

CULTURAL SNAPSHOTS: ON THE *RISHI*

Artist: Phra Siriphong Kharuphankit



Phra Siriphong was born on 7 July 1956. He was the only child of Mr. Maen (Khord) Kharuphan, the operator of an orchard at Bang Tamru District, and Mrs. Chaluey (Jaemjan), from Amphur Tayang, Petchaburi Province.

After finishing Prathom 4, elementary education, from Amnuaywong-wittaya School in Thonburi, he continued his study at the Dance and Music College (Witthayalai Natasin) on 17 May 1967, majoring in Thai Musical Instruments with a Thai music minor.

After leaving the Dance and Music College, he trained in the Thai art of making khon masks. He has created many khon masks and teacher's heads (*srisa khru*). His remarkable achievement and superb craftsmanship was recognized in his being awarded a prize: the Master of the Arts (Sartmedhee), from Professor Mom Luang Pin Malakul Foundation, in the category of the Thai art of khon mask making, on 24 October 2001.

Phra Siriphong was ordained a monk at Wat Suttharam, Bangkok, on 8 June 1986. *Tissapharano* is his ordained name. He was appointed Assistant Abbot of Wat Suttharam on 21 June 2005. On 4 September 2006 Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn bestowed on him a souvenir medal of "Thai Cultural Heritage Conservationist".

The following are excerpts from his book *The Gurus of the Artist*. The first passage is from Phra Siriphong and is a description of the various kinds of Rishi [Eysei, Rsi]. The second section is an explanation of the need for the honoring of the Rishi by Ranadhamma Dharapan which Phra Siriphong included in his book. The last section are illustrations and photos of *srisa khru* (teacher's heads) made by Phra Siriphong and his assistants.

Many examples of Phra Siriphong's work can be found at: www.monnut.com/en.

