

# No River, No Peace: Buddhism along the Mekong River

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The Mekong River (also known in various translations, as the ‘Khong, the Mother of Water’) is considered the 4<sup>th</sup> most important river in all of Asia, but it may be the most important river for over 60 million people of Southeast Asia relying on it for their economic livelihood.<sup>1</sup> Although it has its source in the Tibetan region of China (contributing 16% of the water), it continues to flow down into Myanmar, Laos (contributing the most, 55% of the water into the river), Thailand (Mun-Chi Basin only contributes 6% to the average flow of water), Cambodia and Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> It’s a very important river for these six nations, reliant on this nurture. Millions of people rely on the Mekong river for their economic livelihood – 63% of those living near the river, earn their livelihood derived from the river.<sup>3</sup> The lower region of the Mekong River facilitated the earliest kingdoms in the region, and it is from there that the culture of the region developed. The most ancient records from Chinese travelers are well aware of the region, and mention that they must have been ‘Indianized’ to borrow a term, before the arrival of official record keepers; but as we know, borders were fluid in the ancient times. Anyone could travel freely, and make their own livelihood to support their families, and assist in the development of their community. The development of modern nation states has made long-distance traveling problematic.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/basin-reports/MRC-SOB-report-2010full-report.pdf> - accessed on 6 March 2015

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/basin-reports/MRC-SOB-report-2010full-report.pdf> - accessed on 6 March 2015

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/basin-reports/MRC-SOB-report-2010full-report.pdf> - accessed on 6 March 2015

The Mekong River is considered as a major river for Buddhism. According to some living along the Mekong River, ignoring thousands of years of geological processes, they assert that the Buddha created the Mekong River by slicing open, with a sword, to separate the Himalaya Mountains, and even visited the southern region of the Mekong before passing away.<sup>4</sup> They ignore the research that states that there are sediment deposits and other evidence of the river running as far back (as currently understood), for at least 9000+ years or from the early Holocene Period (the current modern period dating back to 11,700+ years).<sup>5</sup> The Tibetan Plateau actually was raised in the early Cenozoic or Tertiary Period, sometime from 65 million to about 2.5 million years ago.<sup>6</sup> Thousands of temples exist on both sides of the river, for as long as it flows. Although Buddhism is not originally found in Southeast Asia, it was imported and later adopted, practiced and developed into what links the various ethnicities lining the river, into a common social-guidance system. The philosophies from Buddhism are important for the people of Southeast Asia. That these nations are Buddhist is also important for other nations outside of the region – certainly with those seeking commonalities.<sup>7</sup>

Before the modern-era: Buddhist temples were the center of life for the various societies along the river. Young boys begin their education in the temples, which are often adorned with exquisitely drawn fine art-paintings depicting village life, hell-realms, and celestial realms – either relating to the life of the Buddha or scenes of social importance, sometimes with important people drawn as the charac-

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Pathom\\_p.33-45.pdf](http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Pathom_p.33-45.pdf) - accessed on 6 March 2015

<sup>5</sup> Dan Penny: The Holocene History and the development of the Tonle Sap, Cambodia - <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277379105001241> - accessed on 6 March 2015

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/cenozoic/cenozoic.php> - accessed on 6 March 2015 and see <http://zt.tibet.cn/english/services/library/catalogue/natural2.htm> - also accessed on 6 March 2015

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/mekong/development/> - Japan sees Buddhism as a common bond between the nations, when seeking cooperation. Accessed on 6 March 2015

ters that we see on the walls. In these cultures along the Mekong, young men often spend a portion of their life, ordained into the Buddhist monkhood. Everyone seems to know a lot about Buddhism. Everyone in this room knows about Buddhism – so it will not be addressed, doctrinally, in this paper – here we care more about the majestic Mekong River.

Fish from the river is a major source for economics in the region. Most people eat rice, fish and vegetables. There are abundant folk-stories regarding mythological creatures that dwell in the Mekong River, but we cannot trace these creatures today. We can find some of the world's largest fresh-water fish species, including fresh-water dolphins, and there are many important migratory species - in fact, there are thousands of important species vital to the ecology of the region. These species are being harmed by the actions of humans, bent on damaging the river, taming it for their hydro-electric dam schemes, which have and will only create more environmental degradation. Equally as vital to the region is the vegetation, which also features in localized reinterpretations of the Hindu-Buddhist folklore. The Maneekote Tree in Laos is said to be as sacred as the Buddha, and is also fit for worship.<sup>8</sup> It has three branches that are said to point to Cambodia, Thailand and Laos.

