

## An Analysis of the Significance of Khmer Buddhist Monastery in Society

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### Abstract

The objectives of this academic article aims to present 1) what is the monasteries mean for the sake of Khmer people's daily life since ancient to the present times 2) how understanding of crucial role plays of the Khmer Buddhist monasteries in society, and 3) where is the core value of Khmer Buddhist monasteries coming from in the framework of Buddhist philosophy and also Khmer concepts.

**Keywords:** Khmer Monastery, Khmer Concepts, Buddhist Philosophy

### Introduction

For Khmer society, the monasteries or other it's so-called (Pagodas/Wat) are still important catalyst to collect the spirit of Khmer nationality even though during the critical period since ancient to the present times, because the monastery implied the educational philosophy of Buddhism via Buddha's images, status, and Buddhist folktales were painted on the wall of Khmer temples/monasteries as well to reflect the Buddhist ethics, Khmer traditional education through the monasteries.

In this regards, to understanding clearly about the role of Khmer monastery engaged in Buddhism, so it has understood about Buddhist concepts in the monasteries and how Buddhism influencing on the whole Khmer society.

According to Cambodian/Khmer intellectuals and Western scholars found their research article was found. (Zepp, 1997 : 4 - 5)

The early Angkor temples were not Buddhist, but Hindu. The very early temples were based on the cult of Siva, while by the year 1000 the focus had shifted to the cult of Vishnu. In Cambodia today, all the cult of Hinduism is grouped together under the title "Brahmanism" The influence of

Brahmanism can be seen in many Cambodian pagodas. The old Hindu gods appear especially in the carvings and friezes around the entrances.

In terms of Brahmanism and Buddhism to influence over the ancient Khmer society, so it has observed the following:

Buddhism gained its major foothold in Cambodia round the year 1200 under the reign of the famous King Jayavarman VII, builder of Bayon temple, perhaps the most well-known of the Angkor Thom complex of temples in Siem Reap. The Bayon, with its four-face gods, was the first of the Angkor temples devoted to the worship of Buddhism. (Zepp, 1997 : 4)

Originally, Buddhism was born in India in the 6th century BC and was divided into two major sects, the Theravada sect and the Mahayana sect. The Theravada sect worships the Buddha, who has attained enlightenment and entered Nirvana. Today, the countries that practice Theravada Buddhism are the Kingdom of Cambodia, Kingdom of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and some parts of India.

The Mahayana sect follows the teachings and believing in many great bodhisattvas who have not yet attained Nirvana and are waiting to save the world. These bodhisattvas include Lord, Female God, Maitreya, and Baramita Wisdom. Also, The Mahayana sect believes the Buddha is a miracle, divided into all parts, depending on the stage.

Buddhism has become the national culture of Cambodia, influencing family life, education, art, and politics from birth to death. Today, Buddhism in Cambodia has two sects: the Mahanikaya (the Greater Sect) in Cambodia since ancient times and the Dhammayuttikanikaya (Law-abiding Sect) imported from Thailand during the reign of Ang Duong in 1853. (เปรตีสานัญญู และ วัฒนธรร, 2021) Each sect has its own governing system, headed by the Supreme Patriarch or Samdech Preah Maha Sangharaja. (Fresh News, 2021)

More than this, Buddhism can be considered a philosophy or dharma for practice to liberate oneself from suffering. It teaches to identify the mind and explain the human world in relation to mental turmoil. Buddhism has paved the way for people to practice on their own, focusing on the main points that the Buddha taught. However, Buddhism contends that it is only such a political philosophy or ideology which will provide a firm basis for a rule of law, which reflects the rule of righteous or Dhamma, within the state. (Jayatilleke, 1988 : 88 - 89)

Cambodia has a rich history of architecture, with various epochs including pre-Angkorian, post-Angkorian, colonial, and modern styles. However, rapid technological advancements have led to the growth of multi-stories and high-rise buildings, while heritage buildings like public administration and religious structures have declined and increased. Only a few hundred-year-old structures remain, including post-Angkorian Buddhist structures like temples and pagodas. In 2018, the Documentation Center of Cambodia established the Wat Khmer Architecture Project, focusing on cultural values, art, architecture, history, and Buddhism promotion. (Fresh News, 2021)

On the other hand, modern architecture has significantly impacted traditional buildings, particularly pagodas, in Cambodia. Despite government laws to protect these structures, they are often lost, and some churches have been demolished without permission. A project to preserve pagoda architecture is necessary to document the number of pagodas for future generations. The ancient Buddhist hot pot, built in 2472. (Fresh News, 2021)

### **The Role of Monastery/ Wat in Society**

In order to know more about the role of monasteries in Khmer society, so need to figure out that why people need monastery and how important role of the monasteries to contribute pacify among of different group in whole society so far. Since ancient time to the present time, the monasteries are still to become a crucial role play to communicate and to pacify of indifferent view among people in communities for living in harmonious manner, under the umbrella of Dhamma shadow.