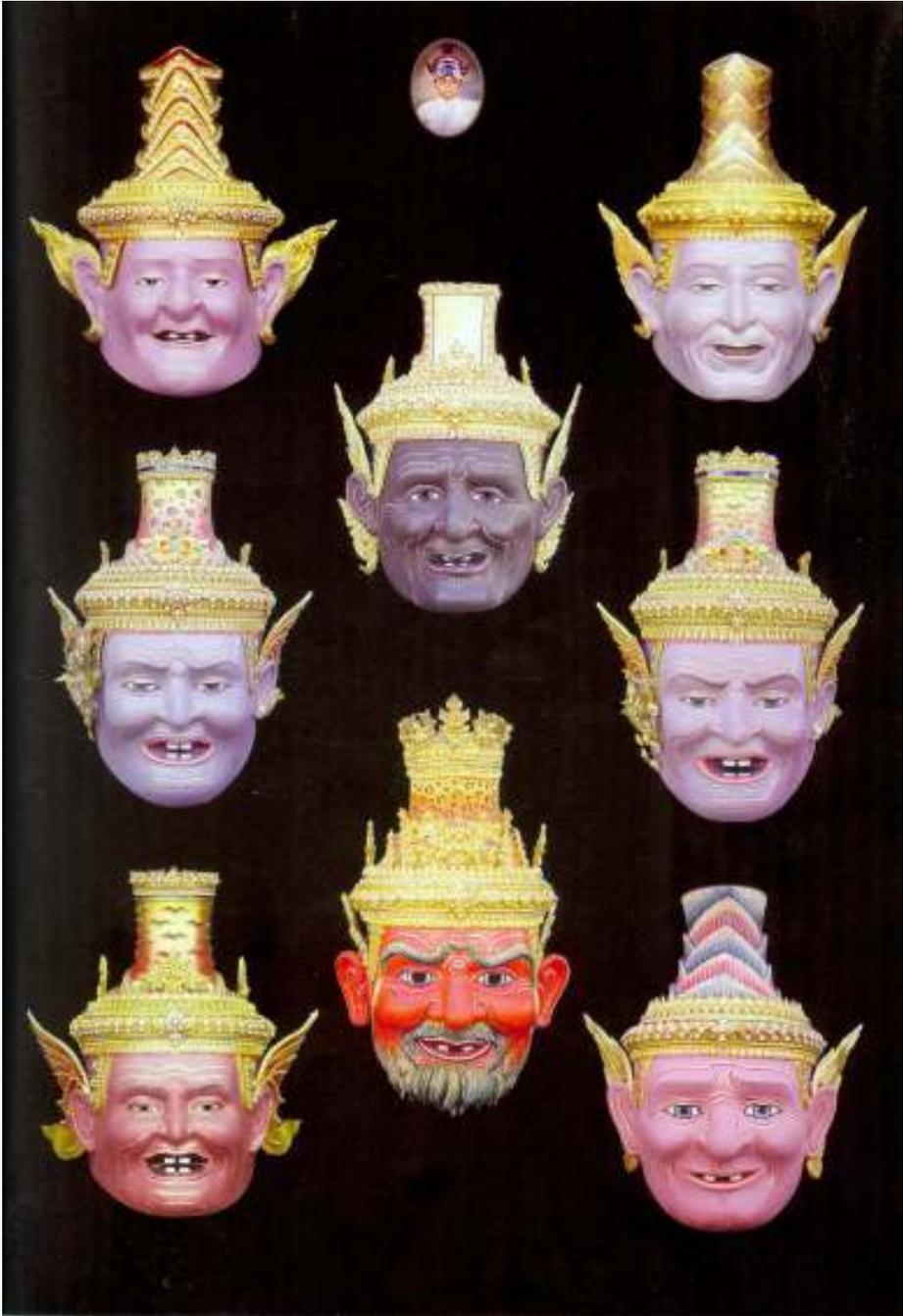
RISHI

Rishi is translated as a 'seer', meaning the possessor of a higher knowledge derived from insight. He can see the past, the present and the future and therefore is called 'the knower of three periods of time' [*trikalajna*]. The Rishi had many roles in ancient times: as a knowledgeable person, as a teacher, as a spiritual leader, and as an observer of culture. They are named according

to their characteristic behaviors or ways of living, for example: a ‘seer’ [*Rishi*], a ‘yoga practitioner’ [*yogi*], a ‘trance possessor’ [*tapasi*], ‘a wearer of long hair’ [*jatila*], ‘a learned person’ [*muni*], ‘a successor’ [*siddhi*]. Rishis may wear a bark cloth, a dyed cloth, or a white cloth.

1. Brahma-Rishi means the Rishis, who are derived from Brahma or Rishis who belong to the Brahmin caste, the highest caste, and observe more intense ascetic practices than any other Rishis. They are Asvavasu, Astavagra, Atri, Ouvara, Bharadwaja, Bhrgu, Cayavana, Suka, Dadhija, Damana, Devasaraman, Gautama, Jachali, Kasayapa, Kathupa, Likita, Lomasa, Mamkanaka, Marakandeya, Narda, Pulassataya, Ricika, Waisampayana, Vasittha, Visawamitta, Vayasa.
2. Deva-Rishi are the Rishis, who are derived from gods, they are originally born in high status, and come to the human world from heavenly world. They became Rishi in order to observe the ascetic practices to achieve the resulting perfections. They include: Brahmanaspati, Aggani, Usnas, Buddha, Asita, Bhurabhula, Kasayapadevapitra, tanupravata, Lomasa, Vasita, and Narada. The last three Rishis are not only derived from gods, but also because of their intense austerity they raised their status to become Brahmarishis.
3. Raja-Rishi means the Rishis who were once kings but renounced their property and became ascetics. They are Janaka, Rama, Lakshna, Vishvamitra, and Vesantara.
4. Maha-Rishi means the great Rishi. But it can also refer to minor Rishis, who practice ascetic lives intensively until they achieve supernatural powers that can even frighten gods and demons. They are known as Duravasa, Kapila, and Agustaya.

In the Sanskrit literature, there are stories narrating important Rishis existing in the human and heavenly worlds. They are as follows:









Mask at center right belonged to Phra Siriphong's teacher Arkom Sayakhom.

1. The Rishi ‘Valamiki’, who is the famous poet, who composed Vedic scriptures and the Ramayana.
2. The Rishi named ‘Bharatamuni’, who is the teacher of dance, who wrote the dancing scripture entitled ‘Natyasatra’, and recorded the 108 dancing postures of Shiva.
3. The Narada-Rishi, who taught the musical subjects.
4. The Rishi who is expert in medicine.
5. The Rishis who suppress all evils, they include Agastya, Kapila and Brhaspati.

