

# The Practicalities of Thai Buddhist Temples in the UK



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# Abstract

There are 31 Thai Buddhist temples in the UK. Those who establish and run them face a double challenge of complying with both Thai and UK government regulations. Obstacles such as visas, building control, people and property management, public health, finances, and other matters lead to the apparent paradox of Buddhist monks, with their reputation for world renunciation and religious service, requiring administrative expertise much as we might expect of civil servants or business managers. Using institutional theory and extensive engagement with the Thai Theravada communities in the UK, this study elucidates how they balance these while fulfilling expectations tied to both Thai and convert temple culture.

Chapter 1 examines the role of Thai temples in Thailand itself, the ways that they are governed under Thai law. Chapter 2 focuses on Thai parent temples that have branches in the UK and the nature of their internationalisation, including traditional royal temples, the Thai Forest tradition and the Dhammakaya temple, whose branches together dominate the UK landscape. Chapter 3 provides six in-depth case studies of temples in the UK, each with its own history, management style and recruitment methods. Chapter 4 investigates the processes monks must undergo in order to leave Thailand, how they establish temples and the myriads of procedures and challenges they must navigate to maintain them. Chapter 5 explores the life of those who live at Thai temples in the UK, including the absence of *mae chi* nuns, but the adaptation of ordination for women at Thai Forest temples. The final chapter examines lay support. It assesses the effect of the Thai immigration patterns to the UK, with a majority of female migrants, and the important contribution of women entrepreneurs. It also examines the importance of conflict avoidance and resolution, with failure leading to the past closure of temples.

## **Key words**

Thai Buddhist temples, Buddhism in the UK, institutional analysis, Buddhist monks as managers, British Buddhism, Buddhist nuns, Thai migration to UK

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# Abbreviations

CIO	Charitable Incorporated Organisation
CTBMUK	The Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland
EST	The English Sangha Trust
MBU	Mahamakut Buddhist University
MCU	Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University
NOB	The National Office of Buddhism
RODB	Regulatory Office for Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus
SSC	The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand
TBSUK	The Theravada Buddhist Sangha in the United Kingdom
TFMSUK	The Thai Funeral Mutual Society in the UK
TIDGA	The Training Institute for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus Going Abroad
UKVI	UK Visas and Immigration
WBDO	World Buddhist Dhammaduta Organisation

# Introduction

## Overview

According to the UK 2018 census, there are 174,000 Buddhists in England and Wales, representing 0.47% of the population, slightly below the number of Jews at around 0.52%.<sup>1</sup> There are also temporary Buddhist visitors to the UK, mainly from Asia, such as students, business people and tourists. While some Buddhists, especially convert Western Buddhists, may not be affiliated to a temple or Buddhist centre, many are, and Thai Buddhists, even with a particular affiliation, will often visit multiple Thai Buddhist temples. Buddhist temples in the UK that are Asian in origin are often staffed by Buddhist monks or nuns. While such monastics usually renounce the societal role of a lay person when they are ordained, they mostly take on new societal roles, serving the religious and other needs of their communities. The expectations of their lay supporters are thus that they both fulfil the ideals of celibate Buddhist renunciators and serve the lay people by providing Buddhist teachings, guidance and rituals, and by being the recipient of lay devotion and offerings. Perhaps somewhat hidden from lay people, behind the scenes there several managerial and organisational tasks that enable the smooth provision of such services. In the UK, Buddhist monastics additionally confront a wide range of UK national and local government regulations over visas, building control, environmental protection, etc. Those temples associated with Thai Buddhism, the subject of this thesis, also come under regulations from Thai national authorities and expectations from the temples and teaching lineages from which they stem in Thailand. Some temples further serve as diplomatic representatives of Thailand, with additional pressures.

The purpose of this research is to examine the administrative and practical challenges confronted by 31 Thai Buddhist temples on the UK mainland in relation to a wide range of both Thai and, primarily, UK national and local government regulations over visas, building control, environmental protection, people management, public health (especially in relation to handling and disposal of dead bodies, a traditional role for temples), finances and other matters,

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<sup>1</sup> This is the most up-to-date data available online. ‘Religion, Education and Work in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics’, accessed 5 July 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/datasets/religioneducationandworkinenglandandwales>.

alongside the expectations of both source and host cultures. I first witnessed these issues and their associated difficulties as a bilingual Thai-British temple volunteer. I was fascinated by how newly arrived Thai nationals navigated them, supported by older, more established generations. However, observing marked failures, I also felt moved to dig deeper for solutions. In the process, I uncovered the complexity of the strictures within which Thai temples function. I realised that more research should be done on this topic, which has almost entirely eluded Buddhist studies to date, despite affecting both the overall viability of the temples and the day-to-day life of those who reside in them and attend them. This is a subject of importance for the Thai Buddhist community in the UK too, beyond my academic interest in the subject. For example, the administrative and practical challenges confronted by Thai temples abroad, that is, outside of Thailand, especially in the UK, formed the central topic of discussion at the recent annual meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland. This took place at Wat Sriratanaram in Manchester in July 2023 and was attended by around 100 monks, around two thirds of all the Thai monks in the UK at that time.

## The Research Context and Process

A particularly striking aspect of temple management is that they are mainly staffed by monks, and volunteers who fall under the authority of those monks. While theoretically choosing a life of seclusion, as ‘world-renouncers’, Thai monks are tasked with serving communities. As Kate Crosby has observed in her study of Theravada Buddhism in Asia, Buddhist monks take on a diverse range of roles. On one end of this spectrum is the ideal of renouncing the world, where a small number of monks dedicate themselves primarily to meditation, with minimal involvement in rituals or community service. However, beyond this ascetic path, most monks engage in activities such as conducting rituals, preaching, teaching, and providing social support—functions more commonly associated in the Christian division between monks and priests with priesthood.<sup>2</sup>

In the UK the communities served by such monks consist of both local converts and Thai immigrants. Setting up and maintaining temples in the UK, and serving these communities, means that monks are involved in administering bi-national and multinational institutions,

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity*, Wiley Blackwell Guides to Buddhism (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 199.

dealing with complex regulations, finding entrepreneurial funding, managing building developments, and finding sophisticated solutions to ever-developing environmental and people management issues, all while conforming to monastic regulations that were laid down in ancient India 2,500 years ago and periodically reconfirmed in Thai history, including during the colonial period, as well as contemporary time. In other words, despite the changes of modern society and culture, monks are still expected to comply with those ancient regulations. During the time that I have been conducting my research, the difficulties presented by fulfilling the various administrative and other roles have been exacerbated by a number of more recent developments: the hostile environment affecting visas in the UK; covid-related racism towards those perceived to look Chinese, within the broader context of the politicisation of immigration by right-wing politicians and populist agitators, exacerbated by social media; a Christian model of religion underlying new visa classifications affecting job descriptions of religious staff recruited from abroad; growing awareness of the plastic catastrophe as well as the health and environmental effects of diet, which particularly affects Buddhist monks because of their traditional reliance on donated food. However, while I gathered data on all these issues, due to the word limit of this thesis, I have had to leave my data relating to the final set of issues concerning plastic, food and diet, to a later time. While in the chapters examining individual temples I provide much information on funding, setting up, recruitment, my later chapters focus on the two biggest issues that temples have to deal with during their establishment and on a day-to-day basis: the management of people and the management of property and land.

## Literature Review

In Buddhist studies more broadly, the trope of the Buddhist monk as renouncer has now been challenged for several decades, most influentially by Gregory Schopen (1997) examining the epigraphy and texts of ancient India to find ample evidence that monks had to engage in many practical, societal and financial matters.<sup>3</sup> To some extent these practicalities have also been explored in relation to lived religion, among Tai practitioners a good recent example being the study of Buddhism in southern China by Thomas Borchert (2017).<sup>4</sup> The implications of this shift in Buddhist studies for our understanding of temples

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas A. Borchert, *Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China's Southwest Border* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

is that rather than seeing them as places of renunciation and withdrawal from society, we should acknowledge that they are complex institutions in a web of restrictive and enabling relationships. In addition, a few studies have examined Thai Buddhist communities in the United States, including works by Wendy Cadge (2004) and Jiemin Bao (2015).<sup>5</sup> Both provide insights into how Thai Buddhist temples navigate the practicalities of establishing and maintaining religious spaces in diasporic contexts. Cadge's work provides a foundational analysis of the first generation of Theravada Buddhist institutions in America by comparing a Thai immigrant temple in Philadelphia, Wat Phila, and a meditation centre primarily composed of white participants, the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center in Massachusetts. She highlights that many immigrant-founded religious organisations in the United States over the past 35 years, including Wat Phila, function not only as religious centres but also as important social spaces where immigrants can find support and alleviate the challenges of adapting to a new country's economic, political, and cultural environment. This dual role of temples as both religious and social spaces is one of the aspects that I explore in my study of Thai Buddhist temples in the UK.

While Cadge's work is broader in scope, Bao's study focuses on a single Thai temple in Silicon Valley. Her ethnography of Wat Thai, a pseudonym, rejects simplistic ethnic-versus-convert dichotomies and instead emphasises a web of interconnections among temple participants. Bao shows how people in a Thai temple community work together across ethnic and social differences, shaping their identities through both their lives in America and their connections to Thailand. She also broadens the understanding of the abbot's role, suggesting that the abbot of Wat Thai resembles a 'chief executive officer' rather than the 'stereotypical otherworldly monk', and highlights the many facets of monks' social lives as they continue their spiritual journey. It is the complexity of this final aspect that I draw out in my study of Thai temples in the UK.

Despite this, almost no prior research in English medium has engaged in the kind of in-depth institutional analysis of Theravada or Thai Buddhist temples that I shall conduct here, dealing with their legal and managerial practicalities. While there are some useful overviews of Buddhism in the UK, most detailed studies are of practice, doctrine, and

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); Jiemin Bao, *Creating a Buddhist Community: A Thai Temple in Silicon Valley*, Asian American History & Culture (Temple University Press, 2015).

congregations, and most focus on Western Buddhist organisations or temples staffed by and serving Western converts.<sup>6</sup> The study of diaspora Buddhism in the UK is somewhat limited. It may be that studies of Buddhism in the UK are conducted primarily by Anglophone scholars without a familiarity of their Asian counterparts, creating perhaps a more religious than practical orientation. Useful exceptions include a comparison of two Burmese temples in the UK by Pyi Phyo Kyaw, an analysis of abbot selection at Thai temples by Graham Winyard, David Azzopardi's portrayal of the complexity and diversity of Sri Lankan Buddhist groups in the UK, and, of particularly relevance, Ven. Vorasak Candamitto's study of Buddhist organizations in Great Britain in 1972 which includes the establishment of the first Thai temple in the UK, namely Wat Buddhapadipa (see Chapter 3).<sup>7</sup> All four are unpublished dissertations. Another relevant unpublished work is a rare institutional analysis, Tony Kemmer's study of the (Western-oriented) London Buddhist Society.<sup>8</sup> Interesting and relevant published work is available in the form of studies on Buddhist temple building types in the UK, including listed and heritage buildings, by Caroline Starkey and Emma Tomalin.<sup>9</sup>

This lack of prior research on the management of the temple in Western academia may reflect the difference in the understanding of Buddhism primarily in terms of a philosophy, a path of renunciation or meditation, and a set of doctrinal beliefs. There is a corresponding difference in the nature of interest in Buddhism on the part of outsiders compared to those who already belong in the tradition. Outsiders or those with an interest developed in adulthood have tended to the focus on the belief, practice, and identity of Buddhists, whether diaspora or convert. For the insider, I would suggest that many of those aspects are assumed while at the same time Buddhism is regarded as part of the fabric of their society as a whole, and the practicalities of maintaining it are therefore more apparent to

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Bluck, *British Buddhism: Teachings, Practice and Development* (Routledge, 2008); Helen Waterhouse, *Buddhism in Bath: Adaption and Authority*, 1st edn (Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Pyi Phyo Kyaw, 'Adaptability and Authenticity: A Comparative Study of Two Burmese Buddhist Monasteries in the UK' (MA independent research, London, SOAS, 2010); Graham Winyard, 'The Role of the Abbot in Western Thai Forest Monasteries of the Ajahn Chah Lineage' (MA Study of Religions, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2013); David Azzopardi, 'Religious Belief and Practice among Sri Lankan Buddhists in the UK' (Ph.D. thesis, London, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2010); Ven. Vorasak Candamitto, 'Buddhist Organizations in Great Britain' (M.A. Thesis, University of Durham, 1972).

<sup>8</sup> Tony Kemmer, 'The Changing Role of the (London) Buddhist Society in the Development of British Buddhism' (MA Dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Starkey and Emma Tomalin, 'Building Buddhism in England: The Flourishing of a Minority Faith Heritage', *Contemporary Buddhism* 17, no. 2 (2 July 2016): 326–56; Emma Tomalin and Caroline Starkey, 'Buddhist Buildings in England: The Construction of "under-Represented" Faith Heritage in a Multicultural and Post-Christian Setting', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 2 (7 February 2017): 156–72.

them. The management of the temple will affect the continuity of the religion and its upkeep is therefore a keen concern among those who are in the tradition, while less visible to outsiders. Those from the outsider and broader convert perspective (by which I mean those who consider themselves Buddhist but are not closely associated with the tradition of a particular country) would like to understand the religiosity of the Buddhist tradition, while those from the insider's perspective might be seeking a robust method for keeping the tradition alive. As more insiders pursue their higher education globally, we might expect the foci of research into Buddhist studies to change.

My suggestion that English-language resources tend to focus on religion in terms of meditation, doctrines, or congregations rather than the detailed practicalities of temples is borne out by the different picture that emerges when we turn to Thai-language sources. When I searched for Thai studies of the administration of Buddhist temples in Thailand. I encountered a substantial number. Scholars at Thai universities have thoroughly investigated various aspects of temple administration and management. Some studies examine the broader picture of temple administration, while others focus on specific areas such as sangha administration, temple tourism management, religious property management, and meditation centre management.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there have been studies on the international dissemination of

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<sup>10</sup> Phrakhrwisutthanantakhun Surasak Visuddhācāro, 'การบริหารจัดการวัดเพื่อความมั่นคงแห่งพระพุทธศาสนา (Monastery Administration for Buddhism Stability)' (Ph.D. thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2014); Phramaha Wasan Nānasiddhi, 'การพัฒนาตัวชี้วัดธรรมภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)' (Ph.D. thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2018); Phrapalad Woramet Nāgavaro, 'รูปแบบการพัฒนาการบริหารจัดการวัดที่ ดีในจังหวัดชัยนาท (A Good Management Model of Monastery in Chainat Province)' (Ph.D. thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2016); Waraporn Chieovet, 'แนวทางในการบริหารและการจัดการวัดให้สำเร็จตาม รูปแบบการบริหาร ของพุทธบริษัท กรณีศึกษาวัดราชธิวาส เขตดุสิต กรุงเทพมหานคร (Guidelines for the Administration and Management Measures to Achieve the Management Style of Buddhists. The Study Measured Rajathiwaswihan Dusit District, Bangkok.)', paper presented at The 2nd National Research Conference for Humanities and Social Sciences Students, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, 2019; Nattaporn Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)' (Master of Political Science (Public Affairs) Thesis, Thammasat University, 2015); Phramaha Jaran Bhūrikovido, 'แนวทางการบริหารกิจการคณะสงฆ์ของพระสังฆาธิการจังหวัดนนทบุรี เชิงพุทธบูรณาการ (Guidelines for the Administration of Sangha Affairs Based on the Buddhist Integration of Sangha Administrators in Nonthaburi Province)' (Ph.D. thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2019); Phramaha Jumngong Siriwunno et al., 'การบริหารกิจการคณะสงฆ์ของพระสังฆาธิการในศตวรรษที่ 21 (The Sangha Administration of Sangha Administrators in the 21st Century)', *Journal of Modern Learning Development* 6, no. 6 (2021); Boonchuay Chanhao, 'พฤติกรรมกรรมการบริหารของเจ้าอาวาสที่ส่งผลต่อปฏิบัติงานวัดในเขตการปกครองคณะสงฆ์คณะจังหวัด (Administrative Behavior of the Abbot Affecting Temple-Tasks in Bangkok Monastic Order)' (Master of Education Thesis, Silpakorn University, 2001); Phra Sura Sanitchai and Ratchaphon Srikaorot, 'บทบาทพระสังฆาธิการในการบริหารกิจการคณะสงฆ์ในเขตอำเภอ เมือง จังหวัดนครราชสีมา (The Roles of Sangha Administrative Officers to Clergy Administration in Zone of Amphole Mueng, Changwat Nakhon Ratchasima)', paper presented at The 6th National Conference Nakhonratchasima College, Thailand, *Aging Society: Opportunities and Challenges of Higher Education*, 2019; Phramaha Sunan

Buddhism through overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus, focusing on the strategies for the propagation of Buddhism and potential development models for overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus.<sup>11</sup> These findings highlight a rich and diverse body of research on temple administration and management in Thailand, underscoring the subject's significance within Thai Buddhist studies.

When examining the definition of temple management, we find various interpretations. According to Thailand's Department of Religious Affairs, temple management is defined as “the act of governing, directing, overseeing, and providing guidance to monks, novices, and laypeople within the temple to uphold order, morality, and proper conduct, while also implementing various temple projects with utmost efficiency for successful outcomes.”<sup>12</sup> In their research on temple administration, Noi Laikram and Suban Chantabut define temple management as a fusion of both art and science, encompassing “the systematic application of knowledge in planning, organising, personnel management, directing, coordinating, performance evaluation, and budgeting to achieve comprehensive and effective results. Moreover, it involves the use of art, such as leadership in human relations at work, to foster cooperation that facilitates the efficient attainment of objectives.”<sup>13</sup> Boonchuay Chanhao defines temple management as “the collaborative effort of two or more abbots or administrators working together to combine administrative resources effectively in order to achieve the set goals.”<sup>14</sup> These three definitions are couched in very general terms, all three mentioning administrative effort applied to specific goals. Only the last of them mentions the significance

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Sunando, ‘การพัฒนาแบบแผนการจัดการศาสนสมบัติของวัดในจังหวัดพระนครศรีอยุธยา (Development of Model for Religious Property Management of Monasteries in Ayutthaya Province)’ (Ph.D. thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2014); Khanika Kamdee, ‘วิธีการบริหารจัดการวัดพระสิงห์วรมหาวิหาร เพื่อการท่องเที่ยว (Tourism Management Methods of Phra Singh Woramahawihan Temple)’, *Journal of Language, Religion and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2019); Tanakom Bantaokul, ‘การบริหารสำนักวิปัสสนากรรมฐานของ สมเด็จพระพุฒาจารย์ (The Management of Vipassanā Meditation Center of Somdej Phra Buddhajarn (Aj Asabhamahathera))’, *Journal of MCU Peace Studies* 7 (2019); Phrakhrupalad Sarawut Thitapanño, ‘การพัฒนาวัดเพื่อเป็นศูนย์กลางการเรียนรู้ของชุมชนในจังหวัดชลบุรี (Monastery Development for Community Learning Centers in Chonburi Province)’ (Ph.D. diss., Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Phramaha Suthep Suwatthano, ‘กลยุทธ์การเผยแผ่พระพุทธศาสนาของพระธรรมทูตสายต่างประเทศ (Strategies for Buddhism Propagation of Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus)’ (Ph.D. thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2018); Udon Khiewon, ‘รูปแบบการพัฒนาศักยภาพของพระธรรมทูตสายต่างประเทศ (Potential Development Model of Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus)’ (Ph.D. thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Department of Religious Affairs, *คู่มือการบริหารจัดการวัดฉบับย่อ (Abbreviated Manual on Temple Management)* (Religious Printing House, 2003), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Siriwunno et al., ‘การบริหารกิจการคณะสงฆ์ของพระสังฆาธิการในศตวรรษที่ 21 (The Sangha Administration of Sangha Administrators in the 21st Century)’, 167.

<sup>14</sup> Chanhao, ‘พฤติกรรมการบริหารของเจ้าอาวาสที่ส่งผลต่อปฏิบัติงานวัดในเขตการปกครองคณะสงฆ์คณะจังหวัด (Administrative Behavior of the Abbot Affecting Temple-Tasks in Bangkok Monastic Order)’, 90.

of the abbot. However, in my research, the significance of the abbot and the specificity of expectations rather than goals to be fulfilled means that temple management should actually be described in relation to the parameters of the role and power of the abbot and the functions of temples.

These parameters are reflected in the definition provided by Phramaha Wasan Ñanasiddhi (hereafter Phramaha Wasan) in his thesis on monastic administration in Thailand.<sup>15</sup> He emphasises that temple management is not rigidly defined; rather, it varies depending on the methods and decisions of the abbot. Certain matters are guided by the resolutions of the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand (Thai: *Mahathera Samakhom*) or directives from the governing body, which typically consist of authoritative orders. These matters may involve the appointment of temple administrators, the establishment of the temple committee, and the implementation of resolutions from the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand. However, the majority of temple management responsibilities, such as financial matters, construction projects, personnel management, and policy planning, are entirely at the discretion of the respective abbot. Ultimately, the abbot plays a pivotal role in the functioning of temple management, making crucial decisions that significantly impact the temple's affairs.<sup>16</sup>

The challenges encountered by temple management have also been examined in Thai Buddhist studies. A key motivation for such institutional analysis within Thai Buddhist studies is the broader cultural concern with the quality and endurance of Buddhism noted above. This is because Buddhist texts predict the decline of Buddhism over the course of 5000 years since the death of the Buddha, which according to Thai tradition took place in 543 BCE, marking the start of the Buddhist Era (BE). While there have been relatively few studies on the issue of the decline of Buddhism, or the *sāsana*, for most Asian Buddhists it has been a significant concern that has shaped the Buddhism we know today. Important work on how this anxiety triggered by colonialism shaped modern Burmese Buddhism has been published by Alicia Turner (2014 and 2017), which show, among other things, the effort invested in preserving and establishing institutions in order to ensure the

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<sup>15</sup> Ñanasiddhi, ‘การพัฒนาคำชี้วัดธรรมภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)’.

<sup>16</sup> Ñanasiddhi, ‘การพัฒนาคำชี้วัดธรรมภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)’ , 2.

health of the *sāsana*.<sup>17</sup> While the Thai response to colonialism differed Thais shared the same concerns and the health of Buddhism continues to be connected in the Thai psyche with the health of the nation and the security of Thais.<sup>18</sup> Buddhists regarded their religion as a treasure received thanks to the efforts of previous generations of Thais, which current Thais have a duty to transmit in good order to those who come after.<sup>19</sup>

Phrakhruwisutthanantakhun Surasak Visuddhācāro (hereafter Phra Surasak) conducted an analysis of monastic administration in Thai temples from four provinces in Thailand. His study focuses on administrative theories related to monastic management, concepts, and principles, while also identifying challenges and obstacles. Among his findings, seven key challenges faced by temple administration were identified:

1. system and structure for temple management
2. leadership skills
3. personnel management
4. budget for temple management
5. technology and equipment for temple management
6. preservation of antiques, Buddhist art, buildings, and landscapes
7. relationships with local communities and authorities.<sup>20</sup>

Nattaporn Jindasawat also conducted research on the administration of monastic institutions in Thai temples, with a specific focus on examining and analysing the sangha administration of the Sangha Supreme Council. The aim of her research was to propose potential strategies and approaches for addressing the prevailing challenges in sangha administration.<sup>21</sup> She delves into the contemporary challenges faced by monks and novices in Thailand.<sup>22</sup> She emphasises that the primary concern revolves around instances of misconduct and disciplinary violations among Buddhist monks and novices. This is of

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<sup>17</sup> Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: Moral Community and the Impermanence of Colonial Religion* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2014); Alicia Turner et al., *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*, Reprint edition (University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Crosby, 'The Shared Origins of Traditionalism and Secularism in Theravada Buddhism', in *Secularizing Buddhism*, ed. Richard Payne (Shambhala Publications, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> For instance, this article highlights that studying the administrative process of a Buddhist temple is essential for developing effective strategies that help the temple thrive and avoid falling into an abandoned state. See Sarin Rattanadilok na Phuket and Nakamol Chansom, 'POSDCoRB Management Process of Theravada Maha Nikaya Buddhist Temple in Phuket Province', *Journal of MCU Peace Studies* 11, no. 1 (2023): 1–13.

<sup>20</sup> Visuddhācāro, 'การบริหารจัดการวัดเพื่อความมั่นคงแห่งพระพุทธศาสนา (Monastery Administration for Buddhism Stability)', 245–47.

<sup>21</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)'.  
<sup>22</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 75.

profound significance because these monks and novices are the embodiment of Buddha's teachings, and the faith of the Buddhist community is intricately tied to their conduct. Any deviation from monastic discipline has the potential to undermine people's faith and in turn their support, on which temples rely.<sup>23</sup>

Jindasawat categorises these issues into two categories: those related to the management and administration of temples and those stemming from the behaviour of the monks themselves.<sup>24</sup> The former category encompasses internal temple administration issues, challenges related to temple property, the state of the temple's surroundings, encroachment on temple land by influential individuals, and a lack of engagement and participation from the Buddhist community.<sup>25</sup> The latter category encompasses issues such as monks' ownership of property, challenges in monastic education, instances of monks and novices not adhering to monastic discipline, health concerns among the monks, and individuals entering the monastic order without a genuine commitment to Buddhism.<sup>26</sup>

Phramaha Wasan also identifies a range of challenges, including unauthorised construction of temple buildings, encroachment on public land, deforestation, and land occupation, as well as mismanagement of temple funds and unclear financial records. Additionally, he highlights the issue of certain temples allowing individuals close to the administration to exploit the temple's resources for personal gain. He points out that temples also face structural problems, such as disputes over power-sharing, centralisation of authority, lack of transparency and accountability among the monastic community, power struggles, favouritism, and self-interest prevailing over collective interests.<sup>27</sup> These challenges highlight the complexities inherent in temple management and I witnessed similar issues in the UK. The findings of these studies have far-reaching implications not only for temple management in Thailand, but also for temple management in other countries, including the UK.

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<sup>23</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 75.

<sup>24</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 75–76.

<sup>25</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 75–76.

<sup>26</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 76–77.

<sup>27</sup> Nanasiddhi, 'การพัฒนาตัวชี้วัดธรรมาภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)', 2–3.

While each of these three studies recognises challenges, their approaches to temple management research differ. In his assessment, Phra Surasak introduced the 5M model as an optimal strategy for temple management. While the conventional 4M model is recognised and applied in management across many sectors, especially in project management, it typically encompasses four pivotal factors denoted by the letter ‘M’: Man, Money, Materials, and Management. However, Phra Surasak added a fifth factor, ‘Moral,’ thus expanding it to the 5M model. By efficiently integrating resources into a management process to meet stated objectives, and emphasising the pivotal factors of man, money, materials, management, and morality, Phra Surasak draws a religious conclusion: he believes that temples could achieve exemplary administrative practices, laying a solid groundwork for the enduring prosperity of Buddhism. This religiously oriented conclusion reflects very clearly the broader cultural concerns to ensure the health and longevity of Buddhism mentioned above. It also relates most closely to the expectations I mentioned at the outset that the temple fulfils a number of personal and social roles associated with religion, and all the remaining aspects of temple management have to be conducted within the parameters set by the expectations of all the different stakeholders.

Looking at the practicalities of enacting the 5M model, Phra Surasak emphasises the importance of managing individuals within the temple, encompassing monks, novices, and laypeople. They are viewed as the most valuable assets in steering the temple’s operations.<sup>28</sup> This resonates with my finding that people management stands as the utmost concern. Therefore, it should be prioritised over other aspects and given a thorough examination. After setting up the necessary background and discussing administrative structures in Chapter 1 and 2, I shall delve into various aspects of people-management in greater depth in Chapters 5 and 6.

Jindasawat, as noted earlier, adopts a different, top-down approach, analysing the Sangha’s administration in Thailand, starting from its highest governing body, the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand (Thai: *Mahathera Samakhom*, Pali: *Mahāthera Samāgama*), hereafter SSC. Operating under the guidelines of the Sangha Act, the SSC oversees specific duties,

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<sup>28</sup> Phrakhruwisutthanantakhun Visuddhācāro, ‘การบริหารจัดการวัดเพื่อความมั่นคงแห่งพระพุทธศาสนา (Monastery Administration For Buddhism Stability)’ (Ph.D. thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2014), 250.

distributing plans to temples across the nation. Top-tier administrative monks guide the overarching vision, ensuring a cohesive approach that cascades from the most senior monks to temple abbots who manage individual temples.<sup>29</sup>

The SSC's oversight of the Sangha extends beyond just addressing monks' breaches of the monastic code. Instead, it actively supports monks, enhancing their capabilities, and preemptively addressing potential issues. By establishing comprehensive policies, strategic mechanisms, and regulations aligned with both monastic discipline and national laws, they ensure streamlined administration. Specifically, the SSC breaks down its administrative responsibilities into six pivotal areas of Sangha affairs: governance, Buddhist propagation, monastic education, ecclesiastical properties, welfare education, and public welfare. Recognising the dynamic challenges faced by temples today, these six areas serve as fundamental policies, ensuring a proactive and sustainable approach to problem-solving.<sup>30</sup>

In administering these six areas of Sangha affairs, every temple should, in accordance with the Sangha Act, adhere to the principles of good governance as a guideline for administration.<sup>31</sup> While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the term 'good governance,' the United Nations describes it as relating to "the political and institutional processes and outcomes that are necessary to achieve the goals of development."<sup>32</sup> Its effectiveness is measured by how well it delivers on human rights, such as health, housing, food, education, justice, and security, all of which are essential for achieving development goals.<sup>33</sup> In Thailand, this term 'good governance' is translated as '*dhammapiban*' which is derived from the word '*dhamma*,' which, rather than referring to the teachings of the Buddha as commonly understood in Buddhist contexts, signifies "morality, good conduct, and right behaviour," and the word '*apiban*' translates to "govern." Thus, *dhammapiban* conflates the religious and political spheres, intertwining the ethical and moral principles rooted in religious teachings with governance.

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<sup>29</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 135.

<sup>30</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 91.

<sup>31</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 135.

<sup>32</sup> 'About Good Governance', Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed 18 August 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/good-governance/about-good-governance>.

<sup>33</sup> Off. U. N. High Comm. Hum. Rights, 'About Good Governance'.

This concept of *dhammapiban* denotes the principles guiding efficient governance and management in the context of state operations. In 1999, as Thailand recovered financially from the *baht* crisis, the government embraced the principles of good governance, a requirement set forth by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Phra Brahmapundit Prayoon Dhammacitto introduced these principles to reform Sangha administration, aligning them with the eight components of good governance as defined by the United Nations. However, for the Sangha's administrative reform, six core elements are emphasised: participation, transparency, accountability, rule of law, efficiency, and effectiveness.<sup>34</sup> According to Jindasawat, these principles are designed to mitigate potential problems within the temple, as all operations necessitate coordination with various state sectors and are applied to the affairs of the Sangha.<sup>35</sup>

Jindasawat deduced that the SSC's administration prioritises the principles of good governance as the cornerstone for overseeing Sangha activities, in order to resolve issues, encourage transparency and enhance supervision across all Sangha undertakings. It mandates the observance of good governance principles at every tier, from provincial and district levels to sub-districts and individual temples. The overarching goal is to foster equity and transparency, which in turn aims to mitigate issues concerning property and financial management within the temples.<sup>36</sup> While Jindasawat provides this overview, it remains at the level of structure and theory. She does not provide practical details of the implications and practicalities at the temple level.

Phramaha Wasan also explores the principles of good governance within the context of temple management in Thailand. He offers an in-depth analysis of governance indicators tailored for Theravada Buddhist temple management and refines these criteria. While one might expect that a temple responding to centralised, modern administrative requirements might have moved away from traditional values, his findings reveal that the temple management in Thailand has remained largely traditional, with four key characteristics: a

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<sup>34</sup> Suthee Wirabundit, Phramaha Sunan Suntho, and Prasert Thilao, 'การปฏิรูปกิจการพระพุทธศาสนา (Buddhist Affairs Reform)', *Journal of MCU Social Science Review* 5, no. 3 (December 2016): 119.

<sup>35</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 120.

<sup>36</sup> Jindasawat, 'การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ในประเทศไทย กรณีศึกษา มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Administration in Thailand: A Case Study of Sangha Supreme Council)', 120.

person-centred approach focusing on the abbot, governance rooted in monastic discipline (*Vinaya*), administration echoing the *Sombunyasithiraj* or absolute monarchy, and a consistent engagement with the community.<sup>37</sup>

The first characteristic is heavily focused on the abbot, whose knowledge or charisma can significantly impact the temple's prosperity. As a result, the administration of the temple often centres around the abbot. In some cases, the abbot may not be able to exercise the authority granted by law because, without sufficient personal charisma or respect, it becomes difficult for people to accept their leadership.<sup>38</sup>

The second characteristic is governance based on the principles of monastic discipline, which can range from strict adherence to discipline to a moderate approach that evolves with societal shifts yet uphold foundational values. The strict adherence approach generally involves monks withdrawing from society and having little involvement in temple management activities. This is because the management within such strictly disciplined monastic communities mainly focuses on performing monastic duties and ensuring that the monks within the temple properly carry out their religious practices. In contrast, the moderate approach embraces contemporary management strategies, fosters community collaboration, and offers temple spaces for community endeavours. Most of the temples I have studied reflect a moderate approach.<sup>39</sup>

The third characteristic of temple management is the style of absolute monarchy, where governance is centralised under the abbot. While some temples have a committee, its authority and duties are merely nominal. By drawing on the idea of governance by absolute monarchy, Phramaha Wasan is drawing a parallel between the abbot and the traditional role of the king in Thailand. He elaborates that a temple's success hinges on the abbot's expertise, proficiency, and charisma, underscoring the critical importance of singular leadership in temple management. We can see the significance of this elsewhere in the Theravada world too, for example in the detailed study by Jeffrey Samuels of the role of

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<sup>37</sup> Nanasiddhi, 'การพัฒนาตัวชี้วัดธรรมภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)', 201.

<sup>38</sup> Nanasiddhi, 'การพัฒนาตัวชี้วัดธรรมภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)', 201.

<sup>39</sup> Nanasiddhi, 'การพัฒนาตัวชี้วัดธรรมภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)', 201.

the abbot in Sri Lankan temples, and the qualities he needs to successfully inspire lay supporters and recruit and retain novices to become the next generation of monks.<sup>40</sup> On this note, I should observe that the recruitment and training of novices is one of the few responsibilities that UK monks do not, on the whole, share with their Thai counterparts since novice ordination in the UK is rare, with recruitment instead being of monks already fully ordained and trained in Thailand.

The last characteristic is the consistent engagement with the community. Most temples, especially in rural areas, maintain strong ties with the local community. The community actively participates in temple management, closely monitoring the behaviour of monks and novices, which discourages them from deviating from proper conduct. This strong connection between the temple and the community fosters mutual dependence and oversight. This relationship will also be evident in my case studies.

Phramaha Wasan states that most temples possess only a management style without a solid system. Nevertheless, he observes that some temples, like Wat Phra Dhammakaya (see Chapter 2), adopt a modern management system, which includes having a clear administrative structure, defining roles and decision-making powers, as well as establishing organisational missions, goals, and action plans.<sup>41</sup> As we shall see, this in part results from their non-traditional method of recruitment in Thailand, with monks joining from university backgrounds after gaining degrees, with even the founder monks having degrees in Economics, Business Administration and Agriculture, rather than as boys from the local community, as is traditional.

These Thai studies illuminate the intricacies of the Sangha's administration in Thailand, spanning from the highest governing body to the prevailing temple management systems. Coupled with the challenges in temple management highlighted earlier, the insights from these studies strengthen the foundation of my research, enriching and contextualising my subsequent analysis. These studies also allow us to see that the temples set up in the UK, while facing additional, and often alien governance, come from a cultural background

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<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey Samuels, *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture*, 1 edition (University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Nanasiddhi, 'การพัฒนาตัวชี้วัดธรรมภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)', 202.

where top-down governance is familiar, where there are three broad models of governance at the temple level, namely (i) abbot, ii) abbot with committee, and iii) fully modernised, delegated and structured, and two broad directions of engagement, namely, a focus on monastic practice or focus on community engagement. We shall draw this out in relation to the temples in our study by looking at their Thai roots, how they are run and how this reflects both their origins and the purposes they seek to fulfil. While the Thai studies show great familiarity with useful structural details and theory, they have a tendency to provide a dry top-down perspective, with little narrative and few case studies showing how this work out in practice. In contrast, Western studies that I have mentioned such as Samuels, Turner, and Borchert tend to provide narratives that make the situation realistic to the reader and from which we can then derive theories. In my study, I shall attempt to combine these approaches, offering the big structural picture, which is often very complex, by also showing how this has affected individual temples and people.

## Methodology

To conduct a comprehensive study of Thai temples in the UK, I draw upon works from the field of institutional analysis, Thai examples of which I have surveyed in the previous section. An institutional analysis is “a structured approach used to investigate the process by which attributes of a community, rules-in-use and biophysical conditions structure interactions in action situations to generate outcomes.”<sup>42</sup> Such analysis may use single case studies, comparative case studies, process tracing, statistical analysis, or meta-analysis.<sup>43</sup> Institutional analysis centres on how institutions shape the incentives, opportunities, and constraints that individuals encounter when interacting with their environment and each other.<sup>44</sup> Currently, each academic discipline such as economics, anthropology, sociology, political science, and history has its own unique methods that contribute to conducting institutional analysis.<sup>45</sup> My institutional analysis delves into the processes by which individuals and organisations—including Buddhist monks, staff, and volunteers, along with their governing bodies—develop institutions, specifically focusing on the Thai

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<sup>42</sup> Reinette Biggs, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods for Social-Ecological Systems*, Routledge International Handbooks (Routledge, 2021), 312.

<sup>43</sup> Biggs, *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods for Social-Ecological Systems*, 312.

<sup>44</sup> Biggs, *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods for Social-Ecological Systems*, 309.

<sup>45</sup> J. Rogers Hollingsworth, ‘Doing Institutional Analysis: Implications for the Study of Innovations’, *Review of International Political Economy* 7, no. 4 (2000): 630.

Buddhist temples that form the core of my research. I study how those institutions (temples) function in practice, and the effects of institutions on each other, on individuals, societies, and the broader society. Hence, I consider my work to lie within the area of institutional analysis which I develop from a Buddhist studies perspective.

Meanwhile, much of the material I have needed to consult in order to understand the dynamics at play within the challenges that I have identified within the relevant institutions falls within the remit of national and local governmental policy. Such material is mainly to be found in websites, guides and documented processes in both UK and Thailand, as well as through Facebook and social media sites designed to support those going through such processes. Extended discussions and interviews with particularly experienced monks, volunteers, trustees, and temple managers have also helped me to navigate and interpret this information (Appendix 2: List of standard interviews).

In order to study the practicalities of Thai temples in the UK, I first needed to establish a basic set of information, such as how many Thai temples there are, where they are located, how they relate to each other and to organisations in Thailand, etc. No one, either in Thailand or the UK, had established a complete list, though there were two initial lists I could draw from, as I shall explain below. Also, most temples lacked a strong internet presence. While there are Thai temples in the UK with Western monks and mixed congregations (see below), most Thai temples are staffed by Thai monks with mainly Thai congregations. The latter temples are not as visible in the UK as the former, in that they are not as visible on the internet or in publications. This may be a language issue, with staff not having the facility to write a website in English. However, they tend not to have Thai websites either. This means that I found out about the existence and details of Thai temples through word of mouth, particularly through the Assistant Abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso (hereafter Phramaha Bhatsakorn), who retains a list – one of the initial lists that I began to build on – since he coordinates the regular meetings of all Thai temples staffed by Thai monks and is involved in securing exit visas from Thailand for monks coming to staff those temples.

More information was usually available on Facebook, although in some cases that also was not visible or available. This relative invisibility is in marked contrast to those Thai-lineage temples with Western monks, who all stem – albeit in varying ways – from the forest tradition of meditation monks in lineages from the famous meditation monk Ajahn Chah Subhaddo (1918–

1992). The websites of these forest tradition temples are well presented with audio talks, upcoming livestreams, online retreats, e-books, audiobooks, English articles, and recorded videos of both Dhamma talks and guided meditations.<sup>46</sup> These lineages are also best represented in writings on Buddhism in the UK such as Robert Bluck's study of the seven largest Buddhist organisations in Britain and Waterhouse's detailed case study based on six Buddhist groups in the city of Bath.<sup>47</sup> Bluck's analysis of the origins, evolution, and characteristics of the British Forest Sangha indicates a number of significant adaptations in response to new monastic or lay needs, ranging from the most visible to the more subtle. For instance, warmer clothes, chanting in English, simplified etiquette for laypeople, and the formation of the nuns' order are all obvious changes. The less obvious adaptations are the modification of Theravada teachings for Western audience who are unable to relate to the supernatural; the emphasis on examining emotions openly including unpleasant emotions; and the use of elements or narratives from Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>48</sup> Similar to Bluck, Waterhouse suggests that the forest tradition of Ajahn Chah's presentation of Theravada Buddhism appeals to many western practitioners, who prefer forms of Buddhism that emphasise meditation experience and psychological interpretation of teaching over supernatural elements.<sup>49</sup> Both Bluck and Waterhouse observe that the British supporters place a greater emphasis on personal meditation practice than on traditional merit-making roles, which I shall discuss in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Given that the Thai temples staffed mainly by Thais outside of the Ajahn Chah lineage remain relatively undocumented in scholarship, and the variability of their websites and social media presence, I have built on the lists I gathered and online searches I conducted through snowballing techniques. Snowball sampling builds on information provided by informants that are accessible to or chosen by the researcher and "is applied when it is difficult to access subjects with the target characteristics. In this method, the existing study subjects recruit future subjects among their acquaintances. Sampling continues until data saturation".<sup>50</sup> Interviewing the former manager of Wat Phra Dhammakaya London Temple, Anuchit

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<sup>46</sup> 'Cittaviveka | Chithurst Buddhist Monastery | Petersfield', Cittaviveka, accessed 28 February 2022, <https://www.cittaviveka.org/>; 'Amaravati Buddhist Monastery | UK | Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah', Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, accessed 28 February 2022, <https://amaravati.org/>; 'Wat Sri Intra Atula', Wat Sri Intra Atula, accessed 28 February 2022, <https://watsriintraatula.org.uk/>.

<sup>47</sup> Bluck, *British Buddhism*; Waterhouse, *Buddhism in Bath*.

<sup>48</sup> Bluck, *British Buddhism*.

<sup>49</sup> Waterhouse, *Buddhism in Bath*.

<sup>50</sup> Mahin Naderifar et al., 'Snowball Sampling: A Purposeful Method of Sampling in Qualitative Research', *Strides in Development of Medical Education* 14, no. 3 (2017), <http://sdmejournal.com/en/articles/67670.html>.

Treerattanajutawat (hereafter Anuchit), was the first step in my research using this snowballing technique. Later, he advised that I interview Phramaha Bhatsakorn, from whom I acquired that first list of 25 Thai temples in the UK.

As I continued my online research, I discovered a document containing a list of Thai temples around the world in 2019 on the National Office of Buddhism's website, which included 29 temples in the UK. However, I then realised that Venenerable Phramaha Bhatsakorn's initial list only included temples in the Mahanikai (Pali: *Mahānikāya*) order, omitting the four Thammayut-nikai (Pali: *Dhammayuttika Nikāya*, hereafter Thammayut) temples, a division within the Thai Sangha that I shall explain in Chapter 1. As a result, I compiled my current list of 31 Thai Buddhist temples in the UK (Table 4) under the authority of the Thai government. This includes two new temples established in Southend-on-Sea and Brighton in 2021.

Initially I planned to provide a full description of each, but due to the amount of data gathered, I had needed to restrict my account to the lists and maps provided (Table 4 and Figure 12) and to descriptions of chosen representative examples of main types of temples according to their monastic affiliation (Figure 6). I was also able to map out the relationships between these temples. I shall explain such relationships in relation to some selected examples and analyse what they mean for these temples in my third chapter. I initially planned to analyse the temples' characteristics according to these relationships and also according to the mother temple that they represented. In practice, however, some temple histories and networks are particularly complex, with monks and patrons shifting temples and lineage. The relationships will therefore be presented in institutional relationship diagrams somewhat akin to family trees, noting also support relationships, and also exemplified through the aforementioned discussion of selected examples (Figure 13). This material is presented mainly in Chapter 3, which has proved particularly long as a result.

Once I had achieved my basic list of temples and networks, I began to identify the various organisations that temples needed to navigate and the issues they had to confront. I began this by drawing on my expertise in Buddhist studies, business management, accountancy and bilingual volunteer experience, and I used institutional analysis through telephone surveys and then in-depth interviews to examine how the Thai temples in the UK navigate these administrative and cultural strictures. Drawing from my initial institutional analysis, I structured my in-depth follow-up interviews to address the main issues raised. My focus

centred on six representative temples: Wat Buddhapadipa, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Wat Phra Singh, Wat Arun Norfolk, and Wat Sri Intra Atula. I selected the first three temples primarily because, with their numerous branches, they collectively embody the majority of Thai Buddhist traditions present in the UK. Meanwhile Wat Phra Singh, which is presently embroiled in a development project, offers distinct insights into property and land management. Its foundation, driven by a local English supporter deeply vested in Buddhism, sets it apart from many other temples. Wat Arun Norfolk is a useful case study because it has previously encountered challenges with building control, and its establishment process differs from that of many other temples. Finally, Wat Sri Intra Atula is distinctive in that it adheres to the minority Thammayut order, in contrast to the predominant Mahanikai affiliation of the other temples. These six case studies will offer both a comprehensive overview of Thai Buddhist temples in the UK and material for an in-depth analysis of the ways in which Thai temples navigate the many strictures and expectations placed on them from two different national governmental systems and two different cultures.

I employed semi-structured interviews as my primary research method, utilising a pre-determined set of questions provided in Appendix 1. While adhering to this framework, I also ensured flexibility in the interview process, allowing for the exploration of emergent topics during the conversation. The participants in this research included abbots, trustees, representatives from the temples, supporters, and volunteers—individuals directly involved in the management and upkeep of the temples. Participants were all over 18. The inclusion criteria are Thai Buddhist temples that are located within the UK: Thai Buddhist temples that have been established for at least 5 years; participants who were involved or have been actively involved with the temple for a minimum of 5 years; and participants who are involved in the management and maintenance of the temples.

Anonymity has been a challenge given the public nature of the temples and the specificity of some of the issues faced. For informants who want to be anonymous, the anonymity of the informants is maintained with pseudonyms replacing their original names throughout the interview transcripts and in the thesis, and information redacted to reduce the possibility of identification by association, even where this has meant providing a more general picture than the one my research actually uncovered. The pertinent data about participants, including ethnicity, gender, age, and date(s) of interview is tabulated as Appendix 2.

Alongside interviews, I used participant observation techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the rituals, practices, and interpersonal dynamics present within the temples. My observations spanned a variety of temple activities and ceremonies, documenting details such as the temple's architectural layout and design. Additionally, I documented interactions among participants, identifying the distinct roles and responsibilities of temple leaders, members of the Thai Buddhist community, and other attendees from the general public. This approach offered a deeper understanding of both the operational dynamics of the temple and its sociocultural and religious significance.

For participant recruitment in this study, I employed the snowball sampling technique. My volunteer position at the temple enabled a direct connection to Anuchit, the former manager of Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, who served as my initial informant. Subsequently, he introduced me to Phramaha Bhatsakorn, the Secretary of Wat Buddhapadipa, who has been influential in managing Thai temples in the UK for over a decade. In the case of Wat Phra Singh, I was acquainted with the temple's founder and trustee, Tony Collacot, via a chef from a restaurant where I previously worked. This chef, a temple supporter, introduced me to the temple's abbot, who in turn connected me with Tony Collacot. For engagements with other temples, I typically initiated contact by arranging a preliminary visit, after which I would schedule formal interviews based on their availability. Notably, many of my contacts and introductions were facilitated by Phramaha Bhatsakorn and Anuchit.

Most of my interviews were conducted in Thai, reflecting the native language of the majority of my informants. However, a few local participants were interviewed in English. I have personally undertaken the translation of the Thai interviews for consistency and accuracy. The topics were selected based on insights from preliminary conversations, interviews, and participant observation. I conducted interviews with 27 informants, including 10 phone interviews, 17 in-person interviews, and some who participated in both formats. Sometimes I interviewed an informant multiple times, conducting 39 interviews in total (see Appendix 2). Additionally, I maintained correspondence with the trustee of Wat Phra Singh UK through multiple email exchanges. For the participant observation aspect of my study, I made 31 visits across 14 temples in the UK (Appendix 3).

As an individual deeply immersed in the Buddhist tradition and having dedicated a significant amount of time volunteering at Buddhist temples, I believe that I possess unique

insights that contribute to this research. Unlike those outside the tradition, my insider perspective grants me an inherent advantage in this endeavour. Moreover, my volunteer work has enabled me to establish meaningful connections with key figures in the management of some temples, affording me convenient access to arrange interviews and ask informed questions. However, despite my familiarity with the Buddhist tradition, I am considered an outsider when interacting with certain temples. For instance, while attending a food offering ceremony at a temple of the Thai Forest Tradition in the UK with my aunt, I was struck by the unfamiliarity of the setting. Although the temple was Thai-oriented, the majority of monks and attendees were not of Thai descent. This discrepancy led to feelings of unease and uncertainty about the appropriate behaviour. While I felt anxious initiating contact with non-Thai monks for interviews, their evident kindness and approachability assuaged some of my apprehensions. Interestingly, interacting with non-Thai participants was somewhat more comfortable, as it alleviated the pressure to strictly adhere to Thai cultural norms usually expected when communicating with Thai adults, whether monks or laity.

## Chapter Outline

### Introduction

The introduction provided an overview of this research and its purpose; a review of both English and Thai academic sources, along with an explanation of my fieldwork methodology. Following the outline of chapters below, I provide a guide to my transliteration of Thai and to specific terms and honorifics.

### Chapter 1: Understanding Buddhist Temples in Thailand

Chapter 1 provides an in-depth exploration of Buddhist temples in Thailand, examining key aspects such as their characteristics, administration, classification, and affiliation. The first section depicts the broader features of temples, including their architectural elements and their significance within the Thai community. This helps us understand Thai Buddhist practice. The second section delves into the administrative structure of temples in Thailand, encompassing the Buddhist sangha, the Sangha Act, and the influential role of the ecclesiastical governing

body. The third part introduces various classifications of temples in Thailand, shedding light on the two prominent Thai Buddhist lineages, namely Mahanikai and Thammayut, recognised by the Thai state. This helps us understand the internal diversity of Thai Buddhism and how it is governed.

## Chapter 2: Tracing the Roots – The Parent Temples of My Case Studies

Chapter 2 explores the origins of the six case study temples in the UK, focusing on their Thai parent temples to elucidate their historical, lineage, and organisational structures, some of which are mirrored in the UK temples. These parent temples are Wat Mahathat, Wat Phra Singh, Wat Arun Ratchawararam, Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Wat Nong Pa Pong, and Wat Prachakhom Wanaram. The chapter delves into the historical background, organisational structure, temple complexes, practices, rituals, and cultural significance of each parent temple. The differences in their history and in the reasons for their international outreach help shape their daughter temples in the UK.

## Chapter 3: Navigating Sacred Spaces in a Foreign Land - Thai Temples in the UK

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive overview of Thai temples in the UK, starting with an overview of these establishments and outlining the data collection methodology. It then examines six case study temples in detail, highlighting their histories, backgrounds, governance, leadership, finances, funding sources, programmes, services, and congregations. Finally, the discussion extends to the relevant Theravada monastic organisations in the UK, exploring their backgrounds, objectives, and functions. It reveals that the landscape of Thai temples in the UK is not a microcosm of the Thai landscape but is instead dominated by certain temples all with distinctive reasons for having an international presence, be that because of their royal status and early role in shaping modern Thai Buddhism, their representation of the reformists' and converts' ideal of renouncer, meditation-oriented Buddhism, or because of their active efforts at missionising and internationalisation. My case studies reflect both these three trends and counter-examples. This thorough investigation yields a nuanced understanding of Thai Buddhism in the UK as well as each temple's distinctive features and dynamics, how they were established, and what it takes for them to recruit monks, receive support and survive, given context to the specific management issues that form the focus of subsequent chapters.

## Chapter 4: Bridging Different Realms – The Complexities of Managing Thai Temples in the UK

Chapter 4 delves into the authorities in both Thailand and the UK involved in the establishment and management of Thai temples. While considering all possible management functions that a temple may require, this thesis focuses on nine essential management functions necessary for a temple: people, property and grounds, finances, food, waste, events, education, Buddhist propagation, and public welfare. In terms of the establishment of Thai temples in the UK, I categorise the timeline of the process into three distinct phases: the period before the monks arrived in the UK, the phase of setting up the temples, and the phase dedicated to their maintenance. The chapter begins by examining the Thai national authorities and their role in the process of obtaining a monastic passport. It then shifts focus to the UK government departments, agencies, and public bodies that play a crucial role in the operation of organisations within the country, including religious institutions. By exploring the roles and responsibilities of these authorities, Chapter 4 sheds light on the regulatory landscape within which Thai temples operate, highlighting the key considerations and challenges they face in terms of personnel and property management.

## Chapter 5: Uncovering the Layers of the Thai Monastic Community in the UK

Chapter 5 examines the intricacies of people management within Thai temples in the UK, focusing specifically on the monastic community. The chapter considers various aspects, including monks' routines, responsibilities, and adaptations in a Western setting by contrasting them with monastic life in Thailand. Additionally, the chapter explores the role of abbotship in the UK by employing the four key characteristics of abbots in Thailand identified by Phramaha Wasan. Lastly, despite the absence of women in Thai monastic roles in the UK, the chapter explores the gender dynamics within the monastic community, focusing on inequalities and efforts to promote equality for women. By thoroughly examining these dimensions of the monastic community in the UK, Chapter 5 uncovers the complex interplay of tradition and adaptation shaped by their experiences in managing the temples while facing numerous challenges.

## Chapter 6: Migration, Community Roles, and Conflicts in Thai Temples in the UK

Chapter 6 delves deeper into the realm of people management within Thai temples in the UK, with a particular emphasis on the roles of the laity, especially women, in sustaining these religious institutions. It begins by examining the migration patterns of the Thai population in the UK and how these patterns have shaped the demographic composition of temple communities. The chapter then analyses the responsibilities and contributions of laypeople in temple life, including financial support, active volunteering, and cultural participation. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of women, specifically marriage migrants, who contribute to the economic and social support of temple communities socially. The chapter also examines potential conflicts that may arise among volunteers, supporters, and outsiders, as well as how these challenges are addressed. By addressing these areas, the chapter provides valuable insights into the intricate relationships among the establishment of Thai temples in the UK and migration patterns; between their prosperity and community involvement; and between their survival and effective conflict resolution.

### A Note on Transliteration and Terminology

In this thesis, I have generally romanised Thai names according to the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) published by the Royal Institute of Thailand and officially used for transcribing Thai words into the Roman alphabet in road signs and government publications. However, I leave unchanged the spellings for names and titles that were already romanised or commonly used. For instance, the honorific titles for monks, such as ‘Luang Por’ and ‘Ajahn,’ retain their recognised spelling, whereas the RTGS’s spelling would be ‘Luang Pho’ and ‘Ajan’. In addition, unless indicated otherwise, all translations of Thai texts presented in this thesis are my own.

The term ‘temple’ will be used in this thesis to translate the Thai word ‘wat’, the complex of religious and sometimes administrative or educational buildings that include a monastery, a residence for monks. For the names of the temples, I will use ‘Wat’ in front of their names; however, in some cases, I will use ‘monastery’ to preserve their original names. The term ‘sangha’ (Pali: *saṅgha*) meaning “community, assemblage, a chapter of (not less than four)

Buddhist monks; the Order; the Buddhist clergy”<sup>51</sup> will be used throughout the thesis to refer to the entirety of Buddhist monks.

The way in which monks are referred to in this thesis varies, as I have used different names based on how they address themselves or how they are commonly referred to by their congregation. For instance, in the forest tradition, monks are typically addressed as ‘Ajahn’ ‘honourable/teacher’ rather than ‘Luang Por’ or ‘Luang Pu’, which are commonly used for the elder monks in Thailand (see Appendix 4 for these titles). Some Thai Buddhists in the UK show respect for monks by addressing them as ‘Than’ followed by their names, rather than using ‘Luang Phi’—a term more commonly used in Thailand for monks who are of similar age or slightly older than the speaker, but typically under the age of 50. In the case of a monk without a rank or a recognised honorific, I will use ‘Phra’ before the monk’s name to show respect and also indicate his monk status. I adhere to the spelling as it is published, even though it may sometimes be inconsistent with RGTS spelling.

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<sup>51</sup> Phra Brahmaganabhorn, ‘संघ (Saṅgha)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

# 1

## Understanding Buddhist Temples in Thailand

In Thailand, approximately 82.36% of the Thai population adheres to Buddhism, as indicated by statistics from 2014.<sup>52</sup> The most recent database, as of July 2022, provides valuable information about the total number and broad adherence of temples officially recognised by the Thai state (Table 1). This comprehensive list encompasses various lineages, including two from the Theravada tradition (Mahanikai and Thammayut) and two from the Mahayana tradition (Jin Nikai and Annam Nikai). Among the 43,146 temples recorded, the majority, 43,107 or 99.9%, belong to the Theravada tradition, while just the small number of 39 temples are affiliated with the Mahayana tradition. The total number of monks also aligns with this dominant trend. As of 30 December 2021, there were 207,875 monks in total (Table 2). Among them, 207,816 belonged to Theravada tradition, while 59 were the minority groups of Mahayana tradition. These figures illustrate the presence of both Theravada and Mahayana traditions in the landscape of temples, and most importantly, they emphasise the prevalence of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand.

Table 1: Temples in Thailand Recognised by the Thai State based on the National Buddhism Office Temple Registration System (July 2022).<sup>53</sup>

<b>Temples in Thailand with monks</b>			<b>43,146 temples</b>
	Mahanikai (Theravada)	38,680 temples	
	Thammayut (Theravada)	4,427 temples	
	Jin Nikai (Mahayana from China)	16 temples	
	Annam Nikai (Mahayana from Vietnam)	23 temples	
<b>Royal Temples (all Theravada)</b>			<b>310 temples</b>

<sup>52</sup> The percentage is calculated based on data collected in 2014 from a population of 53,650,541 people who practise Buddhism and are aged 13 years and older, out of a total population of 65,124,716 people in Thailand during the same year. This database does not specifically mention which traditions of Buddhism are included.

<sup>53</sup> ‘จำนวนผู้นับถือศาสนาจากการสำรวจ (The Number of People Who Practice Religion from the Survey)’, Open Government Data of Thailand, accessed 16 March 2023, [https://data.go.th/dataset/os\\_04\\_00001](https://data.go.th/dataset/os_04_00001).

<sup>53</sup> ‘National Office of Buddhism - Thai Temple Registry’, accessed 1 July 2022, <http://binfo.onab.go.th/Temple/Dashboard.aspx>.

	Mahanikai (Theravada)	247 temples	
	Thammayut (Theravada)	63 temples	
<b>Community Temples</b>			<b>42,836 temples</b>
	Mananikai (Theravada)	38,433 temples	
	Thammayut (Theravada)	4,364 temples	
	Jin Nikai (Mahayana Buddhism from China)	16 temples	
	Annam Nikai (Mahayana Buddhism from Vietnam)	23 temples	
<b>Temples that have been granted <i>wisungkhamasima</i> (royal consecrated boundaries)</b>			<b>26,206 temples</b>
<b>Temples that have not been granted <i>wisungkhamasima</i> (royal consecrated boundaries)</b>			<b>16,940 temples</b>

Table 2: Number of Monks in Thailand based on the Office of the Secretary General of the Sangha Supreme Council Database (30 December 2021).<sup>54</sup>

<b>Lineages</b>	<b>Monks</b>
Mahanikai (Theravada)	183,131
Thammayut (Theravada)	24,685
Jin Nikai (Mahayana from China)	49
Annam Nikai (Mahayana from Vietnam)	10
<b>Total number of monks in Thailand</b>	<b>207,875</b>

While Theravada Buddhism became the court religion in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and gained popularity over time, it coexisted with long-standing belief systems of Animism and Brahmanism that had been present in Southeast Asia for more than two millennia. As a result, these belief systems have become integrated into the essential characteristics of Thai Buddhist culture. This integration is evident in many Thai temples, which often feature not only shrines dedicated to Theravada Buddha statues but also to Mahayana Buddhas and monks, ‘Hindu’ gods or rather Indic gods that have been part of Buddhism since its origins, a range of other deities, and local spirits. The presence of these blended belief systems extends beyond Thailand and can be observed in other countries where Thai Buddhism has established itself, including the UK.

<sup>54</sup> ‘ข้อมูลพื้นฐานทางพระพุทธศาสนา ปี 2565 (The Basic Information on Buddhism, 2565 BE)’, National Office of Buddhism, 15, accessed 13 June 2023, <https://www.onab.go.th/th/ebook/category/detail/id/1/iid/130>.

In this chapter, I aim to provide an overview of Buddhist temples in Thailand to better understand their context in the UK. This material is based on extensive documentary research, which includes the examination of temple-related documents, scholarly writings, and digital content across various websites and social media platforms. Additionally, I have reviewed relevant rules and regulations from Thai sources such as the Royal Gazette, a royal publication initiated in 1858 by King Mongkut (Rama IV) for officially announcing news, laws, decrees, and ministerial proclamations. This chapter is further enriched by my personal experiences and knowledge as a Thai Buddhist, which offer unique insights into the practices within these temple communities.

I will begin by exploring the broader features of temples, which include their architectural elements, their significance within the Thai community, and the individuals who inhabit them. I will then delve into the administrative aspects, such as legislation, organisational structure, and duties, to establish a framework for understanding how Thai temples operate. Additionally, I will explore the various classifications of temples in Thailand. Finally, I will focus on the affiliation of Buddhist temples to establish a foundation for understanding the transnational Buddhist traditions in the UK.

## 1.1 Characteristics

Often located at the centre of Thai villages and urban areas, or on prominent hills overlooking the community, Thai Buddhist temples serve as compelling embodiments of the nation's architectural identity, social cohesion, and sacred ceremonial spaces. Some temples capture the mind with their awe-inspiring spectacular architectural features, distinctively shaped brightly coloured and golden roofs, intricately crafted designs, and sense of magnificence. In addition to serving as places of worship, spiritual reflection, and cultural heritage preservation, they play vital roles within Thai communities. Temples function as centres of religious and communal activity, thereby fostering social cohesion and a sense of shared identity. Moreover, temples provide a sanctuary where adherents can engage in a variety of rituals and ceremonies, acts of devotion, and spiritual solace. In this section, I will discuss the general characteristics of Thai temples including their architectural layout, their significance in community life, and the role of monastic congregations and lay Buddhists.

### 1.1.1 Architectural Features and Layout

According to Crosby, there is a lack of terminological precision in the English terms for the Thai term *wat*, with both ‘monastery’ and ‘temple’ being used for places where monks live, and laypeople attend for their practices. These two terms are often used interchangeably, because both functions are fulfilled by the same cluster of buildings.<sup>55</sup> Their layout is similar across the Theravada Buddhist world, allowing Buddhists from different regions to navigate a monastery or temple in another region.<sup>56</sup>

Figure 1: The various exterior designs of Thai temples.<sup>57</sup>



From the outside, one of the most distinguishing features of a Buddhist temple in Thailand is its roof, along with other architectural elements like doors, windows, and decorative details that contribute to the overall distinctiveness of a Thai temple’s exterior (Figure 1).<sup>58</sup> Internally, Buddhist temples are typically comprised of a cluster of structures enclosed inside a compound.

<sup>55</sup> Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 199.

<sup>56</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 199.

<sup>57</sup> Image courtesy of Canva Pro 11/09/2024. Top Left: Wat Chantaram, commonly known as Wat Ta Soong, in Uthai Thani features golden multi-tiered spires and symmetrical design; Top Right: Wat Phra Kaew, commonly known in English as the ‘Temple of the Emerald Buddha’ located in the Grand Palace, Bangkok, is renowned for its vibrant, ornate roofline, typical of royal temples; Bottom Left: Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai showcases the steep, intricately carved wooden roofs of Lanna-style architecture from northern Thailand; Bottom Right: Wat Rong Khun (White Temple) in Chiang Rai is a modern temple known for its striking all-white design by Chalermchai Kositpipat.

<sup>58</sup> Nithi Sthapitanonda and Brian Mertens, *Architecture of Thailand: A Guide to Traditional and Contemporary Forms*, 1st edition (Thames & Hudson, 2006), 79.

Thai temple layouts are often organised into three main sectors: *buddhavas* (*buddhavāsa*, Pali, literally ‘the Buddha’s dwelling place), *sangkhawas* (*saṅghavāsa*, Pali, literally ‘the monastic community’s dwelling place’), and *thorani sangha* (*dhāraṇī saṅgha*, Pali literally ‘the earth/land of the monastic community, note the different word order from the Pali compound which would be *saṅghadhāraṇī*). The *buddhavas* is the most significant area used for performing religious ceremonies. Structures constructed to serve as the foundation in *buddhavas* are a stupa or a pagoda (Thai: *phra prang* or *chedi*, Pali: *cetiya*), a conical tower (Thai: *prang*) and a square or cubical pavilion with a spired roof (Thai: *mondop*, Pali: *maṇḍapa*). Other architectural components in *buddhavas* include an ordination hall (Thai: *bot* or *ubosot*, equivalent Pali: *uposatha*, the fortnightly holy observance day held in the hall); an assembly hall (Thai: *viharn*, equivalent Pali: *vihāra*, used in Pali for the entire dwelling); a bell tower, an open rectangular-shaped pavilion for resting (Thai: *sala*, Pali: *sālā*, used in Pali for a hall) and a cloister (Thai: *phra rabieng*).<sup>59</sup>

Monks live in the *sangkhawas* area, which consists of a residence for monks known as *kuti* (Pali: *kuṭī*, hut/cell) and other private facilities such as a refectory, a sermon hall, and a temple repository for the Buddhist scriptures (Thai: *ho trai*, literally ‘room for the three [baskets of the canon]).<sup>60</sup> Some temples may use the term *khana* (Pali: *gaṇa*, ‘group’, referring to the smallest unit of monks needed for internal formal monastic activities) to describe a monastery section or a group of *kuti*.<sup>61</sup> The public space known as *thorani sangha* may include a crematorium (Thai: *phra meru*, Pali: *meru*); a public school, especially in rural areas; and a space for laypeople to rent, which provides the temple with a source of income, such as a market or an apartment.<sup>62</sup> Although the structures identified here are found in many temples, temples layouts are not uniform. Some temples, such as Wat Phra Dhammakaya, which is of relatively recent development, do not have a public school or a public crematorium. The overall layout and the appearance of a temple depends on other factors such as geography, tradition, and the creativity of its founders, whether they are the abbots, architects, or main donors of the temple.

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<sup>59</sup> M.L. Varodom Suksawasdi, ‘A Study of Architectural Design of Thai Temples Influenced by Thai and Mon Ethnicity in Sam-Khok District’, *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering* 690, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>60</sup> Varodom Suksawasdi, ‘A Study of Architectural Design of Thai Temples Influenced by Thai and Mon Ethnicity in Sam-Khok District’.

<sup>61</sup> Phra Brahmaganubhorn, ‘กณ (Gaṇa)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Varodom Suksawasdi, ‘A Study of Architectural Design of Thai Temples Influenced by Thai and Mon Ethnicity in Sam-Khok District’.

Another significant aspect within a Thai temple is the *sima* (Pali: *sīmā*). *Sima* is defined as “a boundary; limit; precinct; consecrated area (established by sanctioned boundaries).”<sup>63</sup> It serves as the designated area for monks to perform *sanghakamma* (Pali: *saṅghakamma*), which is “an act or ceremony performed by a chapter of Buddhist monks assembled in solemn conclave, a formal act” or ecclesiastical rites.<sup>64</sup> An example of a *sanghakamma* is the ordination of monks.

### 1.1.2 The Role of the Temple in the Thai Communities

Theoretically, the primary purpose of temples is to provide individuals with a space to cultivate their spiritual development, accumulate merit, and strive for enlightenment, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. In practice, temples serve not only spiritual and religious functions but also act as cultural and community hubs as well as social and charitable services. The role of any given temple within Thai communities differs based on several factors, including the distinction between rural and urban settings, the degree of personal devotion of monks and lay attendees, the history of the temple and the goals established by the abbot and temple committee.

In the past, Thai Buddhist temples played a crucial role in Thai communities, serving as central gathering places for both spiritual and social activities. They also provided education for boys in various skills, including literacy and numeracy, and facilitated social mobility by allowing young men from rural areas to migrate to urban centres in pursuit of education and career opportunities. This mobility extends beyond national borders, with monks able to travel to neighbouring countries, learn new languages, and broaden their experiences.<sup>65</sup> However, with the modernisation and centralisation efforts led by King Chulalongkorn (1853–1910, r. 1868–1910) (see below), Thai temples gradually lost significance for villagers and the broader population, and primarily cater to the poorer classes. With Thai temples losing their significance as the main the centre for education and literacy, they tend now to retain only their religious, cultural and communal significance as well as being repositories of manuscripts, art, history, and folklore.

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<sup>63</sup> Phra Brahmaganabhorn, ‘สิมา (Sīmā)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> Phra Brahmaganabhorn, ‘สังฆกรรม (Saṅghakamma)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

<sup>65</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 201.

Devout Buddhist practitioners frequently visit temples on Buddhist holy days, which occur approximately once a week, based on the lunar calendar (see below). On these days, both monastic communities and laypeople engage in more focused and dedicated spiritual practice. Lay followers bring food to the temple, listen to dhamma talks, and observe either five or eight precepts. As the Thai way of life has evolved and most people only have weekends off, fewer Buddhists are visiting temples on holy days. Instead, many people, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist, visit temples for meditation retreats, astrology, significant Buddhist ceremonies, festivals, and special occasions. In addition, the temple is regarded as a socio-cultural centre, as it offers a space for recreational activities, with parents often bringing their children to play in the temple's yard.<sup>66</sup>

The ceremonies and special occasions, according to Phra Prayudh Payutto, are usually classified as auspicious and non-auspicious.<sup>67</sup> Auspicious ceremonies include ordinations, birthdays, weddings, house blessings, factory blessings, laying of foundation stones, and various additional celebrations. Some of these merit-making ceremonies can also be performed privately at home, in business establishments, factories, hotels or even football fields, depending on invitations from lay Buddhists. These rituals and merit-making ceremonies remain the primary functions of temples, with monks serving as both the source and object of religiosity.

Non-auspicious ceremonies include funerals and memorial dedications for merit-making. Nowadays, funerals in Thailand usually last between three and seven days, with chanting from the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, the third division of the Pali Canon. The chanting is typically done by four monks. The practice is called *Suat Phra Aphitham* meaning chanting the *Abhidhamma*.<sup>68</sup> According to Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, a Thai Buddhist scholar and the first *bhikkhunī* in Thailand (see Chapter 5), the duration of funeral ceremonies has been shortened. She notes that around 20 years ago, when her mother passed away, the body was preserved for 100 days, with nightly chanting performed to dedicate merit. After 100 days, the body was taken for cremation. Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā also mentioned that, in the past, it was a

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<sup>66</sup> Patraporn Chuenglertsiri, 'Transnationalism, Family Life, and Wellbeing: Opportunities and Challenges for Thai Marriage Migrants in the UK' (thesis, University of Sussex, 2020), 86.

<sup>67</sup> Bhikkhu P A Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English* (Wat Nyanavesakavan, 2007), 74.

<sup>68</sup> Phrakuniphatummawat et al., 'วิเคราะห์การสวดพระอภิธรรมในพระพุทธศาสนา (Analysis of Abhidhamma Prayer in Buddhism)', *Journal of Graduate Review, Nakhon Sawan Buddhist College* 11, no. 3 (2023).

common custom to print Dhamma books as gifts to distribute at funerals—one way of preserving the Buddha’s teachings. However, due to economic pressures, people nowadays typically keep the body for only three to seven nights, perform chanting, and offer small gifts to participants. Publishing Dhamma books has become uncommon, though some wealthy families might still uphold this tradition. Another practice that remains is the ordination of sons in the family during the funeral as a way to dedicate merit to the deceased.<sup>69</sup>

Table 3: Categorisation of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Ceremonies in Thai Buddhism

Categories	Ceremonies	Descriptions	Observance Days
Ceremonies for significant events in Buddha’s life	<i>Visakha Bucha</i> or Vesak Day (Pali: <i>Visākha Pūjā</i> )	<i>Visakha Bucha</i> or widely known as Vesak Day commemorates three major events in the life of the Buddha: his birth, enlightenment, and passing. On this day, Buddhists gather at monasteries in the evening, holding lighted candles and incense, to circumambulate sacred precincts such as <i>ubosot</i> , <i>viharn</i> or <i>chedi</i> three times and offer flowers to the Buddha.	On the full moon of the sixth lunar month (usually in May or June).
	<i>Atthami Bucha</i> (Pali: <i>Aṭṭhamī Pūjā</i> )	Worship in commemoration of the cremation of the Buddha’s body.	On the eighth day of the waning moon in the sixth lunar month (usually in late June or early July).
	<i>Asanha Bucha</i> (Pali: <i>Āsāṅha Pūjā</i> )	Worship in commemoration of the Buddha’s first sermon and the foundation of the Buddhist order.	On the full moon of the eighth lunar month (usually in July or August).
	<i>Makha Bucha</i> (Pali: <i>Māgha Pūjā</i> )	Worship in commemoration of the great assembly of disciples, a gathering between the Buddha and 1,250 of his first disciples.	On the full moon of the third lunar month (usually in March).
Ceremonies related to monastic life	<i>Khao Phansa</i> (Pali: <i>Vassa</i> )	<i>Khao Phansa</i> (literally ‘entering the rainy season’) marks the commencement of <i>Phansa</i> , a three-month annual retreat observed by Buddhist monks during the rainy season.	On the first waning moon of the eighth lunar month (usually in July or August).

<sup>69</sup> *Becoming Thailand’s First Fully-Ordained Theravada Nun: Dhammananda Bhikkhuni*, 2023, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gslamUycMY8&list=PLb6E0X4qfeEsvsZx3YBOyvRMxBjtxF309&index=3>.

	<i>Ok Phansa</i>	<i>Ok Phansa</i> (literally ‘exiting the rainy season’) marks the conclusion of the <i>Phansa</i> .	On the full moon of the 11 <sup>th</sup> lunar month (usually in October or November).
	<i>Kathin</i> (Pali: <i>Kaṭhina</i> )	The <i>Kathin</i> Ceremony, held at the end of the monastic rains retreat ( <i>Phansa</i> ), is a significant merit-making event in Theravada Buddhism, where laypeople offer robes, money, and other gifts to monks. This ritual, symbolising a reciprocal exchange of material support for spiritual blessings, grants access to the laity to the enhanced spiritual potency monks have gained during their period of intensive study, meditation, and restricted travel. <sup>70</sup>	During the month immediately following the full moon of the 11 <sup>th</sup> lunar month.
Ceremonies influenced by folk cultures and non-Buddhist influences	<i>Songkran</i> (Sanskrit: <i>Sankranta</i> )	In Theravada Southeast Asia, the New Year is celebrated in April, marking the end of the dry season and the onset of the monsoon, symbolising the change of seasons. <i>Songkran</i> in Thailand has become a national holiday. Key rituals include house cleaning, settling debts and seek forgiveness from respected elders in the family and community, and water-cleansing ceremonies, which are the highlight of New Year festivals. These ceremonies feature a variety of activities, such as lustrating Buddha images, relics, and a Bodhi tree at monasteries, paying respects to elders with a water blessing, and engaging in playful water splashing with buckets and hoses. <sup>71</sup>	On April 13 (The national holiday in Thailand is from April 13 to 15, though celebrations can sometimes extend beyond these dates).
	<i>Sart</i> (Sanskrit: <i>Sarad</i> )	The word ‘ <i>Sart</i> ’ is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘ <i>Śarad</i> ’, ‘autumn’, when crops are harvested at the end of summer in north India. <sup>72</sup>  In Thailand, <i>Wan Sart Thai</i> (literally ‘Thai Sart Day’ is commonly known as ‘ <i>Wan Sart Duan Sib</i> ’ or the Merit-making Festival of the Tenth Month, with regional variations such as <i>Wan Sart Thai</i> in	On the 15 <sup>th</sup> day of the waning moon in the 10 <sup>th</sup> lunar month (usually in late September or early October)

<sup>70</sup> Donald K Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (State University of New York Press, 2010), 35–39.

<sup>71</sup> Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (State University of New York Press, 2010), 52–55.

<sup>72</sup> พจนานุกรมฉบับราชบัณฑิตยสถานพ.ศ. ๒๕๕๔ (*The Royal Institute Dictionary, B.E. 2554 (2011)*), ‘สารท (Sart)’,

<https://dictionary.orst.go.th>.

		Central Thailand, <i>Sart Duan Sib</i> Festival or <i>Ching Pret</i> Ceremony in the South, <i>Khao Sak</i> Merit-making Festival in the Northeast, and <i>Tan Kuay Salak</i> Festival in the North. Influenced by Indian beliefs, it became intertwined with agricultural and ancestral traditions, where making merit for ancestors and revered deities is believed to bring blessings like peace, good harvests, and timely rainfall, while neglect may result in negative consequences. <sup>73</sup>	
	<i>Loy Krathong</i>	<i>Loy Krathong</i> (literally ‘floating vessel’), also known as the Festival of the Floating Boats or Festival of Lights, is a popular Southeast Asian celebration, especially in Thailand, with partial connections to Buddhism but likely rooted in animistic or Brahmanical traditions. The festival involves floating small vessels, traditionally crafted from banana stalks and adorned with banana leaves and flowers, on rivers and ponds, with lit candles and incense sticks inside. While it has been assimilated into Theravada Buddhist practices, its origins and meanings remain diverse, with some linking it to water goddess worship, Indian festivals, or offerings to the Buddha. <sup>74</sup>	On the full moon of the 12 <sup>th</sup> lunar month (usually in late November).
	<i>Phuet Mongkhon</i>	<i>Phuet Mongkhon</i> (literally ‘prosperity for plantation’) marks the start of the agricultural cycle and was adapted by King Mongkut to include a Buddhist element alongside the traditional Hindu first ploughing ceremony. On this day, monks are invited to chant blessings for the prosperity of the crops at the Grand Palace. <sup>75</sup>	It occurs in the sixth lunar month, but there is no specific date each year (usually in early May).

Temples also play a vital role in preserving and transmitting cultural traditions through organising Buddhist events and festivals and promoting tourism. In Table 3, I have provided an overview of the main Buddhist events of the Thai calendar, categorising them according to

<sup>73</sup> ประวัติ “วันสารทไทย 2566” ประเพณีทำบุญเดือนสิบ สำคัญอย่างไร? (History of “Thai Sart Day 2023”: Why is the Merit-making Festival of the Tenth Month important?), [www.thairath.co.th](http://www.thairath.co.th), 13 October 2023, <https://www.thairath.co.th/lifestyle/calendar/2211561>.

<sup>74</sup> Donald K Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (State University of New York Press, 2010), 61–63.

