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# INDIVIDUAL ENLIGHTENMENT AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: ON THE SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE HOLY MONK KHRUBA BOONCHUM

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will assess some sociological interpretations of Theravada Buddhism and Holy Monks which rely on such concepts as charisma, millenarianism and utopianism. In the past, sociologists like Weber and Murti misinterpreted Buddhism as focusing upon individual enlightenment rather than the welfare of society. But these interpretations of Theravāda Buddhism overlook that the Buddhist concept of enlightenment has a deep relationship with social development and social responsibilities. Buddhism has a highly developed sociological basis and need to be understood in its own terms. The practice of Buddhist monks should be understood by means of Buddhist sociology. To illustrate this, this paper will discuss the Theravāda Buddhist concept of the ten perfections (pāramī) in general and perfection of morality (sīla-pāramī) in particular. This will also be illustrated by Buddhist tale of Bhuridatta-Jātaka and the case of Spiritual Master, the Most Venerable Khruba Boonchum, Nyanasamvaro.

Keywords: Buddhism, Buddhist Sociology, Holy Monks, Khruba Boonchum

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*Prajñā Vihāra* Vol. 19 No 2, July - December 2018, 93-115  
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## Introduction

This paper is an attempt to assess the value of sociological interpretations of Theravada Buddhism through the concepts of charisma, millenarianism and utopianism. In the past, scholars like Max Weber and Murti misinterpreted Buddhism as focusing upon individual enlightenment rather than the welfare of society. For instance, Weber stated, “Salvation is an absolutely personal performance of the self-reliant individual. No one, and particularly no social community, can help him”. The Hindu Indian Scholar T.R.V Murti also stated, “The Arahat (Arahant) rests satisfied with achieving his own private salvation; he is not necessarily interested in the welfare of others. The ideal of the Arahat is made of selfishness; there is even a lurking fear that the world would take hold of him if he stayed here too long”. But these interpretations of Theravada Buddhism overlook that the Buddhist concept of enlightenment has a deep relationship with social development and social responsibilities.

Likewise, the Western sociological interpretations of charismatic monks and their communities as a kind of millenarian cult are misleading. Buddhism has a highly developed sociological basis and needs to be understood in its own terms. The practice of Buddhist monks could be understood only by means of Buddhist sociology. Buddhism emphasizes spiritual development rather than sociological power, domination or political revolt. The misinterpretation of Buddhist millenarianism was based on the Buddhist concept of Cakkavatti (Universal Monarch), the coming of the future Buddha-Arimetteya, Dhammarājā (the righteous ruler) and Buddhadesa (The Buddha’s land). These concepts should be carefully studied and analyzed from the original Buddhist understanding.

The arguement here will be based on early Buddhist concepts of these terms, including the Theravāda Buddhist concept of ten perfections (pāramī) in general and perfection of morality (sīla-pāramī) in particular. This will also be illustrated by Buddhist tale of Bhuridatta-Jātaka and the case of Spiritual Master, the Most Venerable Khruba Boonchum, Nyanasamvaro. This paper is presented from the Shan Buddhist perspective of Myanmar with reference to Theravāda Buddhist canons. The charismatic monks and their social functions will be also highlighted.

## The Sociology of Religion

The term ‘sociology’ was first introduced in 1838 by the French philosopher, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) who was considered the “father of sociology”. He used the term “sociology” to refer to the scientific study of society. According to him, all societies develop and progress through the following stages: religious, metaphysical, and scientific. He argued that society needs scientific knowledge based on facts and evidence to solve its problems. Comte observed the science of sociology as consisting of two branches: dynamics, or the study of the processes by which societies change; and statics, or the study of the processes by which societies endure. He also envisioned sociologists as eventually developing a base of scientific social knowledge that would guide society into positive directions. This social theory was later developed by sociologists such as: Karl Marx (1818-1883) Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Max Weber (1864-1920) .

The sociology of religion developed soon after the establishment of sociology. The sociology of religion is the study of the relationship or interaction between religions and society, and the study of beliefs, practices and organizational forms of religion using the tools and methods of the discipline of sociology. Durkheim, Marx and Weber were not religious, but they are interested in the role of religions and its influence on society.

