INTRODUCTION

TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT: TEXT, TECHNIQUE AND EXPERIENCE IN SCHOLARSHIP ON THERAVADA MEDITATION

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Despite the remarkable rise in publications on the subject of meditation practices derived from Theravada Buddhism, the representation of Theravada meditation itself, in all its rich diversity, has remained narrow. The burgeoning literature on meditation and mindfulness has focused on a limited range of practices, with much of Theravada’s historical and current diversity of practice, particularly that within Asia, ignored.\textsuperscript{1} Moreover, while there is general awareness that the list of meditation topics found in early, authoritative Buddhist sources such as the Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta and Visuddhimagga (see below) is far wider than those practised within modernist meditation culture, it is generally unknown that there is also a rich diversity of techniques that may be applied to any given topic. We also find a diversity of expectations, agents or participants, contexts and end goals. A greater attention to global mindfulness has had the unintended consequence of presenting Theravada practice as a modernised version of, or as identical to, the practices described in those early sources, as monolithic and static. The aim of this volume is to buck that trend, to look not at the diversity of the global applications of Buddhism-derived practice, but at the diversity within their presumed source, at the diversity of approaches, practices, techniques and participants.\textsuperscript{2} The contributions also offer commentary on how Buddhist meditation has been received and studied and how this might change.

Trends in the study of Buddhist meditation

The study of Buddhist meditation in western scholarship has undergone a number of significant changes in the last 40 years. Time was – when two of the editors of this volume began their studies – that the academic scholarly discourse on meditation was dominated by text-historical
methods. This in turn had issued forth in relation to a limited number of preoccupations with the subject. As a topic of genuine inquiry *on its own terms*, meditation seems to have been largely ‘beyond the bounds’, possibly because it encroached on or challenged the religious world views of scholars themselves, but also because of insider/outsider tensions in the discourse, and anxieties over the subjective nature of the experiences involved, which were at the time beyond any empirical measure.

Interestingly, and possibly because of the emergent status of psychology as a scholarly discipline in the early twentieth century, an early and far from inappropriate understanding of Buddhist theory and practice as a form of psychology made by pioneer scholar Caroline Rhys Davids was largely ignored. Rhys Davids had studied psychology at University College London as one of its first female graduates (gr. 1886), going on to publish on the topic. This interest must have helped fuel her commitment to editing three of the seven Abhidhamma texts of the Pali canon (plus the *Visuddhimagga*, hereafter Vism) and translating two others, thereby exploring the ‘extraordinarily subtle and detailed matrices of mental processes’ presented therein (Neal 2014, 18) and developing a detailed understanding of the ethical implications of Abhidhamma analysis. In a popular work published in 1912, she presents Buddhist teaching as an antidote to metaphysics, ‘a weapon against this state of over-wrought metaphysical speculation. … [i.e.] the science of the mind or psychology, which the Buddhist movement initiated, and which Buddhist culture subsequently developed’ (Rhys Davids 1912, 61). In particular, she presents Abhidhamma as ‘an instrument for regulating the mind’ (Rhys Davids 1912, 39), as something practical rather than being merely a scholastic and descriptive enterprise, as became the tendency in the later representation of Abhidhamma (see the conclusion of Crosby’s contribution to this volume), a tendency from which scholarship is now beginning to recover, as exemplified by Heim’s in-depth analysis of the Abhidhamma understanding of morality and agency (Heim 2014). For her part, Rhys Davids treats meditation (primarily conceived as *jhāna*) in entirely positive psychological and ethical terms, a strategy of considerable originality for the time (Rhys Davids 1912, 212ff). She singles out Barthélemy St. Hilaire and Sir Monier Monier-Williams as ‘experts’ writing in the previous 50 years, who respectively condemn Buddhism as a metaphysic of ‘incurable désespoir’ (St. Hilaire), of ‘inaction and apathy’ and being ‘ultra-pessimistic’ (Monier-Williams) (1912, 158). She is keen to illuminate the rational and ethical motives and goals behind a detailed presentation of *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation (with which one finds little to quibble over a century after she was writing), and remarkably extends her account to ‘other formulated methods for regulating mental procedure beside the Jhāna practice’ by discussing the *brahma vihāra* (1912, 218). She does not go on to discuss other *kammatthāna* (meditation topics),
perhaps being less familiar with Buddhaghosa’s taxonomy at this time (she did not publish her edition of Vism until 1920) but perhaps also to spare the general readership of the Home University Library, for which she wrote the volume.

Caroline Rhys Davids’s approach was not followed through. While Buddhism influenced the development of psychology, Rhys Davids’s contemporaries and their successors in Buddhist studies looked elsewhere for disciplines to frame discussion of the topic. Perhaps inevitably, these were the well-established high-status humanities disciplines of philology, textual criticism, history and philosophy, which in their turn determined the kinds of questions that would be raised and answered. Meditation was, it seems, of no interest to the natural sciences of the day.

Reflecting this intellectual context, a theme that has had significant airing over the years is the possible origins of Buddhist meditation, focusing on the Buddha’s personal teachers, and variations on claims to identify what is and is not the Buddha’s personal innovation in this area. Alongside this, a considerable amount of ink has been spilt in theoretical text-based discussions of the possible internal incoherence of Buddhist meditation per se, a position which overlaps with the claim that at least two mutually exclusive meditative procedures and/or goals have been mixed and/or confused – this last point usually bearing on the distinction between samatha and vipassanā meditation. The samatha-vipassanā division continues as a trope in presentations of Theravada meditation, including early meditation, in contemporary discourse (on the actual usage of the terms within the tradition, see Skilton’s contribution to this volume). Some of this discussion about origins and coherence issues forth in revisionism, seeking to ‘uncover’ the Buddha’s original teaching, in contrast to the received and developed tradition. Almost always, this kind of discussion is focused on the textual sources identified as representing ‘early’ or ‘original’ Buddhism, i.e. the tipitaka as it survives in Pali language. This was fuelled by and in turn refuelled perceptions that the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia which preserved this version of the canon was somehow coterminous with ‘original Buddhism’, as if the intervening 2500 years had somehow not happened, and that Theravada has been an entirely static phenomenon. The emphasis on those sources as representative of Buddhism and of Theravada as representing original Buddhism have been reaffirmed in global adaptations of Buddhism. Thus, when David McMahan critiques the modern appropriation of Buddhist meditation, the contrast he draws is between the Pali canon and modern practice (McMahan 2017, 21–23), a contrast that reflects the collocation of the two in modern discourse and practice. At all levels, any variety or development within Theravada beyond statements in the Pali texts, until we come to nineteenth–twentieth-century Burmese – and to a lesser extent Thai – revival of meditation in response to colonialism, remains invisible.

CONTEMPORARY BUDDHISM
By variety, we are referring primarily not to the different topics of meditation, i.e. what people meditate on, the narrowing of which in modern practice is observed by McMahan (2017, 21–23), but to the different techniques of meditation, i.e. how they meditate, including at advanced levels of practice. To illustrate what we mean by contrasting topic with technique we might take the example of the boran kammatthan practices of pre-modern Southeast Asia, to which some contributions to this volume are dedicated. The family of boran kammatthan practices uses meditation topics familiar from such texts as Vism, such as mindfulness of breathing, brahmavihāra, asubha, kasīna, etc., but employs a completely unfamiliar technique involving embedding the results of each meditation into the body of the practitioner (see contributions to this volume by Skilton, Choompolpaisal and Crosby). To complicate this picture, we must also point out that the boran kammatthan system incorporates three items from standard meditation discourse as new topics at the start of its programme. In other words, it complicates our understanding of such categories by rendering aspects of experience such as pīti, the delight felt in the first jhāna, as topics to be subject to its distinctive technique (see Skilton in this volume). Similarly, just in relation to mindfulness of breathing, a practice very familiar in the global context, we can see strikingly different techniques applied to this practice, with markedly different end results (see contributions by Kyaw, Shaw and Skilton to this volume).

**Text, practice and experience**

This treatment of early Pali texts as conclusively representative of Theravada seems to express an unconscious ‘protestant’ bias that eschews developed tradition by over-valuing the search for ‘origins’ or the personal ‘word of the Buddha’ and ignoring medieval and early modern accounts of meditation. Yet the preoccupation with origins has also occurred within the Theravada tradition itself, as the expression of emic reassessments and reassertions of identity, particularly at times of crisis, such as the colonial period. Early texts were looked to for renewed inspiration at these times and modern adaptations of Buddhism were influenced by the resulting revival (Charney 2006; Khur-Yearn 2012; Braun 2013; Crosby 2013; see also Khur-Yearn’s and Kemper’s contributions to this volume), hence the link between early texts and global practice noted above. While these revivals produced their own literature, they often obscured previous literature, including that of previous revivals, particularly in the realm of personal practice, i.e. meditation. An outcome of this convergence is that colonial, revivalist and modern secular approaches to Buddhism have co-operated in obscuring the richness of Theravada’s meditation history and practice. Manuscript libraries dating even to the colonial period, when this obscurcation began, contain multiple
texts on meditation. Those texts and editions of them published in their local Theravada contexts remain largely unfamiliar to modern global scholars and practitioners, particularly those working in the English-language medium. As we shall see from contributions to this volume, such texts detail a wealth of variety in meditation technique (see contributions by Choompolpaisal, Crosby, Khur-Yearn, Kyaw, Skilton, Terwiel and Wharton).

