

Leadership Characteristics of Buddhist Monks and Their Roles in Disseminating the Dhamma to Society*

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Received 22 July 2025; Revised 30 June 2025; Accepted 30 June 2025

Abstract

The objectives of this research are to study the leadership, analyze the characters of leadership and the network of Buddhist monks for Buddhist propagation. This is a qualitative study made by documentary study, interviewing 10 monks/persons who are administrators, teachers and experts in the leadership of Buddhist propagation and analyzing the content as specified.

The results revealed that monks' leadership in propagating Buddhism in three dimensions: Chakkhumā, which encompasses a vision for propagating Buddhism both domestically and internationally, a study of Buddhist principles, and the development of interpersonal relationships within a social context; Vidhūro, which encompasses monks with a thorough knowledge of Buddhist principles, expertise in meditation practice, diverse forms of propagation, and a commitment to practicing with faith; Nissayasampanno, which fosters good interpersonal relationships with the public; and the virtues of the Four Divine Abodes, the Four Sanghavatthu, and Kalyanamitra Dhamma, which serve as spiritual leaders in practicing Buddhist principles. The study also examined the leadership characteristics of monks in propagating Buddhism during the Buddha's time.

Keywords: Leadership; Monks; Buddhist Propagation

Introduction

The Lord Buddha led the spread of Buddhism during the Buddha's time, serving as a model for the spread of Buddhism. Buddhism is a religion of education, emphasizing the understanding and understanding of Buddhism, enabling Buddhists to access the essence of the teachings. The process of developing wisdom involves education to gain knowledge and understanding that can be applied to practice. The Sangha is an important Buddhist community, serving as the inheritors of Buddhism, practicing the Dhamma-Vinaya, which exemplifies Buddhist teachings. They also train

and teach morality and ethics, and serve as spiritual leaders of the people. This is an important role and duty of the Sangha, which is related to social duties, as exemplified in the Buddha's words: "Monks, wander for the benefit and happiness of the many, to help the world, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans." (Vi. Maha. (Translation) 4/32/40). This was the announcement of the Buddha's policy of spreading the teachings during the Buddha's time, marking the beginning of team building. His vision and outstanding leadership qualities serve as a role model for Buddhists, as stated:

The Buddha, the Enlightened One, the Self-Enlightened One, is revered as the Supreme Teacher, the Supreme Teacher of the Fourfold Community of Buddhists: monks, nuns, male and female lay devotees. He is not only a teacher of humans, but also of deities. In the Pali language, the term sattha devamanussanam, meaning "Teacher of gods and humans," is also used, with the aptitude phrase anuttaro purisaddhamsarathi, meaning "the incomparable charioteer, the unsurpassed trainer of people." These titles reflect his outstanding leadership qualities, and Buddhists revere and honor him as a master of monastic education and a great teacher. He possesses exceptional wisdom in training and teaching and has successfully communicated the Dhamma and Vinaya to the Buddhist community.

It can be seen that Buddhism entered Thailand. It was found that Phra Sona and Phra Uttara were the first disciples to arrive at Suvarnabhumi, no less than 2560 years ago (Department of Academic Affairs, Ministry of Education, 2001: 2-3). Buddhism has spread to Thai society up until the present day through the leadership roles of monks, which have been passed down from this concept. Monks are morally upright, practice well, and perform their duties to preserve the Buddha's word, protect Buddhism, organize activities to inspect the Dhamma and discipline through the leadership of the Sangha organization team, and know how to communicate well in spreading Buddhism. Buddhist teachings have been systematically categorized for Buddhists to study up to the present. The researcher sees the importance of studying the leadership of Buddhist disciples in order to gain new knowledge and use it as a model for creating organizational leadership, building teams, and communicating well in spreading Buddhism. It can be seen that leadership is a very important person in leading an organization to reach its goals, and it depends on leadership.

Objectives

1. To study the leadership of monks in propagating Buddhism.
2. To analyze the leadership characteristics of monks in propagating Buddhism.
3. To study the networks of monks in propagating Buddhism.