Durkheim’s theory of religion exemplifies how functionalists examine sociological phenomena. According to Durkheim, people see religion as contributing to the health and continuation of society in general. Thus, religion functions to bind society’s members to sustain their common values and beliefs on a regular basis. Social theorist Durkheim in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* defines religion,

As a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden ... beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

However, early Buddhism, does not understand religious belief based upon the sacred and profane as described by Durkheim. Buddhism is based on the theory of Kamma which involves actions and their consequences. The Buddhist theory is also based on the four noble truths — the existence of un-satisfactoriness or suffering (*dukkha*), the cause of suffering (*dukkha-samudaya*), the end of suffering (*nirodha*) and the path leading to the end of suffering (*magga*). The final aim of Buddhism (its soteriological aspect) is to attain final liberation, or *Nibbāna*, which is to be free from the cycle of birth, old age, diseases and death. The path leading to the end of suffering is identified as the Noble Eightfold Path which involves: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Again, this Noble Eightfold Path can be summarised into threefold training as morality, concentration and wisdom.

Though the main purpose of Buddhism is to develop spiritual progress and attain enlightenment, it does not ignore its role in fostering social harmony, peace and development. There are numerous discourses of the Buddha that taught about social wellbeing. For example, *Maṅgala-sutta* (SN.2.4, Khp. 5) provides teachings on social environment, education, social responsibility, ethics and spiritual progress and *Sigalovāda-sutta* (DN.31) also emphasizes the social relationship between parents and children, teachers and pupils, employers and employee, monks and devotees and also to respect the members of the family, religious leaders, teachers, friends and servants as six directions. Moreover, *Parābhāva-sutta* (Sn.1.6) focuses on the ethical behaviour as the causes of downfalls. We can also observe Buddhist economic concepts in the *Kūṭadanta-sutta*, (DN.5) which highlights how to develop the economy of the state and how to maintain peace and order of the nation. Furthermore, *Aggañña-sutta* (DN.27) provides us the information of the evaluation of the world, human being and society. It also deals with the Buddhist democratic concept of electing righteous ruler, peace, equality and fairness in society without any discrimination. In this discourse, the Buddha emphasizes the ethical criteria of superior and inferior, rather than the so called deep rooted

caste system. Cakkavatti-*sīhanāda*-sutta (DN.26) and Mahasudassana-sutta (DN.17) deal with the Buddhist model of good governance and righteous kings, while Mahāparinibbāna-sutta (DN.16) also explains the seven Aparihāniya-dhamma (undeclinable or undefeatable factors) of Vajjian as good examples of the Buddhist teaching on good governance and politics. In addition, the Buddha's teaching of four sublime states (brahmavihāra): mettā (loving kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (joy) and uppekkhā (equanimity), are all applicable to social engagement, social cohesion and harmony. The Buddhist teaching on the four foundation of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) is also nowadays applied in clinical counselling and psychotherapy. Moreover, the commentary of Jataka mentioned three missions that the Buddha accomplished: striving for one's enlightenment (buddhatthacariya), striving for the welfare of one's relatives (ñātattacariya) and striving for the welfare of the whole world (lokatthacariya). The monks also consider these three missions as their goal and purpose of life. These three practices of Buddha have also been inspiring and motivating Buddhist monks to engage in social activities. The above suttas and teachings are very relevant for the Buddhist standpoints of social function applying to many areas of modern society.

Buddhism provides numerous guidelines for social and spiritual developments as well. The Buddhist concept of the perfection of morality (sīla-pāramī) as practised by the Most Venerable Khruba Boonchum goes beyond Durkheim's theory of religious functionalism as it emphasizes spiritual achievement rather than secular social functions. The Buddhist principles of five precepts, such as refraining from killing, stealing, adultery, lying and using intoxicants, do not only function for social harmony, mutual respect and trust, but also for higher spiritual attainment. Therefore, Buddhism is a religion which emphasizes the relationship between individual enlightenment and social developments.

### **Charisma in Secular Sociology**

Charisma has been nowadays widely discussed in the field of sociology. The term 'charisma' was originated in the Bible and was first

introduced by Max Weber as sociological theory to analyse the inner content of a charismatic character. In the Bible, charisma means a divine grace or gift or a divine quality. Weber used the term charisma to argue for relationship between a great man and his followers. He was also the first to place the charismatic within a social context. According to Weber, charisma is to be understood in relation to religions and politics.

Lindholm observes that Weber wrote about two distinct forms of charisma which seemed to oppose one another. The first is the institutional charisma which can be inherited, or achieved with accession to an office, which gives an aura of power to that person irrespective of their actual personal characteristics. It is the institution which bestows charisma and connect that person with the sacred. The other involves the individual charismatic power to command. Weber writes:

Charisma shall be understood to refer to an extraordinary quality of a person, regardless of whether his quality is actual, alleged, or presumed. ‘Charismatic authority’ hence shall refer to a rule over men, whether predominantly external or predominantly internal, to which the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific person.

