

# *Dāna Dhamma* Tradition of the Tai Diaspora in Thailand: The Selection of the Donated Scriptures and the Role of the Tradition<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Because of war and impoverishment, Tai ethnic groups emigrated from many towns of Xishuangbanna in China and from Burma to live at Ban Pha Taek, Tambon Wiang Phang Kham, Amphoe Mae Sai, Changwat Chiang Rai, 50 years ago. These peoples have preserved many of their traditions since then, including the *Dāna Dhamma* tradition. During fieldwork conducted in 2013-2014 at Wat Pha Taek, the main temple of the Tai ethnic groups in Mae Sai district, a number of Buddhist scriptures were found. One of the collections found in quantity was scriptures donated on the occasion of the donor's or the donor's relative's serious illness and for transferring merit to the deceased.

This article aims at examining and analyzing the significance of the 13 most frequently donated scriptures in terms of their content, context, and role for the donors, the Tai diaspora at Ban Pha Taek, Tambon Wiang Phang Kham, Amphoe Mae Sai, Changwat Chiang Rai, Thailand.

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## Introduction

The *Dāna Dhamma* tradition or the donation of scriptures to Buddhist temples is one of the essential traditions which has been preserved and transmitted among several Buddhist Tai groups, including Tai ethnic groups in China, India, and mainland Southeast Asia such as *Tai Lue* [ไทลื้อ] in Xishuangbanna, China, *Tai Khamti* [ไทคำตี้] in Arunachal Pradesh, India, *Tai Yai* [ไทใหญ่] and *Tai Khuen* [ไทเขิน] in Myanmar, *Tai Lao* [ไทลาว] and *Tai Lue* in Laos, and *Tai Yuan* [ไไทยวน] in the Northern region of Thailand.

A few scholars have conducted research on the *Dāna Dhamma* tradition of Tai ethnic groups. For example, Siraporn Nathalang studied the *Dāna Dhamma* tradition of Tai Khamti in Arunachal Pradesh, India, and found that each scripture had a different purpose of donation.<sup>3</sup> Saikham Pradichit studied the same tradition of Tai Lue in Luang Namtha province, Laos, and found that this ethnic group dedicated scriptures, miniature castles, and objects to the dead before listening to Vessantara chanting.<sup>4</sup> Weerayut Nakcharoen studied the roles of literature used in Lanna funerals in Thailand and found that the roles were to increasingly sacralize the funerals, to make the living believe that their deceased relatives would rest in peace and to control people's behavior.<sup>5</sup>

The concepts of both donation and the merit begotten by giving dharma as donation are directly involved the *Dāna Dhamma* tradition. According to the dissertation entitled *Dana and Danaparami: significance in the creation of Thai Buddhist literature* by Arthid Sheravanichkul, giving dharma begets an immense heap of merit. This practice is one way of the transmission of Buddhism. This also allows Buddhists to be reborn in Lord Maitreya's era and is a factor that leads Buddhists on the spiritual path to achieve nirvāna. Because of these significances, the concepts of both the donation and gaining merit are

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<sup>3</sup> Siraporn, "Khamti Shan Buddhism and Culture in Arunachal Pradesh, India", 114-116.

<sup>4</sup> Saikham, *A Study of Process of and Change in the Dāna Dhamma Tradition of Lue Tribe*, 107-110.

<sup>5</sup> Weerayut, *An Analytical Study of Literature Used for Sermons at Lanna Funerals*.

found in some traditions, such as the *Dāna Dhamma* and the *Thet Mahachat*. Moreover, Buddhist literature has been composed, inscribed, duplicated, and recited in these traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Phra Maha Singkham Rakpa studied Lanna *Anisamsa* scriptures. He found that the Lanna *Anisamsa* scriptures have been influenced by the elucidation of merit found in the *Apadāna*, *Vimānavatthu*, and *Jātaka* scriptures. These scriptures have later had influence on the Lanna people's thoughts, values, and worldviews. Their faith in these scriptures has led to the invention of religious architecture and artefacts, such as Buddha image halls, Buddhist chapels, pulpits, dharma chests and Buddhist scriptures. Furthermore, these scriptures also influence the preservation of Lanna local culture and also support Lanna Buddhist traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Phra Maha Suthit Aphakaro studied *Anisamsa* scriptures and other scriptures used for recitation in various Lanna festivals. He found that the *Anisamsa* scriptures influenced Lanna society in both linguistic and literary aspects, strengthen morality, virtues and the concept of living a Buddhist life, and supported the culture and traditions of Lanna communities. These scriptures are the intellectually strategic device of the learned men who desire to express the benefit of good deeds and the transmission of Lanna culture and traditions.<sup>8</sup>