Literature review

Literature review

1. Theoretical foundations of Buddhist leadership

Classical Theravāda sources present leadership as inseparable from moral and spiritual cultivation. Dhirasekera's study of Buddhist monastic discipline emphasizes that authentic monastic life must accord with both Dhamma and Vinaya; leadership in the Sangha is therefore defined not by position alone but by adherence to the normative framework of the Buddha's teaching.

P.A. Payutto's works systematize this doctrinal basis into a modern theory of Buddhist leadership virtues. In *Buddhadhamma* and related writings, he highlights frameworks such as the *Dasa-rājadhama* (Ten Royal Virtues) and *Sappurisadhamma* (qualities of a “true person”) including generosity, moral discipline, self-sacrifice, integrity, gentleness, non-anger, non-oppression and tolerance as normative standards for any kind of leadership. These virtues are not limited to kings but are widely applied by Thai scholars to monastic and lay leaders.

Building on Payutto, Saengthongdee (2018) articulates a “Buddhist leadership features” framework that links scriptural concepts with modern management skills. He interprets the three classical qualities of a wise manager *chakkhumā* (having vision), *vidhūro* (being technically competent) and *nissayasampanno* (being reliable and well-related) as corresponding to conceptual, technical, and human-relation skills in contemporary leadership theory. This mapping provides a bridge between Buddhist moral psychology and mainstream leadership studies.

Other contemporary discussions of “leadership according to Buddhist concepts” further stress that Buddhist leaders must ground their actions in truth and righteousness (*dhamma*), be willing to endure difficulties, and orient followers toward collective well-being rather than greed or anger. Buddhist leadership is thus inherently ethical, relational, and purpose-driven.

2. Leadership characteristics of Buddhist monks

2.1 Moral ethical integrity

Most empirical studies agree that moral integrity is the core leadership characteristic of monks. The status of monks as “field of merit” for laypeople means that their credibility as leaders depends on visible practice of the precepts, restraint, and mindfulness. Dhirasekera argues that monastic authority arises from consistency between doctrinal ideals and personal conduct.

Saengthongdee (2018) and Payutto's writings emphasize *sīla* (morality), non-exploitation, and non-violence as indispensable traits of Buddhist leaders. Related work on Buddhist psychological traits frames the seven qualities of a “good friend” (*kalyāṇamitta* being lovable, respectable, admirable, a good counsellor, a patient listener, deep in conversation, and a wise adviser) as a set of leadership traits that support sustainable relationships in organizations. In the monastic context, these traits shape how monks mentor laypeople in moral cultivation.

2.2 Wisdom, vision and doctrinal competence

A second cluster of characteristics concerns wisdom (*paññā*) and doctrinal expertise. The *chakkhumā* aspect “one who has far-seeing eyes” is interpreted as the ability to read social trends, foresee consequences, and plan in line with Dhamma. Studies of monastic leadership in Thai universities and temples show that effective monk-leaders set clear directions, articulate shared goals, and connect institutional strategies to Buddhist principles.

Empirical research on monks as community leaders likewise underlines deep knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, meditation, and ethics as prerequisites for effective guidance. Kitanant et al. (2024), in their study of monks' strategic roles in community enterprises, report that monks' moral authority and doctrinal competence enable them to function as educators, advisors, and mediators in community economic planning.

2.3 Compassion, service orientation and social responsibility

Leadership in Buddhism is not only about personal purity but also about compassionate engagement. Literature on “engaged Buddhism” portrays monks as social actors responding to collective suffering poverty, conflict, environmental degradation through socially oriented applications of the Dhamma. A recent paper on monastic leadership in social reform movements in Theravāda Buddhism highlights mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion as the philosophical foundation for monks’ involvement in social justice and reform initiatives.

Thai and regional case studies of “development monks” describe monks who immerse themselves in village life, initiate community projects, and help villagers organize around common problems. These monks exhibit service-oriented leadership grounded in *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion), using their moral standing to mobilize local participation.

2.4 Relational, communicative and organizational skills

The *nissayasampanno* dimension stresses human-relation skills: being trusted, building networks, and maintaining harmonious collaboration. Studies of monks in community development consistently note their role as intermediaries between state agencies, NGOs, and villagers requiring negotiation, communication and conflict-resolution skills.