These preoccupations have not only obscured valid diversity; they also skirt around experience. Inevitably, in seeking to uncover past meditation practice, we are primarily dependent on texts, entirely so in the absence of unbroken living traditions, a situation that pertains to all forms of Theravada and Theravada-derived meditation practised today, since they are predominantly text-based revivals, originating in the main no earlier than the nineteenth century. Exceptions to this are the boran kammatthan practices in Thailand and Cambodia which developed sometime during the post-commentarial to early modern period, as far as we can tell in our present state of knowledge. (See contributions to this volume by Skilton, Choompolpaisal and Crosby.) The idea of an ‘unbroken’ lineage of practice is itself worthy of examination. ‘Unbroken’ here means that the meditation practice in question has been a matter of personal instruction passed down generation by generation from its ‘origin’ from a recognised authority. The archetypal authority is of course the Buddha himself, and this sense of continuity is enforced by the apparatus of textual reference that can be invoked through canonical texts. Many practitioners give little critical attention to the widespread assumption that there are (or may be) unbroken lineages of practice that stretch back to, presumably, the time of the Buddha. The sense of such continuity is often very important to the individual’s sense of trust in the method, and their sense of ‘place’ and participation within a well-founded tradition, the efficacy of which is demonstrated by its imprimatur by the Buddha and its ‘success’ over intervening centuries. Even boran kammatthan is susceptible to this powerful urge. The present incumbent of the meditation section at Wat Ratchasittharam in Thonburi, Bangkok, where one strand of boran kammatthan is preserved, keeps a room of relics of former teachers, but pride of place is given to a relic of Rāhula, the Buddha’s son, who is understood at this temple to be the first person to whom the Buddha taught boran kammatthan techniques. Western assumptions about the continuity of Theravada Buddhism and ‘early/original’ Buddhism have unwittingly fuelled unexamined assumptions of continuity in Theravada meditation practice between the time of the Buddha and the present, and, despite historical accounts that expose deep discontinuities in the Theravada world, these assumptions have sometimes appeared to be reflected in scholarly works touching on meditation. We should note that the somewhat fundamentalist textual reform initiated in Siam by Rāma IV (Mongkut), with its rejection of developed tradition,
aggravates the difficulty of accessing records that reveal innovation. (See Skilton in this volume.) Yet the narrative of direct experience of the teacher of a specific lineage is itself important, particularly in contexts where canonical texts do not provide direct confirmation of the authenticity of the practice. The only ‘unbroken’ living traditions are those which reach back to relatively modern or early modern founders, and in this sense they do not fulfil the oft-imagined sense of the phrase. We are therefore forced to accept that the concept of ‘unbroken living tradition’ is, for the analytic scholar, a figment of the imagination, even as, for the practitioner, it remains a potent assumption of continuity and validation.

Quite how to relate text to experience remains a challenge, both to the distant experience in the past to which the text refers and to the contemporary experience which might be regarded as a useful tool for interpreting past texts. Sceptical academic voices have been raised in relation to using experience as a criterion for judging textual accounts of meditation. From the perspective of the textual scholar, apparent contradictions in textual accounts of meditation ‘must not be dismissed on the grounds that accounts of experiential states of mind “elude mere intellectual treatment”’ (Stuart-Fox 1989, 104). This rightly emphasises that variations in textual statements about meditation are themselves historical phenomena, and it reminds us that the historical investigation of the production of a text is reasonably subject to the norms of text-historical discipline. Yet the claim echoes the attitude of text-historical investigators who would ignore or dismiss experience as a valid source of knowledge. By this standard, experience must be subordinated to intellectual logic. While the debate is an old one – insider vs. outsider, or even pratyaksa vs. anumāna – it is intriguing to witness it in relation to a topic that is so essentially concerned with experience. It may be that this reflects an attitude (conscious or not) that the experiential component of textual descriptions of meditation are in fact only textual, i.e. are only fictive literary claims, for which the only legitimate standards of assessment are theoretical and textual. Even with the recent growth in contemplative and yogic studies, the way in which experience eludes a direct academic approach shapes the discipline in interesting ways. This issue is tackled head on by John Taber, who treats to a philosophical analysis the questions ‘Is yogic experience possible? … In short, are these states of consciousness more than mere hallucinations?’ (Taber 2009, 71). He reveals how historically this issue also dogged Buddhist debate when confronted by outsider opponents. Taber concludes both that they are not possible and that they must be! (Taber 2009, 86–87 and 90).

Influential in the study of Buddhist meditation has been Sharf’s argument that ‘meditation experience’ is a retrospective performance that legitimates the institution:
While some adepts may indeed experience ‘altered states’ in the course of their training, critical analysis shows that such states do not constitute the reference points for the elaborate Buddhist discourse pertaining to the ‘path’. Rather, such discourse turns out to function ideologically and performatively – wielded more often than not in the interests of legitimation and institutional authority. (Sharf 1995, 228)

Sharf’s arguments are important in highlighting the role of context in shaping discourse, an argument directly relevant to this volume. (See, e.g. in Kyaw’s contribution, an account of the verification of Sunlun Sayadaw’s and Theinggu Sayadaw’s meditation experiences by Abhidhamma authorities.) Yet a legitimate concern here is that this view, i.e. that such discourse is primarily performative, simply re-affirms a pre-existing distrust for material pertaining to (religious) experience. This distrust is still tangible and found both within the Asian Buddhist context and in western scholarship. In the case of the former, as we see in Kyaw’s contribution, in Theravada Asia it is based on a different type of bias, a bias against those who – whether they are monastics or not – have not received formal monastic education or do not prioritise it, and thus are often perceived with suspicion by monastic and lay literati who place particular value on textual authority and prestige (Kyaw 2015). In the case of the latter, the distrust is more against experience per se. This makes it possible for an eminent textual scholar who is not a meditation practitioner to be asked to comment on ‘the epistemic validity and happiness-engendering value of Buddhist meditation’, and to conclude that the efficacy of meditation is based on the credo (or placebo) effect – a comment that might as well apply to all religion.15

Evidence that might be taken to confirm such a view is that early Indian Buddhist meditation is now practised, and affirmed as effective, in settings and to ends that are in complete contrast to those of its original context. A neat explication of this phenomenon is provided by David McMahan, who looks at how the ‘ideological and performative discourse’ (to use Sharf’s phrasing) of the context in which meditation is practised may shape the experience of meditators. He does this by contrasting the putative experiences of a mindfulness of breathing practice (ānāpānasati), on the one hand for the early world-renouncing monk in ancient India, and on the other for the modern middle-class world-affirming American practitioner (McMahan 2017). McMahan affirms the validity of the practice and experience of both: they are reconstructing themselves in different ways, based on the values affirmed in their divergent contexts. McMahan offers his analysis as a critique of the burgeoning neuroscientific study of meditation experience, to argue that the currently fashionable and highly influential measurement of empirical phenomena in such areas as the brain-imaging of practitioners is in itself inadequate to represent practitioner experience. Rather, the humanities and social sciences have a role in comprehending the contexts
that shape those experiences. He writes, ‘The study of meditation should not succumb to the modern cult of calculability in which something is only real when it is measurable and measured’ (McMahan 2017, 44). This is an interesting step forward in seeking to place experience more securely centre stage, although its relativist conclusion is of course anathema to a traditional – rather than modern eclectic – Buddhist for whom the only valid experience is experience of the objective truth, not a subjective truth, but it once more directs our gaze away from the elusive experience towards the peripheral context that may shape it.

The argument that meditation was used to affirm doctrine was developed in part in response to the view put forward by scholars such as Regamey (1951), Conze (1962) and, in particular, Schmithausen (1976), who all posited that meditation experience was influential in the development of Buddhist doctrine.16 Eli Franco has critically reviewed Schmithausen on this subject, confirming the influence of meditation experience on some aspects of Buddhist doctrine, for example the correlation between cosmological realms and jhāna experience, but rejecting it in other areas, such as anātman, because of a lack of demonstrable causal connection or evidence of pre-existing doctrines to which key Buddhist doctrines may be a response (Franco 2009). There are two difficulties with this critique of Schmithausen. Firstly, as Franco himself points out, ‘it would be difficult to prove that spiritual practice is the cause of something when the spiritual practice itself is all but unknown to us’ (Franco 2009, 126). Secondly, while we may be able to see in the formulation of Buddhist doctrine the rejection of a pre-existing doctrine, this does not in itself exclude the influence of meditation. The doctrine may be rejected because it does not correlate with experience. Meditative experience may act as an invisible motivation for critiquing certain pre-existing doctrines.17 Thus, theorisation in this area, whether for the primacy of doctrine or for the primacy of experience, is hindered by the nature of the subject.

Bridging divides: academic scholar–scholar practitioner

Bringing experience into academic research was avoided until the late 1960s (see e.g. King, below), research until then being conducted on purely philological, text-critical and philosophical premises, with no reference to meditation practice or experience per se. Nor was there collaboration with meditation users who might have been able to offer some kind of relevant comment or perspective on some of the points of discussion. The scholarly discussion of meditation had thus been driven by individuals whose ‘conceptions are basically imagined reconstructions of a putative earliest (set of) practice(s)’ (Stuart 2015, 14). Global practitioner interest and active engagement with Asian teachers from the 1960s led to the better representation of
practitioners, such as Jack Kornfield’s still useful *Modern Buddhist Masters*, published in 1977, and the significant and well-documented development of the modern mindfulness movement (below). However, work on meditation within the humanities often proceeded without such input, leading to a culture in which such input was not alluded to even when significant. An example of the latter is the work of the late Lance Cousins, a meditation practitioner and teacher as well as a renowned academic scholar, whose published academic work does not, however, explicitly exploit his experience in the field. We might therefore anticipate that others publishing on the subject also shielded their practical engagement from public scrutiny.18 Yet we can see how practice can inform more sympathetic engagement with meditation texts from scholars such as Sarah Shaw, whose 2016 article, while examining familiar meditation topics on the basis of the *Visuddhimagga* and other Pali sources, seeks to explain their value from the perspective of how they work in practice. She also shows how context and individual predisposition shape the practitioner experience in a different way from that identified by McMahan (above), namely by necessitating an individual approach to practice in order to find the practice that will prove effective for any given practitioner (Shaw 2016, 123). Shaw documents the history and practice of the joint practitioner–scholar background she shares with Cousins in her contribution to this volume. Meanwhile, engagement with scholarship from the practitioner side is enhancing the accessible representation of some aspects of meditation experience, as for example in Leigh Brasington’s recent volume on *jhāna* experience (Brasington 2015).