Weber also wrote about three types of leadership authority: traditional, legal and charismatic authority in his essay “The three types of legitimate rule”. Traditional authority is the ability and the right to rule, passed down through heredity. Legal authority is empowered by a formalistic belief in the content of law (legal) or natural law (rationality). The charismatic authority is found in a leader whose mission and vision inspire others. It is based upon the perceived extraordinary characteristics of an individual. Weber saw a charismatic leader as the head of a new social movement and one instilled with divine or supernatural powers, such as a religious prophet. These ideas have gradually been applied to Buddhist leaders as well. Nasee observes that,

In social science literature, scholars have applied Max Weber's concept of charisma (Weber 1988) to explain various social movements led by charismatic figures. Similarly, in studies of Buddhist movements led by monks or charismatic figures, charisma is often referred to by the term *barami* (Pali: *parami*), although in fact there is no Pali or Buddhist term that exactly translates the Greek term "charisma" as used by Christians or in modern sociology. In Buddhism, *barami* means the perfection or completeness of certain virtues, which cultivates a way of purification while reaching a goal of enlightenment (Wisdom Library 2014). For Weber (1988), the legitimacy of charismatic authority rests on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.

### **The Buddhist Sociology of Charisma**

In Buddhism, charisma cannot be understood in the Western context. Charisma in Buddhism cannot be understood as in Christianity as a divine gift or grace which sets the charismatic person above his followers. The Buddhist theory of charisma does not set apart the charismatic person from his or her society. Instead they play an important role in society. The Buddhist concept of charisma also has nothing to do with political legitimation of power, domination or authority as defined by Weber. The Buddhist concept of charisma is purely spiritual virtue developed by individual.

The charismatic person in Buddhism developed from the practice *pāramī*, the perfection of virtue, especially the virtue of morality (*sīla-pāramī*). According to Cohen, "the relationship between charismatic monks [of Lanna Buddhism] and their followers are consistent with Weber's seminal definition but also highlight the distinctive character of Thai Buddhist cosmology, in particular the concept of *barami* (*pāramī*)". It means his analysis is somehow identical with Buddhist concept of charisma derived from perfection (*pāramī*). He further observed that "the Lanna variant of Thai Buddhist conceptions of charisma presumes

an integral relationship between the barami of charismatic monks, the identification of the exceptional personal qualities of these individuals at a very early age, and the prolific construction of religious buildings inspired by visions of moral regeneration and utopian moral communities – characteristics exemplified in the lives of Khruba Siwichai and his successors”. The Most Venerable Khruba Boonchum who resides in Shan State and has a large number of followers from Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, China, India and Bhutan is considered as one of the successors of the Lanna holy monk, Khruba Siwichai (1878-1938) and also believed to be reincarnated by Khruba Siwichai. The Thai term for the person possessing the extraordinary quality is called ton bun (the person of merits). Cohen further stated that “these precocious traits are signs of extraordinary charisma based on the accumulation of great merit (bun) and perfections (barami) over past lives. Such qualities are perceived as the marks of a bodhisattva, whose compassion is expressed typically in the Lanna tradition in the building and renovation of religious monuments and the sharing of merit with the laity”. Khruba Boonchum also exhibited the charismatic qualities of a ton bun at a very early age.

### **Millenarianism, Utopianism and Buddhism**

The term ‘Buddhist Millenarianism’ was first introduced by Stanley Tambiah to refer to the Buddhist concept of the coming of future Buddha Arimetteyya, the concept of Universal monarch (cakkavatti) and the righteous king (dhammarājā). He interpreted the movement of Khruba Siwichai as political revolt to the central authority of the State and the Sangha in Thailand as millenarian phenomenon. The term was also applied to all Khruba Siwichai’s successors such as Venerable Khruba Boonchum, Khruba Khao Pi, Khruba Theung, a Karen monk U Thuzana as well as others. The terms millenium, messianism, apocalypticism originate in the Bible. Millennium means a thousand year span and is associated with period after which Jesus Christ will return. It is also the expectation of this return. Later, the term began to be used for the political struggle for liberation from oppression and injustice. Messianic is the coming of the

savior and the apocalyptic is the final day of judgement; and the utopian is the imagination of a perfect society or kingdom. The term *utopia* was coined by Thomas More in 1516 in his book ‘*utopia*’.