<sup>75</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 72.

the analysis of Phra Prayudh Payutto.<sup>76</sup> The Thai Buddhist events follow the lunar calendar, which was influenced by Indian and Chinese time-reckoning systems, subsequently impacting much of mainland Southeast Asia and becoming more integrated into Thai (or Siamese) society during the Sukhothai period, especially for religious and agricultural purposes. The lunar calendar continues to play a central role in scheduling religious festivals.<sup>77</sup> Each lunar month is divided into two halves, reflecting the phases of the moon: the waxing half (Thai: *Khang khuen*) and the waning half (Thai: *Khang raem*).<sup>78</sup> Many significant events in the Buddha's life are believed to have occurred on the fifteenth day of the waxing moon (Thai: *Wan khuen sip ha kham*), also known as the full moon day. For example, *Visakha Bucha*, or Vesak (Pali: *Visākhapūjā*), is celebrated annually on the full moon of the sixth lunar month to commemorate the birth, enlightenment, and passing of the Buddha.<sup>79</sup> Other religious events, such as the beginning of *Phansa* (Pali: *Vassa*), the three-month annual retreat during the rainy season, take place on the first day of the waning moon in the eighth lunar month. This retreat follows a disciplinary rule requiring monks to reside in one location, usually a temple, for the entire three-month period.<sup>80</sup>

In his analysis, Phra Payutto categorises religious rites, rituals, and ceremonies associated with Thai Buddhism into three main groups (Table 3).<sup>81</sup> The first category is particularly significant in Thai society, with important events in Buddha's life, such as *Makha Bucha* (Pali: *Māghapūjā*) and *Visakha Bucha*.<sup>82</sup> These occasions serve not only to honour the Buddha but also to reinforce the cultural and spiritual values deeply rooted in Thai Buddhist tradition, to the extent that they have become national holidays in Thailand. The second category of religious rites comprises ceremonies related to monastic life which are the commencement and conclusion of the *Phansa* and the *Kathin* Ceremony (annual robe-presentation).<sup>83</sup> These ceremonies primarily focus on the observance of disciplinary rules by monks. Lay Buddhists can express their support for monks on these occasions through merit-making activities, such

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<sup>76</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 66–74.

<sup>77</sup> B. J. Terwiel, 'Tai Peoples and the Computation of Time, a Comparative Perspective', *Oriens Extremus* 28, no. 1 (1981): 62–106.

<sup>78</sup> Terwiel, 'Tai Peoples and the Computation of Time, a Comparative Perspective', 68.

<sup>79</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 67.

<sup>80</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 67.

<sup>81</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 66–74.

<sup>82</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 66–68.

<sup>83</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 68–71.

as offering food and monastic necessities.<sup>84</sup> The final category consists of ceremonies intertwined with folk cultures and non-Buddhist influences. These ceremonies have been either adopted by Buddhism or integrated into the Buddhist context through the assimilation or the inclusion of Buddhist elements, such as *Songkran* festival, *Sart*, and *Loy Krathong* (see Table 3 for further details).<sup>85</sup>

Additionally, there is another significant merit-making ceremony that does not fit into the three previously mentioned categories. This ceremony is known by different names in various regions, including *Thet Mahachat* (Sermon on the Great Former Life of the Buddha), *Khatha Phan* (Story of 1,000 Stanzas), and *Bun Phra Wes* (Merit Making Associated with Prince Vessantara).<sup>86</sup> It is one of the grandest merit-making ceremonies, deeply tied to both the spiritual and social lives of the Thai community.<sup>87</sup> The ceremony centres around the preaching of the *Vessantara Jātaka*, a well-known Theravada Buddhist story about the last life of the Buddha, known as Prince Vessantara and his virtue of generosity. According to Charles Keyes, this story is one of the three traditional texts that define the fundamental aspects of a Theravada perspective on the world.<sup>88</sup> It also emphasises the ultimate religious significance of sacrificing possessions through acts of generosity.<sup>89</sup> The first two categories of rites, rituals, and ceremonies are observed in every Thai Buddhist temple, whether in Thailand or abroad, as they are essential to the Buddhist tradition. However, the presence of the third category and this additional ceremony depends on the cultural context and the discretion of each individual temple in organising such activities.

In addition to the aforementioned religious rites, rituals, and ceremonies categorised by Phra Payutto, a significant merit-making event commonly held at temples is *tod pha pa*, also known as the Forest Robe Presentation Ceremony, hereafter robe offering. The term *pha pa* (Pali: *paṃsukūla-cīvara*) literally means ‘rag robe,’ originally referring to cloths discarded in forests or charnel grounds, which monks during the Buddha’s time would collect and use to make their

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<sup>84</sup> Bhakhakanok Ratanawaraporn, ‘The Guideline for Conservation of Living Heritage Temples in Thai Context: The Case Study of Living Heritage Temples in Rattanakosin Island’ (Ph.D. thesis, Silpakorn University, 2011), 69.

<sup>85</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 71–73.

<sup>86</sup> Payutto, *Vision of the Dhamma: A Collection of Buddhist Writings in English*, 73.

<sup>87</sup> Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (State University of New York Press, 2010), 46–49.

<sup>88</sup> Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Westview Press, 1987), 179.

<sup>89</sup> Keyes, *Thailand*, 181.

robes.<sup>90</sup> These cloths were considered ownerless and thus suitable for monastic use—one of the thirteen austere practices (*dhutaṅga*). This ancient tradition evolved during the reign of King Rama IV, who suggested placing such cloths near the temple’s preaching hall for easier access by monks.<sup>91</sup> Over time, this practice developed into a formal ceremony in which donors symbolically offer robes and other necessities to monks. Unlike the Kathin Robe Offering Ceremony, which can only be held once a year at the end of Buddhist Lent, *tod pha pa* can take place at any time and multiple times a year. Today, it serves not only as a religious observance but also as a fundraising event to support temple operations.

Apart from propagating Buddhist teachings, retaining cultural significance and raising funds, some temples are renowned for fortune-telling, talisman cloths, sacred holy water, or even providing potential lottery numbers. Certain temples have shrines dedicated to Mahayana Buddhas, Hindu gods or other spiritual beings. Many people visit these temples to make wishes, whether directed towards the Buddha statue, revered monk statues, or other gods, deities and spiritual figures. These wishes may be for personal matters like gaining admission to a school, career advancement, finding a life partner or conceiving a baby. When their wishes are achieved, individuals often fulfil the promises made at the time of the wish by offering food, performing Thai dances, or other gestures to the respective statues. For instance, Wat Sothon Wararam Worawihan, a famous temple in Thailand, attracts numerous visitors seeking blessings. Those who succeed in making their wishes often return to express gratitude by offering boiled eggs or Thai dance performance, with boiled eggs being particularly popular. My friends personally experienced the power of making a wish at this temple. After being married for four months, they hoped to have a baby. They gathered information from websites and word of mouth, which led them to visit the temple to make their wish. Two months later, their wish came true, and in gratitude, they offered 1,000 boiled eggs to the temple.<sup>92</sup> The reputation of the Buddha statue at the temple in question is so extensive that a replica was imported from Thailand to a temple in the UK, Wat Thai Southend (Figure 2).

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<sup>90</sup> Phra Brahmaganabhorn, ‘ผ้าป่า (Paṃsukūla-Cīvara)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

<sup>91</sup> Phra Nakarindra Jutindharo (Saejang), ‘A Study of the Development of Leaving Paṃsukūla in Thai Society’ (Master of Arts (Buddhist Studies Thesis), Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2016).

<sup>92</sup> The number of boiled eggs offered at the temple varies from 1 to as many as 10,000, and those who make the offering typically take the eggs back home. The temple designates a specific area for these offerings. Recently people have also been making similar egg offerings at Wat Buddhapadipa in UK.

Figure 2: A replica of the Sothon Buddha statue more commonly known as *Luang Pho Sothon*.<sup>93</sup>



Temples have played a significant role as providers of social services and welfare. For instance, temples like Wat Cholprataru Rangsarit in Nonthaburi offer Buddhism classes every Sunday, while renowned temples like Wat Pho in Bangkok provide instruction in massage and Thai medicine.<sup>94</sup> Some temples, such as Wat Chak Daeng in Samut Prakan, actively promote plastic recycling initiatives, transforming plastic bottles into monk robes and PPE suits for monks to use during the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>95</sup> In addition, a recent flood in Thailand saw significant support from monks, who donated dry food from alms offerings to help those affected.<sup>96</sup>

Temples also provide a safety net for individuals seeking refuge from poverty, abuse or challenging life circumstances. For boys, widowers, and the retired, temples act as substitute

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<sup>93</sup> Photo taken by Isara Treesahakiat in Wat Thai Southend 16/04/23.

<sup>94</sup> ‘กิจกรรมของวัด (Activities of the temple)’, วัดชลประทานรังสฤษดิ์ (Wat Chonprathan Rangsarit), accessed 16 June 2023, <https://www.watcholprataru.org/กิจกรรมของวัด/>; ‘โรงเรียนแพทย์แผนโบราณและการนวดแผนโบราณ (School of Traditional Medicine and Traditional Massage)’, วัดโพธิ์ Wat Pho, accessed 16 June 2023, <https://www.watpho.com/th/massage-school>.

<sup>95</sup> ‘บริจาคขวดพลาสติก วัดจากแดง (Donate Plastic Bottles, Wat Chak Daeng)’, accessed 16 June 2023, <https://watchakdaeng.com/2020/บริจาคขวดพลาสติก-วัด/>.

<sup>96</sup> ‘น้ำท่วมพ่ายน้ำใจ! คณะสงฆ์มีมติขานรับช่วยเหลือผู้ประสบภัยน้ำท่วม (Floods Can’t Defeat Compassion! Monastic Community Collects Dry Food and Rice to Help Flood Victims in Nong Khai)’, *Amarin TV*, 18 September 2024, <https://www.amarintv.com/news/detail/232562>; ‘พระวัดดังชัยภูมิ นั่งรถจี๊ปแจกของญาติโยม ลุยน้ำท่วมช่วยชาวบ้านท่าเวอ (Monk from a Famous Chaiyaphum Temple Rides a Jeep to Distribute Supplies to Locals, Braving the Flood to Assist Villagers in Tha Wo)’, *Thairath Online*, n.d., accessed 2 November 2024, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/northeast/2221911>; ‘เจ้าคณะใหญ่หนเหนือ สั่งระดมกำลังช่วยพระสงฆ์ ประชาชน ประสบภัยน้ำท่วม เชียงราย (The Chief Monk of Northern Thailand Orders a Coordinated Effort to Help Monks and Citizens Affected by the Flood in Chiang Rai)’, *Matichon Online*, n.d., accessed 2 November 2024, [https://www.matichon.co.th/education/religious-cultural/news\\_4786497](https://www.matichon.co.th/education/religious-cultural/news_4786497).

families, providing shelter, community, and a sense of belonging.<sup>97</sup> Temples offer support for post-prison rehabilitation, as well as treatment for drug and alcohol abuse and severe diseases, making them essential institutions for social well-being. Wat Phrabat Nam Phu in Lopburi have been dedicated to caring for and rehabilitating individuals infected with HIV/AIDS since 1992, and they continue their efforts to this day.<sup>98</sup> For drug and alcohol detoxification and rehabilitation, Wat Thamkrabok is regarded as having “the toughest drug rehabilitation regime in the world.”<sup>99</sup>

### 1.1.3 Monastic Congregations

The monastic congregations in Thai temple typically consist of monks (Pali: *bhikkhu*), novices (Pali: *sāmaṇera*), and nuns (Thai: *mae chi*).<sup>100</sup> There are two levels of ordination: lower ordination (Pali: *pabbajjā*) for novices and higher ordination (Pali: *upasampadā*) for monks. The former is the initial stage, typically undertaken in childhood from the age of seven onward or in early adulthood, signifying entry into monastic life as a novice and requiring adhering to ten precepts.<sup>101</sup> The latter is the advanced stage, typically undertaken around the age of 20, confers full monkhood and requires adherence to 227 precepts. All monks, regardless of age or the duration of their commitment, whether temporary or long-term, undergo the *pabbajjā* ritual.<sup>102</sup> Temporary ordination is common in mainland Southeast Asia, especially in Thailand, while in Sri Lanka, ordination is generally expected to be lifelong.<sup>103</sup> Since there are very few nuns in Thai traditions in the UK, as I shall explain in Chapter 5.3, and since novice ordination is very limited, this thesis as a whole focuses mainly on the roles of monks and lay people. In Chapter 5.3, I explain why we see so few nuns and the unique challenges they pose to Thai tradition within a western context.

A structured daily routine within a Thai monastery typically revolves around spiritual practice and community responsibilities. The day begins with morning chanting and meditation, followed by the cleaning of the *kuti* and temple grounds. Monks then partake in alms rounds

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<sup>97</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 203.

<sup>98</sup> ‘วัดพระบาทนพ (Wat Phrabat Nam Phu)’, Wat Phrabat Nam Phu, accessed 16 June 2023,

<http://www.phrabatnampu.org/founda.html>.

<sup>99</sup> *Official Wat Thamkrabok Homepage*, n.d., accessed 2 November 2024, <https://wat-thamkrabok.org/>.

<sup>100</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 197.

<sup>101</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 203.

<sup>102</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 204.

<sup>103</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 200.

(Pali: *piṇḍapāta*), receiving food from villagers, which remains significant in some rural areas but is less common in urban temples like those in Bangkok. Nuns, temple boys (see below), or lay residents typically take on the responsibility of preparing meals for monks and novices, either by cooking them freshly or serving food from the alms offering. Health concerns for monastics have recently emerged among researchers in Thailand. At the ‘Buddhism and Food Ethics’ conference held at the University of Oxford in April 2024, researchers Jaruwan Ployduangrat and Sirinthorn Meekhobtong highlighted that monks in Bangkok face a risk of non-communicable diseases including high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and osteoarthritis. A key factor contributing to these health risks is the reliance on alms offerings, which nowadays often consist of pre-packaged foods that are high in sugar, salt, and fat.<sup>104</sup>

The morning continues with dhamma learning and attending to personal matters. While monks from the Thai Forest Tradition observe a single meal per day, most monks have two meals, with lunch typically taken before noon in accordance with the sixth of the ten monastic precepts that apply to both novices and fully ordained monks. Following lunch, temple chores are performed, and some monks may take on the responsibility of delivering dhamma talks to share Buddhist teachings with the lay community. Evenings are dedicated to chanting and meditation, fostering spiritual growth and introspection.

In addition to their daily routine, monks can pursue further education in various ways. Some monks choose to engage in advanced Pali studies, deepening their understanding of Buddhist scriptures. Others pursue higher education at one of the two public Buddhist universities, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (hereafter MCU) and Mahamakut Buddhist University (hereafter MBU). For monks aspiring to propagate the dhamma abroad, overseas Dhammaduta (literally ‘Emissary of Dhamma’) Bhikkhu training programmes are available. The overseas Dhammaduta training project was originally organised jointly by Mahanikai and Thammyut Buddhist orders between 1966 and 1967 but was halted for unspecified reasons. This initiative was launched in response to the need to send monks to the first two Thai temples established overseas by the Thai government: Wat Thai Buddhagaya, established in 1957, and

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<sup>104</sup> Jaruwan Ployduangrat and Sirinthorn Meekhobtong, ‘Health Care among Monastics in Bangkok’, Presentation, Buddhism and Food Ethics Conference, University of Oxford, 20 April 2024.

Wat Buddhapadipa, established in 1966.<sup>105</sup> However, the demand for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus continued to grow, especially in the United States. Thus, the SSC, with support from the Department of Religious Affairs, decided to revive this project and appointed two senior monks as directors, one for each of the Dhammaduta Bhikkhu training programmes of the Mahanikai and Thammayut orders. The two senior monks then assigned to MCU for Mahanikai monks and to MBU for Thammayut monks the responsibility of implementing this training project, which began in 1995 and continues to this day.<sup>106</sup>

The training programmes provide a well-rounded foundation for monks seeking to share the teachings of Buddhism with international communities. The curriculum involves a three-month training period, followed by a written exam and an interview to evaluate the trainee monk's knowledge and ability to conduct religious activities abroad. Its goals are to educate monks and disseminate Buddhist teachings abroad.<sup>107</sup> One informant from the Mahanikai temple shared his experience in the Dhammaduta Bhikkhu training, which included Dhamma studies, meditation practice, and construction project management. For the construction aspect, he and his colleagues were assigned to oversee a real project with a fixed budget. He explained that this practical knowledge was added to the curriculum because of past incidents where Thai monks in the USA were misled during construction projects, which ended up going over budget. Learning how to manage budgets and supervise building construction is therefore considered essential.

#### 1.1.4 Lay Buddhists

Apart from monks, novices, and nuns, there are also permanent lay residents in Thai temples, among them the well-known 'temple boys' (Thai: *dek wat*). A census conducted in 1954 revealed that the number of temple boys in Thailand was a significant 119,044.<sup>108</sup> These temple boys play a vital role in assisting with various tasks, including food preparation, *kuti* cleaning, and caring for the monks' robes. They are typically relatives of the resident monks and receive

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<sup>105</sup> 'ความเป็นมาของพระธรรมทูต (The History of the Dhammaduta)', accessed 31 October 2024, <https://tidga.net/index.php/history/dhammaduta-history>.

<sup>106</sup> 'ความเป็นมาของพระธรรมทูต (The History of the Dhammaduta)'.

<sup>107</sup> 'Dhammaduta College', Overseas Buddhist Missionary Monks, accessed 4 May 2021, <http://www.odc.mcu.ac.th/?lang=en>; 'สำนักฝึกอบรมพระธรรมทูตไปต่างประเทศ(ธรรมทูต) กรุงเทพมหานคร (The Training Institute for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus Going Abroad)', accessed 4 May 2021, <http://tidga.net/>.

<sup>108</sup> Karuna Kusalasaya, *Buddhism in Thailand: Its Past and Its Present* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2005), 19.

free accommodation. Many of these temple boys are students who come from distant homes and rely on the temple's support to pursue education. This support is especially valuable in Bangkok, where the country's prestigious educational institutions are located, and accommodation is expensive. For instance, my father served as a temple boy for two years after relocating from the countryside to Bangkok to attend secondary school. He stayed at a temple close to his school and assisted with different tasks around the temple. One of his main responsibilities was serving as the master of ceremonies for funeral services at the temple.

Besides temple boys, girls may also stay in temples with nuns and assist with temple chores without becoming nuns themselves, though this is uncommon. One example is my mother. She stayed at the temple with her grandmother, who was a nun, from the age of twelve to eighteen to be closer to her school. She would wake up at 5 a.m., prepare her own food, and then go to school. After school or on weekends, she helped with temple duties such as sweeping the grounds, mopping the hall floors, arranging food offerings for the monks, cleaning utensils, assisting with flower arrangements, attending morning and evening chanting, listening to Dhamma talks, and studying the Dhamma. While she was there, another girl stayed at the temple under the same conditions.

Another group of long-term residents at the temple includes individuals, both male and female, who reside there while observing the eight precepts. The reasons for their extended stay vary, ranging from devoted Buddhist practitioners who commit themselves to a Buddhist lifestyle after completing their education (such as laymen or *ubasok* (Pali: *upāsaka*) and laywomen or *ubasika* (Pali: *upāsikā*) at Wat Phra Dhammakaya), to practitioners who, after a year or two, may receive novice ordination, also known as white-robed postulants or *anagārikas* from Wat Nong Pah Pong and its affiliated branches.

For retirees seeking long-term residence at the temple, men commonly choose to become monks, while women often live at the temple, sometimes ordaining as nuns and assisting with temple duties. For example, after my uncle's retirement, he chose to ordain right away and has now been a monk for 20 years. Some of my female relatives, including my great-grandmother and aunt, also ordained as nuns after their retirement, staying at the temple until they could no longer care for themselves. In other cases, such as my grandmother, who did not ordain as a nun but lived as a long-term resident at the temple from the age of 60 to 75, observing the eight

precepts and wearing a white shirt and a black skirt, a practice called ‘*nung dam*’ (literally ‘wearing black’).

Despite not being permanent residents, lay Buddhists contribute significantly to the sustainability and well-being of temples and monastic communities, whether as devoted supporters, volunteers, or active participants. They contribute to the temple’s financial stability through their generous donations which help to maintain the infrastructure, support the monastic community, and fund various religious and cultural activities. Whether it is monetary donations, offerings of food, robes, or other essential supplies, the support of the community ensures the continuity of the temple’s operations and facilitates the well-being of the monastic congregations. Individuals with available time and skills have the opportunity to contribute as volunteers in the temple, offering vital support for both day-to-day operations and special events. From maintaining and upkeeping the temple grounds to organising events and ceremonies, managing administrative duties, and extending hospitality to visitors, volunteers contribute significantly to the smooth functioning of the temple. For example, Wat Phra Dhammakaya is known for having a significant number of volunteers of various ages, primarily university students (see Chapter 3).

In addition to the aforementioned roles, there are individuals who actively participate in religious activities such as daily meditation sessions, dhamma talks, chanting sessions, or retreats. These active participants, mostly retired women, deepen their understanding of Buddhist teachings, strengthen their personal practice, build connections with like-minded practitioners within the temple community, and socialise. The contributions of laypeople as donors, volunteers, and active participants are indispensable to the vitality of the temple community. Their involvement not only supports the functioning of the temple but also cultivates a sense of belonging, fosters spiritual growth, and strengthens the bonds of the larger Buddhist community.

## 1.2 Administration

Thomas Borchert has observed that monks in Thailand are subject to three legal codes: monastic regulations (Pali: *vinaya*), Thailand’s law, and the orders of the Sangha Supreme

Council of Thailand (SSC).<sup>109</sup> The first, the *vinaya*, serves as a fundamental set of rules and guidelines established by the Buddha and early monastic community in India for the well-being and spiritual development of monks within the monastic community as well as the position of the community within its broader society. It governs the lifestyle, discipline, and ethical conduct of monks. At the age of twenty, men and theoretically women can obtain higher ordination, becoming a monk (Pali: *bhikkhu*) or a fully ordained nun (Pali: *bhikkhuni*). They are required to observe the basic code of monastic discipline (Pali: *pāṭimokkha*). While novices keep ten precepts, also kept by monks, and precept nuns keep between eight and ten precepts, the fully ordained undertake the additional set of rules provided in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. There are 227 main rules for monks and 311 main rules for fully ordained nuns, and then a significant number of minor rules.<sup>110</sup> The second is the laws of the country. Despite monks' renunciation of worldly affairs and their adherence to monastic regulations, they remain subject to Thailand's laws. Accusations of criminal offenses, such as money laundering or – in the past – involvement with communism, can lead to severe consequences, including being stripped of their royal ecclesiastical title and rank, losing their monkhood, or even facing imprisonment.<sup>111</sup> The third authority is the SSC's administration. The SSC composed of senior monks, holds the authority to enforce disciplinary measures and oversee the administration of the monastic order in Thailand.

In addition to these authorities recorded by Borchert, it is important to note that the conduct of Thai monks is also subject to local customs and societal expectations. While these cultural norms are not explicitly outlined in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, monks in Thailand are expected to comply with them. One such custom is the practice of receiving offerings from lay women through the use of a cloth as a medium in order to ensure that there is no physical contact between them. This custom reflects the cultural values and traditions of Thailand as a way to maintain a respectful and appropriate relationship between monks and lay practitioners,

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<sup>109</sup> Thomas Borchert, 'Barami and Bureaucracy: Mechanisms of Monastic Power in Contemporary Thailand', Presentation, Glorison Lecture Series in Buddhist Studies 2022-2023 and the Yin-Cheng Distinguished Lecture 2023, University of Oxford, 1 May 2023; Thomas Borchert, 'Monks, the State, and Monastic Governance in Contemporary Thailand', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90, no. 3 (2022): 654–73.

<sup>110</sup> Male and female monks, nuns, and novices comprised the monastic community for roughly 1,500 years. However, the tradition of female ordination was lost. In Theravada countries, there is an ongoing controversy over the issues of women who lives and behaves like nuns and whether any of them can be strictly considered members of the Sangha. See more. Richard Francis Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (Psychology Press, 1988), 2.

<sup>111</sup> Borchert, 'Monks, the State, and Monastic Governance in Contemporary Thailand', 663; Phibul Choompolpaisal, 'Reassessing Modern Thai Political Buddhism: A Critical Study of Sociological Literature from Weber to Keyes' (Ph.D. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2011).

particularly in the context of gender interactions. Other customs, such as monks shaving their eyebrows once a month, are not prescribed in the *vinaya* but have become a compulsory practice in Thailand as an extension of the shaving of the head.

### 1.2.1 The Historical Development of Sangha Administration and the Sangha Act

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thailand was still known as Siam and had not yet established its identity as a centralised state with clearly defined borders, a process it would begin to undertake later in the century in response to the colonial expansion by the British and French in the region. During those times, the region comprised numerous kingdoms with distinct histories, literature, dialects, and religious practices. Theravada Buddhism was practised by both educated people in cities and people in rural areas.<sup>112</sup> The majority of Siamese were Theravada Buddhists, and the Theravada Buddhist Sangha was the central religious institution in their culture.<sup>113</sup> Even so, different kingdoms adhered to Buddhist customs in various ways.<sup>114</sup> Various ethnic groups in Siam, including the Siamese in central Thailand, the Lao in the Northeast, the Khon Muang in the North, and non-Tai groups such as the Mon and Khmer, accepted Theravada Buddhist teachings according to their regional or cultural dispositions.<sup>115</sup> They practised their own local versions of Buddhism and only a few temples in Bangkok and nearby provinces were under the king's jurisdiction. These distinct Buddhist traditions were one of the characteristics of the traditional Siamese state. However, during the reigns of King Mongkut (1804–1868, r. 1851–1868) and his son, King Chulalongkorn, faced with the threat of Western colonial expansion, the process of confronting this challenge initiated the transition of Siam from a traditional to a modern nation-state, and also altered the make-up of the Sangha of Thai Theravada Buddhism as a potential unifying factor in a modern Thai identity.<sup>116</sup>

As part of the modernisation agenda, the administrative structure of the Sangha underwent a significant transformation. In order to bring monks from different traditions in the outlying regions under Bangkok's control, King Chulalongkorn passed a new law in 1902. This was the

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<sup>112</sup> Keyes, *Thailand*, 37.

<sup>113</sup> Keyes, *Thailand*, 35.

<sup>114</sup> Keyes, *Thailand*, 17.

<sup>115</sup> Keyes, *Thailand*, 58; Kamala Tiyavanich, 'The Wandering Forest Monks in Thailand, 1900-1992: Ajan Mun's Lineage' (Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1993), 4.

<sup>116</sup> Keyes, *Thailand*, 42.

Sangha Act of 1902, which aimed to create a systematic and unified national Sangha hierarchy and a centralised authority for high-ranking monks with the ability to control the decisions of the lower ranks.<sup>117</sup> Thus, the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand was subsequently constituted as the highest authority in the Buddhist Sangha hierarchy, functioning as both an administrative body and an ecclesiastical tribunal.<sup>118</sup>

Since 1902, the Sangha Act has been amended several times. The Sangha Act of 1962, modelled on that of 1902, which reaffirms state control over the Sangha and grants absolute authority to a Supreme Patriarch, is still in effect, with the most recent revisions in 2017 and 2018.<sup>119</sup>

### 1.2.2 The Present Structure of the Buddhist Sangha in Thailand

The organisational structure of the Buddhist Sangha in Thailand, as illustrated in Figure 3, was established through those two revisions of the Sangha Act in 2017 and 2018. During the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) appointed by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the Sangha Act was amended twice in rapid succession to enhance the King's authority in appointing the Supreme Patriarch and members of the Sangha Supreme Council, reflecting a significant shift from prior practices where appointments were influenced by the Sangha Supreme Council and involved a more collective decision-making process.<sup>120</sup> This revision grants the King of Thailand the authority to appoint the Supreme Patriarch, requiring the validation of the Prime Minister's countersignature.<sup>121</sup> It also grants the King of Thailand the authority to appoint 20 monks to the SSC.<sup>122</sup> This arrangement resembles the function of the king in the British monarchy, who serves as the Supreme Governor of the Church of

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<sup>117</sup> Somboon Suksamran, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand: A Study of Socio-Political Change and Political Activism of the Thai Sangha* (ISEAS Publishing, 1982), 38.

<sup>118</sup> 'อำนาจหน้าที่ของมหาเถรสมาคม (Authority of the Supreme Sangha Council)', มหาเถรสมาคม The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand, accessed 11 February 2023, <http://www.mahathera.org/index.php?url=content1&id=1>.

<sup>119</sup> Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 229.

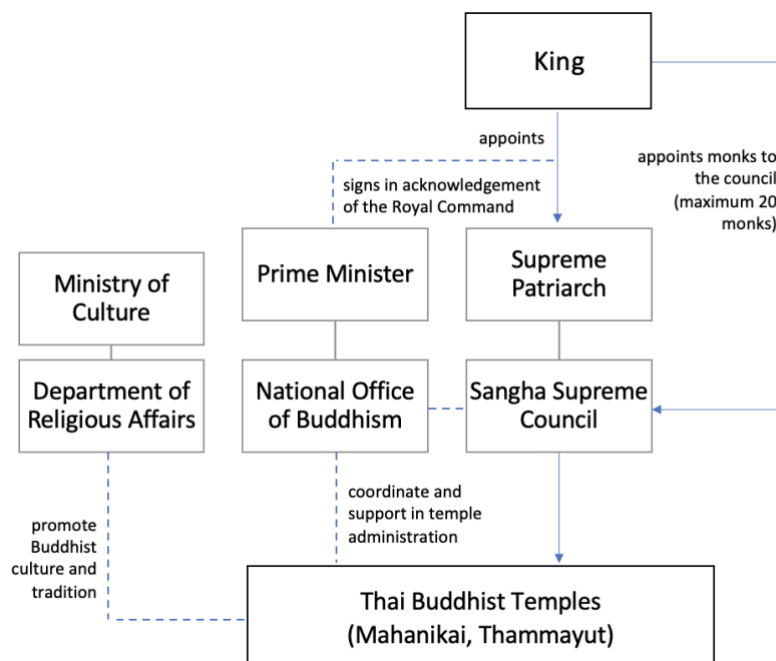
<sup>120</sup> National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) was the military junta that governed Thailand following the 2014 coup d'état. 'สนช. แก้ พ.ร.บ.คณะสงฆ์ 2 ครั้ง เพิ่มพระราชอำนาจตั้งสมเด็จพระสังฆราช และกรรมการมหาเถรสมาคม (The National Legislative Assembly Amended the Sangha Act Twice to Increase the Royal Authority to Appoint the Supreme Patriarch and Members of the Sangha Supreme Council)', accessed 3 November 2024, <https://www.ilaw.or.th/articles/2879>.

<sup>121</sup> 'พระราชบัญญัติ คณะสงฆ์ (ฉบับที่ ๓) พ.ศ. ๒๕๖๐ (Sangha Act (No. 3), B.E. 2560 (2017))', *ราชกิจจานุเบกษา (Royal Gazette)* 134, no. 2 (2017), <https://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2560/A/002/1.PDF>.

<sup>122</sup> 'พระราชบัญญัติ คณะสงฆ์ (ฉบับที่ ๔) พ.ศ. ๒๕๖๑ (Sangha Act (No. 4), B.E. 2561 (2018))', *ราชกิจจานุเบกษา (Royal Gazette)* 135, no. 50 (2018), <https://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2561/A/050/T1.PDF>.

England and has the authority to appoint archbishops, bishops, and deans of cathedrals with the advice of the Prime Minister.<sup>123</sup> Suksamran’s analysis suggests that the relationship between the Thai state and the Sangha encompasses two dimensions: symbolic representation and power relations. Symbolically, religious organisations are portrayed as spiritual leaders, while the state, whether an absolute monarchy (1782–1932), a constitutional monarchy/democracy (1932–1957), or a military dictatorship (1957–1973), is perceived as a preserver or protector of religion. However, in terms of power dynamics, the Thai Sangha has consistently been subject to political control.<sup>124</sup>

Figure 3: Power Structure of Thai Authorities over Thai Buddhist Temples.



In addition to the SSC, which serves as the main governing body responsible for all ecclesiastical affairs within the Thai Sangha, two other government bodies are also involved in the operations of Thai Buddhist temples: the Department of Religious Affairs and the National Office of Buddhism. The Department of Religious Affairs has undergone several modifications throughout different reigns of the Kings of Thailand, reflecting the diverse initiatives undertaken by each monarch. In 2002, a significant governmental reform led to the separation of the Department of Religious Affairs from the Ministry of Education, placing it under the

<sup>123</sup> ‘Leadership and Governance’, The Church of England, accessed 11 February 2023, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance>.

<sup>124</sup> Phiphat Pasutharnchat, รัฐกับศาสนา (State and Religion) (Siam, 2010), 275.

Ministry of Culture. Furthermore, the reform established the National Office of Buddhism (NOB) as an independent entity with departmental status, reporting directly to the Prime Minister.<sup>125</sup>

Since 2002, the Department of Religious Affairs has fallen under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture (Figure 3). While its function in the administration of Buddhist temples has been lessened and replaced by NOB, its principal mission remains the maintenance, promotion, and protection of Thailand's five major religions, namely Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Additionally, the department seeks to promote ethical comprehension and interreligious harmony among these five religions. It encourages individuals in Thailand to incorporate religious principles into their daily lives, which ultimately enhances their overall quality of life and cultivates virtuous and moral character.<sup>126</sup>

NOB operates directly under the Prime Minister and is headed by a director who serves as the secretary of the SSC. As the secretariat of the SSC, NOB's responsibilities include implementing laws and regulations related to Buddhism, coordinating and supporting temple activities, promoting and preserving Buddhism, maintaining temples, fostering Buddhist education and knowledge, supporting the domestic and international dissemination of Buddhism, and making decisions pertaining to Buddhism in compliance with relevant laws.<sup>127</sup> To ensure nationwide coverage and accessibility, the offices of the NOB are distributed across every province of Thailand and are often situated within provincial halls, and in certain cases, they are also located at temples or schools.<sup>128</sup>

The organisational structure of the Thai sangha closely mirrors that of the Thai government, with similar positions and hierarchies. Figure 4, adapted and updated from Suksamran's work on Buddhism and politics in Thailand, illustrates the bureaucratic structure of the Sangha and its relation to the Thai government. Sections 20 to 23 of the Sangha Act of 1962 outline the administrative framework of the sangha, including the provincial administration divided into

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<sup>125</sup> 'ประวัติกรมการศาสนา (History of the Department of Religious Affairs)', Department of Religious Affairs Website, accessed 11 February 2023, <http://www.dra.go.th/page/organization-history-department>.

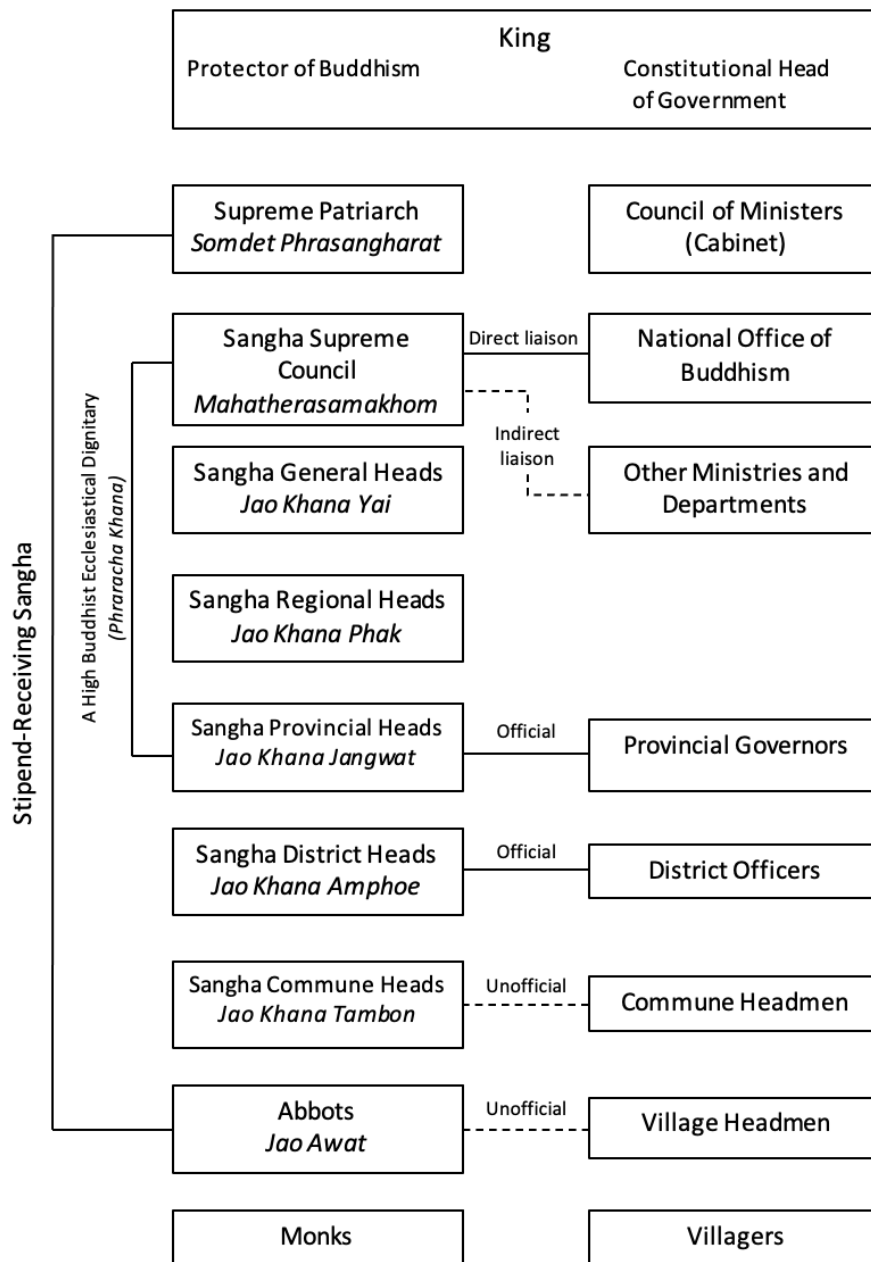
<sup>126</sup> 'อำนาจหน้าที่ (Authority)', Department of Religious Affairs, accessed 11 February 2023, <http://www.dra.go.th/page/organization-authority>.

<sup>127</sup> 'อำนาจหน้าที่ วิสัยทัศน์ พันธกิจ ยุทธศาสตร์ (Mandate, Vision, Mission, Strategy)', สำนักงานพระพุทธศาสนาแห่งชาติ National Office of Buddhism, accessed 11 February 2023, <https://www.onab.go.th/th/content/page/index/id/2>.

<sup>128</sup> 'สำนักงานพระพุทธศาสนาแห่งชาติ (National Office of Buddhism)', accessed 28 June 2023, <https://www.onab.go.th/>.

distinct administrative areas that align with regions, provinces, districts, and sub-districts, which correspond to the same areas as the Thai state. This is accompanied by a list of ecclesiastical positions representing the heads responsible for overseeing these respective areas. This hierarchical structure establishes a clear chain of command and accountability. When a monk needs to obtain an official document such as a passport, for instance, he must obtain approval from five senior monks in positions of authority who hold higher ranks: the abbot of the applicant's temple, the Sangha Commune Head, the Sangha District Head, the Sangha Provincial Head, and the Sangha General Head. Chapter 4 will provide an in-depth examination of the procedure.

Figure 4: Sangha Bureaucratic Structure and its Relation to the Thai Government.<sup>129</sup>



<sup>129</sup> Adapted and updated from Suksamran, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*.

### 1.2.3 The Role of the Abbotship

Section 15 of the Sangha Act of 1962 (as amended in 1992) defines the powers and responsibilities of the SSC in explicit detail. These responsibilities include governing the Sangha in a manner that promotes order, determining the ordination of novices, supervising and promoting religious education, welfare education, propagation, public welfare, and sangha welfare, upholding the dharma and discipline of Buddhism, and performing other responsibilities as prescribed by the Act or other applicable laws.<sup>130</sup> For the SSC to fulfil its responsibilities, the duties of the abbot of each temple correspond to those of the SSC.

The abbot (Thai: *chao avas*, literally ‘Lord of the Residence’) is the head of the temple. Prior to the revision of the Act in 1992, the abbot’s job duties were mainly focused on managing temple administration and monastic education, as stated in the 1902 Act. Since 1992, however, the abbot’s responsibilities have expanded considerably to include administration, propagation, monastic education, construction, welfare education, and public welfare duties.<sup>131</sup> This expansion of responsibilities highlights the abbot’s vital role in furthering the SSC’s objectives and is also reflected in the temple management regulations. I will discuss further in Chapter 2 how temples in Thailand implement these duties and in Chapter 3, I will explore how temples in the UK also carry out this mission.

## 1.3 Classification

The classification of Thai temples is officially documented in the Royal Gazette through the Sangha Act of 1962. According to Section 33 of this Sangha Act, Buddhist temples are divided into two categories: temples that have been granted royal consecrated boundaries, known as *wisungkhammasima* (Pali: *visuṅgāmasīmā*), and temples that have not.<sup>132</sup> *Wisungkhammasima* is “a tract of land (now, usually a small rectangular plot of ground) officially granted to the Sangha for establishing the boundaries of the jurisdiction of a community of monks (now, for

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<sup>130</sup> พระราชบัญญัติลักษณะสงฆ์ (ฉบับที่ ๒) พ.ศ. ๒๕๓๕ (*Sangha Act 1992*), Wat Molilokkayaram Ratchawarawihan, n.d., accessed 18 March 2023, <https://www.watmoli.com/wittaya-one/1192/>.

<sup>131</sup> พระราชบัญญัติลักษณะสงฆ์ (ฉบับที่ ๒) พ.ศ. ๒๕๓๕ (*Sangha Act 1992*).

<sup>132</sup> ‘Sangha Act 2505 B.E.’, Office of the Council of State, 1962, <https://www.onab.go.th/th/file/get/file/20210609d41d8cd98f00b204e9800998ecf8427e091317.pdf>.

consecrating as the site of the Uposatha hall of monastery).”<sup>133</sup> Without *wisungkhammasima*, a temple is not recognised as an official temple and cannot designate the sacred area for *ubosot* within a temple.

The first category encompasses temples that have an *ubosot* and have been granted *wisungkhammasima*, enabling monks to conduct *sanghakamma*. On the other hand, the second category comprises temples that either lack an *ubosot* or have one but have not sought *wisungkhammasima*, rendering them unable to conduct *sanghakamma*. These temples are regarded as monastic residences or *sam nak song*, rather than fully functioning temples.<sup>134</sup> Despite the comprehensive guidelines provided in the Royal Gazette for requesting royal consecrated boundaries, a significant proportion of temples in Thailand, approximately 40% or 16,940 temples, do not possess such consecrated boundaries. Table 1 showcases the data, indicating that out of the total 43,146 temples, approximately 60% (26,206 temples) have been granted *wisungkhammasima*. Additionally, the Royal Gazette contains additional ministerial regulations that outline the procedures involved in establishing temples in Thailand, encompassing various aspects such as temple construction, establishment, consolidation, relocation, dissolution, and the process of elevating abandoned temples to the status of temples with resident monks.<sup>135</sup>

Royal temples hold the highest prestige among Thai temples due to their association with the royal family. This connection may be established through the presence of a pagoda containing royal relics or because the temple was constructed or renovated by a member of the royal family. In some cases, the temples were initially built by commoners and later gifted to the royal family. The second category of temples consists of community temples, which are constructed or renovated by the general public. These temples greatly outnumber the royal temples. According to the data provided in Table 1, out of a total of 43,456 temples in Thailand, there are 310 royal temples, while 42,836 are community temples, which constitute approximately 99.28% of the total number.

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<sup>133</sup> Phra Brahmaganabhorn, ‘วิสุกคามสีมา (Visuṅgāmasīmā)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

<sup>134</sup> พระอารามหลวง (*Royal Temple*), 2nd edn, vol. 1 (National Office of Buddhism, 2023).

<sup>135</sup> *The Royal Gazette*, 134, no. 12 (2017).

In 1915, during the reign of King Rama VI, the royal temples were classified as first, second, and third class. Within each class, the royal temples have been further ranked in a hierarchical structure, denoted by the suffixes *Rajaworamahavihara*, *Rajaworavihara*, *Woramahavihara*, and *Woravihara* added to their names.<sup>136</sup> For example, Wat Mahathat is a first-grade temple of the first-class royal temples, known as Wat Mahathat Yuwarajarangsarit Rajaworamahavihara, meaning ‘Monastery of the Great Relic, Appointed Crown Prince, Royal Great Temple.’ We will revisit this temple in Chapter 2 as it has played a particularly influential role in the establishment of Thai temples in the UK.

## 1.4 Affiliation

Another outcome of the modernisation period was the division of the Theravada monastic community into two groups. During the process of creating a modern Thai nation-state, Thai nationalism was promoted throughout the country. According to Keyes, “Thai nationalism represents a selective reinterpretation of tradition and the promotion of this reinterpretation as being the tradition of all ‘Thai’ in common.”<sup>137</sup> This reinterpretation started with Buddhist reforms set in motion by the King Mongkut.<sup>138</sup> Before he was enthroned as a king, Prince Mongkut was a monk for nearly three decades, having initially ordained in part to avoid the potentially deadly competition for succession caused by the death of his father, after which his half-brother King Nangklao (1788–1851, r. 1824–1851) ascended the throne.<sup>139</sup>

During his time as a monk, Prince Mongkut, or *Vajirañāṇo* Bhikkhu, criticised both urban meditation monks and forest tradition monks for their insufficient emphasis on doctrine.<sup>140</sup> His interactions with Christian missionaries exposed him to Western religious and scientific ideas, led him to develop a Protestant, conservative approach to Buddhist texts, prioritising and giving authority only to those directly attributed to the Buddha,<sup>141</sup> and to advocate that true

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<sup>136</sup> Ratanawaraporn, ‘The Guideline for Conservation of Living Heritage Temples in Thai Context: The Case Study of Living Heritage Temples in Rattanakosin Island’, 89.

<sup>137</sup> Keyes, *Thailand*, 57.

<sup>138</sup> Keyes, *Thailand*, 57.

<sup>139</sup> Kate Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and Its Modern-Era Suppression* (The Buddha Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, 2013), 34.

<sup>140</sup> Jim Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*, First reprint, Social Issues in Southeast Asia (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), 42.

<sup>141</sup> Andrew Skilton, ‘Meditation and Its Subjects: Tracing Kammatthāna from the Early Canon to the Boran Kammathan Traditions of Southeast Asia’, *Contemporary Buddhism* 20, nos 1–2 (2019): 48.

religion should be grounded in rational doctrine and personal belief, expressing disdain for local cultural elements of Thai Buddhism.<sup>142</sup>

In 1833, as part of his reform efforts, and perhaps also as a political expedient, Prince Mongkut initiated a new monastic lineage which he called the Thammayut-nikai, “the nikāya of those monks who follow the dhamma” with himself as the leader of this new ordination lineage at Wat Bowonniwet Vihara Ratchawarawihan (hereafter Wat Bowonniwet) in Bangkok.<sup>143</sup> This temple acted as the central hub for Siamese Sangha affairs from the 1850s until the late 1930s, because, after Mongkut became king, the Thammayut became an instrument of state control over the rest of the Sangha. It is still the centre of Thammayut administration.<sup>144</sup>

Prince Mongkut referred to the rest of the monks who continued to follow traditional practices as Mahanikai, the “great or majority nikāya” and he considered this other group as an “order of long-standing habit”, meaning that monks and laypeople in this tradition blindly followed the Buddhism of their ancestors.<sup>145</sup> Despite the historical preference of the palace for monks in Thammayut and the appointment of senior Thammayut monks as the Supreme Patriarchs for more than three-quarters of a century, the Thammayut lineage represents a smaller faction when compared to the larger Mahanikai lineage in Thailand, with just 260 Thammayut temples compared with 17,305 Mahanikai temples in 1935.<sup>146</sup> In the present day, it remains evident that the Mahanikai lineage continues to dominate the Buddhist landscape in Thailand. According to the National Office of Buddhism database as of July 2022 (Table 1), there are a total of 43,146 Buddhist temples with resident monks. Out of these temples, approximately 89.74% are affiliated with the Mahanikai lineage, while the Thammayut lineage represents around 10.26% of the temples. Additionally, there is a small percentage of 0.09% that belongs to minority groups. The distribution of Thai Buddhist temples in the UK, as further discussed in Chapter 2, mirrors a similar pattern. Approximately 87.10% of the temples in the UK are associated with the Mahanikai lineage, while around 12.90% of the temples represent the

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<sup>142</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 7.

<sup>143</sup> The word nikāya has two meanings: a collection; group; any of the five main divisions of the Sutta Pitaka and a sect; school; denomination. The latter is the meaning in this context where nikāya refer to a Buddhist sect, perhaps best translated as ‘ordination lineage’. Phra Brahmaganubhorn, ‘นิกาย (Nikāya)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

<sup>144</sup> Phibul Choempolpaisal, ‘Political Buddhism and the Modernisation of Thai Monastic Education: From Wachirayan to Phimonlatham (1880s-1960s)’, *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 2 (2015): 430.

<sup>145</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 2nd ed (Yale University Press, 2003), 161.

<sup>146</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 193.

Thammayut lineage. This parallel in percentages highlights the continuation of these distinct lineages even across different cultural and geographic contexts. Despite historical disparities and competition for power, the importance of the distinction for ecclesiastical matters such as ordination, and the continued association between Thammayut and stricter practice in the popular imagination, it is important to note that the present-day distinction between Mahanikai and Thammayut is hardly discernible from the perspective of lay Buddhists, who mostly attend either the local or multiple temples of different nikais without necessarily being aware of their affiliation.

Apart from mainstream Theravada Buddhism, two minority Buddhist lineages have been acknowledged by the Thai state: the Jin Nikai (literally ‘Chinese Schools’) and Annam Nikai. In the 1870s, a group of Chinese monks, led by Xuxing and Guow, formed the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist lineage in Thailand, known as Jin Nikai<sup>147</sup> during a period of massive Chinese emigration caused by a variety of factors such as wars, opium trade, natural disasters, famines, population pressure, and rebellions.<sup>148</sup> For over 150 years, Jin Nikai has been active both within and beyond the Thai-Chinese community.<sup>149</sup> In 2020, Jin Nikai hosted around 1,000 monks and novices in 18 temples situated in various regions of Thailand.<sup>150</sup> As of July 2022, the lineage in question owned 16 temples (Table 1).

Another Mahayana Buddhist lineage, is the Annam Nikai established by Vietnamese monks fleeing the Tay Son Uprising (1770–1802) and the subsequent persecution by the Nguyen court.<sup>151</sup> As of July 2022, there were 23 temples under Annam Nikai, of which 30% are located in Bangkok (Table 1). Both Jin Nikai and Annam Nikai are overseen by the Theravada Supreme Patriarch. However, they have their own governing body with their patriarchs standing second and subordinate in status only to the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai sangha as a whole (Figure 5).<sup>152</sup> Neither of these two Thai Mahayana lineages has established a temple in the UK.

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<sup>147</sup> Yaoping Liu, ‘The History of Jin Nikāya in Thailand: A Preliminary Study from a Socio-Political Perspective’, *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 33 (2020): 121, 126.

<sup>148</sup> Jack Meng-Tat Chia, ‘Diaspora’s Dharma: Buddhist Connections across the South China Sea, 1900–1949’, *Contemporary Buddhism* 21, nos 1–2 (2020): 37.

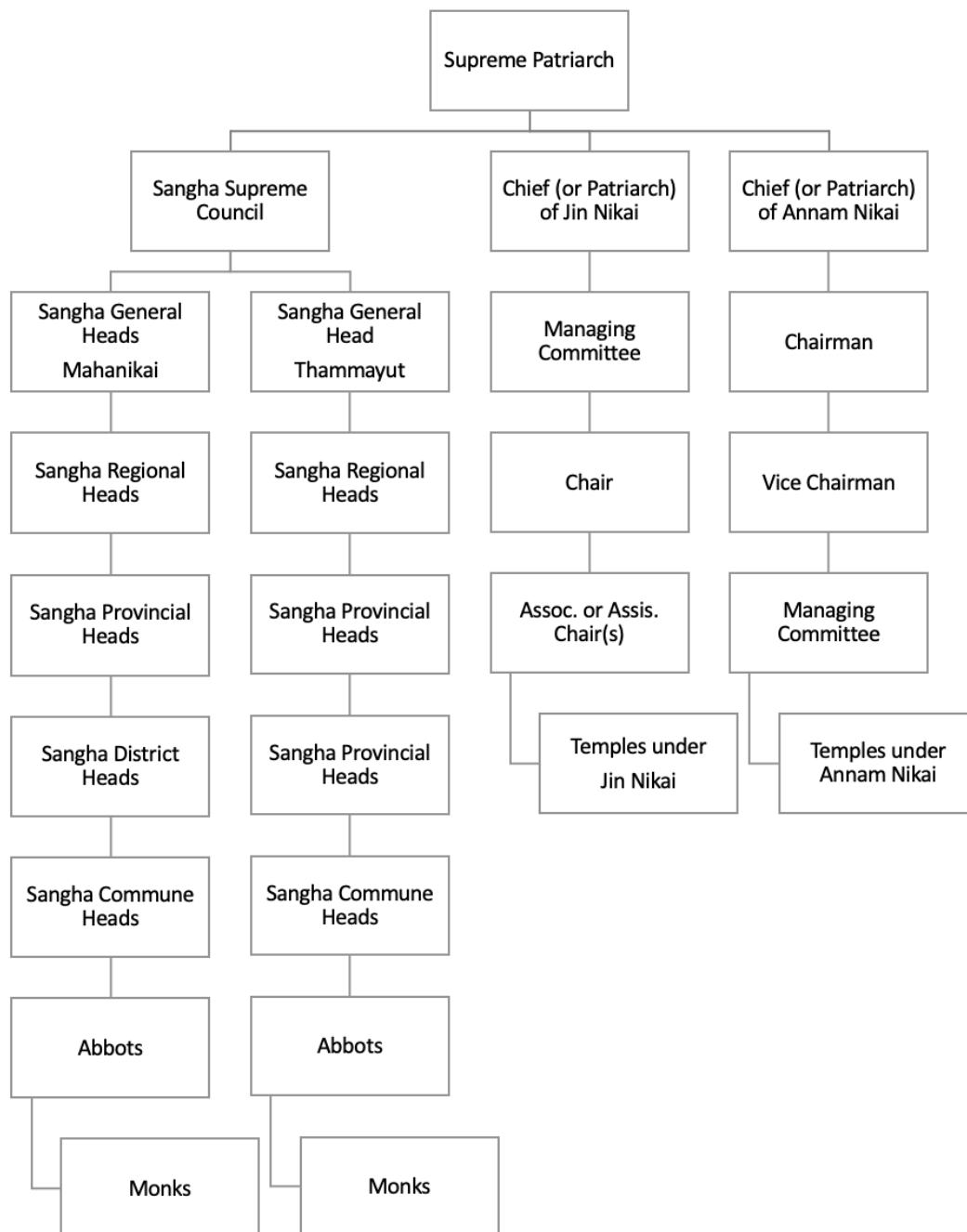
<sup>149</sup> Liu, ‘The History of Jin Nikāya in Thailand: A Preliminary Study from a Socio-Political Perspective’, 121.

<sup>150</sup> Liu, ‘The History of Jin Nikāya in Thailand: A Preliminary Study from a Socio-Political Perspective’, 121.

<sup>151</sup> Liu, ‘The History of Jin Nikāya in Thailand: A Preliminary Study from a Socio-Political Perspective’, 124.

<sup>152</sup> Liu, ‘The History of Jin Nikāya in Thailand: A Preliminary Study from a Socio-Political Perspective’; ‘กฎหมายคณะสงฆ์อนันตนิคาย (Law of Annam Nikai)’, Annam Nikaya of Thailand, accessed 20 March 2023, <https://www.anamnikaithai.com/ecclesiastical/law-of-anam-sect>.

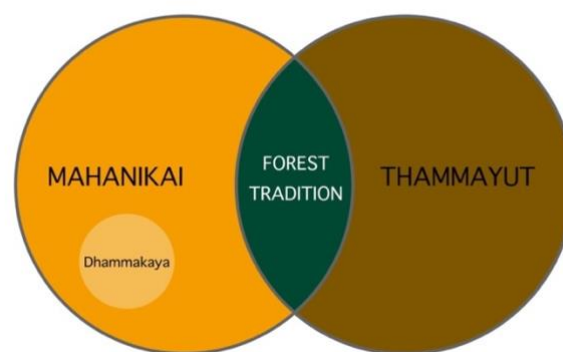
Figure 5: Sangha Bureaucratic Structure of Four Buddhist Lineages: Mahanikai, Thammayut, Jin Nikai, and Annam Nikai.



I have summarised these two minority traditions here in order to present a relatively complete picture of government-recognised Buddhist traditions in Thailand. While there are both Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhist temples in the UK such as Fo Guang Shan, London Lei Zang Si Temple, Linh Son Temple, and Chùa Từ Đàm, some of the former of which indirectly

result from the same 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century migration from China, neither type from Thailand is represented in the UK. However, the two mainstream Thai Buddhist lineages, Mahanikai and Thammayut, are both represented in the UK. Additionally, within each of these lineages, there are various traditions such as the Thai Forest Tradition, Dhammakaya tradition, the Santi Asoke, or the Lanna tradition. In this thesis, I will focus on the former two traditions as they have a presence in the UK (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Venn Diagram of Major Thai Buddhist Lineages (Mahanikai and Thammayut) with Shared Forest Tradition Practice.



## 1.5 Conclusion

Based on histories, ethnographies, government documentation, and personal experience, this chapter has provided an overview of Thai Buddhism through its temples. It has shown their different characteristics and governance, and how they are at the heart of the community, serving as spiritual and communal centres for the diverse groups of individuals they cater to, including both the ordained monastic community and the devoted laity, as well as some of the changes that have taken place in modern times. These general characteristics of temples can be observed not only within Thailand but also outside its borders, and while the architectural design and layout may vary across different regions and countries, some of the core functions and purposes of temples remain consistent (see Chapter 3).

We have also seen how Thai temples represent Thai identity as formulated and governed by the central government. The examination of administrative aspects has revealed the legal framework, organisational structure, and operational responsibilities that govern these temples. These insights underscore the intricacies involved in the management of temples and highlight

the hierarchical structure of the sangha, which remains applicable even for monks living abroad. Regardless of their location, monks are expected to adhere to this established structure, as will be explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

The discussion of the classifications of temples has revealed the diversity and unique characteristics of these religious institutions, ranging from royal temples to unofficial properties such as *sam nak song*. It also has shed light on the various classes within the category of royal temples. This categorisation not only reflects the historical and cultural contexts but also highlights the significant and enduring involvement of the royal family with the Thai temple system. The exploration of temple affiliation has shed light on the recognition of four Buddhist lineages granted by the Thai state, with particular emphasis on the two Theravada lineages. These lineages serve as the origin of transnational Thai Buddhist traditions that span across the globe. This has emphasised the global reach and interconnectedness of Buddhism. The presence of Theravada Buddhism beyond national borders highlights its adaptability and enduring influence in diverse cultural contexts, as will be further investigated in relation to the adaptation of Buddhism in the UK in Chapters 5 and 6.

Through this detailed introduction to the nature of Thailand's Buddhist temples, this chapter has established a solid foundation for further exploration and understanding of the transnational Thai Buddhist traditions in the UK. The next chapter will look at six temples in Thailand more closely, temples that act as the source or parent temple of my six main case studies in the UK, the focus of the subsequent chapters. On the one hand, much that we find in Thai temples in the UK is shaped by the practices, expectations and governing bodies of Buddhism in Thailand. However, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, some functions and practices have not transferred to the UK for various reasons, while the place of the temple as representative of Thai identity and culture gives the UK temple additional functions, and their position as public institutions in the UK burdens them with additional layers of responsibility and obligation.

# 2

## Tracing the Roots – The Parent Temples of UK Case Studies

In this chapter, I will discuss the parent temples in Thailand of the six UK temples which form my primary case studies. The Thai parent temples are Wat Mahathat, Wat Phra Singh, Wat Arun Ratchawararam, Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Wat Nong Pa Pong, and Wat Prachakhom Wanaram. Four of the six temples are from the Mahanikai lineage, with one of those being from the Dhammakaya tradition. The other two temples are associated with the Mahanikai forest tradition and the Thammayut forest tradition, respectively. I will explain these distinctions below. The organisational structure of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is different from that of traditional temples. Therefore, I will delve more deeply into its unique structure and devote more time to explaining it separately, after first giving an account of the other five.

### 2.1 Mahanikai Temples

The term ‘Mahanikai’ is commonly used as a general descriptor for the affiliation of the majority of temples in Thailand. This term originated back in 1833 to distinguish them from the Thammayut lineage when the latter was established by the future king Mongkut (see Chapter 1). According to data from the National Buddhism Office Temple Registration System database, as of July 2022 (Table 1), Thailand is home to a total of 43,146 temples. The majority of these, 38,680 temples, belong to the Mahanikai lineage, with 247 temples classified as royal temples. Among the four Mahanikai temples among my case studies, three hold the esteemed status of royal temples. These three temples bear royal titles, which I here italicise, in their full names, namely *Wat Mahathat Yuwarajangsarit Rajaworamahavihara* (hereafter Wat Mahathat), *Wat Arun Ratchawararam Ratchawaramahawihan*, and *Wat Phra Singh Woramahaviharn* (hereafter Wat Phra Singh). The significance of their royal titles will be explained in due course. The fourth Mahanikai temple, Wat Phra Dhammakaya, is not classified as a royal temple and is affiliated with the Dhammakaya tradition.

### 2.1.1 Wat Mahathat

Wat Mahathat holds a distinguished status as one of only six first-class royal temples, signified by the suffix ‘Rajaworamahavihara’ attached to its name. It is located in Bangkok near the Grand Palace and the National Museum. It holds significant historical value and has deep ties with the royal family. This temple is also an important centre for monastic education and meditation studies. Its origins date back to the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767), which predates Bangkok’s establishment as the capital of Thailand (then known as Siam). Initially called Wat Salak or the ‘Carving Temple,’ the exact year of its foundation and the identity of its founder remain unknown. However, evidence suggests it was likely constructed during the reign of King Narai (r. 1656–1688), as a stone inscription from 1684 mentions the gilding of the primary Buddha image at the temple.<sup>153</sup>

Since the period of King Taksin (r. 1767–1782), Wat Mahathat has not always held the same name, but its significant connection with the royal family under various names has continued over the years. After the downfall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom in 1767, King Taksin relocated the capital from Ayutthaya to Thonburi, initiating the brief Thonburi period of Thai history. He demarcated an area for establishing the capital city on both sides of the Chao Phraya River (these areas now being Thonburi and Bangkok) and the future Wat Mahathat temple, at that time called Wat Salak, was located in Bangkok. King Taksin then granted Wat Salak the status of being one of the royal temples in Bangkok.<sup>154</sup> Wat Salak was subsequently renovated in 1783 by Prince Surasinghanart, a younger brother of King Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok Maharaj, also known as King Rama I (r.1782–1809), and was renamed as Wat Nipphanaram, ‘Temple of Hermitage for Enlightenment’.<sup>155</sup> In 1788, a Grand Council was assembled at the temple in order to revise the Pali Canon, also known as the *Tipiṭaka*, or ‘Three Baskets’ in Pali.<sup>156</sup> To mark the significance of this, King Rama I then gave to the temple the name Wat Phra Si Sanphet, a prestigious name because it had previously belonged to a royal temple on the site of the old palace in Ayutthaya. The name thus both elevated the status of the temple

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<sup>153</sup> Phramahapakorn Kittitharo, *Wat Mahathat Yuwaratransarit Ratchaworawihan* (Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2013), 13.

<sup>154</sup> Kittitharo, *Wat Mahathat Yuwaratransarit Ratchaworawihan*, 13.

<sup>155</sup> Kittitharo, *Wat Mahathat Yuwaratransarit Ratchaworawihan*, 14.

<sup>156</sup> The Pali Canon, the highest textual authority in Theravada Buddhism, is traditionally regarded as the word of the Buddha. It is divided into three sections, known as the “Three Baskets”: the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, which outlines monastic regulations; the *Sutta Piṭaka*, which consists of stories and poetry conveying the Buddha’s teachings; and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, which explores metaphysics, psychology, and philosophy. See Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 71.

and marked the new Rattanakosin dynasty, founded by Rama I, as a continuation of the Ayutthaya dynasty. The temple was then later renamed again as Wat Phra Sri Rattana Mahathat (literally means ‘Temple of Great Glorious Jewelled Reliquary’ referring to a container of the Buddha’s relics, though which relics is not specified) or Wat Mahathat as of today.<sup>157</sup> The name ‘Yuwarajangsarit,’ which translates to ‘Restored under the patronage of the Crown Prince,’ was bestowed later in 1896 by King Chulalongkorn to honour the memory of his son, Prince Vachirunnahis, who had passed away in 1894.<sup>158</sup>

Wat Mahathat has not only maintained a deep-rooted association with the royal families spanning three centuries but has also played a vital role in the development of Thai Buddhism throughout its rich history. During the early Bangkok period from 1782 to 1855, the temple served as the abode for four Supreme Patriarchs. Several members of the royal family, including Prince Surasinghanart, Maha Senanurak (a younger brother of King Rama II), and Mongkut (who would later become King Rama IV), also resided here during their periods of ordination as monks.<sup>159</sup> In addition, the first national Buddhist University was established at Wat Mahathat in 1887 under the royal patronage of King Chulalongkorn. Initially known as Mahathat Witthayalai (‘abode of knowledge’), the institution commenced offering classes to monks, novices, and laypeople in 1889. It subsequently evolved into a public university in 1997, now recognised as Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.<sup>160</sup> Last but not least, Wat Mahathat assumed a pivotal role as a centre for meditation practices under the direction of Phra Aj Asapamahathera (1903–1992; Royal ecclesiastical title and rank: *Somdet Phra Phutthachan*) more commonly known as Phra Phimonlatham.<sup>161</sup>

Phra Phimonlatham played a significant role in revolutionising Buddhist religion in Thailand. He was ordained as a novice at the age of 14 at Wat Sri Chan, located in the north-eastern region of Thailand in Khon Kaen. Driven by his passion for learning, Phra Phimonlatham eventually relocated to Wat Mahathat in Bangkok. He was fully ordained in 1923 and was

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<sup>157</sup> Kittitharo, *Wat Mahathat Yuwarajangsarit Ratchaworawihan*, 15,17.

<sup>158</sup> Kittitharo, *Wat Mahathat Yuwarajangsarit Ratchaworawihan*, 23.

<sup>159</sup> Kittitharo, *Wat Mahathat Yuwarajangsarit Ratchaworawihan*, 13.

<sup>160</sup> ‘ประวัติมหาวิทยาลัย (History of the University)’, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, accessed 25 August 2020, <https://www.mcu.ac.th/pages/history>.

<sup>161</sup> Phibul Choempolpaisal, ‘Political Buddhism and the Modernisation of Thai Monastic Education: From Wachirayan to Phimonlatham (1880s-1960s)’, *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 2 (2015): 438–39.

appointed as the abbot of Wat Mahathat in 1947.<sup>162</sup> He believed that the earlier sangha reforms of 1902 had erred by prioritising textual study over meditation practice. In his view, the true essence of Buddhism could only be discovered through meditation. Hence, he attempted to reform and revitalise state Buddhism by emphasising the integration of meditation practice with textual learning.<sup>163</sup>

Under Phra Phimonlatham's leadership, Wat Mahathat experienced a transformative period. In 1949, he invited meditation monks from various provinces in north-eastern Thailand to teach *samatha* meditation to monks and novices at Wat Mahathat.<sup>164</sup> He also established the Vipassana Meditation Centre in 1952 to promote meditation practice among both monastic practitioners and the wider lay community.<sup>165</sup> Influenced by the religious revival in Burma, Phra Phimonlatham recognised the value of the Burmese style of insight meditation (Thai: *vipassana*, Pali: *vipassana*), commonly referred to as Vipassana meditation. This approach, also known as *abhidhamma*-based *vipassana* meditation, was seen as a suitable and beneficial practice for Thai urbanites.<sup>166</sup> From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, two renowned *vipassana* traditions have held prominence in Burma: Ledi Sayadaw in Upper Burma (1840– 1923) and Mingun Sayadaw in Lower Burma (1868– 1955).<sup>167</sup> Thus, in 1952, Phra Phimonlatham sent his assistant, Phramaha Chodok Yannasittho (1918–1988; Royal ecclesiastical title and rank: *Phra Rat Sitthi Muni*; hereafter Phramaha Chodok) to learn meditation with Mahasi Sayadaw U Sobhana (1904–1982), a pupil of Mingun Sayadaw, in Rangoon for one year.

Upon his return, Phramaha Chodok brought two Burmese meditation teachers to teach 'rising and falling' meditation technique at Wat Mahathat.<sup>168</sup> Subsequently, Phramaha Chodok assumed the position of head of the meditation centre, which led to the remarkable proliferation

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<sup>162</sup> 'ส่วนงานบริหาร สถาบันวิปัสสนาธุระ (Administrative Division, Vipassanadhura Institute)', Administrative Division, Vipassanadhura Institute, accessed 30 May 2023, <https://adm-vipassana.mcu.ac.th>.

<sup>163</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 227.

<sup>164</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 227.

<sup>165</sup> ประวัติความเป็นมา - สถาบันวิปัสสนาธุระ (*Background of Vipassanadhura Institute*), 2 March 2021, [https://vipassana.mcu.ac.th/?page\\_id=120](https://vipassana.mcu.ac.th/?page_id=120).

<sup>166</sup> This meditation practice was developed by high-profile Burmese monks such as Ledi Sayadaw U Ñānadhaja (1846–1923) and the first Mingun Sayadaw U Nārada (1868–1955). Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and Its Modern-Era Suppression*, 12–13. Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 227.

<sup>167</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 163.

<sup>168</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 228.

of this particular meditation technique throughout the 1950s.<sup>169</sup> Mahanikai administrative monks from all across Thailand also came to Wat Mahathat to learn Vipassana meditation.<sup>170</sup> At the same time, Wat Paknam Phasi Charoen (hereafter Wat Paknam), another Mahanikai monastery, had become well recognised for popularising the *vijjā dhammakaya* meditation tradition, which would later become the main practice of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, which was yet to be established (see section 3.4). This Wat Paknam method had also been the practice of the first UK monks to be ordained in Thailand, who were ordained at Wat Paknam under the sponsorship of the English Sangha Trust, a charity founded in 1956 with the aim of establishing a local resident Buddhist sangha in Britain.<sup>171</sup> In 1964, the English Sangha Trust extended an invitation to Phramaha Chodok and Phramaha Vichitra Tissadatto (hereafter Phramaha Vichitra) to teach Vipassana meditation at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara in London.<sup>172</sup> This significant event paved the way for the subsequent establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa, which holds the distinction of being the first Thai temple in Europe and in the UK and is our first case study. Further exploration and analysis of this temple will be presented in Chapter 3.

Wat Mahathat has remained an important meditation centre to this day. In October 2008, Luang Pu Pi Sujāto (Royal ecclesiastical title and rank: Phra Phrom Wachirathibadi), the current abbot of Wat Mahathat, initiated the construction plan of the new International Vipassana Meditation Centre. Distinguished members of the royal family were invited to assume the role of chairman during inaugurations and other significant milestones. The construction was completed in 2012, with the capacity to accommodate over 500 meditation practitioners simultaneously.<sup>173</sup> It offers convenient accessibility, situated in the heart of Bangkok and accessible by boat, bus, and private car. The meditation teachers at this centre are all monks who have undergone

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<sup>169</sup> Choompolpaisal, 'Political Buddhism and the Modernisation of Thai Monastic Education: From Wachirayan to Phimonlatham (1880s-1960s)', 439.

<sup>170</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 197.

<sup>171</sup> Choompolpaisal, 'Political Buddhism and the Modernisation of Thai Monastic Education: From Wachirayan to Phimonlatham (1880s-1960s)', 439; Terry Shine, *Honour Thy Fathers* (2009), 33, [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/honourfathers.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/honourfathers.pdf); Andrew Skilton, 'Elective Affinities: The Reconstruction of a Forgotten Episode in the Shared History of Thai and British Buddhism – Kapilavaḍḍho and Wat Paknam', *Contemporary Buddhism* 14, no. 1 (2013): 149–68.

<sup>172</sup> Phrakhrū Palad Thirawat, *ประวัติวิวัฒนาการปฏิบัติ กรุงลอนดอน ประเทศอังกฤษ (History of Wat Buddhapadipa, London, England)* (Wat Buddhapadipa, 1988), 52.

<sup>173</sup> Kittitharo, *Wat Mahathat Yuwaratrasarit Ratchaworawihan*; Phrakhrupalad Nikom Nagavaro, 'The Development of Management Model and Standard of Provincial Meditation Centers in Bangkok | Mahachula Academic Journal', *Mahachula Academic Journal* 6 (2019): 334–48.

Vipassana meditation training. The course offers flexible duration options, ranging from one to seven days.<sup>174</sup>

Wat Mahathat has expanded its presence internationally with eight branch temples located in different parts of the world. These branches include four temples in Europe, three in the United States, and one in India. Notably, the UK is home to two of the European branch temples associated with Wat Mahathat: Wat Buddhapadipa and Wat Mahathat United Kingdom. These temples serve as important spiritual centres for the Thai and Buddhist communities in the UK, providing a space for worship, meditation, and cultural activities, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

### 2.1.2 Wat Arun Ratchawararam

Wat Arun Ratchawararam Ratchawaramahawihan (hereafter Wat Arun), also locally known as Wat Arun or Wat Chaeng (both names literally meaning ‘Temple of Dawn’), is situated on the Thonburi side of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok and is one of the most recognisable and memorable landmarks of Bangkok’s skyline. This temple holds the esteemed status of a first-class royal temple, sharing the same royal title as Wat Mahathat. Its size and the prestige are such that it has an additional two prong management system, illustrated in Figure 7 with management divided between temple and Sangha administrators.

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<sup>174</sup> ‘กิจกรรม (Activities)’, ศูนย์ปฏิบัติวิปัสสนากรรมฐาน นานาชาติ (International Vipassana Meditation Center, Wat Mahathat Yuwaratransarit), accessed 13 September 2024, <https://watmahathat-inter.saphanbun.com/>.

Figure 7: The Organisational Structure of Wat Arun Ratchawaram Ratchawaramahawihan.<sup>175</sup>



Wat Arun, originally known as Wat Makok (literally ‘Temple of the Olive Tree’) and later renamed Wat Makok Nok (literally ‘Outer Temple of the Olive Tree’), was constructed during the Ayutthaya period. It holds significant roles throughout different periods. In the Thonburi period (1767–1782), it held the prominent position of the chief temple, and it temporarily housed the revered Emerald Buddha before it found its permanent residence at Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram better known as Wat Phra Kaew (literally ‘Temple of the Emerald Buddha’). The widely recognised name ‘Wat Arun’ was given by King Mongkut. The terms ‘Ratchawaram,’ and ‘Ratchawaramahawihan’ can be translated as ‘Temple of the King,’ and ‘Great Monastery of the King’ respectively. Wat Arun’s deep historical connection to the royal family, including its housing of some of King Rama II’s (1767–1824) relics at the base of the Buddha image,<sup>176</sup> continues to this day.

The cultural significance of Wat Arun, for both tangible and intangible heritage, led to its designation as one of Thailand’s most significant heritage sites by the Fine Arts Department in 1949.<sup>177</sup> Its impressive architecture includes the renowned *phra prang* (Figure 8), a Khmer-

<sup>175</sup> Image courtesy of Phramaha Jirawath Ciraputtiyo, Abbot of Wat Arun Norfolk 15/10/2024.  
<sup>176</sup> ‘About’, Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn Bangkok, accessed 14 September 2024, <https://www.wat-arun.com>.  
<sup>177</sup> Kanjanaphorn Polprateep, ‘Interpretation of Wat Arun Ratchawaram (the Temple of Dawn): The Application of Sustainable Cultural Tourism Principles in an Interpretive Plan’ (Ph.D. thesis, Silpakorn University, 2010), 2.

style pagoda, accompanied by smaller *prang* and *mondop* in each cardinal direction. These structures are adorned with vibrant porcelain pieces, making them iconic landmarks of Bangkok. The temple also boasts other remarkable features such as the luxury *ubosot*, Buddha's footprint niche, Chinese statues, statues of the Hindu god Indra, and the sculptures of two mythical giant demons.<sup>178</sup> The incorporation of diverse traditions is a distinguishing characteristic of Thai Buddhist temples, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Figure 8: *Phra prang* at Wat Arun.<sup>179</sup>



Wat Arun's cultural significance extends beyond tangible elements, as it is the exclusive venue for the royal barge procession. The royal barge procession, believed to have originated in the Sukhothai era, gained clarity during the Ayutthaya period over 600 years ago. Historical records reveal that royal processions occurred on various occasions, such as King Naresuan's (r. 1590–1605) return from war and King Narai (r. 1656–1688)'s reception of the French ambassador. During the reign of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927–2016, r. 1946–2016), the royal barge procession was celebrated on various occasions, including the bicentennial celebration of the Rattanakosin period (1782–present), the celebrations for the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of King Bhumibol and the Royal Kathin Ceremony (Thai: Kathin Phra Ratchathan).<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Polprateep, 'Interpretation of Wat Arun Ratchawaram (the Temple of Dawn): The Application of Sustainable Cultural Tourism Principles in an Interpretive Plan', 2.

<sup>179</sup> Image courtesy of Canva Pro 16/09/2024. *Phra Prang* at Wat Arun remains the tallest prang in Thailand, standing at 67 meters tall with a circumference of 234 meters at the base. Its design symbolises Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, particularly the *Tridhātu* concept, or the three realms. See Polprateep, 'Interpretation of Wat Arun Ratchawaram (the Temple of Dawn): The Application of Sustainable Cultural Tourism Principles in an Interpretive Plan', 15.

<sup>180</sup> 'The Royal Barge Procession', *Bangkok Post*, n.d., accessed 24 June 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/specials/royal-barge-procession/2019>.

The Royal Kathin Ceremony is a robe offering ceremony sponsored or granted by the King of Thailand or a member of the royal family to be presented on his behalf to a Buddhist temple, which is considered a highly prestigious religious ceremony. When a Thai temple receives a Royal Kathin Robe, it shows that the temple has royal recognition. At present, there are 16 royal temples designated to receive the presentation of Royal Kathin Robes, including Wat Arun, the only one where the monarchy continues to use the royal barge procession for the presentation.<sup>181</sup> This enduring tradition of presenting Royal Kathin Robes has transcended national boundaries, extending to the branch temple of Wat Arun in the UK, which we will delve into in Chapter 3.

Functioning as a religious site and an iconic city landmark, Wat Arun attracts numerous visitors and is promoted as a significant tourist attraction by organisations such as the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, Fine Arts Department, and Tourism Authority of Thailand.<sup>182</sup> Despite its cultural significance and fame, information about Wat Arun is relatively difficult to find. This is partly because Wat Arun does not have an official website and instead relies on Facebook as its primary means of sharing information with the public. My experience with this issue is supported by Polprateep, who assessed the interpretation and management of Wat Arun as a cultural heritage site.<sup>183</sup> His study found that, while the conservation of the physical architecture and fabric of Wat Arun has been managed authentically and sustainably, the interpretation of the site—both for Thai people and foreign visitors—has been inadequate.

Until recently, there was no English-language website available for Wat Arun. However, a self-funded website was created by an unknown individual who, according to the site, has lived in Bangkok for 27 years. The site is designed to help visitors, particularly non-Thais, have a memorable, informed, and safe experience when visiting Wat Arun.<sup>184</sup> The website contains basic information such as opening hours, detailed directions, entry fees, dress code, virtual

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<sup>181</sup> Polprateep, 'Interpretation of Wat Arun Ratchawararam (the Temple of Dawn): The Application of Sustainable Cultural Tourism Principles in an Interpretive Plan', 204.

<sup>182</sup> Polprateep, 'Interpretation of Wat Arun Ratchawararam (the Temple of Dawn): The Application of Sustainable Cultural Tourism Principles in an Interpretive Plan', 2.

<sup>183</sup> Interpretation refers to "the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage site. These can include print and electronic publications, public lectures, on-site and directly related off-site installations, educational programmes, community activities, and ongoing research, training, and evaluation of the interpretation process itself." See 'The Icomos Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites', paper presented at 16th General Assembly of ICOMOS, Quebec, 29 October 2008,

[https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/interpretation\\_e.pdf](https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/interpretation_e.pdf).

