

## Succession and Development of Lae Melody of Desana Mahajati Sermon in Central Thailand

<sup>1</sup>Phrakruvinaitorn Manop Palaphan, <sup>1</sup>Songkoon Chantachon and <sup>2</sup>Pornpen Tanprasert  
<sup>1</sup>Research Institute of Northeast Thailandern Arts and Culture,  
Mahasarakham University, Muang District, Mahasarakham 44000, Thailand  
<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Humanities, Rajabhat Thonburi University, 172 Isaraphap Road,  
Kwaeng Wat Kanlaya, Thonburi, Bangkok 10600, Thailand

**Abstract:** The Desana Mahajati Sermon is the ritualized preaching of the Vesantara Jataka. The ceremony has existed since the Sukhotai era of Thailand and originated from the 1,000 verses of Pali incantations of the Vesantar Jataka. The 1,000 verses were revised into 13 chapters. Each chapter ends with a musical interlude and a distinctive ornamented melody known locally as Lae melody at the beginning and the middle of the reciting. The Desana Mahajati sermon is divided into the royal version and the public version. Both versions have Lae melodies. The royal version is regarded as the standard pattern or official style of Desana Mahajati and the content directly from the Vesantara Jataka. The public version of Desana Mahajati Sermon or public Lae melodies that refer to content outside the Vesantara Jataka such as other Jataka stories, the history of the Buddha, local folk tales and Thai literature stories. Currently, the succession of the sermons is still continued but the Lae melodies are disappearing and being performed incorrectly. The methods to improve and provide sustainable development of the correct Lae melodies of the sermon can be done by creating a master prototype recording of the accurate royal and public versions and encourage preachers to learn the sermon at the temples. Courses on Desana Mahajati sermon should be taught by teachers, who are experts and have experience. Sermon training should be followed up to assess the effectiveness of the teachings and development. Create prototype media such as CD and DVD by conserving the location, ceremony rituals, melodies, version and content of the correct Desana Mahajati sermon and invite private and government organizations to participate as hosts, sponsors and to help promote the media to preachers, priests and the general public.

**Key words:** Succession, Lae rhythm, Desana Mahajati, sermon, Central Thailand, Vesantara Jataka

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### INTRODUCTION

Every ethnic group of every language will always have culture or unique identity that represents who they are through their lifestyles. Culture is therefore, the blueprint for human existence. Culture is passed on by learning and accumulation of efforts of the community and taught to members of their society. Culture doesn't mean just prosperity and the orderly system of people in a society, but it also means everything that is the expression of the lifestyles of that particular community (Meekuson, 2002). Approximately 95% of Thais are Theravada Buddhists (Cummings *et al.*, 2005). Most Thai citizens have utilized Dharma or the teachings of the Buddha as a guideline to conduct their lives. Majority of Thais, believe that Dharma will bring peace, happiness and prosperity to them, their family and to the nation.

Dharma is conveyed to ordinary citizens by Buddhist priests and monks through teachings and sermons to nurture moral ethics and proper behavior. The faith in Buddhism and in Dharma is the motivational force behind the religious art works. Desana Mahajati Sermon or The Mahajati is an exposition of the life story of the last incarnation of the Buddha or better known as Vesantara Jataka, which is one of the religious art masterpieces of Buddhism. Sermons and discourses have reminded communities to do good deeds and make merit. It also nourishes unity, dedication, honesty and sacrifice (Somjitsripunya *et al.*, 2008).