However, whether these terms are in consistent with the practices of holy monks of Lanna Buddhism needs closer examination. My first argument is that the true practice of Theravāda Buddhism are based on the threefold training: *sīla-sikkhā* (moral training), *samādhi-sikkhā* (mental training) and *paññāsikkhā* (intellectual training). The aim of Theravāda Buddhism is to realize the Four Noble Truths and to attain *Nibbāna*, the ultimate peace or freedom. To be matured enough to become an enlightened person, one has to practice the ten perfections gradually step by step. Hence, what the Lanna monks were practicing are following the path of the Buddha. Therefore, it is not necessary to interpret them in Western secular sociological terms. Secondly, I would like to go back to the definition of the Pāli terms which Tambiah interprets as the elements of Buddhist millenarianism. Indeed, the Pāli term of *Bodhisatta*, referring to the future Buddha, *Arimetteyya* is not in consistent with millenarian, as the timing of the coming of *Arimetteyya* not only extends far beyond the period of a millenium, but the Theravāda Buddhists have no expectations for this coming. There is also no messianic movement in Theravāda Buddhism, as the Buddha taught that,

“You yourselves should make the effort;  
the Tathagatas (Buddhas) only can show the way.  
Those who practise the Tranquillity and  
Insight Meditation are freed from the bond of Mara”  
(Dhp. 276).

Buddhism teaches to rely on ourselves for our own liberation. This applies to the coming of the future Buddha, *Arimetteyya* as well. And, the religious activities of the Lanna lineage Buddhist monks are just based on their spiritual practice and their pursuit of *pāramī* (perfections) which include social responsibilities based on compassion. Buddhist

followers consider a great merits to pay respect to holy monks due to their holy practices (brahmacariya) and also as part of helping each other fulfilling the perfections. The opportunity to see and listen to the Dhamma talk of monks are a part of the blessings as mentioned in Maṅgala-sutta (samaṇānaṅca dassetvaṃ, kālena dhamma-ssavaṇaṃ). And, the concept of Universal Monarch (Cakkavatti) is not also envisaged to occur at this time and even if it does, the person is not considered to be a monk. Therefore, the idea of interpreting the Lanna holy monk as being involved in a millenarian movement should not be taken seriously. The next one, the concept of righteous ruler (dhammarājā) is also concerned with the ruler of the state. The monks never consider themselves as the ruler and the qualities of the righteous ruler are also applied only to the king, which the monks in Theravāda Buddhism never aspire to. Moreover, the use of the term utopian movement for the holy monks are also inaccurate as the monks never consider themselves creating the utopian state called 'The Buddha's Kingdom' or 'The Buddha's land' (Buddhadesa). In fact, there is no such term in the early Theravāda Buddhist canon. Only the term like Majjhimadesa (the middle land), as the land of the Dhamma, is found. So, the sociological term of utopianism can not be applied to the practice of holy monks of Lanna Buddhism.

### **Buddhist Concept of Charisma based on Perfections (Pāramī)**

To understand this concept of Buddhist sociology more deeply we need to look at the meaning of charisma from a Buddhist perspective. In Buddhism, the term 'pāramī (Skt. pāramita)' commonly translated as 'perfection' is similar to what we understood in Western sociology as charisma or charismatic authority for the extraordinary person who inherited the higher position and who is successful in his endeavour, who possesses high moral and spiritual standards. I will first discuss the Buddhist concept of perfection as it appears in the canons and in the commentaries in order to understand the charisma concept in Buddhism.

The Buddha is said to be fully achieve the perfections to become an enlightened being. It takes years of eons (kappas) to fully achieve these

perfections. Likewise, all the great disciples of the Buddha and those attain spiritual achievement during the time of the Buddha fulfill pāramī in their many past existences to be qualified to realize the Noble Truths and become liberated beings. There are ten pāramī in Buddhavamsa and its commentary (Bv. 6, Bv.a. 59) in Theravada Buddhist texts although only eight perfections are listed in the Apadāna (Ap. 1.5) and seven in the Cariyāpiṭaka (Cp.103) while there are six paramita discussed in Mahayana school of Buddhism as the path of Bodhisatva. The ten perfections recognized by Theravada Buddhism are: dāna (charity), sīla (morality), nekkhama (renunciation), paññā (wisdom), vīriya (effort or diligence), khanti (endurance), sacca (truth), adhiṭṭhāna (firm determination), metta (loving kindness) and upekkha (equanimity or balanced mind).

The fulfilments of all ten perfections are in essence a way to commit oneself to spiritual practices and render service to society based on kindness and compassion. According to Theravada Buddhist tradition, when one who vows to become a Buddha, they must follow the path of a Bodhisatta (the Buddha-to-be) by pursuing the ten perfections to the fullest extent. These ten perfections are still relevant to be applied in many contemporary issues of modern society as charisma and function for social harmony.