<sup>184</sup> 'About', Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn Bangkok, accessed 14 September 2024, <https://www.wat-arun.com>.

tours, and Thai costume rentals. What struck me most while viewing the website was a warning about common scams: “It’s not in Thai culture to approach you on the street. Do not listen to anyone on your way to the temple especially offering cheap rides or [claiming] the temple is closed today.”<sup>185</sup> This warning is especially relevant due to the large number of foreign visitors to the temples, who are often targets for scammers.

Today, Wat Arun has become one of the most popular tourist attractions in Bangkok. Apart from its beautiful landscape and historic architecture, the wearing of Thai traditional costumes and taking photos at various spots, particularly around the main *phra prang*, has gained immense popularity among both Thai and foreign tourists over the past two years. There are many Thai traditional costume rental shops located both outside and within the temple grounds. According to newspapers in Thailand, this trend resulted from the influence of Thai TV dramas, which led many temples or historical sites to offer Thai costumes for tourists to rent and wear while visiting.<sup>186</sup> At Wat Arun, foreign tourists have also significantly contributed to this trend, especially those from China, Vietnam, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. Given the growing number of non-Thai visitors, I asked the abbot of Wat Arun Norfolk in the UK, a branch temple of Wat Arun, whether the promotion of wearing Thai costumes was part of a policy to promote tourism, as there is a similar practice in the UK. He said there was no record of such a policy in Thailand. However, this practice of wearing traditional Thai costumes extends to the branch in the UK, where most participants at the temple dress in traditional Thai attire, as will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

### 2.1.3 Wat Phra Singh

Wat Phra Singh Woramahavihara (hereafter Wat Phra Singh) is a prestigious first-class royal temple situated within the historic walls of old Chiang Mai city in the northern Thailand. The temple is renowned for housing a replica bronze statue of the ancient 700-year-old Buddha statue known as the bronze Sihing (Thai: *Phra Phuttha Sihing*, *Phra Sing*; Pali: *Buddha Sihinga*, *Sīhalaṇaṭṭimā*), which gives the temple with its name. This revered statue holds great significance and is considered one of the most renowned Buddha images in Thailand.

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<sup>185</sup> ‘About’, Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn Bangkok, accessed 14 September 2024, <https://www.wat-arun.com>.

<sup>186</sup> ““5 มนต์เสน่ห์” วัดอรุณราชวราราม “ผูกใจ” นักท่องเที่ยววันนี้ (The “5 Charms” of Wat Arun Ratchawararam That “Captivate” Tourists Today)’, *Thairath Online*, 30 June 2024, <https://www.thairath.co.th/lifestyle/travel/thaitravel/2797057>.

According to local beliefs, it has provided protection to Chiang Mai since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>187</sup> Angela Chiu suggests that the name ‘Sihing’ may have origins in the Sanskrit and Pali words for lion, *siṃha* or *sīha*, which symbolises both the Sinhalese people and the Buddha Gotama. In addition, it is believed that the statue’s torso resembles that of a proud lion.<sup>188</sup> It is noteworthy that the logo both of the temple foundation and of its branch temple in the UK encompass the distinct symbols of Wat Phra Singh—the bronze Sihing and the lion.

The temple’s origins date back to 1345 when it was originally constructed by Phaya Phayu, the fifth ruler of Chiang Mai, during the reign of the Mangrai dynasty.<sup>189</sup> Phaya Phayu commissioned its construction to serve as a sacred resting place for the ashes of his late father. The temple was initially named Wat Li Chiang Phra due to its location in an area that served as a marketplace for the townspeople. In the northern dialect, the word for market is ‘Li’.<sup>190</sup> Throughout history, Wat Phra Singh continued to be patronised by successive rulers of Chiang Mai. The most recent significant renovation took place between 1924 and 1926 under the patronage of Chao Kaew Nawarat, the last ruler of Chiang Mai, led by the one of the most legendary monks in the northern Thailand, Khruba Sriwichai (1878–1938).<sup>191</sup> Today, in front of the *viharn* (assembly hall) stands a shrine dedicated to Khruba Sriwichai, adorned with a prominent bronze statue depicting him in a dignified standing position. Despite undergoing various renovations over time, the essence of the original Lanna or northern Thai style architecture at Wat Phra Singh has been preserved. The hallmark of the temple is its striking Lanna roofs and glittering *viharn*. These architectural elements exemplify the beauty of Lanna temple design, characterised by majestic wing-shaped roofs (Figure 9). Similarly, the planning of the new *ubosot* of Wat Phra Singh in the UK aims to embody the architectural style reminiscent of northern Thailand. This distinctive feature will be further explored and discussed in Chapter 3, providing detailed insights into the unique design elements of the temple’s sacred space.

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<sup>187</sup> Angela S. Chiu, *Buddha in Lanna: Art, Lineage, Power, and Place in Northern Thailand* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2018), 20.

<sup>188</sup> Chiu, *Buddha in Lanna*, 20.

<sup>189</sup> Chari Sundarasinha, ed., *วัดพระสิงห์วรมหาวิหาร เจ้าผู้ครองนครเชียงใหม่ (Wat Phra Singh Woramahaviharn Ruler of Chiang Mai)* (TOT Public Company Limited, 2000), 2.

<sup>190</sup> Sundarasinha, *วัดพระสิงห์วรมหาวิหาร เจ้าผู้ครองนครเชียงใหม่ (Wat Phra Singh Woramahaviharn Ruler of Chiang Mai)*, 2.

<sup>191</sup> Sirisak Khumraksa, *Nung Sue Chut Phan Ti Kham Ru Mueang Thai: Sasanasin Bon Din Lanna [Maps of Knowledge about Thailand: Buddhist Art of Lanna]* (Plan Readers, 2003), 16.

Figure 9: Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Mai, Thailand.<sup>192</sup>



## 2.2 Thai Forest Tradition in Mahanikai and Thammayut

The Thai Forest Tradition is a branch of Theravada Buddhism that originated in Thailand. The recorded histories strongly indicate that forest tradition monks have played a significant role in Thai Buddhism since the inception of court-sponsored Theravada in the Thai region in the 13th century.<sup>193</sup> The current tradition is often attributed to Ajahn Sao Kantasilo (1859–1942, hereafter Ajahn Sao) and Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta (1870–1949, hereafter Ajahn Mun), who are considered by some to be the pioneers of the forest meditation lineage in the Northeast region. Kamala Tiyavanich, on the other hand, presents a different perspective, pointing out that this belief is based on the assumption that a previous forest tradition had disappeared and was later revived by Ajahn Sao and Ajahn Mun. However, Tiyavanich argues that this notion is inaccurate since similar practices already existed in various local Buddhist traditions in Siam (now Thailand). Rather it is the Thammayut forest tradition that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Ajahn Sao being recognised as its primary teacher, as Thammayut monks adhere strictly to their own tradition and do not officially acknowledge non-Thammayut teachers.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Image courtesy of Canva Pro 16/09/2024.

<sup>193</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 66.

<sup>194</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 263.

In fact, Ajahn Sao's meditation teachers were from Lao traditions, and he himself belonged to that tradition before converting to the Thammayut order. Similarly, Ajahn Mun was also trained in a Lao tradition, but he later reordained in the Thammayut order and became a student of Ajahn Sao.<sup>195</sup> Because these Lao teachers were not Thammayuts, neither Ajahn Sao nor Ajahn Mun's followers acknowledged them.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, while Ajahn Sao and Ajahn Mun are often associated with the revival and popularisation of the forest meditation practices within the Thai Forest Tradition, it is important to acknowledge that the foundations of this way of practice were already present in different local Buddhist traditions throughout Thailand.

Monks from local traditions came to Ajahn Sao and Ajahn Mun for meditation guidance, often converting to Thammayut after becoming disciples of Mun. When a non-Thammayut monk converted, they lost their seniority.<sup>197</sup> Mun did not insist on all his disciples becoming Thammayut, believing that enlightenment was not tied to a specific sect. He also believed that if all forest monks were to join the Thammayut sect, there would be no one left to guide practitioners in other traditions. He preferred the presence of proficient forest monks in every monastic sect, as it would increase the likelihood of the tradition's longevity and continuity.<sup>198</sup>

The disciples of Ajahn Mun achieved mastery in meditation and went on to establish their own lineages with dedicated followers. Some of his students also had Western disciples who played a crucial role in disseminating this meditation tradition across Western countries.<sup>199</sup> One of his renowned students, Ajahn Chah Subhaddo (1918–1992, hereafter Ajahn Chah), attracted a large number of followers both within and outside of Thailand. Since Ajahn Mun emphasised that sect affiliation was inconsequential for a forest monk, Ajahn Chah remained in the Mahanikai tradition throughout his life.<sup>200</sup> He founded two major temples in the Thai Forest Tradition: Wat Nong Pah Pong in 1954 and Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery) in 1975.

Another notable Thai Forest Tradition temple, belonging to the Thammayut lineage, is Wat Prachakhom Wanaram. It was founded by Luang Pu Sri Mahawiro (1917–2011), the last direct

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<sup>195</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 63.

<sup>196</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 264.

<sup>197</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 267.

<sup>198</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 268.

<sup>199</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 289.

<sup>200</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 269.

disciple of Ajahn Mun.<sup>201</sup> These two forest tradition lineages have a significant number of branch temples in Thailand. Wat Nong Pah Pong alone has over 300 branches throughout the country, while Wat Prachakhom Wanaram has 151 branches. These numbers exemplify the extensive reach and profound influence of these traditions. Moreover, their contributions extend beyond Thailand, as they played a significant role in establishing Thai temples in the UK, a topic that will be further explored in Chapter 3. Therefore, this section will delve into the background of Wat Nong Pah Pong and Wat Prachakhom Wanaram, providing the necessary context for understanding their branch temples in the UK.

### 2.2.1 Wat Nong Pah Pong

Wat Nong Pah Pong is located in Ubon Ratchathani, the largest city in north-eastern Thailand. It holds the distinction of being Ajahn Chah's inaugural temple and has its roots dating back to 8 March 1954, when Ajahn Chah first "set foot in the cobra-infested forest."<sup>202</sup> This refers to the time when Ajahn Chah started residing in the area, initially dwelling in the forest and eventually accepting the construction of buildings made by devoted lay practitioners.<sup>203</sup> Two decades later, with the support of King Bhumibol, the temple was able to establish its own official *sima* by receiving a grant of 74 acres of land.<sup>204</sup> Wat Nong Pah Pong was named after the area where Ajahn Chah settled. There was a big swamp in the middle of the forest surrounded by thick undergrowth. Therefore, the villagers called this area Nong Pah Pong, which literally means swamp forest undergrowth.<sup>205</sup>

The construction of Wat Nong Pah Pong emphasised a simple and unadorned architectural design. The architecture is a combination of Isan (north-eastern Thailand) art and contemporary art. For instance, the *ubosot* eschews the elaborated decoration of the gable apex that we see in other northeast temples. Instead, its pillars are decorated with Isan art pottery. It has no wall, in order to accommodate a large group of people. Wat Nong Pah Pong is the model for forest

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<sup>201</sup> 'Famous Monks in Thailand: Guide to Thai Monk Statues', 5 May 2023, <https://mysakonnakhon.com/famous-monks-in-thailand-statues/>.

<sup>202</sup> 'วัดหนองป่าพง (Wat Nong Pah Pong)', accessed 20 February 2022, <http://www.esanpedia.oar.ubu.ac.th/esaninfo/?p=616>; 'ประวัติวัดหนองป่าพง', วัดหนองป่าพง, accessed 2 May 2020, <http://www.ubu.ac.th/wat/index.php?page=prawatwnpp>.

<sup>203</sup> 'วัดหนองป่าพง (Wat Nong Pah Pong)'.

<sup>204</sup> วัดหนองป่าพง จ.อุบลราชธานี (*Wat Nong Pah Pong, Ubon Ratchathani*), 26 March 2015, <https://nkr.mcu.ac.th/tour/?p=356>.

<sup>205</sup> 'วัดหนองป่าพง (Wat Nong Pah Pong)'.

tradition temples in Thailand as well as other branch temples in Europe, Australia and Canada.<sup>206</sup> Its simplistic design defines the forest tradition in Ajahn Chah's lineage, and it is a characteristic shared by all the branch temples in the UK, as we will explore in detail in Chapters 3.

Ajahn Chah is described as someone who diligently endeavoured to preserve and encourage a simple monastic lifestyle, with the aim of enabling people to study and practise the Dhamma in the present day.<sup>207</sup> He began his spiritual journey as a wandering monk, attracting followers before being invited to establish a monastery near his home village. As more monks gathered to train under his guidance, he sent some of his senior disciples to establish branch monasteries, spreading his teachings and training methods.<sup>208</sup> He also established a training system that emphasised living a simple life, where monastics were responsible for their own chores and adhered to the ascetic practice of eating only once a day from their alms bowls.<sup>209</sup> In term of meditation practice, he emphasised both *samatha* (tranquillity) and *vipassanā* (insight) meditation, illustrating this with the metaphor of a stick: *samatha* and *vipassanā* are like two ends of the same stick—inseparable and mutually supportive.<sup>210</sup> As his health declined, he appointed Luang Por Liem Thitadhammo (1941–present) as the abbot of Wat Pah Pong but emphasised that the monasteries should collectively manage their future instead of depending on one leader.<sup>211</sup> Winyard suggests that this model has been successful, with Luang Por Liem highly respected as abbot and the Forest Tradition monks in Thailand continuing to thrive without a central leader.<sup>212</sup> Despite Ajahn Chah's passing on 16 January 1992 at the age of 74, his training continues to be carried on not only at Wat Nong Pah Pong but also throughout its extensive network of 351 branch temples in Thailand.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> 'วัดหนองป่าพง (Wat Nong Pah Pong)', Dhamma Thai, accessed 21 May 2020,

<http://www.dhammadhai.org/watthai/northeast/watnongpahpong.php>.

<sup>207</sup> 'About Ajahn Chah - Biography', Ajahn Chah, accessed 7 May 2020,

[http://www.ajahnchah.org/book/About\\_Ajahn\\_Chah.php](http://www.ajahnchah.org/book/About_Ajahn_Chah.php).

<sup>208</sup> Phra Phōthiyānathēra (Chā), *Everything Is Teaching Us*, 100th anniversary edition (Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 2018), 74.

<sup>209</sup> Phra Phōthiyānathēra (Chā), *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah* (Aruna Publications, 2011).

<sup>210</sup> Phra Phōthiyānathēra (Chā), *On Meditation*, 100th anniversary edition (Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 2018), 48.

<sup>211</sup> Winyard, 'The Role of the Abbot in Western Thai Forest Monasteries of the Ajahn Chah Lineage', 12.

<sup>212</sup> Winyard, 'The Role of the Abbot in Western Thai Forest Monasteries of the Ajahn Chah Lineage', 12.

<sup>213</sup> Phrakhrū Soponechayapiwade Anālayo and Phramaha Mit Thitapanyo, 'รูปแบบการขยายสาขาของวัดหนองป่าพง (The Model of Branch Expansion of Nong Pa Phong Temple)', *วารสารสันติศึกษาปริทรรศน์ มจร (Journal of MCU Peace Studies)* 8, no. 3 (2020): 3, 3.

The 20 international branches that stem from Ajahn Chah's lineage, encompassing regions such as Australasia, Europe, North America, and South America, originated not from Wat Nong Pah Pong but from Wat Pah Nanachat. Wat Pah Nanachat is an international forest monastery in Ubon Ratchathani, close to Wat Nong Pah Pong, established by Ajahn Chah in 1975 as the number of his foreign students increased. By using English as the main language for communication and instruction, the monastery offers Westerners and non-Thai speakers an opportunity to train as a Buddhist monk. Ajahn Sumedho (b.1934–present), an American disciple, was the first abbot at Wat Pah Nanachat.<sup>214</sup> In 1977, the English Sangha Trust invited Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho to visit Britain.<sup>215</sup>

An attempt to set up a British Theravada sangha can be dated back in 1907 when the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland was formed in London with Rhys Davids (1842–1922) as president.<sup>216</sup> In 1908, the Society welcomed Ananda Metteyya (Allan Bennett, 1872–1923), believed to be the first Englishman to be ordained as a Theravada monk in Burma.<sup>217</sup> Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983), the founder of the Buddhist Society in London, described this event as “the first Buddhist Mission to these shores of which history holds record.” It took place over a five-month period from May to October 1908.<sup>218</sup> Another attempt was made when William Purfurst (1906–1971) or Phra Kapilavaddho, who was ordained as a monk in Thailand in 1954, returned to England the following year, but he disrobed in 1957, temporarily re-robing again towards the end of his life. According to Bluck, a British Theravada sangha was at last established with the arrival of Ajahn Sumedho and three other Western monks in 1978.<sup>219</sup> One year later, in Petersfield, the first Thai Forest Tradition monastery in the UK, known as Cittaviveka ‘seclusion of the mind’, reflecting the tradition’s emphasis on meditation, or Chithurst Buddhist Monastery (hereafter Chithurst), after the local Sussex place name, was established. A detailed exploration of this temple will be undertaken in Chapter 3.

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<sup>214</sup> ‘The International Forest Monastery Wat Pah Nanachat’, Wat Pah Nanachat, accessed 7 May 2020, <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B1Hyz1dw5EnAbklPNkZkck9EcWM/edit>.

<sup>215</sup> Ajahn Chah, ‘About Ajahn Chah - Biography’.

<sup>216</sup> Bluck, *British Buddhism*, 7.

<sup>217</sup> Christmas Humphreys, *Sixty Years of Buddhism in England (1907-1967): A History and a Survey* (Buddhist Society, 1968), 2. As the work of Bocking, Cox and Turner in uncovering the slightly earlier Irish monk U Dhammaloka (1856–1914) shows, it is in fact quite difficult to know when the first English person might have ordained as a monk because of the undocumented working class or subaltern men who may have ordained after their ship docked in Yangon. Dhammaloka’s own life as a working class, possibly originally illiterate sailor would have gone unnoticed had he not taken up anti-colonial and anti-missionary campaigning. Alicia Marie Turner et al., *The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk Who Faced Down the British Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>218</sup> Humphreys, *Sixty Years of Buddhism in England (1907-1967): A History and a Survey*, 5.

<sup>219</sup> Bluck, *British Buddhism*, 17.

### 2.2.2 Wat Prachakhom Wanaram

Wat Prachakhom Wanaram (hereafter Wat Prachakhom), previously known as Wat Pa Kung, is located in Roi Et, which is situated in the central part of north-eastern Thailand. The word ‘Kung’ in the former name of the temple refers to a type of tree, the botanical name of which is ‘*Dipterocarpus tuberculatus*,’ and English common name gurjun. This tree is useful in medicine and building, including the use of its leaves for roofing. I believe that the location of the temple was originally in a wood of such trees. Northeast Thailand has been home to numerous forest monks, where monks “dwell in an isolated forest hamlet, spend a night or a fortnight in some dark cave, or roam a forest and come face to face with a tiger.”<sup>220</sup> However, there have been progressive stages of centralisation and deforestation, which have changed the habitat where forest monks dwelled.

A few decades before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the wandering life of many forest monks was replaced with administrative duties.<sup>221</sup> These duties included being in charge of the temples; getting along with local people and mobilising their labour; spreading dhamma, which emphasised study (Pali: *pariyat*) over renunciation and meditation (‘practice’, Pali: *patibat*); and restoring and building temples.<sup>222</sup> From then on, forest monks were busy establishing forest temples in several districts. The presence of forest monks and the building of temples was seen by the government as a way to bring in people from different ethnic groups into modern state Buddhism.<sup>223</sup>

Wat Prachakhom is perhaps one of the temples that was built during this period as there is no record of when it was established nor who the founder was. The only information that I can find is the temple’s account published on the website of Roi Et Provincial Cultural Office, according to which Wat Prachakhom is an ancient temple that had been abandoned since 1770.<sup>224</sup> Only in 1953 was the temple renovated under Luang Pu Sri Mahawiro (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Thep Wisutthi Mongkon, hereafter Luang Pu Sri). Luang Pu Sri visited

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<sup>220</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 13, 229.

<sup>221</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 7, 179.

<sup>222</sup> Choompolpaisal, ‘Political Buddhism and the Modernisation of Thai Monastic Education: From Wachirayan to Phimonlatham (1880s-1960s)’, 429; Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*; Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and Its Modern-Era Suppression*.

<sup>223</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 179.

<sup>224</sup> ‘เจดีย์หินทราย วัดป่ากุง (Sandstone Pagoda, Pa Kung Temple)’, Ministry of Culture Roi Et, accessed 18 September 2021, [https://www.m-culture.go.th/roiet/ewt\\_news.php?nid=1095&filename=index](https://www.m-culture.go.th/roiet/ewt_news.php?nid=1095&filename=index).

this temple during a pilgrimage. He sought approval from the government to initiate the restoration process and renamed it as Wat Prachakhom Wanaram, which translates to ‘the forest temple of the community.’ Eventually, he assumed the position of abbot at the temple.

Wat Prachakhom is renowned for its unique sandstone pagoda built in 2007, which, according to the official temple’s website, is the first sandstone pagoda ever built in Thailand.<sup>225</sup> The sandstone pagoda, built to commemorate Luang Pu Sri’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and his 60<sup>th</sup> year as a monk, is modelled on the renowned Borobudur, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Indonesia (Figure 10). During his visit to Indonesia in 1988, Luang Pu Sri was deeply inspired by the exquisite design of Borobudur.<sup>226</sup> Upon returning to Thailand, he embarked on a plan to construct a similar pagoda. The construction of this structure began on 5 March 2003 and was completed within two years, with a budget of 40 million Baht, equivalent to approximately 11 million USD.<sup>227</sup>

Figure 10: The Sandstone Pagoda at Wat Prachakhom, Roi Et, Thailand.<sup>228</sup>



<sup>225</sup> ‘About Us – Wat Pa Kung’, Wat Pa Kung, accessed 18 September 2021, <https://www.xn--12cm1b2azd0cj3c3i.com/about-us-2/>.

<sup>226</sup> This visit is likely part of the usual custom of the Thammayut Dhammaduta Bhikkhus residing in Indonesia, who frequently invite Thai Forest Tradition monks, especially from the northeastern region of Thailand, to teach and perform rituals as a means of competing with local Indonesian Buddhist leaders and attracting Chinese patrons. Jesada Buaban analysed this custom as a way for the Thammayut Dhammaduta Bhikkhus (or, in his term, ‘Thai Dhammayutta Missionaries’) to reinvent their identity and legitimise their image as meditative monks. (Jesada Buaban, ‘Invented Identity of Thai Monks in Indonesia’, *Manusya: Journal of Humanities* 23, no. 2 (2020): 170–87, <https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-02302002>).

<sup>227</sup> Wat Pa K., ‘About Us – Wat Pa Kung’.

<sup>228</sup> Image courtesy of Roi Et Provincial Public Relations Office Website 07/09/2024. ‘Roi Et Provincial Public Relations Office’, accessed 7 September 2024, <https://roiet.prd.go.th/th/content/category/detail/id/234/iid/62536>.

The current abbot of Wat Prachakhom, Luang Pu Tong Inn Katapanyo (b.1938–present, Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Rat Patcharayanamuni; hereafter Luang Pu Tong Inn), entered monastic life at the age of 21 through ordination at Wat Pracha Bamrung in Maha Sarakham Province. According to his biography, the primary motivation behind his decision to ordain stemmed from his mother’s enduring illness, as her last wish was for him to ordain. This act aligns with a long-standing Thai Buddhist tradition whereby sons between the ages of 20 and 21 ordain before embarking on family life, but also of the tradition of ordaining in order to transfer merit to a deceased relative, particularly a parent. Luang Pu Tong Inn was ordained in the Thai Forest Tradition.

During the early years of his monastic journey, he had the opportunity to meet Luang Pu Sri, serving as his assistant for a number of years. Following the path of many forest monks, Luang Pu Tong Inn dedicated himself to observing austere practices known as *dhutanga*. These practices encompassed various ascetic disciplines, such as wearing robes made of rags, sustaining oneself solely through alms-food collected in the alms-bowl, and residing in forested areas. As a committed *dhutanga* monk, Luang Pu Tong Inn spent considerable time engaging in solitary forest practice, dwelling in forested regions alongside wild animals, and traversing the Thai countryside.<sup>229</sup>

Throughout his remarkable span of over 60 years as a monk, Luang Pu Tong Inn has assumed leadership over 151 branch temples.<sup>230</sup> Notably, his influence extends beyond the borders of Thailand, as he has overseen the establishment of five temples under his leadership in foreign lands: Wat Sri Intra Atula in the UK and two temples each in Australia and Hong Kong. In Chapter 3, we will delve deeper into the establishment of Luang Pu Tong Inn’s branch temple in the UK. This exploration will shed light on the process, motivations, and significance of expanding the forest tradition to an international setting. We will examine the factors that contributed to the selection of the UK as a location for the branch temple and explore the challenges and successes encountered in its establishment. Through a detailed analysis, we will gain a comprehensive understanding of the expansion of the forest tradition beyond its roots in Thailand and its impact on international followers.

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<sup>229</sup> ‘เพจวัดประชกมวนาราม-ป่าकुง Wat Prachakom Wanaram-Pahkoong’s Post’, Wat Prachakom Wanaram-Pahkoong, accessed 31 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/pahkoong/posts/353524895091976>.

<sup>230</sup> ‘About Our Buddhist Centre’, Wat Sri Intra Atula, 25 March 2019, <https://watsriintraatula.org.uk/about-our-buddhist-centre/>.

The popularity of the forest monks can be attributed to several factors, including the counter-campaign by the Thammayut order (see below), visits from the royal family and urban elites, the appeal of their simple lifestyle, and the growing interest in meditation practices among Westerners during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Tiyavanich, the Thammayut elders in Bangkok did not consider the forest monks from the Northeast as an integral part of the Thammayut order until the early 1950s.<sup>231</sup> However, the growing popularity of meditation practice at Wat Mahathat, the prominent centre of the Mahanikai order discussed above, began to garner support from local communities in the 1950s. The success of Phra Phimontham's Vipassana meditation programme prompted the Thammayut headquarters at Wat Bowonniwet in Bangkok to launch a counter-campaign, highlighting the achievements of provincial forest meditation teachers who belonged to the Thammayut sect.<sup>232</sup>

The initial urban interest in forest monks began in the early 1960s, led by Dr. Ouay Ketsing and a small group of Western-educated Thai meditators.<sup>233</sup> Additionally, after visits by the royal family to some of Ajahn Mun's disciples in the mid-1970s, the forest monks gained nationwide recognition.<sup>234</sup> The upper classes of society, including military officers, politicians, business owners, and corporate heads, started seeking their guidance. Within a relatively short period, the forest monks went from the bottom of the national sangha hierarchy to the top, and their status transformed from being despised vagabonds to revered saints. Their cremations, attended by the royal family and millions of people, surpassed even those of the members of the Sangha Council in grandeur and significance.<sup>235</sup>

The forest monks' embrace of a simple and ascetic lifestyle aligns with the Buddhist principle of finding contentment with minimal possessions, fostering a beneficial detachment, and promoting spiritual growth for both inner and external development. This aspect of their practice has drawn a significant following from around the world. Many individuals seeking inner peace and solitude have found solace in the teachings of these monks, as they resonate with the monks' commitment to simplicity and detachment.

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<sup>231</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 287–88.

<sup>232</sup> Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 155; Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 287–88.

<sup>233</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 258.

<sup>234</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 237.

<sup>235</sup> Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections*, 287–88.

The growing popularity of meditation practices among Westerners during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in turn contributed to the increasing recognition of Thai Forest Tradition monks. By the early 1970s, many enthusiastic Westerners were seeking meditation teachers, which led to the northeastern forest monks gaining recognition among Westerners. Some of these individuals chose to ordain in Thailand at Wat Bowoniwet, eventually moving to selected northeastern forest temples after a period of apprenticeship.<sup>236</sup>

## 2.3 Dhammakaya Tradition

I shall use the phrase ‘the Dhammakaya Tradition’ to refer to a distinctive form of Thai Buddhism found at a network of temples that stem from Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Pathum Thani outside of Bangkok, which in turn has its origins in an older Mahanikai temple, Wat Paknam. Wat Phra Dhammakaya has 179 branch temples in Thailand, which is quite striking given its relatively recent origins, and, even more striking, 100 branches across 30 countries worldwide, as of 2022, including locations in the United States, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. In 2010, the overseas branches organised novice and monk ordination programmes in 12 countries, with the participation of over 800 men from 23 different nationalities. Furthermore, training programmes were conducted for laypeople to observe the eight precepts. Over 30 Congolese women took part in a two-week programme in Congo, while over 1,000 individuals participated in a one-week programme in Mumbai and Kalyan, India.<sup>237</sup> These initiatives aimed to provide spiritual guidance and promote the practice of observing the precepts among lay followers. I will provide a detailed discussion of the four branches located in the UK in Chapter 3.

The name Dhammakaya ‘body of Dhamma’ refers to the teachings that it takes as most authoritative, namely of *vijjā dhammakāya*, literally, the knowledge of/which is the body of Dhamma or, in the Dhammakaya Tradition’s more full interpretation, “the true and supreme knowledge illuminated by the Dhammakaya vision.”<sup>238</sup> This refers to a type of liberating knowledge gained through the distinctive meditation practice at Dhammakaya temples. The

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<sup>236</sup> Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, 262.

<sup>237</sup> ‘44 Years of Wat Phra Dhammakaya: Over 100 Activities in the World Morality Restoration Project’, accessed 14 February 2023, <http://www.dhammakaya.net/blog/2014/02/28/44-ปี-วัดพระธรรมกาย-กว่า-100-โครงการฟื้นฟูศีลธรรมโลก>.

<sup>238</sup> ‘96 Years of Dhammakaya Knowledge’, accessed 17 October 2021, <https://www.dhammakaya.net/blog/2013/09/18/96-Years-of-Dhammakaya-Knowledge>.

meditation is associated with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century monk Luang Por Sodh Candasaro (1884–1959), who studied and practised meditation under various teachers and later became abbot of Wat Paknam in Bangkok in 1916.<sup>239</sup>

One of the temples that emerged from Wat Paknam was Wat Phra Dhammakaya. It is part of the Mahanikai lineage located approximately 50 kilometres to the north of Bangkok, in Khlong Luang District, Pathum Thani province, Thailand. The temple is officially represented by the Dhammakaya Foundation, a non-profit organisation. According to the temple’s website, the initial inspiration to establish the temple came from Luang Por Sodh’s aspiration to disseminate the *dhammakāya* meditation method on both a local and international level, with the aim of preserving the teachings of the Buddha and fostering world peace. Luang Por Sodh, who died in 1959, is still referred to as the main spiritual authority for the temple and its attendees, though within the Dhammakaya lineage itself, the most important monk is Luang Por Dhammajayo (born 22 April 1944), the former abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

The *dhammakaya* meditation method was passed from Luang Por Sodh at Wat Paknam to Wat Phra Dhammakaya through one of his students, the nun (*mae chi*) Khun Yay Chandra Khonnokyoong (1909-2000, hereafter Khun Yay).<sup>240</sup> Following Luang Por Sodh’s passing, she continued to teach this form of meditation at her residence in Wat Paknam. When Khun Yay’s residence became too small for the growing number of students learning meditation, she and her students, led by Luang Por Dhammajayo and Luang Por Dattajivo (born 21 December 1940), decided to establish a meditation dwelling. They wanted to create “a sanctuary for peaceful spiritual practice, a refuge in the midst of a turbulent world.”<sup>241</sup> Therefore, on Makha Bucha Day in 1970, Wat Phra Dhammakaya was established on a 196-rai (77-acre) plot of land donated by Khun Ying (Lady) Prayat Phaetayapongsavisudhathibodi. In December 1977, H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, on behalf of H.M. the King, laid the foundation stone for the main chapel, which marked Wat Phra Dhammakaya as an official temple.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> On Luang Por Sodh’s meditation practice, see Potprecha Cholvijarn, *Seeing the Bodies Within: Exploring the Sammā Arahaṃ Practice of Theravada Buddhism* (Shambhala Publications, 2025).

<sup>240</sup> ‘Dhammakaya Foundation & Wat Phra Dhammakaya’, accessed 16 November 2013, <http://www.dhammakaya.net/about-us/dhammakaya-temple-history>.

<sup>241</sup> ‘Dhammakaya Foundation & Wat Phra Dhammakaya’.

<sup>242</sup> ‘Dhammakaya Foundation & Wat Phra Dhammakaya’.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya is known for its unusual, large, and dramatic layout and architecture. Construction on the former agricultural site, which spans 2326-rai (919-acre) and includes additional land purchases beyond the original gift, has been ongoing since 1970. On the additional site, several structures were built, including halls dedicated to their teachers, Luang Por Sodh and Khun Yay; the Great Sapha Dhammakaya Hall, which is used for Sunday activities and other ceremonies; and the Dining Hall dedicated to Khun Yay, which can accommodate over one thousand monks and novices for breakfast and lunch and eliminates the need for them to go for alms round like other temples. The Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya, also known as the dome-shaped stupa, is one of the most notable and controversial structures constructed on this site. It is the centre for Buddhist ceremonies, meditation practice, and other activities such as the V-Star (Virtuous Stars) Project where one million students participated in the Buddhist activities on 14 December 2013.<sup>243</sup> Between 1998 and 1999, the stupa became a subject of national debate. Followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya regarded it as a sacred site for religious rituals, while some outsiders criticised its architectural design, comparing it to a UFO or describing it as “a giant UFO in elaborately choreographed Nuremberg-style rallies.”<sup>244</sup> According to Scott, the controversy surrounding the construction of the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya highlights “how acts of merit can become sites of contestation in which differing groups assert competing visions of religious practice, identity, and authority.”<sup>245</sup>

The large spaces at Wat Phra Dhammakaya are designed to accommodate more people than the number of residents, as the temple’s religious activities that take place every Sunday and major ceremonies, such as Vesak<sup>246</sup> and Kathin ceremony<sup>247</sup>, are attended by over 100,000 devotees. This distinctive feature reflects the temple’s ambitious goals of organising large-scale events. In 2014, the temple’s website recorded more than 100 projects related to its World

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<sup>243</sup> ‘News: “V-Star Change the World”’, accessed 21 February 2022, [http://www.kalyanamitra.org/th/news\\_detail.php?i=1718](http://www.kalyanamitra.org/th/news_detail.php?i=1718).

<sup>244</sup> ‘Close Encounters of the Buddhist Kind’, accessed 20 February 2022, [http://www.sangam.org/2011/02/Close\\_Encounters.php](http://www.sangam.org/2011/02/Close_Encounters.php). The inappropriate reference to a Nuremberg rally, i.e. to Hitler and Nazi Germany, which for many Europeans immediately invokes connotations of genocide and the Holocaust, is not explained by the authors of the piece. One cannot imagine the US journalists risking such a statement about an institution based in the USA.

<sup>245</sup> Rachele M Scott, *Nirvana for Sale?: Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand* (SUNY Press, 2009), 124–25.

<sup>246</sup> Vesak is a Buddhist holy day that usually falls on the full moon in the 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month. A ritual celebration takes place every year at the temples to commemorate the birth, the enlightenment, and the *parinirvāna* of the Buddha.

<sup>247</sup> Kathina is an annual ceremonial offering of robes or robe cloth to Buddhist monastic community in which it can only take place at Buddhist temples with a minimum of five monks in residence. This ceremony must take place within one month following the end of the Buddhist Lent or the three-month annual retreat.

Morality Restoration Project over the past 44 years.<sup>248</sup> These projects include supporting the monastic community; providing education; providing moral development for youth; propagating Buddhism abroad; producing and disseminating Dharma media; and promoting public welfare. These projects are, in fact, aligned with the six obligatory responsibilities outlined in the Sangha Act that each temple is mandated to adhere to (see Chapter 1). Some of these projects have been organised into large-scale events, such as temporary ordinations for 100,000 men and *ubasika* (*upāsikā*) ordination for 140,000 women. *Ubasika* ordination involves observing eight precepts, similar to that of a nun, but without the requirement to shave the head. These events demonstrate the temple's goals of propagating Buddhism to a far-reaching population. The temple strives to make an impact with its large-scale organisation, using markers to guide seating arrangements and creating visually striking and orderly scenes of large groups meditating peacefully, which are then used for publicity and publication in calendars.

The rapid growth of Wat Phra Dhammakaya has been analysed by Peter Jackson, who highlights three distinct forms of urban Thai Buddhism based on their theoretical or doctrinal perspectives. These include the metaphysical form emphasised by the establishment, the rationalist and doctrinal form embraced by the middle class, and the magical and supernatural form practised by many peasants and urban workers.<sup>249</sup> Jackson suggests that the teachings of Wat Phra Dhammakaya incorporate elements from both reformist rationalism and the metaphysical beliefs of establishment Buddhism.<sup>250</sup> Similar to reformists, the temple emphasises lay meditation and strict moral practice, while also using meditation to gain supernatural experiences and reaffirm traditional cosmological paradigms. Jackson attributes the temple's phenomenal growth in the 1980s to its ability to satisfy the "middle-class demands for direct participation in the legitimated spiritual core of Buddhism, in addition to providing links to the traditional symbols of secular power and authority in the monarchy, bureaucracy, and big business."<sup>251</sup>

I would suggest that, in addition to Jackson's analysis, the growth of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and its ability to organise numerous large-scale events can be attributed to its distinctive

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<sup>248</sup> '44 Years of Wat Phra Dhammakaya'.

<sup>249</sup> Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 40.

<sup>250</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 205.

<sup>251</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 205–6.

approach to recruiting monks, staff, volunteers, and supporters. Unlike traditional temples, where ordination often occurs in childhood due to tradition, social expectations, poverty, or emotional factors, Wat Phra Dhammakaya encourages ordination in early adulthood, typically after completing at least a first university degree.<sup>252</sup> This emphasis on education reflects the legacy of the temple's founder, Khun Yay Chandra Khonnokyoong. Although she was uneducated herself, she strongly encouraged novices, including the current abbot, to finish their university studies before taking full monastic ordination (*bhikkhu*), a practice that continues to shape the temple's recruitment today.<sup>253</sup> This is accomplished by establishing Buddhist societies at various universities throughout Thailand, including the oldest one, Chulalongkorn University. Through these societies, students are invited to participate in various Buddhist activities and events hosted by the temple, such as alms offerings, Vesak Day, Kathin Ceremonies, and *Dhammadaya* (literally 'Dhamma heir') ordination programme, and a three-month summer ordination programme available for both male and female students, timed to fit the university vacation period.

In addition to the summer programme, there are numerous opportunities for students to engage in activities and even take on roles as organisers throughout the academic term. These students work together to support the temple's various projects under the International Buddhist Society (IBS), which serves as the central hub for all Buddhist societies in universities affiliated with Wat Phra Dhammakaya.<sup>254</sup> Upon graduation, those who have developed a strong connection with the temple may choose to ordain as monks for life or become full-time staff, known as *ubasok* (Pali: *upāsaka*) and *ubasika* (Pali: *upāsikā*), adapting the traditional term for a lay devotee.<sup>255</sup> Those who are not prepared to fully commit to the temple can still contribute by

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<sup>252</sup> Examples of the range of reasons why boys traditionally become ordained can be seen through the life stories of novices collected by British monk who had joined the Thai Forest Tradition, Phra Peter Pannapadipo, *Little Angels: The Real Life Stories of Thai Novice Monks* (Arrow, 2005).

<sup>253</sup> 'The Master Khun Yay Acharaya Chandra Khonnokyoong', accessed 17 October 2021, <https://www.dhammadaya.net/about-us/the-master-khun-yay-acharaya-chandra-khonnokyoong>.

<sup>254</sup> 'International Buddhist Society', ชมรมพุทธศาสตร์สากล International Buddhist Society, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.ibsofficial.com/>.

<sup>255</sup> *Upāsaka* literally means "one who comes or sits near" or a lay devotee, a devout or faithful layman, or lay Buddhist. *Upāsikā* is a female devotee or a female lay follower. For Wat Phra Dhammakaya, the term *upāsaka* and *upāsikā* describe a layman and a laywoman who observes the eight precepts and devotes themselves to the temple by working and residing at the temple full-time, ideally for the rest of their life. The eight precepts are those usually, in more traditional forms of Theravada, undertaken by laypeople when they spend a day or more on *uposatha* or holy days at the temple. The eight precepts are: refrain from destroying living creatures; refrain from taking that which is not given; refrain from sexual activity; refrain from incorrect speech; refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness; refrain from eating at the forbidden time (i.e., after noon); refrain from dancing, singing, music, going to see entertainments, wearing garlands, using perfumes, and beautifying the body with cosmetics; and refrain from lying on a high or luxurious sleeping place.

participating as a part-time volunteer or making monetary donations and becoming regular supporters. This approach to recruitment not only provides the temple with a steady stream of long-term devoted monks and staff, but also cultivates a strong connection between the temple and its supporters, and an income stream from the higher earners within society.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya has also successfully attracted young Buddhists through a range of programmes, including the V-Star Project, young volunteer group, and novice ordination. The V-Star project aims at fostering the moral development among children by instilling Buddhist principles in daily life through teachings and activities. The temple also provides opportunities for young volunteers to engage in temple activities. Children who accompany their parents to the temple may choose to join the volunteer group if they are not being cared for at the on-site childcare facilities. During their parents' meditation sessions or attendance at ceremonies, these young volunteers can perform simple tasks, such as greeting laypeople upon their arrival, arranging shoes in an orderly fashion, and assisting with basic cleaning duties.

The temple also offers various ordination programmes for novices, including short-term programmes during school holidays and long-term formats, which include dhamma studies school for novices known as *Phra Pariyatti Dhamma School*.<sup>256</sup> Novice students have the option of selecting one of two paths for their studies: complete immersion in the Pali language or a broader Thai education. Novices who choose the Thai education path can continue their studies at the DCI Centre after completing their final year of high school. The institute offers a Bachelor of Arts in Buddhist Studies that covers a wide variety of ground, from Pali studies and Buddhist studies to English language and computer classes.<sup>257</sup> At the age of 20, novices have the opportunity to undergo monastic ordination and live within the premises of the temple. Once they have completed five years as a monk, they are given the opportunity to travel abroad and choose between advancing their education by residing in one of the temple's branches around the world or engaging in the propagation of Buddhism and *vijjā dhammakāya* to local communities, the Thai diaspora, and the existing followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in that particular country.

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<sup>256</sup> 'About Pariyat', โรงเรียนพระปริยัติธรรม วัดพระธรรมกาย, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://www.pariyat.com/>.

<sup>257</sup> 'ศูนย์พุทธศาสตร์ศึกษา DCI - Center for Buddhist Studies', DCI, accessed 16 February 2023, <https://dcicenter.org/>.

The presence of university-educated monks, staff, volunteers, along with those who have been ordained since childhood and young volunteers, has a significant impact on the management of the temple, ranging from the organisation of large-scale events to the design of the temple's architectural identity and visual representation. With its focus on drawing in educated young adults by targeting university students, the temple has recruited numerous talented and professional graduates, including architects who have led its architectural projects. In some cases, these architects have successfully converted heritage-listed buildings in the UK into Thai temples, which will be further examined in Chapters 3. In addition, the majority of *ubasok*, *ubasika*, and volunteers at Wat Phra Dhammakaya are highly educated, holding a bachelor's degree or even a doctorate. This level of education provides them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively carry out the temple's projects, both within Thailand and across the globe, as well as to effectively communicate with local communities and authorities. In contrast, those who join the monkhood at a young age, be it at Wat Phra Dhammakaya or other temples, tend to be more passive and reliant on their senior monks and laypeople due to their limited worldly experiences. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that several current abbots at Wat Phra Dhammakaya's overseas branches were themselves ordained during childhood.

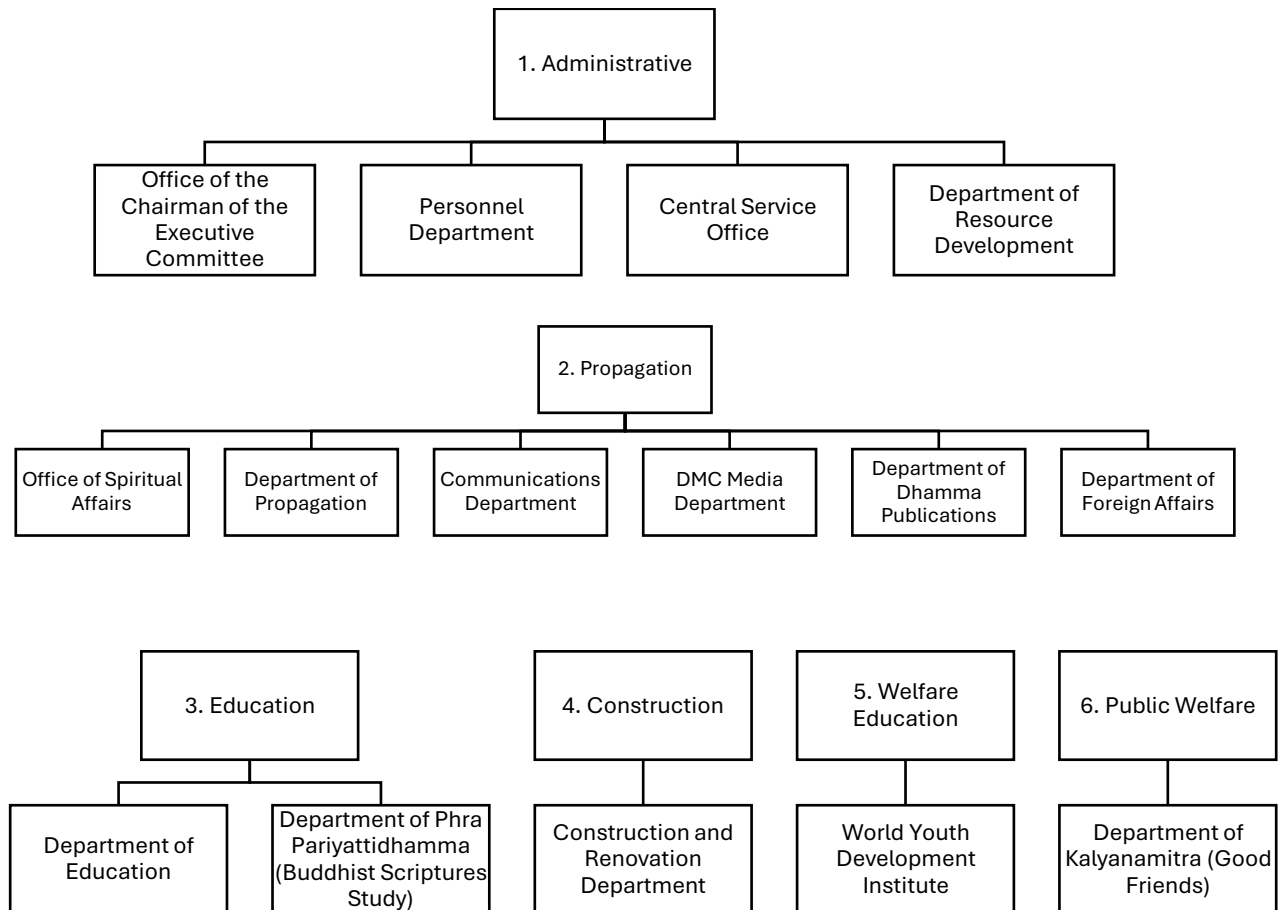
Another distinctive characteristic of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, setting it apart from many other temples, is its highly structured organisation. I attempted to locate an organisational chart for Wat Phra Dhammakaya in order to understand its structure, but I was unsuccessful. However, I discovered an alternative source on the temple's website in the form of a document that listed telephone numbers for various offices within the temple.<sup>258</sup> Through an examination of this document, which provides insight into its organisational structure, I was able to discover that the temple has 15 main departments and more than 500 offices. These departments can be classified into six principal groups, which align with the six obligatory responsibilities of the abbot previously discussed. These categories consist of administrative, propagation, education, construction, welfare education, and public welfare (Figure 11). Out of the 15 departments at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, six are specifically dedicated to the propagation of Buddhism and the *vijjā dhammakāya*, which is the primary goal of the temple. The organisational structure within

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<sup>258</sup> 'Internal Telephone Numbers', accessed 26 April 2022, <https://fdnet.dhammakaya.network/form/เบอร์โทรศัพท์/IPtel-01JUN2019.pdf>.

these departments comprises of various roles, including the director, deputy director, office secretary, division chief, acting division chief, monks, full-time staff, and volunteers.

Figure 11: The Organisational Structures of 15 Departments at Wat Phra Dhammakaya.



These findings suggest that Wat Phra Dhammakaya has established a comprehensive system for managing and regulating its operations and activities. In addition, this organisational structure has been implemented in Wat Phra Dhammakaya’s overseas branches, and even though they have fewer and smaller departments, the roles and framework of these departments remain comparable to those at the temple’s headquarters in Thailand. It is interesting to note that this organisational structure is consistent across the temple’s overseas branches, despite potentially operating in different cultural and societal contexts. This consistency suggests that Wat Phra Dhammakaya places a high value on maintaining a standardised system for managing its operations and activities, regardless of location. In other words, it has the opposite approach

to that of the forest temples, which, as discussed above, emphasise the autonomy of the individual temple.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the parent temples in Thailand of the six UK temples that I have selected as my primary case studies. Doing so has revealed the ways in which Thai temples may be divided according to the ordination lineage (Mahanikai or Thammayut), forest or community temples (so Thai forest tradition or otherwise), royal or otherwise, and modern (Dhammakaya), and how these different types of temple attract different kinds of practitioners and supporters.

Three of them, Wat Mahathat, Wat Arun, and Wat Phra Singh are renowned temples that hold immense historical, cultural, and religious significance. Their royal titles and the annual presentation of the royal Kathin robe exemplify their deep connections with the royal family, underscoring their elevated status. We will later see this connection with the establishment and with royalty reflected in their UK branch temples. Their architectural design is uniquely influenced by various periods and geographical regions. These temples not only serve as vital cultural and spiritual landmarks but also attract visitors from within Thailand and around the world, contributing to the vibrant tapestry of Thailand's religious heritage. As we shall see, in the UK, only Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Mahathat's first branch temple internationally, features an *ubosot* crafted in authentic Thai style. This unique structure has become both a cultural landmark and a hub for Thai Buddhism and Thai cultural studies in London. While location, planning regulations and funds may restrict the emulation of Thai architecture in the UK, it remains an ideal, as witnessed by an ongoing project at Wat Phra Singh's branch in the UK plans to build a new *ubosot* that embodies the architectural style reminiscent of northern Thailand.

The organisational structure of these parent temples and, as we shall see, their branch temples in the UK, is relatively traditional although complicated by their size and prestige. Recruitment to these temples is also quite traditional, with mainly novice ordination in childhood through the local village temple and transfer between temples for educational opportunities. The way

that these temples represent Thai culture and status in turn reflects the congregation and supporters they attract in the UK, as we shall discuss.

Although the forest traditions of Ajahn Chah and Luang Pu Sri belong to different lineages, Mahanikai and Thammayut, they share similarities in practice and have numerous branch temples across the country. These temples are of much more recent origin, reflecting a revivalist tendency towards early Buddhist ideas that came in response to both colonialism and then the over-emphasis on administrative Buddhism in early modern Thailand, and then the international interest in the early ideals of Buddhism and meditation. This emphasis on a form of monasticism dedicated to world renunciation and meditation has appealed to those seeking what they consider a more authentic form of Buddhism closer to its origins and was one of the reasons that Ajahn Chah's lineage was actively sought out by foreign practitioners.

The differences between the temples of these forest lineages, namely Wat Nong Pa Pong and Wat Prachakhom, are more evident in terms of their international followers and architectural designs. Ajahn Chah's lineage has expanded globally with 20 branches, reaching regions such as Australasia, Europe, North America, and South America. In contrast, Luang Pu Sri's lineage has established just five temples overseas, including one in the UK, two in Australia, and two in Hong Kong. Aside from the number of branches, the nationalities of international followers also differ. The international branches of Wat Nong Pa Pong are filled with non-Thai audiences, whereas the international branches of Wat Prachakhom are primarily supported by Thai followers, as we will see in Chapter 3 with their branches in the UK. As for architectural designs, Wat Nong Pa Pong embodies simplicity and minimalism in its unadorned architectural style, blending Isan art with contemporary influences. On the other hand, Wat Prachakhom stands out as a landmark with its remarkable sandstone pagoda inspired by the iconic Borobudur, reflecting the personal connection of the abbot with missionary work in Indonesia. As we will see, these differences and the nature of their organisation are also reflected in their international branches in the UK. Similarly, the attractiveness of the temples' ethos for both Thais and Westerners seeking an authentic form of Buddhism is reflected in the recruitment of mainly adult western monks in the UK and a diverse, international including substantial western congregation, as we shall as explore later.

My overview of the Dhammakaya Tradition highlighted its unique characteristics of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Thailand. The effectiveness of Wat Phra Dhammakaya's well-structured

organisational system is demonstrated by the temple's impressive expansion. Its distinctive approach of recruiting long-term devoted monks, staff, volunteers, and supporters has been effective in assembling a team of skilled and professional members. In addition, the extensive layout and architecture of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, combined with its competent team, have enabled the temple to effectively host and accommodate large groups of people, from single-day events to three-month-long retreats, both locally and internationally. The organisational structure reflects the modernised management system identified in the Introduction. They are interesting in combining elements of both the other types of temple already discussed, with elements Thai traditional culture, on the one hand, and an emphasis on transformative meditation, on the other. Alienated to some extent from establishment Buddhism, they do not reflect specifically Thai culture, but have their own unique ethos and loyal base. In Chapter 3, I shall assess the impact of this background of systematic training and organisation on their capacity of their four UK branches to integrate into UK society and systems of governance.

These six temples are here divided into three main types, with further subdivisions according to the *nikai* to which they are affiliated. The way each came to have an international presence reflects this background, the distinctive reasons reflecting their prestige and representation of Thai culture and identity, their reputation for authenticity and representation of the values of early Buddhism, or their active internationalising mission and development of members' career. It can be observed then that, rather than the profile of Thai temples in the UK being a mirror, if smaller reflection of the spectrum of Buddhism in Thailand, the UK scene reflects those Thai temples that already had varying degrees of higher prestige, international following and/or an international mission. This background led to the establishment of branch temples in the UK and, in fact, three of the six temples above have had a disproportionate influence on UK Buddhism. The royal temple Wat Mahathat from Bangkok has directly or indirectly led to the establishment of nearly half the temples in the UK, influencing the setting up of thirteen UK temples, Ajahn Chah's forest temple Wat Nong Pah Pong from the northeast has five UK branches, and the internationalising Wat Phra Dhammakaya an hour's drive from Bangkok also has four. Thus just three mother temples together, out of the 43,146 temples in Thailand, and just two regions out of six regions in Thailand, have led to the establishment of 22 of the 31 Thai temples in the UK. This is why I have selected them for my case studies, with the other three mother temples, each forming just one UK branch, acting as counterbalance. The picture of these relationships will be examined further in the next chapter, and is tabulated for clarity there in Table 4.

By tracing their roots in Thailand, we can better understand their varied historical contexts, cultural significance, organisational structures, recruitment and attractiveness to supporters. This comprehensive overview of the organisation of Thai Buddhism in Chapter 1 and the specific mother temples in this chapter has now set the stage for our investigation. The UK case studies are Wat Buddhapadipa from parent temple Wat Mahathat, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery from Wat Nong Pah Pong, Wat Phra Dhammakaya London from Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Wat Phra Singh UK from Wat Phra Singh, Wat Arun Norfolk from Wat Arun Ratchawararam, and Wat Sri Intra Atula from Wat Prachakhom Wanaram.

## Navigating Sacred Spaces in a Foreign Land – Thai Temples in the UK

According to the latest published database on the NOB’s website, the statistics for the number of Thai temples abroad, i.e. outside of Thailand, between 2019 and 2021 show consistent figures of 410 Mahanikai temples and 186 Thammayut temples for all three years.<sup>259</sup> Out of these 596 Thai temples, the United States has the highest number with 179 temples, solidifying its position as the country with the most Thai temples. In Europe, Germany ranks third with 45 Thai temples, while the UK holds the fifth position with a total of 31 Thai temples.<sup>260</sup> The number of Thai temples abroad reflects the historical developments of Buddhism beyond Asia, where the United States stands as the pioneer among countries hosting Asian immigrants. Buddhism’s introduction in the United States can be traced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly attributed to the wave of Asian immigrants and both missionising and modernising tendencies emerging from China and Japan.<sup>261</sup> In 1853, Chinese Buddhists founded the initial Buddhist temple in San Francisco.<sup>262</sup> Meanwhile, Europe only observed a significant Buddhist community from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, following the settlement of Asian immigrants with Buddhist roots. The rise of Buddhist diaspora groups in Europe started around the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>263</sup> During this time, Europe saw the establishment of its inaugural Thai temple, specifically in the UK, in 1966.

To provide a complete portrait of Thai temples in the UK, this chapter will begin with an overview of these establishments. It will present a comprehensive picture of Thai Buddhist temples, outlining the methodology used for data collection, which encompasses compiling a

<sup>259</sup> Natl. Off. Buddhism, ‘ข้อมูลพื้นฐานทางพระพุทธศาสนา ปี 2565 (The Basic Information on Buddhism, 2565 BE)’.

<sup>260</sup> Natl. Off. Buddhism, ‘ข้อมูลพื้นฐานทางพระพุทธศาสนา ปี 2565 (The Basic Information on Buddhism, 2565 BE)’.

<sup>261</sup> Jack Meng-Tat Chia, *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity Across the South China Sea*, AAR Academy Series (Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>262</sup> ‘The Association of Religion Data Archives’, accessed 9 August 2023, <https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/history/timelines/entry/?etype=1&eid=354>.

<sup>263</sup> Martin Baumann, ‘Buddhism in Europe: Past, Present, Prospects’, in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002), 86.

list and creating a map of their locations. Subsequently, I will examine six case study temples in detail, shedding light on their histories, backgrounds, governance, leadership, finances, funding sources, programmes, services, and congregations. Finally, the discussion will extend to the relevant Theravada monastic organisations in the UK, exploring their backgrounds, objectives, and functions. This thorough investigation aims to yield a nuanced comprehension of each temple's distinctive features and dynamics.

### 3.1 An Overview of Thai Temples in the UK

By a Thai temple, I mean a temple which follows a Thai ordination lineage and Thai practices. I do not mean that the monks, donors, staff, volunteers or congregation are necessarily Thai. For most Thai temples in the UK, monks are sent from Thailand. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions. Temples in the UK that adhere to the Thai Forest Tradition frequently have monks who are white Westerners, hailing from nations such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the United States, Canada, Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland. The Oxford Buddha Vihara is led by a Shan monk from Myanmar who maintains close ties with Thailand and with monks from various Asian countries and ethnic backgrounds, including, at present, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. This diversity is partly due to the Vihara serving as a base for monks studying at universities in Oxford and London. This led to the question of whether to include it here. The homeland of the Shan ethnic minority straddles northern Burma, northwest Thailand and southern China. However, during the *sima* consecration ceremony held in the temple's back garden, senior monks from Wat Bowonniwet, representing the Thammayut lineage, officiated the event. Consequently, the temple has been recognised under the Thammayut order ever since and hence is on our list. All these temples are included on the list of Thai temples outside of Thailand held by the National Office of Buddhism in Thailand (see Chapter 1).

As mentioned previously, my initial information came from two official sources: one gathered by the National Office of Buddhism in Thailand and the other by Wat Buddhapadipa, the oldest Thai temple in the UK, established in 1966. According to the information available on the official site of Thailand's National Office of Buddhism, there are 29 Thai temples in the UK: three in Scotland, one in Wales, and 25 in England (seven in the North, 11 in the South, two in the East and five in the Midlands). However, the list excludes two temples located in Ireland:

Wat Buddhamahadhatu in Cork and Wat Thai Ireland in Wexford. These cities are in the Republic of Ireland (Éire), not Northern Ireland, and therefore are not part of the UK and not included in this study. Additionally, the list also excludes one temple, Wat Mahathat Isle of Man, located in the Isle of Man. I have also excluded meditation centres, a number of which exist, such as Oxford Buddha Vihara's Park Farm. It is interesting to note that the list of the temples which I obtained from the Assistant Abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, Phramaha Bhatsakorn, is different from that provided by NOB. The first source includes all the temples; 25 in Mahanikai sect and four in Thammayut sect. The latter includes the temples which are represented in the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland and only those temples in Mahanikai sect. From combining sources and some further research, I have succeeded in compiling a list of 31 Thai Buddhist temples in the UK (Table 4), all of which are authorised by the Thai government. This compilation includes two recently identified temples that were established in Southend-on-Sea and Brighton in 2021, as uncovered during my research. It is important to note that I excluded from this list four temples that I came across that had been established previously but have since ceased operations. Consequently, the temples listed in Table 4 are all currently operational as of 2023.

I observed above that the earliest Thai temple in the UK, Wat Buddhapadipa, was established in 1966. This is relatively late in contrast to other forms of Theravada Buddhism which arrived in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as we shall see below. The earliest account of a Thai monk visiting the UK was later, in 1953. The event was initiated by Luang Por Sodh, the abbot of Wat Paknam in Bangkok, who had the ambition to spread his method of meditation practice beyond Thailand. He sent Phra Thitavedo, an emissary monk, to London in 1953.<sup>264</sup> Despite continuous efforts and interactions between Buddhists in the UK and Thailand from this point onwards, and other ensuing developments—such as the establishment of the English Sangha Trust—the first officially established Thai temples in the UK did not emerge directly from these connections. Instead, Wat Buddhapadipa, led by Thai monks and representing Thai Buddhism, was established in 1966. This was followed by Chithurst established in 1979, which mainly houses Western converts who follow the Thai Forest Tradition, and receives support

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<sup>264</sup> Andrew Skilton, 'Elective Affinities: The Reconstruction of A Forgotten Episode in the Shared History of Thai and British Buddhism – Kapilavaḍḍho and Wat Paknam', *Contemporary Buddhism* 14, no. 1 (2013): 150., Sarah Shaw (2019) Tradition and Experimentation: the Development of the Samatha Trust, *Contemporary Buddhism*, 20:1-2, 346-371

from both converts and lay communities reflecting a wide range of Theravada diaspora groups, not just Thai.

Among Thai temples in the UK, we can draw a distinction between those primarily staffed by Thai monks and those staffed primarily by converts and in the Thai forest lineage from Ajahn Chah, reflecting not only the two earliest temples but also subsequent developments. A broader division within Thailand explained in Chapter 1 is between Mahanikai and Thammayut. Of the 31 Thai temples in the UK, the majority—27 of them—are Mahanikai. Among these, six belong to the forest lineage. Among the four Thammayut temples, three also belong to the forest lineage. This indicates that 87.1% of the temples follow the Mahanikai tradition, closely mirroring the proportion in Thailand, where 38,680 out of 43,146 temples or 89.6% are affiliated with the Mahanikai order. While only just over 9% temples in Thailand adhere to the Forest Tradition, nearly a third of those in the UK belong to the Forest Tradition, meaning that the Forest Tradition is three times more prominent in the UK, reflecting differing interests and dynamics in the diaspora context, and especially the attractiveness of the Forest Tradition for Westerners seeking to become monks or practise Buddhism or meditation.<sup>265</sup>

Because the Thammayut was established by Mongkut, the future King Rama IV, and played a key function in the modernisation and reform processes undertaken by Mongkut himself, his half-brothers, son and grandson, it is often assumed that the Thammayut is closely linked with royal or government authority in contrast to most Mahanikai temples. However, the affiliation of three of the four Thammayut temples in the UK to the Ajahn Chah meditation lineage attractive to foreigners complicates that picture. Further, among the Mahanikai temples in the UK, most stem from just a few so-called royal temples. Wat Buddhapadipa in particular is connected with the royal temple Wat Mahathat and is the direct and indirect source of the thirteen UK temples. It is itself part of the diplomatic representation of Thailand in UK, inaugurated in its current position by the late Thai King Bhumibol and his wife. This means that almost half of Thai temples in the UK are to some extent representative of Thai royal and

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<sup>265</sup> The exact number of temples in the Thai Forest Tradition is officially unknown. To estimate it, I searched the temple registry on the National Office of Buddhism's website for temple names that include the Thai word "pa" (meaning forest), assuming that such temples are likely to follow the Thai Forest Tradition. Based on the results, there are 1,797 temples affiliated with the Mahanikai sect, and 2,153 temples affiliated with the Thammayut sect. Therefore, the estimated total number of Forest Tradition temples is 3,950 out of 43,146 registered temples nationwide, or approximately 9.15%. See 'Temple Registry System or Temple Registration System', National Office of Buddhism, accessed 16 April 2025, <https://binfo.onab.go.th/Temple/Temple-List-View.aspx?search=&pagesize=20&pageno=1&sortexpr=&sortorder=&NameTemp=%E0%B8%9B%E0%B9%88%E0%B8%B2&TypeTemp=&Sect=&Province=&District=&SubDistrict=>.

governmental authority. At one level we might see this as a kind of soft power of the Thai government within the UK, but at a more tangible level it means that these temples allow Thais in the UK to maintain a sense of Thai identity and belonging while abroad, even if they are naturalised UK citizens.

Within the Mahanikai temples in the UK we see another division between Mahanikai more broadly and Dhammakaya temples. While also members of the Mahanikai, all Dhammakaya temples stem from Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Pathum Thani, Thailand, known for its strong emphasis on internationalisation and conversion. We can trace this internationalising trait back to another temple in Thailand, Wat Paknam, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century abbot of which, Luang Por Sodh, was mentioned above as the abbot who sent the first Thai missionary monk to the UK in the 1950s, and from which the founding nun and two founding monks of the Dhammakaya hail.<sup>266</sup> The Dhammakaya temples developed distinctive forms of art and temple design and are far more centrally organised around the original temple in Pathumthani than most Thai temples. We can therefore consider Dhammakaya, represented by four temples in the UK, as a significant subdivision of Thai Buddhism here.

In conclusion, while there are over 43,000 Buddhist temples in Thailand, we can see that just three of them dominate the UK Thai temple landscape: Wat Mahathat, the mother temple for Wat Buddhapadipa, its branches and some other temples, Wat Nong Pah Pong of Ajahn Chah, so in a sense the mother temple for the forest tradition temples, and Wat Phra Dhammakaya the mother temple for the Dhammakaya temples. I have also identified a number of other temples in Thailand that are responsible for the founding of just one or two temples in the UK, although many of these temples are also connected with Wat Buddhapadipa. Table 4 indicates this affiliation and the parent or source temple in Thailand, if this is known, while the map in Figure 12 identifies the location of each Thai temple in the UK.

Table 4: List of 31 Temples by Establishment Year, Monastic Order, Forest Tradition, *Sīmā* Presence, Location, and Lineages.

No	Year of Establishment	Name of Temple	Monastic Order	Forest Tradition	<i>Sīmā</i>	Location	Lineage Temple in Thailand	Lineage Temple in the UK
1	1966	Wat Buddhapadipa	Mahanikai	-	Yes	London	Wat Mahathat, Bangkok	-

<sup>266</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 207.

2	1979	Chithurst Buddhist Monastery/ Cittaviveka	Mahanikai	Yes	Yes	Petersfield	Wat Nong Pah Pong, Ubon Ratchathani	-
3	1981	Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery	Mahanikai	Yes	Yes	Belsay	Wat Nong Pah Pong, Ubon Ratchathani	Chithurst
4	1984	Amaravati Buddhist Monastery	Mahanikai	Yes	Yes	Hemel Hempstead	Wat Nong Pah Pong, Ubon Ratchathani	Chithurst
5	1986	Hartridge Buddhist Monastery	Mahanikai	Yes	-	Honiton	Wat Nong Pah Pong, Ubon Ratchathani	Chithurst
6	1987	Wat Santiwongsaram	Mahanikai	-	-	Birmingham	Wat Sanghathan, Nonthaburi	-
7	1999	Wat Phra Dhammakaya London	Mahanikai	-	Yes	Woking	Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Pathumthani	-
8	1999	The Forest Hermitage	Mahanikai	Yes	Yes	Warwick	Wat Nong Pah Pong, Ubon Ratchathani	-
9	2001	Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley	Mahanikai	-	-	Kings Bromley	Wat Mahathat, Bangkok	Wat Buddhapadipa
10	2002	Wat Dhammapadipa	Mahanikai	-	-	Edinburgh	-	Wat Buddhapadipa
11	2003	Wat Oxford Buddha Vihara	Thammayut	-	Yes	Oxford	Wat Bowonniwet, Bangkok	-
12	2004	Wat Phra Dhammakaya Manchester	Mahanikai	-	-	Manchester	Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Pathumthani	Wat Phra Dhammakaya London
13	2004	Wat Buddharam London	Mahanikai	-	-	London	-	Buddha Vihara Plaistow
14	2005	Wat Sriratanaram	Mahanikai	-	Yes	Manchester	Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimon Mangkhalaram, Bangkok	Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley
15	2007	Wat Santivanaram	Thammayut	Yes	-	Gillingham	-	-
16	2009	Wat Sanghapadipa	Mahanikai	-	-	Rhymney	-	Wat Buddhapadipa
17	2009	Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle	Mahanikai	-	-	Newcastle	Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Pathumthani	Wat Phra Dhammakaya Manchester

18	2009	Wat Pa Tesarangsee UK	Thammayut	Yes	-	New Milton	Wat Pa Huay Lad, Loei	-
19	2012	Wat Thai Buddharam	Mahanikai	-	-	Aberdeen	-	Wat Dhammapadipa
20	2012	Wat Phra Singh	Mahanikai	-	-	Runcorn	Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Mai	Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley
21	2012	Wat Matchimaram Leeds	Mahanikai	-	-	Leeds	-	Huddersfield Meditation Centre
22	2014	Wat Buddharam Leeds	Mahanikai	-	-	Leeds	Wat Saket, Bangkok	Huddersfield Meditation Centre, Wat Dhammapadipa
23	2016	Wat Phra Dhammakaya Scotland	Mahanikai	-	-	Helensburgh	Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Pathumthani	Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle
24	2016	Wat Sri Intra Atula	Thammayut	Yes	Yes	Crawley	Wat Prachakhom Wanaram, Roi Et	-
25	2016	Wat Mahathat Plymouth	Mahanikai	-	-	Plymouth	Wat Mahathat, Bangkok	Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley
26	2016	Wat Arun Norfolk UK	Mahanikai	-	-	Norwich	Wat Arun Ratchawararam , Bangkok	-
27	2017	Wat Phra Sri Sanphet	Mahanikai	-	-	Bristol	-	Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley
28	2016	Wat Pa Buddharam	Mahanikai	Yes	-	Northampton	Wat Sanghathan, Nonthaburi	Wat Santiwongsaram
29	2019	Wat Mongkhonwaranam	Mahanikai	-	-	Leicester	-	Phrom Wachirayan Meditation Centre, Wat Sriratanaram
30	2021	Wat Thai Southend	Mahanikai	-	-	Southend-on-Sea	-	Wat Sriratanaram
31	2021	Wat Thai Brighton	Mahanikai	-	-	Brighton	-	Wat Sriratanaram

Figure 12: Map of 31 Thai Temples in the UK Based on Table 4.

Colours differentiate temple groups: light orange circle for Mahanikai, dark green circle for Mahanikai forest tradition, brown circle with white font for Thammayut, and brown circle with green font for Thammayut forest tradition.



As we can observe from the map (Figure 12), Thai temples are scattered across the UK, from north to south. While many are located in major cities such as London, Manchester, and Leeds, others are found in smaller towns. One reason for this distribution is that anyone wishing to

establish a Thai temple in the UK must notify the Executive Committee of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The committee considers and approves each case individually. Once approved, the Chairperson of the Executive Committee submits a report to the Sangha Supreme Council through the Royal Thai Embassy in London.<sup>267</sup> According to Phramaha Bhatsakorn, the committee usually recommends locations without an existing temple or those not in close proximity to another temple, in order to prevent conflicts arising from overlapping support bases.<sup>268</sup> Another reason Thai temples are spread across the UK is that Thai migrants themselves are dispersed throughout the country, rather than concentrated in a single region. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

While I have sought to understand how Thai temples in the UK relate to each other and to temples back in Thailand, as outlined here, this task has been somewhat complicated. It is true that many temples in the UK are either a direct branch of Wat Buddhapadipa or that the monks who established the temple had previously stayed in Wat Buddhapadipa when they first arrived in the UK. However, even though the lineage of Wat Buddhapadipa is Wat Mahathat, many monks who resided at Wat Buddhapadipa were originally from other temples in Thailand such as Wat Saket, Wat Soi Thong, Wat Phra Phutthabat, and Wat Sam Phraya. Some additional UK temples were directly set up by Wat Buddhapadipa. For example, after the successful establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa, the first abbot, Phramaha Chodok Yannasittho (1918–1988; Royal ecclesiastical title and rank: Phra Rat Sitthi Muni; hereafter Phramaha Chodok), wanted to propagate the teaching of the Buddha for the Thai diaspora and locals in other parts of the UK. This led to the building of Wat Dhammapadipa in Scotland in 2002 followed by Wat Sanghapadipa in 2009. Phramaha Chodok used these names to both link the three temples together and to associate with the Triple Gem of Buddhism. Although both temples trace their foundations to Wat Buddhapadipa, the current abbot of Wat Dhammapadipa is affiliated with Wat Saket in Thailand, while the current abbot of Wat Sanghapadipa came from Wat Mai Thong Sen in Thailand, neither of which are directly linked to the Wat Mahathat lineage. Moreover, many members of the Sangha from these two temples have affiliations with various other temples across Thailand, diverging from the main lineage.

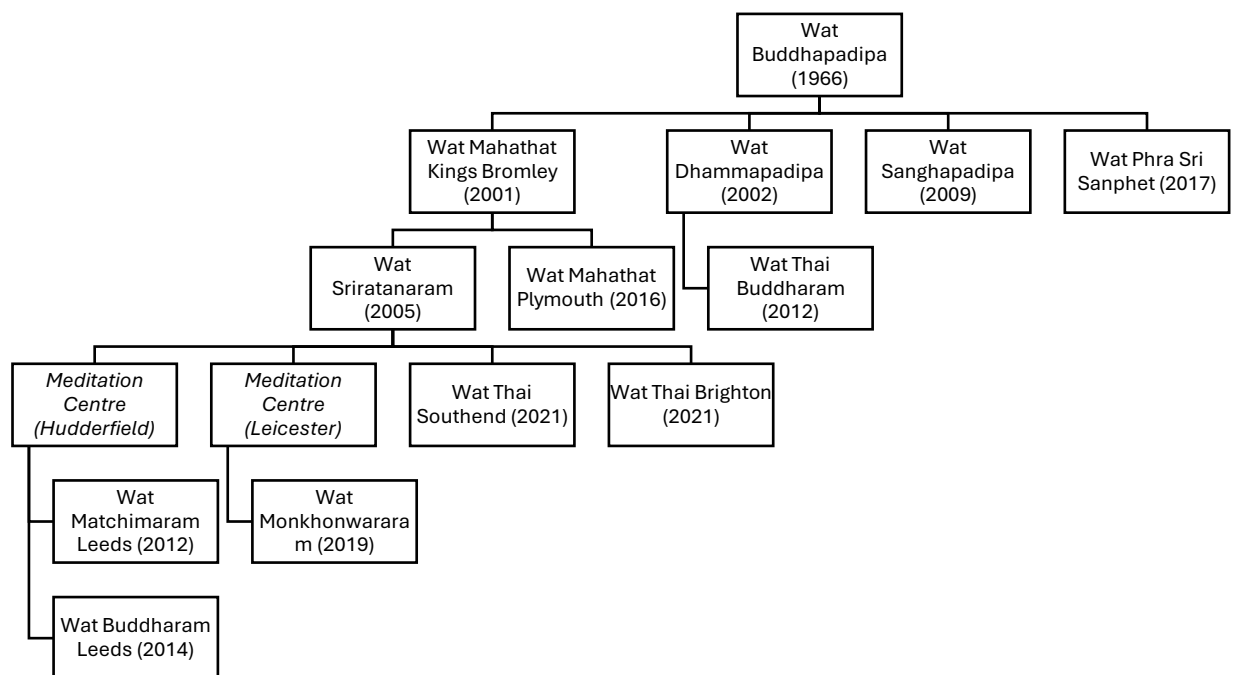
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<sup>267</sup> Secretary Division of CTBMUK, ‘การประชุมสมัชชาสามัญ องค์การพระธรรมทูตไทยในสหราชอาณาจักรและไอร์แลนด์ พุทธศักราช ๒๕๖๖ (The General Meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2023)’, Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2023, 68.

<sup>268</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, ‘Interview by author’, 14 September 2023, In Person.

There are other temples in the UK which also developed as offshoots from Wat Buddhapadipa, yet also have strong affiliations elsewhere (Figure 13). Branching out indirectly from Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley stands as a significant temple with three offshoots, yet it still maintains its lineage connection to Wat Mahathat in Thailand. The founding abbot of Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley, Phramaha Laow Panyasiri—more commonly known as Chao Khun Laow (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Rat Withetpanyakhun; hereafter Chao Khun Laow)—who is now the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, has his monastic roots at Wat Mahathat, where he was ordained as a novice. Upon arriving in the UK in 1987 as a missionary monk, he resided at Wat Buddhapadipa for seven years. In 1994, he was invited by the Buddhists of Indian heritage to dwell at the Buddha Vihara Aston, in Birmingham. By 2001, he acquired ownership of the property from the Indian Buddhist community, transforming it into a Thai temple. Subsequently, in 2007, he moved the temple to what is now known as Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley in Kings Bromley.

Figure 13: Hierarchy Diagram of Temples Stemming from Wat Buddhapadipa Origins



This list of temples with roots tracing back to Wat Buddhapadipa includes four directly affiliated temples: Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley (2001), Wat Dhammapadipa (2002), Wat Sanghapadipa (2009), and Wat Phra Sri Sanphet (2017). Additionally, eight temples are

indirectly affiliated with Wat Buddhapadipa, including Wat Sriratanaram (2005), Wat Thai Buddharam (2012), Wat Matchimaram Leeds (2012), Wat Buddharam Leeds (2014), Wat Mahathat Plymouth (2016), Wat Monkhonwararam (2019), Wat Thai Southend (2021), and Wat Thai Brighton (2021). While these temples were founded by monks who once resided at either Wat Buddhapadipa or Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley, some monks trace their spiritual lineage to the original temples in Thailand where they were ordained, prior to joining the aforementioned temples in the UK as missionary monks (see below). The type of dual origin outlined above is indicated in Table 4. A detailed discussion on the intricate recruitment process leading to such complex affiliations is elaborated upon in Chapter 4.

While I considered excluding the forest tradition temples from my definition of a Thai temple, due to the predominance of non-Thai monks, I ultimately chose to keep them in my study for the following reasons. The monks in the Thai Forest Tradition temples, even though they are not Thai, belong to Thai ordination lineages and maintain close relations with both their lineage and monastic authorities in Thailand. For example, the monks hold Thai monastic titles, which are awarded by the king of Thailand. This relationship became more public in 2009 when Ajahn Brahm ordained several women as *bhikkhuni*, fully ordained nuns. Ajahn Brahm, though now an abbot in Australia, is from the UK and is one of the UK monks in the Ajahn Chah lineage, which constitutes five of the Thai temples in the UK. For monks to ordain nuns is illegal in Thailand and Ajahn Brahm was stripped of his rank which carried the title of *Phra Raja Khana Fay Vipassana Thura*, revealing the authority of the Thai monastic authorities over even foreign monks abroad if ordained within Thai lineages.<sup>269</sup>

A more recent connection occurred when the current King of Thailand, His Majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun (Rama X), bestowed ecclesiastical titles upon 65 monks on the occasion of his birthday celebration on 28<sup>th</sup> July 2019. Among them were four senior Western monks from the Thai Forest Tradition, including Ajahn Sumedho (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Thep Yan Withet Wiset Photitham Khun Wibun Phawana Nusit Maha Khanitson Bawonsangkhawaram Khamawasi, hereafter Ajahn Sumedho), the retired abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, and Ajahn Amaro (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Ratcha Phutthi Warakhun Wibun Sasanakit Chathon Maha Khanitson Bawonsangkhawaram

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<sup>269</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 226.

