prosperity of the Saṅgha sphere and submitting them to the Council of Elders for approval. Once the Council of Elders has considered and approved a proposal, [the office] ensures that it is practiced everywhere in accordance with the regulations. When administrative problems arise special subcommittees may be established to study or examine them and find solutions on a case-to-case basis, and to see that Acts for Saṅgha administration are enforced throughout the country speedily and fairly for all parties concerned.

2. Office of the committee for Saṅgha education

This will perform the function of drafting policies and plans for the education of monks and novices in every aspect and on every level, to be submitted to the Council of Elders for their examination and approval. When proposals have been approved, [the office] puts them into practice and sees them through to successful completion.

The education of the Saṅgha, divided into *nak tham* (Dhamma) and Pāli studies and with presiding Dhamma chiefs and Pāli chiefs, as used at present, should be brought together as part of the work of the office of the committee of Saṅgha education, who will undertake to improve the curriculum and education methods and assess results in ways that are appropriate for the Saṅgha in the global age by, for example, establishing colleges for Pāli studies, both central and regional, and organizing a system of specialized studies for which those who complete them can receive appropriate diplomas or degrees.

However, exactly what work will be under the direction of the office of the committee for Saṅgha education is something to be decided by the committee responsible for amending the Saṅgha Act after careful and thorough examination.

3. Office of the committee for Saṅgha propagation

This office will take on responsibility for the propagation of Buddhism, both within Thailand and in other countries, determining policies and forming plans of operation for propagation in keeping with the times, improving the methods used to present the Buddha's teachings to target groups of specific age and social status. If necessary, the office may establish an institute for training monks and novices so that they gain the knowledge and ability needed for teaching, and so rejuvenate the institute for training "Dhamma ambassadors," which at present exists only in name, so that the spread of Buddhism in other countries is more efficient and suitable, rather than just leaving the task to whoever wants to do it, or each party acting independently, as is done at present.

4. Office of the committee for Saṅgha public services

This office will perform the task of determining policies and forming work plans in regard to public services within the Saṅgha throughout the kingdom, such as policies concerning the building of wats, the establishment of "Saṅgha residences" (*samnak song*), the building of religious places (*sasana sathan*), the encouragement of youth education by granting Saṅgha property for the building of schools, helping with funds for constructing school buildings, building shire public health offices, establishing training centers and child care

centers and other kinds of social welfare work that do not conflict with the proper conduct of a renunciant.

Regarding the form of these four offices operating below the Council of Elders, they should be established along the lines of offices of the civil service like the Bureau for Industrial Production Standards, the Office of Food and Drug Administration, Office of the Consumer Protection Agency. The offices must be centrally located to easily coordinate with the Council of Elders and the Religious Affairs Department. Apart from the main offices there may also be branch offices on both the regional and provincial levels. For the operation of the offices there must be regular officials working on a full-time basis, stopping only on observance days, Sundays and on the various public holidays held by the civil service.

The officials running these offices will be working on the following capacities:

1. Secretary-general
2. One to three deputy secretary-generals
3. Department supervisor
4. Department head
5. Section or group head

Other personnel will be required, such as computer operators, typists, clerks, messengers, drivers, caretakers, etc.

The work of the offices will be in the form of a committee just like the offices of the civil service, which comprise a committee with the secretary-general of the office acting as secretary, with for example, a committee for Saṅgha administration, a committee for Saṅgha education, a committee for Saṅgha propagation, and so on. Lower down will be the special subcommittees of which the secretary-general or deputy secretary-general may or may not be a member, and these special committees can be made up of as many people as required.

In summary, the administration of the Saṅgha in the form of a Council of Elders is a suitable way of administering the Saṅgha, but expecting the Council of Elders to examine and pass judgment on every matter big and small

is highly unsuitable. Thus there should be an amendment to the Saṅgha Act BE 2505 for the four secondary organs to the Council of Elders stated here. Not only will this be reducing the burden on the Council of Elders, but it will also be putting the policies into steady practice, allowing the various activities of Buddhism to progress in step with the age void of communications frontiers we call the age of globalization.

[Translated from the Thai version by *Bruce Evans*]