The various people living along the river share in celebrations. Common holidays feature spectacles that leave wonder in the minds of the people. There are fabulous illuminated-boat parades around the end of the rainy-season, fireballs that rise from the river, and lamps that rise and fill the skies like large fireflies.<sup>9</sup> Many of the cultures along the Mekong also have water festivals to welcome in each new year.

Most of the management of the river today is deeply involved with economics, and the government's control over the river, and the rights that each government claims upon the river. Various nations alone and in conjunction with other nations are seeking to dam the river, to generate electricity for their cities and to bring in

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<sup>8</sup> See: [http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Pathom\\_p.33-45.pdf](http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Pathom_p.33-45.pdf) - accessed on 6 March 2015

<sup>9</sup> See: [http://thailand.prd.go.th/thailand\\_illustrated/content.php?s\\_id=287](http://thailand.prd.go.th/thailand_illustrated/content.php?s_id=287) – accessed on 6 March 2015

electricity to deficient areas. However, there are alternatives that need implemented instead, such as solar-energy, which is less harmful to the environment. Buddhists, ecologically sensitive personnel, using their wisdom to enlighten the world, should better empower society through solar-energy.

There are many factors which bring our nations together in the Mekong River region. First, we are all mainly Buddhists, although we are Buddhists of several varieties. There are monasteries that line the entire range of the river. The BBC produced an entire series with the hostess/narrator Sue Perkins, which traced her travels over the entire stretch of the river, from south to north. She visits the Xayaburi Dam in Laos, takes part in the Dai water splashing ceremony, witnesses the dragon-boat races, observes captive endangered species, takes in breath-taking scenery, enjoys the various local foods – she covers all of this material in her unique and quirky way.

Long ago, the river has been recognized as a shared resource amongst nations. Between the ancient Lan Xang Kingdom of Laos and the Ayutthaya Kingdom of the Siam region, the shared identity and respect for each other was enshrined into the Phra That Si Song Rak (*the Stupa in Honour of Two Loves*) in Loei Province, currently in Thailand. The stupa was built in 1556, and still stands today. There is an inscription which prays that future generations must not violate the territory of the other nation and not to go against the Buddhist principles of greed or deceit, so long as the Sun and Moon shine over the land. This ancient inscription could be some evidence of the non-interference principle espoused today as one of the principles for ASEAN nations to abide together in peaceful-coexistence.

There is so much more to the Mekong River. Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University hosts the Mekong Center for Buddhist Studies. They've held conferences to support the commonalities between all of these nations. The commonality of Buddhism is strong enough to be the bridge over any conflict, because the people will endeavor rightly to seek peaceful means. Rarely do these nations wage war against each other – Buddhism and the peaceful means within Buddhist doctrine is the key in the survival of our nations, as we also move forward together in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

**In conclusion :**

We can ascertain that without water and without life, the river is akin to adhamma. When we have water in our river and we have an abundance in the ecology, we are living with Dhamma. We are Buddhists and we live with Dhamma-vinaya. We need to learn to work together and reform away from our asavas and kilesas which damage our ability to properly live together with nature. There are alternatives to dams, like solar energy. We need to work together with our environment. We need to be vigilant against the ‘capitalistic’ stakeholders trying to force people away from the river. When Buddhism thrives, the people are close to the river; but the situation is changing: now governments and corporations are claiming rights over the river and the people must endure radical changes. Corporations are not undergoing radical changes to improve the region’s ecology.

To empower the local populations along the river: the people of the region are already culturally Buddhist, but now they need to be educated Buddhists in the Dhamma-Vinaya. When Buddhists avoid the dhamma-vinaya and invent their own methods, crisis results. The Mekong cannot sleep, it cannot run dry – this brings crisis to the Buddhist population. We have seen for more than a thousand years: when the Mekong runs, Buddhism runs – it is a mutual relationship. Without Buddhism, the river is disastrously exploited – for instance, recently it became possible to walk across the Mekong without getting wet.

Therefore, we must all learn that destroying our ecology is a kilesa empowering an asava, stopping our stream and our development and process. The Mekong River ecology (the plants and animals – and our relationship with the environment) is like a nimitta, a healthy sign for our progress. When we see the proper healthy signs, we know we are traveling the correct path, the Right Way.



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