The Desana Mahajati Sermon is the ritualized preaching of the Vesantara Jataka and the story concerns the perfection of giving and is the last of the 547 stories or Jataka (Schober, 1997). The story of Vesantara is known widely throughout Thailand to this day. It is

frequently presented to the populace in the form of a sermon, typically in conjunction with a major festival; the story is also dramatized in folk opera and in theater and scenes appear in art. There is probably no Buddhist in Thailand beyond the age of ten or so who could not give at least a synopsis of the story and many people especially in villages (Collins, 1998). The Vesantara Jataka has been very popular among Buddhist since the Sukhotai dynasty up to modern times. The Vesantara Jataka represents not only a positive moral virtue central to the Theravada ethical tradition but is also the paradigm of the meritorious consequence of giving. The story's popularity developed, at least in part because in many Theravada cultures Vesantara's life came to be honored in an elaborate, ritualized preaching of the Jataka tale in the form of Desana Mahajati (Swearer, 1995).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The aim of this study is to investigate the knowledge of a Lae melody of the Thet Mahachat Sermon of the last incarnation of the Buddha called the Vesantara Jataka or Pra Wetsundorn Chādok in the central part of Thailand and to examine its current conditions and succession and development for further guidelines. In this qualitative research, the specific sampling method was used. Fifty-six individuals were included in the sampling group and were divided into three groups; scholars, practitioners and general information providers. The instruments used to gather data were survey inventory, observation, interview, group conversation and workshop seminars. Inductive analysis and qualitative analysis of culture were implemented. The results of the study were presented by means of descriptive analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Desana Mahajati Sermon of Central Thailand**

**Elements of Desana Mahajati Sermon ceremony:** The host of the Desana Mahajati ceremony must prepare and arrange for the following procedures and items.

**Audience:** The audience, which consists of the host, preacher and the listeners. The host will arrange the appropriate sponsors for each of the chapters of the sermon. One or more sponsors are allowed for each chapter in which they will prepare the honorary donations and offerings to the preacher of the chapter. The preacher is invited by the sponsor or sponsors and must choose a preacher that is expressed in that particular chapter and experienced in Desana Mahajati Sermon. Listeners are invited to attend the ceremony through public relations, advertisement and through word of mouth.

**Location:** The location to hold the ceremony should be spacious enough to service the large number of people attending the sermons and that the listeners can clearly hear the preaching. The assembly hall must be arranged and decorated so that it resembles the hall at Khao Wongot or Labyrinth mountain where the Buddha presided during his hermitage. The pathway is constructed in the form of a maze or Labyrinth, suggesting; Vesantara's selfless generosity confounds ordinary sensibilities or concentration and effort are required to attain such moral perfection. Outside the hall at a distance, pillars are positioned to resemble the entrance into the sermon hall. The pillar of the entrance would be made from banana stalks or decorated with banana stocks and sugar cane. The banana tree selected should be one that is bearing fruit. The riper the fruit or banana, the better it is because, it will resemble wholesomeness and fertility. The area all around the sermon hall should be decorated with banana trees, sugar cane, trees and fruits to make it resemble a forest atmosphere. Thirteen scenes from the Jataka tale identifying each chapter are painted on the walls or painted on cloth banners. Sometimes, there will be dolls made to imitate birds and crows woven from tall grass or leaves. The dolls will be engraved or painted beautifully according to the host's desire and hanged within the hall. In front of the hall, there will be a large bowl or earthen jar to hold holy water, which is accompanied with a joss stick pot and a metal or wooden railing to place candles.

**Time originally:** The Desana Mahajati ceremony would be performed after the end of Buddhist Lent (mid October) when the Katin festival has concluded. The original period was between October to December and usually held on Wan Phra (Buddhist Priest day). In modern times the sermon is widely held between the end of Buddhist lent and March. Desana Mahajati sermon is also performed during special events throughout the year to solicit funds for the Monastery or community. Fund raising events and soliciting donations are the reasons for the change from the traditional time period. Originally, the sermons would be held over a period of 3 days. The first day would be the preaching of 1,000 verses of sermons in Pali. The 2nd day would be the Desana Mahajati sermon. The last day would be sermons of Ariyasaja Si or the four truths of Buddhism. Currently, the Desana Mahajati sermons are only held for 1 day. Modern ceremonies start from early morning and last throughout the night. Breaks would be before noon and continue in the afternoon until all 13 chapters of the Desana Mahajati sermon has been completed. Some temples and monastery arrange a modified narrated version of the sermon, which

lasts only several hours. The change of traditional scheduling, time period and modifications of the Desana Mahajati sermons are some of the factors contributing to the disappearance of Lae melody and the 13 chapters of the Desana Mahajati sermon.