However, after reviewing the literature, there has been no research that has studied the scriptures of Tai ethnic groups concerning illness and death. This is despite the fact that these scriptures are used in related and continuous rituals and most of the scriptures devoted to the deceased can be readily found at Wat Pha Taek. It has been found that the Tai diaspora who migrated from Xishuangbanna, China, and Shan State, Myanmar, to settle at Ban Pha Taek in Mae Sai District, a border town between Myanmar and Thailand, still perform the *Dāna Dhamma* tradition donating scriptures to Buddhist temples as they used to in their homeland.

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<sup>6</sup> Arthid, *Dana and Danaparami*.

<sup>7</sup> Singkham Rakpa, *An Analytical Study of the Lanna Anisong Scriptures*.

<sup>8</sup> Suthit Aphakaro, *A Study of the Body of Knowledge and the Local Wisdom Appearing in Lan-Na Buddhist Literature*.

This article aims to study the *Dāna Dhamma* tradition of the Tai diaspora at Ban Pha Taek by focusing on the 13 most donated scriptures that concern serious illness and merit dedication to the dead, in terms of their content, context, and, especially, the role for the donors. The 13 scriptures comprise: (1) *Sattabojjhanghā* [สัตตโฆฆมังคา], (2) *Mahāvīpāka* [มหาวิบาก], (3) *Mahāvīpākaluang* [มหาวิบากหลวง], (4) *Vipākaromcīta* [วิบากรอมจิต], (5) *Malaiprot* [มาลัยโปรด], (6) *Honthang Nipphan* [หนทางนิพพาน], (7) *Visuddhiyā* [วิสุทธิญา], (8) *Phap Kammatthāna* [พับกัมมัฏฐาน], (9) *Thamma Yeluang* [ธรรมเยหลวง], (10) *Petaphali* [เปตพลี], (11) *Nibbāna Sutra* [นิพพานสูตร], (12) *Anisong Song Khao* [อนิสงส์สงข้าว] and (13) *Devaduta Thang Ha* [เทวดาทัง 5].

### **Background of Tai Diaspora at Ban Pha Taek, Tambon Wiang Phang Kham, Mae Sai District, Chiang Rai Province**

Because of war and poverty, three Tai diasporic groups – Tai Yai (Shan), Tai Khuen and Tai Lue<sup>9</sup> – emigrated from many towns of Xishuangbanna, China, and Shan state, Burma, to settle at Ban Pha Taek, one kilometer from the Thailand-Myanmar border, 50 years ago. These peoples have lived there with Tai Yuan, the first settlers at the village, with growing unease.

Ban Pha Taek is a large village, with a population of 6,296.<sup>10</sup> Even though the three diasporic groups have lived there for decades, they have not yet become permanent residents of Thailand. Most are without house registration documents and are illegal immigrants. No matter their statuses, they are all devout Buddhists. Although all Tai ethnic groups share the same religious identity as Buddhists, they practice different from one another in some aspects. Instead of sharing the local temple with the Tai Yuan, the three Tai diaspora, who have

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<sup>9</sup> These peoples have different homelands. The *Tai Yai* live in many countries such as in Yunnan province of China, Shan state of Myanmar, Assam state of India, and the northern region of Laos and Thailand. Social Research Institute, *Tai Yai*, 1-4. The *Tai Khuen* live in Kengtung, Shan state, Myanmar. Arunrat, *The Story of Kengtung*, 3. The *Tai Lue* had emigrated, because of war, from Xishuangbanna, Yunnan province, China to settle in many countries such as Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Social Research Institute, *Tai Lue*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Charun Khaisuwan, interview, 20 November 2013.

rigorously preserved their own traditions, had worked together to build their own temple, called Wat Pha Taek, as the spiritual center for performing their traditions.

One of the significant traditions of the Tai diaspora is the *Dāna Dhamma*. These people have preserved the tradition because they believe in accumulating merit for their subsequent rebirth and in transferring merit to the dead. The tradition is performed in several periods of life. One of the most significant periods is the passage from this world to the otherworld. This includes the donation and the dedication of scriptures during periods of (1) serious illness, (2) funeral ceremonies, (3) cremation rites and (4) after the cremation rites.

