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# Characteristics of an Excellent Buddhist Sermon: A Foundation for Competency Framework Development of a Sermon Training in Indonesia



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**ABSTRACT.** Preaching is the most common and widely-used method in conveying a religious message, including the teaching of the Buddha in Indonesia. However, surprisingly, there is no standard to assess a Buddhist sermon's quality. Thus, this study examines the characteristics of excellent Buddhist sermons among Buddhist householder priests (*Pandita*) in Indonesia. Specifically, it further investigates the discourse of a standard of an excellent Buddhist sermon in the context of *Pandita*. This qualitative research employed a single-case-study method that connects the analysis of documentation studies, observations, and in-depth interviews. The findings exhibited three key dimensions and indicators through which a *Pandita* is expected to employ in their duties related to Buddhist sermon, namely, bringing benefits, skillful delivery, and quality of the content. The findings may benefit future research on the competency framework of sermon training in Indonesia for *Panditas*.

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## 1.0. Introduction

Religion plays many vital roles in regulating life and responding to various life and death problems. Morality, ethics, religious law, or a healthy lifestyle come from religion because religion is meant to explain the meaning of life (Firmansyah et al., 2020). In Wallinder-Pierini (2018), Ikeda stated that even in the Twenty-First Century, the era when the internet was dominant, reliable ethics and value criteria are vital for setting up rules. The foundation must be the golden rules of most religions: not in favor of taking life, stealing, and deceiving. Since compassion is a particular emphasis in Buddhism, Buddhists must support those universal values. Huffman (1988) and Swimberghe et al. (2011), as cited in Arli (2017), suggested that the most vital determinant of values in a person is religiosity, and the formation of beliefs, ideals, and normative social systems in society always involve the role of religious importance.

Several studies have reported positive results of expounding religious messages in some areas. Related to the environmental issue, the teaching of Islam promotes environmental protection, which is a form of human responsibility to the environment as their duty to protect God's property. Siyavooshi et al. (2018) found that the delivery of religious messages showed an increased tendency to purchase plant-based single-use containers compared to environmental messages. Thus, promoting environmentally friendly ideas has a high potential to use religious values. In addition, exposure to messages about helping increases as involvement in religious groups increases. Beyerlein (2016) concluded that religious ties, exposure to spiritual messages about helping others, and giving were more blessings than receiving supports concern for blood donation. Regarding the value of saving a life, The Holy Mass is significant and has an important role in communicating the message of protecting the sanctity of life, supporting social justice, and promoting common goodness and virtues as the three constructs of Respect for Life (Gochoico, 2021). For young adult spiritual development, Cena and Bual (2021) proposed that schools should provide varied and sustainable religious activities that will help their students deeply understand life's essential values.

Laeheem (2020) stated that the main factor influencing the ethical behavior of young people was religious socialization, which is a significant factor that directly and positively impacts the encouragement of ethical conduct. Religious education, providing knowledge and understanding

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of religious principles, practicing spiritual teachings seriously, and participating in religious activities are important factors that enable adolescents to behave ethically. Somaratna (2018) concluded that sermons inspire devotees to a better life in the future by avoiding bad karma and doing good karma. Listening to sermons is an opportunity for them to do good and a reminder to live according to moral and ethical behavior to achieve contentment and happiness. Moreover, a Buddhist sermon is an opportunity to study and understand many aspects of Buddhism, such as cosmology, coherent presentation of Buddhist principles relevant to a ceremony or situation at hand, and more complex Buddhist concepts and ideas, as well as a way to connect the academic or perhaps esoteric understandings of Buddhism and local practices (Tannenbaum, 2015).

A Buddhist sermon is usually performed by monks, nuns, and householder priests (Pandita). Although it has a vital role in conveying Buddha's message, surprisingly, there is no standard for an excellent Buddhist sermon. In a Buddhist sermon training for the Pandita of the Indonesian Buddhayana Council observed, there was no standard to assess participants' competence when they practiced delivering their sermon. There was no written or formal assessment tool regarding the standard for a Pandita to preach. They were asked to write comments and inputs while observing other participants preaching. No evaluation sheets, rubrics, or different kinds of assessment tools were provided, only a small piece of paper to write on, which meant each participant had their judgment.