Research on mindful and spiritual leadership among Buddhist monks also discusses listening, empathy, and presence as leadership capacities that create psychologically safe spaces for followers to reflect and change behavior. These interpersonal traits directly support effective Dhamma dissemination.

3. Roles of Buddhist monks in disseminating the Dhamma to society

3.1 Traditional temple-based teaching

Historically, monks have disseminated the Dhamma through sermons (*desanā*), ritual instruction, and monastic education. Studies on the evolution of the monastic Sangha describe how monasteries became centers for teaching both ordained and lay communities, with monastic leaders balancing internal training and external preaching.

Empirical work in Thailand shows that temple-based propagation remains vital: monks preach on holy days, lead retreats, and provide counseling, shaping moral norms and religious identity in surrounding communities. Leadership characteristics—especially doctrinal expertise and moral integrity directly affect the credibility and impact of this teaching.

3.2 Mass media and digital dissemination

With modernization, monks have increasingly used mass media and digital platforms to spread the Dhamma. A study of Buddhist religious leaders in Thailand found that monasteries used broadcast towers and radio extensively for Dhamma teaching, and later expanded to internet media and online channels, including websites and online radio/TV. Popular movements such as the “Best Friend House” project illustrate how visual and audio media can be used to cultivate morality among youth and families beyond the temple compound.

These modes require new leadership competencies: media literacy, strategic communication, and the ability to contextualize traditional teachings for urban, globalized audiences. Studies on Buddhist monks’ skills for the SDGs note that contemporary monks increasingly need digital communication and project-management skills to fulfil their roles as community leaders and Dhamma communicators.

3.3 Community development and social reform as Dhamma dissemination

A large body of Thai and regional research examines monks' roles in community development interpreting such work itself as a mode of Dhamma dissemination. Early work (e.g., Kloppenborg, 1984) already showed that monks involved in development activities use Buddhist doctrines such as *kamma* and self-reliance to foster responsibility and participation among villagers.

Recent studies provide detailed case analyses. Kitanant et al. (2024) describe how monks guide community enterprises in Nakhon Chai Burin, using Buddhist principles to promote sufficiency economy, moral discipline in business, and harmonious coexistence. Research from Wat Khao Ta-ngoh and other temples highlights models of "engaged Buddhism" where monks provide welfare services, health promotion, education, and environmental activities while explicitly framing these efforts as expressions of Dhamma.

Theses and case studies from Thailand and Laos similarly portray monks as catalysts for community participation, local leadership development, and conflict resolution. In these accounts, monks' leadership characteristics—moral authority, compassion, vision, and relational skills are what make their social projects credible and transformative, thereby reinforcing the persuasive power of the Dhamma.

3.4 Human-rights and peace-oriented engagement

A newer strand of literature situates Buddhist monastic leadership within human-rights and peace discourses. Rodloytuk (2021) analyzes "engaged Buddhist communities" as responses to structural injustices, arguing that Buddhist values of compassion and non-violence can support human-rights work and conflict transformation. Likewise, recent work on monastic leadership in social reform emphasizes that monks can challenge social injustices while remaining rooted in mindfulness and ethical restraint, thus modeling non-violent forms of civic leadership.

These studies extend the understanding of Dhamma dissemination beyond doctrinal preaching to include embodied demonstrations of justice, care, and solidarity in the public sphere.

4. Synthesis and research gaps

Across the literature, leadership characteristics of Buddhist monks can be synthesized into four interrelated domains:

1. Moral–spiritual virtues (e.g., *sīla*, *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *Sappurisadhamma*, *Dasa-rājadhamma*), providing the ethical foundation for authority and trust.
2. Cognitive–strategic capacities (*chakkhumā*, wisdom, doctrinal knowledge, vision, mindfulness) enabling monks to interpret context, plan, and teach effectively.
3. Relational and communicative skills (*nissayasampanno*, *kalyāṇamitta* qualities, listening, counseling, networking) that allow monks to connect with diverse audiences and mediate between stakeholders.
4. Service and engagement orientation (commitment to community development, social welfare, human-rights and peace work) through which the Dhamma is embodied in concrete social actions.