Mention of the possibility of joint practitioner–scholar status reminds us of the almost hermetically sealed divide between scholars and practitioners in the earlier phase of academic engagement with the subject. It is not that insiders were not publishing accounts of meditation practice and experience, as Jarrell’s survey of publications on meditation between 1950 and 1982 shows (Jarrell 1985). It is that the insider perspective was not seen as a fruitful path of scholarly enquiry, on the one hand, and the scholarly enquiry not seen as conducive to enhanced practice, on the other. The perspectives and experiences of practitioners therefore did not enter the academic discourse, and if they appeared in print were treated by scholars as merely sectarian or relegated to the category of memoirs.19 Until recently, serious discussion of meditation could not be undertaken in academic circles on the basis of experience or even with reference to ethnographic accounts of practitioners’ experiences. This is changing. A recent, innovative attempt to do exactly this is Yuki Sirimane’s textual and ethnographic study of advanced states of attainment based on the first four *nikāyas* of the Pali canon and interviews with practitioners in Sri Lanka (Sirimane 2016). While texts provide the theoretical basis for this study, the focus is on
understanding the experience of the transformative process. We are also now finding more in-depth personal accounts. While social scientific accounts of meditation within the context of discussing the presence of meditation in Asia have tended to offer only accounts of entry-level practice, Hyunsoo Jeon, a psychiatrist from South Korea who first came across Pa-Auk meditation in 2006, details his own personal account of his experience of practising meditation in the Pa-Auk meditation tradition from November 2013 to September 2014 (Jeon 2018). Jeon describes not only the advanced practice instruction that he received from meditation teachers from the Pa-Auk tradition such as Sayadaw U Sīla and Sayadaw U Revata, but also his experience as he put the instruction into practice. For instance, as part of practising meditation on dependent origination, he describes in detail how he tried to see past lives after listening to his teacher’s explanation of the two methods for doing this (2018, 134–136).

The use of texts in all these studies builds on an important approach to the discussion of meditation that began in the early period of western Buddhist studies, namely the exposition of authoritative texts on meditation. Such work has helped bridge the two sides of the insider–outsider divide from the outset, since it is of interest to both. An early example of such collaboration and mutual influence, between Anāgārika Dharmapāla and T. W. Rhys Davids, resulted in the Pali Text Society’s first publication of a meditation text (Rhys Davids 1896; also see Kemper’s contribution to this volume). Correspondence between Ledi Sayadaw U ṇāna (1846–1923) and westerners in the early twentieth century also exemplifies such mutual influence. Ledi Sayadaw corresponded regularly with westerners on a wide range of doctrines and complex Abhidhamma topics, including Caroline Rhys Davids of the Pali Text Society and Edmund J. Mills who was chairman of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland, the organisation which distributed Ledi Sayadaw’s texts in Europe (Braun 2013, 128–129). Although such interactions did not lead Ledi Sayadaw and his western correspondents to think of Buddhism in the same way, each party could achieve their own goals. For instance, Caroline Rhys Davids could take from her conversations with Ledi Sayadaw the philosophical knowledge she sought, while such interactions for Ledi Sayadaw ‘reinforced the way he popularised meditation as a close observation of reality informed by Abhidhamma learning’ (Braun 2013, 130). As we will see with Nyanaponika’s work below, we find meticulous scholarship as the basis for widespread engagement in the case of Ledi Sayadaw’s work, which straddled polemics, scholarship and meditation (Visuddha 2018, 3). Mahasi Sayadaw U Sobhana (1904–1982), who came to be regarded as ‘one of the “elders” or “grandfathers” of what has become the Western mindfulness movement and insight meditation’ (Sayadaw 2016, xxii), drawing on his textual erudition, composed authoritative texts on meditation since the 1940s. Mahasi Sayadaw’s The Progress of
Insight (Visuddhiñña-kathā): A Modern Treatise on Buddhist Satipatthāna Meditation, dealing with the advanced stages of the practice within the framework of the seven stages of purification as in the Vism, was one of the first texts to be translated from Pali into English by Nyanaponika Thera (1901–1994), published in 1965 by Forest Hermitage. Mahasi Sayadaw taught vipassanā meditation to both Asian and western meditators such as Sayadaw U Paṇḍita (1921–2016), Nyanaponika Thera, Joseph Goldstein (1944–) and Sharon Salzberg (1952–) who became key figures in spreading insight meditation globally.

From the text-historicist side in the West, this consideration of canonical and other authoritative texts is a matter of examining them for their content and their location within a doctrinal framework (often built by western scholars). From this perspective the text is thus an intellectual property to be interrogated by the scholar, who might even presume to opine on its orthodoxy and validity. From the side of the practitioner and insider–scholar this activity is a matter of the exegesis of important and recognised authorities within the tradition. For Theravada, the subject of this present volume, this is exemplified by work on canonical texts, especially the Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, Buddhaghosa’s fifth-century Visuddhimagga (Vism) and – to a lesser extent – Anuruddha’s c. eleventh–twelfth-century Abhidhammatthaśāsana. Such exegesis could legitimately be conducted by either the academic scholar or the scholar practitioner, the result being cautiously used by the contrasting parties on its individual merits. An example of this approach is the groundbreaking The Heart of Buddhist Meditation by Nyanaponika Thera, who practised meditation under the guidance of Mahasi Sayadaw for a period in the 1950s, an exposition of satipatthāna based on his translation of the Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta, published in 1954. Nyanaponika contextualises the text and its exposition against two meditation methods: ‘Burmese satipatthāna method’ and ānāpānasati. The success of Nyanaponika’s book (and his work in general) in the West cannot be divorced from his careful scholarship and, possibly, his European ethnicity. Another roughly contemporary example is Vajirañāṇa Mahāthera’s (1897–1970) authoritative 1962 study Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice, itself a detailed analysis of samatha and vipassanā meditation explicitly structured around Vism, and originally compiled as a PhD thesis at Cambridge University between 1933 and 1936 (Vajirañāṇa 1962). Vajirañāṇa arrived in the UK as a missionary to the London Buddhist Vihara from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1928, having been selected for this task by none other than Anāgārika Dharmapāla. It seems surprising that 26 years (i.e. 1936–1962) were to elapse before Vajirañāṇa published this major work. A somewhat later example is Henepola Gunaratana’s The Path of Serenity and Insight (1985), a single-volume exegesis of the jhānas that effectively summarises the Buddhist path as set out in
Vism. Drawing on a wide-ranging knowledge and understanding of the Pali canon, including both layers of commentary and Vism, Gunaratana (1927–) compiles an authoritative volume which, in the manner of Vism itself, offers a lucid overview of most aspects of meditation from a single prescriptive perspective that is rooted in Buddhaghosa’s fifth-century model. This book also started life as a doctoral thesis, in 1980; the author clearly thought that there was a more sympathetic readership for this material and only 5 years were to elapse prior to publication. In the same year that Gunaratana completed his thesis, Winston L. King published his likewise accomplished Theravāda Meditation. The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga, again based primarily on Vism (King 1980).26 While in part focusing on the origins of Buddhist meditation, it then examines the function of different meditations holistically, and in the final section contains short accounts of contemporary Burmese masters including Sunlun Sayadaw (discussed more extensively in this volume by Kyaw).

Such textual treatments evidence at least two interesting angles: on the one hand they have emphasised the authority of the Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta and, in particular, Vism, thereby affirming the hegemony of these two texts in modern Theravāda meditation discourse, and leading many western scholars to take these as the authoritative starting point for discussion of meditation; and on the other hand, they reflect the assimilation of individuals between the two worlds of academic and monastic or practitioner scholarship. Gunaratana, whose important work we cited above, was already a learned monk in Sri Lanka, having been ordained at the age of 12, and then acquired a BA, MA and PhD at an American university (in Washington DC) once established in America. As we saw above, Ledi Sayadaw could be seen as a pioneer in this, though he is now primarily known in the West for his association with meditation rather than scholarship. This assimilationist trend is now accepted as to some degree commonplace, with notable individuals continuing to produce work that is widely accepted in practitioner and academic scholarship. Analayo’s book Satipatthāna: The Direct Path to Realisation is a good example. First published in 2003, it offers a detailed exploration of the four satipatthānas, i.e. contemplation of the body, feelings, mind and Dhammas, according to its exposition in the Satipatthāna Sutta. Drawing on the related early discourses and the works of modern scholars of Buddhism, Analayo not only explicates some etymological points regarding key words and the meditation instructions given in the Satipatthāna Sutta, but also relates the discussion to meditation practice. In order to achieve the latter, he draws on the teachings of meditation teachers such as Mahasi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin of Myanmar and Ajahn Chah of Thailand. The sensitivities towards ‘insider’ scholarship – of whatever kind or degree – that in part informed former western squeamishness towards meditation as a subject – appear to have vanished.
To make these reflections is not an attempt to privilege ‘experience’ over textual or historical research, but rather an effort to underline how the history of our engagement with and understanding of meditation has been shaped by our own cultural preoccupations and prejudices and by accidents of history, and to balance these otherwise legitimate research strategies with an acknowledgement that Buddhism is an inhabited realm of action, understanding and experience. For many Buddhists, pace Sharf, meditation is something to be practised rather than performed.

Aside from the integration of the Buddhist practitioner into the western scholarly community (and vice versa), other important historical, cultural and academic changes affecting the study of Buddhist and Theravada meditation have emerged in the last half century or so, some of which we have touched on above. These include:

(1) The social revolution of the 1960s in the West, partly fuelled by the American war in Vietnam, that introduced many ‘dropouts’ to Asian cultures and meditation techniques and to altered mental states, and made mainstream discussion of both possible;

(2) The diaspora of Asian Buddhist teachers of meditation throughout the West, during the second half of the twentieth century, facilitated by the lifting of the ban on Asian immigration to the USA that was in place between 1924 and 1965 (Hickey 2019, 15), complemented by easier international travel allowing many westerners to travel to Asia and practice meditation there, with the result that Buddhist practice has to some extent been ‘normalised’ in the West;

(3) A broad subjectivist turn in western attitudes and values away from ideas of objective truth and towards relativistic positions which emphasise ‘what’s true for me’;

(4) A surge in medical interest in the psychological effects of meditation reflected in clinical studies;

(5) A scientific correlative of the last item, involving hard science investigations of the physiology and effects of meditation in a laboratory setting, often employing MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and other scanning methods, more recently testing blood, skin temperature (Manocha et al. 2010) and hair (Taren et al. 2015). Overall, this is the approach that has taken meditation to the furthest degree of acknowledgement outside of the traditional meditational and therapeutic communities. This began in the 1970s with a surge of more or less clinical studies of the effects of meditation, often focussing on Transcendental Meditation (Jarrell 1985). A recent assessment of and response to this phenomenon and responses to it has been provided by McMahan and Braun (2017).
The global reach of a secularised therapeutic form of meditation known as mindfulness that draws on various influences, including Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, but primarily Burmese vipassanā, that seems to have left everyone on the street now thinking that they know what meditation is, regardless of how carefully its practitioners define it. This follows on from earlier therapeutic implementations of meditation for ‘relaxation’ which had popularised forms of narrative visualisation for that purpose.30