### **The Donation and Recitation of the Scriptures during the Period of Severe Illness**

According to Buddhism, Buddhists believe in the cycle of rebirth and the last *cita* [จิต], or the last mind before death, that leads the deceased to be reborn in a state of deprivation or a better place. When a relative has a serious illness, the Tai diaspora select one among four scriptures to donate to monks and invite them to chant the scripture for the patient.<sup>11</sup> These scriptures are *Sattabojjhanghā*, *Mahāvīpāka*, *Mahāvīpākaluang* and *Vipākaromcīta*.

*Sattabojjhanghā* narrates that when the Lord Buddha was sick, he asked Phra Cunda Thera to deliver the *Bojjhongha* to him three times and he recovered.<sup>12</sup> The Tai diaspora, thus, believe in this

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<sup>11</sup> The ritual of donating the scripture during this period comprises the following sequence of activities. After the monks are invited and approach the house of the patient: (1) an official recites a prayer to the Triple Gems; (2) he and other participants perform the process of requesting and receiving the precepts; (3) he requests the dharma and the monks give a dharma; (4) later, the patient donates the scriptures to the monks and then the ritual finished by pouring ceremonial water.

<sup>12</sup> *Bojjhongha* [โพชฌงค์] is a dharmic principle considered a Buddha's incantation that is recited as protection against illness. According to the Tipitaka, when Phra Mahā Kassapa and Phra Mogghallana were sick, the Lord Buddha visited and delivered to them the *Bojjhongha* and the two monks got well. Later, when the Lord Buddha got sick, he asked Phra Mahā Cunda to deliver the *Bojjhongha* to him and then he recovered. Phra Phrom Khunaporn, *Bhojjhangha*, 1-2.

mantra's power. They also believe in the result of merit-making, that by donating this scripture the donation may cause the patients with severe condition to recover or to pass away naturally and consciously and they will then be sent to heaven.

*Mahāvīpāka* tells the story that a Brahman asked the Lord Buddha why human beings were born to be different in appearance, class, etc. Because each being had different retribution of deeds, the Lord Buddha answered. This scripture helps explicate that one's actions in their past lives leads to present consequences. The Tai diaspora believe that when the patients donate this scripture, they will meet one of two positive consequences: to recover from the serious illness or to peacefully pass away within 3-7 days without suffering.

*Mahāvīpākaluang* tells about the eight major hells and their smaller hells. In details, the scripture explains that hells are realms for punishing beings who, in their past lives, had committed *Anantariya Karma* [อนันตริยกรรม] or five forms of the worst karma,<sup>13</sup> committed *Guru Karma* [กुरुกรรม] or bad karma,<sup>14</sup> or violated the five precepts.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the scripture, the patients with severe condition, and ones with serious retribution, are guided to dedicate this scripture, together with four trays of food and four collections of monk's clothing (robe, sarong and extra robe) and the living are also guided to do so in order to transfer merit to the dead. The Tai diaspora believe that after the scripture donation, the patient with chronic disease would not suffer for a long period.

*Vipākaromcita* narrates the Lord Buddha's delivering of a sermon on the subject of last *cita* (mind) before death.<sup>16</sup> He taught that if one is worried about anything before their last breathing, they would

<sup>13</sup> These forms are to kill one's father, one's mother, and an Arahant; to injure the Lord Buddha; and to break the order of Sangha. They destroy ones' opportunity to go to heaven and attain nirvāna. P.A. Payutto, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 310.

<sup>14</sup> They are forms of bad karma which bring immediate results such as to hurt one's parents, adults, or precept observer; to cause quarrel among monks; to blame the Lord Buddha. P.A. Payutto, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 249.

<sup>15</sup> They comprise (1) killing a human or animal, (2) taking what is not given, (3) sexual misconduct, (4) lying, and (5) drinking liquor. P.A. Payutto, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 175.