Khamawasi, hereafter Ajahn Amaro), the current abbot of Amaravati.<sup>270</sup> Therefore, I have included Thai Forest Tradition temples and Amaravati is included as one of my case studies.

From this overview we can already begin to see that some of the characteristics of Thai temples in the UK reflect the characteristics of the temple or monastic lineage in Thailand from which they derive and from which the monks come. We are beginning to see how temples may in addition be influenced by the expectations and even regulations that govern Buddhism in Thailand. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine representative examples of each tradition, including the six that are central to my analysis of people, property, and grounds management in the subsequent chapters. This discussion will entail an analysis of the nature of the relationships between the UK temples and their respective mother or source temples in Thailand.

## 3.2 Wat Buddhapadipa

Wat Buddhapadipa stands as an esteemed and influential religious institution within the UK, notably among the Thai communities and Thai students in London. Holding a deep historical significance, the temple in question proudly bears the distinction of being the foremost Thai Buddhist temple established on British soil and serves as the first Thai temple in the European continent. Although it was the first Thai temple to be established in the UK, it was actually the third Theravada Buddhist temple overall.

The London Buddhist Vihara was the first Theravada Buddhist temple founded in the UK, and the first of its kind to be established outside of Asia. It was founded in 1926 as a missionary temple by Anagarika Dharmapala, a prominent figure in Sinhalese Buddhist revival movement and, although its location within London has changed, it has maintained a continuous presence to this day.<sup>271</sup> It was funded by the Hawaiian philanthropist Mary Elizabeth Mikahala Foster (1844–1930), who also played a crucial role in the establishment of the first Buddhist temple

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<sup>270</sup> ‘Royal Announcement on the Bestowal of Ecclesiastical Titles’, *Royal Thai Government Gazette* 136, no. 40 (2019): 7–15.

<sup>271</sup> ‘Home - The London Buddhist Vihara’, The London Buddhist Vihara, accessed 22 May 2020, <https://www.londonbuddhistvihara.org>; Azzopardi, ‘Religious Belief and Practice among Sri Lankan Buddhists in the UK’, 14.

in Hawaii and in funding the Mahabodhi Society set up to restore Buddhist sites in India.<sup>272</sup> The Burmese monk Ashin Setṭhila lived in England as a Buddhist missionary during World War II, but this did not lead to a Burmese temple at that time.<sup>273</sup> Following this, the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara emerged in 1962, founded by the English Sangha Trust on Haverstock Hill in London.<sup>274</sup> This temple played a crucial role in the founding of Wat Buddhapadipa. This is because, before the establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa, monks from Wat Mahathat, its parent temple, initially resided at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara. The year of its foundation, the English Sangha Trust invited the Canadian monk Ānandabodhi (1931-2003), who had been ordained in Burma, to England. In 1965 he moved to Scotland to open the Johnstone House Contemplative Community, which might then arguably be the third Theravada temple in the UK, had Ānandabodhi not transferred it to two young Tibetan monks sponsored by Freda Bedi, namely Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Akong Tulku, who were then studying in Oxford. This Theravada meditation centre then became Samye Ling and has remained in the Tibetan Karma Kagyu tradition since.<sup>275</sup>

The establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa can also be traced back to Ānandabodhi and more specifically to the formation of the Vipassana Meditation Centre at Wat Mahathat under the guidance of Phra Phimonlatham (see Chapter 2). Starting in 1953, a number of Westerners from diverse backgrounds began engaging in *vipassana* meditation at Wat Mahathat. Among them was Ānandabodhi and it was upon completing his training, that he embarked on his voyage to England. He shared his experience of *vipassana* meditation with British, European, and American individuals at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, some of whom showed a keen interest in ordaining as novices. This situation sparked an aspiration within Ānandabodhi to request Phra Pimonlatham of Wat Mahathat to facilitate the sending of Thai monks to England for the purpose of teaching *vipassana* meditation. This collaborative effort aimed to make this meditation practice more accessible to a broader audience.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Amal Gunasena, 'Mary Elizabeth Foster: One of the Greatest Benefactors of Buddhism Who Ever Lived and the Queen of the Empire of Righteousness Born to Succour Anagarika Dharmapala's Mission', in *Anagarika Dharmapala and the Spread of Buddhism* (London Buddhist Vihara, 2014).

<sup>273</sup> Janaka Ashin, 'Die-Human, Born Human: The Life and Posthumous Trial of Shin Ukkatṭha, a Pioneering Burmese Monk, during a Tumultuous Period in a Nation's History' (Ph.D. thesis, King's College London, 2016), 114.

<sup>274</sup> Ven. Vorasak Candamitto, 'Buddhist Organizations in Great Britain' (M.A. Thesis, University of Durham, 1972), 61.

<sup>275</sup> Laurence Cox, 'Why Do European Buddhists Meditate? The Practical Problem of Inventing Global Buddhism', *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 16 (2023).

<sup>276</sup> Thirawat, ประวัติวัดพุทธปทีป กรุงลอนดอน ประเทศอังกฤษ (*History of Wat Buddhapadipa, London, England*), 1.

As a result, in 1964, Phramaha Chodok and another monk, called Phramaha Vichitra, were invited to teach *vipassana* meditation at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara in London.<sup>277</sup> Their efforts in propagating Buddhist teachings and collaborating with other Buddhist groups led to a surge of interest in Buddhism and meditation among the Thai diasporas. This interest reached Thai officials, families, and students in Britain, leading to a demand for a Thai temple in London for practising Buddhism and conducting religious ceremonies in accordance with their traditions.<sup>278</sup> With support from the Thai government and Thai Buddhists in the UK, the first Thai temple was established in 1966 under the name Wat Thai Buddha Vihara. This six-bedroom manor house was situated on a large piece of land near Richmond Park. Its tranquil and peaceful environment made it a suitable location for establishing a temple and a conducive place for practicing *vipassana* meditation.<sup>279</sup>

Later in August 1966, the late king and queen of Thailand inaugurated this temple, bestowing upon it the name Wat Buddhapadipa, which translates to ‘the light of the Buddha.’<sup>280</sup> In November 1976, the temple found its current home in Wimbledon, where it sits on a 10-acre property, accompanied by two sizeable houses. Wat Buddhapadipa stands out as one of the few temples in the UK featuring a layout reminiscent of those found in Thailand such as a bell tower, Sunday school for Thai children, and particularly its distinctive *ubosot* or ordination hall, constructed in the traditional Thai style. The main building serves multiple purposes, including housing for the monks, kitchen facilities, a dining area, and a small hall utilised daily by both monks and laypeople for activities such as morning and evening chanting, as well as occasions when laypeople visit to offer food or make donations. Given its connection with the Royal Thai Embassy and the late king, Wat Buddhapadipa holds a unique position. It also holds the distinction of being the only Thai temple in the UK to have an *ubosot* crafted in this authentic Thai style.

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<sup>277</sup> This went ahead despite the fact that between 1962 and 1966 Phimonlatham was imprisoned on false charges. See Choopolpaisal, ‘Reassessing Modern Thai Political Buddhism: A Critical Study of Sociological Literature from Weber to Keyes’, 295–302.

<sup>278</sup> Candamitto, ‘Buddhist Organizations in Great Britain’, 29.

<sup>279</sup> Thirawat, *ประวัติวัดพุทธปทีป กรุงลอนดอน ประเทศอังกฤษ (History of Wat Buddhapadipa, London, England)*.

<sup>280</sup> Candamitto, ‘Buddhist Organizations in Great Britain’, 30.

Figure 14: Murals on the Ubosot Walls at Wat Buddhapadipa.<sup>281</sup>



The *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa is used for a variety of ceremonial events, by both monastic and lay communities. These events range from *sanghakamma* (as outlined in Chapter 1) and ordination ceremonies, to chanting sessions celebrating the birthdays of members of the Thai royal family, and robe-offering ceremonies. At the heart of the *ubosot*, three prominent Buddha statues stand prominently on the altar; the Black Buddha (*Luang Por Dam*), the Golden Buddha (*Luang Por Thong*), and a replica of the Emerald Buddha.<sup>282</sup> Sandra Louise Cate, who has analysed this hall and its murals, suggests that the placement of a replica of the Emerald Buddha, key symbol of the Thai nation at the altar in the *ubosot*, enhances the national significance of the temple's main hall.<sup>283</sup>

The *ubosot's* walls are adorned with intricate depictions of the Buddha's life, masterfully painted by two renowned Thai artists, Panya Vijnthanasarn and Chalermchai Kositpipat, along with 28 young Thai contemporary artists.<sup>284</sup> The project was an extensive undertaking, requiring over seven years to reach completion in 1992. The mural showcases the journey of the Buddha from his birth to his demise, a common thematic element in traditional Thai paintings found in many *ubosots* across Thailand. However, what sets this *ubosot* apart is its inclusion of portraits of notable figures such as Margaret Thatcher, the Mona Lisa, Charlie

<sup>281</sup> Photo taken by Isara Treesahakiat in the *ubosot* at Wat Buddhapadipa 29/09/23.

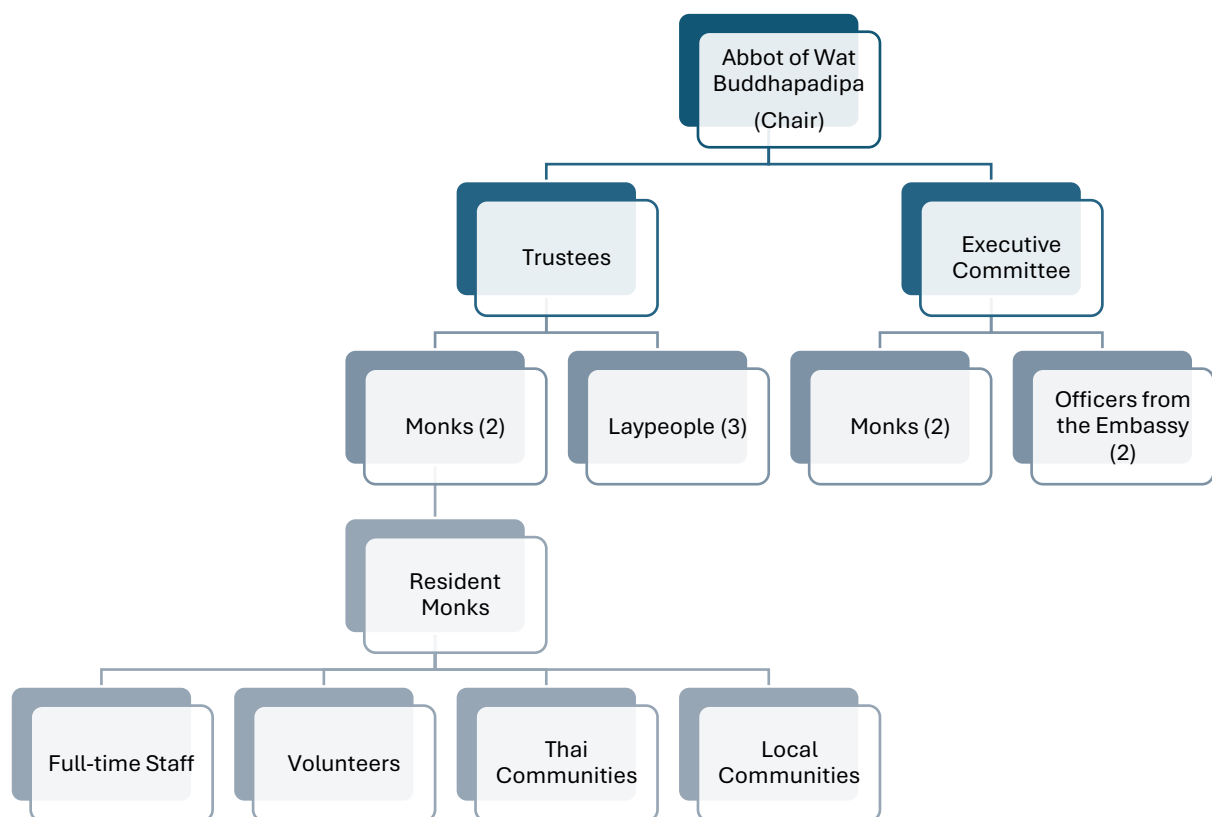
<sup>282</sup> Sandra Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 39.

<sup>283</sup> Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon*, 40.

<sup>284</sup> Sandra Louise Cate, 'Long-Distance Merit-Making: Art at a Thai Buddhist Temple in Wimbledon' (PhD dissertation, University of California, 1998), 8.

Chaplin, as well as self-portraits of the painters themselves, and even the iconic Tower Bridge—all integrated into the mural (Figure 14). Cate writes, “at least two levels of the construction of cultural identity, as Thainess, operate at Wat Buddhapadipa. One level [it] ...projects Thai national culture. At the individual level, ‘Thainess’ expresses a sense of cultural location.”<sup>285</sup> This unique piece of art, coupled with the distinctive design of the *ubosot*, draws numerous Thai and local people to Wat Buddhapadipa, as will be discussed further below.

Figure 15: The Organisational Structure of Wat Buddhapadipa.



There have been two important phases in the organisational structure of Wat Buddhapadipa: one after its initial establishment and the current one, following the temple’s registration as a charity (Figure 15). As the first Thai temple in both the UK and Europe, it received substantial support from the SSC and the Thai government. Consequently, the Royal Thai Embassy played a significant role in its establishment, including purchasing the property, constructing an

<sup>285</sup> Cate, ‘Long-Distance Merit-Making: Art at a Thai Buddhist Temple in Wimbledon’, 365.

*ubosot*, and handling finances. Initially, monks were not involved in this process as the Embassy managed all aspects. Donations received by the temple had to be handed over to the Embassy, and any funds required had to be withdrawn from it, which was impractical.<sup>286</sup> This led Wat Buddhapadipa to register as its own charity in 2011 under ‘The Buddhapadipa Temple Trust’ reducing the Embassy’s involvement.<sup>287</sup>

Members of Wat Buddhapadipa consist of an abbot, resident monks, one full-time staff member, volunteers, and donors. Following the demise of the respected Phra Therawat Amaro (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Thep Phawana Mongkhon Wi, hereafter Phra Therawat Amaro), the late abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa in 2022, Chao Khun Laow transitioned from his position as abbot at Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley to Wat Buddhapadipa. In January 2023, the SSC officially designated him as the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa.<sup>288</sup> This is a distinctive practice, as abbots are typically promoted internally within the temple rather than relying on external appointment from the SSC, reflecting Wat Buddhapadipa importance as the centre for the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, which operates directly under the governance of the SSC, and because of its connection with the Thai government since its inception.

As of May 2023, the temple was home to eight monks. Currently, all resident monks originate from the parent temple. However, historically, when Wat Buddhapadipa stood as the sole Thai temple in the UK, it hosted monks from different temples across Thailand, who later went on to establish their own temples. For instance, the current abbot of Wat Buddharam Leeds, Phra Khru Watana Yasavaḍano (Royal ecclesiastical title and rank: Phra Khru Siri Dhammapadipa, hereafter Phra Khru Watana) initially resided at Wat Buddhapadipa. He was sent to oversee the branch temple, Wat Dhammapadipa in Edinburgh, and later established his own temple, Wat Buddharam Leeds, with the prestigious support from a high-ranking monk at Wat Saket, Bangkok. This practice of monks relocating from Wat Buddhapadipa or from its two branch temples to initiate other temples is typical, resulting in the formation of 13 temples that have their initial origins in Wat Buddhapadipa, as detailed in Figure 13.

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<sup>286</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, Interview by author, In Person, 14 September 2023.

<sup>287</sup> The Buddhapadipa Temple Trust, *Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 December 2021* (MGI Midgley Snelling LLP, 2023).

<sup>288</sup> Bandit Chanhena, ‘มส.ตั้ง “หลวงพ่อดลภก” ที่ปรึกษาเจ้าคณะภาค 3 “เจ้าคุณเหลา” เป็นเจ้าอาวาสวัดพุทธประทีป ลอนดอน (SSC appoints Luang Pho Alongkot as Advisor to the Abbot of Region 3 and Chao Khun Laow as Abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, London)’, *Daily News Online*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.dailynews.co.th/news/1944664/>.

While lay committees handle administrative tasks at many temples, at Wat Buddhapadipa the resident monks are primarily responsible for these duties. These tasks include accounting, arranging visas for monks, managing utility contracts, and overseeing construction projects. In addition, they are also responsible for the temple's activities, either leading the activities themselves, such as the retreats and Sunday School during dhamma talk sessions or assigning tasks to the head volunteers to manage during the *Songkran* and *Loy Krathong* festivals.<sup>289</sup> The proficiency of the monks at Wat Buddhapadipa in managing all these tasks is distinct. This may stem from the extended periods many of them have resided in the UK, with some having attained British citizenship. Their proficiency in English and their familiarity with UK laws and regulations distinguish them from monks at many newer temples.

Similar to most Thai temples in the UK, where the primary donors are typically Thai Buddhists rather than British Buddhists, Wat Buddhapadipa has predominantly attracted Thai donors since its establishment, including members of the royal family, elite groups, business owners, Thai diasporas and students. In his 1972 research, Phra Vorasak Candamitto noted that while British members visited the temple for Buddhist teachings, lectures, meditation sessions, and discussion groups, Thai Buddhists were more inclined to offer meals to the monks, make donations, and attend Buddhist and Thai traditional ceremonies and events.<sup>290</sup> This distinction between the two groups of Buddhists has persisted until the present day.

Even though Wat Buddhapadipa attracts the highest number of visitors among all Thai temples in the UK, Chao Khun Laow anticipates continuity of Buddhism in the UK as one of the temple's challenges.<sup>291</sup> He believes that establishing a temple in the UK is not difficult once a group of devoted Buddhist is present in that area. For the temple to be successful and enduring, significant factors include the monks' proficiency in legal knowledge, the English language, and personal sacrifice. Additionally, financial resources are crucial for establishing and maintaining the temple. With all these elements in place, Chao Khun Laow believes that the temple is in good order.

Nevertheless, while these internal factors can be managed within the temple, the main external obstacle to its continuity is obtaining visas for the monks. Without the continuity of monks, the

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<sup>289</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>290</sup> Candamitto, 'Buddhist Organizations in Great Britain', 34.

<sup>291</sup> Phra Laow Panyasiri, 'Interview by author', 2 May 2023, In Person.

continuity of Buddhism becomes challenging. Chao Khun Laow asserts that the UK government should recognise its importance in enabling monks to come because they serve as listeners and advisors, caring for both Thai and other individuals in society. He believes that they are as beneficial as therapists, and their presence in the UK would be advantageous to the government. If citizens lead better, more peaceful lives, they can work more effectively and contribute more to taxes. Conversely, a populace struggling with problems necessitates extensive governmental spending on housing, healthcare, and other services.<sup>292</sup> This external factor, namely visas, presents a challenge because it is beyond their control, a topic that I will examine in detail in Chapter 4.

As the first Thai temple in the UK, distinguished by its extensive history tied to the royal family and formal affiliation with the Thai government, Wat Buddhapadipa offers most of the religious rites, rituals, and ceremonies associated with Thai Buddhism as mentioned in the three categories in Chapter 1. These ceremonies are frequently attended by dignitaries from the Royal Thai Embassy in the UK, especially the merit-making ceremonies related to the Thai Royal Family such as King Vajiralongkorn's birthday, Queen Suthida's birthday, the Queen Mother's birthday, and the memorial service in remembrance of the late King Bhumibol.<sup>293</sup> Furthermore, Wat Buddhapadipa is also eligible to receive the Royal Kathin Robe (see Chapter 2), bestowed by a state dignitary or an organisation in the name of the King. In 2023, the Chargé d'Affaires of the Royal Thai Embassy in London, Mr. Natthaphong Sittichai, presided over the Royal Kathin Robe Offering Ceremony, accompanied by other officials and Buddhists from Thailand, as well as the Thai community in the UK.<sup>294</sup>

In addition, Wat Buddhapadipa puts on a prominent Thai merit-making ceremony known as *Thet Mahachat* (see Chapter 1). It focuses on the life of Prince Vessantara, the Buddha-to-be Bodhisatta in the life where he perfects the virtue of charity. Wat Buddhapadipa holds this ceremony annually, primarily to disseminate Buddhist teachings and raise funds for the

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<sup>292</sup> Phra Laow Panyasiri, 'Interview by author', 2 May 2023.

<sup>293</sup> 'Events – Wat Buddhapadipa London', The Buddhapadipa Temple London, accessed 29 December 2023, <https://www.watbuddhapadipa.org/calendar/>.

<sup>294</sup> 'อุปทูตฯ สถานเอกอัครราชทูต ณ กรุงลอนดอน เป็นประธานในพิธีถวายผ้าพระกฐินพระราชทาน ณ วัดพุทธปทีป (Charge d'Affaires of the Royal Thai Embassy in London Presided over the Royal Kathin Robe Offering Ceremony at Wat Buddhapadipa)', Facebook, Royal Thai Embassy, London UK, 22 December 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/ThaiEmbLondon/posts/pfbid02SrBqe2uhvrrCSQQ1RGedTfLCDoz3bJZuckDH2JHndybrsMp1rCZpunBBQgPGRd5xl>.

temple's maintenance.<sup>295</sup> In 2024, Phramaha Bhatsakorn, Assistant Abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, who was residing at Oxford Buddha Vihara for his studies, also organised the *The Mahachat* ceremony at Oxford Buddha Vihara to raise funds.

Two further significant Thai cultural events held are the *Songkran* Festival and *Loy Krathong* Festival. Both are organised in the manner typical of temples in Thailand, including food markets, Thai cultural performances, the tradition of pouring water on Buddha statues during the Songkran Festival, and floating *krathongs*, lotus-shaped vessels made of banana leaves, during the Loy Krathong Festival. In addition, beauty contests featuring participants dressed in Thai traditional attire are held, known as Miss Songkran and Miss Noppamas respectively. These contests usually take place at schools, universities, or official venues in Thailand and serve to promote Thailand's tourism campaign. Having all these Thai cultural elements in the UK, Wat Buddhapadipa is more than just a spiritual place for Buddhists; it fosters a cultural identity of Thainess, paralleling Cate's analysis of the murals on the *ubosot*'s walls.<sup>296</sup> Therefore, it is unsurprising that Wat Buddhapadipa has the highest number of participants at such events, sometimes more than 10,000 people attending, comprising approximately 60% locals and 40% Thai.<sup>297</sup>

Wat Buddhapadipa extends its role in the community through the provision of a Sunday school. This is dedicated to teaching Thai language, traditional dance and music, Buddhist customs, and cultural values to the younger generation, ensuring the preservation and continuation of Thainess abroad. Apart from learning how to read and write in Thai, other activities include chanting, meditating, learning the proper way to bow to monks, learning Thai traditional dance and Thai instruments, receiving first aid training, and participating in the *Wai Khru* Ceremony, a Thai ritual where students pay respects and express gratitude to their teachers.<sup>298</sup> The Sunday school not only provides language and cultural education, as well as Buddhist teachings, but also serves as a gathering place where children of Thai descent can connect with their heritage, build friendships, and strengthen their cultural identity in a supportive environment. Through

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<sup>295</sup> เทศน์มหาชาติ (The Mahachat), Facebook, Buddhapadipa Temple, 11 September 2023, [https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=691985196293713&set=a.551162747042626&type=3&locale=en\\_GB&paipv=0&eav=AfbyGZox5RkHFX8sQINnbU8LErFLazpEpZbAmmgyDLix5zd75F2IH\\_IU7iUFQodhu2w&rdi](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=691985196293713&set=a.551162747042626&type=3&locale=en_GB&paipv=0&eav=AfbyGZox5RkHFX8sQINnbU8LErFLazpEpZbAmmgyDLix5zd75F2IH_IU7iUFQodhu2w&rdi).

<sup>296</sup> Cate, 'Long-Distance Merit-Making: Art at a Thai Buddhist Temple in Wimbledon', 54.

<sup>297</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>298</sup> 'Buddhapadipa Sunday School', Facebook, Buddhapadipa Sunday School, accessed 29 December 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064791784160>.

these educational efforts, Wat Buddhapadipa plays a crucial role in nurturing future ambassadors of Thai culture in the UK and in passing on the traditions and knowledge of Thai Buddhism to future generations. I will explore this further in Chapter 6.

Wat Buddhapadipa actively engages in a variety of other community services. These activities include school and group visits, meditation retreats for Thai and non-Thai speakers, the inter-faith meetings, and visits to prisons, care homes, hospices, and hospitals by invitation.<sup>299</sup> Wat Buddhapadipa extends its educational outreach to students and other individuals in the UK through school and group visits. A typical visit lasts up to one hour, featuring a guided tour of the grounds and the *ubosot* which includes an introduction to the temple, the life of Buddha, insights into monastic life, a brief meditation session, and concludes with a question-and-answer session.<sup>300</sup> Chao Khun Laow notes that two to three schools are scheduled for visits each day, further exemplifying the temple's esteemed reputation.<sup>301</sup>

Wat Buddhapadipa continues the legacy of the original mission of Phramaha Chodok and Phramaha Vichitra to propagate *vipassana* meditation in the UK by organising meditation retreats for non-Thai speakers three times a year in spring, summer, and winter. Each retreat lasts five to seven days and typically has around 13 to 14 participants.<sup>302</sup> For Thai people, the annual 9-day residential retreat for female lay members is usually held in July each year, while the 9-day ordination ceremony for male lay members is held just before the Buddhist Lent. Phramaha Bhatsakorn notes that the temple previously held retreats monthly, but providing meals for the participants posed a significant challenge. This is because the full-time staff, already tasked with preparing meals for the monks, found it overwhelming to simultaneously manage the meals of additional retreat participants.<sup>303</sup> Further detailed discussion on this topic will be found in Chapter 6.

In addition to its involvement in community services, Wat Buddhapadipa plays a pivotal role in unifying Thai monks from the Mahanikai lineage across the UK. The temple stands as the centre for the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, further

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<sup>299</sup> *Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 December 2021*, 2.

<sup>300</sup> 'School and Group Visits', The Buddhapadipa Temple London, accessed 1 January 2024, <https://www.watbuddhapadipa.org/school-group-visits/>.

<sup>301</sup> Phra Laow Panyasiri, 'Interview by author', 2 May 2023.

<sup>302</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>303</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

details of which are provided below. During my fieldwork on 26 March 2023, Wat Buddhapadipa hosted the annual robe offering ceremony aimed at supporting the council's basic needs. Representative monks from 24 temples attended, led by Chao Khun Laow. Additionally, around 100 or more lay community members from various temples contributed donations to support the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in their international missions and sustain the presence of Thai temples in the UK. This exemplifies the unity among the majority of the Thai Buddhist community in the UK, including both monks and laypeople.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Wat Buddhapadipa, along with many other Thai temples in the UK and around the world, conducted some of their activities online such as morning and evening chanting, short meditation sessions, daily Dhamma talks, and various other chantings, all live streamed on their Facebook page. The situation compelled the temple to make good use of technology, thereby enhancing new methods of propagating Buddhism. As of 2023, the temple continues to use live streaming on their Facebook page for these activities to engage their lay members. Chao Khun Laow notes that this approach brings Buddhism directly into the homes of laypeople, as they no longer need to travel to the temple.<sup>304</sup>

Wat Buddhapadipa does not have a crematorium or a *chedi* (small stupa) to house the relics or ashes of the deceased, as is common in most temples in Thailand. Instead, Thai temples in the UK, including Wat Buddhapadipa, serve as places to conduct religious ceremonies, such as chanting and merit-making for the deceased. As part of the temple's evolving role in supporting the Thai community in the UK and a response to COVID-19 pandemic, a group of laypeople at Wat Buddhapadipa formed the Thai Funeral Mutual Society in the UK in 2020. This group provides emotional and practical support to members during times of bereavement and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

At Wat Buddhapadipa, funeral arrangements are handled similarly to other Thai temples: the cremation is held at a local crematorium, while the chanting and funeral rites, often accompanied by a portrait of the deceased, are conducted at the temple. Monks may also be invited to perform religious services at the crematorium. However, unlike most other Thai temples, Wat Buddhapadipa permits the ashes to be scattered or buried on temple grounds or in the pond. There was once a proposal to construct a structure resembling a stupa, to house

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<sup>304</sup> Phra Laow Panyasiri, 'Interview by author', 2 May 2023.

the ashes in a more orderly fashion. Although most members of the committee supported the idea, it was ultimately not approved due to concerns over long-term maintenance and administrative burden. Since no one was willing to take on that responsibility, the proposal was dropped. In the end, the decision was made that ashes may be scattered, but no plaques, markers, or symbolic stupas would be allowed, mainly due to limited space and the desire to avoid future complications.<sup>305</sup>

### 3.3 Wat Arun Norfolk

Wat Arun Norfolk is the first overseas branch of Wat Arun in Bangkok. It was established in 2016 and registered with the Charity Commission as ‘Wat Arun Norfolk UK’ in 2017. The establishment of the temple was inspired by the aspirations of Thai Buddhists living in the UK, who wished to have their own temple in Norwich. In pursuit of this vision, members of the Thai community sought advice from the abbot of Wat Buddharam Leeds, Phra Khru Watana. Concurrently, by what may be deemed fate or coincidence, Chao Khun Torsak Sudaravādī (Royal ecclesiastical title and rank: Phra Rat Maha Chetiyaphiban, hereafter Chao Khun Torsak), the assistant abbot of Wat Arun in Thailand, was looking to establish a temple in Europe and had plans to set one up in Germany. Phra Khru Watana had connections with Chao Khun Torsak and mentioned the ambitions of Thai Buddhists in Norwich, thereby bridging the Thai community in the UK and the high-ranking monk in Thailand.<sup>306</sup>

Consequently, Chao Khun Torsak travelled to the UK to conduct religious affairs and visit Thai communities in Norwich. They requested his patronage to establish a temple. Upon consideration, he found the city to be peaceful and suitable for establishing a temple that would serve as a centre for disseminating Buddhism and Thai cultural traditions in the region.<sup>307</sup> After this decision, the Thai community gathered funds by selling food at a Thai Food Festival and also received a contribution from Chao Khun Torsak himself. With these funds, they embarked on their mission, renting a house in a residential area of Norwich’s city centre. However, the house, being at the end of the street with parking space limited to two cars, led to traffic congestion and accessibility issues for nearby residents. Moreover, during events like *tod pha*

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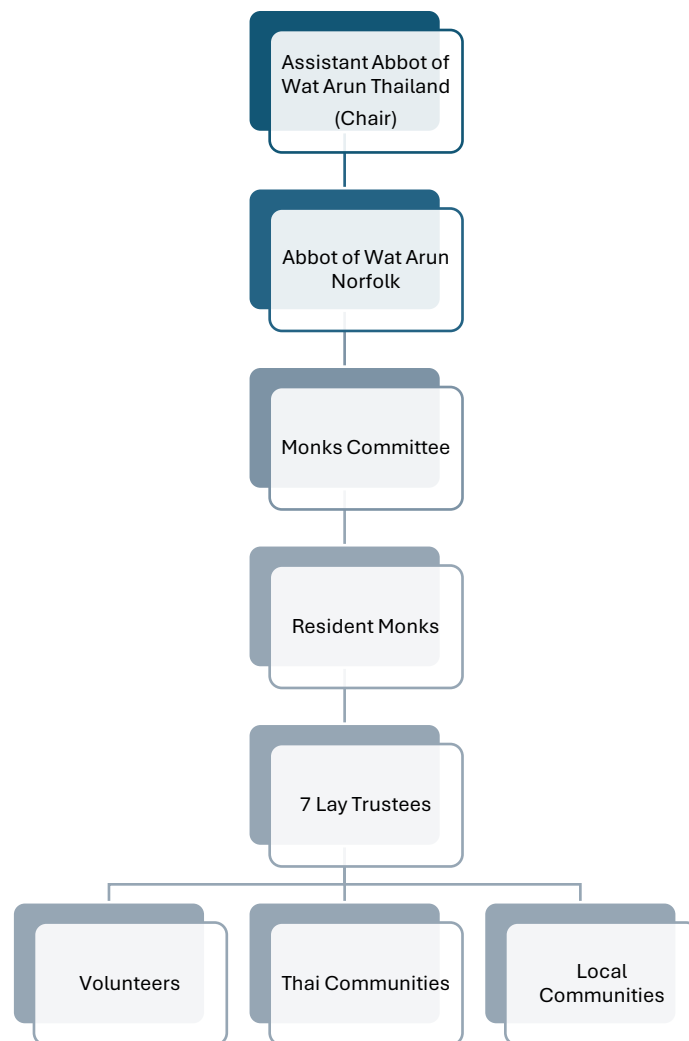
<sup>305</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, ‘Interview by author’, 14 September 2023.

<sup>306</sup> Phramaha Jirawath Ciraputtiyo, Interview by author, Phone Interview, 28 December 2023.

<sup>307</sup> ‘ประวัติวัดอรุณสหราชอาณาจักร เมืองนอร์วิช มณฑลนอร์โฟล์ค แห่งสหราชอาณาจักร (History of Wat Arun United Kingdom, Norwich, Norfolk County, United Kingdom)’, Wat Arun Norfolk, 2021.

*pa* or the robe offering ceremony, attendance exceeded 50 people, causing noise disturbance in the neighbourhood. Consequently, the council instructed the temple to relocate.<sup>308</sup> In mid-2018 Wat Arun Norfolk therefore relocated to a farmhouse outside the city. This new location is more suitable for organising events due to the sufficient parking space. However, it is rented so they are actively searching to purchase their own property and have already secured a mortgage from the bank.<sup>309</sup> This incident involving noise control is among the various challenges I will delve into further in Chapter 6.

Figure 16: The Organisational Structure of Wat Arun Norfolk.



<sup>308</sup> Paul, 'Interview by author', 24 August 2022, In Person; Daraphun Mitchell, 'Interview by author', 23 May 2023, Phone Interview.

<sup>309</sup> Daraphun Mitchell, 'Interview by author', 23 May 2023.

The organisational structure of Wat Arun Norfolk is led by Chao Khun Torsak, the founder of the temple and chair of the charity. Despite spending most of his time in Thailand and only visiting the UK temple for special events, he retains the highest authority in decision-making, alongside the current abbot of Wat Arun Norfolk, Phramaha Jirawath Ciraputtiyo (Royal ecclesiastical rank and title: Phra Khru Palad, hereafter Than Jirawath) and other members in the monks' committee.<sup>310</sup> This committee in question consists of Chao Khun Torsak, Than Jirawath, and other monks from Wat Arun, both in Thailand and the UK. The committee makes most decisions, even when the chair and the abbot are in Thailand, conducting meetings online in such instances. These decisions include selecting monks to join Wat Arun Norfolk, scheduling ceremonies and events, and determining the activities for those events. However, for day-to-day tasks or the actual organisation of events, the abbot delegates responsibility to the acting abbot or the monks currently residing at the temple to make decisions when he is in Thailand.<sup>311</sup>

Monks residing at Wat Arun Norfolk come from both the parent temples and other temples not affiliated with Wat Arun in Thailand. During my visit in March 2023, there were only two monks residing at the temple: the acting abbot, Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi (hereafter Phramaha Phanuwat), and the resident monk, Phramaha Natthawut Thannavudho (hereafter Phramaha Natthawut). Phramaha Phanuwat was from northern Thailand, and Phramaha Natthawut was from Bangkok. Both originated from separate temples in Thailand, distinct from the parent temple of Wat Arun Norfolk. This recruitment process differs from the other five case study temples, where monks are either from their parent temple or branch temples in Thailand (see Chapter 4). Monks at Wat Arun Norfolk may be colleagues from the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus' training programme (see Chapter 1) or have prior acquaintances from Thailand and come through recommendations from monks who have previously been there. However, the recruitment process at Wat Arun Norfolk is similar to that of many other Thai temples in the UK, where monks are not always sourced from their parent temples or branch temples. The abbot of the temple, Than Jirawath, notes that although these monks may not come from the parent temple, they are very familiar and trustworthy. Most of them will reside at Wat Arun outside of the Buddhist Lent period, while monks from the parent temple typically reside during the Buddhist Lent (see Chapter 1).<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Phramaha Jirawath Ciraputtiyo, 'Interview by author', 28 December 2023.

<sup>311</sup> Phramaha Jirawath Ciraputtiyo, 'Interview by author', 28 December 2023.

<sup>312</sup> Phramaha Jirawath Ciraputtiyo, 'Interview by author', 28 December 2023.

Unlike other temples where multiple monks serve as trustees of the charity, Wat Arun Norfolk has a board composed of seven laypeople and only one monk (Figure 16). This structure may reflect the transitory nature of monk residency at the temple. Due to visa restrictions, it has been difficult to maintain a stable, long-term monastic presence since most monks enter the UK on six-month visitor visas. Furthermore, many of the monks are not directly affiliated with the parent temple in Thailand, which adds to the need for lay leadership in administrative matters. Only in 2023 did the temple obtain a sponsor license, enabling it to issue long-term visas for monks. As a result, the current abbot now holds a two-year religious worker visa, a development that has contributed to greater continuity and stability within the monastic community. Despite their short stays, resident monks at Wat Arun Norfolk carry out both spiritual and administrative duties, including accounting. When asked how these responsibilities are managed given the short-term nature of monastic visas, the acting abbot, Phramaha Phanuwat, explained that a well-established internal system ensures the smooth handover of tasks between incoming and outgoing monks.<sup>313</sup>

The temple community consists of the abbot, resident monks, volunteers, and donors. Typically, two monks reside at the temple, although this number increases to five during the Buddhist Lent, reflecting broader trends in Thai temples across the UK. Unlike temples such as Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches, and particularly Amaravati and its affiliated monasteries, where most monks are British citizens or have acquired residency, Wat Arun Norfolk has relied on short-term visiting monks. During periods of absence, such as when the abbot is in Thailand, an acting abbot or designated monk oversees temple affairs. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when international travel was restricted, the temple invited a monk from Wat Santiwongsaram in Birmingham to temporarily reside and provide spiritual leadership.<sup>314</sup>

Much like the majority of Thai temples in the UK, where donations form the primary source of income—especially those received during the Kathin Ceremony—Wat Arun Norfolk also predominantly relies on this special event for its main financial support. However, its Kathin Ceremony is more special than that of other temples. As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, its parent temple in Thailand is among the 16 royal temples designated to receive the

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<sup>313</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi, Interview by author, In Person, 17 April 2023.

<sup>314</sup> Daraphun Mitchell, 'Interview by author', 23 May 2023.

presentation of Royal Kathin Robe. According to one of the temple’s main volunteers, Daraphun Mitchell, the primary donors for the ceremony are mostly from Thailand, with many people reserving their spot as the main donors for this ceremony several years in advance.<sup>315</sup> For this ceremony, the temple rents a university hall, which typically accommodates around 2,000 participants. This highlights the importance of the ceremony, particularly its association with the royal family, which adds an extra layer of significance and attracts more people to participate, thereby securing a reliable income for the temple (Table 5).

Table 5: Sources of UK Temple Funds.

<b>Source of Temple Fund</b>	<b>Description</b>
Donations from Devotees	Contributions from regular visitors or members of the community.
Religious Ceremonies	Income from hosting funerals, blessings, and traditional Buddhist events such as the Kathin Ceremony, where devotees make merit through offerings and donations.
Festivals & Events	Funds raised during special events, including food sales, raffles, and offerings such as flowers, candles, or <i>krathongs</i> for the <i>Loy Krathong</i> Festival.
Government Grants & Schemes	Includes funding from local authorities (e.g. Halton Borough Council) and environmental/community grant providers (e.g. Veolia Environmental Trust).
Gift Aid	A UK government scheme that allows temples (as registered charities) to claim back 25p for every £1 donated by UK taxpayers, at no extra cost to the donor.
Business Ventures	Income from food stalls.
Online Donations	Contributions through the temple’s website or donation platforms.
Voluntary Service Income	Donations received during voluntary services like meditation classes, etc.

Besides the Kathin Ceremony, the Songkran festival is another significant event that attracts many participants and contributes to a considerable amount of donations. This cultural event

<sup>315</sup> Daraphun Mitchell, ‘Interview by author’, 23 May 2023.

serves not only as a means of maintaining Thai identity but also to encapsulate the essence of Thailand, making the Thai diaspora feel more at home in a foreign land. During my visit to the Songkran Festival in April 2023, I was impressed by how well the temple was set up, featuring elements of Thai cultural practices such as ‘chedi sai’ or sand pagodas, marquees selling Thai food, and merchandise including reed mats, triangular backrest pillows, and round wooden trays characteristic of Northern Thai tradition. I was also fascinated by how well the participants dressed up in Thai traditional costumes. During my interview, I discovered that the tradition of dressing in Thai traditional attire is part of the campaign ‘nung sin, mai sai san,’ which translates to ‘wear a Thai sarong, not a short skirt.’ According to Chao Khun Torsak, this concept stems from the practice of visiting the renowned Phra Prang of Wat Arun in Thailand. At this site, sarongs are provided for female tourists to wear over shorts, ensuring modesty and respect for both the place and the monastic community.<sup>316</sup> This concept was also transferred and applied at Wat Arun Norfolk in the UK, serving as a model for Thai temples abroad to promote the wearing of appropriate attire, such as sarongs or long pants, by those visiting the temple.

Beyond its unique Kathin Ceremony and distinctive Songkran Festival, Wat Arun Norfolk hosts a variety of religious ceremonies and community activities. In addition to the three fundamental categories of religious rites outlined in Chapter 1, Wat Arun Norfolk offers daily online morning and evening chanting, as well as Dhamma talks every Sunday. However, the temple is unable to conduct ordination ceremonies due to the absence of an *upajjhāya*, or preceptor. In terms of community activities and supports, Wat Arun Norfolk welcomes school visits twice annually and participates in religious studies classes at local schools approximately six to seven times a year.<sup>317</sup> Furthermore, in 2020, Wat Arun Norfolk established an alms-house as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chao Khun Torsak explains that this initiative was inspired by the Supreme Patriarch’s vision, advocating for monks with the capability to set up alms-houses to support individuals impacted by the pandemic.<sup>318</sup> In pursuit of this goal, Wat Arun Norfolk, with support from devotees, other Thai residents, and Thai restaurants in

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<sup>316</sup> ‘วัดอรุณสหราชอาณาจักร ชวนคนไทย-ต่างชาติ “นุ่งซิ่นไม่นุ่งสั้น” เข้าวัด (Wat Arun United Kingdom Invites Thai and Foreign People: “Wear a Thai Sarong, Not a Short Skirt,” to the Temple)’, *Thairath Online*, 25 April 2017, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/bangkok/922042>; Dr. Pang Chinphong, ‘วัดอรุณสหราชอาณาจักร ดัน “นุ่งซิ่นไม่นุ่งสั้น” (Wat Arun United Kingdom Promotes ‘Wear a Thai Sarong, Not a Short Skirt’), *Manager Online*, 24 April 2017, <https://mgronline.com/qol/detail/9600000041388>.

<sup>317</sup> Daraphun Mitchell, ‘Interview by author’, 23 May 2023.

<sup>318</sup> ‘วัดอรุณสหราชอาณาจักร ในอังกฤษได้รางวัลชนะเลิศรับมือโควิด-19 (Wat Arun United Kingdom in England Won the Award for Best Response to COVID-19)’, *Stars News*, 9 October 2020, <https://www.starsnews.net/?p=7022>.

Norwich, provided boxed meals to hospitals, medical staff, and the vulnerable in the area. This act of compassion was recognised with the Winner Charity Champion Covid Award from NHS Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals in 2020.<sup>319</sup> Phra Maha Phanuwat notes that an ongoing project involves purchasing a property to establish a stable temple in the future, along with two key facilities: a meditation hall for dedicated lay practitioners and a shelter for Thai individuals experiencing hardship. The shelter would provide temporary refuge for those facing challenges such as relationship breakdowns or lack of support, allowing them to stay at the temple, contribute to its activities, and regain stability before moving on.<sup>320</sup>

### 3.4 Wat Phra Singh UK

Wat Phra Singh UK, the first international extension of the Wat Phra Singh temple in Chiang Mai, Thailand, was established by Englishman Tony Collacott and his wife, Kwanjit Collacott. Tony was inspired by his ordination experience in 2008 at Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Mai. He recalls, “I was overwhelmed by the experience and promised the abbot of Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Mai, that I would do something to repay the honour they bestowed upon me. This temple is the fulfilment of that promise.”<sup>321</sup> Hence, in the late 2011, he sought permission from Luang Por Sopano, the current abbot of Wat Phra Singh in Thailand, and Phra Therawat Amaro, the late abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, who was the head of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, to establish the first overseas branch of the Wat Phra Singh in Cheshire. After obtaining the permissions, he extended an invitation to Than Thirasak (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Kru Srisinghakhitwithe), the current abbot of Wat Phra Singh UK, and Phra Kru Charin of Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Mai, to visit the UK to begin the establishment of the new temple.<sup>322</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, Wat Phra Singh in Thailand is one of the oldest temples in Northern Thailand and is renowned for enshrining a replica of the ancient Buddha statue *Phra Phuttha Sihing* (see Chapter 2). Mirroring its parent temple, Wat Phra Singh UK maintains the Northern Thai tradition and also houses a replica of this revered Buddha image.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> *Stars News*, ‘วัดอรุณสหราชอาณาจักร ในอังกฤษได้รางวัลชนะเลิศรับมือโควิด-19 (Wat Arun United Kingdom in England Won the Award for Best Response to COVID-19)’.

<sup>320</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi, ‘Interview by author’, 17 April 2023.

<sup>321</sup> Tony Collacott, ‘Interview by Author’, 30 March 2023, In Person.

<sup>322</sup> ‘Background’, Wat Phra Singh UK, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.watphrasinghuk.org/background/>.

<sup>323</sup> ‘Our Temple’, Wat Phra Singh UK, accessed 15 December 2023, <https://www.watphrasinghuk.org/our-temple/>.

The UK temple was officially registered as a charitable trust in 2012 and acquired the property, formerly the Waterloo Hotel in Runcorn, Cheshire, in January 2013. Tony mentioned the notable coincidence that atop the building was already a stone lion, which symbolically aligns with the name of the temple.<sup>324</sup> In addition, during their first visit to this hotel, Than Thisarak, Tony, and Kwanjit entered one of the bedrooms and were greeted by the sight of six Bodhi tree leaves framed and mounted on the wall. The Bodhi tree holds significant importance in Buddhism, as it is the tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment. They took this as a clear sign that the building was destined to become a temple. Consequently, this eight-bedroom hotel, notable for its unique architecture and spacious rooms, built in 1830, was transformed into a Thai Buddhist temple and meditation centre.<sup>325</sup>

The temple is currently planning to construct an *ubosot*, with a design that adheres to Northern Thai architectural traditions, thereby reinforcing its cultural connection to Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai.<sup>326</sup> Apart from its Northern Thai aspect, Wat Phra Singh UK mirrors many Thai temples in Thailand that embody not only Theravada Buddhism but also include shrines dedicated to Hindu gods, and other spiritual beings (see Chapter 1). Upon arriving at Wat Phra Singh UK, one encounters statues of Naga (Thai: *Nak*, Pali: *Nāga*), a type of serpent or dragon-like deity prevalent in the mythological traditions of many South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures. There is a large golden statue of Ganesha, one of the most well-known and widely worshipped deities in the Indic pantheon, and a wooden shrine for other deities next to it.

The hierarchical organisational structure of Wat Phra Singh UK is straightforward, as explained by Tony: the seniority lies primarily with the monks, and Than Thirasak, the current abbot, is always the most senior. As Tony puts it, “this is his temple,” highlighting the abbot’s foremost position.<sup>327</sup> Below the monks is the board of trustees, which consists of one monk (the abbot) and five laypeople including Tony and his wife (Figure 17).<sup>328</sup> He suggests that if a new temple wishes to establish a board of trustees, it is better to keep the number of board members small. This recommendation is based on his experience with the complexities involved in changing trustees, which, while relatively straightforward with the Charity Commission, has become

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<sup>324</sup> Tony Collacott, ‘Interview by Author’, 30 March 2023.

<sup>325</sup> Wat Phra Singh UK, ‘Background’.

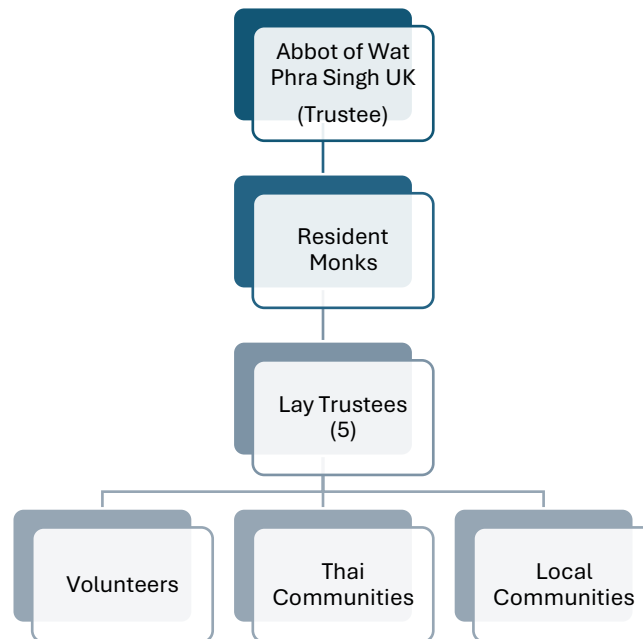
<sup>326</sup> ‘New Hall Project’, Wat Phra Singh UK, accessed 5 October 2021, <https://www.watphrasinghuk.org/new-hall-project/>.

<sup>327</sup> Tony Collacott, ‘Interview by Author’, 30 March 2023.

<sup>328</sup> Tony Collacott, ‘Interview by Author’, 30 March 2023.

more challenging with banks due to anti-money laundering regulations. Additionally, he emphasised that being a trustee is not merely about contributing work to the temple; it carries legal responsibilities, with the potential for legal consequences, including imprisonment, if obligations are not correctly fulfilled.<sup>329</sup>

Figure 17: The Organisational Structure of Wat Phra Singh UK.



Members of Wat Phra Singh UK include an abbot, resident monks, volunteers, and donors. The abbot is always Than Thirasak, even when he is out of the country due to visa regulations. He can only be in the country for two years and must take a one-year cooling-off period, a topic I will return to in Chapter 4. There are usually five monks present at Wat Phra Singh UK, especially during the Buddhist Lent, to ensure that the Kathin Ceremony can be conducted. It is compulsory to have five monks residing at the temple throughout the entire Buddhist Lent period. The monks at the temple in question all originate from Wat Phra Singh Chiang Mai in Thailand and are on either two-year or three-year visas, as the temple has already obtained a sponsor licence (see Chapter 4). Although they are from the parent temple, this overseas branch

<sup>329</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

sponsors their visas, travel costs, and living expenses in the UK. Additionally, each monk receives a donation of £2,000 upon their return to Thailand.<sup>330</sup>

The primary roles and responsibilities of the monks at Wat Phra Singh UK are centred on spiritual duties, including leading religious rituals and meditation teachings. The abbot is mainly involved in decision-making during the trustee meetings, which occur four times a year, or as needed, whenever a decision is necessary. The monks at Wat Phra Singh UK are less involved in managerial roles because Tony, along with his wife, handles all the paperwork, accounting, construction projects, and day-to-day tasks (see Chapter 6). In addition to fulfilling their spiritual duties, most monks at Wat Phra Singh UK also attend English language classes for two hours a day, twice a week. Tony provides English language tuition for the monks because he understands that effective communication is crucial for spreading Buddhism. This initiative is aimed at overcoming language barriers. Additionally, Tony, along with other Thai supporters, frequently takes the monks to diverse locations in the broader community such as museums and National Trust places. These experiences are designed to immerse them in local culture, enriching their understanding and potentially fostering advancements at their parent temple in Thailand. Tony envisions having more monks at the temple who are outgoing and adept at communication at all levels. However, the authority to select monks for travel to the UK rests with the parent temple in Thailand, not with him.<sup>331</sup>

Wat Phra Singh UK, despite being relatively new compared to other Thai temples in the UK, has already successfully obtained the Sponsor License, allowing them to grant long-term visas to monks. Moreover, within just two years of registering as a charitable trust, they have already purchased their own property. Additionally, they have received approval for two planning applications, as well as grants from both the government and a private company. This advancement in establishing the temple is quite distinctive and can perhaps be attributed to the temple's unique position of having an English founder. Even so, Tony still encountered challenges beyond his control, such as the monks' language barrier, as mentioned above, and issues with the UK Border Agency (see Chapter 4).

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<sup>330</sup> Kwanjit Collacott, 'Interview by author', 18 May 2023, Phone Interview. Despite the traditional prohibition in the 10<sup>th</sup> precept against novices, monks and nuns handling money, monks are usually given money in Thailand and Cambodia. In Burma and Sri Lanka, it is not usual and gifts are usually in other forms.

<sup>331</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

At Wat Phra Singh UK, the religious and cultural practices closely mirror those found at other Thai temples in the UK, offering a blend of traditional ceremonies and community engagement. These activities include free meditation classes, school and university visits, scouting groups working to earn their Faith Badge, and visits from interested parties including Women's Institutes, Probus Groups, and the University of the Third Age.<sup>332</sup> In addition, there are the temple's anniversary celebrations, various religious rituals, the Songkran Festival, and the Kathin Ceremony. Although Wat Phra Singh UK is eligible to receive the Royal Kathin Robe (see Chapter 2), similar to Wat Buddhapadipa and Wat Arun Norfolk, whose parent temple is classified as royal temple, Kwanjit mentioned that they have not pursued this option because of the additional costs involved.<sup>333</sup> What sets Wat Phra Singh UK apart and makes it distinctive from all other Thai temples in the UK is the ordination ceremonies on the canal. Due to the absence of an *ubosot*, the temple, situated adjacent to the Bridgewater Canal, hired a boat to conduct ordinations. The monks established a sacred area on the boat, using the canal as a *nimit* or marker to demarcate the designated area. This arrangement allows them to perform *sanghakamma*, in this case, the ordination ceremonies (see Chapter 1).<sup>334</sup>

### 3.5 Amaravati

Amaravati Buddhist Monastery (hereafter Amaravati) is a monastery in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah, affiliated with Wat Nong Pah Pong in Thailand, Ajahn Chah's original temple. It was founded in 1984 in rural Hertfordshire, at the eastern edge of the Chiltern Hills.<sup>335</sup> The name Amaravati, meaning 'deathless realm,' was chosen by Ajahn Sumedho, the first abbot of Amaravati, to reflect the concept of the deathless or emptiness, spiritual ideas he felt were largely absent in British culture.<sup>336</sup> In 2010, Ajahn Sumedho handed over the position of abbot to Ajahn Amaro, an English monk who had previously served for fourteen years as

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<sup>332</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

<sup>333</sup> Kwanjit Collacott, 'Interview by author', 18 May 2023.

<sup>334</sup> This practice of using the river as a *sima* boundary took place in October 1979, when the late Ven. Dr. Saddhatissa, the senior Theravada monk in Britain at the time and Senior Incumbent of the London Buddhist Vihara, performed *upasampadā* (higher ordination) for two *sāmaṇeras* from Cittaviveka in the River Thames. See 'How the Buddha Came to Sussex', Temple Forest Monastery, accessed 27 March 2025, <https://forestmonastery.org/how-the-buddha-came-to-sussex>. The Oxford Buddha Vihara also used this method before having their own *sima* installed.

<sup>335</sup> Amaravati Buddh. Monast., 'Amaravati Buddhist Monastery'.

<sup>336</sup> George Sharp, *The Chithurst Story: Before and Beyond* (2018), 126, [https://buddhistuniversity.net/content/booklets/chithurst-story\\_sharp-george](https://buddhistuniversity.net/content/booklets/chithurst-story_sharp-george).

co-abbot of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in Redwood Valley, California.<sup>337</sup> Amaravati is the largest and most prominent Thai Forest Sangha institution in the UK and is a branch of Chithurst Buddhist Monastery (Chithurst), the first international branch of Wat Nong Pah Pong. Around the same time, other branch monasteries were also established, including Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery in Belsay (1981) and Hartridge Buddhist Monastery in Honiton (1986).

Prior to the establishment of these four monasteries, the English Sangha Trust (EST) invited several monks to the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara in London in the hope of achieving its goal of promoting and furthering Buddhist teachings in the UK by providing, maintaining, and supporting residential centres for Theravada monks.<sup>338</sup> These monks include the Canadian monk Ānandabodhi who had been ordained in Burma, Phra Maha Chodok and Phra Maha Vichitra Tissadatto, the *vipassana* meditation teachers from Wat Mahathat and Ajahn Maha Bua (1913–2011) and Ajahn Pañnavaddho (1925–2004) from the Thai Forest Tradition of the Thammayut lineage in 1956, 1964 and 1974, respectively. Only with the visit of Ajahn Chah and his two Western disciples, Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Khemadhammo (1944–present), in May 1977 did the EST finally achieve its goal after more than two decades.<sup>339</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 1, the distinction between Mahanikai and Thammayut is imperceptible from the perspective of lay Buddhists and some individuals might mistakenly perceive that members of both sects could reside in the same temple. George Sharp (1933–2022), a primary founder of Chithurst and a secretary who later became the chairman of the EST, visited Ajahn Maha Bua at Wat Baan Tard, intending to invite monks from both sects to establish the Forest Sangha in England and operate under the EST, and expecting all monks to belong to one monastic order.<sup>340</sup> He did not foresee any significant issues with this plan, yet, as he conceded, “I was wrong.”<sup>341</sup> Ajahn Maha Bua’s response to his request was, in Sharp’s words, “quite emphatic; he was not prepared to tell any of his monks to join such a venture”, but if any monks wished to participate, they should do so of their own accord. Sharp was disappointed but accepted that these two monastic lineages were firmly established as separate conventions, and

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<sup>337</sup> Amaravati Buddh. Monast., ‘Amaravati Buddhist Monastery’.

<sup>338</sup> Sharp, *The Chithurst Story*, 30.

<sup>339</sup> Sharp, *The Chithurst Story*, 51.

<sup>340</sup> Sharp, *The Chithurst Story*, 51.

<sup>341</sup> Sharp, *The Chithurst Story*, 45.

there was no further discussion or debate on the matter.<sup>342</sup> Thus, only one lineage of the Thai Forest Tradition, belonging to Mahanikai, was established in the UK under the EST.

While there is no Thammayut Thai Forest Tradition from Ajahn Maha Bua's lineage in the UK, international branches exist in Darwin, Australia, and Colorado, the United States. However, the three temples of the Thammayut Thai Forest Tradition in the UK are not derived from Ajahn Maha Bua's lineage but rather from other disciples of Ajahn Mun, as in the case of Wat Sri Intra Atula (see below). Contrary to the forest temples of Ajahn Chah's lineage, which primarily cater to Western monastics and followers, temples of the Thammayut Thai Forest Tradition in the UK predominantly serve Thai Buddhists and are mainly staffed by Thai monks, since their head monks are all Thai. To this date, it can be argued that among Thai temples, both in and outside of Thailand, the lineage of Ajahn Chah has attracted the largest number of international adherents, including Westerners and other non-Thai-speaking individuals, and in particular long-term ordained monks and nuns. This can be attributed to the parent temple and all the other international branch temples' unique ordination procedures, which will be further explored in Chapter 5.

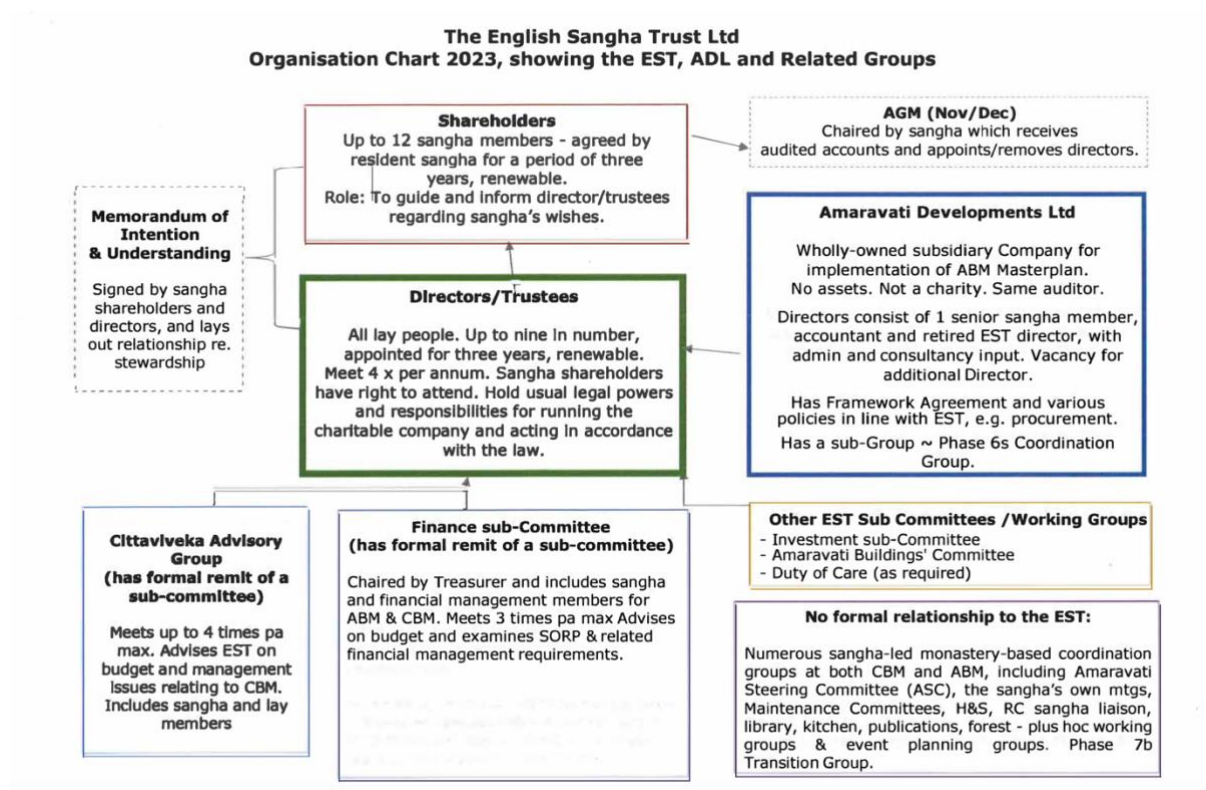
Amaravati was established five years after the founding of Chithurst, primarily to expand residential space. In a recorded talk marking Amaravati's 30th anniversary, Ajahn Sumedho noted that within five years of moving to Chithurst, the residence had become overcrowded with monks and nuns. As the property was located on a narrow road, he also wished to avoid causing inconvenience to local residents. He also wanted to preserve Chithurst as a secluded forest atmosphere, in keeping with the character of the land. In addition, he was looking for somewhere north of London, as before the M25 was built, travelling to Chithurst was complicated and lay supporters often complained. He began searching for a new place, considering options such as prisons and borstals, but found them too depressing. Eventually, he discovered a site owned by Bedford Council: a former wooden hut school for children with learning difficulties. The place suited his vision, as it was neither an elegant nor a listed building, nor a national treasure, which meant he could more or less do what he wanted with it. Although the property itself looked more like a military camp than a monastery, it was set in a beautiful location. He described his first impression as seeing a 'huge dome of sky,' as the

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<sup>342</sup> Sharp, *The Chithurst Story*, 51.

site sat on top of a hill.<sup>343</sup> His decision to locate Amaravati to the north of London was intended to accommodate the needs of laypeople, reflecting its role as a centre that caters more extensively to lay visitors than Chithurst, which primarily functions as a monastic training centre. In line with this practical approach, his choice to avoid a listed building also demonstrates his awareness of the complexities involved in UK property regulations.

Figure 18: The Organisation Chart of the English Sangha Trust in 2023.



Contrary to the usual practice among Thai temples in the UK, which typically establish themselves before registering as charities, Chithurst and Amaravati have been operated under the English Sangha Trust (EST) since their inception. The EST serves as the legal body responsible for supporting the monastic communities at both monasteries, while Aruna Ratanagiri and Hartridge each have their own trusts. This is because, as Ajahn Amaro explained, Amaravati was established through the initiative of abbot Ajahn Sumedho, who sought a larger place, in part to hold retreats and to provide more spacious accommodation for

<sup>343</sup> Ajahn Sumedho et al., *Amaravati 30 Years: Interview*, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 1 August 2014, Audio Interview, <https://amaravati.org/about/>.

the nuns' community, while the other two monasteries were established in response to invitations from lay supporters.<sup>344</sup>

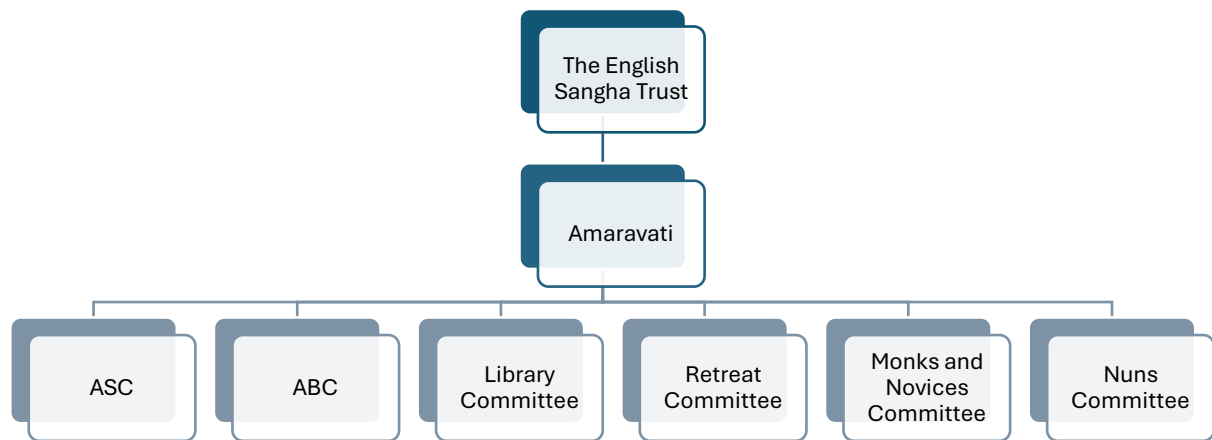
The hierarchical organisational chart in Figure 18 was provided by Caroline Leinster, the EST Secretary, in January 2024, who also supplied further clarification of the structure. According to Leinster, the relationship between the sangha and the lay trustees is guided by a Memorandum of Intention and Understanding, which acknowledges that donations are inspired by the sangha's way of life and wisdom. While the trustees hold the legal responsibility for managing the Trust, they are guided by the sangha regarding the community's needs. Importantly, any sale of property requires the consent of the monastic shareholders. The shareholders, consisting of up to twelve monks and nuns, are appointed by the resident sangha and serve renewable three-year terms. Trustees are laypeople, appointed at the Annual General Meeting (AGM), a brief meeting where audited accounts are presented, and directors may be appointed or removed. Trustees hold full legal responsibility for managing the EST and ensuring compliance with UK charity law. They meet four times a year, with sangha shareholders permitted to attend.

There are two formal sub-committees: the Chithurst Advisory Group (CAG), which advises the EST on budget and management issues, and the Finance Sub-Committee, which oversees financial matters, budgeting, and compliance with charity accounting standards (SORP). These committees are officially established, with clearly defined responsibilities, and include both monastic and lay members working together. In addition to the CAG and Finance Sub-Committee, the EST is supported by other sub-committees and working groups, including the Investment Sub-Committee, Amaravati Buildings Committee, and the Duty of Care group, which meets as required. These groups assist in specific areas such as financial oversight, property development, and community welfare, reflecting the practical responsibilities of the Trust. Alongside these sub-committees, Amaravati Developments Ltd (ADL), a wholly owned subsidiary of the EST, oversees building projects at Amaravati and follows the same policies and auditing standards as the Trust.

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<sup>344</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023, In Person.

Figure 19: The Organisational Structure for the Informal Sangha-Led Committees within Amaravati.



In addition to formal committees, there are many informal sangha-led committees and working groups at both Chithurst and Amaravati that help manage daily operations, such as maintenance, the kitchen, the library, and health and safety. These groups do not have formal legal status under the EST but are essential to both daily functioning and strategic decision-making. According to Ajahn Amaro, there are six main committees at Amaravati (Figure 19). First is the Amaravati Steering Committee (ASC), which includes two senior monks and two senior nuns, and makes decisions regarding monastery activities, event planning, teaching requests, and visitors seeking to carry out projects or interviews. Second is the Amaravati Building Committee (ABC), chaired by Ajahn Amaro, which oversees the physical site, including buildings, grounds, and other aspects of infrastructure, essentially everything involved in keeping the lights on and maintaining the property. There are also committees responsible for the library and the retreat centre. The final two are the Monks and Novices Committee and the Nuns' Committee, each of which handles internal community matters. For example, they may discuss whether to accept someone wishing to join the monastic community or whether to redecorate a particular set of rooms.

The governance and leadership of Amaravati present a modern and decentralised model, in contrast to the more traditional abbot-centred structures found in some other Thai temples. Amaravati employs a decentralised management system, with responsibilities divided among six committees overseeing different operational areas. According to Ajahn Amaro, most decisions at Amaravati are made by consensus, meaning that everyone within the relevant group has to agree. This applies to both the monastic community (monks and nuns) and the

various committees. For example, decisions about whether someone is ready to be ordained as a monk are made by all the monks and for nuns by all the nuns. If even one person objects, the ordination does not proceed. While unanimity (everyone saying yes) is ideal, consensus (agreeing to go along without objecting, even with uncertainties) is the working principle. Reaching consensus can involve multiple rounds of discussion to ensure that everyone's concerns are heard and that the best possible outcome is achieved for any candidate or issue, reflecting the inclusive nature of the process. Ajahn Amaro believed that if unanimity cannot be achieved, "consensus is the way forward. Otherwise, you could be discussing things forever."<sup>345</sup>

The chain of command is not strictly hierarchical in the traditional Thai temple sense. While Ajahn Amaro, as the abbot, holds significant spiritual authority, legal and financial authority rests with the lay trustees and directors of the EST. Although he is not the sole authority, Ajahn Amaro is still regarded as the 'head of things' and is consulted on most matters involving the whole community. However, he actively promotes a shared decision-making model and does not seek to control everything. His involvement varies depending on the committee and the nature of the decision. This structure helps distribute the administrative burden that, in smaller temples, often falls solely on the abbot. At the same time, it fosters collaboration among members, including both monastics and laypeople. I will further discuss his role as abbot in Chapter 5.

The community at Amaravati consists of monks, novices, nuns, and a number of full-time lay residents. At the time of my interview with Ajahn Amaro in May 2023, the community included 22 monks and 11 nuns. In addition to the monastic community, there are 11 long-term lay residents who live at the monastery and take on responsibilities in various areas such as administration, grounds and maintenance, and the retreat centre. They are not regarded as unpaid workers but as residents with defined roles within the spiritual community. They live according to the five precepts and observe celibacy while residing in the monastery. Although the traditional eight precepts are often associated with monastic environments, the physically demanding nature of some lay roles, particularly in groundskeeping and maintenance, makes full adherence to the eight precepts challenging. For this reason, some lay residents choose not to follow the precept of abstaining from eating after midday, especially during colder months,

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<sup>345</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

when energy demands are higher. In terms of paid staff, the monastery employs two individuals. One is a Thai woman who serves as the project manager for a large construction project and is employed by the trust. The other is the monastery's bookkeeper. Both have formal employment contracts and are considered staff rather than community residents. In addition, short-term lay guests are welcomed to stay at the monastery for a limited time to experience monastic life and engage in practice. As a result, even without accounting for day visitors, there are typically between 70 and 80 people staying overnight at the monastery throughout the year.<sup>346</sup>

Amaravati's finances are primarily managed through the EST. This trust legally owns the properties of Chithurst and Amaravati, and all donations to these temples are directed to the EST. The EST operates with a board of lay trustees who hold the decision-making responsibility for finances and legal affairs. However, these trustees consult with the monastic community, who are ideally the shareholders of the trust, representing the real owners of the property without direct control over financial transactions. This structure aims to align with the *vinaya* principles by separating financial stewardship (lay trustees) from ownership (Sangha).<sup>347</sup>

Within Amaravati, financial allocation is coordinated through various committees. The Amaravati Building Committee (ABC) manages expenditures related to the physical site, including buildings and grounds maintenance. Meanwhile, the Amaravati Steering Committee (ASC) is responsible for spiritual programming, community events, and resident monastics, although it does not hold the authority to approve spending. For major long-term development projects, such as the ongoing construction of a new £10 million *sala* (hall), a dedicated subsidiary of the EST, Amaravati Developments Limited (ADL), was established to manage the associated costs and logistics. The financial sustainability of Amaravati is underpinned by this well-structured legal framework and by the continued generosity of a global donor community. The presence of long-term lay residents who offer their time and skills further reduces operational expenses. As Ajahn Amaro notes, the EST currently manages approximately £22 million in holdings for Chithurst and Amaravati, in addition to the £10 million allocated specifically for the new *sala* project.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

<sup>347</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

<sup>348</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

Amaravati offers a variety of programmes and services encompassing religious events, educational activities, and community engagement. Like other Thai temples in the UK, the religious events at Amaravati include the fortnightly recitation of the *pāṭimokkha* (the fundamental monastic precepts), weekly Sunday meditation classes, the annual Kathin ceremony, ordination ceremonies, and the daily food offering ritual. Ajahn Amaro notes the demographic pattern among participants: more local people tend to attend the Sunday meditation class, while those from Asian backgrounds are more likely to participate in the daily food offering. This demographic pattern is similar across other Thai temples in the UK.<sup>349</sup>

A core aspect of Amaravati is its educational offerings. Dhamma talks are conducted primarily in English, as are the retreats. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the monastery typically held around 20 retreats per year, led by both monastics and lay teachers. One retreat each year is conducted in Thai, led by Ajahn Amaro and another Thai monk who recently moved to take over the monastery in Norway. This, along with the historical context of Ajahn Sumedho's efforts to establish monasteries in the West, including his invitation for Ajahn Amaro, an English monk, to succeed him as abbot, reflects a broader mission. Rather than serving solely the Thai community, Amaravati aims to establish and support the growth of Theravada Buddhism in the Western world. However, its influence extends beyond the West, as Amaravati is now known globally. This broader vision is reflected in the diversity of individuals who visit or stay at the monastery, with visitors coming from countries as far afield as Brazil, the United States, Australia, Thailand, and India. The temple's online presence further demonstrates its international reach. According to Ajahn Amaro, the Amaravati website receives approximately 300,000 visits per month, around 10,000 per day, from individuals accessing its teachings and resources.<sup>350</sup>

### 3.6 Wat Sri Intra Atula

Wat Sri Intra Atula is one of the four Thammayut temples in the UK and belongs to the Thai Forest Tradition. I chose this temple as one of the case studies to represent the Thammayut tradition in the UK and because of my personal interest in and admiration for its parent temple, Wat Prachakhom, in Thailand, as discussed in Chapter 2. During my fieldwork, I interviewed

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<sup>349</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

<sup>350</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

the current abbot of the temple, Luang Por Nikom Akkavaro (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Khru Akkarathammanusarn; hereafter Luang Por Nikom), who provided me with a booklet containing information regarding the establishment of the temple. According to this document, the endeavour to establish this temple commenced in 2004 when a group of Thai Buddhists in the UK extended an invitation to Luang Pu Tong Inn Katapuñño (1938-present), the abbot of Wat Prachakhom Wanaram, to establish a branch temple in the country.<sup>351</sup> Although he then visited annually, it was not until 2015 that he finally decided to establish a temple in the UK.

The temple was officially registered as a charity under the name ‘Wat Sri Intra Atula’ in 2016, a name that honours three senior monks in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Mun: Luang Pu Sri Mahawiro (the last direct disciple of Ajahn Mun), Luang Pu Tong Inn (the abbot of Wat Prachakhom), and Luang Por Mana Atulo (the abbot of Wat Pa Non Mueang). The name ‘Wat Sri Intra Atula’ integrates ‘Sri’ from Luang Pu Sri Mahawiro, ‘Intra’ from Luang Pu Tong Inn, and ‘Atula’ from Luang Por Mana Atulo.<sup>352</sup> The temple’s objectives are “to establish a Thai temple in England that follows the way of life and practices of Luang Pu Mun Bhuridatto, to create an understanding of Dhamma practice and self-training according to the meditation monks’ guidelines and to disseminate the religion globally among Buddhists.”<sup>353</sup> The temple’s name and objectives reflect its strong connections to senior monks in the Thai Forest Tradition lineage, demonstrating profound respect and commitment to the teachings and practices initiated by the revered founder of the Thai Forest Tradition.

In 2017, a large rural property consisting of two houses on a 4.5-acre site near Crawley, located 40 miles south of London, was acquired and subsequently transformed into monks’ bedrooms, a meditation room, a dining area, a library, a seminar and teaching space, a kitchen and a large garden for laypeople to set up tents in summer. Additionally, there are separate bungalows for laywomen for short stays, as it is customary in Thailand where monks and laywomen often reside in separate quarters within temple complexes. This separation is part of monastic rules and cultural traditions meant to promote modesty and prevent any breaches of monastic discipline.

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<sup>351</sup> ‘Wat Sri Intra Atula England’, Wat Sri Intra Atula, 2022.

<sup>352</sup> Phra Nikom Akkavaro, ‘Interview by author’, 20 April 2023, In Person.

<sup>353</sup> ‘Wat Sri Intra Atula England’.

On July 24th, 2019, the temple hosted a grand opening ceremony in conjunction with the consecration of its temporary *ubosot* (ordination hall), which was attended by 136 Thammayut monks from Thailand and other countries. The current *ubosot* was constructed using a long white marquee and a temporary wooden floor that serves as a platform. A deep green marble Buddha statue is prominently displayed at one end of the marquee. The *ubosot* has already been consecrated, enabling the monks to conduct various ceremonies such as ordination ceremonies and other *sanghakamma*. However, it was initially established as a temporary structure, prompting the temple to seek planning permission for a permanent construction. The approval of planning permission for the permanent *ubosot*, granted in March 2023, was a matter of great concern to the monks and committee due to its proximity to green belt land, an area typically governed by stringent planning regulations.<sup>354</sup>

During the application process for the permanent structure, the council displayed a public notice regarding the proposed construction, and since no objections were raised, planning permission was eventually granted. Although the process took around a year and a half, Luang Por Nikom believes the successful outcome reflects the *barami* (Pāli: *pāramī*)—the spiritual merit—of Luang Pu Tong Inn.<sup>355</sup> Luang Por Nikom also notes that Luang Pu Tong Inn envisions the new *ubosot* resembling the traditional wooden halls found in Thailand. While a local construction company will oversee the main build, certain elements may require input from Thai monks with specialised construction skills. The intention is to create an *ubosot* for the Thammayut tradition, inspired by the presence of *ubosot* belonging to the Mahanikai at Wat Buddhapadipa.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the division between Mahanikai and Thammayut is still observed even outside of Thailand. This separation is evident during the consecration ceremony of the temporary *ubosot*, where only Thammayut monks are allowed to participate. The two traditions do not perform *sanghakamma* together and this practice is mandatory even outside of Thailand. However, based on my interview with Luang Por Nikom, monks from both traditions can and do participate in other social contexts. For example, Chao Khun Laow, the current abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, a Mahanikai temple, visited Wat Sri Intra Atula and participated

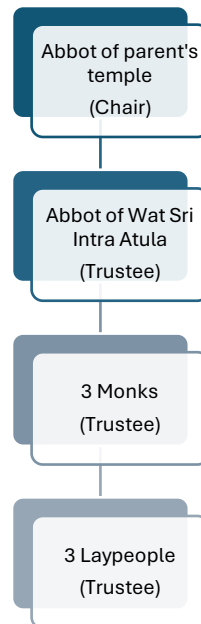
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<sup>354</sup> ‘Wat Sri Intra Atula – Ubosot Building Project’, Wat Sri Intra Atula, 13 June 2022, <https://watsriintraatula.org.uk/wat-sri-intra-atula-ubosot-building-project/>.