The emergence of a new field of study and research entitled ‘contemplative studies’ (as distinct from older, outmoded categories such as mysticism);31

And specifically in Theravada studies, from Francois Bizot, a series of studies of a major tradition of Buddhist meditation that was not consistent with the prescriptive view of meditation derived from the Mahāsati-patthāna Sutta and Vism – and largely unrecognised in the Anglo-German tradition of Buddhist studies at the time – but that turns out to have been hegemonic in multiple Southeast Asian Theravada countries at least as far back as the sixteenth century and well into the twentieth century (see Choompolpaisal’s contribution to this volume), and also to have been transmitted to Sri Lanka in the eighteenth century (see Crosby’s contribution to this volume). This tradition is referred to by the denominator boran kammathan (or cognates) in this volume. It is an irony that publications on aspects of this meditation had been put out by practitioners all through the twentieth century (with a flush of items in the 1930s in Thai; see Choompolpaisal in this volume), but also books in English as early as 1960, by Terry Magness, dealing with the strand of this earlier tradition taken up by Luang Por Sot (Candasāro).32 That they were and have since been largely ignored could be put down to at least the heritage if not the lingering presence of anti-practitioner bias in western scholarship, although we should also consider the dismissal of this tradition as a theoretical invention, for example by the influential anthropologist, Michael Carrithers (See ‘Themes’ below).

A further promising development in material on esoteric Theravada practice is the recent return to the study of Burmese weikza (e.g. Rozenberg, Brac de la Perrière and Turner 2014), facilitated by the increasing openness of Myanmar to foreign researchers. Whether close examination of the meditations practised within weikza will be possible without the normative lens of Burmese normalising authorities remains to be seen.33

For reasons such as these, then, a combination of broader social changes and the ‘discovery’ of hitherto unconsidered forms of meditation, the overall
complexion of scholarly work in the field of Theravada meditation has changed considerably with the passage of a few decades. Everyone nowadays does have an opinion about meditation or at least ‘mindfulness’, and we have seen variants of that practice applied to a very wide range of clients, including UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), British Members of Parliament, prisoners, pregnant mothers, gamblers, people suffering from depression, teachers and their pupils, to name but a few.34 In this sense meditation has been thoroughly ‘normalised’, largely by being secularised initially as ‘relaxation’ and later as ‘mindfulness’, and has begun to receive wide attention from psychiatric and hard science research programmes, formerly the reserves of deepest scepticism.35 No longer is the subjective aspect of meditation experience a problem, but rather it is now the object of medical and scientific scrutiny. There is even an increasing awareness of so-called ‘dark night’ experiences, which some for the moment call ‘adverse reactions’ to mindfulness and other meditation techniques, and these too are the object of study.36 It should be pointed out here that ‘unpleasant’ experiences in or resulting from meditation may be indicators of progress on the path (see Kyaw in this volume), but get to be classified as ‘problematic’ due to the mismatch of expectation and motive in undertaking the practice in the first place, e.g. experience of the ‘purification by knowledge and vision of the path (patipadāññadassana-visuddhi) involves the ‘knowledge of the fearful’ (bhayatūpathamānā-nāṇā). This may be tolerable for the practitioner if undertaken for soteriological purposes but a very unwelcome development if one has taken up meditation to reduce anxiety or control depression.37 We can thank Andrea Grabovac for pointing out that not all experiences of meditation are or should be expected to be pleasant (Grabovac 2015). The processes of insight are extremely challenging and some of what is understood superficially as ‘bad’ meditation experiences might, from a practitioner perspective, be positive steps forward on the path, be a crucial object of learning (see Kyaw this volume), or relate to broader expectations of Buddhist meditative experience.38 This last consideration brings us neatly back to the division between practice and scholarship/investigation, which otherwise has been partially blurred by meditation’s therapeutic popularity.

The work of Bizot and a handful of other scholars from the 1970s onwards on the so-called yogāvacara traditions of Cambodia (hereafter boran kammathan), combined with more recent fieldwork amongst Dai communities (Khur Yearn, and Wharton, in this volume) has alerted the scholarly community to a variety of now-marginal meditation techniques which involve more than the normative and canonically authorised techniques outlined in Mahāsatipatthāna-sutta or Vism. The exploration of these is justified on a number of fronts.
On the one hand, these less familiar meditation traditions have a regional and cultural significance which can easily be lost under the impact of regional political centralisation and of globalisation. Ignoring them, we fail to understand regional forms of Theravada Buddhism in their entirety. On the other hand, by unwittingly colluding in the narrowing of meditation to a set of prescribed activities from one authoritative source or another, we fail to understand the broader functions and potentials of meditation, and it may not be overextending the claim to suggest that to the degree that we do this, we also fail to appreciate Buddhism in both its historical fullness and its potential. Another consideration arises from reflection on the success of just one technique in therapeutic applications, akin to our dependence on the commercial production of the Cavendish banana. Somewhat in the manner of ecologists who argue for the protection of rainforests by speculating on the potential value of their species for pharmaceutical applications to benefit human beings, it is neither unreasonable, nor at odds with the Buddhist ambition to ‘benefit the many’ (bahujanahitāya), to make a similar case on behalf of yet-unexplored meditation techniques.

It is therefore not unreasonable to see our historical engagement with meditation as having fallen into two major phases: textual, up to the 1970s, and thereafter divided between textual and clinical studies. To this, more recently, we can add the contributions made by the fieldwork of social scientists such as Houtman (1990, 1999) and Jordt (2006, 2007) in Myanmar (Burma), and Cook (2010), Schedneck (2015) and Cassaniti (2017, 2018) in Thailand to understanding the significance of context, culture, community and political functions to the practice and discourse of meditation. Houtman’s 1990 work on traditions of Buddhist practice (patipatti) in Myanmar explores not only complex dimensions regarding vipassanā-samatha and pariyatti-patipatti divides as understood by his respondents, but also institutional aspects of the practice such as the social organisation and function of meditation centres. Building on his study of vipassanā and samatha meditation traditions of Myanmar, Houtman (1999) examines how Burmese ideas about these two traditions of ‘mental culture’ inform and shape Burmese politics, especially during the 1988 political crisis. Drawing on observations at the Mahasi meditation centre in Yangon and interviews with members of government ministries and senior monks, Jordt (2007) gives a detailed account of the development of Burmese vipassanā practice in contemporary Myanmar in the broader context of the mass lay meditation movement. Using the lay meditation movement in Myanmar as a case study, Jordt’s 2006 article examines ‘how people who acquire meditation-derived knowledge’ have come to form ‘a community of knowers’.

Turning to ethnographic studies in Thailand, Cook (2010), drawing on fieldwork at Wat Bonamron in northern Thailand, examines motivation, experience, practice and duties of monks, and those of mae chi (Thai...
Buddhist female monastics), highlighting complex social relationships and a gender hierarchy within the context of the monastery. She also argues that meditation has an important social dimension, influencing the psychological benefits that people experience as a result of its practice (Cook 2010, 7). Cassaniti (2017) analyses how understanding and practice of mindfulness in a Thai cultural context contrasts sharply with those of mindfulness in America, and shows that ideas about non-self (anattā), spirits that inhabit the body (khwan in Thai) and personhood inform understandings of mindfulness in northern Thailand. Building on her study of the concept of mindfulness and mindfulness practice in Thailand, Cassaniti’s recent book (2018) investigates how mindfulness is understood in the cultural, religious and social context of Theravada Asia (Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka), and highlights how this is similar to and differs from that in the American context. While the above studies focus on the practice, experience and understanding of meditation among Asian practitioners, Schedneck (2015) looks at experiences of ‘international meditators’ (i.e. tourists, expatriates and non-Thai visitors) at meditation centres or temples in Thailand. She examines the ways in which the international meditators relate to their motivations for and expectations of life at meditation centres and how they make sense of such experiences in the context of the commodification of meditation through promotional materials. She also explores the cultural translation performed by teachers at international meditation centres for international meditators, bringing meditation into dialogue with modern discourses such as psychology, secularism, individualism and universalism. As part of this cultural translation, Schedneck (2015, 166–167) observes that many of the external practices of the meditation retreat such as bowing to a Buddha statue, chanting etc. are not performed or are deemed unacceptable or unnecessary by international meditation centre teachers, their students, or both.

In these social scientific studies of meditation practitioners, we see an emphasis on understanding the place of meditation in the wider social, cultural and political contexts and how this shapes practice, discourse and the way the practitioner negotiates their place in that context. They thus exemplify the type of work commended by McMahan (2017), noted above, and place them in a different genre from those fieldwork-based studies that focus on the dynamics of the practice-experience itself, including higher level practice, within the framework of the Buddhist path, such as those by Sirimane and Jeon, noted above.

Nowadays, discussion of meditation is no longer restricted to textual statements that are to be understood solely by text-critical, historical or philosophical analysis. Yet there remain further horizons to reach. Moreover, while these later fields of engagement, the clinical and the social scientific, have added much, they have perhaps – with some exceptions noted
above – contributed to a simplified representation of what meditation entails, often repeating for Theravāda the *samatha-vipassanā* trope, and assuming that basic mindfulness of breathing exercises to be found in closely related forms in the normative texts and modern classes are a valid representation of what Theravāda meditation is and has been. While the academic study of Buddhism has always acknowledged the differences between traditions, with Zen and Tibetan practices being highest on the radar of those looking to the influences on global Buddhist-derived meditation culture, it is now perhaps time for a third evolution of engagement to begin, and that is to recognise and explore the internal diversity of meditation practice within specific traditions of Buddhism. Interesting developments in this area are underway in non-Theravada traditions (see e.g. Greene forthcoming on early Chan). However, for Theravada, the exposition of meditation has for too long been dominated by iconic texts of the Pali canon and Vism, and their representation in the uptake of *Vipassanā* and within the modern mindfulness movement. The danger is that these can been taken as a prescriptive and exclusive account of what meditation is and can be within Theravada.