<sup>16</sup> "Romcita" means to gather minds.

be reincarnated in *peta* [เปรต] form to guard those things they had been previously worried about. For instance, a monk who thought of clothing before death would be reincarnated as a flea to live on the clothing. This scripture also teaches the patients with severe illness to remain neutral. In other words, it teaches them that neither beloved ones nor objects should be worried about. Otherwise, they would be born in *Apaya-bhumi* [อภายภูมิ] or a state of deprivation.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the scripture claims at its last part that the Lord Buddha warned Buddhists to induce their relatives with severe illness to think of the Triple Gems (the Buddha, dharma and sangha), before passing away, by chanting “*Phuttho menatho, Thammo menatho, Sangkho menatho.*”

Some Tai diaspora interviewees explained that a small number of patients have recovered after performing the ritual of scripture dedication, although most pass away during the performance. Some pass away before the monks gave a sermon or while they were doing so, and some passed after pouring ceremonial water.<sup>18</sup>

The period of severe illness is a life crisis being between life and death. The relatives will gather around the patients and help set the serene atmosphere for them by inviting monks to pray and receive offerings. The monks will select proper scriptures to recite, especially *Vipākaromcīta*. This reflects that they give importance to supporting and moving the patient’s last minds to a better world. The ritual of scripture donation helps confirm that patients will be able to pass this situation positively or peacefully.

## **The Donation and Recitation of the Scriptures during Funeral Ceremonies**

The Tai diaspora hold funeral ceremonies for three days and monks are invited to recite the scriptures each night. *Malaiprot* is recited on the first night, *Mahāvīpāka* on the second night and the

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<sup>17</sup> It consists of four levels of existence: rebirth in hell, as a hungry ghost, as an angry demon, or as an animal. P.A. Payutto, *Dictionary of Buddhism*: 319.

<sup>18</sup> Phra Sitthichai Thitasophano, interview, 10 January 2015; Inkaeo Duangdi, interview, 25 March 2014.

*Nibbāna Sutra* on the third night. Apart from *Mahāvipāka* previously described, the other two scriptures will be explained here.

*Malai prot* tells the story of Phra Malai, the Buddhist saint who attained supernatural power.<sup>19</sup> He visited hell and helped a great number of long-suffering beings by extinguishing the hell fire. Later, while he was asking for alms in Jambu-Dvipa, he told about messages to their relatives that the beings asked them for merit transfer. Furthermore, he spread the words of Yama, the Lord of Hell, who wanted human beings to donate, to observe the precepts, to cultivate spirituality, to give alms regularly and transfer merit to the dead, to recite the prayer of “*Devaduta Thang Ha* [เทพทูตทั้งห้า], or the five divine messengers,”<sup>20</sup> and not to commit *Anantariya Karma*.

The *Nibbāna Sutra* explains that performing *dāna* [ทาน] or donation, *sīla* [ศีล] or observing the precepts, and *bhāvanā* [ภาวนา] or mental development, gains the following results. The result of performing *dāna* is to guard against starvation. The result of observing *sīla* is to have power. The result of growing *bhāvanā* is to have wisdom. If one has perfectly performed *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā*, one will lead oneself to the ultimate truth, *nirvāna*. The Lord Buddha thus guided all Buddhists to donate this scripture.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> day before the coffin is carried to the cremation site, the scriptures mentioned above and other scriptures, such as *Visuddhiyā*, will be donated and recited in the morning. *Visuddhiyā*, which means purity, relates that a wealthy man usually donated things, but did not observe the precepts. Consequently, he was reincarnated and suffered in hell. The Lord Buddha suggested to his son to donate the *Visuddhiyā* in order to free himself from hell.

All the scriptures mentioned above are relevant. The donation and recitation of all the scriptures disclose the idea of the Tai diaspora that they would like Phra Malai to help their relatives who may have

<sup>19</sup> *Malai* means the Buddhist saint named “Malai” and *prot* means to help.

<sup>20</sup> Five divine messengers comprise (1) a new-born baby, (2) an aged person, (3) a patient, (4) a dead person, and (5) a priest. These messengers remind Buddhists to notice the change in each period of life and the impermanence of life and urge them to give up bad deeds, to donate, to observe the precepts, to cultivate spirituality, and to transfer merit to the deceased.

been reincarnated in hell (*Malaiprot*) to be free from their retribution (*Mahāvīpāka*). Then, their relatives will be purified (*Visuddhiyā*) and be able to attain nirvāna (the *Nibbāna Sutra*).