<sup>355</sup> Phra Nikom Akkavaro, ‘Interview by author’, 20 April 2023.

in a tree-planting activity. Similarly, monks from Wat Sri Intra Atula occasionally visit and participate in activities at the Mahanikai temple in Brighton.

Figure 20: The Organisational Structure of Wat Sri Intra Atula.



Wat Sri Intra Atula's organisational structure is hierarchical, with a top-down approach to power control (Figure 20). The charity is composed of seven trustees, consisting of four monks and three laypeople, headed by Luang Pu Tong Inn, who wields the highest decision-making power as chair.<sup>356</sup> Luang Por Nikom, the abbot of Wat Sri Intra and a trustee, possesses a lower level of authority, responsible for day-to-day decisions, overseeing temple ceremonies, and handling matters such as monk residency in the UK and visa renewals. When it comes to significant projects and large financial matters, Luang Por Nikom consults and discusses with Luang Pu Tong Inn, the abbot of the parent temple in Thailand. While there are three laypeople among the trustees, the final decision-making authority rests with the monks.

In contrast to many other Thai temples in the UK, where laypeople on the trustee or committee are generally in charge of accounting and visa-related tasks, at Wat Sri Intra Atula, monks oversee all these matters. The fact that monks oversee these matters may be related to the Thammayut's administrative history. The result is that, while the Thammayut tradition is

<sup>356</sup> 'Wat Sri Intra Atula - Charity 1168534', accessed 24 May 2023, <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5078412/trustees>.

generally associated with stricter monastic discipline, monks here are involved in roles typically handled by laypeople. In cases where specific tasks require specialised expertise, solicitors are engaged to handle them, such as applying for sponsor licences and securing planning permissions. Even when Luang Por Nikom is residing in Thailand, he effectively manages the temple's affairs remotely, with the assistance of an acting abbot in the UK. Through online banking and virtual meetings, he maintains an active role in trustee meetings and contributes to decision-making processes.

At the time of the interview (April 2023), the temple accommodated seven monks, most of whom came from the parent temple in Thailand. Wat Sri Intra Atula has already obtained a sponsor licence which enables them to sponsor the visa for monks or staff from Thailand who intend to perform religious duties in the UK (Chapter 4). As with many other temples, the primary obstacle is obtaining a Tier 2 visa, which would enable the monks to remain in the UK for a longer duration without being subjected to a one-year cooling-off period. However, this type of visa demands an advanced level of English proficiency, which is one of the greatest challenges for Thai temples in the UK (see Chapter 4). The temple's operation becomes more challenging without the consistent presence of the same monks.

The selection process for the monks who wish to come to the UK is overseen by both Luang Pu Tong Inn and Luang Por Nikom. To be eligible for consideration, all monks must have been ordained for at least five years, passed the dhamma examination, and accomplished the Dhammaduta programme from Mahamakut College (Chapter 4). After the monk has been chosen, he is granted a six-month tourist visa and then evaluated to determine if he is eligible for a Tier 5, two-year Religious Worker visa. This procedure is intended to filter the monks and ensure that only those who are qualified are chosen. The sole authority for selecting monks lies in the hands of the abbots from the parent temple and the branch temple in the UK.

Wat Sri Intra Atula, like many other Thai temples, faces challenges regarding the English proficiency requirement for obtaining the Tier 2 visa and the logistical difficulties that arise when monks need to travel to various locations. Despite these challenges, the temple has skilfully established an organisational structure that aim to mitigate conflicts among laypeople because of Luang Pu Tong Inn's vision to establish a temple that warmly welcomes individuals seeking solace and guidance in their spiritual journey and provides a sanctuary for those in confusion or without a refuge, offering them a seat to practice meditation. He aims to create an

atmosphere where anyone burdened by suffering finds solace and support within its sacred walls.<sup>357</sup>

Hence, from my perspective, it appears that he intentionally implemented a hierarchical organisational structure when establishing Wat Sri Intra Atula allocating decision-making authority to the monks, particularly the abbots, to proactively prevent potential disputes from arising among laypeople. Furthermore, the monks at Wat Sri Intra Atula personally oversee essential matters within the temple, including accounting tasks and issuing sponsorship certificates for visa applications (Chapter 4). They thereby maintain complete control over the operations of the temple, eliminating the need for decision-making by laypeople. The effectiveness of this structure would be compromised if laypeople were to hold primary roles within the temple.

Wat Sri Intra Atula relies on donations from both local and international supporters to sustain its operations. The temple receives financial contributions from various sources including individuals within and outside the UK. The booklet provided by the abbot during the fieldwork reveals that the temple has three primary sources of donation, which were used to purchase and renovate the temple at a total cost of £2,030,000. Firstly, the temple received donations from *tod pha pa* or the robe offering ceremony in Thailand, which was specifically organised to raise funds for purchasing the property. Secondly, Kathin Ceremony from branch temples of Wat Prachakhom Wanaram also provided financial support. Lastly, the devotees of Luang Pu Tong Inn both within Thailand and abroad contributed towards the temple's funding.<sup>358</sup>

The temple was able to purchase the property in full, without the need for a mortgage, due to its three sources of income. This was an unusual situation for temples in the UK, which generally start with the renting of a house, then searching for a larger property and subsequently applying for a mortgage. The generous contributions donated to the temple highlights the strong belief and faith in Luang Pu Tong Inn, as well as the unwavering support from his devoted followers who were eager to contribute to his vision of establishing a temple overseas. Wat Sri Intra Atula is the first branch temple to be established in the UK.

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<sup>357</sup> Phra Nikom Akkavaro, 'Interview by author', 20 April 2023.

<sup>358</sup> 'Wat Sri Intra Atula England'.

The daily routine at Wat Sri Intra Atula follows the traditional Thai Forest Tradition practice. The day begins with morning chanting, eating one meal a day, meditation, temple chores, and evening chanting.<sup>359</sup> A unique feature of the temple is the practice of eating only one meal a day, which distinguishes it from the traditional Theravada practice of consuming two meals before noon. This practice is a characteristic of the Thai Forest Tradition and is one of the thirteen optional *dhutanga* practices (Chapter 1). In addition to its daily routine, the temple also organises various Buddhist events such as Kathin Ceremony, Songkran Festival, meditation retreats, ordination ceremony and visits from nearby schools. These events are similar to those held at other Thai temples and provide opportunities for the temple to engage with local community and promote share the teachings, practices, and cultural traditions of Buddhism. The school visits serve as a platform for the temple to reach out to younger generations and promote understanding and appreciation of Buddhist values and principles, which may be unfamiliar to them.

It is often the case that the Thai Forest Tradition temples tend to attract a higher number of English-speaking participants or volunteers in comparison to other Thai cultural temples. My survey of temple websites indicates that those with high-quality English websites are predominantly from the Thai Forest Tradition. This links to the distinctive transmission pattern of forest temples, which are often staffed by non-Thai monks and attended by a strongly mixed, international congregation (Chapter 1). Prior to conducting fieldwork at Wat Sri Intra Atula, I assumed that this characteristic also applied to Wat Sri Intra Atula, given its well-organised website with extensive information on Buddhism, the history of the Thai Forest Tradition, the ordination process, and updated news on the temple's activities in the UK and its parent temple in Thailand, Wat Prachakhom Wanaram. However, during an interview with Luang Por Nikom, it was revealed that the majority of participants in the temple are Thai, and that English attendees are often husbands accompanying their spouses. It is perhaps because all the monks at Wat Sri Intra Atula — and those from its parent temple — are Thai, which makes it quite different from Thai Forest temples in the Ajahn Chah lineage, where the head monks and many resident monks are non-Thai, often Western. That naturally attracts more Western supporters. In contrast, this temple may feel more culturally Thai in its language, rituals, and community, which could be less immediately accessible to Westerners.

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<sup>359</sup> Wat Sri Intra Atula, 'Wat Sri Intra Atula'.

### 3.7 Wat Phra Dhammakaya London

Wat Phra Dhammakaya, as discussed in Chapter 2, is renowned for its global outreach. By 2022, it has established around 100 branches worldwide, including 28 in Europe. This expansion into Europe commenced with the establishment of branches in Belgium and France in 1997, followed by the initiation of the first UK branch in 1999. The founding members initially settled in Wimbledon, London, where they rented a residential property. This property was used as a centre for Buddhist events, ceremonies and meditation classes and was known as the Dhammakaya International Meditation Centre of the UK. This adaptation of residential spaces for religious purposes reflects a common strategy among diaspora religious communities of Sri Lankan, Burmese and Thai heritages, as discussed in Starkey and Tomalin.<sup>360</sup> In 2002, the group relocated to Norbury, where they rented another house and established the Wat Charoen Bhavana (literally ‘Temple for Meditation Practice’).<sup>361</sup> This name signifies the temple’s focus on meditative practice within the Dhammakaya tradition.

After several attempts to find a suitably prestigious building big enough for their following, they were successful in purchasing a former chapel at Brookwood Hospital in Knaphill, Woking, in 2005. The chapel had been constructed in 1903, and while not designated as a statutory listed building, it holds local significance and is included in Woking Borough Council’s ‘List of Locally Listed Heritage Assets.’<sup>362</sup> A factor contributing to the option of buying this chapel is that it was formerly part of Brookwood Hospital, an NHS asylum, which had been closed, with most of its land and buildings redeveloped as housing.<sup>363</sup> Such asylums were often located in Victorian buildings, reflecting the period when they came into existence.

This property underwent a significant transformation, eventually becoming the current Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, sharing the name of the headquarters in Thailand. The addition of ‘London’ in its title serves as a tribute to the group’s original settlement in the city. The transformation into Wat Phra Dhammakaya London symbolises a remarkable fusion of cultures

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<sup>360</sup> Starkey and Tomalin, ‘Building Buddhism in England’, 334.

<sup>361</sup> Anuchit Treeratanajutawat, ‘Interview by author’, 29 October 2020, Phone Interview.

<sup>362</sup> ‘Brookwood Hospital, Woking (1867-1994): Records - Archives Hub’, accessed 27 March 2025, <http://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb176-3043>; Woking Borough Council, *Draft List of Locally Listed Heritage Assets* (Woking Borough Council, 2024), <https://modern.gov.woking.gov.uk/documents/s37618/EXE24-071%20Appendix%201%20-%20Draft%20Local%20List.pdf>.

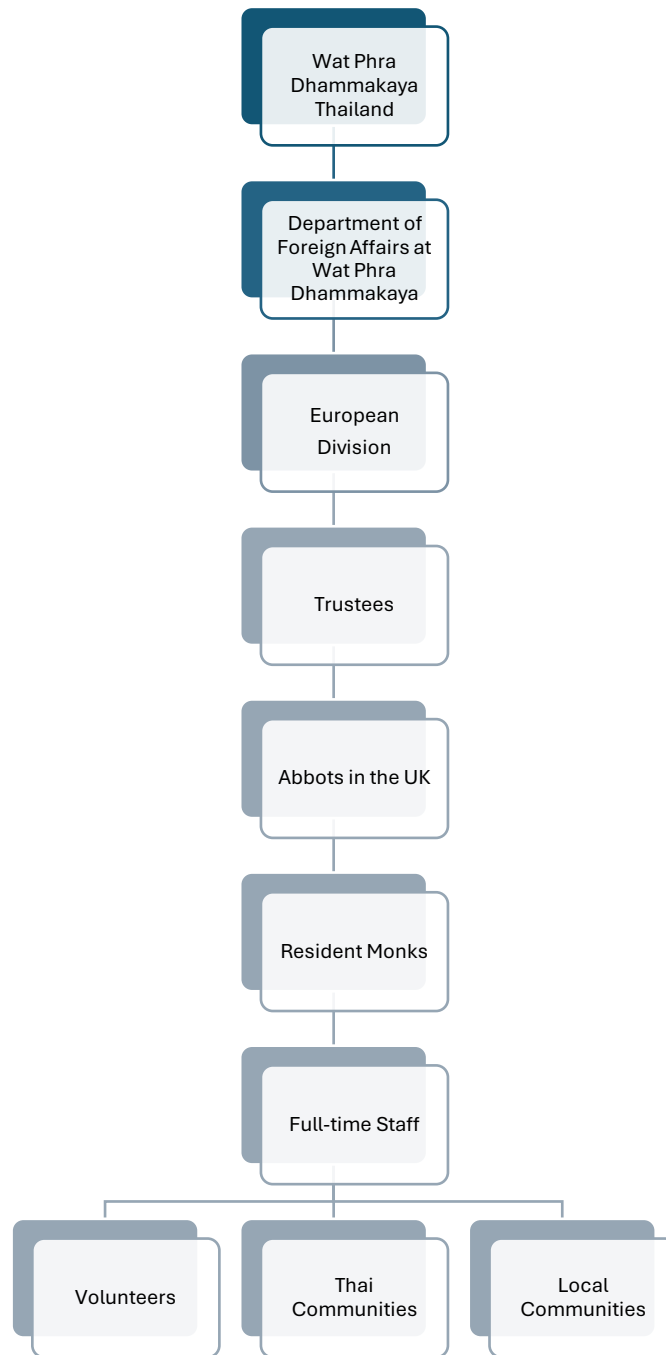
<sup>363</sup> ‘Brookwood Hospital, Woking, History’, Exploring Surrey’s Past, accessed 17 October 2021, <https://www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/themes/subjects/disability-history/brookwood>.

and religious practices. The main chapel of the former church was repurposed as the main hall for Buddhist ceremonies. The old mortuary was converted into a residence for monks, further demonstrating the adaptive reuse of the building for the temple's purposes. Since establishing Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, as the UK headquarters, Dhammakaya has established three branch temples in the UK: Manchester (2004), Newcastle (2009) and Helensburgh (2016). While all four temples have repurposed former churches into Buddhist temples, only one, Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle, is designated as a Grade II listed building on the National Heritage List for England.

The Newcastle temple started its life as St. Andrew's Church in Hebburn, Newcastle. Founded in 1872 by Andrew Leslie from Aberdeen, Scotland, it has striking Victorian gothic architecture and a distinctive spire. Two of its buildings are Grade 2 Listed: the chapel itself and also the office/accommodation. It was in use for Christian purposes for over a century, until 1993. After that, the buildings were maintained by the South Tyneside Council for two decades, then sold to Dhammakaya Scandinavia International (DSI), the charity behind Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Newcastle. This transformation of a Christian church into a Buddhist temple provides an example of religious and cultural adaptation in a multicultural society. The details of the properties' change of use and their status as listed buildings will be thoroughly explored in Chapter 4.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Thailand has purposefully established branch temples overseas. These branches maintain a direct affiliation with the parent temple, ensuring a strong and continuous connection, as well as consistency in propagating the Dhammakaya tradition. As highlighted in Chapter 2, the organisation has developed a comprehensive system to manage and regulate its operations and activities across all locations. The roles and duties in the overseas branches mirror those of the parent temple, albeit with relatively fewer and smaller departments. These overseas branches are operated under the parent temple's Department of Foreign Affairs, which is divided into different continents: Oceania, Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, America, the Middle East, and South Africa. The UK branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya fall under the European division (Figure 21).

Figure 21: The Organisational Structure of Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches in the UK.



The decision-making processes within the temple's UK branches are characterised by a hierarchical structure, lacking autonomy. Decision-making authority is centralised, mainly exercised either at the organisation's headquarters or by the committee overseeing the European division. Crucial decisions, particularly those involving monks or staff travelling abroad, require approval from the headquarters. While abbots at the UK branch temples can propose candidates for these delegations, their selections must be approved by the European

division, with the final decision resting with the headquarters in Thailand. This recruitment approach for monks and staff contrasts with the practices of most other Thai temples in the UK, which do not necessitate approval from parent temples. The intricacies of this recruitment process will be elaborated upon in more detail in Chapter 4. Additionally, decisions regarding property acquisitions are made by the European division. Although UK abbots can propose such purchases, they do not possess complete decision-making authority. Their authority is confined to their respective branch temples and predominantly pertains to the managerial aspects of daily tasks, events, and personnel management within the temple. In contrast to other UK temples, where abbots usually stay until they die (most temples) or specifically request to be relieved of their duties (Thai forest Sangha), Dhammakaya rotates its abbots, the decision about their appointment and term being made by European Division.

Although abbots do not possess full decision-making authority, they are able to voice their opinions and concerns during quarterly meetings. These assemblies involve abbots from all 28 branch temples across Europe. The venues for these meetings alternate among the various temples. The final meeting of each year is consistently hosted at the headquarters in Thailand. Furthermore, within their respective temples, abbots typically conduct weekly meetings involving resident monks and full-time staff. Beyond these routine meetings, additional meetings are convened for special ceremonies or events that necessitate the involvement of volunteers. In contrast with other temples, lay trustees have very little role at Dhammakaya temples, but are needed to fulfil the requirements of charitable status.

Each UK branch temple of Wat Phra Dhammakaya comprises an abbot, resident monks, full-time staff, volunteers, and donors. Abbots are customarily appointed by either the headquarters in Thailand or by the head of the European Division. Resident monks and full-time staff must receive approval from the headquarters in Thailand before residing at an overseas branch temple. Additionally, they are required to complete passport and visa processes (see Chapter 4). Full-time staff may also include long-term temple adherents who have resided in the UK for an extended period and are approaching or have reached retirement, committing their later years to temple service.

As outlined in Chapter 1, Phra Payutto identified three categories of religious rites in Thai Buddhism. Wat Phra Dhammakaya's UK branches adhere to these categories, following the religious rites and ceremonies prevalent in most Thai temples. However, due to their centralised

structure, they maintain consistency in the execution of events and ceremonies, adhering to the procedures and patterns set forth by the headquarters in Thailand. For instance, in the Kathin Ceremony, the four UK branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya adhere to the same procedures as the main temple in Thailand. The ceremony commences in the morning with chanting and meditation. This is followed by an afternoon ceremony, during which participants form a distinctive procession unique to Wat Phra Dhammakaya to offer the Kathin Robe.

In addition, the four UK branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya also conduct ceremonies unique to the Dhammakaya tradition. These ceremonies include commemorations of significant dates such as the birthdays of prominent figures such as Luang Por Sodh, Khun Yay, and Luang Por Dhammajayo, as well as the commemoration of the cremation day of Luang Por Sodh (see Chapter 2). In addition, a distinct ritual specially held at Wat Phra Dhammakaya is the first Sunday ceremony. This ceremony is held simultaneously worldwide on the first Sunday of every month. It begins at 9:30 AM in Thailand, corresponding to either 2:30 AM or 3:30 AM in the UK, depending on daylight saving time. The ceremony typically starts with chanting, followed by an hour of meditation and verses for offering food to the Buddhas. All international branches, including the four in the UK, synchronise their schedules with those of Thailand, thereby emphasising the centralised nature of the organisation.

The temple's four UK branches also actively engage in organising community events serving both the Thai diaspora and the non-Thai communities, a practice that aligns with the traditions of many Thai temples throughout the UK. These events include meditation retreats for both Thai and non-Thai speakers, novice ordination ceremonies, educational visits from schools, and weekly meditation classes in English. The annual higher ordination ceremonies, which most Buddhist temples in Thailand usually hold around the Buddhist Lent, are absent among the four branch temples due to their lack of an *ubosot*. Instead, they send individuals interested in ordination to Belgium. This ordination programme typically takes place every July and lasts for two weeks, drawing participants who are primarily locals from various European branch temples. They convene in Belgium for this unified ordination experience, an event that not only exemplifies the conformity and centralised structure inherent in Wat Phra Dhammakaya's organisational approach but also highlights the members' competence to organise events in a foreign land. However, there are plans to hold the first ordination programme at Wat Phra Dhammakaya London in May 2025, following the grand *sima* consecration ceremony held in June 2024. With the *ubosot* now consecrated, it can be officially used for ordinations.

A distinctive characteristic that sets the Wat Phra Dhammakaya UK branches apart from other Thai temples is their emphasis on inclusivity, particularly in making their ceremonies accessible to non-Thai participants. The ceremonies and events are simultaneously translated into English by full-time staff or volunteers using translation devices. This ensures that all participants, regardless of their native language, can fully engage with and comprehend the ceremonies and teachings of the monks. This strategy forms an integral part of Wat Phra Dhammakaya's internationalisation efforts and reflects their recruitment strategy. I will discuss the role of the volunteers and laypeople and their contributions to the temple in more detail in Chapter 6.

### 3.8 Theravada Monastic Organisations in the UK

Most Thai temples in the UK are affiliated with one or more of the three primary monastic organisations. The first, established in 2005, is the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, which is composed solely of monks from the Mahanikai tradition. Notably, although they share the same lineage, the five temples that follow the Thai Forest Tradition operate independently and are not members of this council. Additionally, there is no formal council for Thammayut monks, largely because there are only four temples in the UK adhering to the Thammayut order. The second organisation, the Theravada Buddhist Sangha of the United Kingdom, was formed in 2006 and is more encompassing, welcoming Theravada monks of all traditions and nationalities across the UK. The most recent, the World Buddhist Dhammaduta Organisation, was founded in 2019 and serves as a global body for all Thai missionary monks from the Mahanikai tradition. This section delves into each of these organisations, offering detailed insights into their histories, objectives, organisational structures, functions, primary activities, and their overall impact within the Buddhist community.

#### 3.8.1 The Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland (CTBMUK)

In response to the growing number of Thai monks in the UK, either for the duration of the Buddhist Lent or short visits, a group of monks from Wat Buddhapadipa took the initiative to

unify Mahanikai lineage Thai monks in the UK and lay down guidelines.<sup>364</sup> These guidelines were crafted to ensure that practices, aligned with the governance of the Thai Sangha in Thailand, are consistently implemented across the UK. As a result, the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland (CTBMUK) was founded in 2005. Its mission is “to ensure the orderly propagation of Buddhism by Dhammaduta Bhikkhus, foster unity, and instruct in Buddhism consistent with the Buddha’s teachings.”<sup>365</sup>

As highlighted in Chapter 1, Thai Buddhist monks are subject to the *vinaya*, Thailand’s law, the directives of the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand, local customs, and societal expectations. However, while residing in the UK, they not only uphold their monastic regulations but also adhere to the SSC rules and regulations overseen by CTBMUK. This adherence extends to Thai customs, Buddhists’ expectations, and UK laws. The primary objectives of CTBMUK involve supporting Thai monks in the UK to ensure they adhere to both the *vinaya* and the SSC regulations, reflecting the hierarchical authority structure. This oversight is not exclusive to monks in Thailand; it also extends to those beyond its borders.

CTBMUK has broadened its objectives to strengthen its connection with the Thai diaspora and Thai temples in the UK. In alignment with this mission, several supplementary goals have been formulated to amplify the engagement and support rendered to these communities. These goals encompass establishing a network for cultural relations, promoting understanding between Thai Buddhists and practitioners of other traditions, facilitating requests for monastic ranks, and assessing the viability of establishing new Thai temples in the UK. Additionally, the council aims to support activities in Thai temples, promote unity among Thai Buddhist monks, coordinate with governmental agencies on matters like monks’ passport renewal requests (see Chapter 4), and assist individuals affected by various disasters.<sup>366</sup>

The head office of CTBMUK is located at Wat Buddhapadipa. The abbot of this temple also serves as the Chairman of the council. Since CTBMUK’s inception, there have been two chairmen: the late abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, Phra Therawat Amaro and the current abbot,

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<sup>364</sup> Secretary Division of CTBMUK, ‘การประชุมสมัชชาสามัญ องค์การพระธรรมทูตไทยในสหราชอาณาจักรและไอร์แลนด์ พุทธศักราช ๒๕๖๖ (The General Meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2023)’, 64.

<sup>365</sup> Secretary Division of CTBMUK, ‘การประชุมสมัชชาสามัญ องค์การพระธรรมทูตไทยในสหราชอาณาจักรและไอร์แลนด์ พุทธศักราช ๒๕๖๖ (The General Meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2023)’, 64.

<sup>366</sup> Secretary Division of CTBMUK, ‘การประชุมสมัชชาสามัญ องค์การพระธรรมทูตไทยในสหราชอาณาจักรและไอร์แลนด์ พุทธศักราช ๒๕๖๖ (The General Meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2023)’, 64.

Chao Khun Laow. CTBMUK oversees a total of 24 Thai temples in the UK and Ireland, including one temple in Dublin. While five temples aligned with Ajahn Chah's lineage are not officially affiliated with CTBMUK, they still fall under the Mahanikai sect's jurisdiction. During my participant observation at Wat Buddhapadipa in March 2023, I attended the annual *tod pha pa* or the robe offering ceremony, a fundraising event organised by CTBMUK. Despite not being a part of CTBMUK, Amaravati, a temple from Ajahn Chah's lineage, made a generous donation in support of CTBMUK. This act highlights the solidarity among Buddhist monks within Thai traditions, showcasing support across different affiliations.

Regarding the organisational structure of CTBMUK, there are two distinct committee types. The first encompasses advisory and sponsorship members, which includes both monks and laypeople. Members of this committee are the head of the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus' training programme, the Director of the National Office of Buddhism, the Chancellor of MCU, and the Ambassador of Thailand in London. The second, an executive and operational committee, incorporates both monks and laypeople across seven roles: Chairman, Vice President, Secretary General, Head of Office and Registrar, Public Relations, Treasurer, and Secretary. Each position on the executive committee, excluding the Chairman, has a 3-year term. Appointments are made by the CTBMUK Chairman in conjunction with the abbots of the 24 temples, selecting from the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus members. For laypeople representation on the committee, individuals knowledgeable about CTBMUK's rules and regulations and devout Buddhists are chosen. This committee selection process encourages collaboration, joint decision-making, and fosters unity among the varied temple communities.<sup>367</sup> The presence of figures such as the Director of the National Office of Buddhism and the Ambassador of Thailand in London within CTBMUK underscores the council's diplomatic role, acting as a bridge between the religious community and governmental entities. This liaison is vital for addressing practical issues that affect monks, such as passport renewals and visa applications.

CTBMUK organises three types of meetings: the annual assembly, monthly meetings, and the ordinary assembly. The annual assembly is usually convened in person, mainly at Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon. However, it has occasionally taken place at other temples, such as Wat Santiwongsaram in Birmingham and Wat Sriratnaram in Manchester. Monthly sessions,

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<sup>367</sup> Secretary Division of CTBMUK, 'การประชุมสมัชชาสามัญ องค์การพระธรรมทูตไทยในสหราชอาณาจักรและไอร์แลนด์ พุทธศักราช ๒๕๖๖ (The General Meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2023)', 65.

adapted to the post-COVID era, are conducted via Zoom across the 24 temples. These virtual gatherings facilitate discussions on a myriad of subjects, ranging from updates to UK laws concerning the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus, to projects at individual temples, and collaborative efforts among the 24 temples like the daily online Dhamma talks.<sup>368</sup> The ordinary assembly, on the other hand, is convened for pressing matters that demand immediate deliberation. Decision-making during these meetings hinges on a majority vote, with the chairman holding the power to break any ties. To deem an executive committee meeting legitimate, the presence of at least two of the three committee members is mandatory.<sup>369</sup>

In an interview on March 30, 2023, Tony Collacot, a trustee at Wat Phra Singh, discussed his association with CTBMUK. He explained that the annual meetings alternate between Wat Buddhapadipa and Wat Santiwongsaram, expressing his preference for Wat Santiwongsaram due to its strategic location in Midlands. Tony also spoke about his involvement in the yearly robe offering event hosted by CTBMUK, noting that he could not attend in 2023. On that occasion, the abbot of Wat Phra Singh UK asked him to designate funds from the temple to support the event. Tony highlighted that every temple makes an annual contribution to CTBMUK's fund. Tony shared concerns based on his experiences, pointing out a perceived lack of transparency in how CTBMUK uses its funds and the loans it offers to other temples. As a solution, he suggested that CTBMUK should present financial details during meetings to keep contributors well-informed about how funds are allocated. I informed Tony that I had attended the March 2023 robe offering event. At the ceremony, the CTBMUK secretary disclosed the total funds collected, expenses made, and the remaining balance in the organisation's bank account. This disclosure indicates a step forward in ensuring fund transparency within CTBMUK. Nevertheless, from Tony's viewpoint, even greater transparency could be achieved with the distribution of a comprehensive written financial statement.<sup>370</sup>

In addition to the transparency issue, a range of considerations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of both CTBMUK and the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in the UK were highlighted. These matters were discussed at the annual meeting on July 7, 2023, hosted at Wat Sriratanaram

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<sup>368</sup> Phra Sutas Amonsudhi, 'Interview by author', 29 August 2023, In Person.

<sup>369</sup> Secretary Division of CTBMUK, 'การประชุมสมัชชาสามัญ องค์การพระธรรมทูตไทยในสหราชอาณาจักรและไอร์แลนด์ พุทธศักราช ๒๕๖๖ (The General Meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2023)', 68.

<sup>370</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

in Manchester. The morning session began with introductory remarks from Phra Phrom Senabodee, Vice President of the Regulatory office for Overseas Dhammduta Bhikkhus. This session was primarily focused on addressing challenges faced by the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus community. Most of the discussion took the form of a question-and-answer segment, wherein Thai monks residing in the UK posed questions to the representative from the Regulatory office for Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus.

A major concern centred on the validity duration of monks' passports. While most Thai citizens have passports valid for 10 years, monks' passports are only valid for 5 years. This distinction creates challenges for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus when applying for visas. Sometimes, the duration of the visa they receive is shorter than the period they request because of the limited validity of their passport. The intricacies of acquiring a monk's passport will be detailed further in Chapter 4. Other questions pertained to the passport application process, which currently requires in-person submission with physical documents rather than an online submission option. Discussions also touched on the fund designated for supporting temples abroad, training provisions for a preceptor (Pali: *upajjhāya*) within the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus, and the guidelines for applying for a monk's royal ecclesiastical rank and title.

The afternoon session spanned a continuous, intense three hours without any intermissions. The assembly included the abbots of various Thai temples in the UK, though not all 24 were represented, as I observed. Alongside the UK-based abbots, Dhammaduta Bhikkhus from the United States, India, Singapore, Norway, and Germany also participated. This session's primary topic revolved around the multifaceted roles of Thai monks in promoting Buddhism worldwide, outside of Thailand's boundaries. The discussions highlighted challenges confronted by monks both within the UK and internationally. This topic accentuates the significance of practical matters concerning the temples for Thai Buddhist monks, an area this thesis aims to delve into.

The dialogue commenced with the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa and the Chairman of CTBMUK, Chao Khun Laow. He traced the historical journey of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in the UK. He noted that during the early stages, the monks mainly focused on teachings rooted in Vipassana meditation. However, in the subsequent phase, they melded the promotion of Thai cultural elements with meditation teachings. During this second phase, Thai individuals made up 70% of the attendees at the temples. He questioned the success of the Dhammaduta

Bhikkhus in propagating Buddhism in the UK. He evaluated the progress made, pondered a potential shift back to teaching core Vipassana meditation, and considered strategies for furthering the spread of Buddhism.

In addition, Chao Khun Laow reflected on past challenges and achievements, contemplated future directions, recognised current limitations in progress, and underscored the importance of steady advancement. He spoke about the difficulties of setting up a temple in the UK, the language barriers, the crucial support from the English community, and the profound value of genuine connections and mutual support among the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus. The discussion also touched upon independent governance practices, the prospect of international gatherings, and the potential for virtual meetings through Zoom. He concluded his remarks by raising insightful questions and motivating attendees to increase the number of monk ordinations in the UK while cultivating a habit of introspection.

Following Chao Khun Laow's opening remarks, the discussion among attendees deepened. Fourteen abbots shared their insights on the topic, which were later summarised by the CTBMUK secretary, Phra Sutas Amonsudhi (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Khru Phawanawithan Wi; hereafter Phra Sutas). The conversations touched upon the myriad challenges confronting Buddhist temples, including administrative hurdles, management and leadership dilemmas, passport-related issues, language barriers, technological progression, the preservation of traditions, modern-day adaptations, and the evolving role of monks.

Proficiency in the English language emerged as a significant issue, with five monks highlighting its importance. The Secretary-General of the Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the U.S.A., Phra Thanat Atthacari (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Videsratanaporn), pointed out that less than half of the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus have a proficient grasp of English. He voiced his desire to see these monks make a concerted effort to learn the language, emphasising its crucial role as a tool for propagating Buddhist teachings. In a similar vein, the abbot from Europe, Phra Samruat Kamalo (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Wimonsasanawitet), the head monk of Wat Thai Norway and president of the Union of Thai Sanghas in Europe, posited that a dedicated two-year immersion would be requisite to effectively master English.

Meanwhile, Phra Supasin Sirijanto, the resident monk of Wat Ananda Metyarama in Singapore and representative of the Thai Sangha Smatcha Singapore, noted that while Dhammaduta Bhikkhus have the requisite knowledge for propagation, there is a pressing need for continuous self-development. He posed a crucial question: “If monks cannot comprehend the local language, how can they effectively communicate with the locals?” Highlighting this point, he cited the monks of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Singapore, who seamlessly communicate in both Chinese and English, thus drawing a considerable following of Singaporean Buddhists. This serves as a testament to the value of continuous improvement. He further stressed that monks must remain up-to-date of worldly changes, adapt, and adeptly harness modern technologies and media, integrating them with the principles of Dhamma. This becomes especially pertinent as laypeople increasingly stay home, making the transition of Dhamma teachings to online platforms a valuable means of easy accessibility.

Another perspective came from Phramaha Khomsan Kuttadhammo, (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Khru Pariyat Phowitzet, hereafter Phramaha Khomsan), the abbot of Wat Thai Chetawan Mahavihar in India and spokesperson for Thai Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in India and Nepal. He emphasised the distinct advantage Dhammaduta Bhikkhus in Europe have in improving their English proficiency, given the prevalent linguistic context in their host countries. Moreover, the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Manchester, Phra Seri Sirisampanno (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Khru Samu), stressed the pivotal role of English proficiency in conveying the teachings of Buddha. Drawing an analogy, he described the Dhamma as water – inherently pure – and highlighted how language can become an obstacle. He expressed the possibility that Theravada Buddhism could encounter more difficulties in its propagation compared to Vajrayana Buddhism, primarily due to such linguistic barriers.

Another point of emphasis during the discussion was temple administration. Phra Sakchai Cittamedho (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Rat Watcharawitset), the Vice President of the Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the U.S.A., detailed this by categorising the responsibilities into four distinct sectors: administration, education, public welfare, and dissemination. These roles require the active involvement of not just monks and nuns, but also laymen and laywomen. The primary aim is to enrich and bring joy to the community, guiding individuals on the path of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. To fully realise this vision, the organisation must strengthen its foundations. This entails recruiting skilful Dhammaduta Bhikkhus, addressing the difficulties in propagation, and refining internal governance. He questioned how to

streamline the administrative structure of the temple and strengthen the relationships among the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus.

Moreover, Phramaha Khomsan introduced a perspective on CTBMUK's management. He drew a comparison with Thailand's official institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His proposition was to view the CTBMUK more formally, elevating the stature of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus to resemble that of government officers, all while preserving the essence of monastic administration. This would involve setting clear objectives, facilitating role transitions and relocations, all encapsulated within a structured framework and systematic operation.

The abbot of Wat Monkhorwararam in Leicester, Phra Kulthorn Cittindri (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Khru Vinaithon), stressed the significance of nurturing internal development within the temple's organisation. He likened this transformative process to the act of decluttering one's personal living space. He advocated for a tactical approach to solidify one's position, much like the essential groundwork needed before addressing specific issues, such as passport matters with the SSC. Similarly, Phra Somchai Cittagutto (Royal ecclesiastical title: Phra Khru Suddabuddhivites), the abbot of Wat Buddharam London, having lived in the UK for over twenty years, echoed the aforementioned metaphor of cleaning one's own home. He remarked that the CTBMUK consistently addresses the same challenges annually, seemingly ensnared in a perpetual loop. He pinpointed a fundamental weakness within the group, cautioning that without active solutions, these issues would persist and likely emerge in the subsequent year's meeting.

As the meeting neared its end, Phra Sutas presented questions from various temples, covering topics such as charity registration procedures, the advantages and practicality of adopting gift aid, and training for its effective use. He also announced upcoming training sessions scheduled for the then current Buddhist Lent year (2023), hosted online. These sessions would delve into bookkeeping practices, emphasising the importance of transparent donation sources, verifying expenditure documentation, and navigating digital accounting platforms like Sage and Xero. Additionally, he said, the curriculum would encompass technological and media proficiency, including setting up cloud computing systems and creating engaging social media content for the dissemination of Dhamma and uplifting messages.

The annual meetings of the CTBMUK serve as an important platform revealing several facets of the UK Thai Buddhist monastic community. They highlight the community's efforts to address various challenges, including issues with monks' passports and language barriers affecting the propagation of Buddhism. Discussions also focus on temple administration and management, financial matters and transparency, and the significant role and influence of CTBMUK in the UK. Moreover, the meetings demonstrate collaboration among monks and their connection to Thai religious authorities, while also identifying and promoting areas for improvement, such as language proficiency and the adoption of technology for Dhamma dissemination.

In addition to the meetings that bring together all 24 Thai temples, the CTBMUK introduced three primary activities aimed at engaging these temples and further propagating Buddhism since the pandemic in 2020. First is the online morning and evening chanting sessions. Each temple is encouraged to distribute chanting books to their followers and inspire them to participate in online chanting sessions on their temple's Facebook page. Following the chanting, temples are advised to share a daily Dhamma discourse or update followers about temple-related news. Finally, a united effort among the 24 temples under the CTBMUK involves providing daily Dhamma teachings, with each temple taking turns to host every day. These teachings are broadcast live on the CTBMUK's Facebook page.<sup>371</sup>

CTBMUK's establishment is important for preserving the Thai traditional practices and doctrines of Thai Buddhism within the diaspora community. By standardising practices and ensuring adherence to the *vinaya* and SSC regulations, the council helps maintain a sense of cultural and religious continuity among Thai Buddhist monks far from their homeland. The council's efforts to connect with the Thai diaspora and support Thai temples in the UK reflect a broader mission to serve as a communal anchor. The fundraising events, cultural networking, and disaster relief initiatives all point to a role beyond spiritual guidance: CTBMUK appears to act as a cultural and communal hub for Thai Buddhists in the UK.

Beyond its broad communal role, the CTBMUK profoundly affects the individual monks within its sphere. Its influence extends from the collective Thai Buddhist community in the UK to the intimate aspects of the monks' lives and duties. It serves as a unifying force, ensuring

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<sup>371</sup> Phra Laow Panyasiri, 'Interview by author', 2 May 2023.

they remain informed about relevant laws, regulations, and cultural shifts in both Thailand and the UK, all while introducing new layers of responsibility. These monks navigate their temple obligations alongside commitments within the CTBMUK, illustrating their dedication and adaptability to dual roles in the UK. The council, therefore, is not just a support system but a testament to the monks' multifaceted roles.

### 3.8.2 The Theravada Buddhist Sangha of the United Kingdom (TBSUK)

The Theravada Buddhist Sangha of the United Kingdom (TBSUK), established in 2006, serves as a beacon of unity and support for its members. With goals that include fostering friendliness and concord among the Sangha, offering mutual support, safeguarding Buddhism, and representing the interests of Theravada Sangha and Buddhism, the organisation has solidified its presence in the UK.<sup>372</sup> While all Theravada monks and nuns are automatically considered members, they do have the liberty to opt-out if they wish. To foster dialogue and make decisions, the TBSUK holds two main gatherings every year, one in March and the other in August.<sup>373</sup> The governing body of the organisation consists of a diverse committee, including a Chairperson, a Secretary, and five other members. This team represents a blend of various traditions and nationalities, such as Thai, Sri Lankan, English, and Burmese, ensuring a holistic approach to the organisation's endeavours.<sup>374</sup>

In an interview with Phramaha Bhatsakorn, he shared that the TBSUK was founded by the abbot of the Forest Hermitage, Ajahn Khemadhammo (Royal ecclesiastical title: Chao Khun Phawanawithet). Ajahn Khemadhammo recognised that immigration legislation posed challenges for Thai monks. In response, he founded the TBSUK to organise meetings for all Theravada Buddhist monastic members to discuss and address the challenges they faced. After several such meetings, the group advocated for direct conversations with British individuals to promote mutual understanding. To address specific issues confronting the monks, they initiated dialogues with the Home Office and certain lords. Consequently, some provisions were clarified: monks could be exempt from the resident labour market test. Additionally, there was

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<sup>372</sup> 'Objectives', TBSUK, accessed 22 September 2023, <https://tbsuk.wordpress.com/objectives/>.

<sup>373</sup> TBSUK, 'Objectives'.

<sup>374</sup> 'Committee', TBSUK, accessed 22 September 2023, <https://tbsuk.wordpress.com/committee/>.

no requirement for a salary provision for monks; they could simply input ‘0.00’ in the appropriate field. I will address the issues related to religious work visas later in Chapter 4.<sup>375</sup>

After addressing the aforementioned challenges, the structure of the annual meeting was modified to facilitate a panel discussion, welcoming the participation of senior Theravada Buddhists in the UK. In August 2023, the TBSUK convened its annual gathering at Wat Pa Buddharam, situated in Northampton. The proceedings commenced with a diverse recitation of *parittas*, auspicious texts. This spiritual setting was further augmented by an alms-giving ceremony, attended by approximately 50 monastics and several hundred lay supporters. Following the midday repast, the afternoon segment featured a panel discussion entitled ‘The Unity of the Sangha’. This discourse benefitted from the profound insights of respected senior Theravada Buddhist monks residing in the UK. The dialogue was contemporaneously broadcast on TBSUK’s official Facebook platform.

The influence of TBSUK on Thai monks in the UK is significant. Beyond fostering unity among all Theravada monastic communities, it addresses challenges and facilitates mutual understanding between UK authorities and the distinct practices of Buddhist monks, a topic to which I return in Chapter 4.

### 3.8.3 The World Buddhist Dhammaduta Organisation (WBDO)

The World Buddhist Dhammaduta Organisation (WBDO), established in 2018, received its official registration as a private limited company in November 2019. Chao Khun Laow attributes the inception of WBDO to the centennial celebrations of Wat Ananda Metyarama, Singapore’s oldest Thai Buddhist temple, founded in 1918.<sup>376</sup> For this milestone event, the temple had anticipated inviting Thai monks globally. The projected expenses for this grand celebration ranged between 20 to 30 million Baht, which is roughly equivalent to £450,000 to £680,000. However, Chao Khun Laow envisioned a more impactful use for the anticipated funds from the centennial celebrations. Initially, he proposed setting up an educational fund for monks. This idea evolved further during his trip to Norway, where he conferred with fellow

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<sup>375</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, ‘Interview by author’, 14 September 2023.

<sup>376</sup> Ng Jun Sen, ‘Oldest Thai Buddhist Temple in Singapore Turns 100, PM Lee Attends Celebration’, *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 13 May 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/oldest-thai-buddhist-temple-in-singapore-turns-100-pm-lee-attends-celebration>.

Thai monks. They shared a collective aspiration to propagate Buddhism, uniting Dhammaduta Bhikkhus from Asia, America, Europe, and Oceania, while steering clear of traditional hierarchies or authoritative structures. Their primary emphasis was on spreading Buddhist teachings.

With this vision, the WBDO was founded, aiming to elevate the expertise of Thai monks and Thai Buddhists. This mission encapsulated funding monk education and supporting lay missionary work. Their approach sought a holistic grasp of Buddhism for Thai Buddhists, combining both its theoretical and practical facets, encouraging them to impart this wisdom within their communities. The lay missionary initiative was inaugurated in September 2022 at Wat Mahathat Plymouth.<sup>377</sup> Additionally, a congregation of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus spanning the four continents convened in Singapore in May 2023.<sup>378</sup>

These three Theravada monastic organisations illustrate the complex interactions and relationships among Thai monks in the UK, their international counterparts, and those associated with other Theravada traditions. Furthermore, Thai monks in the UK shoulder an extensive range of duties, serving not just within their temple precincts but also actively championing the goals of these collective entities. The challenges they encountered are multifaceted, stemming both from their personal spiritual journey and external imperatives. These challenges span personal development, spiritual growth, acquisition of vital worldly skills—chief among them being English proficiency—participation in diverse Buddhist organisations and adhering to guidelines set by both Thai and UK authorities.

### 3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a foundational understanding of the presence, diversity, and characteristics of Thai temples in the UK while also examining relevant Theravada monastic organisations operating within the UK, exploring their backgrounds, objectives, and functions. My research identified 31 active temples in the UK that are authorised by the Thai government, as of 2023 (Table 4). This number highlights the UK's position as a significant location for the

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<sup>377</sup> Phra Laow Panyasiri, 'Interview by author', 2 May 2023.

<sup>378</sup> 'พระธรรมทูตไทยสายต่างประเทศ 4 ทวีปประชุมพระธรรมทูตโลกที่ประเทศสิงคโปร์ (Thai Dhammaduta Monks from Abroad of the Four Continents Convene at the Global Dhammaduta Assembly in Singapore)', Siamrath, 18 May 2023, <https://siamrath.co.th/n/447757>.

dissemination of Thai Buddhist traditions outside of Thailand, ranking fifth globally in the number of Thai temples abroad and second within Europe. The chapter combined a broad perspective with a focus on six main case studies.

A key finding of this chapter is the diversity in the origins and affiliations of these UK temples, which can be traced back to the various lineages and types of parent temple found in Thailand, as explained in the previous chapter. The six case studies—Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Arun Norfolk, Wat Phra Singh UK, Amaravati, Wat Sri Intra Atula, and Wat Phra Dhammakaya London—were intentionally chosen to represent this variety. This selection allowed for an examination of temples with royal connections (Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Arun and Wat Phra Singh UK), those rooted in the Thai Forest Tradition (Amaravati and Wat Sri Intra Atula), and the more modern, globalising tradition (Wat Phra Dhammakaya).

This chapter identified seven distinct approaches to the establishment of Thai temples in the UK: (1) state-supported initiative, (2) direct affiliation with parent temples in Thailand, (3) semi-independent foundations initiated by monastics, (4) lay-initiated establishments, (5) establishments led by English Buddhists, (6) temples founded under the patronage of esteemed monks in Thailand, and (7) independent establishments by Thai monks already residing in the UK (Table 6).

Table 6: Establishment Models of Thai Temples in the UK.

<b>Model</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Initiated by</b>	<b>Primary Support Base</b>	<b>Example Temples</b>
1.State-Sponsored	Set up by the Thai government under royal patronage aimed at creating a centre for religious practice and a cultural hub for the Thai diaspora	Thai government	Mixed (Thai and Western)	Wat Buddhapadipa
2.Direct Affiliation	Fully controlled by parent temple in Thailand; monks sent by headquarters	Thai parent temples	Thai community (Thailand and UK)	Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches in the UK
3.Semi-Independent Monastic Foundation	Initiated by monks from temples in Thailand or parent temple in UK but with more autonomy	Monks	Mixed (Thai and Western)	Amaravati
4.Thai Lay-Initiated	Thai laypeople in the UK initiate temples by inviting monks to establish them	Thai laypeople (diaspora)	Thai community in the UK	Wat Phra Sri Sanphet

5. Western Lay-Initiated	Westerners invite monks out of interest in Dhamma and meditation	English/Western lay practitioners	Mixed (Thai and Western)	Chithurst, Wat Phra Singh UK
6. Patronage from Esteemed Monk	Temples established under the name or blessing of revered Thai monks	High-ranking monks in Thailand	Thai community (Thailand and UK)	Wat Arun Norfolk, Wat Sri Intra Atula
7. Independent by Resident Monks	Thai monks residing long-term in the UK establish temples independently	Thai monks in UK	Thai community in the UK	Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley, Wat Sriratanaram, Wat Buddharam Leeds

Table 6 demonstrates the diverse origins of temples through a variety of channels, including state sponsorship, parent temples, monastic initiatives, lay support (Thai or Western), and individual monks in the UK. It reflects varying degrees of institutional control, community involvement, and cultural orientation. From state-sponsored centres to grassroots lay initiatives, these establishment models highlight the adaptability of Thai Buddhism in response to both diaspora needs and local contexts.

The model of establishment is closely tied to who initiates the temple, whether it is the Thai government, parent temples in Thailand, Thai or Western laypeople or independent monks residing in the UK. These models reflect differing levels of authority, decision-making, and governance structures present within the temples, typically categorised as either a top-down or bottom-up hierarchical model. Top-down models involve decisions made by higher authorities such as the Thai government, parent temples, high-ranking monks, which are then passed down to the branch temples abroad. Examples include Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Phra Dhammakaya UK branches, Wat Arun Norfolk, and Wat Sri Intra Atula. For instance, the appointment of Wat Buddhapadipa's abbot was approved by the SSC and decisions regarding the residence of monks and staff at Wat Phra Dhammakaya's UK branches are made by the headquarters in Thailand. This structure has allowed Wat Phra Dhammakaya to scale rapidly, but also leads to critiques of uniformity or lack of local contextualisation.

In contrast, bottom-up models refer to temples founded by Thai monks already living in the UK, supported by local Thai lay communities, where decisions-making lies primarily with the

resident abbot. Examples include Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley, Wat Sriratanaram, and Wat Buddharam Leeds. Similarly, temples established by Thai or Western laypeople, such as Wat Phra Sri Sanphet and Wat Phra Singh UK, reflect bottom-up dynamics. For instance, even though Wat Phra Singh UK is affiliated with Wat Phra Singh in Thailand, it operates with significant local autonomy with most decision-making is handled by the temple's committee, with the abbot in the UK serving as the highest authority. It can be categorised as a bottom-up model with loose affiliation.

Temples that do not fit neatly into either of these models include those in Ajahn Chah's lineage, particularly Chithurst and Amaravati, which have complex organisational structures and have been operated under the English Sangha Trust (EST) since their inception. Although they can be described as bottom-up models with loose affiliation, these temples were established in response to Western lay demand and operate independently of any formal control from Thai parent temple. Instead, they operate within a structured and collaborative management system that moves away from a purely abbot-centric model. While there is a clear leadership role for the abbots, the duties and responsibilities divided among committees, facilitating a decentralised governance model.

The support base varies by establishment models. Temples initiated by the Thai state or Thai diaspora tend to serve the Thai community, while those supported by Western laypeople often appeal to a broader, more diverse audience, especially Westerners and non-Thais. This distinction was evident during temple visits and participant observation, where more than 70% of attendees at the former group of temples were Thai, with most non-Thai attendees being British spouses. In contrast, temples in the latter group such as Chithurst and Amaravati had more mixed audience, with a higher proportion of Western attendees who were practitioners rather than accompanying a Thai partner.

Moving beyond the establishment models, I have delved into a more profound comprehension of the nuanced organisational structure, operational dynamics, and the challenges that permeate the CTBMUK. This council plays a pivotal role in not just maintaining religious and cultural continuity for Thai Buddhist monks in the UK, but also navigating the complex interplay of religious practices, legal obligations, and cultural expectations in a non-native setting. The CTBMUK stands as a compelling case study, illustrating how religious entities function within the diaspora, striking a balance between conserving traditional practices, and adapting to new

cultural and legal contexts. Furthermore, it brings to light the intricate and frequently underestimated administrative and practical challenges encountered by religious practitioners in today's world. The council's work, therefore, has significant implications not just for the propagation of Thai Buddhism, but also for the broader discourse on religion, globalisation, and cultural preservation.

In addition to the CTMBUK, two other monastic organisations, TBSUK and WBDO, highlight the complex dynamics among Thai monks in the UK and globally. Their roles extending beyond temple confines to supporting broader objectives. They navigate numerous challenges, from spiritual growth to practical matters like language proficiency and compliance with UK regulations. The establishment of these monastic organisations represents a strategic endeavour to foster unity and provide mutual support among Thai monks in the UK, as well as monks of other nationalities, whether they share an ordination lineage or belong to the broader Theravada tradition. This initiative mirrors a fundamental drive in Thai Buddhist studies, especially in institutional analysis, aiming to safeguard and uphold Buddhism. At the heart of this effort is a commitment to the vitality and longevity of Buddhism, ensuring its sustained presence in this country for years to come.

Having presented the big picture of Thai temples in the UK while also providing substantial detail of our six cases, the following chapters will focus on specific types of challenge met in the establishment and maintenance of these temples. We begin by looking at the different Thai and UK regulatory bodies that govern and delimit the activities of temples (Chapter 4), then turn to the roles of monks and abbots, as well as the relative absence of female monastic (Chapter 5), ending with practical matters unique to the diaspora context from lay involvement and gendered dynamics in temple support to conflicts within the temple, funeral practices, and the negotiation of tradition within a foreign cultural environment (Chapter 6).

# 4

## Bridging Different Realms – The Complexities of Managing Thai Temples in the UK

While theoretically choosing a life of seclusion, as ‘world-renouncers’ and conforming to monastic regulations laid down 2,500 years ago, Thai monks in the UK are tasked with serving convert and Thai diaspora communities, administering bi-national and multinational institutions, dealing with complex regulations, fundraising in ways that require entrepreneurship, managing building projects and finding sophisticated solutions to ever-developing environmental and people management issues. The challenges they encounter stem not only from the expectations of the temples and teaching lineages in Thailand from which they originate but also from the regulations issued by Thai national authorities and additional pressures from UK laws. Although Thai monks remain subject to the SSC’s regulations due to their Thai ordination lineage, the SSC does not govern the temples in the UK. Consequently, Thai temples in the UK must comply with a range of UK regulations, encompassing everything from immigration laws and food hygiene to financial compliance and health and safety standards.

This chapter provides an overview of the authorities in both Thailand and the UK involved in establishing and managing Thai temples in the UK. Based on the six administrative responsibilities of Sangha affairs outlined by the SSC –governance, Buddhist propagation, monastic education, ecclesiastical properties, welfare education, and public welfare – augmented by what I have deduced from my personal involvement and the interviews conducted during fieldwork, I have identified nine essential management functions necessary for a temple: people, property and grounds, finances, food, waste, events, education, Buddhist propagation, and public welfare. Table 7 summarises the Thai authorities involved in temple management in the UK, particularly concerning monks traveling abroad, while Table 8 outlines the administrative landscape of charitable organisations in the UK, with a focus on Thai temples, and illustrates how various aspects

of their management are overseen by different UK authorities. The nine management functions I have identified form the ‘Management of’ or vertical axis of Tables 4 and 5, while the different administrative and legislative bodies make up the ‘Authorities’ or horizontal axis, with the Thai authorities listed in Table 7 and the UK authorities in Table 8. As indicated in both tables, monks or committees involved in temple management in the UK must coordinate with seven Thai authorities and, to the best of my knowledge, at least 13 relevant UK bodies.

In terms of the establishment of Thai temples in the UK, I shall categorise the timeline of the process into three distinct phases: the period before the monks arrived in the UK, the phase of setting up the temples, and the phase dedicated to their maintenance. First, I will examine the relevant authorities in both Thailand and the UK responsible for overseeing monks travelling abroad. Then, I will explore the various departments, agencies, and public bodies within the UK government, focusing particularly on those involved in the registration of charitable organisations, specifically Thai temples, and in acquiring properties for these temples. Lastly, I will investigate the UK authorities involved in the maintenance of the temples.

Table 7: Thai Authorities and Organisation in Relation to Temple Management in the UK.

<b><u>Thai Authorities</u></b>	<b>Management of</b>								
	<b>People</b>	<b>Property &amp; Grounds</b>	<b>Finances</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>Waste</b>	<b>Events</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Buddhist Propagation</b>	<b>Public Welfare</b>
The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand (SSC)	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
National Office of Buddhism (NOB)	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Regulatory Office for Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus (for Mahanikai) (RODB)	✓							✓	
The Training Institute for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus Going Abroad (for Thammayut) (TIDGA)	✓							✓	

Department of Consular Affairs	✓								
The Center of Ecclesiastical External Mission (Sor Tor Por)	✓							✓	
The Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland (CTBMUK)	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	

Table 8: UK Authorities in Relation to Temple Management in the UK.

<u>UK Authorities</u>	Management of								
	People	Property & Grounds	Finances	Food	Waste	Events	Education	Buddhist Propagation	Public Welfare
Home Office	✓	✓	✓						
Charity Commission	✓	✓	✓			✓			
Scottish Charity Regulator	✓	✓	✓			✓			
Companies House	✓	✓	✓			✓			
General Register Office (Place of Worship)	✓	✓				✓			
Local Council	✓	✓			✓	✓			✓
Local Planning Authority	✓	✓				✓			
Insurance Companies	✓	✓	✓			✓			
Food Standards Agency (FSA)	✓			✓		✓			
Health and Safety Executive	✓	✓				✓			
HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC)	✓	✓	✓						
Banks	✓	✓	✓						
Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Checks	✓					✓			

## 4.1 Pre-Arrival Phase

Before Thai monks can set foot on British soil, they must navigate the regulations of authorities in both Thailand and the UK. The regulations and procedures for monks and novices travelling abroad were first mentioned in the Sangha Act of 1962, revised in 1992, and the current version was revised in 1994. The regulations categorise two types of travelling abroad: official business or Sangha activities, and personal travel. Those who travel for the first type, under the authority and duty of the SSC, will obtain an official passport, while those travelling for the latter type must comply with the requirements laid down in these Sangha regulations and will obtain an ordinary passport.

### 4.1.1 The Process of Recruiting and Acquiring Monastic Passports in Thailand

For monks to visit the UK, obtaining a visa is just one part of the process; there are additional prerequisites to be met in Thailand before they can apply for a UK visa. This section will discuss the process of recruiting monks and acquiring monastic passports, providing background on the initial steps Thai monastics must take before relocating to the UK. It will offer insight into the Thai government's processes and the specific requirements for monastics to be recognised for international travel and religious work abroad, thereby setting the stage for understanding the complexities involved from the start of their journey.

#### Recruiting Process

From my six primary case studies, along with visits to additional Thai temples, I have identified three methods these temples use to recruit monks and staff. The first and most common method is recruitment through referrals. This can come either from colleagues within the Dhammadata Bhikkhus' training programme (see Chapter 1) or from established acquaintances in Thailand, based on recommendations by monks who have previously been in the UK. Most Thai temples in the UK, including Wat Arun Norfolk, predominantly use this method to source monks. This recruitment process relies on trust and the credibility of the referrer. The decision to bring in the recommended monk may solely depend on the abbot of the temple in the UK, although sometimes the temple committee may also be involved. As highlighted in the previous chapter, monks at Wat Arun Norfolk, especially during periods outside the Buddhist Lent, come from a range of temples throughout Thailand, instead of being directly affiliated with its parent

temple. Nonetheless, a critical commonality among these monks is their successful completion of the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus' training programme.

During my fieldwork at Wat Arun Norfolk, only two monks were residing at the temple: Phramaha Phanuwat, the acting abbot, and Phramaha Natthawut, the resident monk. Neither monk is originally from the parent temple, but both graduated from the same Dhammaduta Bhikkhus' training programme in the same year, which has led to their strong acquaintance. The current abbot of Wat Arun Norfolk, Than Jirawath, was in Thailand at the time of my visit, so I later conducted a phone interview with him. According to Than Jirawath, the temple employs two methods to recruit monks for the UK branch. The first method involves referrals; for example, Than Jirawath nominated individuals he knows, such as his mentor Phramaha Phanuwat and his colleague Phramaha Natthawut from the same Dhammaduta Bhikkhus' training batch, to a committee composed of monks from both Wat Arun Norfolk and Wat Arun in Thailand. The second method allows monks to apply directly to the committee after completing the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus training, submitting their profiles to the temple committee. Monks typically recommend each other for recruitment, while opportunities are also announced through the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus' training programme, which is held annually from March to June.<sup>379</sup>

In the interview with the two monks, Phramaha Natthawut emphasised the benefits of the referral method, noting that for the temple to operate effectively, it is essential for the monks to be well-acquainted and able to collaborate harmoniously.<sup>380</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat highlighted that, in addition, having a diverse array of skills—including cooking, IT, event organisation, construction, and meditation teaching—is essential for missionary monks. Ideally, the five monks residing at the temple during Buddhist Lent should each specialise in different areas to ensure the temple's effective operation.<sup>381</sup> These skills contrast with the traditional ideals of monkhood, which emphasise solitude, simplicity, and detachment rather than managerial or economic activity. Given the traditional expectations that monks depend on lay people for food, cooking may also come across as a surprising requirement. However, some monks in overseas temples are required to cook their own food (see below). Furthermore, the Home Office presents an additional challenge by expecting Ministers of Religion, such as monks in this

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<sup>379</sup> Phramaha Jirawath Ciraputtiyo, 'Interview by author', 28 December 2023.

<sup>380</sup> Phramaha Natthawut Thannavudho, Interview by author, Phone Interview, 17 April 2023.

<sup>381</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi, 'Interview by author', 17 April 2023.

instance, to acquire English language skills at a level similar to that required of international students who wish to pursue undergraduate studies in the UK (see below). This underscores the complexity and dynamic nature of modern monkhood, indicating a need for both practical and spiritual skills, including the contemporary necessity for English language proficiency alongside traditional religious practices.

The second method of recruitment involves public advertising. This is achieved through training programme for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus at universities such as MCU, as well as via social media platforms including Facebook and through websites. In an interview, Chao Khun Laow, the current abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, recounted his initial recruitment effort when he moved to the temple in Birmingham in 1994. Invited by Buddhists of Indian heritage to reside at the Buddha Vihara in Aston, Birmingham, he was the temple's sole monk at that time. Six months later, he recruited the first group of monks from MCU in Thailand.<sup>382</sup> He invited an English interviewer to conduct the recruitment session, resulting in the successful enrolment of five monks. This recruitment occurred a year before the formal establishment of the Dhammaduta training programme at the Buddhist universities of Mahanikai and Thammayut, which was supported by the Department of Religious Affairs in 1995 (see chapter 1).<sup>383</sup>

When asked about the criteria used to select monks for various activities, Chao Khun Laow explained that he categorised the monks into distinct groups based on their skills and interests to provide everyone with an opportunity. The first group includes monks who engage in *dhutaṅga* practices or live in forest monasteries. The second group consists of those skilled in construction.<sup>384</sup> The final group comprises monks who are interested in pursuing further studies.

Newly recruited monks usually come to the UK with a 6-month visitor visa. During this period, Chao Khun Laow assesses everyone's capabilities and subsequently recommends some for

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<sup>382</sup> Phra Laow Panyasiri, 'Interview by author', 2 May 2023.

<sup>383</sup> 'วิทยาลัยพระธรรมทูต (Dhammaduta College)', Dhammaduta College, accessed 7 April 2024, <https://odc.mcu.ac.th/>.

<sup>384</sup> Being skilled in construction is essential for monks, especially those residing abroad, because they need to oversee the temple's construction or renovation, or even perform some basic tasks. There was an incident in the United States where monks were overcharged for construction materials due to their lack of basic knowledge about construction. Therefore, the training programme for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus includes construction skills in its curriculum. Monks are taught to calculate construction costs, learn about all materials related to the construction project, and understand how to construct a building within a budget.

Dhammaduta Bhikkhus training. For those in the second group, who are often monks possessing the necessary skills and knowledge but are older, training programme participation may be precluded; however, they are well-suited for work because of their prior experience. Chao Khun Laow stated that they are not required to undergo this training, but it is essential that he can manage them effectively. Without a certificate from this training, these monks can only apply for an ordinary passport, not an official one. Those who complete the training and obtain the certificates can then apply for an official passport (see below). After obtaining either an ordinary or official passport, Chao Khun Laow would offer them a 2-year religious worker visa to reside at the temples in the UK under his supervision.

Chao Khun Laow also recruited monks via Facebook and a website. In the interview, he said the recent batch he recruited included 20 applicants, about ten of whom are now staying at Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley, where they began their English studies immediately. After that, they may pursue master's or doctoral degrees if their English is sufficient. Chao Khun Laow insisted on supporting their education, having faced difficulties in the past trying to pursue his own education as a monk. He said, "Previously, many [monks] studied in India; now, they attend MCU in Thailand for their master's degrees, but their English proficiency remains inadequate. Therefore, it is beneficial for them to come to England, where English is the native language. This makes England a suitable place for providing monks with opportunities."<sup>385</sup> The importance of education and English proficiency reflects issues discussed at the annual meeting of the CTBMUK on July 7, 2023, where English was viewed as a key tool for propagating Buddhist teachings (see Chapter 3).

Chao Khun Laow's recent announcement on Facebook in January 2024 called for monks who wish to perform religious duties on a trial basis in the UK specifying that candidates must meet at least three of the following criteria: completion of the Dhammaduta Bhikkhu's training for missionaries in foreign countries; proficiency in chanting the *pāṭimokkha* (the list of ancient rules that monks must follow); ability to teach Vipassana meditation; robust IT skills; strong English language skills; a passion for propagating Buddhism; and qualities such as diligence, perseverance, determination, and sacrifice.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Phra Laow Panyasiri, 'Interview by author', 2 May 2023.

<sup>386</sup> 'Facebook Phramaha Laow Panyasiri', accessed 9 April 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/wat.unitedkingdom>.

These criteria align with those recommended by Phramaha Phanutwat from Wat Arun Norfolk, as discussed earlier, reflecting the evolving demands of modern monkhood. In particular, the emphasis on English and IT skills highlights the shift from traditional expectations to contemporary requirements. The inclusion of *pāṭimokkha* chanting proficiency may seem unusual, as monks are traditionally required to recite it fortnightly. However, given the complexity of memorising all 227 rules, only those with exceptional proficiency typically lead the recitation. In cases where temples lack such expertise, they must invite a qualified monk from another temple.

The recruitment process itself reflects the influence of modernity. Monks can now register with their mobile phones by scanning a QR code displayed in a Facebook post, streamlining the application process and making it more accessible. While the use of mobile phones may appear contradictory to the ascetic lifestyle of monks, many in Thailand have embraced them as valuable tools. They serve practical purposes such as facilitating religious duties, engaging with laypeople via social media, and managing personal affairs. Despite concerns about distractions, mobile devices have proven essential during challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling monks to connect with communities through live-streamed chanting, meditation, and Dhamma teachings. These developments further illustrate the evolving role of monks, balancing spiritual responsibilities with the practical demands of a rapidly changing world.

This second recruitment method using Facebook and websites not only demonstrates the required IT skills but also highlights an adaptation that is quite advanced for a monk like Chao Khun Laow, who has been ordained for over 40 years and is now engaging with platforms popular among younger generations. Facebook is widely used among Thai people, ranking 9<sup>th</sup> in the world with 51.6 million active users out of a population of 65 million as of 2023.<sup>387</sup> It is unsurprising that most Thai temples in the UK, except those following the Thai Forest Tradition (see below), use Facebook as the main platform to communicate with the Thai community, posting about temple activities, live chanting and meditation, Dhamma teachings, and announcements for upcoming events such as *Songkran*, *Loy Krathong*, and Kathin Ceremony, as well as live-streaming of events, making it an effective means of communicating with the Thais in both Thailand and the UK.

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<sup>387</sup> 'Facebook Users, Stats, Data, Trends, and More', Data Reportal – Global Digital Insights, accessed 9 April 2024, <https://datareportal.com/essential-facebook-stats>.

The third method for recruiting monks is through their own institutions. The UK branches of Wat Phra Singh and Wat Phra Dhammakaya recruit only monks who have been ordained at their parent temples. I interviewed Phra Nuntanat Kittisaphano (hereafter Than Nuntanat), the resident monk at Wat Phra Singh UK, to learn more about the recruiting process. Since Wat Phra Singh UK has already obtained the sponsor licence, monks are eligible to apply for a 2-year religious worker visa directly through the institution (see below).<sup>388</sup> At Wat Phra Singh in Thailand, Luang Por Sopano, the current abbot, is the primary decision-maker for recruitment. The three main criteria for selecting monks for overseas missions are: the potential to spread Buddhism, the capability to organise religious and cultural ceremonies, and graduation from a Faculty of Humanities with a major in English. However, these criteria serve only as guidelines. For instance, Than Nuntanat did not graduate in Humanities with a major in English but in religious studies in both bachelor and master's degrees. In addition, he was not required to participate in the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus training programme, which is voluntary.

My findings highlight the varying criteria across different temples. For instance, at Wat Arun Norfolk and Wat Buddhapadipa, passing the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus training is mandatory for monks. In contrast, at Wat Phra Singh, this training is not required. Instead, obtaining the approval of the abbot is essential. Nevertheless, according to the Regulations of the Thai Dhammaduta Order in the United Kingdom, monks intending to conduct religious activities in the UK, regardless of whether they have undergone training in the Dhammaduta Bhikkhus programme, must first secure approval from the management committee of the CTBMUK. This approval process is conducted on a case-by-case basis. Monks are permitted to travel to the UK for religious purposes only after a temple has formally submitted a proposal on their behalf.<sup>389</sup>

Another example of this method is the complex recruitment process at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, reflecting its large organisation (see Chapter 2). The temple employs an internal process to determine the eligibility of monks or staff members for overseas religious duties. During my fieldwork in Thailand, I interviewed Phra Chaiyut Chayawangso (hereafter Phra Chaiyut), a senior monk at the Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Pathum Thani. With 21 years of ordination and 15 years of experience in recruitment and in the passport application process for monks at the temple in question, he currently serves as the Director of International Branch Liaison.

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<sup>388</sup> Phra Nuntanat Kittisaphano, 'Interview by author', 29 June 2023, Phone Interview.

<sup>389</sup> Secretary Division of CTBMUK, 'การประชุมสมัชชาสามัญ องค์การพระธรรมทูตไทยในสหราชอาณาจักรและไอร์แลนด์ พุทธศักราช ๒๕๖๖ (The General Meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2023)'.

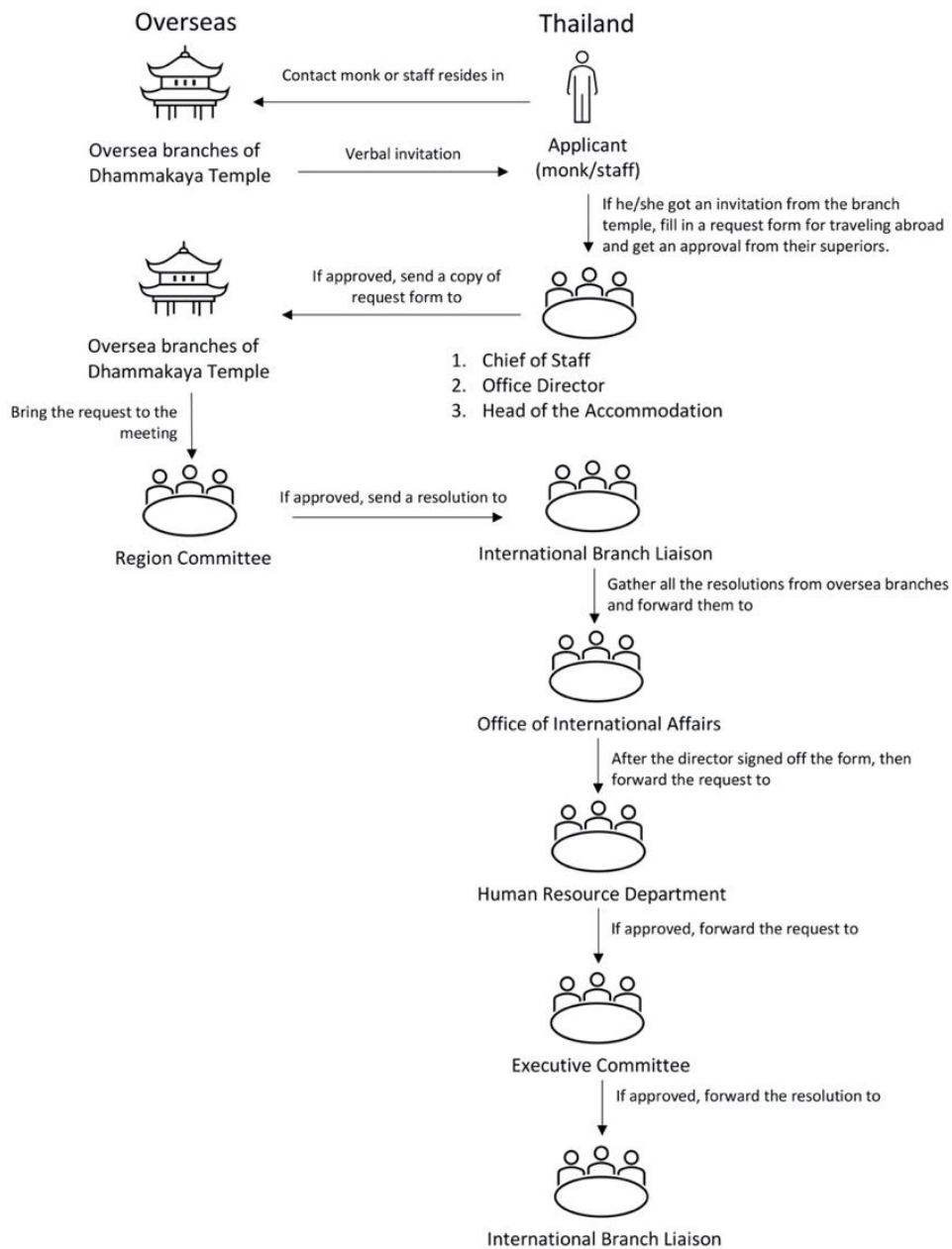
According to Phra Chaiyut, before monks or staff at Wat Phra Dhammakaya can apply for a passport or visa, they must undergo an approval process within the temple, which typically takes about three months. The process starts when a monk or staff member in Thailand contacts a colleague at an overseas branch, such as Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle in the UK. After discussions with the abbot there, and upon receiving a verbal invitation, the Thai monk or staff member completes a request form and submits it to their superiors: the Chief of Staff, the Office Director, and the Head of Accommodation. If approved, the request form is sent to the overseas branch for further consideration at the regional assembly, where the decision to recruit is made.

The branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Europe, including the UK, are managed by the European committee, which conducts weekly online meetings involving the abbots of all 28 European branches. Post-meeting, the regional secretary forwards a summary of the discussions to the International Branch Liaison in Thailand. This liaison gathers all resolutions from the international branches and forwards them to the director of the Office of International Affairs for approval. The resolutions are then presented to the Human Resources Department, comprised of three representative types reflecting the temple's constituents: monk, *ubasok* and *ubasika*. Decisions are made monthly, around the third Thursday, and subsequently, the Human Resources Department forwards approved names to the Executive Committee, which meets on the last Tuesday of each month. Finally, the Human Resources Department summarises and forwards the decisions back to the International Branch Liaison, who then initiates the passport or visa application process.<sup>390</sup> Below, a flowchart depicts this review process, enabling monks or staff members at Wat Phra Dhammakaya to perform religious duties abroad (Figure 22).

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<sup>390</sup> Phra Chaiyut Chayawangso, 'Interview by author', 14 April 2021, In Person.

Figure 22: Flowchart of the Approval Process for Performing Religious Duties Abroad for Monks and Individuals at Wat Phra Dhammakaya.



The complex recruitment process at Wat Phra Dhammakaya exemplifies a comprehensive system for managing and regulating its operations, as detailed in Chapter 2. Unlike many temples where decision-making relies solely on the abbot, such as at Wat Phra Singh UK and Wat Buddhapadipa, decision-making at Wat Phra Dhammakaya involves many individuals and committees. Implementing such a system is essential for managing the extensive, highly centralised organisation, which includes 179 branches in Thailand and 100 international

branches. In addition, the process reveals that within the organisation, monks and staff require referrals either from known contacts at the overseas branches or from those in Thailand who can connect them with contacts abroad. Without these personal connections, direct communication with the abbots of these temples is nearly impossible. Lastly, this recruitment process highlights the complexity of the modern role of monks within a large organisation, where decision-making involves numerous processes rather than being traditionally centred solely on the abbot's judgment. It also emphasises the importance of personal connections, contrasting with the ideal of monkhood characterised by seclusion and detachment.

The last example of a different recruitment method is that at Amaravati, which recruits not from Thailand but within the UK. Ajahn Amaro, the current abbot of Amaravati, explained that Amaravati does not advertise or recruit monks or nuns on any platform. Instead, those interested contact them directly via email or the temple's website. The website is their only online platform and receives significant traffic, with 300,000 visitors monthly. At the time of the interview in May 2023, Amaravati housed 22 monks and 11 nuns, including some visiting monks from branch temples in Thailand, Norway, and the United States.<sup>391</sup>

Before one can join the monastic community at Amaravati, be it as monks or nuns, they must go through a long training process lasting a minimum of two and a half years. This timing has been set up for all the different branches in the West to ensure that individuals who want to join the monastic community can actually adapt to monastic life. In the interview, Ajahn Amaro, explains that a two-year period serves as a suitable transition for those entering Thai monasteries. Unlike many temples in Thailand and the West, where ordinations can be temporary and occur more rapidly, the branch temples of Ajahn Chah focus instead on individuals who are interested in making a long-term commitment.<sup>392</sup>

The process of joining the monastic community at Amaravati involves a structured, step-by-step commitment that contrasts with traditional, immediate ordinations. Initially, interested individuals start with a short-term stay, limited to a maximum of two weeks, to assess their fit both personally and for the community's assessment. For those traveling from distant places such as Australia or the States, the length of stay can be negotiated but cannot extend beyond

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<sup>391</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

<sup>392</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

a month. During their stay, they must observe the eight precepts, including celibacy and not eating after noon. If they wish to continue pursuing membership after their first visit, they need to arrange another visit later in the year as laypersons, this time for a two to three-month stay.<sup>393</sup>

After this initial period, if they are still interested in joining, the monks or nuns at Amaravati will review and vote on the suitability of the candidate. This decision requires a consensus. If approved, a date will be set for the candidate to shave their head, switch to white robes, and continue adhering to the eight precepts. These white-robed postulants at Amaravati and its branches—part of the Ajahn Chah lineage—are known as *anagārikas*, and they commit to this role for one year. At the end of this year, both the community and the individual will review the arrangement to determine whether the *anagārika* will continue in the community. If the individual chooses to stay, the path differs by gender: women will spend at least another year in white robes, while men will commit to another year as *sāmaneras*, or novices. This next step involves the *pabbajjā* ceremony, where they formally take on the ten precepts, including the vow to abstain from handling or using money. After completing this one-year period, women may request to take the ten precepts, which is the only form of ordination available for them there. Men, on the other hand, have the option to undertake *upasampadā*, the higher ordination, and become a *bhikkhu*.<sup>394</sup>

While the absolute minimum period before ordination is two and a half years, it may take a bit longer; for instance, two days after my interview with Ajahn Amaro, there was a *pabbajjā* ceremony for one female *anagārika* who had been in white for about three years. Ajahn Amaro explains that the process was much less systematic in the past but has proven helpful over time, both for the individual interested in joining the community and for the community itself because, being in the West, “there’s no Buddhist culture around you. So, it’s stepping into quite a different way of life.”<sup>395</sup> In addition to an individual’s transition from lay life to monastic life, there is also the surprise and adjustment required by families. Ajahn Amaro affirms that the two-year period serves as an effective ‘entry point’ or ‘buffer zone,’ allowing both the individuals and their families to gradually adjust. During this time, while residing in the monastery and observing the eight precepts, individuals can still visit their families, handle

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<sup>393</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

<sup>394</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

<sup>395</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

money, and drive, among other practical activities. However, they must adhere to certain monastic rules, such as abstaining from eating supper and maintaining celibacy.<sup>396</sup>

The approach adopted by Amaravati before allows new monastic members to make the necessary cultural adjustments and significant lifestyle changes while simultaneously allowing existing community members to observe the newcomer's behaviour, helping to prevent later potential conflicts. At first glance, one might argue that this process for integrating individuals into their communities is more effective than that of other Thai temples, which tend to ordain individuals more readily. However, the purposes for establishing temples vary, as I discussed in Chapter 3; consequently, the processes by which each temple recruits monks also differ. Some temples may adopt more than one method of recruitment, such as Wat Arun, which utilises all three methods discussed. Nevertheless, when one looks closer, this gradual transition resembles the approach Chao Khun Laow adopted for newcomer monks from Thailand, initially providing them with a 6-month visitor visa, assessing their suitability, and only later granting them a 2-year religious worker visa. Both groups of monks— Western monks and Thai monks—must navigate significant cultural transitions: one group adapting to the Buddhist way of life, while the other adjusts to Western environments and learns a new language.