**Origins of this volume and some of its themes**

Despite all the advances in the study of Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditation, investigation into variety in Theravada meditation has been long overdue and was the motivation behind three workshops related to our project of comparing Theravada meditation systems and to some of the material presented in this volume. These events were ‘Variety in Theravada Meditation’, held on 23 October 2014 at King’s College, London; ‘Traditional Theravada Meditation (*boran kammatthan*)’, 5–6 July 2016, held at the École Française d’Extrême-Orient, Siem Reap, Cambodia; and ‘Buddhism, Meditation and Ageing’, held on 27 October 2017 at King’s College, London. The first two looked at identifying and exploring different types of meditation within Theravada, with the second specifically tackling the problem of identifying different techniques with manuscript collections. The third conference was inspired by the documentation of the benefits of mindfulness meditation on the preservation of cognitive reserve in ageing (Malinowski and Shalamanova 2017) and the traditional periods of meditation practice held in certain Theravada communities specifically for their senior generation (Eberhardt 2017; contributions by Khur-Yearn and Wharton to this volume). Versions of a number of the papers that follow were originally aired at one or another of these three events. At the first event, we also had the honour of a keynote paper on ‘Continuities and Discontinuities’ given by the late Lance Cousins, who included in his talk a short review of the changing understanding of the word *kammatthāna*. 
Alas, Lance, who – with his eminent scholarship and practice experience – had acted as a wonderful mentor in our work, had declined to be recorded at the conference, and we have been unable to trace his notes. For this subject, then, and in Lance’s honour, Andrew Skilton has included his own exploration of this subject in his contribution. These have been supplemented with invited contributions from a number of authors which help broaden the view in a number of ways.

Several themes emerge in these articles. Firstly, several seek to examine advanced practice and the correlation with advanced spiritual progress (Choompolpaisal, Crosby, Kyaw, Skilton). While there have been attempts to compare teachings and methods given by different meditation teachers in the past (Kornfield 1977; van Oosterwijk 2012; Schedneck 2015), those accounts have necessarily been of entry-level practice, whereas the articles here look in detail at advanced stages of the practice, with Kyaw and Choompolpaisal comparing the advanced practices of different teachers following closely related practices. Related to this, Abhidhamma’s relationship to practice is examined in Kyaw, Crosby and Skilton. Several articles look at lay practice outside of the modern Vipassanā and mindfulness movements (Khur Yearn, Wharton, Shaw, Kyaw, Kemper, Terwiel). While the spread of practice among lay people undoubtedly reflects the changes in colonial Burma and the subsequent spread of practices to the West during the counter-cultural revolution and beyond, other lay practice can be found and some of it may significantly predate that modern development. They may even be inspired by the same authoritative text, Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the Mahāsatippatthānasutta. There, Buddhaghosa describes the country where the Buddha teaches the sutta as the ideal place because lay people too are focused on practice:

When people are at the weavers or ford, they don’t stand about gossiping, they ask one another about their meditation practice. If a woman answers that she doesn’t practise they criticise her for the lost opportunity of being born as a human in the time of the Buddha’s teaching. (quoted in Crosby 2014, 218)

Given the importance of the Mahāsatippatthānasutta and its commentary in the nineteenth-century revival, against the devastation and social upheavals of the British period, those such as Ledi Sayadaw (Braun 2013) and Sao Amat Long (Khur-Yearn 2012), who promoted meditation practice among lay people, may have been inspired by the description of the ideal society of practice-orientated lay people offered by Buddhaghosa.

Several articles touch on the relationship between meditation and ‘ageing and death’ as well as meditation on death. Khur-Yearn and Wharton look at communities among Tai ethnic groups in Southeast Asia in which meditation practices are undertaken by middle-aged lay people, and how such practice marks the beginning of their religious or spiritual life. Kyaw documents that
a near-death experience of Theinngu Sayadaw led him to undertake meditation. Crosby and Kim discuss recollection and understanding of death as it appears in the texts they explore. A range of meditation topics is examined (to varying degrees) in these articles: breath (Choompolpaisal, Crosby, Kemper, Kim, Kyaw, Shaw, Skilton), asubha (Choompolpaisal, Crosby, Kong, Kyaw, Skilton), nimitta (Choompolpaisal, Crosby, Kemper, Kim, Kyaw, Skilton), vedanā (Kim, Kyaw) and food, the āhāre patikulasaññā practice (Kong). As mentioned above, the focus in this volume is on a variety of techniques, not of topics. For example, the articles mentioning breath as a meditation topic highlight different techniques of meditating on breath: to follow the breath up from navel to the nose or lip (Choompolpaisal), to count from 1 to 10 with each breath (Kemper), to observe strong, rapid, rhythmic breathing (Kyaw), to count up to a given number during the inbreath and count back down from it during the outbreath (Shaw), or to focus on the breath at specified points of the body (Skilton).

The articles are based on textual, historical and fieldwork approaches. Around half of them are also written by those who have experience of practice within the tradition they discuss – or one closely related to it, in the case of the historical studies. While this volume addresses a wide range of themes, issues and perspectives, there are several areas that need further research. The first relates to the terminology, either Pali or vernacular, used in meditation texts and meditation instruction in different contexts and communities. Cassaniti (2018) explores how Buddhists in Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka understand and relate to sati – ‘mindfulness’ in a broader context – a topic examined in relation to early Pali literature by Kuan (2008). In this volume, Skilton explores the changing referents of the term kammatthāna from canonical through to contemporary usage. This work on changing referents and other specifics of terminology, as well as ways of expressing Pali and Pali-derived technical terminology with nuance in English, needs expanding. Secondly, more adventurous textual work looking at manuscripts of non-normative texts still needs to be done. In the case of meditation texts in Myanmar, identification of non-normative texts has yet to be started. In manuscript collections everywhere, texts on meditation abound, their variety often hidden beneath normative or descriptive titles. Thirdly, the relationship between Abhidhamma and meditation practice as well as meditative experience needs further research (see contributions by Kyaw and Crosby here). For instance, apart from boran kammathan texts, the extent to which other Abhidhamma texts and concepts could be used in practice requires further textual work and fieldwork to uncover more about the ways in which Abhidhamma relates to practice and has different modes of transformative power.40

Finally, given the unwarranted assessment by Michael Carrithers of the Sri Lankan and Siamese lineages of boran kammathan as ‘an example of an
imaginative but not very insightful attempt to revive meditation from the texts’ (Carrithers 1983, 233), i.e. a kind of early modern fiction, it has been a desideratum to establish not only its historicity, the historical lineages of transmission of this meditation tradition, but also its authenticity, its internal coherence as an expression of recognisable Theravada principles, values and goals. This concern is expressed through a number of the contributions to this volume, notably Skilton, Choompolpaisal and Crosby, but could usefully be the focus of considerable future research, both manuscript based and in the field.

Overview of articles

The present volume consists of 12 articles, most revealing aspects of the variety of meditation practices and techniques found within Theravada in the early modern and modern periods. Two (Harris and Kemper) indicate the difficulties experienced by those not within a living tradition but faced with the challenge of recovering or understanding Theravada practice in the colonial period, when this subject as a whole was so alien to the wider world. We have placed the articles in an order that is roughly chronological in respect of their contents, although a number of them discuss material from several of the periods covered: from canonical and commentarial periods though to medieval, pre-modern, colonial, modern and contemporary texts and practice.

In the first article, framing our study by tracing the history of meanings of keys words such as kammatthāna, samatha and vipassanā, Andrew Skilton’s ‘Meditation And Its Subjects: Tracing Kammatthāna From The Early Canon To The Boran Kammathan Traditions Of Southeast Asia’ shows how the meanings and referents of these key terms have changed over time. He also examines the development of different lists of kammatthāna, meditation topics, drawing out features that are distinctive to the pre-modern Theravada meditation (boran kammathan) that is also the subject of several articles in this volume (Choompolpaisal, Crosby, Terwiel). He identifies variations between different transmissions of boran kammathan into the twentieth century and explores the relationship of its vipassanā practices to Abhidhamma, while also indicating criteria useful for identifying boran kammathan manuscripts in the field. Two articles then tackle variety of practice in early Theravada sources. Kyungrae Kim’s ‘A Comparison of the Lists and Categorisation of Meditation Practices (Kammatthāna) in the Visuddhimagga and *Vimuttimagga’ explores the commentarial classification of kammatthāna in the *Vimuttimagga, preserved in Chinese, and the text thought to be its successor, the more familiar Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosa, the latter seen as normative in Theravada tradition. He observes the variations in topic and method of meditation between these two works. Man-Shik Kong’s ‘Variations in the Contemplation
of the Repulsiveness of Food, Āhārepatikūlasaṅņa: Canonical, Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna Forms’ looks at the rather neglected topic of meditation on food. He demonstrates two key developments from the canonical to commentarial periods. One is the progressive restriction of the benefits attributed to the practice. The other is the divergence between Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda/Mahāyāna in how to practise. Theravāda developed a practice that focuses on the reality of repulsiveness of stages of the alms-round, i.e. the acquisition of food, and its consumption and digestion, rather than seeing food as repulsive in and of itself. In contrast, Sarvāstivāda/Mahāyāna teach the practitioner to develop an attitude of repulsiveness by cognitive association, allocating an aspect of asubha (impurity) to different types of food.