Giving alms (*dāna*), observing precepts (*sīla*), and developing concentration (*bhāvanā*) are on the spiritual paths to end suffering entirely and completely attain nirvāna. These three acts are in the way of life of the Tai ethnic groups. They give alms in many ways, such as dedicating the offering and donating the dharma scriptures to the monks. When they enter middle age, around 45 years old and upwards, and do not have any burden on their shoulders, they customarily go to the temples in order to observe the precepts and practice the dharma. They practice the dharma intensely on the Buddhist holy days during the Buddhist Lent. That is, they will leave their homes and spend the night at the temples in order to observe the eight precepts which are more rigorous strategies in controlling themselves. Moreover, they pray, count sacred beads, meditate and listen to the dharma so as to lead their minds to reach peaceful stages. Later, when they enter old age, they are thus able to complete those three acts and be on the path to achieve nirvāna, the absolute goal of Buddhism.

The dedication and recitation of the scriptures in funerals reflects the thought of the Tai ethnic groups who wish their deceased relatives rebirth in a better world and the attainment of nirvāna. The donation and recitation of the scriptures helps soothe the relatives of the deceased because of the ritual guarantees that the deceased will be reincarnated in a better place and attain the ultimate goal of Buddhism, nirvāna.

### **Scriptures to Be Burnt with the Deceased**

In Ban Pha Taek, if adults aged 45 and older carry less burden in their families, they will go to Wat Pha Taek for dharma practice during Buddhist Lent. These people always carry with them two scriptures called *Phap Kammattāna* and *Thamma Yeluang*. Traditionally, if they pass away, the two scriptures will be burnt together with their bodies and accompany them to the underworld.

*Phap Kammatthāna* is a collection of Pali prayers, wish-making before growing *Kammattāna* [กัมมัตฐาน] or mindful contemplation, and the prayer of five divine messengers.<sup>21</sup> *Thamma Yeluang* narrates the Lord Buddha's prophesy.<sup>22</sup> He foretold that when he relinquished his life, a monk in Lanka would take a journey to gather dharma from Pha Tang Pha To city [ผาตั้งผาต่อ] and store them in *Thamma Yeluang*. Anyone who built their own *Thamma Yeluang* would not be reincarnated in the state of deprivation. When ones passed away, this scripture had to be tied with their bodies to accompany them to the underworld. At the hall of the God of Hell, Yama would ask them about merit-making in their past lives. If they could prove to have been true in merit-making and mindful contemplation and could recite the prayer of five divine messengers, Yama would send them to heaven. If any beings had not performed merit-making in their past lives, they would be punished in hell. Consequently, the Lord Buddha gave the prayer of five divine messengers to Buddhists so they could be learnt by heart and would help prevent their reincarnation into a state of deprivation.

Moreover, the scripture clearly mentions that when one passes away, the scripture must be put into a rice bag and brought to the cemetery. The Tai diaspora follow this guidance. Their descendants put rice, food, and *Thamma Yeluang* into a white cloth bag and carry it in front of the funeral procession to the cemetery. According to Buddhism, life has two aspects: body and mind. Rice is food for the physical body and dharma is for the mind. Putting food and the scripture into the bag and carry it to the cemetery is symbolic behavior signifying that the journey to the otherworld needs provisions, both edible and merit, accumulated in one's whole life.

The Tai ethnic group has a larger number of scriptures with more than 100 titles. The selection of only two titles, *Phap Kammatthāna*

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<sup>21</sup> Most of the adults at Ban Pha Taek can remember by heart the prayer of five divine messengers because they believe that if they could recite it in front of Yama, they would not be punished in hell. Tham Namkaeo, interview, 25 March 2014.

<sup>22</sup> *Thamma Yeluang* means a large barn for storing dharma. The Tai diaspora believe it is the origin of all dharma. All dharma are from this dharma origin. Tham Namkaeo, interview, 25 March 2014.

and *Thamma Yeluang*, to be burnt with the deceased identifies that these scriptures are essential for the deceased's journey to the other world. This also identifies that the Tai ethnic groups give importance to the accumulation of merit through giving alms, observing the precepts, and especially developing concentration. The burning of *Phap Kammatthāna* and *Thamma Yeluang* with the deceased's body guarantees the Tai diaspora that their deceased relatives who had performed good deeds and observed the precepts would be sent to heaven after Yama's judgment.

### **Donation of Scriptures and Merit Transfer to the Deceased after Cremation**

After cremation, the Tai diaspora still transfer merit to their deceased relatives on many occasions. Not only are items and food donated, but also scriptures.<sup>23</sup>

After the cremation rites are finished, relatives will offer *Huen Tan* [เฮินตัน] or a miniature house to the monks in order to transfer merit to the deceased. The house contains all necessary things for contemporary life. For example, clothes, bed, kitchen equipment and toilet articles, such as toothbrush, toothpaste, and soap. The Tai diaspora believe that the donation guarantees a comfortable living by their deceased relatives.