This study intends to identify characteristics of excellent Buddhist sermons from the point of view of the Pandita. Furthermore, the findings are expected to be a significant foundation for future research on the competency framework for Buddhist sermon training in Indonesia to create more competent Buddhist priest preachers.

## **2.0. Methodology**

This study utilized a single-case study qualitative approach to investigate the characteristics of good Buddhist sermons from the point of view of the Pandita. Qualitative research is an approach to representing the views and perspectives of study participants to capture their perspectives so that events and ideas that emerge from qualitative research can represent the meanings given to real-world events by people who live it (Yin, 2016). Moreover, a case study is a contextual analysis of one or several naturalistic phenomena, among others, to individuals, organizations, programs, events, geographic locations, or decisions (Tracy, 2019).

The data collection techniques are the in-depth interview, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with 11 Panditas from different years of service, of which the least experienced priest/*pandita* has served for two years, and the most senior one has served for 47 years. Participant observation was conducted by joining two Buddhist sermon training. Documents collected and analyzed were videos from some sermon trainers, written training materials, and training notes. Data analysis procedures included preparing and organizing data, doing the first cycle of descriptive coding to identify recurring codes and themes, performing the second cycle of focused coding to find the most significant codes and categorize them into ascertain themes, and presenting the findings in visual form.

For ethical considerations, approval and endorsements from the Indonesian Buddhayana Council and the committees of the sermon training were constantly sought. All informants freely gave their consent to participate in the study after explaining the purpose and value of the research. The anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses were assured.

## **3.0. Results**

The paper aims to identify characteristics of excellent Buddhist sermons from the point of view of the Pandita, document analysis, and observation. After a thorough analysis, the finding shows that the sermons have three dimensions: bringing benefits, skillful delivery, and quality of the content. There are several indicators for each dimension. This section will further discuss each dimension and the indicators.

### **Bringing benefits: easy to understand and give solution**

Since the underlying motivation of delivering sermons is compassion for the world, the primary purpose of a Dharma sermon is to benefit all as much as possible. This was stated by one of the trainers in the training videos:

"One fundamental principle is that teaching Dhamma is for the welfare of many people. For the happiness of many, and on what basis? Based on a love for the world, for gods and for humans' benefit, welfare, and happiness. That is the goal." (Trainer 01, 01. Doc-Video, August 31, 2021)

The extent to which a sermon can provide benefits can be a measure that a Dharma discourse can be said to be close to the truth. It was highlighted when one of the participants said:

"If the sermon is useful for many people and can provide input for a better future, then the sermon can be said to be useful." (Participant 01, personal interview, November 13, 2021)

When the audience benefits from the sermon, their faith in Dharma is expected to grow. As narrated by one of the informants:

"The spirit of delivering a sermon is that the audience finds the sermon useful and beneficial from the teachings so that their faith in Dharma might grow." (Participant 02, personal interview, November 25, 2021)

A priest should not only convey beautiful words but must also be able to give meaning in his sermon. This research found that the benefit of a Dharma sermon is that people understand the Dharma easily and find solutions in the Dharma.

**Easy to understand.** Buddhists do not need a complex sermon but prefer one they can understand easily. Clear, simple, and easy to understand are the characteristics of Buddhist sermons that benefit the audience because they want sermons that are not hard for them to understand. As one of the participants explained:

"When Buddhists attend a service in which a sermon is usually part of it, they generally prefer not to think too hard to understand the discourse delivered." (Participant 03, personal interview, November 03, 2021)

In addition, it is also essential to put the audience as a subject of a sermon instead of the object. One of the participants expressed this thought, saying:

"The main focus of a Buddhist sermon is not the skill of the preacher but the understanding of the audience. A Pandita must be able to explain the text in such a way that the people understand the message contained. They need to discuss the text easily, instead of elaborating it intellectually and impressing the audience". (Participant 04, personal interview, November 03, 2021)

A message understood means it enters the listeners' hearts and helps them put Dharma into practice.