**Tools and utilities tools:** Utilities and decorations needed for the ceremony must be selected to conform with the context of the Vesantara Jataka and to the beliefs of the community. Items that are selected differ according to the community and region. Required items for Desana Mahajati sermon in Central Thailand consists of: set of altar tables, Buddha statue, joss stick pot, candle stand, seat of Sermon (elevated seating for 1 Priest), seats for priests, chamber pot, ceremonial fan, pedestal tray for holding the tri-pitaka Bible, offerings for each chapter, audio amplifier, microphone, banana trees, sugar cane, Banyan tree branches, flowers, ceremonial umbrella, flags, joss sticks, holy water bowl or large earthen jar, holy thread and others.

#### **Desana Mahajati Sermon procedures**

**Before the Sermon:** Before the ceremony begins, the sponsor or sponsors of the chapter will light the candles and joss sticks to honor phrarattana-tri (the Buddha, the teachings and the Buddhist priest). Then the Wong Pi Paht ensemble (Thai orchestra consisting of five groups of wood and percussion instruments) will perform the opening song and then the Satuhkarn song. During the period when the priest is positioning himself at the Sermon chair, the sponsor will present the ceremonial fan to him and lay the offering of robes for the priest on the pedestal tray. Afterwards the sponsor will light the candle sets at the altar tables and light the sermon candle, which is put in place next to the sermon chair by another individual.

**During the sermon:** During the sermon the sponsors will be seated in the front rows and perform their duties in candle lighting and handle the donation trays. The sermon will begin with the recitation of a 1,000 verse summary of the Vessantara Jataka tale in Pali, monks expressly trained to chant one of the thirteen chapters of the Thai version of the Jataka will continue the ritual preaching of the story. Each chapter ends with a musical interlude and usually the preacher may punctuate his recitation with a distinctive ornamented melody known locally as Lae melody at the beginning, middle and end followed by a summary of that part of the text.

**Ending the Sermon:** At the end of each chapter, musical performances will provide the interlude and the songs played must match each of the 13 chapters.

Each chapter of the Jataka has one or more lay sponsors. They invite one of their favorite monks to preach and are responsible for preparing an appropriate donation honorarium at the end of his chapter. These will be carried on decorated offering trays in procession through the forest gate and labyrinth pathway up to the assembly hall, sometimes to the accompaniment of drum, horn and cymbal. The lay sponsors place their gifts before the monk, while he chants a blessing. This sequence repeats itself until all 13 chapters have been completed, a process beginning early in the morning and ending late at night. Traditionally on the 3rd day of the Desana Mahajati Sermon ceremony may include the preaching of the legendary life of the Buddha and the Buddha's first discourse. The latter contains the most familiar doctrinal formulae of the Theravada tradition, the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path (Swearer, 1995).

#### **Origin of the Lae melody of Desana Mahajati Sermons:**

Desana Mahajati Sermon existed since the Sukhotai era of Thailand. The Sermon back then originally came from the 1,000 verses of Pali incantations of the Vesantara Jataka. The 1,000 verses were revised into 13 chapters and inserting light and heavy vowels into the sentences. The 13 chapters were later revised during the reign of king Phra Jao Songtham and the Mahajati Poem was created by the scholar from the royal academy in 1602-1627. The poetry was revised by initially starting the sermons with Pali and followed by Thai translation. The sermons developed by the royal scholars followed an elongated style and is hypothesized to be only used by preachers during royal ceremonies. The elongated style of the sermon during the period of king Pra Jao Songtham is the origin of the melodic styles of Desana Mahajati sermon. At the end of the Ayuttaya period, there were many teachers and schools giving training in Desana Mahajati sermons. Other melodies besides, the royal version were taught and created during this period by the general public. The public melodies were different from the royal version by adding heavy and light notes mixed with other tunes. The difference between the elongated sermons with minimal melodies against mixed tunes is what separated and defined Desana Mahajati of royal version and public version.