Sīla (morality) is a virtue and one of the trainings (sikkhā) which every Buddhist has to practice to achieve his or her spiritual goal. The three sikkhā are the morality (sīla), concentration (samādhi) and wisdom (paññā) which we can summarize from the noble eightfold path which is also claimed to be the middle path of the Buddha. Sīla is the foundation of Buddhist teaching as it lies in the middle way. The Buddhist five precepts for lay disciples appear in many suttas in Aṅguttaranikāya of Pañcakkā-nipāta (AN.II.203-205). The five precepts are: 1) to refrain from taking lives 2) to refrain from stealing 3) to refrain from sexual misconduct 4) to refrain from telling lies and 5) to refrain from drinking alcohol and intoxicating things. These five precepts are prescribed for the lay followers and the eight and ten precepts are for observing on special occasions and vow, and 227 rules or morality for fully ordained monks.

In order to achieve the spiritual goal of Buddhism, purity of morality (sīla-visuddhi) is required. Further analysis of sīla will be drawn from the Buddhist Canonical text, Sīlakkhandha-vagga of DN and Commentarial literature as well as the first chapter, Sīlaniddesa, of Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification) by Venerable Buddhaghosa.

There are three levels of moral perfection explained in Buddhist commentaries, sīlapāramī, sīla-upapāramī and sīla-paramattha-pāramī (Bv.a. 59). The first level, sīlapāramī, is the normal observation of the morality when one restrains from committing any immoral acts externally by body and speech. The second level, sīla-upapāramī, is higher as it is involved with bodily organs. Though one has to sacrifice any of his organs for the sake of keeping morality, he will do so without hesitation. The third and the highest level of the morality is the sīla-paramattha-pāramī. This involves risking or sacrificing one's life for the purpose of keeping one's morality. In this way, each perfection can be multiplied into three levels; and the ten perfections become thirty perfections (timsapāramiyo). The charisma of a Buddhist monk does not elevate them above the people, it is the achievement of perfections which come about through service to their community. This can be seen in the Buddhist Jataka stories.

### **Charisma in the Bhuridatta-Jātaka**

In Theravada Buddhism, the Jātaka stories recount how the Bodhisatta achieved these perfections by sacrificing himself for the welfare of the many. Once, the Bodhisatta was born as a nāga prince named, Bhūridatta (Ja.a. 158). The nāga is a magical serpent who can assume human form whenever it wishes. The nāgas live in the realm under water or the earth. They guard rare jewels, jade and precious minerals which are always glittering and bright. They possess supernatural powers and are capable of exhaling fire and spitting out poison. They often emerge out of their realm and wander around on the surface of the earth or the water. The arch enemy of the nāga is the garuda, a magical bird-man which lives in the sunlit and airy skies. Once, Bhūridatta was meditating and observing sīla (morality) coiling himself at an ant-hill in a forest by

making a vow “Let him who will take my skin or muscles or bones or blood”. One day, he was caught by a Brahmin with a magic charm and crushed into a basket and forced to perform various dances in many places to earn the Brahmin wealth and fame. However, Bhūridatta did not react aggressively though he has the power to do harm. One day, the Brahmin took him to perform show in front of the palace in a big crowd including the king. While he was forced to perform various dances and his brother nāga who transformed himself into an ascetic arrived at the scene and competed with the Brahmin through magic. The Brahmin was defeated and run away, and the kingdom was brought in to peace without violence. Due to the nāga Bhūridatta’s practice of moral perfection, the violence was avoided and the society returned to peace and harmony.

In this Jātaka story, Bhūridatta, as a Bodhisatta, has succeeded in achieving the perfection of morality (sīlapāramī). This is one of the last of the ten Jātakas, or previous life stories of the Buddha, leading to his becoming the Buddha. From this Jātaka story we learn how Bodhisatta practised moral perfection by giving his life as in his vow. This is the third and highest level (sīla-paramattha-pāramī) undertaken by a Bodhisatta. We can learn from this that the virtuous one never gives up his morality for whatever reason even in a situation of the threat to his life. Nowadays, many people surrender their morality very easily due to selfishness. As mentioned above, normal or regular observation of sīla is sīlapāramī; giving one’s part of body is sīla-upapāramī and giving one’s life for the purpose of observing morality is paramattha-pāramī. The normal observation of morality is easiest because it only involves constrains of one’s bodily desires and speech. The second level becomes more difficult as it involves giving up one’s bodily organs such as, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, kidney, liver, flesh, blood etc. for the sake of morality. The third level is the most difficult because it involves giving one’s life for the sake of keeping one’s morality. The third kind of morality can only be achieved by Bodhisatta.