**A solution to daily problems.** Providing solutions for Buddhists who need answers to phenomena that occur daily or difficulties they are currently facing is one of the indicators that a Buddhist sermon is beneficial for its listeners. Householder Buddhists face various challenges and issues that require solutions. They want to know which Buddha's teaching in the scriptures is relevant to their situation. One of the informants explained:

"If the sermon can solve the problems of everyday life, it can still be by the scriptures themselves, because we as Buddhists want to know what Buddhist teachers teach, according to the scriptures." (Participant 05, personal interview, November 10, 2021)

The Buddha's teachings in the Tripitaka must be well conveyed so that the Dharma discourse is relevant to everyday life in today's times because the complexity of the problem is not the same as in the Buddha's time. Various life challenges that householder Buddhists face require answers in practical ways to help them overcome the difficulties they face. As explained by one participant:

"A sermon should be an inspiration. People come to a service and listen to a sermon to have an idea of how to solve problems in life according to Buddha's teachings. We experience many obstacles and problems in everyday life, and we may also have choices. Nevertheless, of course, what we do must be based on the teachings of the Buddha". (Participant 01, personal interview, November 13, 2021)

Panditas are expected to deliver Buddhist sermons that can help people face the difficulties they are experiencing. This can be done by presenting everyday life examples and experiences and references from the scriptures that confirm how Buddha-Dharma can be a solution.

**Skillful delivery: focused, systematic, employing multimedia, modest, and interactive**

Delivery is the immediately-recognized element of a sermon. In general, an excellent Buddhist sermon is characterized by skillful delivery. Within the first five to ten minutes, the audience can quickly judge how good a sermon is and decide if they decide to stay and continue to listen or leave. It is one aspect of the evaluation in the sermon training in which participants give written and oral suggestions to other participants after they finish performing sermon practice. This research concluded five indicators that contribute to skillful delivery: focused, systematic, employing multimedia, modest, and interactive.

**Focused.** Panditas needs to take Buddha as a model in delivering Buddhist sermons, mainly how Buddha was focused on his talk, straight to the point in directing his followers to understand his message effectively. This is expressed explicitly by one of the informants:

"I think as the Buddha himself in expressing his suttas, he was not long-winded. Not long-winded means focused on what to convey. He specifically invited his audience or directed the audience, his listeners, to understand what was being conveyed. So do not linger, saying unnecessary things that are not following what was initially intended." (Participant 06, personal interview, October 30, 2021)

They must understand that they must not talk too long, back and forth, since it will obstruct the message as the audience will find the sermon confusing and challenging to follow and understand.

To follow the Buddha, Pandita can do the opening, the discussion, the closing, and the question-and-answer session with materials relevant to the topic. This can be taken from an observation note:

"The material given by Mr Setiawan focused on tonight's topic, namely the practice of walking meditation. The presentation is done in stages. He begins with a song to lead participants to the topic, explains the instructions for doing walking meditation, and then outlines its benefits. He shared from the theoretical and practical side what he did. The question-and-answer session from the participants is also only related to this topic." (01-FRON-MBI-DKI, observation note, July 13, 2021)

A focused-delivered sermon helps the audience to understand the Dharma message the preacher wants to convey.

**Systematic.** Delivering systematic Buddhist sermons means explaining Dharma in a precise order, starting from the opening, discussion, and closing. In addition to good content, a gradual and straightforward flow helps the audience to understand the message better because humans think in a structured way. In one of the narratives, one informant emphasized:

"If it's systematic, it's good, with a clear flow. For the layman, who wants to learn, if it is systematic, there is an introduction, discussion, and then closing. That is more effective; we can understand the purpose of his lecture, especially if it is delivered with examples, stories, it will be more interesting." (Participant 05, personal interview, November 10, 2021)

They also enjoy listening to the sermons because the priests do not talk from point A to point C, which might confuse them. Sermons supported by sophisticated multimedia materials also become less optimal if the talk is not systematic. As one of the informants mentioned:

"Systematic is good so that our delivery does not discuss point A, then move to C, then back to B. It will be ridiculous and confusing for the audience even if the sermon uses multimedia." (Participant 02, personal interview, November 25, 2021)

Systematic means that Buddhist sermons are delivered clearly in three stages: opening, discussion, and closing.

**Multimedia.** The use of multimedia in a Buddhist sermon is relevant to the present day as it is the era in which technology has become an integral part of people's daily lives. The use of pictures, tables, graphics, short videos, animations, songs, and so on relevant to the topic is critical because it makes a sermon more attractive, not dull, and easier to understand. This was expressed by one of the informants:

"Add examples, Buddhist stories, use multimedia, so the audience does not get bored." (Participant 02, personal interview, November 25, 2021)

Some previously complex concepts that are hard to express become easy to explain using multimedia. It is beneficial to use multimedia to bring understanding to the audience. One of the informants explained why multimedia is important.