During Buddhist Lent, the Tai diaspora transfer merit to the dead because they believe that Yama temporarily frees the beings in hell to gain merit in the world. Thus, their descendants are obliged to offer food to monks and transfer merit to the hell beings. If their relatives died naturally, the Tai diaspora offer food inside the temple. If they died unnaturally, such as dying of an accident, drowning, or lightning strike, they will make the offering outside the temple because the dead are believed to have severe retribution and can not enter the temple.

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<sup>23</sup> The donation of scriptures has been very popular among the Tai diaspora. According to the fieldwork at Wat Pha Taek, Wiang Phang Kham Sub-district, Mae Sai District, Chiang Rai province, I surveyed and listed all scriptures at this temple on 20 May 2014 and found that a great number of each title were found. For instance, there are 469 copies of *Mahāvīpāka*, 329 copies of *Vipākaromcīta*, and 184 copies of the *Nibbāna Sutra*.

However, not only is food donated to the dead, but also scriptures during Buddhist Lent. If their deceased relatives have harsh retribution, the Tai diaspora will make annually offerings of *Mahāvipāka* and *Mahāvipākaluang* for three years in order to use up the retribution of the dead. If the Tai diaspora consider that their deceased relatives had worried about something before death, they will donate *Vipākaromcīta*.

Apart from the scriptures previously described, other scriptures are also donated for different purposes:

*Malaiprot*, previously described, *Petaphali* and *Honthang Nipphan* will be donated, if the Tai diaspora would like to dedicate merit to their general relatives. *Petaphali* tells the story of King Bimbisara asking the Lord Buddha how he could transfer merit to his deceased relatives. The Lord Buddha answered that he could do it on the full-moon day of 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month because Yama would annually allow the beings whose retribution had been nearly used up to gain merit in the world. The king followed the Lord Buddha's instruction. He and his servants carried food, robes, sarongs, etc. to offer to the Lord Buddha and the monks, and then dedicated merit to the deceased. Moreover, the scripture states that the beings, whose descendants transferred merit to them, would be sent to be reincarnated in deva form. Then, they would bless their descendants. Whereas, those, who did not gain merit and had to return to live their suffering lives in hell, would scold and curse their descendants. *Honthang Nipphan*<sup>24</sup> tells about the performance of good deeds contributing to one's growth towards spiritual liberation. Those acts are such as worshipping the Triple Gems, donating Kathin robes or Salakkaphat, etc.<sup>25</sup>

*Visuddhiyā* and *Nibbāna Sutra*, previously described, are dedicated to deceased parents and grandparents. *Anisong Song Khao*

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<sup>24</sup> *Honthang Nipphan* means the path to nirvāna or spiritual liberation.

<sup>25</sup> *Kathin robes* are new robes offered to monks from the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the waning moon period of 11<sup>th</sup> lunar month to the last day of the waxing moon period of 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month. *Salakkaphat* is the donation of food or anything to monks by drawing lots. This tradition is annually held during 6<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> lunar month.

would be dedicated by parents to their deceased children.<sup>26</sup> *Anisong Song Khao* narrates that when a Brahmin's son passed away, the Brahmin ordered his servant to offer food to his son at his grave. One day, his servant could not complete the obligation because of rain. He made a decision to offer food to a monk instead. His son appeared in his dream and told his father that he had just received an offering. Then, the Brahmin went to discuss his dream with a monk and knew that if he would like to dedicate merit to his deceased son, he had to donate four requisites [ปัจจัยสี่] to monks.<sup>27</sup>

The scriptures that are donated to the temples in order to dedicate merit to the deceased are usually inscribed with the wish “liberating from suffering and reaching happiness.” This message emphasizes the objectives of donating the scriptures, which are to dedicate merit to the deceased, to free them from suffering, and to support them with merit so they can be happy in the next world.

