

THE PILGRIMAGE TO THAT LUANG

TRANSLATION OF TEXT OF ADDRESS PREPARED BY MAHA CHANSOUK FOR
DELIVERY IN LAO AT LAA ON NOVEMBER 6, 1970

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is once again my privilege to be invited by the Lao-American Association to talk to you. This time my topic is "The Pilgrimage to That Luang."

There are many Lao and foreigners who know the story behind the That Luang very well, because the Pilgrimage to That Luang is a traditional national houm which must be held every year. At the same time, many Lao and foreigners think that the That Luang Festival is just an international trade fair, because most of the entertainment now is more secular than religious.

Tonight I would like to tell you about its history, beginning from its inception, relating it to the general history of Laos and to the account of the monument itself.

In translation the words That Luang literally mean a big that or stupa, or a state that, because the word luang has many meanings. It can mean big, public, state, or personality. For instance, thang luang, big road or public road; may luang, big city; khon luang, public property, and so on.

The original name of this that appears in the account which was given by King Sayasetha, or Setthathirat, the founder of the shrine, as Lokachulamani Chedi, which sounds very similar to that of the monument containing the Buddha's hair in Heaven. The That Luang was built to contain a relic of the Buddha which had been brought by five disciples who were missionaries from India during the reign there of King Asoka.

The original That Luang was built by King Chantaboury Nasithisak during the year 236 of the Buddhist Era, corresponding to 307 years before the Christian Era. It was not so tall as the one we see now. Its width was only 4 yan /a full stretch of arms from the tip of the longest finger of one to that of the other/ and its height was 4 yan and 3 gank /the distance from the longest fingertip to the pointed end of the corresponding elbow/. The basic structure of the original one looked very much like That Sanchi, a stupa in India.

When King Sayasetha moved the capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, he rebuilt the that and increased its size to make it more of a national shrine. According to the inscription on the

corner stone, the new construction was begun in the year corresponding to 1566 of the Christian Era, by covering up the original that.

Surrounding the new that the King built 30 smaller ones. Inside each of these, there was a that of cast gold weighing four bahts. A baht was less than an ounce, and with each one of these, there was a gold leaf more than one span long on which sacred words were inscribed. Some of these gold thats and leaves were discovered in 1930 during the restoration of the shrine.

It has always been the practice, whether in Laos, Thailand, or Ceylon, that a King who built a wat or shrine would assign the neighboring village to look after it, and would exempt that village from taxes. So King Sayasetha, after completing the That Luang, assigned the people nearby to take care of it.

Besides this monument, the King built many wats and Buddha statues, such as Wat Sisongvong, south of the That Luang; a that to contain a relic of a disciple of Buddha at Wat Sokpaluang; Wat Hongthong; Wat Nong Pangkham (on the site of the Settha Palace Hotel); Wat Huaybangphuan; the statue of Buddha Ongtu in Wat Ongtu; a statue in Ban Namhong, across the Mekong; the statue of Pra Souk and Pra Seum in Nongkhay.

Apparently there were no further alterations or remodeling of the That Luang by any of the later kings.

The visitors' book recorded that the Dutch merchant Van Wusthoff arrived here in 1641 during the reign of Soulinavongsa, at the right time of year for the That Luang Festival.

Inside the That Luang courtyard, the King gave a special reception to this, his first western visitor. In his diary, Van Wusthoff declared that the that was one of the most beautiful monuments he had ever seen. Its base was covered with 1000 pounds of gold leaf. The That Luang celebration has been a traditional practice since that time.

Each year, before the actual ceremony of That Luang begins, the ceremony of worshipping the tutelary deity of Vientiane must be held at Wat Simuang. Wat Simuang is the oldest wat of Vientiane. So the That Luang Festival actually begins at Wat Simuang one day before it comes to That Luang.

After that, a traditional pong is held at Wat Ongtu and Wat Inpeng; it probably began as the anniversary of the erection of the statue of Buddha Ongtu by King Sayasetha at the same time as he built the That Luang.

In addition to the religious acts, the That Luang festival includes other activities. But the religious is regarded as the most important, because the purpose is to venerate the that or the relic of Buddha. Followers of Buddhism in the whole country and in the neighboring countries flock in to worship, because this act of worship yields much merit and it is held only once a year.

You will see Buddhists day and night, with flowers, candles, and incense in their hands, walking into the that. Flowers, candles, and incense are considered to be pure and to evidence respect.

Before entering a place which one respects or which is sacred, one must, according to Buddhist custom, take off his shoes and hat, and leave every sort of weapon outside. And before actual worship takes place, he must face east and then walk around the place three times. This act is a sign of high respect. This custom has been followed for over 2500 years.

Besides the religious acts, the government includes various other activities which are not considered inimical to Buddhist teachings, in order to enliven the occasion of the That Luang festival. The diary of Van Wasthoff reports the inclusion of polo, horse racing, dueling, boxing and other sports. These are still practiced at the festival.

One of the most important of these acts is the Great Oath-taking. Every ghag mngong, and nowadays officials from every ministry, join in the ceremony of oath-taking before the sacred statue of Ongtu to express their loyalty to the King and the people. Then they go to worship at the That Luang.

I have noticed that it has now become a tradition for farmers and artisans to bring to the That Luang festival their production of the past year to barter or sell for cash and to show the progress they have made during the year. When Van Wasthoff was here, he had with him some cloth, mirrors, rings, and so on. This merchandise was sold at the fair and in the meantime his party purchased lao merchandise such as gum benzoin, cinnamon, elephant tusks, and animal hides.

The modern custom of displaying both domestic and foreign merchandise has become more and more prevalent. Now it can almost be said that the Pilgrimage to That Luang is a That Luang Trade Fair. Nowadays different ministries, instead of the people and ordinary artisans, take this opportunity to exhibit the result of their work during the past year.

Besides the ministries, foreign embassies in Vientians display the progress of their own countries in economy, administration, art, culture, and sciences in order to help entertain the people. Therefore many people who do not well understand the festival think that the emphasis of the celebration has been put more on the exhibition of merchandise. But theoretically its primary aim is to give all Buddhists the opportunity to come and worship the relics of Buddha.

Naturally all mankind has to be occupied with work day and night in order to survive; but every year, after working hard in a field or office, one can spare some free time to come participate in the festival and meet others in the capital city. In conclusion, the That Luang Festival yields good results both religious and secular.