However, several gaps remain. First, much of the Thai literature is descriptive and case-based; more comparative and theoretical work could clarify how Buddhist monastic leadership differs from, and overlaps with, secular leadership models. Second, digital Dhamma dissemination is rapidly expanding, but systematic studies of monks' digital leadership competencies and ethical challenges are still limited. Third, many

studies focus on exemplary "development monks," which may under-represent ordinary monks and nuns and overlook gendered dynamics in Buddhist leadership.

Methodology

1. Analyze data from documents in the Tripitaka and books, textbooks, and documents related to the analysis of leadership characteristics and the propagation of Buddhism.
2. Invite five experts with knowledge of Buddhism and educators to provide analysis and recommendations.
3. Interview ten experts with knowledge of Buddhism and administrators, both monks and laypeople, to determine criteria for selecting interviewees.
4. Analyze content data, including context, and present it in a descriptive format.

Results

1 . The leadership of monks in propagating Buddhism can be summarized as follows: 1.1 The leadership of monks in propagating Buddhism in 3 aspects as follows: 1) The leadership of monks in propagating Buddhism in the aspect of Chakkhumā, consisting of 1 . 1) Having a vision to propagate Buddhism both domestically and internationally; 1 . 2 Having a vision to study knowledge according to Buddhist principles; and 1.3 Having a vision to practice and build human relations in the context of society. 2) The leadership of monks in propagating Buddhism in the aspect of Vidhuro, consisting of 2 . 1 Monks who propagate Buddhism must have very good knowledge of Buddhist principles. 2 . 2 Having expertise in meditation practice. 2.3 Having expertise in propagating Buddhism in various forms according to Buddhist methods. 2 . 4 Being a person who is eager to learn and eager to practice with faith. 3) The leadership of monks in propagating Buddhism The Nissayasampanno aspect consists of 3.1 building good human relations with the public; 3.2 having virtues in the four divine states, the four social virtues, and the principle of Kalpayanamitra Dhamma; and 3.3 being a spiritual leader in practicing Buddhist principles. This is consistent with the research of Kanungnit Chantabutra on "The Status and Role of Buddhism in Thailand." The study found that the value of Buddhism in the past was very high due to the many special characteristics that the religion had for society. In the past, temples were a source of knowledge, and monks were intellectual leaders, leading to the tradition that all Thai men were required to ordain as monks to receive education and training in ethics and morality. The status and role of Buddhism began to decline in the era of modern society, with the full adoption of Western culture, leading to the neglect of religious ethics and morality, the foundation of society. The deterioration of Buddhist monastic institutions led to the idea of religious reform, as evidenced by the emergence of several new monasteries, such as Suan Mokkhaphalaram. Monasteries like Wat Long Pa Pong and Wat Dhammakaya, among others, all share a common goal: to reform religion, transforming it into a center of public faith. Today, the status and role of Buddhism has improved. This is evident in the increasing interest in Dhamma

principles, the practice of Dhamma, and the increasing attendance at temples. Furthermore, they recognize the shortcomings of capitalist development. The solution to social problems is a return to religious principles, fostering a simple, natural development free from vices and addictions, with Buddhism as the spiritual guiding principle of the people.

2. Results of the Analysis of the Leadership Characteristics of Monks in the Propagation of Buddhism, Both During the Buddha's Time and Present Day. The analysis of the leadership characteristics of monks in the propagation of Buddhism during the Buddha's time found that they: 1) had faith in propagating Buddhism; 2) had knowledge and ability; 3) had vision; 4) had good interpersonal skills; 5) were exemplary in practicing Buddhist principles; and 6) were outstanding in Buddhism (excellent in the Buddha's teachings). This is consistent with the research of Supaporn Makchaeng and Sompong Makchaeng on "A Study of the Sangha's Educational Management." The study found that "the current Sangha educational administration is separated from the national educational administration system, causing problems in management, budget, curriculum management, teaching and learning processes, assessment and evaluation, educational quality, the quality of educational personnel, both administrators and teachers, as well as welfare and job security." The curriculum does not meet the needs of learners, who are categorized into three groups: those seeking expanded educational opportunities, those seeking to be religious heirs, and those ordained according to tradition. In implementing Sangha educational reform, the overseeing agency should prepare to amend regulations. This is an obstacle to the provision of education according to the national education structure. Develop professional personnel to create stability and welfare for personnel in order to determine the effective workforce for each type of education. Analyze the cost per head of each type of student in order to determine the budget that the government must support.