The next three articles address visual aspects of meditation in pre-modern Theravāda, evidence for which is drawn from the sixteenth century to the modern day. They all relate to the family of practices referred to in this volume as the ‘old meditation method’, boran kammatthan, a theme commenced in the opening article. Kate Crosby’s ‘Abhidhamma and nimitta in Eighteenth-Century Meditation Manuscripts from Sri Lanka: A Consideration of Orthodoxy and Heteropraxy in boran kammatthāna’ examines manuscripts that attest to the presence of a transmission of boran kammatthan from Ayutthaya in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka. After surveying the available evidence, she focuses on the relationship between different types of nimitta, visual signs experienced prior to death and in meditation, and how they are utilised within this tradition. She shows how the practice offers a detailed working out of the spiritual path as contained within commentarial Abhidhamma through a progressive substitution of increasingly pure mental states within the embodied individual. Phibul Choompolpaisal’s ‘Nimitta and Visual Methods in Siamese and Lao Meditation Traditions from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day’ also focuses on nimitta, to draw out differences in high-level practice between the boran kammatthan systems of several high-ranking Lao and Siamese clerics including three supreme patriarchs (saigharāja/sangharat): from sixteenth century Laos, to eighteenth–nineteenth century Thailand, as recorded in publications from the early twentieth century. He is then able to show the connections between specific lineages in the pre-modern period and three important heirs to boran kammatthan in the modern period: the meditation lineages at Wat Ratchasiththaram, those at Wat Pradusongtham, and among the network of temples that adopt Sodh Candasaro’s (1884–1959) Dhammakaya method (vijjā dhammakāya). Depictions of high-level attainments and even of Nibbāna itself are the topic of the next article, by Barend Jan Terwiel, whose ‘The City of Nibbāna in Thai Picture Books of the Three Worlds’ identifies for the first time the detailed symbolism of depictions of the City of Nibbāna and the eight supramundane stages that culminate in arhatship in manuscripts from the eighteenth century containing the cosmological text the ‘Depiction of the Three Worlds’, Samutphāpraiphrūm. The final stage of the arhat in these
depictions is shown as a monk holding what looks like a crystal ball at his navel, a motif recognisable from several boran kammatthan schools of meditation, including the practice followed by King Taksin, who had commissioned one of these illustrated manuscripts. As an aside, this adds further evidence against the oft-stated claim that manuscript illustrations do not relate to their contents in a Theravada context.

There follow two articles on the efforts in the nineteenth century to comprehend the then-elusive practice of meditation in Sri Lanka from two completely contrasting camps, that of the British colonial observer in Elizabeth Harris’s ‘Buddhist Meditation and the British Colonial Gaze in Nineteenth-Century Sri Lanka’ and that of the Buddhist revivalist Anāgārika Dharmapāla in Steven Kemper’s ‘Anagarika Dharmapala’s Meditation’. Elizabeth Harris follows the development of the use of ‘meditation’ and related terms in writings by different British observers of Sri Lanka in the colonial period, showing how this reveals not only the varied colonial influences and preoccupations, including the varying influences of Christianity and theosophy, but also the range of practice present in Sri Lanka. She finds that the term ‘meditation’ begins to accommodate its current range of referents (i.e. moving away from a western understanding of meditation on something, which excluded its use for the jhāna experiences, for example) only in the mid-nineteenth century with William Knighton, with the broader range then later used by the influential Pali scholar and dictionary-writer Robert Childers. She identifies the importance of jhāna experience among the local informants of these observers and suggests that the tendency to equate meditation with Vipassanā is a subsequent narrowing down of the range of the term that comes with the twentieth-century emergence of global Buddhist modernism. In ‘Anāgārika Dharmapāla’s Meditation’, Steven Kemper traces Anāgārika Dharmapāla’s commitment to meditation, observing how – contrary to his portrayal in earlier biographical sources – self-transformation and the attainment of the supramundane states (from stream entrant to arhatship) were his primary motivation. As documented in his diaries, he experimented with meditation on an almost daily basis and sought information on meditation practice from multiple sources. He drew on the Visuddhimagga and arranged for a copy to be made of the boran kammatthan manuscript that he would lend to T. W. Rhys Davids, as noted above, to be published in 1896 as The Manual of a Mystic, the first modern publication of a meditation manual. Surprisingly, given his oft-cited falling out with Olcott, theosophy and his belief in Koot Hoomi, one of the mahātmā above Tibet with whom Blavatsky claimed to be in communication, influenced Dharmapāla’s quest throughout his life.

The final four articles all examine varieties of practice in contemporary Theravada, and all relate to lay practice rather than that of monastics. Three
of these examine practices in Southeast Asia, while that by Sarah Shaw looks at a Southeast Asian practice transposed to and adapted in the UK. Offering a window into the diversity of practice found within the revival of meditation in Myanmar since the nineteenth century, Pyi Phyo Kyaw’s ‘The Sound of the Breath: Sunlun and Theinngu Meditation Traditions of Myanmar’ offers a detailed account of the meditation practices and experience of two famous meditation teachers, Sunlun Sayadaw Ven. U Kavi (1878–1952) and Theinngu Sayadaw Ven. U Ukkattha (1913–1973), both considered to have reached Awakening. Their practices, commenced as middle-aged lay men, offer interpretations of suffering (dukkha) that may be surprising to outsiders. She documents the experiences they reported and the ways in which their experiences were confirmed as valid against canonical and commentarial evidence by senior members of the Sangha. She also examines the meditation techniques and popularity of the two traditions founded by them. Kyaw’s article highlights a challenge with terminology. Once we are beyond general terms and into the realm of describing experience, within a Theravada context we enter the often untranslatable realms of Abhidhamma – untranslatable both in terminology and in terms of the way Abhidhamma seeks to capture processes, rather than the perspective on an undeconstructed individual. Jotika Khur-Yearn and David Wharton document the collective practices of undertaking precepts and meditation on the part of usually older lay practitioners during the rainy season. While the goals of most practices treated in the preceding articles have been personal transformation and even liberation, the primary objectives of the meditation practitioners discussed in David Wharton’s ‘Meditation in Tai Nuea Lay Buddhist Practice’ are merit-making and a preparation for death. The practitioners are women and men over 50 years of age during the annual rainy season retreat in a Tai Nuea village in north-western Laos. Wharton follows their meditation practices within the context of their attendant rituals, offerings and attitudes of non-attachment to the lay life they have temporarily left behind. Meanwhile, Jotika Khur-Yearn examines how meditation is brought into the lives of Shan lay people from their early childhood, culminating in the dedicated practice of meditation during ‘temple sleeping’ in later life. In his ‘Traditional and Modern Meditation Practices in Shan Buddhist Communities’, he examines changes to Shan practice within the twentieth century, as part of traditional temple sleeping and with the introduction of meditation centres, both in the 1930s with the rise of Burmese Vipassanā and more recently with the global spread of Mindfulness. Our final contribution brings us to the UK, where a group established as The Samatha Trust built up a dedicated community of lay practitioners inspired by the teachings of Nai Boonman Poonyathiro, a Thai ex-monk and gem trader who began to teach meditation shortly after arriving in the UK in 1963. Sarah Shaw’s ‘Tradition and Experimentation:
the Development of The Samatha Trust’ summarises the sparse availability of Buddhist meditation in the UK in those early days, and tells us of Nai Boonman’s life and practice, the development of the trust, including its openness to other teachers, and the practices at its core. We learn of the practices undertaken, samatha practices based on breathing leading to both calming and insight, how these relate both to Pali canonical and commentarial sources and to practices once popular in Thailand, and how they differ from Vipassanā practice.

Technical terms relating to meditation

A group of technical terms used in Theravada discourse about meditation appear repeatedly through the volume, and so provisional explanations or definitions are given here to assist the reader unfamiliar with this technical terminology. Readers should be aware that on occasion more complex definitions, and the effects of semantic change over time and in a given context, may well be addressed in individual articles, and those explanations supersede the explanations offered here.

- **samādhi**: Literally meaning ‘collected’ in the sense of ‘brought together’, this is usually translated as concentration and in both the canon and Vism designates a ‘one-pointed state of mind (ekaggacittatā)’ and equanimity in which mental activity is calmed and focussed either on an object or in itself.
- **jhāna**: These are a series of stages in the calming and collection of the mind leading towards full one-pointedness. In canonical sources there are four such stages, and in Abhidhamma the first is sub-divided, making five in total. They are characterised by increasing simplicity of mental contents and activity, as disruptive mental activities – even subtle and ‘positive’ ones – drop away to leave the mind experiencing just one-pointedness and equanimity. They are temporary states and the practitioner enters and leaves them. They have been variously translated as absorption, rapture, ecstasy and even trance, of which the first is most suitable.
- **upacāra**: This is the stage of mental activity in samatha meditation where the mind has begun to focus preceding attainment of the first jhāna. It is usually translated as ‘access concentration’ or ‘neighbourhood concentration’.
- **appanā**: This is understood as the immediate run-up into the experience of the jhāna proper. It is sometimes translated as ‘absorption concentration’, and is the phase of concentration in which the mind is fixed onto its object. Vism identifies the capacity for specific
meditation topics (*kammathāna*) to lead to *upacāra-* and full *samādhi* (see Kim Kyungrae in this volume).

- **nimitta**: Usually translated as ‘sign’, a nimitta is understood to be an eidetic image (or sometimes another sensory experience) that corresponds to the object of concentration. For this reason it is also sometimes translated as ‘mark’ or ‘image’. In Vism nimitta are understood only to appear during *upacāra-* and *appanā-samādhi*, i.e. as the mind approaches full *jhāna*. In this sense they are precursor signs that herald approaching success in the development of full *samādhi*. In boran kammatthan, nimitta are given an enhanced role in several practices (see Choompolpaisal, Skilton and Crosby in this volume). In Vism they are subdivided into *uggha-* and *patibhāga-nimitta*, where the former are associated with *upacāra-samādhi* and the latter with *appanā-samādhi*.

- **samatha**: This is the general designation for practices (and activities) that calm the mind and promote the development of *jhāna* and *samādhi*. In Theravada meditation it is paired with *vipassanā* (see below), the two required as complementary factors for progress on the path and realisation of awakening.

- **kammatthāna**: This emerges as a technical term in the commentaries to designate the topic of meditation taken up by the meditator. See Skilton in this volume for further discussion of this term.

- **bhāvanā**: This means ‘cultivation’ or ‘development’ and designates several meditation topics that are treated as ‘developmental’ exercises. These include the four *brahma vihāras* (of which the most widely practised is the *mettā bhāvanā*) and the *asubha* practices.

- **vipassanā**: This term means ‘insight’ and designates the cognitive or ‘wisdom’ component of awakening in Theravada. It is considered the counterpart to *samatha* in the meditation context, in that the practitioner needs to calm the mind and on that basis cultivate insight into the ‘way things really are’, invariably as formulated in such classic Buddhist formulae as the *tilakkhaṇa* (the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*), *abhiññā* or *vimokkha*, etc.

**Notes**

1. Another type of simplification in the popularisation of Buddhist-derived practices in the therapeutic context has been the narrowing of the reference of mindfulness itself, a problem that is actively being addressed in Buddhist studies, for example Kuan (2008) which seeks to address this issue by integrating a text-historical perspective with cognitive psychology.

