



A Khmer Buddhist Foundation Provides \$1 Million in Grants to Digitize and Preserve the Largest Surviving Collection of Cambodian Buddhist Palm Leaf Manuscripts

-- Rare 500-year-old collection of Buddhist literature on culture, science, medicine, history and religion is made available free to the global community online --

SAN FRANCISCO—February 9, 2022— [A Khmer Buddhist Foundation](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to preserving the culture of the Khmer population, is proud to announce it has furnished over \$1 million in grant funding to the [Buddhist Digital Resource Center](#) (BDRC) to source, preserve, restore and digitize nearly 1.5 million pages of palm-leaf manuscripts — the largest collection of Cambodian Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts in the world.

The chief medium for Cambodian literature for hundreds of years has been the palm leaf manuscript. A South and Southeast Asian tradition for millennia, palm leaf manuscripts are typically short bundles of rectangular palm leaves that are tied together with colorful strings. Palm leaf manuscripts are created by drying and trimming young palm fronds and then using a sharp stylus to etch text onto both sides of each strip of palm leaf. Given their organic nature, the manuscripts are perishable and also vulnerable to insects and fire. To protect them from loss, scribes would regularly recopy manuscripts, transmitting knowledge from generation to generation. To this day, palm leaf manuscripts are crucial sources of Buddhist rituals and teachings and also of Khmer culture more broadly, including history, literature, astrology and medicine.

Sadly, scholars estimate that more than 95% of manuscripts in Cambodia disappeared between 1975 and 1990, due to neglect or outright destruction by the Khmer Rouge regime. However, even the texts that survived will also be lost, along with their rich history, without preservation.

“These manuscripts are critical for the revival of Khmer culture, which is why I am so passionate about seeing them digitized and shared,” explains Lyna Lam, founder and executive director of A Khmer Buddhist Foundation. “The manuscripts -- some of them 500 years old -- offer a snapshot of the fascinating cultural and spiritual landscape that existed in Cambodian society before the country was ravaged by war and are critical to educating future generations about our vibrant and meaningful history and traditions.”

“We are grateful for the funding, as it helps us advance our efforts to preserve culture and share it with a wide audience online,” says Jann Ronis, executive director of the BDRC. “The project is vital to

permanently record this important literature, which would otherwise have vanished. We are proud of the tremendous work done by local teams in Cambodia, who have worked tirelessly in some of the most remote areas to find the historic manuscripts and then collect, organize and catalogue them so they can be easily available to future generations.”

Digitization of the manuscripts began in 2019, thanks to an initial grant to the BDRC from A Khmer Buddhist Foundation. It took two and a half years to locate, clean, organize and scan the texts. In total, 11,000 palm leaf manuscripts were digitized, and currently over 8,600 are available online for free viewing and download. The remaining 2,500 will be processed and released online in the next few months. To maximize access, BDRC is making the Khmer manuscripts available through its [main site](#) and also through a user interface designed for the Khmer community, <http://khmer-manuscripts.bdrc.io> (in development).

“It’s been an enormous undertaking,” says Lam. “BDRC went above and beyond to locate these important artifacts, then photograph, archive and catalog them to share with others. We appreciate and honor their diligence and care.”

The preservation project involves more than photographing the palm leaf manuscripts. While that format comprises 70% of the manuscripts being digitized, the remainder includes several hundred rolls of film made by the [École française d'Extrême-Orient](#) between 1990 and 2012. Many of the palm leaf texts documented in these films have since been lost. And because they have been stored in canisters in non-climate-controlled offices in Cambodia, the reels – the only surviving copies – are degrading and are at risk of being lost as well without proper preservation.

The new digital resource will not only help preserve a priceless record of Cambodian society and history, but it will also provide modern readers access to a trove of Cambodian Buddhist literature. The website will also be valuable to scholars and monks, enabling them to continue their tradition of studying these older texts.

The project’s next step is to create additional content and videos/short documentaries that describe and explain the manuscripts, including their craftsmanship and traditions.

About A Khmer Buddhist Foundation

A Khmer Buddhist Foundation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the lives of the Khmer people and preserving their rich traditions and culture. It offers grants each year to enrich and strengthen the lives of the Khmer population, in areas that include arts and culture and business. Learn more: www.akhmerbuddhistfoundation.org

About the Buddhist Digital Resource Center

The Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to seeking out, preserving, documenting and disseminating Buddhist literature. The organization provides scholars, translators, Buddhist practitioners and the general public with access to an unparalleled collection of

Buddhist texts. Joining digital technology with scholarship, BDRC ensures that the cultural treasures of the Buddhist literary tradition are secure and accessible for generations to come. Learn more: www.bdrc.io

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