## **Khruba Boonchum and Millenarianism**

The most Venerable Khruba Boonchum is one of the most prominent Theravada Buddhist monks among the Tai speaking people in Shan State, Myanmar, Northern Thailand, Southern China and Assam, Arunachal Pradesh of India and beyond. He is known as a forest dwelling monk (*āraññavāsī*) who started meditation in a cave since he was eleven-years-old and has always been a vegetarian. He has been described as holy monk or charismatic monk of our time by many scholars including Paul T. Cohen (2017), Pisit Nasee (2017) and Amporn Jirattikorn (2017). His main temple, Wat Dhat Don Reung, is situated in the Golden Triangle Area of Mong Phong region of Tachilek township, Myanmar, bordering Lao PDR and Thailand. His parents were originally from Mong Yong of Eastern Shan State. He was born and raised on Thai soil in Chiang Rai Province and has Thai citizenship. Having been ordained at a young age, he dedicated himself to studying traditional Lanna Buddhist literature and meditating in the cave, in the forest. As he grew up, his fame and popularity spread far and wide due to his ton bun (the person of merit) character of Lanna tradition according to Paul Cohen. In general Buddhist belief, it is called *pāramī* (perfection) which he accumulated in previous lives. He is also well-known for repairing holy places, pagodas, temples and constructing new pagodas. Khruba Boonchum also has skills in both languages and design. When he builds or renovates religious buildings, he often creates the designs by himself. Mostly, he was inspired by the design of old stupas in Lanna style of Northern Thailand. He has attracted followers from Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and China since his novicehood. At time, his fame and popularity grew, the wealthy and middle class Shan people of Myanmar and Thailand become his main followers and supporters. He travels widely in Myanmar and people follow him and welcome him in big crowds wherever he goes. People follow his chanting in Lanna style and listen to his talks which is mostly given in Shan language. He sometimes travelled to Bhutan and meditated in the snowy Himalaya forests. He is also well respected and worshiped by the Bhutan Royal Family and the people of Bhutan. Being suspicious of his

popularity and activities, the Myanmar military government restricted him from travelling out of the area near his temple during 2004 and he was later forced to leave the country. In 2005, he moved to Thailand and started a project of building a temple at Doi Wiang Kaew, Chiang Saen District, Chiang Rai Province. In 2010, he vowed to meditate for three years from his 47 years' birthday to his 50-year birthday at the Rajagriha Cave in the remote area of Lampang province, Thailand. He came out of the cave in 2013 and the Thein Sein government welcomed him back to Myanmar and issued him a national identification card so that he can travel both within Myanmar and outside the country easily. He was also conferred the religious title of Sadhammajotikadhaja for his missionary works before he was forced to leave to Thailand and recently he was again conferred another title 'Aggamahā-kammaṭṭhānācariya' as the highest level of teacher of meditation by the Union Government of Myanmar.

He celebrates his birthday every year. Without invitation, tens of thousands of people from all walks of life from different regions join his grand birthday celebration. Free food stalls are set up by his wealthy and middle class followers for all participants for a week long. His audience is comprised of many ethnic groups: Shan, Thai, Burmese, Chinese and minority groups such as Palaung, Wa, Akha, Karen and Lahu. His teachings cover charity (dāna), morality (sīla) and meditation (bhāvanā). His Pali chanting is mainly related to the ten and thirty perfections (pāramī) and the great ten Jātaka stories. He is considered as a Bodhisatta by his followers and also claims himself to be Bodhisatta at some places. Some people have claimed to have witnessed miracles and even consider him as an Arahant. However, he never claims himself to be an Arahant, instead he says he is an ordinary monk who is subject to decay and death. The difference between the Arahant and Bodhisatta is that the Arahant is the one who renounces the world and the Bodhisattva is the one who is actively and compassionately involved in the world. Nevertheless, the idea that an Arahant renounces the world is not always true, as some Arahants during the time of the Buddha also have shown social responsibility. For example, though the chief disciples of the Buddha such as Venerable

Sāriputta and Moggallāna were the Arahants, they also shared social concerns and responsibilities whenever they were needed, for example, the psychological counselling of the sick, and dying person, taking care of monastic community and so forth. Khruba Boonchum is also well-known for his strict Vinaya rules and avoiding close contact with females. He is a trans-border monk with followers from different countries. He is also contributing financial assistance to many projects including education, literature, culture and social works. He is considered as highly endowed with pāramī (perfection).