3. Network of monks in propagating Buddhism. The creation of a network of monks in propagating Buddhism during the Buddha's time. The leadership of monks in propagating Buddhism in each area was outstanding.

Discussion

1. Spiritual leaders in practicing Buddhism, in line with the research of Kanungnit Chantabutra, studied "The Status and Role of Buddhism in Thailand." The study found that Buddhism's value in the past was highly valued due to its many special characteristics to society. In the past, temples were a source of knowledge, and monks were intellectual leaders, leading to the tradition that all Thai men were required to ordain to receive education and moral training. The status and role of Buddhism began to decline in the era of modern society, with the full adoption of Western culture, leading to the neglect of religious ethics and morality, the foundation of society. The deterioration of Buddhist monastic institutions led to the idea of religious reform, as evidenced by the emergence of several new monasteries, such as Suan Mokkhaphalaram, Wat Long Pa Pong, and Wat Dhammakaya. All monasteries share the common goal of reforming the religion to become a center of public faith. Today, the status and role of Buddhism has improved, as evidenced by the increasing interest in Dhamma principles, the increasing practice of Dhamma, and the increasing attendance

at temples. This, coupled with the recognition of the shortcomings of capitalist development, suggests a return to religious principles and morality. To develop society in a simple, natural way, free from vices and addictions, by holding onto Buddhism as the spiritual guide of the people (Kanungnit Chanthabut, 1989: 14) and in line with Chanchai Achinsamacharn, who mentioned the steps of the vision-building process as follows (Chanchai Achinsamacharn, 2007: 149).

2. The analysis of the leadership characteristics of monks in propagating Buddhism during the Buddha's time found that they: 1) had faith in propagating Buddhism; 2) had knowledge and abilities; 3) had vision; 4) had good interpersonal skills; 5) were exemplary in practicing Buddhist principles; and 6) were outstanding in Buddhism (excellence from the Buddha). This is consistent with the research of Supaporn Makjang and Sompong Makjang on "A Study of the Sangha's Educational Management." The study found that "the current Sangha educational administration is separated from the national educational administration system, causing problems in management, budget, curriculum management, teaching and learning processes, assessment and evaluation, educational quality, the quality of educational personnel (both administrators and teachers), as well as welfare and career security." The curriculum does not meet the needs of learners, who are divided into three groups: those seeking to expand educational opportunities, those wishing to be religious heirs, and those ordained according to tradition. In implementing Sangha educational reform, the overseeing agency should prepare to amend regulations that hinder educational management according to the national educational structure, develop professional personnel, and create security and welfare for personnel." To determine the effective workforce for each type of education, analyze the cost per head of each type of student in order to determine the budget that the government must support" (Supaphon Makchaeng and Sompong Makchaeng, 1999).

3. The Networking of Sangha in the Spread of Buddhism During the Buddha's Time The leadership of monks in the spread of Buddhism in each area was outstanding, as follows: 1) Visionary leadership: Visionary leaders in the spread of Buddhism. Examples include Sariputta Thera, Maha Moggallana Thera, Anuruddha Thera, Maha Kassapa Thera, Vangisa, and Pindola Bharadvāja. These six great monks were instrumental in the spread of Buddhism. Each of them excelled in their own unique way of spreading the Dhamma, which the Buddha praised. For example, Sariputta Thera was honored by the Buddha as his chief disciple. He was a Dharma minister who delivered profound sermons and explanations on Dhamma topics. He possessed wit and foresight in teaching Buddhists, contributing to the rapid spread of Buddhism during the Buddha's time. 2) Vidhuro: Knowledgeable leadership. The ability to spread Buddhism in the 4 S. case studies, namely Phra Uruvela Kassapa, Phra Culapanthaka Thera, Phra Rahula Thera, Phra Lakuntaka Bhaddiya, and Phra Punnamantaniputta Thera, all 5 of them were great monks with knowledge and ability to spread Buddhism, who were very important forces during the Buddha's time. Each of them was outstanding in spreading Buddhism, such as Phra Uruvela Kassapa, a monk who was praised by the Buddha as the foremost in having many followers. Before being ordained in Buddhism, Phra Uruvela Kassapa was a highly respected ascetic in Magadha. When he was ordained in Buddhism, it led to more people accepting Buddhism, which is consistent with Vasin Inthasara further elaborated on the principles of his question-answering in the Panhapayakana Sutta by using the question-answering technique as a teaching method.