### Monastic Passport

After being selected to perform his religious duty in the UK, the monk must undergo the passport application procedure, which in Thailand, is far more complicated for monks than for laypeople. For laypeople, the process usually takes one week or less and involves only one Thai authority, namely the Department of Consular Affairs. However, for a monk, it takes at least a month and requires the involvement of four Thai authorities—two administered by monks and the remaining two by the Thai government. There are two types of passports: an official passport with a blue cover and an ordinary passport with a crimson red cover. While both passports are valid for visa applications, the official passport grants visa-free travel to 89 countries for short stays, whereas the ordinary passport only allows entry to 34 countries. To qualify for an official passport, monks must receive a certificate of completion from the training programme for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

<sup>397</sup> Overseas Buddh. Mission. Monks, 'Dhammaduta College'.

## Official Passport

The website of the Regulatory Office for Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus (RODB) lists five stages that must be completed to obtain a monk's official passport.<sup>398</sup> First, the abbot of the overseas (i.e., U.K.) temple sends a letter to the abbot of the Thai temple where the selected monk resides. If the abbot in Thailand grants permission for the selected monk to work abroad, the overseas Thai Buddhist temple will send a letter of request to the president of the RODB. If a council of Thai Buddhist monks exists in that country, it will be the one to send a request letter. The president of the RODB will then write a letter of consideration to the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand after granting the request.<sup>399</sup> The council decides if the selected monk is qualified to travel overseas at a meeting conducted twice a month. If the council grants approval, a letter of authorisation will be sent to the National Office of Buddhism, which includes a letter instructing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to issue a passport to the monk in question.<sup>400</sup> After obtaining a passport, the monk can contact the National Office of Buddhism to request a visa from the foreign embassies in Thailand.<sup>401</sup> I created the flowchart (Figure 23) below to demonstrate this process.

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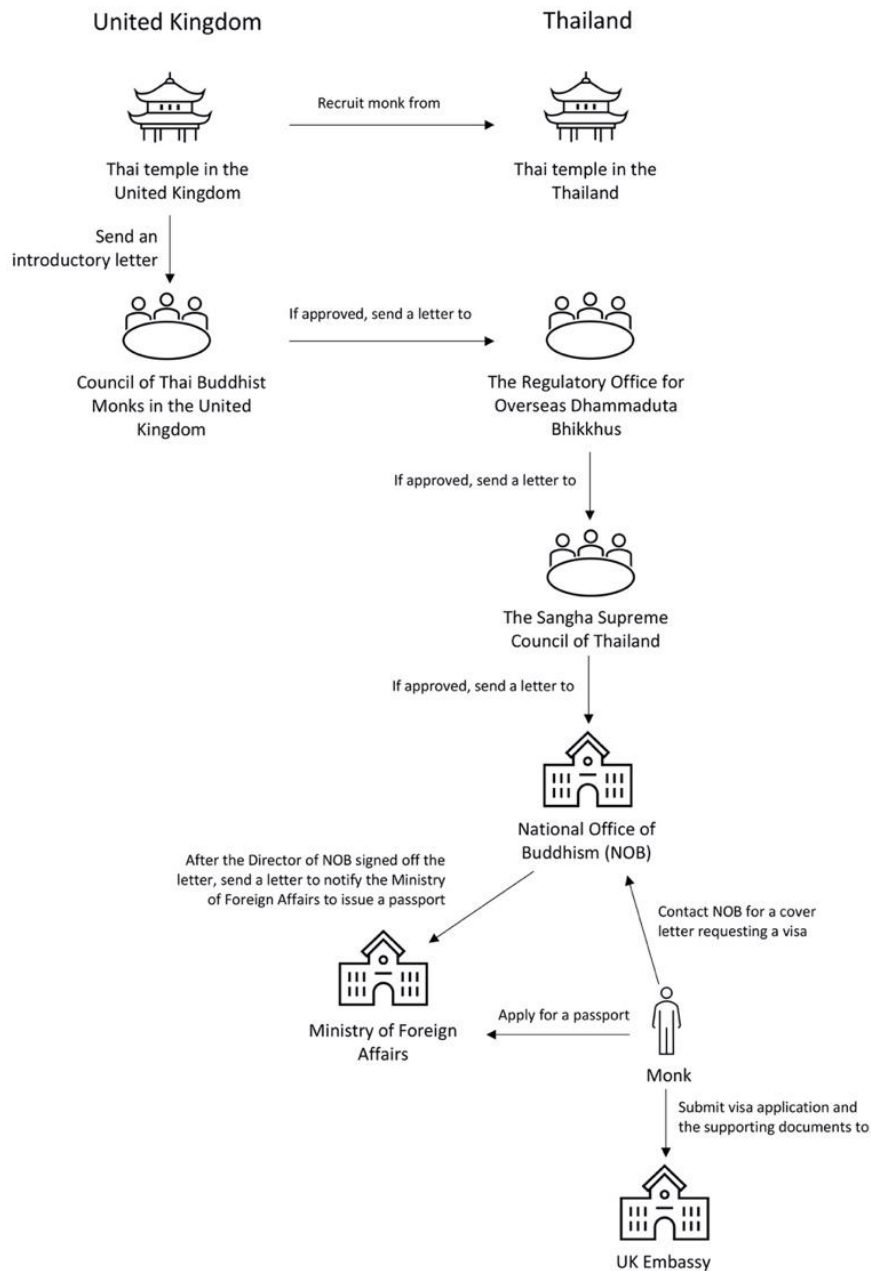
<sup>398</sup> 'Regulatory Office for Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus (RODB)', accessed 1 April 2021, <https://www.obhik.com/passport>.

<sup>399</sup> 'มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand)', The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand, accessed 12 April 2021, <http://mahathera.onab.go.th/>.

<sup>400</sup> 'กระทรวงการต่างประเทศ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand)', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, accessed 12 April 2021, <https://www.mfa.go.th/>.

<sup>401</sup> 'Regulatory Office for Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus (RODB)'.

Figure 23: Flowchart of Procedures for Obtaining an Official Passport for a Thai Monk Invited to Perform Religious Duty in the UK.



As I explored the RODB website further in 2021, I noticed that it had not been updated since 2018, and its associated Facebook page had similarly remained inactive since August 2018.<sup>402</sup> This lack of updates is perhaps due to a change in leadership at the RODB. The website was originally created under the supervision of Phra Phomsitti, the former abbot of Wat Saket

<sup>402</sup> 'Regulatory Office for Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus (RODB)'; 'สำนักงานกำกับดูแลพระธรรมทูตไปต่างประเทศ (Office of Dhammaduta Supervision Overseas)', accessed 9 April 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/dhammadutath/>.

Rajavaravihara, who was appointed president of the RODB in 2015. However, in 2018, Phra Phomsitti was implicated in a scandal involving the alleged misappropriation of temple finances, leading to his succession by the current president, the abbot of Wat Yannawa, Somdej Phramaha Theerajarn.

Under the new management at Wat Yannawa, a new Facebook page for the RODB was launched in June 2019; however, no official website has been established.<sup>403</sup> This Facebook page publishes a list of Dhammaduta Bhikkhus who have successfully completed their training and promotes their religious activities in Thailand and abroad. However, it does not provide any instructions for applying for a monk's passport, which may cause confusion for monks seeking guidance. I too was unsure whether the previously mentioned method was still applicable and was fortunate to have the complexities of the matter clarified during an interview with Phra Chaiyut, Director of the International Branch Liaison at Wat Phra Dhammakaya (above p.169).

In an hour-long interview, Phra Chaiyut provided valuable insights into the monk's passport application process. With 15 years of experience in applying for passports for monks at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, he is considered an expert in this field. He confirmed that the above procedure is still valid. Additionally, he explained in detail how a monk can obtain a standard passport with a crimson red cover (below). The primary distinction between these two processes lies in the decision-making authority: the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand oversees the issuance of the official monk's passport, while the Center for Ecclesiastical External Mission (Sor Tor Por) handles the ordinary passport.<sup>404</sup>

### Ordinary Passport

According to the official website of the Center for Ecclesiastical External Mission (Sor Tor Por), there are five steps required for a monk to apply for an ordinary passport.<sup>405</sup> Once a monk in Thailand has received an invitation from the temple abroad, he can complete an online

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<sup>403</sup> ‘สนง.กำกับดูแล พระธรรมทูตไปต่างประเทศ (Office of Supervision Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus)’, accessed 12 April 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/odb.yannawa>.

<sup>404</sup> The Center for Ecclesiastical External Mission (Sor Tor Por) is an administrative body responsible for overseeing and regulating international travel for Buddhist monks and novices. Its duties include granting travel permissions, managing the registry, and monitoring the well-being of monks and novices abroad. See ‘The Center of Ecclesiastical External Mission (Sor Tor Por)’, accessed 1 May 2021, <https://sortorpor.com>.

<sup>405</sup> ‘The Center of Ecclesiastical External Mission (Sor Tor Por)’.

application form. He submits this document to five senior monks who are his superiors: the abbot of the monk's temple, the Ecclesiastical Chief of the Village, the Ecclesiastical District Officer, the Ecclesiastical Province Governor, and the Ecclesiastical Inspecting Official for the Region, in that order.

These five senior monks must hold positions in the same region where the applicant originally received their monastic identification card. Monastic identity cards date back to the reign of Rama I (1782–1809), but the current format is not identical to the original. In the past, only monks from outside Bangkok who sought to study meditation at a temple in Bangkok were required to carry one. This document contained the monk's personal information, including his monastic name, his previous name as a layperson, his preceptor and how long he has been a monk, as well as a stamp from a high-ranking monk of the province in which the monk resided.<sup>406</sup> Currently, all monks in Thailand are required to carry an official identity card that contains additional information including his parents' names, his figure and build, his skin tone, and any birthmarks or other unique attributes, as well as his ordination information and the temple where he resides. This monastic identity card is subject to approval by the monk's preceptor and abbot.<sup>407</sup>

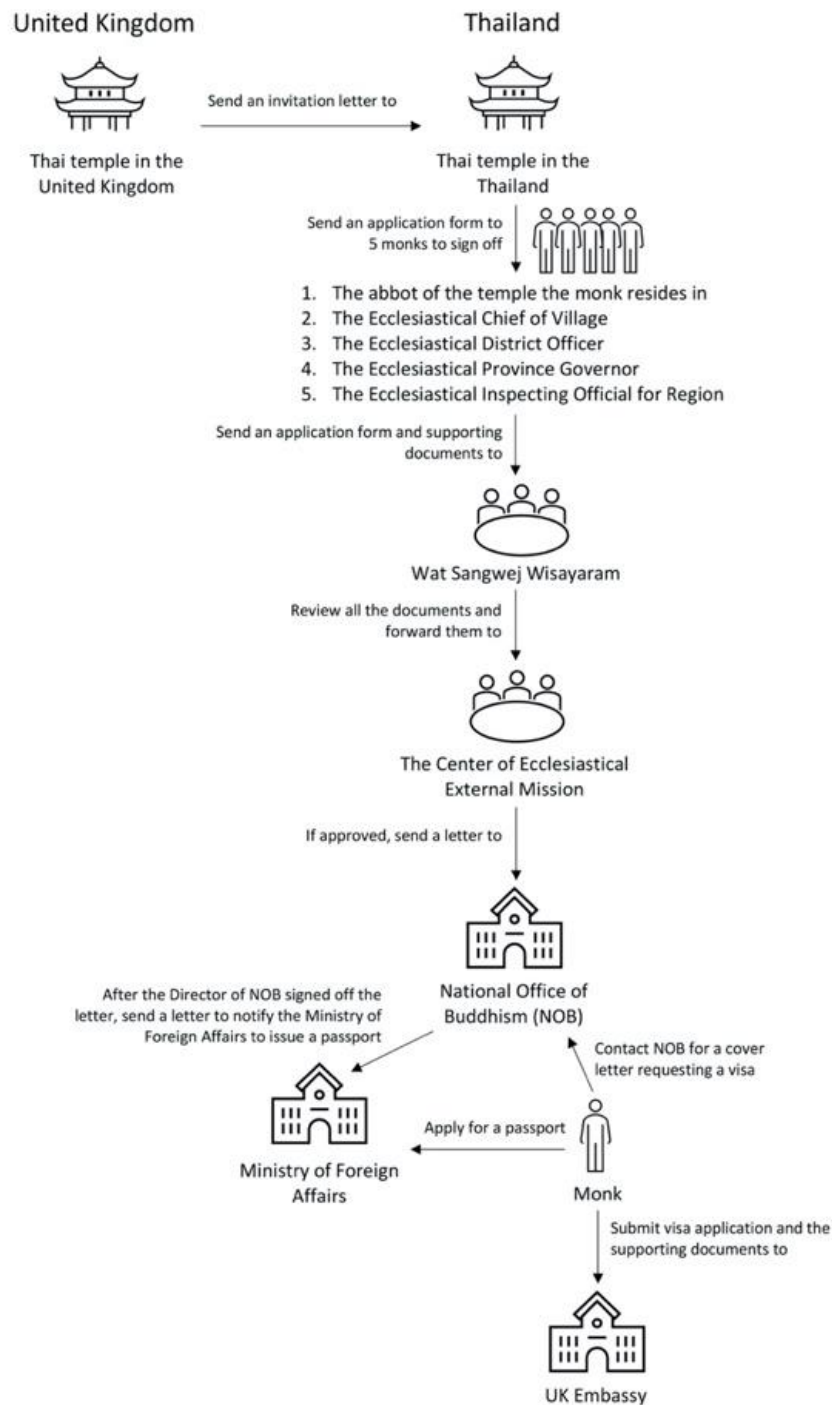
The second step is to submit this application form and any additional supporting materials to the secretary of the Center for Ecclesiastical External Mission at Wat Sangwej Wisayaram in Bangkok. After reviewing all the paperwork, the secretary will send them to the Center for Ecclesiastical External Mission. The meeting at which the topic is discussed is held on the first and fifteenth of each month. The next processes are similar to those required when a monk applies for an official passport. Following committee approval, a letter of authorisation will be sent to the National Office of Buddhism. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will thereafter get notified to issue this monk a passport. After obtaining a passport, the monk can contact the National Office of Buddhism for a cover letter to request a visa from foreign embassies in Thailand. The flowchart depicting this process is shown below (Figure 24).

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<sup>406</sup> Sawang Udomsri, *การปกครองคณะสงฆ์ไทย (Thai Sangha Administration)*, 1st edn (Nitithamkanpim, 2016), 343.

<sup>407</sup> 'ตอนที่ ๔ วิธีออกหนังสือสุทธิ (How to Issue Monk's Identity Card)', Wat Molilokkayaram Ratchawarawihan, accessed 8 June 2021, <https://www.watmoli.com/wittaya-two/1947/>.

Figure 24: Flowchart of Procedures for Obtaining an Ordinary Passport for a Thai Monk Invited to Perform Religious Duty in the UK.



Phra Chaiyut has experienced difficulties in applying for monks' passports at Wat Phra Dhammakaya due to time constraints and the inaccessibility of senior monks and directors. As Sor Tor Por only meets twice per month, Phra Chaiyut must precisely time the submission of an application form; otherwise, he will have to wait an additional two weeks. According to him, it takes around one week to obtain the signatures of five senior monks. In rare instances, the process may take longer because one of the senior monks is absent, preventing Phra Chaiyut from completing an application form. In other instances, the procedure may be delayed if the National Office of Buddhism director is absent or too preoccupied to sign an authorisation letter.

The complicated visa application process makes it more difficult for monks to travel overseas than laypeople. One reason for this complexity is that the monastic community in Thailand is not a fully autonomous organisation; instead, it is governed by the current Sangha Administration Act under the Thai government. Additional qualifications required for monks and novices who wish to travel abroad are outlined in this Act, including five years of ordination, adequate knowledge of Dhamma and discipline, and good character and behaviour. However, there is an exception for novices and monks ordained for less than five years, who may travel overseas for religious work at the request of an abbot from overseas temples.<sup>408</sup> This requirement that a monk must be ordained for at least five years aligns with the status of a *navakabhikkhu*, the Pāli term for 'recent monks,' applied to monks ordained for less than five consecutive years.<sup>409</sup> These monks are considered neophytes and remain under the supervision of a preceptor.<sup>410</sup>

As outlined, a monk wanting to travel abroad must navigate six Thai authorities to acquire permission, obtain a passport, and apply for a visa (Table 7). Among these, the SSC plays a pivotal role. It established the regulations and appointed a committee of monks known as the Center of Ecclesiastical External Mission (Sor Tor Por). In addition, two Sangha organisations, operating under the supervision of the SSC, are responsible for overseeing and training

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<sup>408</sup> ระเบียบมหาเถรสมาคม กำหนดวิธีปฏิบัติในการไปต่างประเทศสำหรับพระภิกษุสามเณร พ.ศ. ๒๕๓๖ (*Regulations of the Sangha Supreme Council - Procedures for Travelling Abroad for Monks and Novices, 1994*), Wat Molilokkayaram Ratchawarawihan, 2 May 2019, <https://www.watmoli.com/wittaya-one/1516/>.

<sup>409</sup> Phra Brahmaganabhorn, 'นวกภิกขุ (navakabhikkhu)', in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

<sup>410</sup> Phra Dhammakittiwong, 'นวกะ (navaka)', in *พจนานุกรมเพื่อการศึกษาพุทธศาสน์ คำวัด (Dictionary for the Study of Buddhism - Kham Wat)* (Thammasapa Banluetham, 2008).

missionary monks from two distinct lineages: the Regulatory Office for Overseas Dhammaduta Bhikkhus (RODB) for Mahanikai and the Training Institute for Dhammaduta Bhikkhus Going Abroad (TIDGA) for Thammayut.

Apart from the four Sangha bodies mentioned above, two government sectors are involved in these processes. The first is the National Office of Buddhism (NOB), a ministry-independent, department-level government agency that reports directly to the Prime Minister. It is responsible for the state administration of Buddhism and sponsors Thailand's overseas Buddhist missionary policy and activities.<sup>411</sup> The second is the Department of Consular Affairs, one of the departments within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that performs functional duties. The passport-issuing process is just one of the many consular matters handled by this department.<sup>412</sup> Although this department operates under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when it comes to issuing ordinary passports for monks, the department follows the guidance of the SSC. Since 2020, Thai citizens have been able to select the validity period of their passports, choosing between five and ten years. However, this choice is not extended to monks, who are only eligible to apply for a five-year passport. This issue has been a primary concern for monks in the UK, as discussed during the annual meeting of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Chapter 3).

#### 4.1.2 The Home Office

So much for Thai authorities, now let us turn to the UK. The Home Office is the foremost UK authority, serving as the initial barrier to entry into the country for immigrants, including Thai monks. The Home Office is the ministry of the UK government responsible for the security and economic prosperity of the UK.<sup>413</sup> One of its primary responsibilities is “securing the UK border and controlling immigration”; and hence, controlling migration.<sup>414</sup> This results in some of their policies targeting immigrants, such as the hostile environment policy (see below).

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<sup>411</sup> ‘สำนักงานพระพุทธศาสนาแห่งชาติ (National Office of Buddhism)’.

<sup>412</sup> ‘กรมการกงสุล กระทรวงการต่างประเทศ (Department of Consular Affairs)’, Department of Consular Affairs, accessed 17 February 2024, <https://consular.mfa.go.th/>.

<sup>413</sup> ‘About Us - Home Office’, GOV.UK, accessed 21 April 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/home-office/about>.

<sup>414</sup> GOV.UK, ‘About Us - Home Office’.

One of the divisions of the Home Office that significantly impacts the establishment and stability of Thai temples in the UK is UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI). UKVI manages the UK's visa system and determines who has the right to visit or stay in the country. This includes visitor, study, and work visas, as well as applications for British citizenship and asylum. Additionally, UKVI assesses applications from employers and educational institutions seeking a sponsor licence, which allows them to employ or sponsor non-UK residents for work or study.<sup>415</sup> Thai temples require this licence to sponsor monks or staff from Thailand, enabling their legal stay in the UK. As a result, one of the key challenges faced by temple managers is navigating UKVI's complex regulations—a topic I will discuss in the next phase.

However, before a temple can apply for a sponsor licence, it must first register as a charity and secure its own place, either by renting or purchasing. So, how did the first groups of Thai monks enter the UK before temples were established and in a position to sponsor? Findings suggest that most initially arrived on visitor visas, which permitted them to stay in the UK for up to six months. Following the establishment of the first Thai temple, Wat Buddhapadipa, in 1966, most Thai missionary monks resided there before founding their own temples. Wat Buddhapadipa served as a central hub for newly arrived monks, providing accommodation and a connection to the Thai community in the UK.

In contrast to the more common route of entering the UK as visiting monks via an invitation from Wat Buddhapadipa, the founding members of Wat Phra Dhammakaya London initially came on student visas. In an interview I conducted with Anuchit, a key figure in this expansion, he explained that a six-person delegation—comprising three monks and three laypersons—was dispatched by the parent temple in Thailand to establish a new branch and promote the Dhammakaya tradition in the UK.<sup>416</sup> With no sponsoring organisation available for work visas at the time, the group enrolled in English language schools upon arrival, and some later pursued bachelor's or master's degrees as a means of remaining in the country while laying the groundwork for the temple.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> 'About Us - UK Visas and Immigration', GOV.UK, accessed 22 February 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-visas-and-immigration/about>.

<sup>416</sup> Anuchit Treeratanajutawat, 'Interview by author', 29 October 2020.

<sup>417</sup> In a personal communication, I was informed that a similar method was used in the 1980s by nuns setting up the Taiwanese Fo Guan temple in London, an organisation which has a similar global outreach.

## 4.2 Establishment Phase

After navigating through several organisations in Thailand and the Home Office, Thai monks encounter a new set of challenges from multiple UK authorities when they enter the second phase, establishment. This involves finding accommodation, acquiring property, converting it into a temple, establishing it as charitable organisation, and applying for a sponsor licence to bring monks and staff into the country.

### 4.2.1 From Rental Homes to Religious Hubs

The first generation of Thai missionary monks typically stayed in temples or properties established by other Theravada Buddhist groups, such as those by Sri Lankans, or by English Buddhist charities. The first Sri Lankan temple was established in 1926. Following the establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa four decades later most Thai missionary monks resided there before establishing their own temples. In other instances, such as with Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Wat Arun Norfolk, the first group of monks arriving in the UK rented residential houses to use as temples. In some circumstances, monks stayed at the homes of Thai supporters for a certain period until they could rent or purchase their own properties.

Once sufficient funding is secured, whether through contributions from donors or support from their parent temple, they undergo a purchasing process akin to that of an individual acquiring a house, either obtaining a mortgage or making a cash purchase of the house. However, most temples are set up either in historic buildings or ordinary houses and require a change of use. Since they are often also rebuilt or developed in the process, temples often have to engage with their local planning authority.

The local planning authority (LPA) is the planning department within the local government including the district, borough and city council, serving as the governing body responsible for overseeing the development and management of local areas.<sup>418</sup> The responsibilities of the LPA include producing a local plan, determining planning applications, taking appropriate action in response to suspected violations of planning control, and supporting neighbourhood

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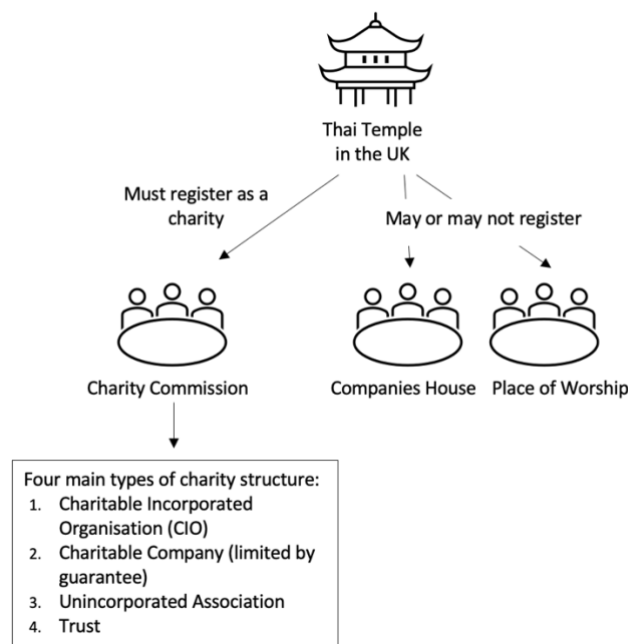
<sup>418</sup> 'Annex 2: Glossary - National Planning Policy Framework - Guidance - GOV.UK', accessed 26 April 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/annex-2-glossary>.

planning.<sup>419</sup> This planning control manages the development of land and buildings to preserve the best of the heritage buildings and improve infrastructure. Of six detailed interviews conducted on this topic, five mentioned the difficulties of dealing with local councils. These challenges include issues such as noise complaints from neighbours, restrictions associated with the green belt area, and difficulties in obtaining planning permission for properties listed as Grade II on the National Heritage List for England.

#### 4.2.2 Charitable Status and Legal Structures

To fully operate and access the benefits available to non-profit organisations, temples have the option to register as places of worship, as charities, or as both (Figure 25). When registered as a place of worship, temples are exempt from council tax or business rates on their property. As charities, they gain access to additional benefits such as gift aid, stamp duty exemption, charitable rate relief, and tax reliefs. Registration as a charity is not mandatory for temples. For example, Wat Buddhapadipa, the first Thai temple established in the UK in 1966, did not register as a charity until 2011. However, without charity status, they cannot apply for a visa sponsor licence.

Figure 25: Legal Registration Options for Thai Temples in the UK.



<sup>419</sup> ‘National Planning Policy Framework’, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, December 2023, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/669a25e9a3c2a28abb50d2b4/NPPF\\_December\\_2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/669a25e9a3c2a28abb50d2b4/NPPF_December_2023.pdf).

Once registered as charities, they are then governed by charity governance regulations. Charity governance in the UK has been devolved since the 2000s. The Scottish Charity Regulator has been operating in Scotland since 2003, and the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland since 2008, while England and Wales operate under the same Charity Commission.<sup>420</sup> The primary function of all three of these non-ministerial government departments is to ensure that the public can confidently fund charities.<sup>421</sup> There are four main legal forms for charities according to the Charity Commission for England and Wales: the charitable company (private company limited by guarantee), the charitable incorporated organisation (CIO), the charitable trust, and the unincorporated charitable association.<sup>422</sup> These charity structures are distinguished by their unique characteristics, designed to accommodate various operational scales. This includes factors such as the size of the charity, its capacity to legally enter into contracts and employ staff, the level of liability protection for trustees, and the presence of a wider membership.<sup>423</sup> Charities with a wider membership involve members in key decisions, such as appointing committee members and amending governing documents, often through voting at an annual general meeting. This structure can enable charities to leverage the voluntary efforts and insights of their members, potentially including those they aim to assist, ensuring their views are considered. Contrarily, some charity structures operate without a wider membership, with trustees solely responsible for decision-making regarding finances and trustee appointments.<sup>424</sup>

The first two charity structures are corporate bodies that provide trustees with limited or no personal financial liability for the organisation's debts or obligations. They can both be set up with or without a wider membership. Charities employing these structures can own property and employ staff in their own name, making them suitable for larger charities with significant activities. Unlike the charitable company (limited by guarantee), the CIO was introduced more recently, in 2013, and is specifically designed for charities, eliminating the previous need to register with Companies House. The third and fourth structures are both unincorporated forms, which means there is no liability protection for the trustees. Charities adopting these structures do not possess the legal capacity to independently engage in contractual agreements or directly

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<sup>420</sup> 'Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)', accessed 25 July 2021, <https://www.oscr.org.uk/>; 'The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland', accessed 25 July 2021, <https://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk/>.

<sup>421</sup> 'About Us - Charity Commission', GOV.UK, accessed 24 April 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission/about>.

<sup>422</sup> 'Set up a Charity', GOV.UK, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/setting-up-charity/structures>.

<sup>423</sup> 'Charity Types: How to Choose a Structure (CC22a)', GOV.UK, 4 November 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-types-how-to-choose-a-structure>.

<sup>424</sup> GOV.UK, 'Charity Types'.

manage some investments in their own name. If the charity aims to include a wider membership without the need for a corporate structure, and it will be small in terms of assets, setting up an unincorporated association is advisable. On the other hand, a charitable trust is suitable for charities without the need for a wider membership or a corporate structure, especially if the charity will not employ many staff or engage in business activities.<sup>425</sup>

Among the 31 Thai temples in the UK, 28 are known to be registered as charities, albeit under various structures, reflecting the diversity within the Thai community and their strategic adaptation to UK charity regulations. The charitable company structure is the most popular among Thai temples in the UK, with nine temples adopting this model. This includes temples from the two main traditions with the most branches in the UK: the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah and the Dhammakaya tradition (see Chapters 2 and 3). This preference suggests a strategic decision, most likely because it facilitates larger operations, such as hiring staff and owning property, by providing a mix of corporate benefits and charitable status, allowing these temples to participate more effectively in their community and charitable activities.

The charitable trust and CIO structures have been adopted by eight temples each. Most temples affiliated with either structure operate as standalone entities without branches, indicating they likely have smaller-scale operations. An exception to this trend is Wat Buddhapadipa, which has two direct branch temples and engages in significant charitable activities. This temple is registered as a charitable trust, a choice possibly influenced by the unique situation of its properties being owned by the Thai government (see Chapter 3). Additionally, the trend towards CIO registration among recently established temples indicates a changing landscape. This shift could be attributed to the CIO's legal structure offering a more modern charity form that combines limited liability with charitable status, without the need for dual registration as a charity and a company. Consequently, it reduces administrative burdens and enhances legal protections for trustees and members.

#### 4.2.3 The Sponsor Licence System in the UK for Religious Institutions

In the preceding section, we examined the various processes undertaken by different parties in Thailand concerning the transfer of monks to the UK. Now, let us turn to the procedures within

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<sup>425</sup> GOV.UK, 'Charity Types'.

the UK that must be executed by the temple seeking to facilitate the entry of the recruited monk into the country. If a UK-based organisation wishes to hire someone “who is not a settled worker and who does not otherwise have immigration permission to work in the UK,” it must obtain authorisation from the Home Office.<sup>426</sup> This authorisation is called a “sponsor licence,” and employers who possess a sponsor licence are referred to as “sponsors.”<sup>427</sup> This also applies to Thai temples and religious organisations of other faiths. Therefore, Thai Buddhist temples in the UK that intend to recruit monks or staff from Thailand must apply for a sponsor licence.

There are two categories of sponsor licences: Tier 2 for skilled workers with offers of long-term employment and Tier 5 for skilled temporary workers. The broad Tier 2 and Tier 5 groups are subdivided by employment classification. Relevant to our purposes here is that within Tier 2, there is a ‘Minister of Religion’, and within Tier 5, there is a ‘temporary religious worker’. I shall show below how these two categories correlate with the Church of England’s understanding of religious worker roles, which implicitly distinguishes between pastoral and non-pastoral functions through ordained ministry and supporting lay roles, thereby creating challenges for Buddhist workers on religious worker visas whose roles do not fit neatly within this framework.<sup>428</sup> An organisation may apply for a licence for either or both tiers. The types of sponsorship licences correlate with the visas that the organisation will sponsor. After the application has been approved, an organisation or, in this case, a Thai temple, can issue a certificate of sponsorship enabling monks or staff in Thailand to enter the UK. The sponsor licence is valid for four years if the organisation fulfils the following responsibilities as a sponsor:

- check that your foreign workers have the necessary skills, qualifications or professional accreditations to do their jobs, and keep copies of documents showing this
- only assign certificates of sponsorship to workers when the job is suitable for sponsorship
- tell UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) if your sponsored workers are not complying with the conditions of their visa.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> ‘Workers and Temporary Workers - Guidance for Sponsors Part 1: Apply for a Licence (Accessible Version)’, GOV.UK, accessed 25 July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/workers-and-temporary-workers-guidance-for-sponsors-part-1-apply-for-a-licence/workers-and-temporary-workers-guidance-for-sponsors-part-1-apply-for-a-licence-accessible-version>.

<sup>427</sup> GOV.UK, ‘Workers and Temporary Workers - Guidance for Sponsors Part 1’.

<sup>428</sup> ‘Key Roles and Responsibilities of Church Office Holders and Bodies Practice Guidance’, House of Bishops, The Church of England, October 2017.

<sup>429</sup> ‘Responsibilities, UK Visa Sponsorship for Employers’, GOV.UK, accessed 20 November 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/uk-visa-sponsorship-employers/your-responsibilities>.

On top of these responsibilities, organisations must have a human resources management system in place to monitor their employees' immigration status, retain copies of their documents, including passports and degree certificates, track and record employee attendance, and notify the UKVI of any issues, such as when a sponsored worker stops coming to work.<sup>430</sup> The government places the responsibility of monitoring immigrants with employers. This reflects the hostile environment policy, which is the set of regulations that emerged from the hostile environment and required the British public to take on border policing roles in their daily lives. As a result, landlords, doctors, employers, staff in educational facilities, community workers, and more are required by law to determine the immigrant status of individuals before employing or becoming involved with them. Employers are obliged by law to keep track of their employees and all documentation about their immigration status. Employers who fail to comply are liable to fines and face the risk of having their licence revoked.<sup>431</sup> I shall return to the issue of the hostile environment policy when discussing the religious work visas below.

#### Case Study of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle for Sponsor Licence Application Process

To understand the sponsor licence process and the difficulties Thai temples encounter, I interviewed a female member of administrative staff (anonymous informant, INF001) of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle and the former temple manager of Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, Anuchit. In 2007, Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle was registered as a private limited company by guarantee without share capital use of 'limited' exemption under Dhammakaya Scandinavia International (DSI). It changed its name in 2017 to Dhammakaya North United Kingdom (DNUK) and registered with the Charity Commission in the same year. At that point, the temple became qualified for a sponsor licence, and my interviewee, a female staff member, initiated the application process in November 2017. It took her about a month to prepare the necessary paperwork and complete the application form. Applying for a sponsor licence is complicated. Consider, for instance, the 209-page sponsor guideline document that non-native English speakers must comprehend before applying. In addition, there are the supporting documents stated in Appendix A that she was required to submit when applying for

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<sup>430</sup> GOV.UK, 'Responsibilities, UK Visa Sponsorship for Employers'.

<sup>431</sup> Dr. Charlotte Sanders, *What Is the 'Hostile Environment'?* *An Introduction to Immigration Policy in Britain*, n.d., accessed 12 June 2022, <https://www.port.ac.uk/news-events-and-blogs/blogs/democratic-citizenship/what-is-the-hostile-environment>.

a licence, such as the details of the parent organisation, a hierarchy chart, and the form for certifying a place of meeting for religious worship under the Places of Worship Registration Act 1855.<sup>432</sup> With her fluent English, she finished the application without the assistance of a lawyer. She stated that the sponsor guidance material was straightforward, but when ambiguity arose, she contacted the Home Office for clarification.

The process of comprehending and organising the documents is less burdensome in comparison to a sponsor compliance visit. There are two types of compliance visits: pre-licence assessment visits and post-licence compliance visits.<sup>433</sup> The former is when Home Office staff visit the premises of an organisation after it has applied for a sponsor licence. The latter is a visit following the granting of a sponsor licence. Details on conducting sponsor compliance visits for Home Office staff were released on the government website on February 19, 2018, under the heading “Points-based system sponsor compliance visits.”<sup>434</sup> This document provides compliance officers with guidance for pre- and post-licence sponsor compliance visits and assessments on the “areas you must consider when carrying out a visit and processes you must follow before, during and after a visit.”<sup>435</sup>

In March 2018, the sponsor licence was issued to Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle. Before issuing the sponsor licence, the Home Office conducted an audit of the temple. A week before the appointment, the abbot was notified through email. The visit of two compliance officers on 9 February 2018 lasted two hours and primarily consisted of a group interview with the abbot, Anuchit, and the female staff member. According to Anuchit, the immigration agents were initially friendly, but their voices grew rougher, and their facial expressions became more serious during the interview. The interview questions were in-depth. Questions included how frequently the temple organised events, how many staff members would be required to support this operation, their work duties, why the staff received a low salary, and how the temple kept track of staff attendance. The interview was conducted entirely in English and simultaneously

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<sup>432</sup> Leonie Souster and Peter Grant, ‘Appendix A: Supporting Documents for Sponsor Licence Applications’, accessed 27 November 2020, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/936664/2020-11-18\\_Sponsor-guidance\\_Appendix-A\\_11-20\\_v1.0.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936664/2020-11-18_Sponsor-guidance_Appendix-A_11-20_v1.0.pdf).

<sup>433</sup> ‘Points-Based System Sponsor Compliance Visits’, accessed 27 November 2020, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/682453/PBS-sponsorship-sponsor-mgmt-compliance-v15.0.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/682453/PBS-sponsorship-sponsor-mgmt-compliance-v15.0.PDF).

<sup>434</sup> ‘Points-Based System Sponsor Compliance Visits’.

<sup>435</sup> ‘Points-Based System Sponsor Compliance Visits’.

written down. Even though Anuchit has lived in the UK for over two decades, he reported that the interview questions were challenging and that he felt under pressure during the interview.

The sponsor compliance visit conducted at Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle was a pre-licence assessment visit. Although it was conducted on short notice, prior notification had been given. According to the guidance document, compliance officers are advised **not** to conduct unannounced visits to religious premises due to their potentially sensitive nature.<sup>436</sup> If an unannounced visit is necessary, officers “must seek a minimum of senior executive officer (SEO) approval and be able to justify why the visit should be unannounced.”<sup>437</sup> Despite this guideline, unannounced visits continue to take place at Thai temples and potentially other religious organisations. For example, in 2016, compliance officers conducted an unannounced visit to Wat Phra Dhammakaya London. They intended to interview the key contact; however, he was in Thailand at the time.<sup>438</sup> As a result, they conducted a three-hour interview with the temple manager instead. Similarly, in 2020, an unannounced visit to another Thai temple led to the suspension of its sponsor licence. In this thesis, the identity of this temple will remain anonymous. I will revisit this case in the next section.

In the case of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle, despite the visit being announced, the abbot and staff encountered several challenges during the sponsor licence application process. These challenges included the requirement for an advanced level of English to comprehend the application and interview process, as well as feelings of intimidation. Interviews are more than just fact-checking exercises. In this case study, the interviewees underwent a two-hour questioning session with two government officials, which could be intimidating for non-native English speakers under any circumstances. Although interviewees who are not proficient in English have the option of using an official interpreter, choosing this option can lead to further scrutiny by compliance officers for potential visa abuse, as outlined in the compliance officers’ guideline manual:

Where an authorising officer or key contact cannot speak English or Welsh, the interview may be carried out through the use of an interpreter.

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<sup>436</sup> ‘Points-Based System Sponsor Compliance Visits’.

<sup>437</sup> ‘Points-Based System Sponsor Compliance Visits’.

<sup>438</sup> According to the Points-based system sponsor compliance visits document, “the sponsor is required to give certain responsibilities to members of their staff, some or all of whom will have access to the sponsorship management system (SMS) once they have been granted a licence. These are known as ‘key personnel’. There are 4 roles: an authorising officer (AO), a key contact (KC), a level 1 user, a level 2 user.”

On return to the office you must carry out a systems check on CID [Case Information Database] and CRS [Central Reference System] to identify if the person has gained citizenship or some other form of indefinite leave which requires an example of English language ability. If this is the case, you must send to the intelligence team through the IMS [Intelligence Management System] referral process as possible abuse.<sup>439</sup>

This case study of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle highlights the challenges of navigating the UK government's complex sponsor licence application process, which demands advanced English proficiency, extensive documentation, and a thorough understanding of immigration compliance responsibilities. Staff members were required to absorb vast amounts of information, prepare documentation, and implement new procedures to meet the requirements. It is not surprising that it took the female staff of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle around one month to fully comprehend the guideline material and prepare the supporting documentation for the licence application. In addition to requiring an advanced level of English proficiency for reading and writing, the key contact—whether the abbot or the temple manager—must also possess excellent listening and speaking skills to handle both the pre-licence assessment visit and the post-licence compliance visit. During these visits, compliance officers expect the interviewee to be fluent in English and highly knowledgeable about managing monks or staff recruited from Thailand. Moreover, the key contact is responsible for monitoring the immigration status, working hours, and whereabouts of their recruits. This requirement underscores the impact of the UK's hostile environment policy, which legally obligates employers to maintain detailed immigration records.

#### Case Study of Wat Phra Singh UK for Sponsor Licence Application Process

Another case study that sheds light on the sponsor licence application process comes from an interview I conducted with Tony Collacott, the English founder and trustee of Wat Phra Singh UK. Tony shared his experiences in applying for a sponsor licence. He began the application process in 2012, immediately after successfully registering the temple as a charity. The first challenge was receiving inaccurate advice regarding the employer's liability insurance. At the time, Tony had only rented, not purchased, a place for the temple, so a UKVI customer service advisor informed him that employer's liability insurance was not required. Based on this

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<sup>439</sup> 'Points-Based System Sponsor Compliance Visits'.

advice, he submitted the application without it. However, the application was rejected because the insurance was, in fact, mandatory. Initially, he was told to reapply and pay the £500 fee again. However, after arguing that he had been given incorrect advice, the authorities allowed him to use the existing application without an additional charge.<sup>440</sup>

A week after submitting the second application, Tony had an interview scheduled with UKVI compliance officers. The interview took place in winter in a recently purchased, unheated building, a former hotel that was being converted into Wat Phra Singh UK. Neither Tony nor the two compliance officers were dressed appropriately for the cold. The interview lasted an hour and a half. When asked about his experience, Tony responded that ‘interrogated’ was a more accurate word, reflecting the intense and pressured experience. Tony further explained that his background in engineering project management and experience working for an American corporation had shaped his approach to challenges. When faced with difficulties, he would develop written procedures. To prepare for the interview, he documented a detailed procedure for managing the Sponsorship Management System (SMS). Each time the officers asked questions, he referred to this document. The compliance officers expressed interest in this document, prompting Tony to provide them with a copy. During their discussion, Tony pointed out a discrepancy in the UKVI guidance, which the officers acknowledged. They suggested he could file a complaint but provided no further assistance on the matter.<sup>441</sup> In 2013, Tony successfully obtained the sponsor licence for Wat Phra Singh UK.

Despite this success, he faced further difficulties with individual visa applications, some of which were wrongly denied, indicating the UKVI’s own staff are unfamiliar with or confused by the processes that they are meant to implement. In response, Tony sought assistance from his local MP, but no significant changes were made. Tony expressed his frustrations with the UKVI system, particularly the financial burden it places on applicants. He highlighted the additional fees required for clarifications on refusals and even charges for basic communications such as phone calls and emails. He also raised concerns about the potential financial gains UKVI might derive from these refusals, a sentiment echoed by his MP.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> Tony Collacott, ‘Interview by Author’, 30 March 2023.

<sup>441</sup> Tony Collacott, ‘Interview by Author’, 30 March 2023.

<sup>442</sup> Tony Collacott, ‘Interview by Author’, 30 March 2023.

This case study of Wat Phra Singh UK highlights the challenges Thai temples face in bringing monks to the UK. It also highlights that while Tony took multiple actions to address sponsor licence and visa application issues—including documenting procedures, communicating directly with UKVI, and seeking help from his local MP—these efforts did not fully resolve the challenges he faced. Tony faced systemic issues, such as a lack of support from UKVI and unresponsiveness from authorities. This lack of support likely stems from regulations that restrict the advice compliance officers can offer. According to the published guidance for pre- and post-licence sponsor compliance visits, officers must not provide immigration advice beyond sponsorship matters, even in areas where they previously worked, as their knowledge may be outdated. Instead, they are required to refer inquiries to the relevant unit or contact centre.<sup>443</sup>

#### 4.2.4 Religious Work Visas and Their Requirements

There are two main routes for religious institutions to recruit from overseas, a longer-term visa and a short-term visa, according to an official publication on the UK's Points-Based Immigration System Further Details in July 2020.<sup>444</sup> Ministers of Religion (Tier 2) are “those playing a leading role as faith leaders, leading congregations and preaching the essentials of the creed.”<sup>445</sup> Temporary Religious Worker (Tier 5) refers to “those undertaking non-pastoral roles, supporting the activities of religious institutions.”<sup>446</sup> Tier 2 (Minister of Religion) visa holders may remain in the UK for up to 3 years and 1 month, while Tier 5 (temporary religious worker) visa holders may live and work in the UK for up to 2 years. The applicant for these two types of visas is required to have a certificate of sponsorship from a licenced sponsor and pay the healthcare surcharge as part of the application process.

The primary distinctions between these two visas are the requirement for English language proficiency and the job descriptions, which categorise roles as either pastoral or non-pastoral. The applicant for a Tier 2 (Minister of Religion) visa must prove English language proficiency by either:

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<sup>443</sup> ‘Points-Based System Sponsor Compliance Visits’, 128.

<sup>444</sup> ‘UK Points-Based Immigration System: Further Details Statement’, GOV.UK, accessed 12 June 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-points-based-immigration-system-further-details-statement>.

<sup>445</sup> GOV.UK, ‘UK Points-Based Immigration System’, 53.

<sup>446</sup> GOV.UK, ‘UK Points-Based Immigration System’, 53.

1. passing an approved English language test with at least CEFR level B2 in reading, writing, speaking and listening.
2. having an academic qualification that was taught in English and is recognised by UK NARIC as being equivalent to a UK bachelor's degree, master's degree or PhD.<sup>447</sup>

It is challenging for Thai monks to pass the English language exam, particularly for senior monks who did not attend secular school, as the English requirement is equivalent to the undergraduate level in the UK. Prior to the change in Tier 5 (temporary religious worker) immigration laws that took effect on 10 January 2019, Thai monks whose English did not meet the required standard were eligible to apply for Tier 5 (temporary religious worker) visas to work as ministers of religion. However, in December 2018, the Home Office made amendments to the Tier 5 category in a Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules, including preventing Tier 5 visa holders from working as ministers of religion. Caroline Nokes, the then Minister of State for Immigration, released additional information on these amendments in a Written Statement dated 6 December 2018:

The Government greatly values the roles played by our charities and religious institutions and those who wish to come to the UK to contribute to these organisations are extremely welcome. However, there are some issues with the routes as they currently operate.

Our immigration system makes specific provision for both Ministers of Religion and those coming as religious workers. This distinction between the two roles reflects the importance we place on our faith leaders speaking English to a high standard, whilst at the same time still permitting other members of religious communities to contribute to the UK in non-pastoral roles.

Whilst it is not the intention of the Tier 5 Religious Workers route, our current rules could permit religious workers to perform roles, that include preaching and leading a congregation, without first being required to demonstrate that they speak English to an acceptable standard. To address this, we are prohibiting Tier 5 Religious Workers filling roles as Ministers of Religion and direct them instead to do so through the correct Tier 2 Minister of Religion sub-category. This will require Ministers of Religion to demonstrate a strong command of English and ensure they can interact with the community around them.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> 'Minister of Religion Visa (T2)', GOV.UK, accessed 4 October 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/minister-of-religion-visa/knowledge-of-english>.

<sup>448</sup> 'Written Statements - Written Questions, Answers and Statements - UK Parliament', accessed 5 October 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2018-12-06/HCWS1159>.

Based on this statement, monks who hold the Tier 5 (temporary religious worker) visa can no longer perform pastoral roles, including preaching and leading ceremonies, unless they achieve a minimum B2 level on the English language test. This requirement presents one of the biggest challenges for Thai monks, as observed during the discussion at the annual meeting of CTBMUK, as discussed in Chapter 3. In addition to this challenge, Phramaha Bhatsakorn notes that during the transition to the new immigration rules, at least two temples encountered errors in the application review process due to inexperience and lack of knowledge among Home Office officers. Both temples applied for a Tier 5 visa, but the officers reviewing the applications mistakenly assessed them under the Tier 2 criteria and then questioned why there were no English language qualifications. As Phramaha Bhatsakorn remarked, “Of course, there wasn’t one—because they weren’t applying for Tier 2 in the first place!”<sup>449</sup>

At the same time, the Home Office also introduced a new rule requiring a 12-month cooling-off period.<sup>450</sup> The cooling-off period for a Tier 5 visa is 12 months, which means that after leaving the country, the immigrant cannot apply for a new Tier 5 visa for at least 12 months. The reason for this new regulation is:

The Tier 5 arrangements for Religious Workers and Charity Workers have always been intended to provide for only limited periods of residence in the UK of up to two years. We have however seen instances of migrants in these categories repeatedly applying for consecutive periods of leave, in effect achieving ongoing residency in the UK. We will therefore introduce a ‘cooling off period’, preventing Tier 5 Religious Worker and Tier 5 Charity Worker visa holders from returning to the UK, via these immigration routes for 12 months after their visa expires. This change ensures that we will continue to welcome those coming to make a contribution to our religious and charity organisations, whilst at the same time underpinning the Government’s intention that these are temporary routes.<sup>451</sup>

This new rule adds another layer of difficulty for the monks and affects the stability of temples in the UK. This can be exemplified through the case of Wat Phra Singh UK. During the time of my fieldwork, Than Thirasak, the current abbot of Wat Phra Singh UK, was in the UK on a Tier 5 religious worker visa, which only allows him to stay for two years. Under this new rule, once a monk’s two-year term ends, he must leave the UK for a full year before reapplying. Tony highlights the impact of this restriction, explaining that Than Thirasak, as the temple’s

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<sup>449</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, ‘Interview by author’, 14 September 2023.

<sup>450</sup> *HC 1779 – Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules*, 1971, 38.

<sup>451</sup> ‘Written Statements - Written Questions, Answers and Statements - UK Parliament’.

head monk, plays an important role in maintaining continuity and stability for the community. However, due to the cooling-off period, he is forced to return to Thailand once every two years, which disrupts temple operations and makes even simple administrative tasks, such as signing documents, a challenge. At the time of the interview, Than Thirasak had left the UK on October 18, 2022, and would not be able to return until October 19, 2023. Tony notes that his visa application process needed to begin in August to ensure his timely return.<sup>452</sup> In the meantime, the temple and its supporters must endure a significant period of uncertainty, highlighting the broader challenges posed by the UK's immigration policies for Buddhist monks.

The justification given for this rule is to prevent individuals on a Tier 5 visa from using it as a pathway to eventual citizenship. However, Tony argues that this could have been addressed more directly through regulation rather than imposing an arbitrary cooling-off period, which creates unnecessary disruptions for temples and their communities. He does not believe that is the real reason. As he explains,

They could simply write it into the regulations, stating that no person on a Tier 5 visa has any right to apply [for citizenship]. You don't need this cooling-off period. They've just put it in there to be awkward, and it causes us no end of problems because our supporters want to see the continuity of monks. He is our head monk. He is adored by our supporters. For him to go away for 12 months is a big setback for the temple.<sup>453</sup>

The changes to the Tier 5 (temporary religious worker) visa have a significant impact on faith communities and the issues were raised by the Scottish National Party in a debate on Immigration in the Commons Chamber on 26 June 2019.<sup>454</sup> Gavin Newlands, the Scottish National Party MP for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, stated that the religious leaders in his constituency were deeply concerned about the financial and practical implications. He provided Catholic communities as an example. The majority of Catholic dioceses generally use the Tier 5 (temporary religious worker) visa route for supply priests to enter the UK while parish priests are temporarily absent. These supply placements are crucial, as they allow devotees to continue attending events. Carol Monaghan, a representative for the Scottish National Party in Glasgow Northwest, also stated that a number of priests have contacted her because they are unable to

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<sup>452</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

<sup>453</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

<sup>454</sup> 'Immigration - Hansard - UK Parliament', accessed 5 October 2020, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-06-26/debates/1A5B866D-893C-42BA-9BB2-23FEDBA2304D/Immigration#contribution-67177CFA-4104-4B0B-AC37-F54B3C8781AB>.

obtain supply priests from Africa and India, necessary to make up the shortfall in local ordination, as a result of the new visa policy. Under the current regulations, priests on supply postings must apply for a Tier 2 (Minister of Religion) visa, which doubles the costs. Consequently, less affluent areas cannot afford to pay. Joanna Cherry, the Scottish National Party MP for Edinburgh Southwest, became aware of this visa issue in respect to the Thai temple in her constituency. I shall return to this when discussing the effects of these changes on Thai communities below. These amendments to the immigration criteria for the Tier 5 (temporary religious worker) visa affect not only the Catholic congregations, but many other religious groups. As Monaghan puts it, “the hostile environment is also targeting faith communities.”<sup>455</sup>

The hostile environment is a set of policies to make living as difficult as possible for illegal immigrants in the hope that they may voluntarily leave the UK. Former Home Secretary Theresa May introduced the hostile environment policy, which went into effect in October 2012, and stated at the time, “the aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants.”<sup>456</sup> May supervised over seven immigration legislation acts and 45,000 changes to immigration rules during her six years as Home Secretary.<sup>457</sup> The Immigration Act of 2014 and 2016 restricts the access of those without legal status to public services, housing, drivers’ licences, and bank accounts.<sup>458</sup> Employers, private landlords, bank employees, and NHS staff are required by law to request proof of citizenship or immigration status as part of the policy’s measures.<sup>459</sup> Individuals who are unable to provide this document could be denied services, and employers, landlords, and others who fail to comply with these measures could be fined up to £10,000.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> ‘Immigration - Hansard - UK Parliament’.

<sup>456</sup> Amelia Hill, “‘Hostile Environment’: The Hardline Home Office Policy Tearing Families Apart”, UK News, *The Guardian*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/hostile-environment-the-hardline-home-office-policy-tearing-families-apart>.

<sup>457</sup> Hill, “‘Hostile Environment’”.

<sup>458</sup> ‘Immigration Act 2014’, GOV.UK, accessed 25 February 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-bill>; ‘Immigration Act 2016’, GOV.UK, accessed 5 October 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-bill-2015-16>.

<sup>459</sup> Gary Younge, ‘Hounding Commonwealth Citizens Is No Accident. It’s Cruelty by Design’, Opinion, *The Guardian*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/13/commonwealth-citizens-harassment-british-immigration-policy>.

<sup>460</sup> “‘It’s Inhumane’: The Windrush Victims Who Have Lost Jobs, Homes and Loved Ones”, UK News, *The Guardian*, 20 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/20/its-inhumane-the-windrush-victims-who-have-lost-jobs-homes-and-loved-ones>.

Although designed to reduce illegal immigration, the hostile environment policy has also negatively affected people who have a legal right to live in the UK. The Windrush controversy of 2018 is perhaps the most well-known example. The Windrush generation refers to Caribbean immigrants who arrived in the UK between 1948 and 1971. The name comes from the ship *MV Empire Windrush*, which arrived at Tilbury on June 22, 1948. It is commonly understood that the *Empire Windrush* brought workers from the Caribbean islands to help fill post-war labour shortages in Britain.<sup>461</sup> However, historian Ian R. G. Spencer points out that despite Prime Minister Clement Attlee publicly welcoming Caribbean immigrants in 1948, the British government did not actively encourage further migration from its colonies, even though there was a serious labour shortage at the time. In fact, the government remained hostile to the settlement of Asian and Black people, continuing the restrictive policies of the pre-war years. This opposition to non-white immigration persisted for at least a decade after World War II.<sup>462</sup>

The precise number of individuals constituting the Windrush generation remains uncertain; however, it is estimated to be in the thousands. According to estimates from the University of Oxford, they are among the more than 500,000 UK residents who were born in a Commonwealth country and arrived before 1971.<sup>463</sup> Many became labourers, cleaners, drivers, and nurses, while others pioneered new ways to represent black Britons in society. Despite living and working in the UK for decades, many were later informed they are illegal residents due to a lack of official documentation.<sup>464</sup>

In 2018, around 50,000 members of the Windrush generation were unlawfully detained, denied legal rights and medical treatment or other services and deported.<sup>465</sup> At least 83 confirmed cases were wrongfully deported from the UK.<sup>466</sup> During the debate on Immigration: Hostile Environment in the Lords Chamber on 14 June 2018, Lord Bassam of Brighton drew attention

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<sup>461</sup> 'Windrush Generation: Who Are They and Why Are They Facing Problems?', UK, *BBC News*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43782241>.

<sup>462</sup> Ian R. G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (Routledge, 1997), 53–56.

<sup>463</sup> *BBC News*, 'Windrush Generation'.

<sup>464</sup> *BBC News*, 'Windrush Generation'.

<sup>465</sup> 'Windrush Generation: Home Office "Set Them up to Fail", Say MPs', *The Independent*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/windrush-home-office-set-them-up-fail-mps-affairs-select-committee-a8428041.html>; *The Guardian*, "'It's Inhumane'".

<sup>466</sup> Kevin Rawlinson, 'Windrush: 11 People Wrongly Deported from UK Have Died – Javid', UK News, *The Guardian*, 12 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/nov/12/windrush-11-people-wrongly-deported-from-uk-have-died-sajid-javid>.

to the fact that the hostile environment policy not only affected the Windrush generation but “the Oxford Migration Observatory estimated that some 57,000 Commonwealth migrants from Pakistan, India, Kenya and South Africa might be caught by the policy.”<sup>467</sup>

In addition to the government’s hostile environment regulations, immigrants also confront the Home Office’s target culture. The Guardian reported in April 2018 that the Home Office set a 2015 goal of 12,000 voluntary departures of those deemed to have no right to remain in the UK.<sup>468</sup> In addition, the six-page memo obtained by the Guardian revealed that the department had set a goal of 12,800 enforced returns for 2017–2018 and that they had exceeded their target of assisted returns.<sup>469</sup> As a result of this leaked memo, Amber Rudd, a former Home Secretary, was urged to resign. Rudd, having previously told MPs that her department did not set these targets, admitted their existence and that the Home Office had been “using local targets for internal performance management.”<sup>470</sup> Rudd resigned not long after, citing two reasons: the Windrush generation scandal, and inadvertently misleading MPs.<sup>471</sup>

Changes to immigration regulations and the hostile environment policy affect many immigrant communities, including Thai Buddhists. In 2020, two compliance officers visited a temple, which will remain anonymous in this thesis. At that time, a Thai monk with a Tier 5 (temporary religious worker) visa was residing at the temple in the absence of the abbot, who was the key contact for the sponsor licence. The compliance officers interviewed the monk and asked: “What is the difference between monks on a Tier 5 visa and those on a Tier 2 visa? How are their duties different?” The monk, being honest and straightforward, replied that there was no difference in their duties and the only difference was that those on a Tier 2 visa had passed an English language test, while those on a Tier 5 visa had not.

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<sup>467</sup> ‘Immigration: Hostile Environment - Hansard - UK Parliament’, accessed 6 October 2020, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2018-06-14/debates/4EB5AD24-87B4-43E9-908F-1DE447952889/ImmigrationHostileEnvironmenthighlight=hostile+environment>.

<sup>468</sup> Jessica Elgot, ‘Amber Rudd Urged to Resign over Immigrant Removal Targets’, Politics, *The Guardian*, 26 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/apr/26/amber-rudd-admits-home-office-set-local-targets-for-deportations>.

<sup>469</sup> ‘Amber Rudd Was Sent Targets for Migrant Removal, Leak Reveals | Amber Rudd | The Guardian’, accessed 13 June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/apr/27/amber-rudd-was-told-about-migrant-removal-targets-leak-reveals>.

<sup>470</sup> Elgot, ‘Amber Rudd Urged to Resign over Immigrant Removal Targets’.

<sup>471</sup> ‘Amber Rudd Resigns as Home Secretary’, *BBC News*, n.d., accessed 15 June 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-43944988>; ‘Amber Rudd: I Was Right to Resign over Windrush Controversy’, UK Politics, *BBC News*, 3 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-45399684>.

The officers then discovered that he did not strictly adhere to the supporting role outlined in his job description for the visa, as he preached and taught Dhamma to the Thai congregation. According to immigration regulations, pastoral duties can only be performed by those holding a Tier 2 (Minister of Religion) visa. However, his visa only permitted him to perform non-pastoral tasks and assist with the temple's activities. This conflicts with Buddhist religious practice, in which a senior monk is traditionally assisted by junior monks while chanting and preaching. As a result, the Home Office suspended the temple's sponsorship license, threatened to revoke it entirely, and sent the temple a 48-page letter claiming mismanagement. In response, the temple sought help from a Thai lawyer, who assisted in resolving the issue by submitting a 500-page response. This included detailed explanations of how the temple contributes to the community, the value of its work in society, descriptions of temple activities, and over 3,000 photographs as evidence. It took two months to resolve the issue, after which the Home Office reinstated the licence. This situation has caused a degree of anxiety in relation to visas, which was exacerbated in the summer of 2020, on which I shall return below.

The Thai monastic community has made numerous efforts to address such visa issues. The earliest known attempt was in 2006 when TBSUK was established by the abbot of the Forest Hermitage, Ajahn Khemadhammo, an English monk ordained in the lineage of the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah. Recognising that immigration legislation presented challenges for Thai monks (Chapter 3), he founded the TBSUK for all Theravada Buddhist monastic members, providing a platform to discuss and address their challenges.

Before the resident labour market test was abolished in December 2020, UK employers, including religious institutions, were required to conduct a formal resident labour market test before hiring a non-UK worker. This involved advertising the job in a way that demonstrated a genuine attempt to recruit from the local labour market.<sup>472</sup> Under this old system, the resident labour market test made it more difficult for temples to bring in monks from Thailand, as they had to prove that no suitable UK-based candidates were available. The authorities enforced a rule stating that if no local applicant applied within six months, only then could the employer bring in their chosen candidate. As a result, the abbot of Oxford Buddha Vihara, Venerable Dr

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<sup>472</sup> 'Appendix D: Guidance for Sponsors on Keeping Documents (Accessible Version)', GOV.UK, accessed 14 March 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-records-for-sponsorship-appendix-d/appendix-d-guidance-for-sponsors-on-keeping-documents-accessible-version>.

Khammai Dhammasami, had to print a leaflet advertisement and display it at the Jobcentre for six months.<sup>473</sup>

After several TBSUK meetings, Ajahn Khemadhammo reached out to a member of the House of Lords and held discussions with the Home Office and the Minister of Immigration, explaining the role of Buddhist monks and helping them understand the situation. According to Phramaha Bhatsakorn, Ajahn Khemadhammo clarified to the authorities that becoming a monk is not a profession that just anyone can apply for, and it is not as simple as someone walking in and being accepted. Eventually, the authorities agreed that the resident labour market test would not be required for monks, and they also exempted monks from salary requirements since 2007. Phramaha Bhatsakorn notes that, in fact, Ajahn Khemadhammo did not have any issues with these regulations since his resident monks were not from Thailand. However, he perceived that the law acted like a form of birth control for monks, limiting their entry. He recognised that this would affect Thai temples, so he intervened to advocate and clarify the situation.<sup>474</sup>

Another effort to address the challenges posed by the new English language requirement for the Tier 2 (Minister of Religion) visa involved negotiations with the Thai Embassy. Phramaha Bhatsakorn states that a group of monks sought the embassy's help in negotiating the IELTS score requirement, hoping it would take the lead on the matter. However, despite multiple discussions, the embassy was unwilling to advocate for the Thai monks. Phramaha Bhatsakorn notes that while some regulations can be negotiated, the embassy refused to engage. The monks requested that the required IELTS score be lowered from 5.5 to 5.0, as their statistics showed that most monks who could communicate effectively in English achieved a score of 5.0. In contrast, 5.5 proved more challenging, with some monks needing to retake the test multiple times, while many failed to pass, which ultimately prevented them from applying for the Tier 2 (Minister of Religion) visa. Despite their efforts, the attempt to resolve this issue was unsuccessful.<sup>475</sup>

A further attempt to address the visa-related challenges faced by Thai Buddhist communities, including both monks and laypeople, came after the Home Office visits to the temple, which

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<sup>473</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>474</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>475</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

led to the suspension of its sponsor licence, as discussed above. These visa difficulties, however, were not isolated incidents but part of broader challenges faced by Thai temples across the UK. During the summer of 2020, Thai temples in the UK encountered two main obstacles: COVID-19, which affected the mobility of monks between Thailand and the UK, and revisions to visa requirements under the Conservative Home Office administration led by Priti Patel in the run-up to Brexit. On 6 April 2020, the CTBMUK, which represents Mahanikai monks from 24 Thai temples in the UK, held an online meeting via Zoom titled “Problems and Concerns for the Monks’ Visa”, at which they decided to send letters to their MPs, the Home Office, and the Archbishop of Canterbury expressing their concerns over adjustments to visa regulations, including the new point-based system. The specific concerns are as follows:

1. In January 2019 The UKVI introduced HC1779 legislation which created a twelve month “cooling off” period for Tier 5 Religious Workers. This means that once a monk on a Tier 5 visa leaves the UK at the end of the visa period he is not allowed to return for twelve months. Most Thai Buddhist monks in the UK are on Tier 5 visas, and therefore this rule means that there is no continuity for the temple supporters, or indeed for the monks themselves. I ask that this twelve month cooling off rule is rescinded and that Tier 5 Religious Worker visa holders once again be allowed to return to the UK without delay after the expiry of their visa.
2. The reason most Thai Buddhist monks come to the UK under a Tier 5 Religious Worker visa is because a Tier 2 Minister of Religion visa requires an applicant to attain a B2 Standard of English, and there are very few monks who can reach this. Many Thai Buddhist monks in the UK undertake professional private tuition but are still struggling to reach the B2 standard. I ask that the B2 requirement for Tier 2 Ministers of Religion be lowered to B1. This level is achievable for many Thai Buddhist monks, and would still allow the temple to meet its charitable objectives.
3. The new Points Based System to be introduced in 2021 will include a requirement for an applicant to reach a total of 70 points. It is reported that 20 of these points will be based on salary. The Vinaya rules that a Buddhist Monk undertakes mean that they cannot take a salary, and rely solely on charitable donations to support them. They live a simple life wearing only their robes, and live outside normal society in a Buddhist temple. I would ask that the special circumstances of a Buddhist monk are considered when the rules of the new points based system are finalised.<sup>476</sup>

On 22 July 2020, CTBMUK held its second meeting. There were nine monks and six lay representatives in attendance, representing twelve temples. The duration of the meeting was

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<sup>476</sup> Tony Collacott, ‘Letter to MPs’, 6 April 2020.

three hours and fifteen minutes. It commenced with responses to the letters they had submitted. Many of them received standard replies. For example, Chao Khun Laow, who was both Acting Chair of the CTBMUK and abbot of Wat Mahathat Kings Bromley at the time, and who is now the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, received only an automated email from the Home Office and a standard reply from Lambeth Palace, the headquarters of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Tony, the trustee of Wat Phra Singh UK, had sent letters to a number of officers, including Minister of State for Immigration Kevin Foster, Shadow Immigration Secretary Holly Lynch, Labour MP for Halton Derek Twigg, Labour MP for Weaver Vale Mike Amesbury, and even Home Secretary Priti Patel. Many did not respond. He received a response from Priti Patel's department stating that they were aware of the issues but had no plans to alter the situation. He was left with the impression that their collective voices were not listened to. In addition to the typical expressions of appreciation for the letter, the representative from Wat Dhammapadipa in Scotland received one promising response from Joanna Cherry, the MP for Edinburgh Southwest, who offered to assist and said she would pass the letter to the Home Office along with her own letter.

Although the process for monks to remain in the UK is challenging, the Tier 2 (Minister of Religion) visa offers a significant advantage. If a monk obtains this Tier 2 visa for five years, he can apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) at the end of the fifth year. This status grants the right to live, work, and study in the UK indefinitely, as well as access to certain benefits similar to those of a British citizen.<sup>477</sup> After holding ILR for one year and meeting additional requirements, a monk can then apply for British citizenship. Most of the abbots I interviewed have already obtained British citizenship. Such routes to obtaining citizenship in the host country are also available in other European countries, such as Norway and Sweden. In contrast, Thai monks in Indonesia, for example, are generally regarded as Thai bureaucrats due to their use of Official Passports, which prevents them from acquiring Indonesian citizenship.<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>477</sup> 'Check If You Can Get Indefinite Leave to Remain', GOV.UK, accessed 19 March 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/indefinite-leave-to-remain>.

<sup>478</sup> Buaban, 'Invented Identity of Thai Monks in Indonesia'.

## 4.3 Maintenance Phase

Once established, temples have to deal with various authorities including the local council, insurance companies, the Food Standards Agency (FSA), Health and Safety Executive (HSE), HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), in no specific order. While there is some overlap, I will categorise them according to the management areas outlined in Table 8: property and grounds, finances, food, and events.

### 4.3.1 Property and Grounds

Monks are responsible for managing the property and grounds after they have settled in the UK. This includes performing routine maintenance, complying with local council regulations, adhering to fire safety and building codes, maintaining gardens and outdoor spaces, managing waste, engaging with insurance companies to mitigate financial risks, and, when necessary, making landscaping modifications or building extensions. Regular maintenance is vital to keep temple buildings in good condition, providing a safe and functional space for religious activities, monk accommodation, and community engagement. This includes structural repairs, plumbing, electrical safety checks, and upkeep of heating systems. Neglecting maintenance can lead to major repairs, such as boiler leaks or electrical failures, which can be a significant financial burden. Many temples rely on full-time staff or volunteers to handle these responsibilities, but professional services may be required for larger repairs.

In addition, temples must comply with health and safety regulations set by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), particularly if they accommodate residents or host public events. The HSE oversees safety standards across various industries, ensuring compliance with health and safety laws and providing guidance to prevent workplace accidents, injuries, and illnesses.<sup>479</sup> During his time as manager at Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, Anuchit was responsible for implementing health and safety measures at the temple, assessing risks and hazards that could affect monks, staff, and visitors, including fire risk assessments using checklists available on the government website. Although the local council may or may not inspect these assessments, they are essential documents when applying for public liability insurance.<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>479</sup> 'HSE: Information about Health and Safety at Work', accessed 20 October 2024, <https://www.hse.gov.uk/index.htm>.

<sup>480</sup> Anuchit Treeratanajutawat, 'Interview by author', 5 August 2022, Phone Interview.

Anuchit further elaborates on the importance of fire safety. Fire prevention systems, including emergency exits, must be inspected weekly to ensure they remain accessible and functional. The emergency lighting system should be checked monthly to confirm it operates correctly and the fire alarm system must be tested regularly to ensure buttons function properly and can trigger an alarm in case of emergency. Fire extinguishers require monthly pressure checks and must undergo a professional inspection annually. Additionally, emergency equipment must always be readily available.<sup>481</sup>

All electrical installations require an annual inspection, with compliance stickers attached to indicate they meet safety standards. Insurance companies often check these stickers in the event of an issue. In kitchen areas, the smoke extraction hood must be cleaned by a certified technician every six months or annually, depending on usage, to prevent fire hazards. Furthermore, handrails must be routinely inspected to ensure they remain secure and in good condition, reducing the risk of accidents.<sup>482</sup> These maintenance measures are essential for upholding the safety, functionality, and legal compliance of the temple's facilities.

Another key aspect of property management is insurance. Building insurance is essential as it protects temple property against damage caused by fire, floods, or other unforeseen incidents. Public liability insurance is equally important, given that temples frequently host public gatherings. This coverage safeguards the temple in case of accidents or injuries on the premises. For example, if an attendee falls down the stairs during an event, this insurance can cover medical expenses, legal claims, or compensation costs. Additionally, if the temple employs staff, the employer's liability insurance is legally required to cover workplace-related injuries or disputes.<sup>483</sup>

Before turning to a specific example, it is useful to consider the broader context of how Buddhist temples in the UK acquire and manage their buildings. As Starkey and Tomlinson report, there are several different types of building used for Buddhist temples in the UK, from ordinary houses, to old guest house, civic building, old school, shops, office space, to listed buildings.<sup>484</sup> Some of these listed buildings are repurposed Christian buildings that have been

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<sup>481</sup> Anuchit Treeratanajutawat, 'Interview by author', 5 August 2022.

<sup>482</sup> Anuchit Treeratanajutawat, 'Interview by author', 5 August 2022.

<sup>483</sup> Anuchit Treeratanajutawat, 'Interview by author', 5 August 2022.

<sup>484</sup> Starkey and Tomalin, 'Building Buddhism in England'.

sold, either because the congregation dwindled and is unsustainable or because the function of the building is no longer required.<sup>485</sup> For example, Fo Guang Shan in London, a Taiwanese Buddhist organisation, is housed in a listed building that was formerly a seminary, a training ground for Catholic priests associated with a nearby church.<sup>486</sup> As training places have dropped, former seminaries have been sold off. When a religious building is sold off, there is a degree of preference for selling it to another religious group or other public service such as hospital or educational service, rather than treating it as a secular building. For example, Venerable Kuan Guang, who repurposed a church in Peckham into a Chinese Buddhist temple, found that the committee selling the church favoured their application over commercial bids, even though there is no formal policy requiring closed church buildings to be retained for religious use.<sup>487</sup>

Within this broader context, Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle provides a useful example of the property management challenges faced by temples. Phra Samhu Pichit Thitachayo (hereafter Phra Pichit), the current abbot of the temple, ordained in 1999 after completing his studies in architecture at Rangsit University in 1998. Before coming to the UK in 2005, he was involved in the construction of the dining hall at the parent temple in Thailand, which can accommodate over 1,000 monks. He has acted as architect for all the branch temples in the UK, as well as for the other Dhammakaya temples in Europe including Denmark, Norway, Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland. This experience allowed him to combine a deep familiarity with the distinctive style of Dhammakaya architecture, which is part of Dhammakaya identity, with modern architectural requirements. According to Phra Pichit, the most significant and challenging issue he has encountered since establishing the temple in Newcastle was obtaining planning permission.<sup>488</sup> This challenge was closely tied to the building's historical status and previous uses, as the temple was established within a former Grade II listed church with a long history.

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<sup>485</sup> 'Closed Church Buildings Available for Disposal', The Church of England, accessed 17 October 2021, <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/parish-reorganisation-and-church-property/closed-churches/closed-church-buildings>; Naftali Bendavid, 'Europe's Empty Churches Go on Sale', World, *Wall Street Journal*, 3 January 2015, <https://online.wsj.com/articles/europes-empty-churches-go-on-sale-1420245359>; Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (Taylor & Francis Ltd, United Kingdom, London, 2009).

<sup>486</sup> Starkey and Tomalin, 'Building Buddhism in England', 346.

<sup>487</sup> Church of England, *Guidance for Purchasers and Lessees on Acquiring a Closed Church Building* (Church Commissioners, 2017), <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/guidance-for-purchasers-and-lessees.pdf>

<sup>488</sup> Phra Pichit Thitachayo, 'Interview by author', 5 April 2023, In Person.

This building was St. Andrew's Church, originally established in 1872 to serve the hundreds of Presbyterian Scots who had settled in Hebburn and was restored in 1985. Seven years later, it was purchased by the local council to accommodate business units and was subsequently used by the health authority. Although St. Andrew's Church remained active for over a century, it eventually stood vacant for many years. During that period, it attracted around 30 planning bids, including proposals to convert it into a brewery and a recording studio.<sup>489</sup> In 2012, Phra Pichit was appointed as the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle by the vice abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Thailand. Upon taking up his position, he set out to firmly establish a branch temple in Newcastle, as the previous location had been a rented house. In 2013, he acquired the former St. Andrew's Church and the adjacent St. Andrew's Centre (originally serving as the church hall), with approval from the European committee and the parent temple in Thailand.

The planning permission process for renovating the church building took two years. Phra Pichit noted that the delays stemmed from lengthy queues and the additional complexity caused by the building's status as a place of worship. An additional complication was that the purchased building was a Grade II listed property, a classification requiring official permission for any alterations to both its exterior and interior. Had it been a Grade I listing, the process might have been somewhat easier.<sup>490</sup>

While planning permission for the church took two years, approval for the church hall took only six months, as it is classified as a service building and was, therefore, less complicated. Phra Pichit explained that during the planning permission process for this service building, the authorities focused primarily on the building plans, particularly the intended use of each area, such as identifying whether a room would serve as a dining hall, an office, a bedroom, a multifunctional space, a kitchen, or a toilet. They also emphasised details like fire escape routes, fire alarms, and various safety features.<sup>491</sup>

However, the process became more complicated when Phra Pichit requested planning permission to extend two rooms (a kitchen and a multipurpose room). He recalled that the

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<sup>489</sup> 'Dhammakaya Meditation Centre of Newcastle', accessed 21 March 2025, <https://www.peaceintouch.info/centres/dhammakaya-meditation-centre-of-newcastle>.

<sup>490</sup> Phra Pichit Thitachayo, 'Interview by author', 5 April 2023.

<sup>491</sup> Phra Pichit Thitachayo, 'Interview by author', 5 April 2023.

conservation officer suggested two possible approaches for the extension, considering the building's age of over 150 years: design the extension to closely match the original structure or create a completely different design. Phra Pichit chose the second option, resulting in a design where the side wall became a regular rendered wall, and the roof adopted a modern lean-to style, angled upward like a shed roof. The rear section featured stone panels. Ultimately, this design was approved, but permission took about a year.

After receiving this approval, Phra Pichit encountered additional challenges closely tied to the building's historical status. He recounted that when construction of the extension rooms began, authorities came to inspect the stone specifications for the panels, insisting that they use exactly the same type of stone as the original church building, which was limestone, and that it should match the original's rough, chipped finish. Initially, the contractor had the stones mechanically chipped at a factory, but the authorities stated that the finish appeared too machine-made and requested that Phra Pichit obtain hand-chipped stones instead, significantly increasing costs. The labour-intensive process required workers to manually chip the stones for approximately one to two months at wages of around £20–£30 per hour, increasing the budget by about £20,000 solely for hand-chipping the stone. He noted that the main issue arose because the initial approval was based on one specification, but the requirements unexpectedly changed when the actual work commenced on-site.<sup>492</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Finances

As charitable organisations in the UK, temples are obligated to submit their annual return, report, and accounts to the Charity Commission. Trustees can assign someone else to provide the information, but it remains the responsibility of all trustees to ensure that the correct information is submitted on time.<sup>493</sup> The required documents differ depending on the type of charity structure and the income level. Charitable companies and unincorporated organisations with income under £10,000 only need to submit a report of income and spending. For income between £10,000 and £25,000, an additional document in the form of an annual return questionnaire is required. However, charitable incorporated organisations (CIOs) must always submit an annual return with a trustee annual report and accounts. A full audit is required for

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<sup>492</sup> Phra Pichit Thitachayo, 'Interview by author', 5 April 2023.

<sup>493</sup> 'What to Send to the Charity Commission and How to Get Help', GOV.UK, accessed 22 October 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-to-send-to-the-charity-commission-and-how-to-get-help>.

all these charities if the income exceeds £1 million or if gross assets exceed £3.26 million with an income over £250,000.<sup>494</sup> Thus, the temple should have an efficient financial system to fulfil this obligation.

During his tenure as a manager at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Anuchit was involved in implementing a new financial system for the temple. The temple's accountant provided essential guidance to the monks and staff to establish an efficient system for receiving donations. Donations are the primary source of income for the temple. These are typically given in envelopes and handed to the monks. The new system involves counting the money from donation envelopes, recording the amount on the envelopes, and then logging each transaction in the temple's own accounting programme as evidence of receipt, including details such as the donor's name, date, amount, and purpose of the donation. Afterwards, two people should lock the money in the safe and update the total amount before depositing it into the temple's bank account under the charity's name. The donation envelopes are kept as evidence for at least five years. Donors also have the option to request a receipt for their contributions.<sup>495</sup>

A similar accounting process has been implemented at Wat Phra Singh UK, with Tony, the trustee of Wat Phra Singh UK, responsible for this. He explained the process as follows:

the monks take them [donations] and record those donations in the book in Thai. They then take the money out of the envelopes. I ask them if an envelope is written in Thai to translate it as best they're able to because I need them in English. Then at the end of every month, they give me the money and the envelopes. I count the money again. That goes straight into the bank account. Then I take the envelopes, and on these we can gain Gift Aid. Very important to us. So, I use an online database called Fund Filer, and I take these envelopes and put all the details into this database, and that calculates all our Gift Aid for us.<sup>496</sup>

Gift Aid is a UK government scheme that allows charities to claim an extra 25p for every £1 donated by UK taxpayers.<sup>497</sup> Tony emphasised that Gift Aid is important for the temple because it enables them to claim an additional 25% of the donation amount from HMRC. Donors simply need to register by providing their name and address on a donation envelope, which serves as

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<sup>494</sup> 'Prepare a Charity Annual Return', GOV.UK, 5 October 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/prepare-a-charity-annual-return>.