His latest social engagement was involved the twelve children and one coach of a football team who were trapped in the cave in Maesai, Chiang Rai province, Northern Thailand, in June 2018. The news was widely spread in the social media of the Buddhist saint who predicted their rescue within two or three days, and his chanting stopped the rains which made the rescue team easier to access to the children in the trapped area .

Scholars like Cohen (2000, 2001), Jirattikorn (2017) identified Khruba Boonchum as having the character of ton bun (person of merit) in the tradition of Khruba Siwichai who built and renovated religious buildings and Pagodas. At young novice age, Khruba Boonchum was invited to Chiang Mai, and he accepted the invitation. People contributed money to help him renovate Pagoda at Doi Wiang Kaew. According to Cohen, this is the starting point of ton bun character that Khruba Boonchum has undertaken. The ton bun is again linked to the concept of Buddhist charisma of perfection (pāramī). Tambiah described millenarian expectations with the coming of a future Buddha Arimetteyya (Maitreya in Sanskrit). Moreover, Keyes described the ton bun tradition with a bodhisattva or a person who vows to become a Buddha in the future. Khruba Boonchum follows the tradition of a ton bun as a form of Bodhisatta, as indicated in the letter that he wrote to Tham Ratchakhrue saying that he vowed to become a future Buddha.

As Venerable Khruba Boonchum has lived and traveled in Shan State, the majority of his followers are usually the Shan people. The Shan people welcome him wherever he goes in the Shan State in a big crowd

with their traditional costumes, drums and dances; and the Dhamma talk given by the Venerable Khruba is also usually in Shan language. The Shan see him not only as a holy monk but also as the unity icon of the Shan people. This made the Myanmar military junta suspect his activities and restrict his traveling in Shan State and also later forced to leave his monastery in Mongphone, Tachilek. As a matter of fact, Khruba Boonchum has never preached politics or staged on a protest against the military government to be accused of political involvement. Mostly, he preached to live a moral life, to develop social harmony and peaceful co-existence of the diversified communities.

After spending time in Thailand for about ten years, Myanmar political condition changed and the new civilian government invited him to reside in Mongphone in Myanmar. The effort of bringing Khruba Boonchum back to Myanmar had been partly due to the effort Shan MPs (the Member of Parliament) demanding the government to allow Khruba Boonchum back to Shan State. In November 2013 thousands welcomed him at the border of Mae Sai and Tachilek. For the Shan, it was the return of the saint or holy monk, but some interpreted it as millenarian event or the creation of the Buddha's Kingdom. Cohen argues that Khruba Boonchum's millenarianism has been expressed in a form of active utopianism. Moreover, Cohen also stated that Khruba Boonchum's movement can be seen as revival of morality and the old Lanna tradition. On the other hand, Tatsuki Kataoka identified Khruba Boonchum as millenarian for the Lahu people of Yunnan and Myanmar as they consider Khruba Boonchum was a reincarnated of their former G'ui Sha who was a glorious Lahu ruler in the past. Moreover, Khruba Boonchum has also been interpreted as having a millenarian character as he is seen as defiant and not fully integrated into the established Sangha institution of the State in Myanmar and Thailand.

As mentioned above, the Most Venerable Khruba Boonchum is a Theravāda Buddhist monk and practicing Theravāda Buddhism based on his Dhamma knowledge. However, what he emphasizes is the pursuance of the ten perfections, the path of the Bodhisatta. All his

activities are also based on the practice of the ten perfections as appeared in Theravāda Buddhist texts. Therefore, the interpretations of the Most Venerable Khruba Boonchum in terms of millenarianism and utopianism are not accurate.

## **Conclusion**

The research shows that the Buddhist concept of individual enlightenment has a connection with social responsibilities. The charismatic monks who strive for their spiritual achievement have also committed themselves to many social activities such as building bridges, roads, shelter, helping the people in time of crisis, donating fund for education, fostering peaceful co-existence among different communities and providing Dhamma teachings for psychological wellbeing. These are functional aspects of the charismatic monks who have been struggling for their individual enlightenment. The Buddhist teaching of the ten perfections of Bodhisatta path and the moral teachings (*sīla-parami*) are a good example of this. The Buddhist Jātaka story of Bhūridatta practicing the moral precept not to kill, even though his bone, flesh and life was threatened, led to the peace and harmony of his realm. Similarly, the Most Venerable Khruba Boonchum, though he is very strict in his ascetic practice, does not neglect his social responsibilities. His social engagement during his three years' solitary retreat in the cave of Rājagriha, his aid to the earthquake victims in March 2011 in Shan State, and involvement in the wild boar football team trapped in the cave in Mae Sai District in June 2018, proves a relationship between the individual enlightenment and social responsibility. The Most Venerable Khruba Boonchum practicing the Dhamma and pursuing his spiritual perfection (*pāramī*) through both individual spiritual quest and social responsibilities. Therefore, his popularity and charisma should not be interpreted as millenarian movement or of a utopian character.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Max Weber. “On Charisma and Institution Building,” 213.

