

# THE BUDDHIST ARCHIVE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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Luang Prabang, Laos

## **A unique collection of Buddhist photographs**

We started our research on Buddhist photographs of Luang Prabang in the year 2006 at the private reception room of The Most Venerable Phra Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thera, Abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam. The revered abbot, our teacher and mentor, had collected and preserved a great number of historic photographs in this room, for more than 70 years. He entrusted his collection to us with the aim of finding ways to further preserve, identify and publish these photographs. He held his collection as a rare testimony of the history of Lao Buddhism and its rich spiritual heritage; he wanted it to be available for future generations of Lao people. As we worked on Phra Khamchan's photographs, and came across more and more surprising aspects of his collection, we also discovered other collections of photographs in other monasteries of Luang Prabang that had been hidden for many years. Today, we know of 12 distinct collections containing more than 35.000 photographs. They illustrate 120 years of Lao Buddhism and are immensely valuable documents in regard to the history of the 20th century, to Buddhist studies, ethnology, anthropology, architecture and many other disciplines of research. Some of these photographs are also pieces of art: two collections put artistic interest in photography in the foreground, and there is at least one artistic oeuvre that must be noted, done by a monk-photographer, Phra Oune Heuane Hasapanyo.

Following the wish of Phra Khamchan, the Buddhist Sangha of Luang Prabang created the Buddhist Archive of Photography and assigned an archive and work space at Sala Thammaviharn, Vat Khili. Through the support of the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, digitization of the archive's photographs and related documents, and research on its content, are now under way. This work is done by a small team of local and foreign researchers under the auspices of the Buddhist Sangha of Luang Prabang District, The National Library of Laos and the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Lao P.D.R. The aim of our work is to make the archive accessible for researchers through high quality digital copies that will be accessible in Luang Prabang, Vientiane (National Library) and London (British Library). All original photographs, being property of the Buddhist Sangha, will remain in Luang Prabang.

This modest book for the first time shows a small selection of the archive's photographs to a larger public. We selected these 'treasures' along several lines of interpretation that at the moment seemed interesting to us; other publications from the archive are in preparation and will follow. Since December 2009, an exhibition of the selected photographs has been set up at the ancient library of Vat Khili, Luang Prabang, that is open to the Lao and to foreign visitors. A large format calendar has been produced and was distributed as a dhamma gift to 800 monks in Luang Prabang and its surrounds where it is now used for teaching novices and young monks.

Buddhist photographs of Luang Prabang have almost miraculously survived the difficult times of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Laos found itself in the middle of violent conflicts, war and civil war,

a revolution and deep social changes. Through the eyes of the Theravada monks, they reflect these times and at the same time are a consistent and highly articulate statement about a Buddhist culture and tradition very little known to the outside world. Lao Buddhism is different from the Buddhism of neighboring countries. If there was need for a resolved proof for this fact, it can be found in our photographs.

While the monks of Luang Prabang in their photographs had great attention for their specific spirituality, for the portraits of great monks and for their rich cultural and religious traditions, they also had an extraordinarily open eye for the outside world. We found proof of their exchange with other religions for more than 90 years, for their pilgrimages and travel, and for continuous relations with other Buddhist people in other countries. Isolated as their city was for so many years, they found ways to be in touch with Buddhist Lao people all over the world. Photography played an important role in that.

We are grateful to all the institutions and people who sustain, support and encourage our work. We sincerely thank the philanthropic gentleman who, with his gift to the archive, has made the printing of a series of bilingual books on its contents possible. Following gracious and ancient Buddhist tradition, he wishes to remain anonymous.

Luang Prabang, Laos  
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