What is the crucial role of Buddhist monastery? This article showing that the Wat/monastery serves as a sacred space for monks to educate Buddhists, connect people to Buddhism, and provide psychological support. On the other hand, it is a sacred place for performing Buddhist traditions, refining the mind, and providing refuge for monks, nuns, and poor descendants. It also serves as a place for Cambodian festivals and New Year celebrations.

In addition, the Monastery is a mental illness hospital, pagoda, and community hub for all. It supports societal development through bridges, roads, schools, and cultural preservation. Monks in Cambodia represents the symbol of Buddhism and Spirit unity in society. (វត្តសោភណ្ឌ ឆោបលើ, 2020)

As for the Khmer Buddhist Monks sacrifice life, family, wealth, and honor, and have no attachment to life, relatives, or race. They prioritize satiating life, religion, and society, and are non-partisan in religious and social work. Their devotion and non-attachment to family life have allowed them to achieve great achievements, such as living by begging in the streets and seeking Dharma. The nineteenth century was a difficult and turbulent time in Cambodia, so the Buddhist monks stand to response to social change, (Hansen, 2007 : 45) and this showing that the participation of Buddhist monks was an important role to save the country and Buddhism at that time.

Cambodia currently has over 60,000 monks and over 4,000 monasteries/Wat, both of which have been developed and improved in terms of study and practice. The Khmer monks have played a significant role in the socio-economic development of Cambodia, preparing education projects, developing programs, organizing management leadership, sharing support and sponsorship, establishing relief funds, making requests to the Royal Government, cooperating with various organizations, monitoring results, and improving work. They can also afford to work on projects aimed at improving the lives of orphans, homeless people, and those affected by HIV/ AIDS. (វត្តសោភណ្ឌ ឆោបលើ, 2020)

In Khmer society, when talking about the monasteries like as talking about the morality, because the monasteries are role model for daily life of layman and laywoman, in addition, the monasteries are intertwining with society where could not separate each other from one side to others. If comparing of these subject matter, founding that or similar as a coin that need both sides to scaffolding each other.

The Buddhist monasteries in Khmer Society will reflect many dimensions, covering the whole of Khmer Life such as one Buddhist scholar from Sri Lanka expressed that an expression of Buddhism conceived in a resolutely modern spirit by one of the most qualified and enlightened representatives of that religion. (Rahula, 1958 : XI)

### **The New Knowledge of the Concepts of the Khmer Monastery**

In this academic article found a new knowledge, starting from the concepts of Khmer monastery in the contextual meaning in the Buddhist philosophy-based approach. As summary, found that there are four new knowledge in which is an implied in the concepts of the monasteries in the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia (Khmer) as followings:

a) **Cultivate the Moral Conduct in Society:** The Khmer monastery to cultivate the Buddhist morality is a part of the Buddhist ethics to shape the Khmer society living in harmony in accordance with the Buddha's Teaching, so Khmer ancestors always brought the Dharma, especially the Buddhist ethics into practices in the daily life since ancient to the present day.

b) **The Center for Buddhist Education:** The Khmer monastery become a sacred place for the educational purpose or so-called the Center of Buddhist Education in whole society both the monks and laymen. This point is crucial role play to contribute for the sake of Khmer society, leading move to the civilized-based Buddhist approach in the practices. On the other hand, the monastery is the source of knowledge both Buddhist theory and skillful (know-how based).

c) **Traditional Preservation:** The Khmer monastery is a the most important place for keeping the traditional preservation for generations both sculpture and cultural perspectives in whole society, if someone to know more about the traditional culture, could find those documents in the monastery with multiple source and choices.

d) **Awareness of National Identity:** The Khmer monastery is a vast considerable place to awareness of the national identity for one generation to next generation in terms of knowing the national identity, starting from the monastery.

The new knowledge of the concepts of the Khmer Monastery like Figure 1.



**Figure 1** New Knowledge of the Concepts of the Monastery

## Conclusion

The role of Khmer Buddhist monastery is still significant in the society since the ancient time to the present time because of the Buddhist monastery role plays a central catalyst of society. In addition, the monastery/Wat is still stay in Khmer heart, especially it contributes to take part in society during the critical period.

Besides of awareness of moral education and conducting of traditional culture in Khmer society, the monastery is still to help in social affairs during the national disaster assistant via the red cross of Cambodia and helping directly from the Khmer Buddhist monks on site.

In this regards, the monastery is become a significantly knowledge-based source place in society both scientific and cultural knowledge such Khmer philosophy, Buddhist thoughts that can find in the monasteries in the country. Hopefully, the Khmer monastery will become a place for cultivate the people to get considerable knowledge for the general people both academician and the publics for the sake of Buddhism and society as much as possible.

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