"Multimedia makes it easier for us to convey our materials. It would not be easy to provide an example or picture without multimedia. The use of media makes it easier for listeners to understand." (Participant 07, personal interview, November 26, 2021)

Generally, Buddhist sermons in some temples use PowerPoint slides that need to be designed attractively by adding multimedia content. Pandita must use multimedia thoughtfully to contribute to a successful Buddhist sermon.

**Modest.** Modesty as one indicator of skillful delivery of Buddhist sermon is related to the physical appearance, speeches, and attitude during preaching. Physical appearance is essential, considering that the audience can immediately appraise the priest from his hair, face, or outfit. In particular, one of the participants raised this matter, saying:

"A tidy Pandita will make an excellent first impression and attract audience attention and support. Moreover, it is also essential to pay attention to the body fragrance and neatness of the uniforms. Wear proper attire, not T-shirt." (Participant 08, personal interview, November 10, 2021)

Pandita must be able to control himself from uttering harsh words, speaking ill of, or demeaning others during a Buddhist sermon. Even though humor is necessary to bring joy and happiness, Pandita must be careful when using humor related to specific ethnic groups. This concern was raised by one of the informants:

"A joke that provokes laughter should not include elements of ethnicity and race so that no one gets offended during the sermon. A funny story is not funny anymore if it is an insult." (Participant 01, personal interview, November 13, 2021)

Another important reminder is related to other religions. It is vital to respect adherents of other faiths, as noted in observation during training.

"It is best not to discuss other religions and focus on content from Buddhist sources. A comparison of religion, no matter how small and simple, is not necessary for a Buddhist sermon since it might provoke some misjudgment of other religions." (03-FRON-PDII-SUMSEL, observation note, July 25, 2021)

Finally, showing a good attitude is essential because a Pandita is the center of attention during his talk. One trainer reminded this in the video:

"In the use of hand gestures, be careful not to point any fingers at anyone impolitely.  
"(Trainer 01, 01. Doc-Video, August 31, 2021)

To be polite in a Buddhist sermon delivery, a Pandita needs to be neat, tidy, smell good, and be kind in his words and behaviors to others.

**Interactive.** Two-way interaction between the Pandita and the audience during a Buddhist sermon is evidence of successful communication. One informant concluded this when he stated:

If the audience wants to respond to the priest resulting in an interactive dialogue, they are interested in the topic and pay attention to the priests." (Participant 08, personal interview, November 10, 2021)

To create interaction, ask the audience to get involved in the sermon. One of the informants shared some techniques as he explained:

Never read the slides. Instead of giving a monotonous speech where the speaker is the only star of the show, plan activities like question and answer, short dialogue or a more extended discussion, and even games, quizzes, or singing. They are some techniques that attract active involvement of the audience." (Participant 08, personal interview, November 10, 2021)

Moreover, interaction is crucial because it prevents the audience from getting bored and leaving their cushion. As one informant stated:

"When they interact, they become part of the sermon and feel appreciated. In addition, it is also essential not to just read the slides on the screen because it will kill the audience's enthusiasm to listen more. Instead, use them as a tool that enables a more interesting discussion." (Participant 07, personal interview, November 26, 2021)

In short, a creative two-way delivery prevents audiences from boredom and makes the sermon excellent and interesting.

**Quality of the content: reference from the Tripitaka, contemporary knowledge, and relevant examples**

In short, a creative two-way delivery prevents audiences from boredom and makes the sermon excellent and interesting. One of the informants pointed out the reason that quality of content is vital:

"Pandita is the voice of the Buddha's words in this present life since they speak out the Buddha's teaching concerning the current issue in today's world. They present the wisdom of the Buddha to motivate and inspire Buddhists to follow the path of awakening, developing compassion and wisdom for the benefit of all beings and are moved to be a better individual by practicing the Buddha's teaching." (Participant 08, personal interview, November 10, 2021)

This research concluded that an aspiring and meaningful sermon requires good content that uses references from the Tripitaka, contemporary knowledge, and relevant examples.