**Royal version:** The royal version of Desana Mahajati follows the elongated pattern and Lae (vocalization) patterns or melodies. The content of the sermon in the royal version must always adhere to the context of the chapters in the Vesantara Jataka. The royal version is regarded as the standard pattern or official style of Desana Mahajati. The preacher must be skilled in vocals

through the practices of high and low pitch vocals. The 13 chapters of the Desana Mahajati sermon contains Royal melodies of 152 Lae melodies or vocalizations. The 152 Lae melodies can be categorized into 11 distinct melodies; affixed Lae melody for each chapter. Dharmawat and Dharmawat Grai melody. Tumnong Dern Tumada (general progression) and Tumnong Dern Grai (stride) melody. Tumnong Kuen Tumada (high) and Tumnong Kuen Soong (higher) melody. Tumnong Yai (regular movement) and Tumnong Yai Tehn (dancing movement). 6) Tumnong Glohm (lull) melody, Tumnong Pah (convey) melody, Tumnong Tehn or Kluen Kratoob Fuhng (dancing or waves against the shore) melody. Tumnong Kuhttarad Yeab Kruad (Khuttarad stepping on gravel). Tumnong Tohk Kmer Tee Lehk (Kmer beating metal) melody. Tumnong Dhai Mai Lum Diew (Climbing on a Pole) melody.

**Public version:** The public version of Desana Mahajati Sermon are melodies that reference content not included in the Vesantara Jataka such as Lae melodies of other Jataka stories, Lae melodies of the history of the Buddha, Lae melodies of local folk tales and Lae melodies of Thai literature stories. The individual Lae melodies created by charismatic preachers are all considered public versions. The public version of Lae melodies can be summarized into five melodies; Personal melody created by individual preachers and written for specific purposes or content. These personal Lae melodies include such as; Lae Tumnong Porn (blessing) melody, Lae Tumnong La (departure) melody. Lae Tumnong Pah is a melody used for admiring nature. Tumnong Kae (sheep) melody. Tumnong Prohd (religious routine). Lae Tumnong Chuchok Koh Than (Jujaka begging) melody.

#### **Problems of the Lae melody of Desana Mahajati in central Thailand**

**Current model:** The Desana Mahajati sermons in the past used to be performed by each temple and every Buddhist Priest participated in each of the chapters. Currently that phenomenon is scarce and replaced with short versions of the sermons and limited chapters. Sometime there is even a Sohng Kruang (Gourmet) version of Desana Mahajati sermon where the sermons are accompanied with Likeh (Thai Dramatic performances), which is wrong and dishonors the sermon. Currently, the schedule of the ceremony is decided by the preacher, which is a change from the past where the sermon would only be given after the end of Buddhist lent where large groups of audience would gather and listen to the sermon. In modern times, there aren't as many preachers with expressed experience in Desana Mahajati sermons. Preachers, who are skilled