<sup>495</sup> Anuchit Treeratanajutawat, 'Interview by author', 5 August 2022.

<sup>496</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

<sup>497</sup> 'Tax Relief When You Donate to a Charity', GOV.UK, accessed 22 October 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/donating-to-charity/gift-aid>.

a Gift Aid declaration. Twice a year, in March and September, Tony submits the claim through Fund Filer, which sends the information to HMRC. The money is then directly deposited into the temple's bank account within five days.<sup>498</sup>

How donations are handled is just one aspect of internal financial controls which, according to the Charity Commission, are essential for charities to protect assets, make informed financial decisions, and fulfil legal duties. These controls help manage risks, maintain accurate accounting records, and ensure compliance with financial reporting requirements. Without proper controls, charities risk financial instability, damage to staff morale, harm to their reputation, and loss of public trust. They safeguard against fraud and financial mismanagement.<sup>499</sup> Anuchit explained that while he was working at Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, the bank requested the internal financial controls document via email and occasionally visited the temple in person to review these controls. He was told by the temple's accountant that he should have this document ready. He also emphasised that because a donor's name, address, and telephone number are considered personal information, the temple is then required to keep this information confidential in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).<sup>500</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Food

Food hygiene is essential at the temple, especially during ceremonies and events, as large gatherings occur. Unlike food businesses, which need to register with the local authority and receive inspections from food hygiene inspectors once a year or every two years, temples are not required to do this. However, temples with full-time staff or volunteers who cook for monks and lay attendees must have knowledge of food hygiene and food allergies, and at least one person should hold a food hygiene certificate. In temples without full-time staff, restaurant owners, who already hold this certificate, mainly provide food for events. For example, at Wat Buddhapadipa during the *Loy Krathong* Festival, food business owners with food trucks sell their food on the premises. Food hygiene is overseen by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), which was established in 2000 in response to several high-profile outbreaks of foodborne

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<sup>498</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

<sup>499</sup> 'Internal Financial Controls for Charities', GOV.UK, accessed 23 October 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/internal-financial-controls-for-charities-cc8/internal-financial-controls-for-charities>.

<sup>500</sup> GOV.UK, 'Internal Financial Controls for Charities'.

illness. An independent government department, it works to protect public health and consumer interests regarding food in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, regulating food businesses and combating food crime to ensure a trustworthy food system.<sup>501</sup>

#### 4.3.4 Events

Local councils may conduct inspections related to noise control and waste disposal, particularly if a temple is located in a residential area. This makes event organisation more complex, as temples must carefully manage noise levels, parking, and waste disposal to comply with regulations and maintain good relations with the local community. As a result, organising events in the UK can be more challenging than in Thailand, especially for temples without their own property. Noise and parking are common concerns, as seen in the case of Wat Arun Norfolk (see Chapter 3). Some temples that own property but lack sufficient space for large events such as Oxford Buddha Vihara, which rents a hall in a hospital to hold the Kathin Ceremony, take such measures to avoid conflicts with neighbours over noise and parking while also providing more space for participants.

For temples that own property, organising events on their private land or on council-owned land requires notifying the local council. For private land, notifying the council allows the Safety Advisory Group—which includes the council, police, fire, and ambulance services—to review event plans and provide advice and guidance. For council-owned land, such as the street directly in front of a temple, including the pavement, informing the council is essential. They will check the location’s suitability and review safety plans, as there is a duty of care to ensure the safety of those using council facilities.<sup>502</sup> For example, before organising the annual Kathin Ceremony at Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle, the event’s head monk, Phra Karucha Pabhākaro (hereafter Phra Karucha), would inform the local council and police. Officially, the council expects notification, as stated on the South Tyneside Council website.<sup>503</sup> However, they only requested documents from Phra Karucha once. In subsequent years, he invited police and council representatives as guests without submitting additional notifications. He further stated that when organising the alms-offering ceremony on the street in front of the temple

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<sup>501</sup> ‘Food Standards Agency Brochure’, Food Standards Agency, accessed 27 April 2022, <https://www.food.gov.uk/about-us/who-we-are>.

<sup>502</sup> ‘Organising an Event’, South Tyneside Council, accessed 4 March 2025, <https://southtyneside.gov.uk/article/1592/Organising-an-event>.

<sup>503</sup> South Tyneside Council, ‘Organising an Event’.

building, he only needed to inform the council of the date and time, and they then arranged the road closure. On the day of the event, the local police would arrive in the morning to block the street in front of the temple, ensuring a safe and organised space for the alms-offering ceremony.

For events involving vulnerable individuals, such as children, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check is required. In the UK, a DBS is a background check that helps employers make safer recruitment decisions by reviewing individuals' criminal records.<sup>504</sup> Temples that organise activities for children who will be staying overnight at the temple without their parents, such as summer camps, novice ordination programmes, or retreats for girls, must ensure that either a monk or staff member who will be looking after them obtains a DBS certificate. This requirement of checking the criminal records for those working with children is not present in Thailand. Therefore, it is a new practice that those who establish the temple in the UK have to adhere to.

## 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the intricate web of regulations and authorities, both in Thailand and the UK, that govern the establishment and ongoing management of Thai Buddhist temples in the UK. The analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how transnational religious institutions navigate secular legal systems in host countries. It brings to light the demanding administrative responsibilities that monks must undertake, introducing a new dimension to their traditional role as world-renouncers and priests and highlighting the complexity of modern monkhood, which is a far cry from any ideal of monkhood as a state of renunciation, simplicity and solitude.

The first part of this chapter focused on the recruiting of monks, the obtaining of passports, the sponsor license procedure, and the application for religious work visas in the UK. What it reveals is the enormous complexity of this process. In Thailand, a monk must go through five

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<sup>504</sup> 'DBS Check Eligibility Guidance for the Charity Sector and Overseas Aid Organisations', GOV.UK, accessed 4 December 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dbs-check-eligibility-guidance-for-the-charity-sector-and-overseas-aid-organisations>; 'DBS Checks: Guidance for Employers', GOV.UK, 13 July 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/dbs-check-requests-guidance-for-employers>; 'The Disclosure and Barring Service Is Created', GOV.UK, accessed 2 December 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-disclosure-and-barring-service-is-created>.

authorities and seven procedures to obtain an official passport, and nine procedures to receive an ordinary passport. In addition, ten processes must be completed for a monk or staff member of Wat Phra Dhammakaya to obtain permission to work overseas, while monks from other temples require approximately three processes to obtain permission to work abroad. Meanwhile, within the UK there are a further four processes, from gaining a sponsor licence to applying religious work visa. In Thailand, the procedure for monks to work overseas is more complicated than that for laypeople, while in the UK, monks are treated similarly to other working immigrants and are subject to a similar visa application process.

The recruitment processes in Thailand reflect the ways in which Thai Buddhism is overseen by and subject to the Thai government, in ways enacted in multiple Sangha Acts which began over a century ago, in response to colonialism and modernisation, and have continued to be revised and reissued until the present. This close relationship between monastic institutions in Thailand and the Thai government may explain why the UK Thai temple scene is dominated by three particular monastic institutions: firstly, those with great authority and proximity to the government, namely the royally backed Wat Mahathat through the royally established Wat Buddhapadipa, secondly, by the very centrally organised and internationally outward-looking Wat Phra Dhammakaya and, thirdly, by the Western-convert-oriented forest lineages stemming from Ajahn Chah at the internationally famous forest temple, Wat Nong Pa Pong.

While these three source temples are very different from each other, reflecting strikingly different forms of Thai Buddhism, they each are adapted in distinctive ways that make them more able to handle the complex challenges of the recruitment process. The Wat Mahathat/Wat Buddhapadipa cluster of temples all benefit from long association with Thailand's ruling elite, the early and royal establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa and the long-term experience of its senior monks. This has meant that even where new temples are established by monks who were not from Wat Mahathat, they have links with Wat Mahathat through Wat Buddhapadipa, and tend to reflect the clusters of values, activities and interests of Wat Mahathat. This cluster of values, activities and interests includes royal or governmental representation seen as the extended manifestation of Thai identity and culture, together with emphases on both study and meditation. Other than for educational visits and meditation classes, most of these temples are attended primarily by Diaspora and visiting Thais, with relatively few Western convert attendees. The challenges confronted by the recruitment and visa approval processes in both Thailand and, especially, the UK, means that a stronger, more centralised type of cooperation

is seen between these mainly Mahanikai temples in the UK than would typically be found in Thailand. The temples derived from Wat Phra Dhammakaya are geared toward internationalisation, and highly centralised, reflecting not just the character of the Wat Phra Dhammakaya itself but also its mother temple in turn, Wat Paknam, which had sent out the first Thai missionary monks and ordained the first UK-based monks in the 1950s. This means that Dhammakaya temples benefit from the highly organised systems in place, with highly experienced, committed lay staff recruited largely from their *ubasok* base facilitating the roles of the monks. Meanwhile the Thai Forest Tradition temples, staffed mainly by non-Thai monks, circumvent many of the processes discussed in this chapter, even though they still come under Thai monastic authorities in terms of how monks must conduct themselves. However, their approach to admitting new monastic members is more structured, involving a step-by-step commitment that contrasts with traditional, immediate ordinations. This allows for a gradual transition to the renunciant lifestyle, along with cultural adjustment to Buddhist principles.

The second and third part of the chapter examined the administrative landscape of charitable organisations in the UK which apply to Thai temples in the UK. Table 8 outlined at least 13 different bodies with which temple management must engage across various aspects of their operations. These range from the Home Office concerning visas, the Charity Commission and Scottish Charity Regulator for registration, Local Councils and Planning Authorities for property and events, to the Food Standards Agency, Health and Safety Executive, HMRC for financial matters, and even the Disclosure and Barring Service.

The number of these requirements and institutions underscores the significant time and effort that must be dedicated by those involved in running these temples, which often falls upon monks. These findings highlight that a considerable portion of time is devoted to administrative duties, balancing world renunciation with Buddhist public service, while also representing Thai culture and identity. In addition, they must develop significant expertise across multiple levels of UK law, insurance protocols, and various areas of compliance. This necessity of navigating such a complex regulatory landscape draws a striking parallel to the management demands of far larger, more established, and sophisticated organisations such as universities. These organisations typically have dedicated departments and specialised staff to handle such complex matters. In contrast, Thai temples in the UK often rely on the developing expertise of monks and volunteers, mainly from Thailand, who may

have limited prior experience to the intricacies of the UK's legal and administrative systems. This reality highlights the demanding and often unexpected roles taken on by those maintaining Thai Buddhist temples in the UK. Therefore, what may appear to be the initial and straightforward steps in establishing a temple—gathering a supportive community, recruiting monks, and securing premises—are, in reality, just the beginning of a much more complex journey.

# 5

## Uncovering the Layers of the Thai Monastic Community in the UK

In this chapter and the next chapter, I delve deeper into the realm of people management. My findings are mainly based on the six temple case studies that I examined in depth in Chapter 3, bearing in mind the challenges examined in Chapter 4. Following the analytical method used by David Azzopardi in his study of Sri Lankan Diaspora Buddhism in the UK, in order to gain a comprehensive analysis of the diaspora community, we should avoid establishing firm divisions between institutions, as this approach can lead to “limited, one-dimensional forms of analysis.”<sup>505</sup> While drawing on six temples helps avoid this, I also include interviews and examples from other Thai temples across the UK, aiming to present a broader and more nuanced picture. Further, my sections in these two chapters touch on various aspects of the monastic and lay Buddhists’ experience in the UK, examining these institutions along a number of different axes, to provide a multi-dimensional view of their lives and their institutions. While I am often able to cite specific institutions and affiliations, for topics deemed sensitive and potentially harmful to specific temples, I will generalise information and ensure anonymity for both participants and institutions involved.

This chapter focuses on the lives and roles of Thai Buddhist monks and monastic women in UK temples. I will explore daily monastic life, highlighting monks’ routines, responsibilities, and adaptations in a Western setting by contrasting them with monastic life in Thailand. I will then examine the role of the abbot and the specific challenges they encounter. Lastly, despite the absence of women in Thai monastic roles in the UK, I will assess the gender dynamics within the monastic community, focusing on inequalities and efforts to promote equality for women.

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<sup>505</sup> Azzopardi, ‘Religious Belief and Practice among Sri Lankan Buddhists in the UK’, 305.

## 5.1 The Everyday Life of Monks

The daily routines of monks in the UK and Thailand share similarities, particularly in their morning activities, which typically include chanting and meditation. However, there are distinct differences in the practice of alms round, the traditional means for monks to receive prepared food from laypeople. In Thailand, the tradition of morning alms round persists, especially in rural temples, though many urban temples in Bangkok have phased out this practice. In contrast, alms round among monks in the UK are rare, primarily due to the local population's lack of familiarity with this tradition. For instance, when Thai forest monks first settled in the UK in 1977 and sought alms food in Hampstead, the residents were unfamiliar with this tradition, resulting in no food being offered.<sup>506</sup>

In addition, the local authority viewed this act as potentially against the law. Sharp describes how he explained the custom and its purpose in a letter to the Chief Constable of London. The response he received stated that the monks' actions contravened the law, specifically the 1824 Vagrancy Act, which penalises “idle and disorderly persons, and rogues and vagabonds, in England.”<sup>507</sup> After consulting with a lawyer, Sharp submitted a document titled ‘Opinion,’ along with other documents, but received no response. He concluded that the practice of alms rounds was, in fact, legal.<sup>508</sup>

Today, this custom of alms rounds is still carried out in the UK on specific occasions, but with approval from the council or local police. For instance, Wat Buddhapadipa recently organised alms rounds in the heart of London in October 2023 and April 2024. During these events, more than ten monks from various Thai temples conducted alms round at popular tourist sites, starting from the London Eye, crossing Westminster Bridge, passing Big Ben and Houses of Parliament, continuing to Battersea Park, and stopping at the Peace Pagoda where they had their lunch.<sup>509</sup> The temple pre-announced the event on social media and invited Buddhists to contribute dry food in contrast to traditionally freshly prepared food. Similarly, Wat Phra Dhammakaya London also organised an International Alms Giving Ceremony at Jubilee

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<sup>506</sup> Sharp, *The Chithurst Story*, 51.

<sup>507</sup> ‘Vagrancy Act 1824’, accessed 16 April 2024, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo4/5/83>.

<sup>508</sup> Sharp, *The Chithurst Story*, 51–52.

<sup>509</sup> บัณฑิตโลกกลางกรุงลอนดอน (*Walk For Alms 28 October 2023*), n.d., accessed 16 April 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/buddhapadipa>.

Square, in the centre of Woking.<sup>510</sup> Additionally, temples usually organise alms rounds within their premises during events such as the Kathin ceremony or Songkran festival. This illustrates an effort to maintain and adapt traditional practices within a new cultural context.

Without the alms food that monks typically receive in Thailand, monks must rely on food preparation and offerings from laypeople at the temple. In temples with full-time staff, resident laypeople, or volunteers who live nearby—such as Wat Buddhapadipa, Amaravati, branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, or Wat Sri Intra—laypeople prepare and offer food for the monks (see Chapter 6). However, in many temples without such support, monks may have to cook for themselves. Such cooking is prohibited by the *vinaya* and regarded as an ecclesiastical offence (Pali: *āpatti*), and monks in the Theravada tradition typically do not cook, unlike their Mahayana counterparts. Nevertheless, it is only classified as a minor offence (Pali: *pācittiya*) that requires expiation, similar to offences such as digging or asking someone to dig or cut down trees.<sup>511</sup> In practical terms, where lay people only visit to offer food on special occasions or offer unprepared food, monks will cook for themselves.

After breakfast, monks may engage in temple chores, attend to personal business, or study. For lunch, monks typically eat at temples where donors take turns offering food, or they may visit restaurants, homes, or companies upon invitation. For instance, at Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, Thai restaurant owners usually have a designated day to provide meals. Other donors who do not own restaurants often collaborate to sponsor food on a specific day. In terms of invitations, monks are frequently asked to participate in various ceremonies, such as merit-making for housewarmings or business inaugurations, as well as events like birthdays, funerals, or the Songkran festival, where they are also provided with lunch.

This invitation for monks to perform religious duties is similar to practices at temples in Thailand. However, in Thailand, arranging transportation for monks is relatively straightforward, with many lay Buddhists available. In contrast, in the UK, particularly where there are no full-time staff or lay residents, monks depend on volunteers for transportation. For instance, Wat Arun Norfolk, situated in a rented house on a farm, miles away from the city

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<sup>510</sup> *International Alms Giving Ceremony 2022 – Wat Phra Dhammakaya London*, 17 August 2022, <https://www.watphradhammakayalondon.co.uk/international-alms-giving-ceremony-2022-2/>.

<sup>511</sup> Phra Brahmaganabhorn, ‘ปาจิตติย (Pācittiya)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010).

centre and lacking public transport, relies solely on cars for mobility. The only feasible way to commute is by car, and monks must wait for a volunteer to transport them, as it is inappropriate for them to drive according to the Sangha Act (see below). Such is also the case with Wat Sri Intra. Unlike the branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, which consistently have full-time volunteers, monks at Wat Sri Intra Atula face difficulty in traveling because they depend on supporters or part-time volunteers.

Driving is considered inappropriate for monks in Thailand, and this issue has been a long-standing controversy. In his article, Preecha Saowmong examines this issue, highlighting that the term ‘vehicles’ in Buddhist scriptures refers to various modes of transportation, such as boats, carriages, palanquins, chariots, and elephants.<sup>512</sup> He further states that the Buddha did not permit monks to use vehicles for transportation, except for palanquins in specific circumstances for those who are ill.<sup>513</sup> Saowmong believes that monks should refrain from engaging in driving because it may lose them respect among the local community, suggesting that exceptions should be made in certain genuine cases, such as illness or residing in remote areas.<sup>514</sup>

More recently, on April 30, 2021, the SSC issued a new regulation to explicitly prohibit monks and novices from engaging in driving activities:

1. Monks and novices are strictly prohibited from driving cars and riding motorcycles.
2. Any actions that would enable driving cars or riding motorcycles, such as applying for driving licenses, are also prohibited.
3. If anyone observes any of the aforementioned actions being performed, the governing monastic authorities shall consider imposing appropriate disciplinary measure in accordance with their powers and duties, unless the vehicle is being used to facilitate the movement of temple-related items or in cases of necessity or serious emergencies.
4. The NOB is responsible for notifying the two Sangha Provincial Heads about these regulations, who in turn will inform the associated governing monastic authorities and notify the temples within their respective administrative areas.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> Preecha Saowmong, ‘พระสงฆ์กับการขับขี่ยานพาหนะ: ความจำเป็นหรือจงใจ (Buddhist Monks Driving Vehicles: Necessity or Deliberate Choice?)’, *Journal of Educational Innovation and Research* 1, no. 3 (2017): 120.

<sup>513</sup> Saowmong, ‘พระสงฆ์กับการขับขี่ยานพาหนะ: ความจำเป็นหรือจงใจ (Buddhist Monks Driving Vehicles: Necessity or Deliberate Choice?)’, 121.

<sup>514</sup> Saowmong, ‘พระสงฆ์กับการขับขี่ยานพาหนะ: ความจำเป็นหรือจงใจ (Buddhist Monks Driving Vehicles: Necessity or Deliberate Choice?)’, 125.

<sup>515</sup> Sangha Supreme Council. Thai., ‘มหาเถรสมาคม (The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand)’.

Despite this, in the UK some monks hold UK driving licenses and even own their own car in order to facilitate the fulfilment of their duties, including school visits, going to houses for funerary services and alms invitations, or managing temple duties alongside other activities such as university studies.

In the afternoon, monks may engage in various temple activities such as maintaining the grounds, supervising student groups during school visits, teaching meditation classes, studying, or performing administrative work. During my visit to Wat Sriratanaram, I observed all monks involved in outdoor tasks, which included gardening, construction work, and preparations for the upcoming *sima* consecration ceremony and the annual CTBMUK meeting scheduled for July 2023.

In the evening, monks gather for chanting and meditation. The verses chanted and the meditation practices vary between temples, most of which adopt the traditions of their parent temples in Thailand. For example, branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in the UK use the same chanting verses and the *dhammakaya* meditation method taught by Luang Por Sodh as their parent temple. Similarly, Wat Buddhapadipa and its affiliated branches practice *vipassana* meditation as taught at Wat Mahathat.<sup>516</sup> These temples also make both morning and evening chanting and meditation sessions available online through platforms like Facebook or Zoom for their devotees. Additionally, the chanting verses can vary depending on the attendees; for instance, Oxford Buddha Vihara uses three languages—Thai, Shan, and Burmese—in their chants to adapt to the diverse cultures of its devotees.

The daily routines of Thai monks in the UK and Thailand are more similar than different. They are subject to the same authorities, including monastic disciplines and the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand. While monks in the UK are governed by UK laws rather than Thailand's general laws, they are still influenced by Thai customs, such as using a cloth to receive offerings from lay women in order to avoid direct contact and shaving their eyebrows once a month (see Chapter 1). Even though they are not in Thailand, these practices persist. Nonetheless, the social expectations for monks may vary between the two countries. While some behaviour persists that might seem unusual in Thailand, laypeople in the UK find it understandable and

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<sup>516</sup> Phibul Choempolpaisal, 'Political Buddhism and the Modernisation of Thai Monastic Education: From Wachirayan to Phimonlatham (1880s–1960s)', *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 2 (3 July 2015): 439.

acceptable. When I asked one of the volunteers if Thai people in the UK find it odd that monks cook for themselves, she replied, “No, they don’t. If they [monk] don’t do it themselves, they would starve, wouldn’t they?”<sup>517</sup> This flexibility in adapting to different environments, while still adhering to monastic regulations established more than 2,500 years ago, along with new regulations from the Thai Sangha governance, highlights the resilience and persistence of the monastic community in maintaining their spiritual practices even as they navigate practical challenges.

## 5.2 The Role of Abbotship

Every temple has an abbot who is the head of both the organisation and the monks. He is the one whom monks approach for permission to do something. While he may or may not be the head of the committee that runs the temple, he holds the highest authority in decision-making. The role of an abbot in both Thailand and the UK involves spiritual leadership, governance, and community engagement. However, the practical demands and institutional structures that shape their roles differ significantly between the two contexts. In Thailand, abbots operate within a well-established monastic hierarchy governed by the Sangha Act, whilst in the UK, they must navigate secular laws and charity regulations, as seen in Chapter 4, as well as multicultural communities.

In Thailand, the formal appointment process varies based on the type of temple: royal or community temples (see Chapter 1). In royal temples, appointments are made by the Supreme Patriarch. Meanwhile, in community temples, abbots are appointed by the Sangha Provisional Heads following a selection process involving the Sangha District Heads, Sangha Deputy District Heads, Sangha Commune Heads, Sangha Deputy Commune Heads, and related officials. Abbots in Thailand are officially recognised by the Thai Sangha and, under Section 45 of the Sangha Act, hold the status of state officials. For abbots overseas, the appointment process is officially recognised only if the temples have been established or sponsored by the Thai Government. Within the UK, Wat Buddhapadipa is the sole Thai temple falling into this category (see Chapter 3). The abbot at Wat Buddhapadipa is appointed directly by the SSC from Thailand, with the most recent appointment in 2023, conferring the title upon Chao Khun

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<sup>517</sup> Daraphun Mitchell, ‘Interview by author’, 23 May 2023.

Laow. The official certificate of the abbot's appointment, bearing the signature of the Supreme Patriarch, is framed in gold and displayed in the reception room of Wat Buddhapadipa.

In contrast, abbots at other Thai temples in the UK are not recognised as holding official positions within the Thai Sangha. Their appointment processes vary. Some abbots are designated by their parent temples in Thailand (e.g., Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches, Wat Arun Norfolk, Wat Phra Singh, and Wat Sri Intra). Others are selected internally within UK-based temples when a superior monk designates a successor (e.g., Amaravati). Alternatively, a monk who has resided in the UK for a significant period may be invited by the Thai Buddhist community to establish a temple in their locality. In such cases, he would automatically become the abbot.

In the UK, the subject of abbotship has been examined in practical terms by Graham Winyard, particularly within the context of the Thai Forest Monk Tradition.<sup>518</sup> In this tradition, finding an abbot is particularly challenging due to its emphasis on meditation rather than administrative leadership. In contrast, other traditions, such as Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Wat Buddhapadipa, place greater emphasis on structured temple governance and outreach. His research highlights that abbots often navigate the challenges with little structured guidance, leading to significant variations in temple management (see below).

In order to better understand the role of abbots in UK, I employ here the four key characteristics of abbots identified by Phramaha Wasan writing about Thailand (see Introduction). I also incorporate Winyard's findings from the Thai Forest Tradition.

### 5.2.1 Comparing the Four Leadership Characteristics of Abbots in Thai and UK Temples

In the introduction the study analysing management styles in Thai temples by Phramaha Wasan, who identified four traditional styles and then modern management systems. The first is the use by abbots of charisma-based leadership, which depends on their personal qualities, such as knowledge, respect, and charisma. Their legitimacy as leaders is not inherently guaranteed but depends on their ability to earn the trust and support of the community. In

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<sup>518</sup> Winyard, 'The Role of the Abbot in Western Thai Forest Monasteries of the Ajahn Chah Lineage'.

Thailand, laypeople generally recognise an abbot's authority as part of an ingrained social and religious hierarchy. However, in the UK, abbots must actively work to gain respect within a multicultural and legally structured religious environment. If an abbot lacks charisma or influence, their formal position alone may not be sufficient to maintain control. Without strong community support, their ability to lead effectively becomes significantly weakened. This dynamic is particularly evident when the expectations of the lay community diverge from monastic leadership. Lay dissatisfaction with an abbot's management style has led to the closures of three UK temples (see Chapter 6).

Phramaha Wasan next identified governance based on monastic discipline (*vinaya*), which varies in practice from strict adherence to the *vinaya* rules maximising monks' withdrawal from society to a more flexible, community-oriented approach. In the UK, this is most relevant to Thai forest traditions, which, rather than serving the Thai diaspora tend to be inward-looking because they house westerners serious about renunciant practices such as meditation over cultural activities, maintaining a level of detachment from worldly matters. In contrast, temples such as Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Phra Singh, Wat Arun Norfolk, and Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches actively organise Thai cultural events like *Songkran* and *Loy Krathong*. These temples serve as cultural and social hubs for the Thai immigrant community, and are therefore more outward looking, a theme further explored in Chapter 6.

Even within the Thai Forest Tradition, degrees of engagement vary. During my initial fieldwork, I sought to interview the abbot of Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery, part of the Chithurst lineage. Despite my introduction by a main temple supporter, the abbot declined, explaining that his temple does not accept interviews, as many people have wanted to interview him in the past. Instead, he directed me to Ajahn Amaro at Amaravati, a temple known for a more outward-facing approach. This interaction illustrates the differing interpretations of monastic discipline—some temples remain highly reclusive, while others, like Amaravati, engage more openly with external audiences. These variations reflect the adaptability of monastic traditions to different social and cultural contexts.

Phramaha Wasan describes a further aspect of Thai temple management as traditionally hierarchical, with governance centred on the abbot, who holds ultimate decision-making authority. This leadership style closely resembles Thailand's former absolute monarchy, where decisions are made unilaterally without external validation. Certain temples in the UK adopt

this centralised model, with the abbot maintaining full control over governance. At Wat Phra Singh UK, for instance, Than Thirasak holds the highest authority, delegating administrative tasks to Tony, the temple's founder and trustee. While Tony manages paperwork, accounting, and construction projects, final decisions rest solely with the abbot. As Tony stated, "This is his temple," this despite Tony's crucial role in establishing the temple, underscoring the traditional hierarchical structure. Similarly, at Wat Buddhapadipa, Chao Khun Laow, appointed by the SSC in January 2023, wields ultimate authority, further reinforced by his dual role as head of the CTBMUK, which oversees Mahanikai temples in the UK. In these temples, governing committees exist, but their power is purely advisory—the abbot has the final say on all matters. This model ensures that the temple's vision, policies, and decisions remain firmly under the abbot's control, reflecting the centralised authority historically associated with monastic leadership in Thailand.

However, not all abbots in the UK have full autonomy. Some operate within a hybrid governance model, where leadership is shared with parent temples in Thailand. For example, at Wat Sri Intra Atula, Luang Por Nikom oversees daily affairs but must obtain approval from Luang Pu Tong Inn, the abbot of the parent temple in Thailand, for major financial decisions. Similarly, at Wat Arun Norfolk, Than Jirawath oversees temple operations, but final decision-making power remains with Chao Khun Torsak, the temple's founder and a senior monk of the parent temple in Thailand. This adds a complexity to their management less common in Thailand.

In these cases, while abbots govern spiritual and daily affairs, they must defer to senior monks in Thailand for larger institutional decisions. This hybrid governance structure balances local abbot-centric leadership with external oversight, ensuring adherence to parent institutions' traditions and standards. It also highlights the financial dependency of UK temples on their Thai counterparts. Senior monks such as Luang Pu Tong Inn and Chao Khun Torsak wield significant influence, leveraging their monastic authority to secure financial contributions from Thai lay supporters. Consequently, they retain control over major financial decisions, reinforcing the hierarchical nature of monastic governance beyond national borders.

The final aspects of temple governance identified by Phramaha Wasan concerns consistent engagement with the lay community. In both Thailand and the UK, laypeople play an active role in temple management, often participating in decision-making and monitoring monks'

conduct. In the UK, temples established by Thai immigrant communities tend to maintain strong ties with laypeople, who sometimes exercise significant influence over temple operations. This influence can extend to financial control, as seen in one UK temple where conflicts between the lay committee and monks ultimately led to the temple's closure (see Chapter 6).

To prevent such conflicts, the abbot of Wat Sri Intra Atula, Luang Por Nikom, emphasises that while three laypeople serve as trustees, the final decision-making authority remains with the monks (see Chapter 3). This structure follows the guidance of Luang Pu Tong Inn, who sought to prevent disputes arising from lay control over monastic leadership. His governance model aims to balance lay involvement with monastic leadership by ensuring that monks retain ultimate authority, fostering long-term stability within the temple community

### 5.2.2 Modern Management System

In addition to the traditional and overlapping aspects of temple management identified by Phramaha Wasan, all of which are relevant in the UK, he also highlights a distinction between an informal approach handed down through traditional leadership practices, and newer, more modern management systems, which incorporate formalised structures, administrative hierarchies, and strategic planning such as that of Wat Phra Dhammakaya.<sup>519</sup> This structured governance approach is evident in the Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches in the UK, which mirror the parent temple's emphasis on centralised decision-making and institutional control, where the abbots of UK branch temples lack full autonomy in their decision-making processes. While they retain authority over daily operations, significant decisions such as appointing monks, staff movements, and property acquisitions must receive approval from governance committees in both Europe and Thailand (see Chapters 3 and 4). These committees, composed of senior monastic and lay representatives, oversee transnational decision-making processes to ensure continuity with the parent temple. This hybrid governance model reflects a structured yet decentralised approach, integrating both hierarchical oversight (top-down from Thailand/Europe) and local authority (bottom-up from UK abbots). Unlike the purely abbot-centric models found in traditional Thai temples, this structure incorporates elements of

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<sup>519</sup> Nanasiddhi, 'การพัฒนาตัวชี้วัดธรรมภิบาลในพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท สำหรับบริหารจัดการวัด (A Development of the Theravada Buddhist Good Governance Indicators for Monastery Administration)', 202.

network governance, where leadership responsibilities are shared across different levels of institutional hierarchy.

Amaravati is another temple from my case studies that, while to some extent following the traditional abbot-centred approach, also adopts a modern management system. Unlike traditional hierarchical temple governance, Amaravati has established specific management structures to oversee various aspects of its operations. This structured approach is essential, as it is the temple with a significant number of residents, around 70 people, including monastics, permanent lay residents, and short-term guests from around the world. Instead of the abbot chairing every meeting and making all major decisions, Amaravati operates under a decentralised and collaborative governance model. Given the large number of residents, responsibilities are divided into eight committees, each managing different operational areas (see Chapter 3). While Ajahn Amaro, the abbot, participates in these committees, he does not preside over all meetings, nor does he act as the sole decision-maker. As he explains, the abbot is “sort of the head of things, and so most matters are either referred to me or to the head monks.”<sup>520</sup> However, authority is shared rather than concentrated in one figure, which is the model he prefers.<sup>521</sup> This shared decision-making model reflects a key feature of modern management systems, promoting a collaborative leadership style instead of a hierarchical, top-down approach. By distributing decision-making responsibilities among committees, Amaravati not only ensures efficient governance but also reduces the pressure on the abbot as the sole authority. Instead, leadership is exercised collectively, reinforcing an inclusive and participatory model of temple management.

### 5.2.3 Additional Responsibilities for UK Abbots

The role of the abbot extends beyond religious leadership, encompassing a range of responsibilities that vary based on the size and stage of the temple’s establishment, as well as legal and administrative duties in the UK. The size and stage of a temple’s establishment significantly influence the abbot’s role. Larger temples typically require greater administrative oversight and broader community engagement. For example, Amaravati, with around 70 residents, distributes responsibilities across eight committees (see Chapter 3). As discussed above, Ajahn Amaro does not centralise decision-making but instead participates in a

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<sup>520</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

<sup>521</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

collaborative governance model. This shared leadership approach reduces the administrative burden on the abbot while ensuring efficient temple management.

In contrast, abbots of smaller temples often have to oversee or directly manage a broader range of responsibilities. For example, at Wat Sriratanaram in Manchester, despite its large physical space, only five resident monks live at the temple, and there are no full-time staff. During my visit, the abbot, Phramaha Paganon Buddhimedhee (hereafter Phramaha Paganon), was actively involved in tending to the temple grounds alongside the other resident monks in preparation for the upcoming CTBMUK annual meeting and *sima* consecration ceremony. This contrasts with Ajahn Amaro, who has lay residents to assist with similar tasks.

Even within the same institution, such as Wat Phra Dhammakaya, the role of the abbot and the scope of their duties can vary between branches. The parent temple in Thailand is massive, both in physical size and in the number of residents, including monastics, *ubasok*, *ubasika*, full-time staff, and volunteers, totalling more than 3,000 people (see Chapter 2). However, with a well-established system for managing and regulating its operations, the abbot in Thailand does not need to oversee every aspect of temple management. In contrast, abbots in the UK branches take a more hands-on role, actively engaging in daily operations and practical responsibilities. These include overseeing construction and renovation projects, organising ceremonies, tending to temple grounds, and even posting events on social media.

The stage of a temple's establishment also plays a crucial role in shaping an abbot's responsibilities. In the early stages, an abbot may oversee renovation projects and structural conversions as exemplified by Phra Pichit at Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle discussed above in Chapter 4.

Differences in legal frameworks further complicate the role of UK abbots. Unlike in Thailand, where abbots are recognised as state officials under Section 45 of the Sangha Act, their status in the UK depends on their temple's legal structure, where they may serve as directors of a company, trustees of registered charities, or both, complying with Companies House and Charity Commission regulations as well as contemporary challenges such as visa regulations, planning permissions, and financial sustainability, as discussed in Chapter 4. In the UK there are no guidelines for these responsibilities and the relevance of guidelines in Thailand, such as the principles of *Dhamma Piban* (good governance) and the *Wittaya Phra Sanghathikarn*,

a two-volume monastic governance manual, which covers the Sangha Act and legal provisions and provides practical guidelines and examples for monastic administration, is unclear.

### 5.3 Female Monasticism in the UK Temple

This thesis is about monasteries and, while women are important as donors and volunteers, there is an absence of women in monastic roles in the UK. This differs from the situation in Thailand, so here I want to explain about female monastics in Thailand and their current invisibility in UK in order to highlight the contrast as well as to explain why I have no female monastics in my study. It is not because I am unaware of female monastics. Indeed, raised in a Buddhist family, I have been surrounded by *mae chi*, Thai Buddhist nuns—my great-grandmother, aunt, and niece—for much of my life. In middle age, after her family no longer needed her care, my great-grandmother dedicated the remainder of her life to spiritual practice at the local temple in her hometown, and my aunt and niece continued this tradition. The Thai term ‘*mae chi*’ means ‘honourable lady in white’, sometimes shortened to just ‘*chi*’. It applies to women who undertake the eight or ten precepts, dress in white robes, shave their heads and eyebrows, and live in temples for a long period of time or even their entire lives. As in Burma, Thai Buddhism does not have a lineage of fully ordained nuns (Pali: *bhikkhunī*, see below).

Among the *mae chi* I have met, most are typically over fifty, having found solace and purpose in their later years. However, some embrace this path as children, sometimes driven by economic necessity – particularly the support it provides to continue education for low-income families – sometimes by a profound affinity for Buddhist teachings. My niece was ordained around age 15, just as her brother became a novice at a young age, inspired by my aunt, who is their grandmother. My aunt’s journey into monastic life began in her mid-40s, and now, at 79, her days are a testament to her faith. Beyond observing the eight precepts, chanting, and meditating, she also supports the monks by caring for the temple’s upkeep and preparing meals, either using alms collected by the monks or cooking the meals herself when no donors are available that day. These are the typical roles of the *mae chi* in temples in Thailand. When I was young, many temples had groups of *mae chi* living separately from monks but within the temple complex. These days, not many temples have *mae chi* unless there is a relative who is a monk in that temple. Instead, it is more common for those ordained as *mae chi* to reside at the centres set up for *mae chi* under the Thainun (sic) Foundation Under the Queen’s

Patronage.<sup>522</sup> Nonetheless, they remain a visible and important part of the Thai Buddhist Sangha.

Within the Theravada tradition, the full *bhikkhunī* lineage appears to have died out by the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>523</sup> While it has been successfully revived and is flourishing in Sri Lanka, and some Thai women, having received ordination there, are now living as *bhikkhunī* in Thailand and the UK, attempts at its reinstatement in both Burma and Thailand have failed due to strong resistance from the central monastic authorities. In Burma, it is illegal to be a *bhikkhunī*.<sup>524</sup> In Thailand, a law was enacted on June 18, 1928, prohibiting the ordination of women in Thailand and making it a monastic offence for a monk to participate in such a ritual.<sup>525</sup>

The controversy surrounding nuns in Thailand was reignited when Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a Thai scholar of Buddhism, took higher ordination in Sri Lanka and became Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā in 2003. She became the first Thai woman to be fully ordained as a Theravāda *bhikkhunī* and is currently the abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. Thus, her ordination in Sri Lanka has allowed her to circumvent the prohibition on the ordination of *bhikkhunī* there. While the concept and institution of a *bhikkhunī* Sangha goes back to the time of the Buddha and is accepted both historically and to this day in East Asian Buddhist cultures, it is often perceived differently in Thailand. As Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā explains, “We have to make a differentiation between Buddhist culture and Thai culture. Ordained women are very much part of the Buddhist culture. But in Thai culture, we don’t have that. We never had that.”<sup>526</sup> According to her, as of 2023, there are 270 *bhikkhunīs* spread across at least 30 provinces in Thailand. In addition to Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā’s community, there is a dedicated centre for fully ordained nuns in Chiang Mai, known as the Nirodharam

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<sup>522</sup> The Thainun Foundation was established in 1969 as a result of a national meeting of nuns attended by more than 500 participants. The meeting aimed to create guidelines and regulations to unite and improve the status of nuns in Thailand. Key outcomes included the establishment of the Thai Nuns Association under the name “Thai Nuns Institute” and the drafting of operational regulations for nuns. Additionally, it was mandated that nuns must have an identification card called “*Sutthibun*.” To further promote their activities, a journal was launched, and a fund was established to support these initiatives under the name “Thainun Foundation. According to the website, there are 27 centres across Thailand established to carry out the foundation’s projects, serve as places for Dhamma practice, and provide accommodation for nuns and women engaged in spiritual practice. These centres were made possible through land donations to the foundation. See more ‘มูลนิธิธรรมาภรณ์แม่ชีไทย ในพระบรมราชูปถัมภ์ (Thainun Foundation Under the Queen’s Patronage)’, accessed 10 December 2024, <http://thainunfoundation.com/>.

<sup>523</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 219.

<sup>524</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 234.

<sup>525</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 226.

<sup>526</sup> *Becoming Thailand’s First Fully-Ordained Theravada Nun*.

Bhikkhuni Arama. This centre was founded in 1995 by Bhikkhuni Rungduean Nanthayani, who received ordination within the Sri Lankan tradition in 2008. Currently, the centre serves as a residence for approximately 26 *bhikkhunīs*.<sup>527</sup>

Additionally, there is another lineage of *bhikkhunī* in Australia that originated from an English monk associated with the Thai Forest Tradition. Despite the legal constraints in Thailand, in October 2009, Ajahn Brahm conducted the full ordination of four *bhikkhunī* in Australia. This ordination was into the Thai Forest Tradition lineage of Ajahn Chah associated with Wat Nong Pah Pong, so stemming from the same lineage as the Mahanikai forest temples in the UK.<sup>528</sup> As a result of his ordination of women, he is considered to have diverged from the Thai tradition.<sup>529</sup> As a result he was removed from the Thai Sangha and stripped of the rank and title that the late King Bhumibol had awarded him. Nonetheless, the *bhikkhunī* lineage that he instigated continues in Australia and has now reached Oxford, UK, through the Anukampa Bhikkhuni Project, which was founded by Venerable Canda in 2016 at the request of her teacher, Ajahn Brahm, who serves as her spiritual adviser. Venerable Canda and the group aim to promote Early Buddhism's teachings and practices and establish the first forest monastery in England where women can train towards full *bhikkhunī* ordination, as this is still not permitted at Chithurst and Amaravati temples (though women do have other roles at these temples, as discussed below).<sup>530</sup> However, this development in the UK is very recent (2016–present), and this lineage is not affiliated with the Thai temples that I selected for this study. For this reason and because their situation is subject to specific challenges that warrant a different approach and study in their own right, it will not be discussed further here.

In contrast to its disapproval of *bhikkhunī* ordination, the Thai Sangha has increased its support for *mae chi* in recent decades. Despite this, it is rare to find *mae chi* in Thai temples in the UK, perhaps because the social roles of older women and the social needs of girls who become *mae chi* do not exist in the UK. During my fieldwork, I learned about only one *mae chi* in a Thai temple in the UK. She is a supporter of a Thai temple who embraced the *mae chi* life after her

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<sup>527</sup> 'Nirodharam Bhikkhuni Arama', accessed 16 June 2023, <http://www.nirodharam.com/>.

<sup>528</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 227.

<sup>529</sup> 'Dhammasara Nuns Monastery', Buddhist Society of Western Australia, accessed 16 June 2023, <https://bswa.org/location/dhammasara-monastery/>.

<sup>530</sup> *Anukampa Bhikkhuni Project – Bringing the Bhikkhuni Sangha to the UK*, n.d., accessed 6 May 2024, <https://anukampaproject.org/>.

husband's passing and now resides at Wat Santiwongsaram in Birmingham, reaffirming the specific social role of this type of ordination.

Despite the almost complete absence of *bhikkhunī* and *mae chi* in the UK, there are two types of nuns at Chithurst and Amaravati, which preserve the Ajahn Chah Thai Forest lineage connected with Wat Nong Pah Pong mainly among non-Thais. The nuns in this lineage in the UK are not referred to as *mae chi*. Rather, they are divided into two types undertaking either eight or ten precepts, and known as *anagārikā* 'homeless lady' and *sīladhārā* 'precept holder' respectively.<sup>531</sup> I want to include a short exploration of these nuns because they provide an interesting illustration of the challenges for the abbot of running a Thai temple within a UK context, leading to unique negotiations between the two cultures while respecting the institutional oversight that comes from Thailand.

The history of the nuns' community at these two temples dates back to 1979 when four Western women, drawn to the monastic way of life, were accepted as white-robed *anagārikā* at Chithurst. During the initial five years, they resided in a cottage on the fringe of Chithurst Forest, roughly a ten-minute walk from the main house of the monastery, leading a celibate and contemplative lifestyle. With the permission of the Elders in Thailand (presumably the senior monks in Bangkok), Ajahn Sumedho, acting as a preceptor, ordained the first four *anagārikās* as *sīladhārās* in 1983 at Chithurst.<sup>532</sup> These *sīladhārās* observe the ten precepts, which are usually reserved for *sāmaṇeras* or novices.

One of the key challenges faced by the Western nuns' community in the UK is the lack of adequate living space, a problem distinct from the situation in Thailand, where temples often provide separate areas for nuns. Acquiring property in the UK is expensive, making it difficult for many Thai temples to afford a separate building or construct a dedicated compound for nuns. At Chithurst, this issue became apparent in its early days as the growing number of women led to overcrowding. Ajahn Sumedho recognised the importance of providing a

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<sup>531</sup> 'Female Monastic Community', Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, accessed 6 May 2024, <https://amaravati.org/about/female-monastic-community/>.

<sup>532</sup> In the interview, Ajahn Amaro noted that Ajahn Sumedho had sought permission from senior monks in Bangkok; however, he did not specify their names. I subsequently wrote to Ajahn Amaro to request clarification regarding the specific identities of these monks; as of the time of writing, no response has been received. In addition, the official website of Amaravati mentions that Ajahn Sumedho requested permission from "the Elders." Therefore, I have adopted the same term as used on the website. See Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 'Female Monastic Community'.

separate space, not only to accommodate the increasing number of nuns but also to expand facilities for laypeople and monks.<sup>533</sup> This vision eventually led to the establishment of Amaravati, a larger monastery specifically designed to address these needs by purchasing a new property.

However, similar challenges have recently persisted in other Thai temples in the UK, where such solutions are not feasible. For instance, at Wat Phra Singh UK, an English nun who had been ordained at a temple associated with the Thai Forest Tradition resided in the same building as the monks due to the lack of a designated space for nuns.<sup>534</sup> Despite having the abbot's permission to stay and making significant contributions to the temple—particularly by connecting with the local community and giving talks in English to school students about Buddhism and meditation techniques—her presence in the monks' building provoked disapproval from the Thai community. Unlike Chithurst, Wat Phra Singh UK was unable to resolve this issue by acquiring a new property or constructing a separate space, ultimately leading to the nun's departure from the temple.

Inequality is another significant challenge for female monastics, a disparity deeply embedded in Thai society where it is largely unchallenged. While Buddhism promotes spiritual equality—enabling both men and women to attain enlightenment, the ultimate goal—it does not extend to social equality. Crosby highlights that Pali literature reflects either an unquestioned acceptance of gender inequality or a depiction of distinct roles and spheres of influence for men and women. She further emphasises that these ideas, along with their real-world implications, align with what Sponberg terms 'institutional androcentrism', where societal rules and structures are centred around men.<sup>535</sup> This inequality is evident in the daily life of nuns in Thai temples, where tasks such as looking after the monks' meals, eating after the monks, wearing white robes, and observing eight precepts are seen as normal and unquestionable. However, when these customs are introduced in the UK, they often appear peculiar and provoke questions from British laypeople, including young children. This cultural contrast highlights how these practices, deeply normalised in Thailand, are perceived differently in Western contexts.

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<sup>533</sup> Sharp, *The Chithurst Story*, 119.

<sup>534</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

<sup>535</sup> Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 221.

During the interview, Ajahn Amaro recalls the early days at Chithurst when the first instance of inequality between male and female monastics emerged. Chithurst began in June 1979, and by October 1979, the first four women had taken the eight precepts, shaved their heads, and donned white robes like most nuns in Thailand. Meanwhile, other men joined the community, adopted white robes, observed the eight precepts, and underwent a two-year period as *anagārikas* before becoming monks. In 1981, Ajahn Sumedho initiated the ordination of monks, starting with the first three *anagārikas*. By 1982, more men had joined and become monks, while the four women remained in white, overseeing kitchen duties, driving cars, and doing the grocery shopping. This led many laypeople to question the nuns' roles and status, wondering why they continued to wear white robes and handle chores.<sup>536</sup>

In response, Ajahn Sumedho began consulting with other senior monks in Thailand, including those at Wat Nong Pah Pong and Bangkok, to address this issue. Ajahn Chah's health had already deteriorated by that time, so he could not offer any advice. Eventually, Ajahn Sumedho decided to introduce a 10-precept ordination for women, allowing them to wear brown robes, carry alms bowls, and follow a structured training system. This practice does not exist in Thailand—or at least, based on my personal experience, I have never encountered nuns wearing brown robes there. According to Ajahn Amaro, this solution was designed to find a middle ground between Thai tradition and Western egalitarian values. Although it leaves both sides somewhat uneasy, Ajahn Sumedho summarised the situation: “It is not quite liberal enough for the West and not quite conservative enough for Thailand, but it is acceptable.”<sup>537</sup> When I asked if the Thai government or the SSC approved this, Ajahn Amaro confirmed that they did.

Although Ajahn Sumedho addressed some aspects of inequality, other issues remain unfamiliar and sometimes problematic in the British context, such as the hierarchical structure of monastic meal practices. Ajahn Amaro is currently working to address these challenges. At the time of my interview with Ajahn Amaro, Amaravati was undergoing a project to rebuild the *sala* (large hall). Traditionally, the morning alms round involves the chanting of *anumotana* (Pali: *anumodanā*), after which monks are served food first, followed by nuns.<sup>538</sup> In the new *sala*,

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<sup>536</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

<sup>537</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

<sup>538</sup> *Anumotana* is “the act of taking delight in the virtuous acts of others” or it is also used to refer to “the benedictions that monks recite after receiving a meal or a gift, which express thanks or gratification to the donors for their offerings.” See Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez, ‘Anumodana’, in *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (2013).

Ajahn Amaro strongly advocated for the inclusion of two separate serveries. This adjustment would allow monks and nuns to go through the serveries simultaneously, rather than nuns following monks. He shared that he had to rely on his seniority to push for this change, but gaining consensus required careful persuasion rather than enforcement.<sup>539</sup>

Ajahn Amaro's reasoning for this change stems from school visits to Amaravati, during which students observe aspects of Buddhist culture, including the alms round, where monks are served food before nuns. This hierarchical arrangement often appears strange or unfair to British students, who are accustomed to more egalitarian principles. For children, the notion that boys and girls should be treated equally is straightforward, and they quickly perceive the prioritisation of monks over nuns as unequal. Ajahn Amaro noted the challenge of navigating these cultural differences, where the deeply rooted Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia meet Western expectations of fairness. For him, this balance is not just a practical concern but an interesting opportunity to bridge two distinct cultural perspectives.<sup>540</sup>

These practical changes at Chithurst and Amaravati are being advocated to promote equality. The effort to ensure that both monks and nuns use the new servery simultaneously illustrates a practical approach to addressing gender bias, inspired by the simple observations of children and the clear unfairness they perceive in traditional practices. This situation reveals a complex interplay of cultural traditions and the push for modern gender equality, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges in reconciling these aspects within Buddhist communities. Furthermore, advancements in gender equality within Buddhist communities are more likely to occur in settings like the UK, particularly within the predominance of Western monastic communities, due to the broader promotion of gender equality in the country and the Western context. The UK, considerably detached from the influence of the Thai government and the SSC, provides opportunities and advocates for gender equality among female monastics—opportunities that are unavailable in Thailand.<sup>541</sup> The last, but perhaps the most significant, advantage that these two temples have in promoting gender equality stems from their affiliation with the lineage of Ajahn Chah's Forest Tradition. This connection grants them a certain level of autonomy—or a free pass—thereby enabling such progressive changes, although, as we saw

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<sup>539</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

<sup>540</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, 'Interview by Author', 5 May 2023.

<sup>541</sup> Similarly, in Tibetan Buddhism, Western nuns were the first to attain double ordination, allowing them to become full *bhikkhuni*, while Tibetan nuns have only recently achieved this status, reflecting Western influence on gender equality in monastic traditions.

from the treatment of Ajahn Brahm, the freedom does not extend to the flouting of the Thai regulation prohibiting monks from ordaining women as *bhikkhuni*.

Moreover, it is undeniable that we still exist within an androcentric, patriarchal society where men hold dominant roles, and thus, the advancement of gender equality and the elevation of women's status often depend on men. This is exemplified by the efforts of Ajahn Sumedho, who has worked to enhance the status of nuns by adopting the ten precepts and brown robes, and by Ajahn Amaro's initiative to design two serveries that address gender inequalities among monastics while maintaining the gender segregation expected within a celibate renouncer community. Such improvements are contingent upon the involvement of men, especially those holding positions of high authority—potentially the highest within the temple. This involvement is crucial not only for implementing changes but also for mitigating conflicts with conservative laypeople who might oppose these changes.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the complex interplay of tradition and adaptation shaped by the experiences of monks and abbots, looking at how the challenges for temples examined in previous chapters play out for the monks and abbots charged with maintaining those temples. While these temples strive to maintain their spiritual practices and cultural heritage, they face numerous challenges, including navigating unfamiliar legal frameworks, managing diverse communities, and addressing issues of gender inequality.

The first section explored monks' daily routines, responsibilities, and adaptations in a Western context, contrasting monastic life in the UK with that in Thailand. While monks must strictly adhere to the monastic codes and regulations set by the SSC in Thailand, they must also navigate UK laws and regulations, as well as cultural expectations from both their home and host countries. Thai monks in the UK are often expected to uphold religious and social norms established in their home country, reinforcing transnational ties. This includes religious duties, merit-making ceremonies, Buddhist rituals, and Thai festival events, as diasporic communities seek to preserve their cultural and religious identity.

While many Thai cultural and religious traditions are carried over and practised in the UK, some are perceived as unfamiliar or even conflicting with UK regulations. For example, in 1977, the Thai Forest monks' alms round was seen as unconventional, raising concerns over its alignment with local laws. Nevertheless, this custom continues to be observed on specific occasions, albeit with official approval from local councils or police authorities. A recent example is Wat Buddhapadipa's alms round in central London, held in October 2023 and April 2024. This reflects both the continuity and adaptation of traditions within a new cultural environment, as well as their negotiation within the host country's regulatory framework.

The second part of this chapter examined abbotship, highlighting its different characteristics based on Phramaha Wasan's study of abbotship in Thailand. By comparing his study with abbotship in the UK, this research a spectrum of governance structures among UK abbots, ranging from centralised, abbot-centric leadership to more decentralised, collaborative approaches. It also provides deeper insight into how Thai monastic leadership evolves in diaspora contexts, leading to hybrid governance models in some temples (e.g., Wat Arun Norfolk and Wat Sri Intra Atula). The findings not only demonstrate how religious institutions transition from traditional to modern governance but also provide insights into transnational religious management. Both sections contribute further to the understanding of Thai Buddhist monks as manager, administrator and entrepreneur alongside their roles as world-renouncer and priest.

Finally, this chapter acknowledged the absence of mention of female monastics in this study, explaining the reasons for this, observing the marked contrast between the pervasive presence of *mae chi* at temples in Thailand and their almost complete absence in the UK. We also looked at how those temples recruiting non-Thai monastic and serving a broader congregation beyond the Thai Diaspora, namely the Thai Forest tradition temples, have sought to accommodate Western expectations with Thai legal and cultural constraints on the status of nuns, given the Thai prohibition on *bhikkhuni* ordination, indicating another, quite distinctive area of delicate negotiation on the part of abbots at Thai temples in the UK. Let us now, in our final chapter, turn to a consideration of the lay community behind these temples, the role of the laity including female supporter, and the issue of maintaining harmony given the multiple areas of potential conflict.

# 6

## Migration, Community Roles, and Conflicts in Thai Temples in the UK

There is limited literature and research on Thai communities in the UK. The most recent data on the Thai-born population in the UK that I could find is from 2021, published on the website of the Office for National Statistics. Among the sixty most common countries of birth, Thailand ranked 47<sup>th</sup>, with an estimated 43,000 Thai-born residents (11,000 male and 32,000 female).<sup>542</sup> Their diverse migration patterns make them less visible as a distinct group. Unlike some migrant groups, Thai people in the UK do not tend to form concentrated communities in specific areas. Instead, they are scattered across the country, and the widespread presence of Thai restaurants is one of the clearest indicators of this. Marriage migration plays a significant role in this pattern, as many Thai individuals move to where their spouses are already settled. Stereotypes, often shaped by sensational headlines or exaggerated portrayals, contribute to misunderstandings about Thai people in the UK. In her study on Thai immigrant service-based entrepreneurship in the UK, Sirijit Sunanta argues that her research highlights how Thai migrants integrate into the host country's economy, challenging the common stereotype of Thai migrants in Europe as “economically dependent foreign wives or sex workers.”<sup>543</sup>

In this chapter, I will explore the dynamics of people management within Thai temples in the UK, with a particular focus on the role of the laity, especially women, in sustaining these religious institutions. I will begin by examining the migration patterns of the Thai population in the UK, identifying how these patterns have shaped the demographic composition of temple congregations. I shall assess the roles and responsibilities of the laity in temple life and their critical contributions to the temple's financial, cultural, and physical upkeep, not only through donations but also through active volunteering and community involvement. Special attention

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<sup>542</sup> ‘Population by Country of Birth and Nationality’, Office for National Statistics, accessed 19 April 2025, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality>.

<sup>543</sup> Sirijit Sunanta, ‘Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK: Mixed Embeddedness, Superdiversity, and Combined Ethnic and Non-Ethnic Capital’, *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2022): 214, 2.

will be given to the significant role that women, especially marriage migrants, play in supporting the temple communities, both economically and socially. Additionally, I will discuss potential conflicts that may arise among volunteers, outsiders, and supporters within the temple setting, and how these challenges are managed. By exploring these aspects, I aim to provide insight into the complex relationships and dynamics between monks and the laity, and the broader role of Thai temples in the UK as cultural and spiritual hubs for the Thai migrant community.

## 6.1 Thai Migration and Temple Dynamics

In the UK, the Thai migrant community is relatively new and small, with a distinctive demographic profile characterised by a higher proportion of women and a high internal diversity. While the first recorded interaction between Thailand and the UK dates back over 400 years, when the British East India Company visited Siam in 1612 during the reigns of King Songtham of Ayutthaya (r. 1611–1628) and King James I of England (r. 1603–1625), official diplomatic ties were not formed until much later. It was in 1855, under the reigns of King Mongkut in Siam and Queen Victoria in Britain (r. 1837–1901), that the Treaty of Amity and Commerce was signed, formally establishing relations between the two nations.<sup>544</sup> Following this, the UK established a consulate in Siam in 1856 and Siam established its first legation in London in 1882.<sup>545</sup> Since then, the UK has become the main destination for elite Thais seeking a Western education, a privilege once reserved for the upper class.<sup>546</sup> However, the migration patterns shifted from the 1990s onwards due to the dominance of marriage migration among Thai women, which coincided with the growing trend of transnational marriages between Thai women and Western men.<sup>547</sup> Between 2001 and 2006, most Thai nationals naturalising as UK citizens were marriage migrants.<sup>548</sup> This rising trend of marriage migration takes place alongside the traditional migration of upper-class Thais to the UK for educational purposes.<sup>549</sup> While some of these students have become permanent residents in the UK through

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<sup>544</sup> ‘Political Relations’, Royal Thai Embassy, London, accessed 4 October 2024, <https://london.thaiembassy.org/en/page/politic?menu=65afe63369565e0f3234c853>.

<sup>545</sup> Royal Thai Embassy, London, ‘Political Relations’.

<sup>546</sup> Sunanta, ‘Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK’, 218.

<sup>547</sup> Sunanta, ‘Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK’, 218.

<sup>548</sup> Jessica Mai Sims, ‘Empowering Individuals & Creating Community: Thai Perspectives on Life in Britain’, The Runnymede Trust, 2008, i.

<sup>549</sup> Sunanta, ‘Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK’, 217.

employment, they make up only a small percentage of the Thai migrant population in the UK.<sup>550</sup>

The increasing prevalence of marriage migration led to a significant gender disparity within the Thai migrant population in the UK. According to Jessica Mai Sims, the 2001 census reported that there were 16,256 Thai-born individuals living in the UK, 72% of whom were women.<sup>551</sup> In her study, Sunanta asserts that research on cross-cultural marriage and migration, particularly between Thai women and Western men, indicates that the first generation of Thai female marriage migrants in Europe predominantly came from working-class and rural areas in the impoverished northeastern region of Thailand.<sup>552</sup> However, she suggests that more recent generations tend to have professional backgrounds and higher levels of education.<sup>553</sup> This significant proportion of women who come from the northeast of Thailand where traditional Buddhist values tend to be more strongly upheld than in central Thailand including Bangkok helps explain why so much of the sponsorship of Thai temples in the UK comes from Thai women. Based on this data, my findings are confirmed, showing that the primary congregation at Thai temples in the UK consists of female marriage migrants. This aligns with my fieldwork observations, where approximately 70% to 80% of Thai Buddhists supporting these temples belong to this migrant group. Their role is crucial in supporting the monastic communities in the UK to which I will discuss further below.

Thais migrating to the UK do not form concentrated communities in specific areas; rather, they are scattered throughout the country, with Thai restaurants serving as a testament to their widespread presence. Research on Thai immigrant entrepreneurship in the UK shows that Thai migrants typically operate small-scale businesses or offer personal services in three areas: cleaning and caregiving, beauty and massage, and food and catering.<sup>554</sup> Sunanta suggests that Thai migrants, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds in Thailand, face similar challenges in accessing professional positions in the UK labour market.<sup>555</sup> This limited upward

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<sup>550</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 218.

<sup>551</sup> Census 2021 estimates indicate that there are 41,663 usual residents in England and Wales classified under the Thai ethnic group; however, publicly released data does not yet include a gender breakdown specific to this detailed subgroup. See 'Ethnic Group (Detailed)', Office for National Statistics, accessed 5 August 2025, [https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/TS022/editions/2021/versions/2?showAll=ethnic\\_group\\_288a#ethnic\\_group\\_288a](https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/TS022/editions/2021/versions/2?showAll=ethnic_group_288a#ethnic_group_288a) and Sims, 'Empowering Individuals & Creating Community', 4.

<sup>552</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 218.

<sup>553</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 218.

<sup>554</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 213.

<sup>555</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 222.

mobility encourages many Thai women to pursue self-employment, particularly in service industries like massage parlours and restaurants.<sup>556</sup> This explains a substantial number of Thai restaurants in the UK. Based on my research through Companies House and various websites, I found 1,117 Thai restaurants across 57 towns in the UK. However, the actual number may be higher, potentially around 2,000 or more.<sup>557</sup>

Based on the estimated Thai population of 43,000 and the presence of 1,117 Thai restaurants in the UK, and assuming these restaurants are owned by Thai individuals, there is approximately one Thai restaurant owner for every 39 Thai individuals. While some entrepreneurs may own multiple establishments, these figures provide a useful indication of the prevalence of Thai restaurant ownership. This is particularly significant given the strong role of Thai business owners in supporting Thai temples. Many of these entrepreneurs were among the earliest contributors to temple establishments in the UK, offering financial support and promoting community engagement.

According to Table 4 and Figure 12, 31 Thai temples are located in 27 different towns and cities across the UK, with some towns—such as Leeds, Manchester, and London—having more than one temple. Similarly, Thai restaurants are present in more than 57 towns, reflecting the widespread presence of Thai communities. This correlation underscores how Thai business networks, particularly restaurant owners, play a crucial role in supporting Thai temples through financial contributions and community engagement.

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<sup>556</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 217.

<sup>557</sup> This is because, when searching for Thai restaurants in Companies House, I was able to retrieve only around 500 restaurants with 'Thai' in their registered name. This excludes many Thai-owned establishments that do not explicitly include the word 'Thai' in their business names. To expand my search, I looked for Thai restaurants using other sources and came across TripAdvisor, a platform where most restaurants in the UK are listed. While searching on TripAdvisor, I looked for Thai restaurants across 57 towns and discovered 1,117 listed as Thai restaurants. However, there are actually 36 cities and 1,063 towns across the UK, so there are many more towns that I have not looked up. This suggests that the number of Thai restaurants in the UK could potentially be around 2,000 or more. Carl Baker, *City & Town Classification of Constituencies & Local Authorities*, 4 February 2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8322/>.

Table 9: Comparison of Thai Population and Number of Thai Temples in Selected Countries.

Country	Thai Population	No. of Temples	People per Temple
Thailand	65,969,270	43,146	1,529
USA	343,265	179	1,918
Germany	115,000	45	2,556
UK	43,000	31	1,387

The expansion of Thai Buddhism in the UK has been notable since its establishment in 1966 as recent figures show that the UK has one of the highest Thai temple densities outside Thailand (Table 9). With a Thai population of approximately 43,000 (as of June 2021) and 31 temples, the UK has a ratio of one temple for every 1,387 people. By comparison, Thailand, with a population of 65,969,270 (as of September 2024) and 43,146 temples, has a ratio of 1,529:1. Other countries with significant Thai populations and relatively high numbers of Thai temples, such as the United States (343,265 people and 179 temples, ratio 1,918:1) and Germany (115,000 people and 45 temples, ratio 2,556:1), show lower temple densities. These numbers highlight the relatively strong presence of Thai Buddhist temples in the UK context.<sup>558</sup>

In addition, considering that Thai Buddhism in the UK has existed for just over 50 years, the rate of temple expansion has been relatively rapid. Compared to Thailand, where Buddhism has been deeply rooted in society since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the UK has seen remarkable growth in the number of Thai Buddhist temples within a much shorter period.<sup>559</sup> This suggests a strong demand for religious and cultural institutions among Thai communities in the UK and highlights the proactive role of Thai immigrants in establishing and supporting these temples. As discussed in Chapter 3, many Thai temples—such as Wat Arun Norfolk, Wat Sri Intra Atula, and Wat Phra Sri Sanphet—were established through the aspirations of local Thai communities. Their involvement continues beyond the initial founding of these institutions, as

<sup>558</sup> ‘B02018 | Asian Alone or in Any Combination by Selected Groups’; Amt, ‘Partners for Sustainable Development’; ‘สถิติประชากรทางการทะเบียนราษฎร (Population Statistics from the Civil Registration)’; ‘Population by Country of Birth and Nationality’.

<sup>559</sup> Different opinions exist regarding the exact time Buddhism reached Thailand. However, based on archaeological finds and historical evidence, it is widely accepted that Buddhism first arrived during the Mon-Khmer period, when their capital was Dvāravātī (now Nakhon Pathom), in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Archaeological discoveries at Nakhon Pathom suggest this, including the Dhamma Chakra, Buddha footprints and seats, and Pali inscriptions. See Karuna Kusalasaya, *Buddhism in Thailand: Its Past and Its Present* (Buddhist Publication Society, 2005).

they remain actively engaged in maintaining their existence. Thus, community contributions, particularly from Thai entrepreneurs, continue to play a vital role in sustaining these Buddhist institutions.

## 6.2 The Role of the Laity in Temple Life

In Thailand, one finds permanent lay residents, such as temple boys, girls, or retirees, living in temples. In the UK, however, such individuals are rarely seen in Thai temples. This difference can be attributed to factors such as the limited space available in UK temples as well as alternative provision for some of the social needs provided by temples in Thailand. For example, the availability of free education for children in the UK, including Thai immigrant children, eliminates the need for them to live at temples to pursue their education, as some do in Thailand. Similarly, the provision of retirement homes and caregiver services for UK citizens means that there is no need for temples to provide places for retirees with nowhere else to go. Consequently, the UK temples lack the support and labour provided by these two groups. Instead, they rely heavily on volunteers and their contribution.

This reliance on laypeople in UK temples can be better understood through the lens of transnationalism, as explored by Pattaporn Chuenglertsiri in her work on Thai marriage migrants in the UK. Thai marriage migrants often maintain strong cross-border connections to their homeland, influencing their engagement in temple activities and broader community roles in the UK. Chuenglertsiri highlights how transnational social fields serve as multidimensional spaces where migrants recreate ties to their homeland through participation in cultural and religious activities, such as temple ceremonies. This is particularly significant for women, who, as noted, are central to maintaining these connections.<sup>560</sup>

While most temples rely almost entirely on laypeople for their operations, a few exceptions exist, such as the UK branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and the branches of Thai Forest Tradition. As discussed in Chapter 2, Wat Phra Dhammakaya is known for its highly structured organisation, with full-time staff at its UK branches, often comprising *ubasok* (*upāsaka*, *laymen*), *ubasika* (*upāsikā*, *laywomen*), and volunteers from the parent temple in Thailand. These individuals undergo the approval process detailed in Chapter 4 before travelling to the

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<sup>560</sup> Chuenglertsiri, 'Transnationalism, Family Life, and Wellbeing'.

UK, commit to adhering to the eight precepts during their stay, and hold various types of visas based on their agreements with the abbots regarding the duration of their stay. The number of staff members residing at the temple can vary depending on the time of year and special occasions. For example, during the *sima* consecration ceremony at Wat Phra Dhammakaya London in June 2024, over twenty staff members from the parent temple assisted with the event, with more than ten staying at the temple until their visas expired. A rare instance of a permanent lay resident is a Thai woman with UK citizenship who chose to remain at the Wat Phra Dhammakaya London branch after retiring.

Amaravati is another temple that hosts permanent lay residents, referred to as “long-term volunteers” by Ajahn Amaro.<sup>561</sup> During the time of the interview, 11 long-term volunteers assisted with maintenance and groundskeeping. Unlike the staff members at Wat Phra Dhammakaya’s UK branches, who come from the parent temple in Thailand, Amaravati’s long-term volunteers are locally sourced from the UK. When a position becomes available, Ajahn Amaro announces it on the temple’s website. Interested individuals then attend an interview. Ajahn Amaro emphasises that the temple does not employ these volunteers and the volunteers do not receive any wages.<sup>562</sup> They live at the temple as *luksit wat* (literally ‘disciples of the temple’). They are expected to adhere to the five precepts, not the eight precepts like other long-term residents who wish to ordain.

In this section, I will examine the significance of the lay Buddhist communities in the UK, including long-term staff and volunteers residing in the temple, casual volunteers, donors and participants from Thai and other ethnic groups. I will categorise the different roles and contributions that laypeople make in temple life into three areas: i) organisational, managerial and daily operations support (6.2.1), ii) event and festival support (6.2.2), and iii) community and cultural engagement (6.2.3). I will also examine the significance of Thai women entrepreneurs and cross-cultural networks in temple support (6.2.4).

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<sup>561</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

<sup>562</sup> Phra Amaro Bhikkhu, ‘Interview by Author’, 5 May 2023.

### 6.2.1 Organisational, Managerial, and Daily Operations Support

Establishing a temple in a foreign country presents significant challenges for Thai monks, as discussed in Chapter 3. One major hurdle is the language barrier, which is crucial for managing official documents and interacting with the local community. Laypeople play an essential role by providing organisational and managerial support. Many temples delegate these responsibilities to British individuals, often the husbands of Thai immigrants. For instance, at Wat Arun Norfolk, the lay trustees are mainly responsible for the documentation work, such as applying for charity status, sponsor licences, and visas.<sup>563</sup> Given that one trustee is British and the others are Thai women with British partners, they have a better command than the monks in navigating official documents.

Similarly, at Wat Phra Sri Sanphet in Bristol, three British committee members are partners of Thai wives. Their primary responsibility involves reviewing official documents and finances, including overseeing income, expenses, and various payments. However, they do not have the authority to approve payments. Any costs incurred must be discussed in a committee meeting. For instance, if repairs to doors or windows are needed or if workers are to be hired for specific tasks, these matters must be addressed in a committee meeting.<sup>564</sup>

At Wat Phra Singh UK, monks have a lesser role in management than those at other temples in the UK. This is because the instigator behind the founding of this temple, Tony, who is English, manages all paperwork, accounting, and construction projects. Following his retirement, Tony has dedicated all his time to the temple. Other lay trustees contribute to temple management using specific skills, such as financial advising, IT, and architecture.<sup>565</sup> This arrangement, where monks have minimal involvement in the secular aspects of managing the temple, is somewhat unique among Thai temples in the UK.

Additionally, with an experienced British individual like Tony, the sources of income for Wat Phra Singh UK are more diverse than those of other temples. The primary source of donations for Wat Phra Singh UK comes from within the UK, supplemented by additional funding from the parent temple in Thailand, particularly for construction projects. Additionally, while most

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<sup>563</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi, Interview by author, In Person, 17 April 2023.

<sup>564</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, Interview by author, In Person, 14 September 2023.

<sup>565</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

Thai temples in the UK rely primarily on donations, Wat Phra Singh UK also received grants from three sources: the local authority, Halton Borough Council; Veolia Environmental Trust, which uses funds from the Landfill Tax; and the central government through the Levelling Up Fund. This fund is administered by Halton Borough Council under the Runcorn Town Deal Regeneration project.<sup>566</sup> Regarding the grants, Tony specifically applied for them to support two ongoing construction projects: the Northern Thai style *ubosot* and a Peace Garden, which is part of the new development project in Runcorn. Additionally, he successfully secured a grant for building maintenance, including installing new windows and doors.<sup>567</sup> Tony's knowledge of the local funding culture has enabled him to develop the temple in unique ways within its UK environment.

Wat Phra Singh UK is one of the few temples that shares its financial summaries on their website. Tony mentions conducting monthly comprehensive bank reconciliations and posting summaries on Facebook and hard copies on the temple notice boards. This practice demonstrates his commitment to complete transparency, which is particularly important as the temple is a charitable organisation dependent on donor support. Currently, there are 2,500 registered supporters, and Tony uses an online database named Fund Filer to record all donations and manage Gift Aid. This system not only records every donation but also keeps a record of each donor.<sup>568</sup> While having an English Buddhist brings many advantages to Wat Phra Singh UK, it also presents a potential vulnerability. If Tony were no longer available, it could create issues, as he manages all the essential tasks.

Lay Buddhists also play a crucial role in the daily operations of UK temples and their administrative duties. Unlike in Thailand, where monks traditionally perform alms round in the morning for their meals, monks in the UK rely on food preparation and offerings provided by laypeople at the temple. At Wat Phra Dhammakaya UK branches and Amaravati, full-time staff and volunteers are responsible for meal preparation for monks and participants. At Wat Buddhapadipa, one full-time staff member is primarily responsible for preparing breakfast for the monks, with occasional lunch preparation. This staff member has been with the temple for nearly 20 to 30 years, earning a salary of £700 per month. He resides in a small house on the temple grounds. When Wat Buddhapadipa was initially established, it did not have full-time

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<sup>566</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 24 April 2023, In Person.

<sup>567</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 24 April 2023.

<sup>568</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

staff for meal preparation, which forced the monks to cook for themselves due to a lack of Thai people in the area.<sup>569</sup>

For those temples without full-time staff or volunteers, the monks need to prepare their own breakfast. Sometimes, they may skip breakfast, as is the practice for certain Wat Phra Singh UK monks. For lunch, most Thai temples receive food offerings from lay Buddhists, who either cook or bring food to the temple. Additionally, some food is provided by Thai restaurant owners, either at the temple or at their restaurants. For example, on weekdays at Wat Phra Singh UK, a group of Lao people and restaurant owners from Liverpool typically come to offer meals for lunch. On weekends, Kwanjit, Tony's wife, usually prepares the meals.<sup>570</sup> In addition to her weekly meal preparation, Kwanjit recalls that during the first few months of establishing the temple, there were about five to six women, including herself, working on renovating the former hotel. This work involved painting and removing all the unused furniture.<sup>571</sup>

At Wat Sri Intra Atula, the temple community is composed of individuals from various nationalities, including local English residents, as well as Sri Lankans, Indians, Laotians, Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Koreans. However, Thai Buddhists are generally more active in food offerings than other communities, especially during the three-month Buddhist Lent period. Throughout this period, monks were invited to visit restaurants in various locations, such as Windsor, Chelmsford, and Dunstable, almost daily, and groups of Thai people gather at restaurants to make alms offerings.<sup>572</sup>

In addition to meal preparation, lay Buddhists assist with various duties, including cleaning the temples, maintaining the grounds, and providing transportation. Many temples face transportation challenges because it is frowned upon for monks to drive in Thailand. As a result, they are meant to rely on laypeople to drive them to different locations. For example, the Oxford Buddhist Vihara once had a layman assisting with driving. However, since he was only sometimes available, the Shan monks at that temple had to learn to drive and obtain a driving license in the UK. Likewise, the monks at Wat Arun Norfolk rely entirely on the support of laypeople, especially as their current temple is in a farmhouse outside the city. Daraphun

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<sup>569</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>570</sup> Kwanjit Collacott, 'Interview by author', 18 May 2023.

<sup>571</sup> Kwanjit Collacott, 'Interview by author', 18 May 2023.

<sup>572</sup> Phra Nikom Akkavaro, 'Interview by author', 20 April 2023.

Mitchell, a laywoman from Norwich, has become a dedicated volunteer at Wat Arun Norfolk. She is currently the primary person responsible for assisting the monks. Her responsibilities vary; she translates during school visits, provides meals, serves as the master of ceremonies, and acts as a driver. Daraphun reports that during her seven years with the temple, she has driven to Heathrow Airport to pick up and drop off monks more than 100 times.<sup>573</sup>

## 6.2.2 Event and Festival Support

Buddhist events and festivals are at the heart of Thai Buddhist communities, especially in foreign lands, as they foster a sense of home and belonging among many Thai diasporas within their co-ethnic social circles. Since few monks reside at the temples in the UK, lay Buddhists contribute significantly to these events. Some temples, such as Wat Buddhapadipa, have structured volunteer groups that were mainly active during the initial establishment, known as the Lay Buddhist Association and the Young Thai Buddhist Group.

The Lay Buddhist Association consisted mainly of British Buddhists and non-Thai individuals. The group's objective was to assist monks in propagating the Buddha's teachings in English. This was achieved by welcoming newcomers to the temple and organising programmes in English, including discussions, meditation groups, seminars, and retreats.<sup>574</sup> During this early period, the monks were not required to oversee the English programmes, as they were the responsibility of the English-speaking volunteers. However, according to an interview with Phramaha Bhatsakorn, the Lay Buddhist Association has become dysfunctional due to a shortage of permanent English-speaking volunteers.<sup>575</sup> Therefore, there are fewer activities organised for British Buddhists besides the retreats that the monks currently organise.

While the Lay Buddhist Association catered to British Buddhists, the Young Thai Buddhist Group supported the monks by promoting Buddhist traditions and organising religious ceremonies and festivals for mainly Thai Buddhists. These included *Makha Bucha*, *Songkran*, *Visakha Bucha*, *Asanha Bucha*, *Thet Mahachat*, *Loy Krathong*, and New Year's Eve (Table 3).<sup>576</sup> Although the group's name suggests 'young,' Phramaha Bhatsakorn notes that many

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<sup>573</sup> Daraphun Mitchell, 'Interview by author', 23 May 2023.

<sup>574</sup> Candamitto, 'Buddhist Organizations in Great Britain', 37.

<sup>575</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>576</sup> Candamitto, 'Buddhist Organizations in Great Britain', 37–41.

members are now in their sixties and above, as the temple has been established for over 50 years. However, this group of Thai volunteers was temporarily dissolved in 2016 due to conflicts among members during the *Loy Krathong* Festival.<sup>577</sup> Despite this, Phramaha Bhatsakorn states that there are plans to revive the group.

Since then, the Thai volunteer group at Wat Buddhapadipa has been less structured, with authority resting upon the monks rather than the president or other officers in the group, as was the case in the past. For instance, during the *Loy Krathong* festival, Phramaha Bhatsakorn delegates tasks to 20 to 30 volunteer leaders in the meeting. They, in turn, recruit around 100 to 150 additional volunteers to manage specific duties such as overseeing food marquees, lucky dip booths, garbage disposal, the contest stage, public relations, and traffic.<sup>578</sup> These individuals are casual volunteers, offering their assistance during festivals.

Other temples, such as Wat Phra Singh UK, Wat Arun Norfolk, and Wat Sri Intra Atula, operate with a similar system of casual volunteers. For instance, the two primary events at Wat Phra Singh UK are the *Songkran* festival and the Kathin Ceremony. Over 20 volunteers participate in the preparations, which involve organising the event space, cleaning the temple, and setting up tents for food distribution on the event day. During these two main events, approximately 1,000 participants attend.<sup>579</sup> As with other Thai temples in the UK, most attendees at this temple are women.