<sup>2</sup> T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 263.

<sup>3</sup> The word *Khruba* (*khuba* in Northern Thai) is commonly translated as ‘Venerated teacher’. Etymologically it is probably derived from the word *khрупacariya*, combining the Pali *guru* and *pacariya* (meaning ‘teaching and teacher of teacher’ or ‘great grand teacher’). According to Tambiah, the title of *khрубa* ‘is conferred upon monks, usually of advanced age, who are highly venerated for their holiness and personal charisma’.

<sup>4</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Lindholm, *Charisma*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 28-29.

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, 295.

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, “On Charisma and Institution Building” 1-12.

<sup>9</sup> Pisith Nasee, “Globalized World, Modern Khruba (Venerable Monk) and the Construction of Network in Thai Buddhist Society” 204.

<sup>10</sup> Lanna is the name of the former kingdom in Northern Thailand established in 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D., comprised the principalities (*muang*) of Chaing Mai, Lamphun Lampang, Chiang Rai, Phayao, Phrae and Nan. Lanna had a fluctuating political influence over Chiang Rung, Muang Yong, Muang Pu, Muang Sat and Muang Nai in the Shan States (Sarassawadee 2005, 82.)

<sup>11</sup> Paul T. Cohen, *Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism*, ۷.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, ۷.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 306

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/utopianism/v-1>

<sup>17</sup> “Dānaṃ sīlaṃ caṅkhammaṃ, paññāvīriyañca kīdisaṃ; Khantisaccamadhiṭṭhānaṃ, mettupekkhā ca kīdisā”.

<sup>18</sup> A person who takes a vow to carry on the path of the Buddhahood.

<sup>19</sup> Normally Buddhist nuns and Yogis keep eight precepts, and Novices (*sāmaṇera*) keep ten precepts.

<sup>20</sup> *bāhirabaṇḍapariccāgopāramīnāma*, *aṅgapariccāgoupapāramīnāma*, *jīvitapariccāgoparamatthapāramīnāmāti*.

<sup>21</sup> Paul T. Cohen, “A Buddha kingdom in the Golden Traingle: Buddhist revivalism and the charismatic monk Khruba Bunchum»

<sup>22</sup> Amporn Jirattikorn, “Buddhist holy man Khruba Bunchum: a Shift in a Millenarian Movement at the Thai-Myanmar Border,” 384

<sup>23</sup> Paul T. Cohen, “Buddhism unshackled: The Yuan ‘holy man’ tradition and the nation-state in the Tai world,” 244–45.

<sup>24</sup> For further details, see: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/monk-predicted-thai-cave-rescue-hailed-intervention.html>

<sup>25</sup> Paul T. Cohen “A Buddha kingdom in the Golden Traingle: Buddhist revivalism and the charismatic monk Khruba Bunchum,” 144.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 306.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Keyes, “Death of two Buddhist saints in Thailand,” 149–80.

<sup>28</sup> Amporn Jirattikorn, “Buddhist holy man Khruba Bunchum: A Shift in a Millenarian Movement at the Thai-Myanmar Border,” ၆၀၂.

<sup>29</sup> Paul T. Cohen, “A Buddha kingdom in the Golden Traingle: Buddhist revivalism and the charismatic monk Khruba Bunchum,» 143.

<sup>30</sup> Tatsuki Kataoka, “Millenarianism, Ethnicity and the State: Kruba Bunchum Worship among the Lahu in Myanmar and Thailand, in *Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism*,” 242

## ABBREVIATIONS

Ap	Apādāna
AN	Aṅguttaranikāya
Bv	Buddhavaṃsa
Bv.a	Buddhavaṃsa-aṭṭhakathā
Cp	Cariyapiṭaka
Cp.a	Cariyapiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā
Dhp	Dhammapada
DN	Dīghanikāya
MN	Majjhimanikāya
SN	Saṃyuttanikāya
Sn.	Suttanipāta
Jā.a	Jātakatṭhakathā

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