2. An extremely useful contribution to the study of variety in meditation across religious divides is Halvor Eifring’s 2016 volume, which includes his own proposals for developing a comparative framework for the study of meditation across cultures (Eifring 2016).
3. Primarily see Rhys Davids (1900, 1914, 1936).
4. She was invited to edit two volumes based on the lecture notes of George Croom Robertson, her teacher in the topic, the first of which was dedicated to psychology and the second to philosophy – the two themes that dominated her interpretation of Abhidhamma. See Rhys Davids (1896a, 1896b).
5. The edited texts are *Pattadhana, Vibhaiga, Yamaka* and *Visuddhimagga*; the translated texts are *Dhammasaiga* and *Kathavatthu*; she also performed a co-translation of the *Abhidhammatthaasaiigaha*. (Neal 2014, 18, states incorrectly that she translated all five of the canonical texts.)
7. It cannot be ignored that prejudice against Caroline Rhys Davids herself, as was still perceptible in the 1990s and whether purely misogynist or not, also played a part here. Wakoh Shannon Hickey’s work on the earlier phase of pre-1960s interest in Hindu and Buddhist meditative practices provides context for Rhys Davids’ interest. Hickey documents the role of vested interests and misogyny in shaping practice and discourse, and sidelining early western pioneers in these and related areas. This had the effect of stemming early twentieth-century applications of meditation from Hindu and Buddhist sources in the USA and set the parameters for the expansion of modern mindfulness (Hickey 2019).
8. We are thinking here of the influence of Tibetan Buddhism and Zen on such well-known figures as Karen Horney and Carl Jung.
9. There are a handful of exceptions to this. We can see a thin thread of her influence in this respect running through publications by other authors until the late 1960s, when the association of Buddhism and psychology became ubiquitous. While Rhys Davids herself continued publishing on this topic until 1936, we can note English-language volumes interpreting Buddhism as psychology primarily in response to Abhidharma – written mainly by practitioners – as follows: Dharmapala (1921), Govinda (1938), Thera (1949), Guenther (1957), Jung (1958), Suzuki (1960), Jayasuriya (1963) and Johansson (1969).
10. A valuable survey of aspects of this history can be found in Stuart (2015, vol. 1, 7–17), as a part of contextualising the significance of the early Mahayana *Saddharmasrimyupasthanasutra*. Stuart’s survey confirms the doggedly historicist and philosophical cast of western studies of Buddhist meditation. Stuart explicitly stops short of reviewing non-text historical studies. See Hickey (2019, Chapter 1, e.g. 28ff.) for some interesting examples of early nineteenth-century assessments of practices such as mesmerism and hypnosis that would go on to shape the later reception of Buddhist-derived meditation. Caroline Rhys Davids was still using the language of hypnosis in her discussions of meditation in the early twentieth century (e.g. Rhys Davids 1912, 212).
11. As merely representative recent examples (a full history is a matter for another occasion), we might cite Nakamura (1979), King (1980) and Wynne (2007).
13. A surprisingly recent example of this strategy would be Polak (2011).
14. McMahan brings in a variety of topics, pointing out how the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* contains a progression of potential practice not developed by the modern world-affirming practitioner, including, for example, the repulsiveness and
deconstruction of the body (McMahan 2017, 29). However, as will be seen, our interest is primarily the variety of techniques rather than topics.

15. The discussion is published in ‘an academic journal “dedicated to the manifold interactions between the sciences and human religious and moral convictions” (http://www.zygonjournal.org/).’ The quote is from Deleanu (2010, 605) who candidly admits that his ‘rambling thoughts are only a hypothetical view put forth with a genuine intention to tackle meditation free from traditional presuppositions’ (ibid., 620–621). In fairness to the author we should also note that in a footnote (n. 28) Deleanu describes himself as ‘in my private hopes and fears, a Buddhist – not an orthodox believer and definitely not a practicing follower, but a sympathizer who finds a modicum of solace in some teachings and their chanting’ (ibid., 624). In all such discussions it strikes us that when dismissing meditation on one basis or another, western authors are always privileging their own experience and values over those of the real or imagined Buddhist practitioner, without reflecting on their own experiential and intellectual biases. Deleanu is to be commended for making the autobiographical perspective on his conclusions explicit.

16. For summaries of these and further works on Schmithausen, see Franco (2009, 94–95).

17. For an overlapping critique of Franco and other recently influential scholarly positions on meditation, see Stuart (2015, vol. 1, 18–26).

18. Between 1973 and 2015, Lance Cousins published eight scholarly articles mostly addressing aspects of Buddhist meditation in early Buddhist sources, but latterly broaching aspects of practice (see Harvey 2015). We await with great interest the posthumous publication of a volume, to be edited by Sarah Shaw, of his writing on the subject of meditation.

19. For example, Randall (1990). Embedded within an autobiographical narrative set in the 1950s, this volume contains detailed descriptions and discussions of the author’s meditation experience. Though obviously written after the events it describes, at the earliest 1957, and prior to Randall’s death in 1971, it only came to be published at least 20 years later and then by a Buddhist publisher (Aukana Publishing) on the basis of donations raised for the purpose.

20. We should note Caroline Rhys Davids’s collaboration with U Shwe Zan Aung in preparation of the latter’s translation of the Abhidhammatthasāṅgaha published by the Pali Text Society in 1910. He, a sometime pupil of Ledi Sayadaw, had already prepared his own translation of the text, and Rhys Davids, interested in preparing her own, had been put in touch with him. He shared his text; she responded with her own translation and deferred to him ‘to collate the two and decide as to choice of renderings’. She describes the result as ‘To the best of my belief, … the first attempt to treat of Buddhist philosophy by East and West working hand in hand, and I trust it may prove the forerunner of many another collaboration’ (quoted in Aung 1910, xii–xiii). She was to be disappointed.

21. For a detailed analysis of the impact of Ledi Sayadaw and the recognition of his credentials in Myanmar and beyond, see Braun (2013).

22. Mahasi Sayadaw wrote it first in Burmese in 1950, and later he wrote a Pali version of it (Mahasi Sayadaw 1995, 3).

23. For the Indian mainland and the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna traditions, the counterpart text is the Yogācārabhūmi, an exposition of the stages of the path hugely influential in its homeland and in the Buddhist traditions of East and Central Asia, which, due to its unfortunately fragmented survival in various
languages, is still not translated in full into a western language. Readers can consult Kragh (2013) for an extensive overview of this text. In contrast to this, Vism has been translated into English in full twice: Pe (1922–1931), and Nyanamoli (1956). It is also translated into a number of other European languages. This results from the easy access to the text at an early date of western interest in Buddhism through reliable manuscripts in the original language, and to native practitioner authorities, both of these as a result of the colonial presence in Theravada countries.

24. In addition to his translation of the Mahāsatipatthāna Sūtta, the book includes a 75-page anthology of translated passages ‘dealing with Right Mindfulness’ (Thera 1954, 151–226).

25. After his return to Ceylon in 1932 he had served in government and university, as inspector of pirivena and eventually as Dean of the Philosophy Faculty at Vidyodaya University, concurrently holding the Presidency of the Mahabodhi Society Colombo. These facts are drawn from Russell Webb’s chronicle of the London Buddhist Vihara (2004, 14), and Alec Robertson’s memoir of the author fronting the second edition of Vajiraña’s book (1975, iii–vi, n.p.).

26. King was himself an important bridge between the worlds of practice/belief on the one hand and western academia on the other. Serving as pastor in two churches between 1930 and 1949 and Dean of the Chapel at Grinnell College (1949–1963), he simultaneously developed an academic career, eventually retiring as professor of the history of religions at Vanderbilt University (1964–1973). His methodological perspective has been described by Donald K. Swearer thus: ‘he saw being a person of faith as an advantage rather than a disadvantage in the study of religion … [he] believed that the adherent of a particular faith is better able “to penetrate to the centrally important features of another religion” that might be opaque to the “nonreligionist”’ (Swearer 2001, iv). As early as 1961 he had published an account of his experience of meditation during a 10-day retreat at U Ba Kin’s International Meditation Centre, in part describing his subjective experiences and U Ba Kin’s explanations of them (King 1961).

27. The mutual interpenetration of, on the one hand, western and Asian scholarship and on the other of practitioner and academic scholarship, makes categories such as ‘western’ somewhat anachronistic.

28. An important 2007 meta-survey reviewed 813 research publications on ‘meditation practices for health’ (Ospina et al. 2007, 1) culled from 17 databases and published between 1956 and 2005. The authors concluded that ‘The field of research on meditation techniques and their therapeutic applications has been clouded by confusion over what constitutes meditation and by a lack of methodological rigor …’ (2007, 209). Of the 10 broad categories of technique identified by the review, four were more or less directly related to Buddhism: Vipassana, Zen meditation, MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) and MBCT (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy) (2007, 28–46). Without doubt the number of publications has expanded dramatically in the 12 years since that review. For example, a 2014 review of publications about the rather narrower topic of meditation used for stress reduction and well-being identified 18,753 unique items drawn from eight databases (of which only 47 studies met reasonable inclusion criteria, such as being randomised, using controls, and original data. Goyal et al. 2014). On the early twentieth-century interest in this area, and how the approach of the establishment to it then, as
well as US health insurance now, has shaped its representation divorced of the Buddhist context, see Hickey (2019).


30. We should note the pioneering studies of Herbert Benson in the late 1960s, which combined some of the earliest clinical investigations of the physiological and psychological effects of meditation – in his case a secularised version of TM (Benson and Klipper 1975). In Benson’s case the development of meditation as a relaxation therapy went hand in hand with the discovery of ‘stress’ as a clinical factor in illness.

31. As examples only, at the time of writing there are programmes at Brown University, Rice University, Emory University, Naropa University and the universities of Michigan, Redland, San Diego and Virginia, and this does not include higher education institutions simply offering courses on the subject of meditation or courses in meditation practice to support study. (We need to carefully differentiate the study of contemplation and the contemplation of study.)