The Tai ethnic groups annually donate scriptures to the temples in order to dedicate merit to the deceased, no matter how long they have passed away. The ritual of donating the scriptures helps relieve the relatives because it guarantees that they can fulfill their duties as descendants. This signifies their gratefulness towards ancestors, the love and care among family members, and the wish for the deceased to be free from suffering. Moreover, it is a good opportunity for relatives to be able to come together annually after separating to work or study in different places. Moreover, the donation and recitation of scriptures is performed on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of *Dāna Mahāpang* [ทานมหาปาง] or *Thet Mahāchāt* [เทศน์มหาชาติ] festival.<sup>28</sup> The scripture donation is

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<sup>26</sup> This scripture, which is found at Wat Pha Taek, has various titles such as *Setthi Song Khao* [เศรษฐีส่งข้าว] or *A Wealthy Man Offers Rice*, *Anisong Nam Nong* [อนิสงสนั่นนาง] or *the Result of Overflow*, *Anisong Than Chom Khon Sia* [อนิสงส์ทานชอมคนเสีย] or *the Result of Dedicating to the Deceased*. Sometimes, this scripture was dedicated to parents. An interviewee said that after having dedicated *Mahāvīpāka* for three years in order to free her deceased father from his retribution, she will have to dedicate *Anisong Song Khao* for another three years. Therefore, her father could have rice to eat. Tip Tamung, interview, 17 September 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Four requisites comprise of food, clothes, shelter, and medicine.

<sup>28</sup> *Thet Mahāchāt* is the recitation of all chapters of *Vessantara Jataka* which tells the story of one of the Lord Buddha's past lives.

always performed, no matter how long their relatives have passed away. The donation of scriptures in order to transfer merit to the dead can be performed on several occasions and reflects the living's care for the deceased and their gratitude to parents and ancestors.

## Conclusion

The Tai diaspora at Ban Pha Taek, Chiang Rai province, perform the *Dāna Dhamma* tradition in several periods of their lives. This includes the long period of transition from this world to the otherworld which comprises of four periods: serious illness, funeral ceremonies, cremation rites and after the cremation rites.

During the period of serious illness, the Tai diaspora will donate one of four scriptures: *Sattabojjhanghā*, *Mahāvīpāka*, *Mahāvīpākaluang* and *Vipākaromcīta*. The donation helps confirm that severely ill patients will be able to pass this crisis positively or peacefully.

During funeral ceremonies, the Tai diaspora donate *Malaiprot*, *Mahāvīpāka*, *Visuddhiyā* and the *Nibbāna Sutra*. The scripture donation helps soothe the deceased's relatives and helps guarantee that the deceased will be reincarnated in a better place and attain nirvāna.

During cremation rite, *Phap Kammatthāna* and *Thamma Yeluang* will be burnt together with the body of the dead person. This performance guarantees that the deceased, who had performed good deeds and observed the precepts in their lives, would be sent to heaven after Yama's judgment in hell.

After the cremation rites, scriptures are donated on many occasions, such as Buddhist Lent and the Mahachat festival. During Buddhist Lent, three scriptures are donated: *Mahāvīpāka* and *Mahāvīpākaluang* will be donated for three years in order to use up the retribution of the dead if the Tai diaspora consider that their deceased relatives have harsh retribution; and *Vipākaromcīta* will be donated if the Tai diaspora consider that their deceased relatives had worried about something before death. Apart from the three scriptures previously mentioned, other scriptures are also donated for different purposes. *Visuddhiyā* and the *Nibbāna Sutra* are dedicated to parents and grandparents; *Anisong Song Khao* is dedicated by parents to their

deceased children; *Malaiprot*, *Petaphali* and *Honthang Nipphan* are donated in order to dedicate merit to general relatives. Such scripture donation reflects the care of the Tai diaspora for their deceased relatives and also expresses their gratitude to parents and ancestors.

Finally, the donation of the scriptures identifies the Tai diaspora as devout Buddhists who have repeatedly donated scriptures in order to dedicate merit to their deceased relatives to free them from retribution, sending them to better places such as heaven, and wishing them attainment of Buddhism's ultimate goal, nirvāna. Not only is this tradition performed for the benefit of the dead, but also for the living since the descendants of the Tai diaspora can learn how to preserve their tradition, even though they have been far from their motherlands.

The Tai ethnic group at Ban Pha Taek have continuously preserved the *Dāna Dhamma* tradition, even though they had moved to settle in Thailand. Not only this tradition, but they have also preserved other traditions such as the *Dāna Mahāpāṅg* tradition. This reflects the roles and relation between Buddhism and diasporic Tai ethnic group. Furthermore, this tradition is essential for these peoples as helps guarantee their spiritual achievement as Buddhists, even though they have not formally become permanent residents even after decades of settlement in Thailand.

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