have found it difficult to accept invitations because of the limited time available. The preacher can only accept one sermon at a time and therefore rescheduling other invitations. The rescheduling of the ceremony have caused audiences to decrease because it was inconvenient or could not allocate the time to the new schedule or do not have enough time to attend the full sermon and prefer to listen to the shorter versions. Preachers have to adapt to the demands of the audience, host and sponsors and reduced the usual Lae melodies to shorten the sermon. Regular Desana Mahajati sermons are long and have many Lae melodies. The long duration of the sermons is to complement and provide adequate time to express the Lae melodies to boost the sacredness of the Mahajati sermon. Shorting the sermons means cutting down on the Lae melodies causing some of the Lae melodies to completely be discontinued and forgotten. Managers and hosts of Desana Mahajati sermon ceremonies have little knowledge in the sacredness of religious rituals. This has decreased the traditional values. The musical interludes that preceded the sermons of each chapter were carefully chosen and performed with passion, virtue and were an important ingredient in elevating the sacredness of the ceremony. The traditional music that used to accompany the Desana Mahajati sermons can seldom be found and the sponsors of the ceremony do not have true knowledge of the value of the musical performances. There are only several events that the audience can experience the traditional music of Desana Mahajati sermon and that is during annual events arranged by provincial and large sponsors such as; The annual Desana Mahajati sermon organized by Kasertsart and Sukhotai Thamairat university. The sermon hall decorations and the elaborate settings for traditional Desana Mahajati sermons is not often followed because the sponsors have reduced the costs and give little attention to the details of recreating the environment of the Labyrinth mountains or Khao Wongkot, where prince Vesantara presided during his hermitage. Managers and sponsors favor inviting preachers that are their own relatives or friend more than on the preacher's skills and experience.

**Content:** Many preachers lack the discipline to preserving the traditional Desana Mahajati sermons. It is common practice among preachers to insert too much excess content and is of little value and discourages the audience to embrace or understand sermon.

**Lae melody:** The melodies of the Desana Mahajati sermons have never been studied. The melodies themselves are sometime referred to by the chapter names

which are unrealistic because there are over 100 melodies, while there are only 13 chapters in the Jataka. The preachers, who have started their learning and training in Desana Mahajati sermon, do so because out of necessity and not because of dedication. This involuntary practice has led to many preachers inability to remember the phrases and melodies correctly. Many preachers that are experts and charismatic in the public version of Desana Mahajati sermon cannot perform the royal version at all. Many preachers aren't even sure if they are following the correct melody and continue to give the sermon without confidence. Some preachers lack the knowledge of using melodies or Lae in the sermons and continue the reciting with a mono tone from start to finish. Many modern preachers lack the skill of innovating new Lae melodies, limiting the development of new Lae melodies. Transferring knowledge and skills of Lae melodies to the next generation of preachers is a difficult task because the traditional Lae melodies are a time-consuming practice. Only preachers with the gift of vocals can obtain the skills correctly. A charismatic preacher is one that has an exceptional voice that can soothe and lull the audience. Charismatic preachers must also be able to convey the importance of the verse in a short period of time and make the audience understand clearly. These obstacles are the reasons behind the disappearance of Lae melodies because there aren't many people left capable and interested to inherit the art.

**Summary of the problems of the succession of Lae melodies:**

**The preacher:** There are very few preachers that truly knows the correct details of the melodies of the Desana Mahajati sermon. Many preachers ignore the significance of using Lae melodies. Many new preachers or inexperienced and lack the knowledge of correct Lae melodies. The scarcities of experienced preachers have decreased the development of new Lae melodies. Preachers who are experienced in giving sermons lack skills in knowledge transfer of their experiences and talent to others preachers.

**Manager, host, sponsor:** Provide inadequate time for the sermon, which limits the required time to fully express the complete Lae melodies. Managers, sponsors and hosts invite mostly preachers that they know personally and not on their expertise. Desana Mahajati sermons have become more of a commercial event that a cultural heritage.

**Lae melody's difficulty:** The traditional Lae melodies are difficult to reproduce and successful preachers must be knowledgeable in poetry, literature and talented vocals.

Most important is that preaches must have patience and determination in their relentless study and training. The difficulty of obtaining the accurate form of Desana Mahajati has deterred many interested preachers and limited professional preachers to just a few.

**Audience:** The majority of the audience believes that they must receive the sermon of all 13 chapters to receive the most merit. But attending the entire traditional 13 chapters is a time-consuming event. Most audiences require that the host arrange for the preaching of all 13 chapters but in a short program, limiting the Lae melodies.

**Education system:** Currently, there are no educational institution that is interested in creating courses in Desana Mahajati sermons and Lae melodies. Even Buddhist universities and colleges do not provide these classes.