**Reference from the Tripitaka.** The Tripitaka contains excellent moral messages, values, and ethical behavior in stories, parables, poems, and others that Pandita can quote as reference. Since it is a religious message, reference from the scriptures is necessary. A quote from the note from one of the training:

"A Buddhist sermon without any Tripitaka reference means the Pandita expounds his teaching instead of the Buddha's words. Although it is not necessarily wrong, it is his personal opinion and harmony with the Dharma. However, it is considered an expert opinion instead of a Buddhist sermon." (03-FRON-PDII-SUMSEL, observation note, July 25, 2021)

It is imperative to include some citations from scriptures of any Buddhist traditions because Buddhists would consider that the sermon is good. As one informant narrated:

"Since there is no standard of an excellent Buddhist sermon yet, a sermon with Tripitaka references is commonly considered good and well-prepared." (Participant 07, personal interview, November 26, 2021)

Citing a liable source by noting the name of *the sutta* or *sutra* is vital to tell that no matter old, Buddhism is meaningful until today. This is specially stated by one informant saying:

"By citing Tripitaka's reference, Pandita shows how relevant Dharma is to the present-day circumstances and that the Buddha's teaching could provide answers to today's challenges." (Participant 09, personal interview, November 03, 2021)

In short, a sermon must include a Tripitaka reference. Otherwise, it is just an expert opinion instead of a Buddhist sermon.

**Contemporary knowledge.** The era of the Buddha and the present day's condition is a significant difference. The socio-economy, politics, technology, and many other circumstances have changed drastically, creating more complex and diverse challenges and problems. This was highlighted by one of the participants saying:

"The world has gone tremendous change, and the teaching of the Buddha is expected to be able to answer the challenges and difficulties of today's world. Therefore, a Buddhist sermon is also interesting if it discusses issues relevant to current situations." (Participant 08, personal interview, November 10, 2021)

Therefore, a Buddhist sermon needs to include materials other than the scripture to meet this need.

"Besides references from the Tripitaka, citing information from newspapers, magazines, current news, articles, books, videos, poems, and much other contemporary knowledge relevant to the topic is needed. Pandita is encouraged to include them in their sermon for issues such as cryptocurrency, cloning, investment, liberalism, and many others that did not exist in the time of the Buddha." (Participant 10, personal interview, November 18, 2021)

As a Buddhist sermon is expected to solve present-day problems, a combination of Tripitaka references and contemporary knowledge will give the optimal answers.

**Relevant examples.** Besides Tripitaka's reference and contemporary knowledge, relevant examples are useful in a Buddhist sermon. One informant stated:

"Difficult or abstract concepts in the Dharma, such as *sunyata* or *anatta*, suddenly become not-so-difficult to grasp when examples are given." (Participant 11, personal interview, November 26, 2021)

Stories and life experiences are the two most recommended forms of examples. One informant explained this:

"Even though Buddha told many stories in Tripitaka, additional narrations from the present time that the audience finds related to their own lives are also encouraging, touching, and inspiring." (Participant 08, personal interview, November 10, 2021)

Moreover, the life experience of the Pandita or others is a real example that might also move the audience. They can learn precious first-hand real-life lessons narrated directly by the actor.

"For the Pandita, sharing his own experience in Dharma practice and daily life challenges is the talk from the heart. (Participant 07, personal interview, November 26, 2021)

Examples in the form of stories and life experiences are powerful messages and valuable in conveying some abstract teaching. The audience will understand a Buddhist sermon better if Pandita shares many examples.

#### **4.0. Discussion**

The results of this study show much significant understanding of the characteristics of excellent Buddhist sermons and the corresponding indicators. First, a Buddhist sermon is expected to bring benefits. As concluded by Hemnithi and Yodmalee (2018), people should be able to apply the understanding they get from attending Buddhist sermons. Moreover, a study has shown how human development strategies can be derived from Buddhism (Noksakul et al., 2021). Furthermore, bringing benefits means easy to understand and provide solutions. Schedneck (2021) reported how Phra Maha Sombong made his talk easy to understand and gave consultation to help householder Buddhists. In addition, religious leaders are expected to be active in solving various problems (Hartono et al., 2020).