WHY WE NEED TO HONOR THE *RISHI*?

By **Ranadhamma Dharapan**

Translated by **Veerachart Nimanong**

I am often asked by people, when they see me exhibiting or worshipping an amulet or statue of Rishi at my home: Why do you exhibit the Rishi? Why do you worship the Rishi? Who is the Rishi?

A Rishi [*Eysei, Rsi*] is an ascetic, often dwelling in the forest, observing celibacy, renouncing material possessions, and following practices quite similar to Buddhist monks. Yet it is clear that a Rishi is not a monk when considered from his outward appearance.

The story of Rishi existed long before Buddhism. In fact, when the Lord Buddha was born, a Rishi, visited the royal palace and predicted that Siddhartha will someday be ordained as a monk and will become the great teacher of the world.

After Siddhartha grew up, he went to study with two ascetics: a Rishi named Alara Kalamakotta and one named Udaka Ramaputta. Rishi Alara taught him to perfect up through the seventh level of trance and the Rishi Udaka taught him to perfect the eighth level of trance. When he finished his study with the two ascetics, he then knew that it was not the way for which he was searching. Why is this so? Because, even though while in trance, all images of his worldly relations like his wife and son, together with his worldly possessions disappeared, they immediately reappeared when he emerged out

from the trance.

He then decided to be ordained, and his ordination for the first time was as a Rishi, because the tradition monkhood did not begin until Siddhartha became the Lord Buddha. After his enlightenment, he thought about to whom he should preach his Dharma for the first time. Suddenly, he thought of his former teachers, Alara Kalamakotta and Udaka Ramaputta. But when he went to search for them to preach to them, he discovered that they died to their bodily existence before his arrival. The Lord Buddha knew with his special insight that since his former teachers were born in the Brahma world (a formless plane of existence [*arupa-bhrahma*] where the span of life is up to 8400 eons) they did not have the bodily instruments to benefit from his preaching concerning the path to Nibbana. Only human beings can achieve the attainment of Nibbana.

How to explain the Lord Buddha's gratitude toward the Rishi? Even the Buddha, who is the most sublime of the human beings and gods, still gives honor to the Rishi. So shouldn't we ordinary human beings, with our wives and children, and our desire for worldly things, also honor the Rishi?

The Triple Gem is the sanctuary and the object of highest worship; this includes the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. However, the Lord Buddha never prohibits the worshipping of the teacher, no matter who they are. He always taught that one should be humble to our seniors. This involves:

1. Seniority in age: Those who are older than us. Whether they be our brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, and elderly people.
2. Seniority in birth: Those who are born higher than us. For instance the king and queen.
3. Seniority in virtue: Those who have more virtue than us. They are monks and novices, and those who are our benefactors, like our father, mother and teachers. This last category includes Rishi.

The Lord Buddha mentions the merits resulting from being humble to these three groups:

Those who humble themselves to those who are senior
Will receive four kinds of blessing: long life, beautiful skin,
Bodily and mental happiness and physical and mental energy.¹

The Lord Buddha never taught that people should pay respect only to the monks. Even the Supreme Patriarch (Carem Nanavaro), the noble monk from Wat Thepasirindarawasa, teaches that one should prostrate oneself five times a day: the first prostration is for the Lord Buddha, the second for the Dhamma, the third for Sangha, the fourth for our parents, and the fifth for our teachers. He even accepts prostration done for trees, so why not for the Rishi, who are nobler than the trees.

At the very least we should think of the Rishi's life as the original influence of the Lord Buddha's celibate lifestyle, the teaching of the 'form and formless trances' [*rupajana* and *arupajana*], the teaching of non-violence, the observance of the eight precepts, and the vegetarian diet. The Rishi always spreads loving kindness and good-wishes to all living beings. (Translated from the book entitled 'Holy' [*Saksit*], 15 Vol. 15, No. 348, 1 July 1997/2540K).

Endnote

¹Aphivadanasilissa niccam vutthapacayino cattaro dhamma vatthanti ayuvanno sukham phalam.