**Economy:** The modern economic environment has created a society that is engaged in developing income and accumulation of material values. Many individuals have ignored the importance of moral development and ethical education.

**Development of the succession and Lae melody of Desana Mahajati Sermon in central Thailand:** The development of sustainable traditional art performances can be done through maintenance of the traditional performances and dissemination through various media and there must be master recordings to be referenced. The recorded music must also be in accordance with current situations to be used as media for decimating and public relations on different activities of agencies in the state and private sectors as well as making local database for study and research (Kaewpengkro *et al.*, 2008). The development of a sustained succession of Lae melody of Desana Mahajati sermon can be done by implementing three methods.

**Method 1:** Create prototype recording of the accurate royal version and encourage preachers to learn the sermon at the temples. The temple should be the center of studies, conservation and development.

**Method 2:** Temples should open courses on Desana Mahajati sermon with teachers who are experts and have experience and knowledge. Sermon trains should be followed up to asses the effectiveness of the teachings and provide continuous improvements.

**Method 3:** Create prototype media such as CD and DVD by conserving the details and decorations of the ceremony, location, rituals, melodies, version and content

of the correct Desana Mahajati sermon and invite private and government organizations to participate as being hosts and sponsors and to help promote the media to preachers, priests and the general public.

The applications of the methods have been tested and verified via workgroup sessions and resulting in the creation of: master CD for the accurate royal version of Desana Mahajati and the various Lae melodies that are currently in practice. Prototype CD of teaching preachers in the arts of Desana Mahajati sermon and the examples of the correct melodies by expressional preachers who are experts in the royal version and public version Desana Mahajati. The CD includes the teachings of how to correctly insert ethical contents and Dharma into the sermon with efficiency. Master CD for organizing Traditional Desana Mahajati sermon that is the most accurate. Master CD of modern Desana Mahajati Sermon of all 13 chapters.

### CONCLUSION

The current problems occurred with the Lae melody of the Mahajati preaching in the central part of Thailand were caused by six following issues; the Mahajati preaching has not been valued by the preachers because they lack knowledge, experience and skills and do not know how to apply the Lae melodies correctly and effectively. In addition, they are disqualified in prosody, resulting in no Lae melody innovation has been developed, the sermon managers are more concentrated in commerce than public faith. The partisan plays important role in inviting the Mahajati preacher monks inappropriately, including sermon ability and lesser time spending on preaching, the melodic pattern is difficult in practice. It is suggested that the Mahajati preacher-monks should perform correctly in term of composition, prose's; both Rai (poetic-prose) and Klon (rhythm-prose) and verses. They must be talented in vocals and be patient.

This is why, it is hard to find someone to succeed in the preaching, the audiences require reduced time for listening to entire preaching. Some present temples have manipulated the sermon in applied manner to shorten time, educational institutions do not recognize that the sermon teaching course should be developed. The curriculum has not been provided into the related universities particularly the Buddhist clerical university and economic issues have resulted that people are negligent of mind and soul development. People pay little attention to the Desana Mahajati sermons, which is a vehicle of teaching the ethical values. Each of episodes describes a desirable

aspect of human behaviors which will lead to higher level of social development. Sustainable development and conservation of the correct Lae melodies of the Desana Mahajati sermon can be done by creating a master prototype recording of the accurate royal and public versions and encourage preachers to learn the sermon at the temples. Courses on Desana Mahajati sermon should be taught by teachers who are experts and have experience. Sermon trains should be followed up to assess the effectiveness of the teachings and development. Create prototype media such as CD and DVD by conserving the location, ceremony rituals, melodies, version and content of the correct Desana Mahajati sermon and invite private and government organizations to participate as hosts, sponsors and to help promote the media to preachers, priests and the general public.

### SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Further research should be supported to encourage the study of developing modern musical notes for Lae melodies and comparative studies between Desana Mahajati sermons in other regions of Thailand and other countries.

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