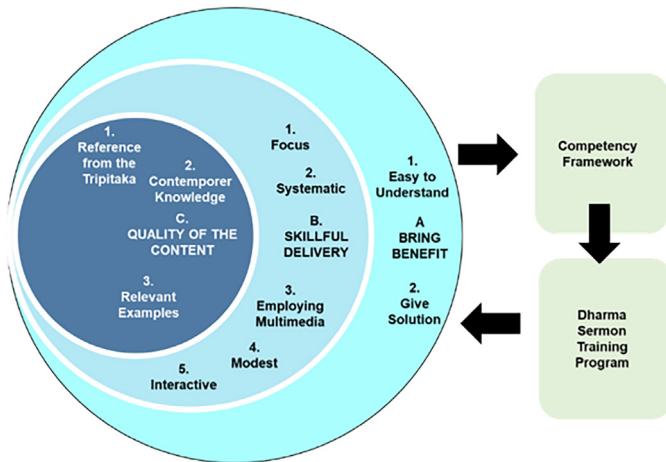
This study concluded that the second dimension is skillful delivery. It is the aspect of methodological competence, which is the ability to perform a sermon prepared (Hasanah et al., 2018). Further, the content of sermons prepared is important, but if they cannot be delivered well, the sermon will not reach the hearts of the listeners (Manning, 2020). The research revealed that a focused-delivered sermon is necessary. A Pandita must not talk too long and ramble. In their study, Wijaya Mulya et al. (2022) concluded that NU's traditional preaching style with long and reflective discussions might not be very interesting, especially for the new middle class. Moreover, systematically presenting a sermon is also necessary, as Kent (2015) concluded that sermons delivered systematically must be triumphant. Informants from this research also stated the importance of the use of multimedia, as a previous study also suggested the use of multimedia to show the content of a sermon (Salleh et al., 2019). Another crucial factor in skillful delivery, as presented by the informants, is modesty. It was concluded that the preacher is expected to use strategic politeness elements in delivery or risk compromising the efficacy of the sermon (Kareem, 2018). In addition, excellent Dharma sermons are also characterized by interactive delivery, as Sutrisno revealed that dialogue occurs in delivering Dharma messages as one of the characteristics of visual communication skills (Sutrisno et al., 2020).

Lastly, Pandita must prepare quality content in their sermon so that people will benefit after listening, helping them to find the solutions they need. Some informants expressed the need to use Buddhist scripture references and additional contemporary knowledge. The use of the Bible as a primary source is awaited by listeners (Carrell, 2009). The sermon text used by modern churches today consists of material based on religious books and non-religious content (Morozova, 2015). In addition, relevant examples of stories and real-life examples are unique and effective in conveying a message. This has been shown by Phra Maha Sombong, who used examples and narrated Thai village life stories and even plots from widely-beloved Korean soap operas (Schedneck, 2021).

#### **5.0. Conclusion**

A sermon is one of the most common methods of conveying the Buddha's message. A monk, nun, or Pandita, is invited to preach in the Sunday morning service or on other Buddhist occasions. Even though a sermon is a vital attempt to educate Buddhists to understand and practice Dharma well, there is not any standard or formula of any kind, particularly in the Indonesian Buddhayana Council, as a tool to evaluate if a sermon is well-delivered. This research answered the question of what an excellent Buddhist sermon is?





**Figure 1.** The characteristics of excellent Buddhist sermons and its relation with a competency framework

An excellent Buddhist sermon has three dimensions: bringing benefits, skillful delivery, and quality of the content. A sermon brings benefits of easy-to-understand and solutions to daily life problems as the audience attends a sermon expecting a topic would be helpful for them. A Pandita is considered skillful in his delivery if he is focused, systematic, employs multimedia, modesty, and is interactive. A sermon must contain references from the Tripitaka from either Pali or non-Pali text, relevant contemporary knowledge, and examples in the form of stories and experiences in Dharma practice or daily life.

The findings of this study are expected to serve as an empirical reference in developing a competency framework for a Buddhist sermon-training program. Figure 1 presents the characteristics of excellent Buddhist sermons and their relation with a competency framework. It is necessary as it is a map to decide the training materials needed. Moreover, the training program is crucial because it is critical to ensure that only qualified Buddhists and Pandita are allowed to expound Dharma in public and prevent any misleading sermon that can create misunderstanding.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest in this research publication.

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