Similarly, at Wat Arun Norfolk, more than 20 volunteers assist during significant events despite the presence of only a limited number of volunteers on regular days. Like Wat Buddhapadipa, the head monk at Wat Arun Norfolk allocates tasks among the volunteers. For instance, before the *Songkran* festival, volunteers alternate visiting the temple to aid in preparations, including setting up marquees, arranging flowers, and adorning the temple with Thai and colourful flags.<sup>580</sup> This effort exemplifies the commitment of the Thai diaspora, eager to celebrate their cultural events. Their preparations make these celebrations possible, as it would be impossible for the two monks to organise everything alone.

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<sup>577</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>578</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, 'Interview by author', 14 September 2023.

<sup>579</sup> Tony Collacott, 'Interview by Author', 30 March 2023.

<sup>580</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi, 'Interview by author', 17 April 2023.

Despite being established only seven years ago, Wat Arun Norfolk has quickly become a vital hub for the Thai community, attracting large numbers to its ceremonies. Key events like the Kathin Ceremony and the Songkran Festival draw about 2,000 and 1,000 attendees, respectively. Like most Thai temples, except for Chithurst and its branches, the attendees at Wat Arun Norfolk are primarily Thai, constituting 95% of the congregation. English partners comprise about 4%, with the remaining 1% from other nationalities.<sup>581</sup>

With such a large congregation, conflicts between individuals are inevitable. Monks at Wat Arun Norfolk often mediate between these parties, demonstrating the temple's central role as both a spiritual and social anchor (see below). Beyond interpersonal dynamics, financial support also reveals interesting patterns: while many individuals participate in the Kathin Ceremony, prominent donors consistently come from Thailand. This is mainly because most Thai attendees at Wat Arun Norfolk work in modestly paid jobs, such as caregiving or hospitality. Only a small portion are restaurant owners or business operators, who typically have higher incomes. The temple, therefore, relies more heavily on donations from Thailand than from within the UK, which complicates fundraising efforts to purchase property. As Phramaha Phanuwat noted, the sharp rise in UK property prices since the temple's founding has further widened the gap between local contributions and the funds needed to purchase and convert a property into a temple.<sup>582</sup>

Like many other Thai temples in the UK, the Kathin Ceremony at Wat Phra Dhammakaya are among the most significant fundraising events. The Kathin Ceremony for the four branches take place on different dates. Typically, the London branch hosts its ceremony in the first week following the conclusion of the Buddhist Lent. This arrangement enables participants to attend all four branches' Kathin Ceremony without overlapping schedules, some going to all four temples, even though they are spread throughout the UK. The ceremonies also resemble those of their parent temple in Thailand and other Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches worldwide. While the ceremony may have slight variations, the core activities remain consistent. The main activities in the morning are chanting, meditation, and alms offerings. Lunch is provided at the marquees located on the temple grounds for all participants, with Thai supporters, including restaurant owners and individuals, preparing cooked meals for everyone to enjoy.

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<sup>581</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi, 'Interview by author', 17 April 2023.

<sup>582</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi, 'Interview by author', 17 April 2023.

Following lunch, the procession for the Kathin Ceremony is organised, featuring flower girls and boys who carry the flags of Thailand, Buddhism, and the Dhammakaya Foundation at the forefront of all donors and attendees. Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, with its standalone building and a pathway around its perimeter, provides an ideal setting for traditional processions to encircle the *ubosot* three times. In contrast, in 2024, Wat Phra Dhammakaya Scotland adapted to its local environment by holding its procession in the town centre, led by a Scottish bagpiper, highlighting a blend of Thai tradition and Scottish culture. During the procession, many locals inquired about the event, discovering for the first time that a Buddhist temple existed in their town. Following the procession came the robe offering ceremony, which is the highlight of the Kathin Ceremony. At the robe offering, the primary donors will deliver offering statements, in which they state in Pali, Thai and English the intention of all the donors to make the specific offerings. They lead the recitation of these statements, then the other donors repeat their words. The statements cover robe offerings and other essentials, and are made prior to the actual presentation of the Kathin Robe to the monks.

Although all branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya have full-time staff, they still rely on volunteer support from the UK and occasionally from Thailand during events, especially during the Kathin Ceremony. There are five main volunteer teams: the welcoming team, the catering team, the ceremonial team, the media production team, and the groundwork team. This last team is responsible for parking, cleaning, and waste management. Since 2013, I have volunteered and been a part of the ceremonial team for the Kathin Ceremony and, in some years, attended all four branches. Each team would be led by monks or full-time staff members who assign tasks to their team members. For instance, I volunteered for the Kathin Ceremony in 2024 at Wat Phra Dhammakaya in London, Scotland and Newcastle. My role involved assisting in the ceremony by handing the microphones to donors for reciting the offering statements, guiding them on when to make offerings, and directing them on what to do during the ceremony. The monk leading the team communicated instructions to us via walkie-talkie. He oversaw the entire ceremony while the volunteers supported him to ensure everything ran smoothly.

The ceremonial team members were mostly full-time staff, and some were students. Since ceremonies require smooth execution and precise timing, a meeting is held beforehand to rehearse the sequence of events. The full-staff members are experienced and familiar with the schedule, while student volunteers—whether from university, high school, or elementary

school—serve as additional support. The university students are primarily Thai students undertaking postgraduate studies. Most of them have volunteered at the parent temple in Thailand before coming to the UK, as was the case for me. A few of them are new attendees who know Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches in the UK through a connection with friends. High school and elementary school volunteers are primarily the children of Thai mothers and English fathers. Since most of them were born here, their proficiency in Thai is quite limited. During processions, they typically take on roles such as flower girls or flag bearers. However, communication can be challenging for the monks and the temple's full-time staff, as their limited English skills sometimes make it difficult to interact with the volunteers.

Other volunteer teams consist primarily of adults. The welcoming and groundwork teams include both Thai and non-Thai volunteers. The media production team typically comprises full-time staff from the UK branches or volunteers from the parent temple in Thailand who visit specifically for this event. The catering team mainly consists of Thai supporters who bring food from their own restaurants or individuals skilled in cooking. Based on my observation, it is interesting to note that among Thai volunteers, 80% are women, while among non-Thai volunteers, the gender ratio is more balanced.

In contrast to the highly structured Kathin Ceremony conducted at the various branches of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, which involve many volunteer staff members, the temples of the Thai Forest Tradition embrace a simpler ceremonial approach. In November 2023, I had the opportunity to participate in the Kathin Ceremony at Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery, also known as Harnham Buddhist Monastery. This monastery is located in the rural village of Belsay, Northumberland, in northern England. It is one of four branch temples following the Thai Forest Tradition under the lineage of Ajahn Chah. The temple is situated on a hill with limited parking spaces. Upon arrival, I encountered English volunteers stationed at the bottom of the hill, assisting visitors with parking.

The morning's activities began with offering rice to the Sangha, where lay Buddhists formed a line along one side of the pathway, awaiting the monks during their alms round. The Sangha then partook of the various food offerings that laypeople had brought and placed on tables. After the offerings, everyone joined together for a meal, with the children going first. Following lunch, the afternoon proceedings commenced in the Dhamma Hall. My cousin, as the primary donor for the Kathin Ceremony, took on the role of the ceremony leader. Unlike many temples,

where full-time staff or volunteers are appointed as masters of ceremonies, the main donor serves as the Master of Ceremony here. He guided all participants in reciting the Five Precepts and led the recitation of the verse for offering the Kathin Robe. This was followed by a Dhamma Talk delivered by a senior monk, presented in both Thai and English. Due to the simple ceremonial structure, the requirement for volunteer assistance was minimal, especially when compared to the elaborate events at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, which often necessitate a large number of volunteers to manage various logistical and ceremonial tasks.

### 6.2.3 Community and Cultural Engagement

As we have observed, temples serve as hubs of community and cultural engagement, connecting the Thai diaspora, local communities, and individuals drawn to Buddhist teachings and Thai traditions. While temples provide the physical space, it is the laypeople, working in collaboration with temple leaders, who form the heart of these communities, nurturing the Thai identity and ensuring the flourishing of Thai culture. Through their combined efforts, traditions are passed on to younger generations, preserving a strong sense of heritage even far from their homeland. For example, the Sunday school at Wat Buddhapadipa was established by the third abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, Phra Maha Kasem Angsukari (unknown date; Royal ecclesiastical title and rank: *Phra Ratchawiriyaphon*) in 1984.<sup>583</sup> It reflects the temple's ongoing commitment, supported by lay volunteers, to provide religious and cultural learning to the Thai community.<sup>584</sup>

#### The Sunday School at Wat Buddhapadipa

To understand how the Sunday school at Wat Buddhapadipa operates, I interviewed one of the volunteers, Chaweewan Wongprase. Chaweewan moved to the UK as a postgraduate student in 1986 and subsequently met her Thai husband here. After having two children, they decided to make the UK their permanent home. Despite having been employed in the skilled labour sector in Thailand, she initially took on blue-collar jobs in the UK, working as a chambermaid and waitress, before establishing her own restaurant in 2004. She first visited Wat

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<sup>583</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, Interview by author, Phone Interview, 6 January 2024.

<sup>584</sup> Another temple that offers Thai classes is Wat Buddharam Leeds in Leeds. It provides classes for children aged 5 to 17 and adults aged 18 and above, covering subjects such as the Thai language, Thai culture, and Buddhism. Additionally, it serves as a hub for Thai housewives to share their knowledge, including cooking and baking skills, in order to enhance their work opportunities.

Buddhapadipa during her inaugural year in the UK, viewing it as a vital hub for the Thai community and residents in London. She shares her perspective,

When Thai people come here, they immediately know about Wat Buddhapadipa. It is something that every Thai person who comes here would be aware of. For newcomers, when they start to miss home—miss Thai traditions, Thai people, or Thai food—they simply come here. It's natural. During festivals or other events, everyone comes. It's also a chance to meet friends or invite others to join. Coming here makes people feel connected to their Thai identity and happier. For those living far from home, visiting Wat Buddhapadipa, a Thai temple that represents Thailand, brings joy to everyone.<sup>585</sup>

Chaweewan usually goes to the temple to make merit by offering food to the monks on special occasions such as family birthdays and also by attending Buddhist ceremonies and festivals. When her son was 10 years old and her daughter was six, they could speak Thai well but were unable to read or write the language. A friend suggested that she enrolled her children in the Sunday school at Wat Buddhapadipa. She noticed that the school taught her children well, and they learned a lot. After they had attended the school for two years, she decided to begin volunteering as a teacher and continued doing so from 2007 until the beginning of 2024.

The Sunday School serves children aged 6 to approximately 14 years, whether from mixed-parent families or full Thai backgrounds. It runs every Sunday from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM. The session begins with the monk leading chanting and teaching Buddhism for the first 30 minutes, followed by Thai language and Thai customs classes, with a break in between. An additional session is available an hour before the regular class begins for students interested in Thai cultural activities such as traditional dance or music. The school is structured into six levels, and students who complete all levels will attain a Thai language proficiency equivalent to Year 2 in Thailand.

One of the monks at Wat Buddhapadipa has been assigned the role of school principal, leading meetings with volunteers and being involved in the decision-making process regarding the curriculum and the needs of the students. However, the teaching and administration of the school are run by two separate groups of volunteers. Teachers are responsible for instruction, while the administrative staff handle tasks such as record keeping, enrolment, and collaborating with the parents. Volunteers are given a transportation allowance, but many choose not to

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<sup>585</sup> Chaweewan Wongprase, 'Interview by author', 15 December 2024, Phone Interview.

accept it. Most of the volunteers are mothers of students. While most volunteers have university degrees, anyone can apply if they can show teaching skills. During her time as a volunteer teacher, Chaweewan stated that 100% of the volunteers were women. However, she notes that a male lawyer recently started volunteering after she left.

The Sunday school is vital for preserving Thai identity among diaspora members, especially younger generations born in the UK or those who moved here with their parents. Chaweewan wished for her children to not only grasp the Thai language but also embrace Thai traditions and customs, helping them understand their heritage. She believed her children gained more from the temple's structured learning environment and engagement with peers than they would have from home instruction. Additionally, she said,

For Thai people living here, when they take their children to study at the temple, they get to visit the temple, listen to Buddhist teachings, and learn about monks—like how to properly respect monks—even more so than children in Thailand. You see, even though temples are everywhere, children in Thailand are distanced from the temples. Here, I feel that children are more engaged in temples. If I compare it to myself when I was in Thailand, I would go to the temple but not as often as I do now that I'm living in England. Here, I get much more involved with the temple. That's how I feel.<sup>586</sup>

#### Thai Funeral Mutual Society in the UK (TFMSUK)

In addition to the volunteer group that oversees the Sunday school at Wat Buddhapadipa, I discovered another volunteer organisation during an interview with Phra Sutas, the abbot's assistant at Wat Buddhapadipa: the Thai Funeral Mutual Society in the UK (TFMSUK).<sup>587</sup> This society was formed to provide crucial support to its members during times of bereavement. Established in 2020, TFMSUK operates from its office at Wat Buddhapadipa. It provides financial assistance and other offering support to members' families during bereavement, advising on funeral procedures. It has also established a relief fund for Thai individuals who have passed away and are without relatives.<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>586</sup> Chaweewan Wongprase, 'Interview by author', 15 December 2024.

<sup>587</sup> 'Thai Funeral Mutual Society in the UK', accessed 19 December 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/TFMSUK>.

<sup>588</sup> 'ระเบียบข้อบังคับสมาคมฌาปนกิจสงเคราะห์คนไทยในสหราชอาณาจักร (Regulations of the Thai Cremation Association in the United Kingdom)', Facebook, Thai Funeral Mutual Society in the UK, accessed 5 January 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/TFMSUK>.

The TFMSUK is managed by a committee composed of various members, including a president, vice presidents, secretary, treasurers, registrars, public relations officers, and other positions filled by 12 lay members. While monks do not hold committee positions, they act as advisors. Monks from both Wat Buddhapadipa and Wat Buddharam in London fulfil this advisory role. During the initial term of the committee, monks from both temples provided their endorsement and announced the appointments. Each committee term lasts for two years. The society's operations are funded through membership fees, donations, and other sources.<sup>589</sup>

Membership is open to Thai individuals residing in the UK, requiring an annual fee of £60 and attendance at the annual meeting. Phra Sutas emphasises that, in the event of a death, many individuals feel uncertain about where to start or whom to contact. In such situations, TFMSUK offers guidance and support for religious ceremonies, including assistance with funeral and cremation arrangements. Following a member's passing, the society organises a merit-making ceremony, including the traditional Thai Buddhist funerary practice of chanting the *Abhidhamma* for one night.<sup>590</sup>

The examples of the Sunday school and TFMSUK illustrate the indispensable role of the laity in temple life. Their contributions extend beyond religious observance, encompassing education, cultural preservation, and community support. Through their efforts, laypeople ensure that Thai temples in the UK remain vibrant hubs of cultural and spiritual life, adapting to the needs of a diaspora community while preserving the essence of Thai traditions. By actively engaging with temple initiatives, the laypeople not only sustain these institutions but also strengthen the collective identity of the Thai diaspora.

#### 6.2.4 Thai Women Entrepreneurs and Cross-Cultural Networks in Temple Support

A significant yet often overlooked aspect of temple support comes from Thai women entrepreneurs. Many of these women turn to business ownership as a means of overcoming employment barriers in the UK. Historical research on the British immigration policy since

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<sup>589</sup> Thai Funer. Mutual Soc. UK, ‘ระเบียบข้อบังคับสมาคมฌาปนกิจสงเคราะห์คนไทยในสหราชอาณาจักร (Regulations of the Thai Cremation Association in the United Kingdom)’.

<sup>590</sup> Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 3.

1939 by Spencer highlights that Asian and Black immigrants in the UK were not initially recruited as an unskilled underclass but instead arrived with diverse qualifications and experiences comparable to those of Britain's white population. However, despite being overqualified, many were forced into lower-status roles due to discrimination.<sup>591</sup> A similar pattern can be seen among Thai immigrants, particularly women.

In her study of Thai immigrant service-based entrepreneurship in the UK, Sunanta's research suggests that, despite coming from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, Thai migrants face similar constraints in the UK labour market and experience the same negative gendered and ethnic stereotypes, which limit their employment opportunities. Highly educated and skilled individuals often experience downward mobility, taking on jobs for which they are over-qualified. This lack of upward mobility pushes many Thai women toward self-employment, particularly in service industries such as restaurants and massage parlours, where they can leverage their cultural knowledge and skills.<sup>592</sup> As their businesses grow, many of these women become key supporters of Thai temples, contributing financially through donations, meal offerings for monks, and funding Buddhist ceremonies such as Kathin. Their entrepreneurial success enables them to play a vital role in sustaining temple activities and serves as a driving force in establishing Thai temples in the UK.

Sunanta highlights that having a British husband or partner is one of the key factors in the success of many Thai women entrepreneurs in the UK. Her findings indicate that this support provides significant advantages, particularly through access to their husbands' expertise in local markets, financial resources, and legal matters. Unlike other Thai immigrants who may depend more on ethnic networks, these women gain greater access to mainstream business opportunities, allowing them to expand and succeed.<sup>593</sup> As Sunanta notes, "support from British husbands constitutes bridging social capital as well as access to non-ethnic financial and cultural capital."<sup>594</sup> This reflects Robert D. Putnam's concept of bonding and bridging social capital: bonding capital strengthens ties within ethnic communities while bridging capital connects individuals or groups across social divisions such as race, class, and

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<sup>591</sup> Spencer, *British Immigration Policy since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain*, 160–61.

<sup>592</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 216–17.

<sup>593</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 224–25.

<sup>594</sup> Sunanta, 'Thai Immigrant Service-Based Entrepreneurship in the UK', 216.

religion.<sup>595</sup> The ability of Thai women entrepreneurs to access bridging capital rather than rely on intra-ethnic networks enables their businesses to succeed and, in turn, significantly contributes to temple sustainability. However, as shown by Chaweewan's case (above, p. 252), Thai women with Thai husbands also take up entrepreneurship.

A clear parallel exists between Thai women entrepreneurs benefiting from British husbands and Thai temples receiving support from British volunteers—many of whom are married to Thai women. As discussed in section 6.2.1, Tony, a founder, trustee, and volunteer at Wat Phra Singh UK, assists the temple with administrative tasks such as managing contracts, sponsor licenses, and accounting. He also plays a key role in engaging with the local council and securing funding from British institutions. This reinforces the parallel: just as Thai women entrepreneurs benefit from British husbands' access to mainstream financial and business opportunities, Thai temples also gain access to non-ethnic financial capital through British volunteers, rather than relying only on Thai community funding.

This connection between Thai women entrepreneurs and British temple volunteers further demonstrates how cross-cultural relationships strengthen the sustainability of Thai religious and cultural spaces in the UK. Contrary to the assumption that immigrant religious institutions rely exclusively on ethnic networks, this relationship shows how external collaborations can provide crucial financial and administrative support. As Putnam explains, bridging social capital connects people across different social groups, facilitating economic mobility and institutional integration.<sup>596</sup> By strengthening connections with British volunteers and funding sources, Thai temples expand their influence beyond their immediate ethnic communities, enhancing their long-term stability and growth.

Bridging social capital plays an important role in expanding economic and institutional opportunities for Thai temples in the UK. However, over-reliance on external networks may lead to power imbalances, creating dependency and reducing autonomy, particularly when key figures such as Tony are no longer available. To mitigate this risk, Thai temples must strengthen internal capacity by developing leadership and financial independence. While Tony emphasised that all decision-making rests with the abbot, Wat Phra Singh UK remains heavily

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<sup>595</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>596</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 22–23.

reliant on his administrative expertise. To ensure long-term sustainability, the abbot and resident monks must acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to manage temple affairs independently rather than depending solely on external volunteers. While bridging social capital provides access to external resources, true empowerment comes from balancing external engagement with internal self-sufficiency to secure the future of Thai temples in the UK.

### 6.3 Conflicts and Challenges in Temple Communities

Conflicts within organisations, even those often perceived as serene, such as religious institutions, are inevitable. This holds true even for Buddhist temples, which are frequently regarded as sanctuaries of peace and solitude. The longevity and functionality of these temples hinge significantly on the efficacy with which these conflicts are addressed. Notably, four Thai Buddhist temples and two Thai Buddhist centres in the UK, despite being founded with the intent of fostering peaceful environments, have fallen into conflict, resulting in dysfunction within a few years of their establishment.

In this section, I will explore the causes and impacts of the eight primary types of conflicts I identified within Thai Buddhist temples in the UK: internal conflicts, substantive conflicts, value and belief conflicts, relationship conflicts, information conflicts, system conflicts, cultural conflicts, and legal or external conflicts. I will also examine strategies recommended by interviewees and compare them with principles outlined in the Vinaya Pitaka, the foundational text of Buddhist monastic discipline, to evaluate their alignment and effectiveness. Since this topic is relatively sensitive, I will omit the names of some temples and replace them with pseudonyms or initials to avoid any discomfort or potential issues that might affect the Buddhist community.

#### 6.3.1 Theoretical Framework for Understanding Conflicts

As one of the religions that promotes peace through principles and theories, Buddhism has been the subject of numerous studies related to conflict. These include conflict management using modern approaches such as Buddhist loving-kindness and mindfulness meditation, frameworks for conflict analysis and transformation, studies on conflicts within the development of early

Indian and Japanese Buddhism, and individual-level paradox research on how Buddhist monks frame conflicts and tensions central to Buddhist philosophy.<sup>597</sup> However, scholarly works specifically addressing conflicts within Buddhist temples are exceedingly rare. Consequently, I have examined studies from other religious institutions to gain insights into the types and causes of conflict within religious organisations.

One relevant work that I found, which serves as a useful framework for understanding conflicts within Buddhist temples, is Donald Hicks' PhD thesis on church conflicts.<sup>598</sup> He identified six types of church conflict:

1. Internal Conflicts—This type of conflict is within oneself, such as anger or bitterness.
2. Substantive Conflicts—Examples of this type of conflict are church budgets, committees, removal of pastor, or other church staff members, church building projects.
3. Value and Belief Conflicts—This type of conflict deals with Biblical Doctrine.
4. Relationship Conflicts—This type of conflict deals with the heart in the area of lack of forgiveness and making things right with an individual or group.
5. Information Conflicts—How information is given to staff or the church on any issue.
6. System Conflicts—This type of conflict is how a church is governed and who is responsible for what.<sup>599</sup>

Although originally designed for churches, these categories provide a structured framework for analysing conflicts in other religious organisations, including Thai Buddhist temples. In the next section, I will integrate this theoretical framework with findings from my fieldwork to explore the types of conflicts within Thai Buddhist temple communities in the UK. Additionally, building on these six types of church conflict, I have identified two additional types of conflict specific to Thai Buddhist temples in the UK: cultural conflicts and legal or

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<sup>597</sup> Venerable Neminda, 'Conflict Management by Buddhist Peaceful Means of Loving-Kindness (Metta)', *The Journal of International Association of Buddhist Universities (JIABU)* 12, no. 1 (2019), <https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Jiabu/article/view/208965>; Tatsushi Arai, 'Toward a Buddhist Theory of Conflict Transformation: From Simple Actor-Oriented Conflict to Complex Structural Conflict', *Peace and Conflict Studies*, ahead of print, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.46743/1082-7307/2017.1450>; Yoshihiro Matsunami, 'Conflict within the Development of Buddhism', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (1979): 329–45; Hee-Chan Song, *How Do Buddhist Monks Frame Conflicts?: A Buddhist Approach to Paradox*, Carnegie Mellon University Library Publishing Service, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.34891/WY45-9F66>.

<sup>598</sup> Donald Hicks, 'A Study of the Conflicts within Churches That Lead to the Termination of Pastors within the Southern Baptist Convention, Accompanied by a Proposal of Preventive and Interventional Solutions' (Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/408>.

<sup>599</sup> Hicks, 'A Study of the Conflicts within Churches That Lead to the Termination of Pastors within the Southern Baptist Convention, Accompanied by a Proposal of Preventive and Interventional Solutions', 39.

external conflicts. These additions highlight the unique challenges faced by temples operating in multicultural and regulatory environments.

### 6.3.2 Types of Conflicts and Their Impacts on Temple Communities

Conflicts within temple communities often arise due to various factors, including interpersonal tensions, operational challenges, and differing cultural expectations, which may sometimes overlap. While some conflicts can be avoided or resolved, others may be unavoidable and lead to the most severe consequence—the closure of temples. This section examines the eight primary types of conflicts identified in Thai Buddhist temples in the UK, provides examples to illustrate their manifestations, and explores their impact on temple communities.

#### Internal Conflicts

Internal conflict occurs when individuals, whether monks or laypeople, experience personal frustrations. For example, some monks struggle to balance their administrative roles and adapt to a new language, culture, and environment while also pursuing their spiritual development and their goal of propagating Buddhism in the UK (see Chapter 3). They may also take further outside commitments such as pursuing a degree. Additionally, with only a few monks at the temple, many responsibilities for organising events fall upon laypeople. Some volunteers feel overwhelmed by these, as they must navigate their own personal lives and work commitments as well. Such conflicts can lead to burnout, eventually causing individuals to leave the Buddhist communities or, in the case of monks, to disrobe or return to Thailand.

#### Substantive Conflicts

Substantive conflicts arise over tangible issues such as resource allocation and budget management. For instance, the closure of Wat PM and a Buddhist centre highlights this challenge. Insufficient funds, driven by the high cost of property rental and other expenses, coupled with inadequate donations, made sustaining operations impossible. Consequently, both the temple and the unrelated centre were forced to shut down.<sup>600</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, Interview by author, In Person, 14 September 2023.

### Value and Belief Conflicts

Value and belief conflicts occur when differing interpretations of Buddhist practices clash with the community. Among the four dysfunctional temples I noted above, a primary reason for problems at three of them was differing views on monastic roles. At Wat TP and Wat RB, laypeople advocated for stricter ‘forest monk’ practices, expecting the monks to adopt a lifestyle akin to that of forest tradition temples in Thailand. This caused tension as the monks struggled to reconcile these expectations, and the temples eventually closed.<sup>601</sup> In contrast, at Wat TB, a group of laypeople invited a monk from the Thai Forest Tradition lineage in Thailand. The monk focused on teaching, meditation, and spiritual practice rather than administrative or logistical tasks. However, the laypeople expected his practical involvement in setting up the temple, which clashed with the monk’s traditional role in the forest tradition, ultimately leading to the temple’s closure.<sup>602</sup>

### Relationship Conflicts

Relationship conflicts involve interpersonal tensions among community members, including monks, volunteers, and supporters. For example, small but frequent issues among laypeople may arise over food-related matters, such as disputes regarding kitchen duties at a temple. These conflicts often stem from lay volunteers perceiving an unequal distribution of tasks, with some feeling they are required to cook more frequently than others. Additionally, tensions can arise when laypeople perceive differences in how they are treated by monks, further exacerbating conflicts. A lack of communication and perceived favouritism can escalate these tensions, disrupting the functionality and harmony of the temple and straining relationships among community members. Therefore, clear task delegation and mutual respect are essential to maintaining harmony within the community.

### Information Conflicts

Information conflicts often arise from miscommunication, misinformation, or a lack of transparency regarding financial matters. To address these issues, Tony, one of the trustees at Wat Phra Singh UK, ensured that all the temple’s financial reports were made publicly

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<sup>601</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, ‘Interview by author’, 14 September 2023.

<sup>602</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, ‘Interview by author’, 14 September 2023.

accessible. However, language barriers for monks present another significant challenge, as they can lead to difficulties when engaging with non-Thai individuals. Many Thai monks in the UK lack proficiency in English, which limits their ability to communicate effectively with the local community and authorities. This issue is exemplified in a case discussed in Chapter 4, where a Thai monk's responses during an unannounced visit from the Home Office resulted in the suspension of the temple's sponsor license.

### System Conflicts

System conflicts are rooted in governance and structural issues within the temple. These may arise from an imbalance of power between monks and laypeople, such as when the lay committee holds more authority than the monks and dictates how things should be managed. For example, at Wat TP, disputes over financial management between the lay committee and the monks ultimately led to the temple's closure (see below). To avoid such conflicts, Wat Sri Intra Atula has adopted a model in which the lay trustees have a limited role in decision-making, with primary control resting with the monks. This approach helps to prevent potential power struggles between the two groups. In addition, unlike many other Thai temples in the UK, where laypeople serving as trustees or committee members typically oversee accounting and visa-related tasks, at Wat Sri Intra Atula, monks handle these responsibilities. This underscores the critical importance of establishing clear and balanced governance structures.

### Cultural Conflicts

Cultural conflicts often arise in multicultural settings where differing traditions or norms clash. For example, when Thai forest monks attempted to receive alms in Hampstead, the local authority deemed their actions potentially unlawful, citing the 1824 Vagrancy Act (see Chapter 5). This highlights how cultural practices considered normal in one context may be misunderstood or even criminalised in another. Another instance involved an English nun residing in the same building as monks, which caused disapproval within the Thai community, as separate quarters are traditional in Thai temples (see Chapter 5). This ultimately led to the nun's departure despite her valuable contributions to the temple. Additionally, tensions can emerge when Thai Buddhist traditions encounter Western expectations of fairness and equality, particularly concerning gender roles. At Chithurst, Ajahn Sumedho sought to address these challenges by introducing a 10-precept ordination for women, enabling them to wear brown

robes, carry alms bowls, and follow a structured training system (see Chapter 5). Such conflicts often require temples to adapt and find compromises that respect both cultures while remaining true to the core teachings of Buddhism.

### Legal or External Conflicts

Legal or external conflicts arise between temples and external entities such as government authorities, local communities, or other institutions. These disputes typically involve legal, regulatory, or societal issues that extend beyond the internal dynamics of the temple community. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, Thai temples in the UK have faced such challenges since their early stages. For instance, legal conflicts related to immigration laws and policies include sponsor license suspension following unannounced visits, increased scrutiny under the UK's hostile environment policy, and conflicting interpretations of immigration regulations, leading to inconsistent application processes. These issues create significant operational difficulties for temples, particularly by limiting their ability to bring monks from Thailand. Additionally, Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle encountered conflicts with local planning authorities over building permits and disagreements regarding architectural style, which ultimately resulted in the temple's extension not being built as originally intended (see Chapter 4).

Another example of external conflict involves interactions with local communities. For instance, Wat Arun Norfolk had to relocate due to noise complaints from neighbours and parking issues (see Chapter 3). Similarly, some temples, such as Oxford Buddha Vihara, own their property but lack sufficient space to host large events (see Chapter 4). To address this, they rent spaces, such as a hospital hall, to organise events like the *Songkran* Festival and the Kathin Ceremony. This approach helps mitigate conflicts with neighbours over noise and parking issues. These examples highlight the importance of temples carefully considering their location in relation to residential areas and the potential impact of their activities on the local community.

### 6.3.3 Strategies for Resolving Conflicts

#### Recommendations from Interviewees

To resolve conflicts within temple communities, insights from interviews and fieldwork highlight a range of effective strategies that can foster harmony and resolve disagreements. One such strategy, as demonstrated by Phramaha Bhatsakorn before establishing Wat Phra Sri Sanphet in Bristol, involves understanding the preferences of the lay community. As noted early, Phramaha Bhatsakorn has been in the UK since 2006 and has observed the success and failings of many Thai temples here. He therefore asked the laypeople who wanted him to establish the temple whether they preferred a “traditional” temple with cultural activities, such as *Songkran* and *Loy Krathong* festivals, or a “forest tradition” temple focused exclusively on meditation and dhamma teachings.<sup>603</sup> They chose the traditional model. Thus, potential conflicts—such as value and belief conflicts arising from differing views on monastic roles, as seen in the three dysfunctional temples—could be avoided. Additionally, Phramaha Bhatsakorn emphasised the importance of financial transparency in temple operations, as clear financial management helps prevent disputes and accusations of misconduct.<sup>604</sup>

Similarly, Phra Sitthiporn Tantipalo, a resident monk from Wat Sriratanaram in Manchester, emphasised the importance of financial management, particularly the need for solid financial planning to ensure temple sustainability. He also noted that, without strong leadership and mediation skills, conflicts among monks and laypeople are likely to arise.<sup>605</sup> Financial foresight, strong leadership, and effective mediation are crucial for maintaining harmony and preventing both substantive and relationship conflicts.

Phra Seri Sirisampanno of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Manchester and Phramaha Paganon Buddhimedhee of Wat Sriratanaram proposed additional methods for conflict resolution. Both abbots suggested organising regular meetings to enhance communication, as well as participating in frequent meditation practice. Additionally, Phramaha Paganon emphasised that “morning and evening chanting helps calm the mind, cultivate mindfulness, develop concentration, and foster wisdom to resolve various problems.”<sup>606</sup> He further stated that

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<sup>603</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, ‘Interview by author’, 14 September 2023.

<sup>604</sup> Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso, ‘Interview by author’, 14 September 2023.

<sup>605</sup> Phra Sitthiporn Tantipalo, ‘Interview by author’, 9 May 2023, In Person.

<sup>606</sup> Phramaha Paganon Buddhimedhee, ‘Interview by author’, 1 June 2023, In Person.

conflicts should be resolved through meetings and discussions, explaining that in the meeting, “whatever can be resolved or compromised is addressed, and decisions are made based on the principles of the Dhamma. Ideas are shared, mistakes are forgiven, and everyone starts anew.”<sup>607</sup> He also recommended that individuals should remember, “we work not for fame or wealth, but as an offering to the Buddha and to honour our parents.”<sup>608</sup> With this intention, the tendency to seek recognition or show favouritism, whether towards the abbot or anyone else, can be avoided. These strategies highlight the importance of consistent communication, mindfulness practices, and commitment to Buddhist principles to effectively prevent and address conflicts while creating a culture of merit-making and selflessness.

At Wat Arun Norfolk, monks adopt a neutral stance in personal conflicts among laypeople, ensuring equal respect for all community members. They avoid taking sides or escalating disputes, instead fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment where no one feels excluded or perceives favouritism. Phramaha Phanuwat shared an example: when laypeople who do not get along plan to visit the temple on the same day, he adjusts their timings to prevent direct encounters. If both visit unexpectedly, he acts unaware of their disagreement. During merit-making activities, he focuses on the positive and avoids addressing their personal disputes. As a result, visitors leave feeling at peace, and the conflict is momentarily set aside.<sup>609</sup> This approach emphasises neutrality, equal treatment of all individuals, and avoiding direct involvement in laypeople’s personal matters.

### Alignment of Conflict Resolution Strategies with the Vinaya Pitaka and Buddhist Principles

This section examines how the conflict resolution strategies identified during fieldwork align with the principles outlined in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the core text of Buddhist monastic discipline, as well as broader Buddhist teachings. The *Vinaya Pitaka* categorises four main types of issues or cases (*adhikaraṇa*):

1. Dispute-issues (*Vivādādhikaraṇa*): Concerning *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, which the community must address by declaring which side is right and which is wrong.

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<sup>607</sup> Phramaha Paganon Buddhimedhee, ‘Interview by author’, 1 June 2023.

<sup>608</sup> Phramaha Paganon Buddhimedhee, ‘Interview by author’, 1 June 2023.

<sup>609</sup> Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi, ‘Interview by author’, 17 April 2023.

2. Accusation-issues (*Anuvādādhikaraṇa*): Related to offences, which the community must resolve by judging whether the accusations are true or false.
3. Offence-issues (*Āpattādhikaraṇa*): Involving the commission of offences, to be addressed by the offender undergoing prescribed penalties (e.g., confession, penance, or expulsion from the community).
4. Duty-issues (*Kiccādhikaraṇa*): Relating to community transactions, such as ordination and the monthly recitation of the *pāṭimokkha*, which must be performed correctly to ensure validity.<sup>610</sup>

When these issues arise within the Sangha, members collectively address them through a process known as *adhikaraṇa-samatha*—the rules for settling disputes.<sup>611</sup> The *Vinaya Pitaka* outlines seven methods for resolving such disputes:

1. Proceeding in presence (*Sammukhā-Vinaya*): The resolution of the issue must be conducted in person, involving direct interaction with the Sangha, the individuals concerned, and in alignment with the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*.
2. Proceeding for the consciously innocent (*Sati-Vinaya*): This verdict of innocence is issued in response to an accusation, based on the accused’s clear recollection that they did not commit the alleged act offence.
3. Proceeding in the case of those who are no longer out of their mind (*Amūḷha-Vinaya*): This is another verdict of innocence issued in response to an accusation based on the fact that the accused was mentally unwell at the time of the offence and is therefore absolved of responsibility.
4. Proceeding on confession of guilt (*Paṭiññāya*): This pertains to two types of situations. The first involves the standard confession of offences, where no formal interrogation takes place, and the confession is considered valid only if it aligns with the facts. The second situation arises when, following an accusation, the Sangha convenes to question the monk, and he admits to committing the act in question. If he

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<sup>610</sup> *Adhikaraṇa* is also defined as “a case, question, affair, lawsuit, dispute, disciplinary case of dispute, legal process, legal question.” See Phra Brahmaganabhorn, ‘อธิการณ์ (Adhikaraṇa)’, in *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 19th edn (S. R. Printing Mass Products Company, 2010), 356; Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monastic Code I*, Third edition (Metta Forest Monastery, U.S.A, 2013), 583.

<sup>611</sup> The term *adhikaraṇa-samatha* is translated by T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg as “the rules regarding the settlement of cases” and by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu as “the settling of issues.”

acknowledges it as an offence, appropriate measures are taken according to the severity of the offence.

5. Proceeding by majority of the chapter (*Yebhuyyasikā*): This applies to situations where monks are unable to reach a unanimous resolution to a dispute, even after following all the proper procedures. In such cases, decisions can be determined by a majority vote.
6. Proceeding for the obstinate (*Tassapāpiyasikā*): This refers to situations where a monk acknowledges committing the offence only after undergoing formal interrogation. Once the offence is disclosed, the Sangha is required to perform a further punishment transaction against him, addressing his lack of cooperation that necessitated the formal interrogation.
7. Proceeding by covering over as with grass (*Tiṇavatthāraka*): When both sides in a dispute recognise their actions as unbecoming of contemplatives, addressing offences individually risks further division or schism. To prevent this, the monks gather as a group, and each side selects a representative to confess on behalf of their faction. This approach emphasises collective reconciliation and prevents further discord within the community.<sup>612</sup>

These resolutions mainly concern monks breaking rules and are therefore not directly relevant to my research. My interviews were not initially designed to focus on conflicts among monks, which may lead to gaps when comparing my findings with the principles in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, which primarily addresses conflict resolution within the Sangha. Instead, my research centred on disputes related to temple management, particularly those between monks and lay committees or among laypeople themselves. However, some conflict resolution strategies suggested by interviewees can still be aligned with these rules. For instance, Phramaha Bhatsakorn's approach—understanding the lay community's preferences before establishing a temple—reflects the principle of *sammukhā-vinaya*, which requires that issues be resolved through direct, in-person engagement. While this is not yet a conflict, this practice of open communication helps pre-empt potential disputes by ensuring that expectations are aligned.

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<sup>612</sup> T. W. Rhys (Thomas William Rhys) Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, *Vinaya Texts*, with Princeton Theological Seminary Library (Oxford, The Clarendon press, 1881), 68; Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monastic Code I*, 697–704.

On a related note, Phramaha Phanuwat at Wat Arun Norfolk adopt a neutral stance in handling lay disputes, prioritising harmony by avoiding direct involvement in personal conflicts. While the rules do not explicitly prescribe this neutral approach, it aligns with the principle of *tiṇavatthāraka* (proceeding by covering over as with grass), which reflects impartiality in dispute resolution. This method is applied when addressing individual offences could lead to greater division, paralleling Phramaha Phanuwat’s strategy of ensuring that all parties feel respected and included without escalating tensions.

There are additional rules for settling disputes outlined in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, the second division of the Pali Canon, which consists of stories and poetry conveying the Buddha’s teachings. These teachings are more applicable in a general context, as they are not specific to monastic regulations but focus on the broader community. They are particularly relevant when comparing the conflict resolution approaches adopted by interviewees —such as the discourses on the *Conditions for Amiability* (*Sārāṇīya-Dhamma*) and the *Conditions of Non-Divide* (*Aparihāniya-Dhamma*). These principles are essential for promoting harmony within the Sangha and preventing the decline of the community.

The *Conditions for Amiability* outline six key principles that foster unity within the Sangha:

1. Physical Acts of Loving-Kindness (*Metta Kāyakamma*): Kind actions toward others, both openly and privately.
2. Verbal Acts of Loving-Kindness (*Metta Vacīkamma*): Speaking kindly and courteously to others, whether in their presence or absence.
3. Mental Acts of Loving-Kindness (*Metta Manokamma*): Maintaining goodwill and benevolence toward others, both openly and privately.
4. Sharing of Material Gains (*Sādhāraṇabhogitā*): Willingly sharing rightful gains and possessions with others.
5. Harmony in Virtuous Conduct (*Sīla Sāmaññatā*): Upholding consistent ethical conduct in line with fellow practitioners, both openly and privately.

6. Harmony in Views (*Diṭṭhi Sāmaññatā*): Sharing a common understanding and agreement on the *Dhamma*.<sup>613</sup>

Similarly, the Conditions for Non-Decline ensure stability and prosperity within a community. Preached by the Buddha to both the Sangha and the Vajjians (Vajji clan), these principles serve as a framework for preventing the decline of Buddhism while also promoting effective governance and societal harmony.

1. Regular Meetings: The community meets regularly and discusses matters of importance in a harmonious manner.
2. Unity in Decision-Making: Decisions are made collectively and in agreement, avoiding divisive actions.
3. Respect for Established Rules and Traditions: Members respect and uphold the rules, teachings, and traditions of the community.
4. Respect for Elders: Elders and senior members are respected, and their wisdom is acknowledged.
5. Avoiding Craving and Greed: The community avoids being dominated by desires and greed, maintaining simplicity and contentment.
6. Preservation of Sacred Sites and Dhamma Teachings: Sacred places, including monasteries, are well-maintained, and the Dhamma teachings are preserved and practised.
7. Encouragement of Spiritual Growth: Members encourage each other in virtuous conduct, mindfulness, and the pursuit of enlightenment.<sup>614</sup>

While no specific principle explicitly backs the financial transparency strategy advocated by Phramaha Bhatsakorn and Phra Sitthiporn, it resonates with the principle of sharing material gains (*Sādhāraṇabhogitā*) from the Conditions for Amiability, as well as the principle of avoiding craving and greed (*Anesanāpaṭikūla*) from the Conditions of Non-Decline. Sharing

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<sup>613</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, ‘Sārāṇīya-Dhamma Sutta’, accessed 12 January 2025, <https://www.dhammadata.org/books/ChantingGuide/Section0028.html>.

<sup>614</sup> ‘Suttanta Pitaka, Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāvagga’, in *Thai Tipitaka: The Pali Canon (Royal Edition)*, electronic edition, vol. 10 (n.d.), <https://etipitaka.com/read/thai/10/68/?keywords=อภิธานิขรรณ%20๑>.

of material gains emphasises the willing sharing of rightful gains and possessions with others. This principle serves as a foundation for financial transparency, as stated in the Pali Canon: “Whatever righteous gains the monk may obtain in a righteous way—even if only as much as the alms in his bowl—he does not consume them alone. He consumes them after sharing them in common with his virtuous fellows in the holy life.”<sup>615</sup> Additionally, the principle of avoiding craving and greed aligns with the idea that financial matters should be handled with integrity and without personal gain. Therefore, financial transparency reflects the monks’ freedom from greed regarding donations and guarantees that the laypeople’s contributions are managed appropriately.

The conflict resolution methods proposed by Phra Seri and Phramaha Paganon, which include regular meetings, frequent meditation, and chanting, align with several Buddhist principles. One key aspect is both abbots’ emphasis on organising regular meetings to improve communication, which corresponds to the principle of holding regular meetings to discuss important matters harmoniously. Additionally, Phramaha Paganon also highlighted resolving conflicts through meetings and discussions, aligning with the principle of proceeding in presence (*sammukhā-vinaya*), which stipulates that issues should be addressed through direct interaction among the Sangha. Phramaha Paganon’s description of the meeting process, where “whatever can be resolved or compromised is addressed, and decisions are made based on the principles of the Dhamma,” clearly reflects this.<sup>616</sup>

Another significant recommendation is Phramaha Paganon’s advice on morning and evening chanting to calm the mind, cultivate mindfulness, and develop concentration. This practice aligns with the principle of members encouraging each other in virtuous conduct, mindfulness, and the pursuit of enlightenment. These proposed practices are designed to promote spiritual growth, which can help prevent conflict. Finally, his reminder that “we work not for fame or wealth, but as an offering to the Buddha and to honour our parents” aligns with the principle of avoiding craving and greed.<sup>617</sup> This focus on selflessness and service helps monastic members avoid conflicts arising from personal gain or recognition.

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<sup>615</sup> Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, ‘Sārāṇīya-Dhamma Sutta’.

<sup>616</sup> Phramaha Paganon Buddhimedhee, ‘Interview by author’, 1 June 2023.

<sup>617</sup> Phramaha Paganon Buddhimedhee, ‘Interview by author’, 1 June 2023.

## 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter explored the intricate relationship between the establishment of Thai temples in the UK and migration patterns; between their thriving and community involvement; and between their survival and successful conflict resolution. To understand this, this chapter has emphasised how Thai temples serve not only as religious institutions but also as cultural and social hubs for the Thai migrant community. This challenges the representation of temples as places to withdraw from society, because they both reflect and contribute to it.

The first part of the chapter shed light on the correlation between Thai diplomatic and migration patterns and the dynamics of Thai temples. The establishment of Thai temples in the UK was initially closely tied to the long-standing diplomatic relationship between the UK and Thailand, which began in 1855. The initial wave of migration, primarily consisting of diplomats and members of the elite, played a crucial role in laying the foundation for Thai Buddhism in the UK. Despite multiple efforts by Thai monks and British monks ordained in Thailand to spread Buddhism in the UK, however, initial attempts to establish a permanent temple failed due to institutional and financial barriers. However, with the support of the Thai state and elite Thai individuals, Wat Buddhapadipa was eventually founded in 1966, marking a turning point in the institutional presence of Thai Buddhism in the UK. Its establishment highlights the importance of transnational networks and diplomatic ties in embedding Thai Buddhism within the British religious landscape.

After the establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa, the next phase of the founding of Thai temples in the UK, which began in 1979, saw the establishment of monasteries within the Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah (Chapter 3). These were primarily established through the efforts of British supporters, reflecting European engagement with Southeast Asia rather than Thai migration. This is evident in the writings that these temples produced on Buddhism found in both published and electronic books, as well as in recorded audio and video materials of Dhamma talks and guided meditations—all of which are in English. This reflects the primary audience of these temples, which consists mainly of non-Thai, predominantly British practitioners, who place greater emphasis on personal meditation practice rather than traditional merit-making ceremonies or Thai cultural festivals. These are thus part of the counter cultural revolution and ongoing globalisation of Buddhism that escalated from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and do not relate to migration per se. Nonetheless, since they

face some of the same issues of people management, I have included information from Amaravati, my chosen case study of this kind of temple, here. What we see from the evidence presented in this chapter is that some of the issues for these temples entail the bridging of Thai and Western expectations.

It was not until 1987 that another Thai temple, Wat Santiwongsaram in Birmingham, was established, just over two decades later. The establishment of this temple reflected a shift from reliance on diplomatic efforts to Thai migration, as it was founded by a group of Thai communities and local English individuals, unlike Wat Buddhapadipa, which was associated with the Thai embassy. From 1999 onwards, the number of Thai temples grew, aligning with shifting migration trends, particularly the rise of marriage migration among Thai women in the 1990s. These latter trends, then, reflect the evolving needs of the Thai migrant community to create a space where they can uphold their Thai identity and preserve their cultural heritage for future generations.

The second part of the chapter demonstrated how Thai temples in the UK are sites of transnational community-building. This is evident in the role of Thai temples as hubs for the Thai diaspora, providing spaces where migrants can preserve their religious and cultural identity while adapting to their host country. Unlike the Thai Forest Tradition temples, which primarily focused on meditation and Dhamma talks, community-founded temples served as cultural and social hubs for Thai expatriates, offering Buddhist ceremonies, Thai festivals, language classes, social support services and activities for Thai housewives, allowing them to share their knowledge, including cooking and baking skills. Additionally, the movement of monks and laypeople between Thailand and the UK, along with financial donations flowing in both directions, reinforces connections between Thai temples in the UK and broader transnational religious institutions. This dynamic underscores that Thai temples in the UK are integral parts of a larger, cross-border Buddhist network that sustains Thai identity and spirituality beyond Thailand.

This chapter then examines the specific roles of laypeople in sustaining Thai temples in the UK. The indispensable role of the laity in temple sustainability challenges conventional understandings of religious authority, shifting it beyond monastic leadership to include lay actors. I identified the roles of laypeople as temple founders, trustees, donors, administrators, chefs, drivers, accountants, construction project managers, event organisers, teachers, and Thai

funeral advisors. It also highlights the interdependent relationship between monks and laypeople. While temples serve as sacred spaces and monks are considered fields of merit, allowing laypeople to accumulate merit through them, these temples could not survive without the active support of the lay community. This dynamic underscores how monks and laypeople rely on each other for religious continuity and communal cohesion, again overturning the popular perception of monks as world-renouncing.

Building on this discussion, a particularly significant finding is the pivotal role of women in sustaining Thai temples in the UK. Beyond their financial contributions, women actively engage in temple activities, organise community events, and facilitate cultural preservation. Their involvement challenges the perception of traditional gender roles within Buddhist institutions, demonstrating that religious authority and temple sustainability are not solely dependent on monastic leadership but also on the dedicated efforts of laywomen. This also offers to rebalance the presentation of women in Buddhism, since studies predominantly focus on monastic and men or on the quest for the recognition of nuns. Similar to Sunanta's research that contests stereotypes of Thai women as 'economically dependent foreign wives or sex workers,' this chapter also challenges such misconceptions. It underscores the crucial role of Thai women in supporting temples, emphasising their dual roles as entrepreneurs and religious upholders. Their contributions not only sustain temple activities but also reshape transnational religious practices, highlighting the intersection of gender, entrepreneurship, and faith within diaspora communities, which are essential to both the establishment and long-term sustainability of these Thai temples in the UK.

An additional key insight from the findings is the mutual benefit of contributions of British spouses to both their Thai wives and the temples. Through these contributions, both individuals and religious institutions gain access to 'bridging capital', rather than relying solely on Thai communities. This dynamic underscores how cross-cultural relationships play a crucial role in sustaining and enhancing Thai temples in the UK, both directly and indirectly. The former refers to direct contributions to the temple, either through administrative or legal support, while the latter involves indirect support for Thai wives in their businesses, which, in turn, enables these women entrepreneurs to support the temple. Nonetheless, the analysis also revealed that while bridging social capital provides Thai women entrepreneurs and temples with economic and institutional opportunities, it simultaneously raises concerns about dependency and autonomy on non-ethnic networks. In other words, where a temple relies too much on single,

highly competent and motivated British supporters, as in the case of Wat Phra Singh UK, there is a risk that the temple would be vulnerable in the future, should that single supporter become unavailable, because of the lack of a broader network of skilled supporters. While, as this chapter has shown, this situation currently gives Wat Phra Singh UK many advantages, including engagement with broader institutions such as the local council and access to a wider range of funding, my analysis indicates that the future risk to the temple is relatively high.

This chapter has identified how complex the relationships between monks and laypeople, as well as among laypeople themselves, can be, and how much this shapes the character of the temple. While temples adapt to changes to the demographics of its supporters, as shown in particular in relation to Wat Buddhapadipa, the complexity of these relationships and the differing expectations as to the direction and main purposes that should be pursued by each temple, can lead to significant conflicts within the temple. The final section of this chapter highlighted eight primary types of conflicts among monks, staff, volunteers, and external supporters. In responding to these challenges, monks have applied and suggested various conflict resolution strategies, many of which align with the principles outlined in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* and the *Sutta Piṭaka*, although some parallels are more implicit than explicit. This section underscored the importance of conflict management. Without appropriate measures, or if the abbot fails to identify and address the root cause of a conflict in a timely manner, it can negatively affect both the monastic community and the lay community. In extreme cases, as I have shown, unresolved conflicts have even resulted in temple closures. This chapter overall, then, has demonstrated the enormous significance of lay support and the management of that support for the success or otherwise of Thai temples in the UK.

# Conclusion

This thesis has provided the first comprehensive survey and institutional analysis of the 31 Thai Buddhist temples in the UK. It marks a stark contrast with the majority of studies on British Buddhism which tend to favour Western over diaspora groups and religious belief and practice over practicalities. This study reveals a far more intricate level of organisation and a set of demanding challenges than often anticipated, particularly given the traditional perception of temples as places of tranquillity and renunciation. It is a data-rich first study. Thus, this conclusion will now try to draw out some of the big picture.

## Influence and Structure of Temples

The influence of Thai parent temples is clearly evident in the shaping, establishment and ongoing development of Thai temples in the UK. The degree of that influence varies depending on the temple's establishment model and the nature of its connection—whether direct or indirect—to the parent institution in Thailand. Chapter 3 outlines how the six case study temples were established through direct links to specific Thai parent temples: Wat Buddhapadipa to Wat Mahathat Yuwarajarangsarit Rajaworamahavihara, Wat Arun Norfolk to Wat Arun Ratchawararam, Wat Phra Singh UK to Wat Phra Singh Woramahavihara, Amaravati to Wat Nong Pah Pong, Wat Sri Intra Atula to Wat Prachakhom Wanaram, and Wat Phra Dhammakaya London to Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

Those Thai temples in the UK established through top-down hierarchical models, such as Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Phra Dhammakaya branches, Wat Arun Norfolk, and Wat Sri Intra Atula, are significantly shaped by their parent temples in Thailand, both in their origins and ongoing operations. For instance, Wat Buddhapadipa represents the state-sponsored Buddhist institution with the unique feature of being the only Thai temple in the UK to have an *ubosot* crafted in an authentic Thai style, which has become both a cultural landmark and a hub of Thai Buddhism and Thai cultural studies in London. The temple serves as the main centre for all Mahanikai lineage Thai monks in the UK, operating under the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland (CTBMUK). It bridges the monks in the UK with the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand (SSC).

A direct affiliation indicates that Wat Phra Dhammakaya's UK branches are under the direct control of the headquarters in Thailand, with monks being appointed and sent from there. While they hold Thai cultural identity events like most other Thai temples in the UK, they mainly focus on their own traditions and the dates that commemorate their teachers, such as the celebrations of their teachers' birthdays and other dates that hold particular significance for Wat Phra Dhammakaya. This ongoing connection is also evident in financial dependencies and the need for approval from senior monks in Thailand for significant decisions, as seen at Wat Arun Norfolk and Wat Sri Intra Atula.

However, with less centralised oversight, Forest Tradition temples in the Ajahn Chah lineage—particularly Chithurst and Amaravati—have developed distinct characteristics despite originating from Wat Nong Pa Pong. One example is their introduction of the 10-precept ordination of women wearing brown robes, a practice not traditionally found in Thailand. This approach was introduced by Ajahn Sumedho as a middle ground between Thai monastic tradition and Western egalitarian values. These two temples also exhibit unique governing styles, marked by decentralised and collaborative modes of leadership.

While conducting my analysis, I found that a limitation of my choice of case studies is their strong reliance on close associations with parent temples—such as state sponsorship (Wat Buddhapadipa), direct affiliation (Wat Phra Dhammakaya London), and patronage from esteemed monks (Wat Arun Norfolk and Wat Sri Intra Atula). Even though my sample includes temples from a semi-independent monastic foundation (Amaravati) and a Western lay-initiated temple (Wat Phra Singh UK), their affiliations with parent temples remain strong and continue to shape both their origins and ongoing operations. What is missing from this study are temples that represent establishment models initiated by Thai laypeople or independently founded by resident monks. However, I did encounter such temples during the final stage of my fieldwork and interviewed two of the abbots, but it was too late to include them as the main case study.

The continuity and sustainability of Thai temples in the UK are influenced by various factors, including the consistent flow of monks from Thailand, the temples' ability to adapt to UK regulations and cultural contexts, the continuation of the parent temple's prestige and authority, and the preservation of specific religious traditions such as the Dhammakaya tradition. In addition, active engagement and support from the lay community play a vital role—often through the continued involvement of the same individuals over time. The role of Theravada

monastic organisations in the UK in providing support and addressing challenges also contributes to the continuity of the monastic community. However, challenges such as visa restrictions for monks, the reliance on volunteer support, and potential cross-cultural conflicts can impact long-term continuity. The pitfalls that can beset temples that do not manage these challenges successfully were also visible in the near-disastrous—fortunately only temporary—loss of the sponsor license so crucial for staffing temples with monks and the ways in which conflict resulting from vulnerable management structures has ultimately led to temple closures.

The ongoing connection serves as a reaffirmation of shared identity and religious tradition. Most Thai temples in the UK—apart from those in the Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah’s lineage which have a more international orientation—function as important centres for preserving and reaffirming Thai cultural and religious identity within a transnational context. They serve as physical spaces where Thai migrants can observe their Buddhist traditions, celebrate Thai festivals, and maintain connections to Thai cultural heritage. The presence of Thai monks, the use of the Thai language in rituals, and the provision of cultural activities help to foster a sense of home and belonging for Thais living in the UK.

## Roles and Functions of Thai Temples and Monks

This research challenges the traditional Western perception of Buddhist monks as “world-renouncers” and “priestly roles” by highlighting their significant administrative and managerial responsibilities. Chapter 4 and 5 demonstrate how monks are tasked with managing complex UK regulations related to visas, building control, environmental protection, and public health. In addition, they often take on managerial duties such as financial oversight, property development, and people management—responsibilities more commonly associated with civil servants or managers. While fulfilling all of the aforementioned roles, Thai monks must also adapt to cultural differences in the UK and demonstrate English proficiency equivalent to that required of international students applying for a bachelor’s degree to meet the visa requirements for the Minister of Religion position. Monks are still expected to fulfil the ideals of celibate Buddhist renouncers while serving their communities’ religious and other needs and adapting to modernity. Thus, the roles of monks are multifaceted, particularly in the diaspora, where they are responsible for religious guidance as well as administrative duties, cultural mediation, and community support.

This study also underscores the role of Thai temples in the UK, which serve both similar and distinct functions compared to those in Thailand, with additional roles emerging in the diaspora context. As in Thailand, temples in the UK provide spaces for spiritual development, merit-making, and religious rituals. However, they also function as important cultural and social hubs for the Thai migrant community, helping to preserve Thai identity, culture, and language. Some temples additionally serve as sites for negotiating cross-cultural interactions, particularly within communities involving mixed marriages. Unlike in Thailand, where temporary ordinations are common, this practice is rare in most UK temples. Furthermore, certain temples in the UK—such as Wat Buddhapadipa—have historically played a role in the diplomatic representation of Thailand.

Future research could be valuable in examining whether Thais in the UK visit Thai temples more frequently than they did in Thailand. Due to time constraints, this study cannot determine the overall proportion of temple-goers; however, the three volunteers interviewed, each from a different temple, all reported visiting temples in the UK more often than they had in Thailand. One participant also noted that her quality of life had improved as a result of this increased engagement.

## Community Engagement and Migration Context

The comparable density of Thai population to temple by country can be seen in Table 9. The UK has the highest density of Thai temples relative to its Thai population when compared to Thailand, the USA and Germany. This suggests that the Thai community in the UK has exceptionally high access to temples per capita, even more than in Thailand itself. Remarkably, this development has occurred at a rapid pace, especially when compared to Thailand, where temples have been established for over 2,000 years. This accelerated growth can be attributed to various factors. First, the small size of the country allows for easy mobility between towns, which in turn helps foster stronger networks within the Thai migrant community. As the community is relatively small, individuals can more easily connect with those who have already settled in the UK. This interconnectedness facilitates the establishment of temples, as newcomers can draw on the knowledge and support of those who have already gone through the process.

Secondly, Thai temples in the UK benefit from diverse forms of patronage. Initially, some temples—such as Wat Buddhapadipa—received significant support from the Thai government and royal family. Over time, the Thai diaspora, including entrepreneurs and lay supporters, became a crucial source of financial and in-kind contributions. Some temples, particularly those in the Thai Forest Tradition, also attract patronage from Western lay practitioners. Additionally, parent temples in Thailand often provide both financial and monastic support, reinforcing a transnational network of patronage. The nature of this support often influences a temple's governance structure and reflects the community it serves—whether primarily the Thai community or a broader international audience.

In addition to financial patronage from laypeople, other sources of funding include UK institutions such as local councils, the Veolia Environmental Trust, and the central government through the Levelling Up Fund. Wat Phra Singh UK has benefited from these external grants largely through the efforts of Tony, the temple's English founder and trustee. His deep understanding of the UK's funding landscape, along with his ability to navigate grant application processes, has played a crucial role in securing support that is relatively uncommon among Thai temples in the UK. While Wat Phra Singh UK is in good hands, there remains a concern about the reliance on a single, highly competent and motivated individual. Such dependence carries the risk that the temple may become vulnerable in the future, should this key supporter no longer be available.

Third, the nature of patronage is international, shaped by a diverse demographic that includes not only Thai migrants but also Western converts and second-generation Thai-British individuals. The community itself is quite mixed, with people in intercultural marriages, as well as Thai entrepreneurs who regularly move between the UK and Thailand. The recent growth in the number of temples seems closely tied to shifting migration patterns and the fluid, transnational character of the Thai diaspora. It is not only that the temples have become international by expanding abroad, but also that the communities they serve are themselves increasingly international.

Lastly, the nature of Thai migration itself is significant, with around 70% of migrants being women. This observation adds depth to our understanding of Thai migration, particularly by challenging the common stereotype of Thai women as economically dependent foreign wives or sex workers. In reality, many Thai women play an important role in supporting temples,

taking on dual roles as both entrepreneurs and upholders of religious and cultural life in the diaspora. With the support of Thai women, temples receive both financial and in-kind contributions, particularly through daily meal offerings, which play a vital role in ensuring the continuity and sustainability of temple life. On the other hand, female renunciators, *mae chi*, so ubiquitous in Thailand, are absent in the UK, and temples here do not serve the traditional function as a place of refuge for older lay women, partly because of the dispersed and younger demographics of the Thai diaspora, partly because such welfare functions are served by other public services.

To finish, I would like to state that it has been an honour to learn from my many informants. My hope is that this thorough analysis of the practicalities of Thai temples, the way they bridge Thailand and the UK while shouldering additional roles and responsibilities and the extraordinary expertise in multiple fields shown by monks, volunteers and sponsors as they navigate complex challenges will lead to a greater appreciation of all that is entailed, while also acting as a guide to both insiders and outsiders interested in the running of these important cultural and religious institutions. Finally, returning to my original motivation—one that I share with many other Thai Buddhist scholars—is a broader concern with the endurance of Buddhism and, in this case, the sustainability of Thai Buddhist temples in the UK. In closing, I warmly dedicate this thesis to the wonderful Thai Buddhist communities in the UK. Their ability to adapt, serve, and inspire across cultures and generations truly shines, and their impactful work far exceeds my own in its practicalities.

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# Appendix 1: Interview Questions for Abbot, Trustee or Representative of the Temples

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1. What is your name?
2. What is your nationality?
3. What is your nationality of birth?
4. How long have you been the abbot/ trustee/ manager/ representative in the UK?
5. How old are you?
6. Contact details?
7. Do you have any official Thai ranks or title?
8. What is the background of your Buddhist tradition? Any main branch in Thailand?
9. Are you connected to the temple in the UK? or elsewhere outside of Thailand?
10. Who is the founder of this temple? Who're the main donors at the beginning? Now?
11. When was the temple founded and what was the date moving to the current site?
12. How many monks, nuns, and other type of residents reside in this temple? What are their ethnicities?
13. How do you recruit?
14. What type is the building? Is it a listed building?
15. Do you need planning permission? Have you needed or do you need planning permission to change use, build or change any part of the building or grounds?
16. Do you have Sima in the temple? Who consecrated it?
17. Do you do ordination of Bhikkhus? Novice? Women? Temporary or intended life long?
18. Do you have relics at the temple? Where from? Any special Buddha or other images? Shrines to any gods?
19. Is your temple located in urban (town/ city centre), suburban, rural, or remote area?
20. What ethnicities are your main congregations? (e.g. UK convert Buddhists, UK married partners of Thais, Thais, other Southeast Asian ethnic groups, etc. provide a list you think is representative)
21. What are the main activities and regular events undertaken at the temple?

22. What is the reason for the foundation? Why was this temple set up? Who's officially own the temple?
23. How do you organise lay supporters and volunteers?
24. How do people know about your event? Facebook, word of mouth?
25. Do you attend any Buddhist meeting in the UK or outside?
26. What languages do you use? Do you have difficulty in communicating in English?
27. Could you describe the organisational structure of the temple? Who holds leadership positions, and what are their responsibilities?
28. How are decisions made within the temple? Who is involved in the decision-making process, and what factors are considered when making decisions?
29. Could you describe the role of the temple in the local community? How does the temple interact with and serve the community, and how does it engage with local social and cultural norms and values?
30. How is the temple funded? What are the main sources of income for the temple, and how are financial resources allocated to different activities?
31. Could you describe the relationships between the temple and other institutions in the community (e.g. other religious organisations, local governments)? How do these relationships impact the temple's operations and decision-making processes?
32. Are there any challenges or opportunities that the temple is currently facing? How is the temple addressing these issues, and how do you envision the temple evolving in the future?
33. Please indicate if you would like your identity to be anonymised (yes or no, or any particular aspect of your identity)
34. Please indicate if you would like any information provided generalised so that it cannot be associated with you (indicate by question number)

# Appendix 2: List of Standard Audio Recorded Interviews and Email Correspondence

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I have arranged this list chronologically based on the dates of my interviews. For informants I interviewed multiple times, I have included the specific dates of each interview. Their royal ecclesiastical rank, title, and temple position reflect their status at the time of the first interview. While these details may have changed since, or may change after the completion of this thesis, I have chosen to retain the original titles and positions as they were at the time of our initial meeting.

- 1. Interview date:** 29/1/2020, 29/10/2020, 26/7/2022, 5/8/2022  
**Name:** Mr. Anuchit Treeratanajutawat  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 45  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Former temple's manager  
**Location of interview:** Phone interview  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1 and background of Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, its branches, the sponsor licence process, how to handle a deceased body, and purchasing property owned by Wat Phra Dhammakaya in the UK.
- 2. Interview date:** 1/2/2020, 9/11/2021, 14/9/2023, 6/1/2024  
**Name:** Venerable Phramaha Bhatsakorn Piyobhaso (Pali: *Piyobhāso*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 48  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Chairman of Wat Phra Sri Sanphet's charity, Secretary of Wat Buddhapadipa, Treasurer of Wat Mahathat King's Bromley), Abbot of Wat Phra Sri Sanphet)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 25 years (Novice 7 years)  
**Location of interview:** Phone interview/ in person interview at Oxford Buddhist Vihara  
**Interview topic:** Initial conversation about the list of Thai temples in the UK, background of Wat Buddhapadipa, the associated temples and the relationship between Wat Buddhapadipa and other Thai temples, organisational structure of Wat Buddhapadipa, background of Theravada Buddhist Sangha of the United Kingdom (TBSUK) and interview questions from Appendix 1.
- 3. Interview date:** 16/02/2020, 5/4/2023  
**Name:** Venerable Phra Pichit Thitachayo (Pali: *Thitajayo*)

**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Samu  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 46  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 23 years  
**Location of interview:** Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle, UK  
**Interview topic:** History of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle and the management of the temple and interview questions from Appendix 1.

4. **Interview date:** 6/3/2020, 14/07/2022, 24/10/2022  
**Name:** Venerable Phramaha Somchai Thannavuddho (Pali: *Thānavuddho*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Khru Palad Suwatthanaphothi  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 60  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Tokyo)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 37 years  
**Location of interview:** DCI Centre for Buddhist Studies, Thailand and phone interview  
**Interview topic:** Background of Dhammadhuta monks, the background of Thammayut and Mahanikai monks with regards to *saṅghakamma*.
5. **Interview date:** 28/10/2020  
**Pseudonym:** INF001  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 30-39  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** Temple's staff  
**Location of interview:** Phone interview  
**Interview topic:** Sponsor licence for the temple.
6. **Interview date:** 14/4/2021  
**Name:** Venerable Phra Chaiyut Chayawangso (Pali: *Jayavaṃso*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 45  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Director of International Branch Liaison at Wat Phra Dhammakaya Pathumthani)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 22 years  
**Location of interview:** Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Pathumthani, Thailand  
**Interview topic:** Visa process for the monks in Thailand and the recruiting process for the monks to go abroad for Wat Phra Dhammakaya.
7. **Email correspondence:** 24/1/2022, 24/6/2022  
**Interview date:** 30/3/2023, 24/4/2023  
**Name:** Mr. Tony Collacot  
**Place of birth:** UK

**Age:** 60-69  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Wat Phra Singh's trustee  
**Location of interview:** Wat Phra Singh, Runcorn  
**Interview topic:** Background of Wat Phra Singh, UK's authorities, monk's visa, interview questions from Appendix 1.

**8. Interview date:** 28/7/2022

**Name:** Venerable Phra Nipon Thirapanyo (Pali: *Dhīrapañño*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 73  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Suan Pa Thammatara, Thailand)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 18 years  
**Location of interview:** Phone interview  
**Interview topic:** Establishment of temple in Thailand.

**9. Interview date:** 24/8/2022

**Name:** Paul  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 30-35  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Restaurant manager, temple's supporter  
**Location of interview:** Thai restaurant, London  
**Interview topic:** Background of Wat Arun Norfolk UK.

**10. Interview date:** 17/11/2022

**Pseudonym:** INF002  
**Age:** 40-49  
**Gender:** Female  
**Location of interview:** In person  
**Interview topic:** The experience of visiting Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Thailand for the first time.

**11. Interview date:** 17/4/2023

**Name:** Venerable Phramaha Phanuwat Wisutthimethi (Pali: *Visuddhimedhī*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 37  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Acting abbot)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 17 years, (Novice 8 years)  
**Location of interview:** Wat Arun Norfolk UK, Norwich  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1.

**12. Interview date:** 17/4/2023

**Name:** Venerable Phramaha Natthawut Thannavuddho (Pali: *Thānavuddho*)

**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 27  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk  
**Ordination year:** Monk 7 years (Novice 12 years)  
**Location of interview:** Wat Arun Norfolk UK, Norwich  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1.

**13. Interview date:** 20/4/2023

**Name:** Venerable Phra Nikom Akkavaro (Pali: *Aggavaro*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Khru Akkarathammanusarn  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 65  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Acting abbot of Wat Sri Intra Atula)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 38 years  
**Location of interview:** Wat Sri Intra Atula, Crawley  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1.

**14. Interview date:** 22/4/2023

**Name:** Venerable Phra Seri Sirisampanno (Pali: *Sirisampanno*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Khru Samu  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 47  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya Manchester)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 28 years  
**Location of interview:** Wat Phra Dhammakaya Manchester, Manchester  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1.

**15. Interview date:** 2/5/2023

**Name:** Venerable Phramaha Laow Panyasiri (Pali: *Paññāsiri*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Ratchawithetpanyakhun  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 63  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 43 years (Novice 7 years)  
**Location of interview:** Wat Buddhapadipa, London  
**Interview topic:** The associated temples and the relationship between Wat Buddhapadipa, Wat Mahathat King's Bromley and other Thai temples and interview questions from Appendix 1.

**16. Interview date:** 5/5/2023

**Name:** Venerable Phra Amaro Bhikkhu  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Rājabuddhivaraguṇa  
**Place of birth:** Kent, UK

**Age:** 66  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Amaravati)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 44 years  
**Location of interview:** Wat Amaravati, Hemel Hempstead  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1.

**17. Interview date:** 5/5/2023

**Name:** Venerable Phra Ronnapop Chotilapo (Pali: *Jotilābho*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 61  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya London)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 26 years  
**Location of interview:** Wat Phra Dhammakaya London, Woking  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1.

**18. Interview date:** 9/5/2023

**Name:** Venerable Phra Sitthiporn Tantipalo (Pali: *Tantipālo*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 63  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Member of the monastic community at Wat Sriratanaram, expert in construction projects)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 20 years  
**Location of interview:** Wat Sriratanaram, Manchester  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1.

**19. Interview date:** 18/5/2023

**Name:** Mrs Kwanjit Collacot  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 64  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** Self-employed in food catering, temple's trustee and volunteer.  
**Location of interview:** Phone interview  
**Interview topic:** Her role in supporting the temple as a trustee and a volunteer.

**20. Interview date:** 23/5/23

**Name:** Mrs Daraphun Mitchell  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 58  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** Self-employed in food catering, temple's volunteer  
**Location of interview:** Phone interview  
**Interview topic:** The founding of the temple and her role as a volunteer in supporting it.

- 21. Interview date:** 1/6/2023  
**Name:** Venerable Phramaha Paganon Buddhimedhee  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Khru Sriratanadhammavides  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 51  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Sriratanaram)  
**Ordination year:** 30  
**Location of interview:** Wat Sriratanaram, Manchester  
**Interview topic:** Interview questions from Appendix 1.
- 22. Interview date:** 29/6/2023  
**Name:** Venerable Phra Nuntanat Kittisaphano  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 29  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk  
**Ordination year:** Monk 8 years (Novice 9 years)  
**Location of interview:** Phone interview  
**Interview topic:** Background of Wat Phra Singh Chiang Mai, recruitment process.
- 23. Interview date:** 29/8/2023  
**Name:** Venerable Phra Sutas Amarasuddhi  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 53  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot's assistant)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 32 years (Novice 9 years)  
**Location of interview:** Wat Buddhapadipa, London  
**Interview topic:** Background of the Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland, challenges in temple's establishment in the UK.
- 24. Interview date:** 20/9/2023  
**Name:** Venerable Phra Boonsi Phakinno (Pali: *Bhakinno*)  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Khru Sangharak  
**Place of birth:** Thailand  
**Age:** 58  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Santivanaram)  
**Ordination year:** Monk 38 years  
**Location of interview:** Phone interview  
**Interview topic:** Background of Wat Santivanaram.
- 25. Interview date:** 28/12/2023, 30/4/24, 15/10/24  
**Name:** Venerable Phramaha Jirawath Ciraputtiyo  
**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** Phra Khru Palad

**Place of birth:** Thailand

**Age:** 28

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** Monk (Abbot of Wat Arun Norfolk)

**Ordination year:** Monk 9 years (Novice 9 years)

**Location of interview:** Phone interview

**Interview topic:** Background of Wat Arun Norfolk UK, role of the abbot, and the organisational structure of Wat Arun in Thailand.

**26. Interview date:** 5/5/24

**Name:** Mae Chi Jamlong Wimonpradit

**Royal ecclesiastical rank and title:** -

**Place of birth:** Thailand

**Age:** 82

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** Nun at Wat Khao Wang Ratchaburi, Thailand

**Ordination year:**

**Location of interview:** Phone interview

**Interview topic:** Background of being a nun in Thailand.

**27. Interview date:** 15/12/2024

**Name:** Chaweewan Wongprasert

**Place of birth:** Thailand

**Age:** 63

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** Restaurant owner, temple supporter and volunteer

**Location of interview:** Phone interview

**Interview topic:** The role of a volunteer at Wat Buddhapadipa

## Appendix 3: List of Temple Visits and Periods of Participant Observation

No.	Temple	Location	Date of Visit	Event/ Activity
1.	Wat Phra Dhammakaya Newcastle	Newcastle upon Tyne	31/10/21	<i>Kathin</i> Ceremony
			30/10/22	<i>Kathin</i> Ceremony
			3/6/23	First Sunday Ceremony and Vesak Day
2.	Wat Phra Dhammakaya London	London	6/11/22	First Sunday Ceremony and Loy Krathong Festival
			23/10/23	<i>Kathin</i> Ceremony
			5/5/23	Interview Abbot
			11/6/23	International Vesak Day
3.	Wat Arun Norfolk UK	Norwich	24/3/23	First time visiting the temple
			17/4/23	Interview two monks
			30/4/23	Songkran Festival
4.	Wat Buddhapadipa	London	26/3/23	Robe Offering Ceremony
			2/5/23	Interview the abbot
			29/8/23	Interview resident monks
5.	Wat Phra Dhammakaya Scotland	Helensburgh	2/4/23	First Sunday Ceremony
6.	Wat Phra Dhammakaya Manchester	Manchester	22/4/23	Annual Earth's Day Ceremony
			7/5/23	First Sunday Ceremony
7.	Wat Buddharam Leeds	Leeds	8/5/23	First time visiting the temple
8.	Wat Sriratanaram	Manchester	9/5/23	First time visiting the temple
			1/6/23	Interview the abbot
			7/7/23	The Council of Thai Buddhist Monks in the United Kingdom and Ireland's annual conference
			9/7/23	<i>Sima</i> Consecration Ceremony
9.	Oxford Buddhist Vihara	Oxford	23/2/23	Anthropology of Buddhism's lecture at the temple
			21/5/23	Food offering and Ajahn Brahmari's talk
10.	Wat Thai Southend	Southend- on-Sea	23/2/23	Sponsor Licence's discussion
11.	Wat Phra Singh	Runcorn	30/3/23	Interview trustee, offering monks' necessities
			24/4/23	Interview trustee
12.	Amaravati	Hemel Hempstead	19/4/23	First time visiting the temple
			5/5/23	Interview abbot
13.	Wat Sri Intra Atula	Crawley	20/4/23	Interview Abbot
14.	Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery	Newcastle upon Tyne	8/6/23	Offering food
			5/11/23	<i>Kathin</i> Ceremony

# Appendix 4: List of Titles used in Thai Buddhism

In Thailand, we have a diverse range of honorifics, especially when addressing monks. Below is a list of the most common titles Thai people use when addressing monks.

RGTS Romanised	Thai	Pali	Translation
Ajan (commonly, Ajahn)	อาจารย์	<i>ācariya</i>	The term is translated as ‘professor’ or ‘teacher’. It is frequently used as a prefix to the names of monks in the Thai Forest Tradition.
Chao Khun	เจ้าคุณ		A title designated for monks who hold the rank of <i>Phra Rachakhana</i> and above, but excluding those with the rank of <i>Sangharaja</i> or <i>Somdet Phra Rachakhana</i> .
Luang A, Luang Na	หลวงอา, หลวงน้า		‘Venerable Uncle’ is a term of respect used for elderly monks without specific titles, typically those aged between 40 and 50 years old.
Luang Lung	หลวงลุง		‘Venerable Uncle’ is a term of respect for elder monks without formal titles, usually those over 50 years old.
Luang Phi	หลวงพี่		‘Venerable Elder’ is a term of reverence used to address a monk, whether younger or older than the speaker, typically those under 50 years old.
Luang Pho (commonly, Luang Por)	หลวงพ่อ		‘Venerable Father’ is a term used to show respect and reverence for Buddhist monks who have many years of ordination and hold a high status in the Buddhist community in Thailand. This title is especially used for monks who lead temples or are well-known in the community.
Luang Ta/Luang Pu	หลวงตา/หลวงปู่		‘Venerable Grandfather’ is a term of respect for senior monks without specific titles.

Phra	พระ		An honorific title often used as a prefix for monks' names in Thailand. It can be translated as 'monk'.
Phramaha	พระมหา		It is an honorific title used before the names of monks who have passed the examination of at least three Pali scriptures or levels.
Samanen	สามเณร	<i>sāmaṇera</i>	A designation for a novice monk not yet ordained at a higher level.
Than	ท่าน		It is an honorific term that can be translated to 'you' in a respectful or formal context. Depending on the context, it can also be translated as 'Sir,' 'Madam,' or 'Venerable' (when referring to monks). The appropriate translation often depends on the specific situation in which it is used. In the UK, many Thai Buddhists use this term as a prefix when addressing monks by their names.