While the interlocutor may not have directly asked him a question, he chose to communicate with them in a similar manner to the Panhapayakana Sutta. He classified these into five types: 1) Ekangsa-lakhana (one-sided assertion), 2) Vibhajja-lakhana (clearly dividing the issue), 3) Padpuccha-lakhana (asking questions before teaching), 4) Thapana-lakhana (leaving aside questions without making predictions), and 5) Umap-lakhana (association), which teaches through comparisons (Vasin Inthasara, 1981: 39-49). 3) Nissayasampanno: Leadership in the propagation of Buddhism with good interpersonal skills. Case studies include Anya Kondanna, the Elder Sonakutikanṇa, and the Elder Mahakappina. And the four great monks, Phra Upasena Wangkanthabutra Thera, were all great monks with excellent human relations, resulting in improved human relations among the Sangha and the villagers, who became more familiar with and had more faith in Buddhism. For example, Phra Maha Kappina was knowledgeable and wise in teaching. He was familiar with and had good relationships with the monks, so he regularly gave advice to them. Once, he gave advice to 1,000 monks until they attained Arahantship. This aligns with Rungchai Muenchana. Asst. Prof. Dr. stated that humans began communicating with each other in caves. They communicated together, lived together, married, and hunted together. However, human relations in those days were still natural. People lived together in harmony, and when conflict or dissatisfaction arose, they would resolve it with weapons. Later, humans evolved through the ages, leading to the emergence of religious ideologies. The teachings of various religions all serve as guidelines for fostering human relations, encouraging people to live together peacefully. When problems arose, they learned to resolve them using wisdom and reason. This was followed by the Industrial Revolution, when slave labor was used to control people.

Conclusion

The leadership of monks in propagating Buddhism consists of three core dimensions: visionary leadership (Chakkhumā), wisdom-based expertise (Vidhuro), and supportive moral leadership (Nissayasampanno). Monks must possess a vision for spreading Buddhism both domestically and internationally, develop deep knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, and build strong human relationships within society. They must also demonstrate expertise in meditation, mastery of various propagation methods, and a sincere eagerness to learn and practice. At the same time, their leadership requires moral virtues such as the Four Brahmavihāras, social virtues, and the qualities of a good spiritual friend, enabling them to guide communities spiritually. These findings align with research noting that Buddhism historically held high societal value, with temples serving as centers of knowledge and monks acting as intellectual and moral leaders. Although modernization once weakened the role of Buddhism, contemporary society has renewed interest in Buddhist teachings as people recognize the limitations of capitalist development and return to spiritual principles. Leadership traits during the Buddha's time similarly included faith, knowledge, vision, interpersonal competence, exemplary conduct, and doctrinal excellence. However, modern Sangha education faces challenges such as outdated curricula, insufficient personnel development, and separation from national education structures, indicating the need for regulatory reform, improved curricula, and stronger welfare systems for personnel. Additionally, monks during the Buddha's time formed effective propagation networks, with leadership in each region contributing to the successful spread of Buddhism.

Recommendation

Based on this research, recommendations for its application and the opinions of qualified monks and laypeople with expertise and experience in Buddhist leadership in propagating Buddhism are provided, including:

1. Agencies involved in propagating Buddhism should organize training for personnel involved in propagating Buddhism, such as training programs for monk preachers and training programs for monk missionaries.
2. Agencies involved in propagating Buddhism should adhere to the principles of the Buddha's propagation of Buddhism by establishing dissemination networks.
3. Buddhist study centers should organize training for monks and novices to enhance their knowledge and use of teaching media and propagation of Buddhism.

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