32. The original publication by Magness in 1960, The Dhammakāya – Metaphysical Implications, was quickly reprinted in an enlarged second edition in 1961 under the title Sammā Samādhi I. It is now available online, under yet another title, Vistas Buddhist Insight into Immortality 2007. Magness’ practice lineage was at Wat Paknam in Thonburi, rather than the now famous Wat Dhammakaya in Pathumthani, and his writings are not considered authoritative guides to practice at the latter temple.

33. On the normative control of meditation practice in Burma on the part of the centralised Sangha hierarchy, see Ashin and Crosby (2017, e.g. 217–218), and Kyaw in this volume.

34. A recent survey study lists meditation in use for alleviating ‘stress, addiction, chronic pain, mood disorders, psychiatric disorders, and medical conditions’ plus improving ‘cognitive abilities and emotion regulation’ (Lindahl et al. 2017, 2). The UNESCO event addressed by the founder of the [British] Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG) was entitled “Could Emotional Intelligence help us build a better world and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?” (17 May 2019). For other applications of mindfulness the reader might consult some of the 199 million hits that a Google search for the term produces.

35. ‘Meditation, when shorn of its mystical connotations, is essentially a specific series of techniques much like relaxation training’ (Lazarus 1976, 601). Seemingly, meditation always achieves its therapeutic status by being secularised, by the shearing away of its ‘mystical’ context or accoutrements. The more recent secularisation of ‘mindfulness’ follows the same vein of accommodation.


37. We can also reflect on the relative lack of broader context or understanding of meditation as a factor in this particular issue. Some Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism have called into question the decontextualisation of mindfulness meditation from larger Buddhist ethical, philosophical and cosmological contexts (McMahan and Braun 2017, 14), and from traditional social support. Well-run mindfulness programmes doubtless provide
mentoring, but courses are always time limited. Participants may also be too goal orientated, i.e. too focused on relief from unwanted negative experiences or gratification of expectations of contentment. Within a more traditional Buddhist context, a practitioner usually has ongoing support, and meditation is itself regarded as a public good, allowing the practitioner to get more guidance and reassurance. This idea is linked to Turner’s (2014) assessment of Burmese Buddhism as a public religion, also mentioned in Kyaw (this volume).

38. Anecdotally, a frightening meditation experience on the part of one of the present editors was interpreted as messages from ancestors in need of merit transference, the practice of meditation making one more open to such communication.

39. We would like to thank the Ji Xuegen Research Funding for Buddhist Studies and Dhammakaya International UK for their support of these two workshops.

40. On Abhidhamma and practice, see also Kyaw (2014, Chapter 2).

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MEDITATION AND ITS SUBJECTS: TRACING KAMMATTHĀNA FROM THE EARLY CANON TO THE BORAN KAMMATHAN TRADITIONS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the term kammatthāna in three contexts. It begins by looking at the rare usage in the Pali canon where it denotes secular work, but is extended to include the work of the ascetic. It then looks at its usage in the commentarial period to denote the meditation subjects for samatha meditation, and where extensions of this to include vipassanā also occur. Finally, the article looks at kammatthāna in early modern Southeast Asia (primarily Siam) in the context of a variety of pre-modern meditation, boran kammathan, where the number of meditation subjects is increased, the patterns of their usage has changed with a new emphasis on experiencing nimitta, and kammathan is employed as a general term for meditation per se. The article also considers some ancillary features of boran kammathan texts, offering suggestions to enhance the search for new boran kammathan texts in manuscript archives and libraries.

When tackling the subject of meditation in his well-received study of Siamese Buddhism, The Wheel of the Law: Buddhism Illustrated from Siamese Sources (Alabaster 1871), Henry Alabaster (1836–1884) defined kammathan (Siamese¹; Pali, kammatthāna) as ‘analytical meditation’. The topic arose as a note to his translation of the first 10 chapters of the Pathamasambodhi, i.e. the Siamese biography of the Buddha.² The note in full reads:

Kammathan (Pali, Kammatthana), is one of the modes of Buddhist meditation, and may be called analytical meditation. He who exercises it fixes his mind on any one element, and reflects on it in all its conditions and changes, until, so far as that element is concerned, he sees that it is only unstable, grievous, and illusory. To aid this kind of meditation there are formulas; some people incorrectly call them prayers, in which a list of the elements is repeated; and the ordinary exercise of Kammathan is probably a mere mumbling of these formulas. One of these is a list of the thirty-two constituents of the body – a string of thirty-two Pali words, translated as, ‘hair of the head, hair of the body,
nails, teeth, skin, flesh, muscles, bones', &c, &c. I do not know whether the term is used in Sanscrit; it does not occur in my dictionary. I presume that it is a compound of Karman, ‘action, the cause of life’, and sthâna, ‘fixed position’; but I do not feel at all certain. (Alabaster 1871, 204)

In another note concerned with meditation, Alabaster explains that bhâwana (Pali, bhâvana) ‘meditation’, consists of five ‘sections’ each of which is elaborately ritualised such that it consists of ‘repetition of set forms or texts’. The five are ‘Meditations of Charity (Maitri), of Pity (Karuna), of Joy (Mudita), of Sorrow (Asubha), and of Indifference (Upeksha)’ and ‘Those most frequently mentioned among the Siamese are the first and the last, called by them Meta and Ubekkha’. (Alabaster 1871, 168).

Alabaster was a relatively sympathetic nineteenth-century commentator and translator of Buddhism. The Wheel of the Law as quoted here was a composite text, printed one year after its first section had appeared as an independent essay published as ‘The Modern Buddhist’. This had been compiled by Alabaster on the basis of close consultation with ‘an eminent Siamese nobleman’ whom he later names as Chao Phya Thipakon. It was in fact largely a translation of a Thai-language publication written by Thipakon, and thus his first publication was subtitled ‘Translated, with Remarks by H. Alabaster’, thus referencing his dependence on Thipakon’s Kitchânukit. Alabaster was himself British vice-consul to Siam, and after the publication of these books became a personal adviser to King Chulalongkorn and apparently was responsible for, amongst other things, the first catalogue of the royal library. Alabaster was a close observer of Siamese Buddhism and not averse to fieldwork.

While Alabaster’s comments contain elements that may be questioned, in particular what seems an unexpected distinction between bhâvanâ and kammathâna, anyone familiar with the standard exposition of Theravada meditation derived from Buddhaghosa’s authoritative Visuddhimagga (Vism) will recognise that he has drawn the reader’s attention to six of the 40 meditation subjects (kammatthâna) prescribed and described therein: the four brahmavihâra, the asubhabhâvana and kâyagatâsati. Alabaster was evidently a linguist since he was toting a Sanskrit dictionary, could speak and read Thai, and made a very creditable speculative etymology for the Siamese word kammathan, correctly assuming a parallel in the Sanskrit terms karman ‘work’ and sthâna ‘location’. We can refine this somewhat by drawing on the recognised Pali usage for thâna to mean ‘situation’ or ‘status’, and see the term as potentially meaning ‘work situation’. While the eventual focus of this article is to look at such kammathan as listed in early modern Southeast Asian meditation texts around the time of Alabaster’s observations, it is not inappropriate to start, as he did, with an examination
of the provenance of the term *kammatthāna* and its usage in the Pali corpus that predates the later texts and their accounts of *kammathan*.

**Kammatthāna**

If we turn to the Pali canon we find that the term *kammatthāna* occurs in a very uneven distribution across the corpus. Thus, in the *mūla* texts, that layer of Pali literature that is canonical in the narrowest sense, i.e. is traditionally attributed to the Buddha himself and regarded thus as *buddhavacana*, we find very few references to the term. Across the three *pitakas* there are a total of six texts which use it: one *sutta* in the Majjhima Nikāya and four in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. It also appears in the published text of *Petakopadesa*, but by virtue of its later date I will not include it in my discussion here. The term is therefore relatively rare in the *sutta* texts, and completely unused in Vinaya and Abhidhamma. In fact, if we look at these *suttas* we can see that *kammatthāna* is really used only three times, by which I mean that it is embedded in formulaic expressions mirrored between our texts. Thus, three of the Aṅguttara texts contain the term in the following formula: ‘idha, byagghapajja, kulaputto yena kammatthānena jivikam kappeti . . .’ (Aṅguttara Nikāya 8.54), meaning ‘Here, Tiger’s Path, where a son of good family pursues an occupation (*kammatthāna*). . .’, where only the vocative term, the ‘name’, is altered, and where all three finish the sentence identically with:

… – whether a farmer, a trader, a herdsman, a hunter, a civil servant or something else, like a craftsman – he is handy and energetic, and possesses strategic judgement such that he can either do it or give instructions. That, Tiger’s Path, is what’s called having initiative.

So here, an individual’s engagement with a secular occupation (with examples helpfully listed for us) is used to illustrate the virtue of having initiative (*utthānasampadā*).

The same point is made in the last Aṅguttara text, where the term is in a stock phrase that is repeated as many as 15 times in a stylised questioning scenario: ‘idha puriso yena kenaci kammatthānena anāpajja akusalam divasam kahāpanam nibbiseyya. dakkho puriso utthānasampannoti alam vacanāyā?’ (Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.46). Here a person takes up some occupation or other and without doing harm might earn a coin for a day’s work. Is that enough to call him a handy chap who shows initiative?

Clearly, in the earliest stratum of the canon in which the term is employed, *kammatthāna* is used to denote a person’s secular ‘work’ or ‘occupation’ and only crops up in discussions of having initiative. It is therefore interesting to see in the Majjhima Nikāya an extension of the field of reference, one which was to come to have great significance.
The Subhasutta (MN 99) opens with a dialogue between the Buddha and a brahmin student who questions the Buddha on the value of the occupation (kammatthāna) of a householder vs that of someone who has ‘gone forth’ (pabbajjā) i.e. a recluse like the Buddha and his disciples.

mahatttham idam mahākiccam mahādhikaranam mahāsāmārambham gharavāsa-kammattthānam mahapphalam hoti; appatthamidam appakiccam appādhikaranam appasamārambham pabbajjā-kammattthānam appaphalam hoti’ti. idha bhavam gotamo kimāhā”ti.

The occupation of a householder has great purpose, great obligations, lots of responsibilities, great sacrifice and results in great outcomes; the occupation of a recluse has no great purpose, few obligations, few responsibilities, little sacrifice and it results in little outcome. So, Gotama, what do you say to that?

The Buddha replies that there are occupations that can involve a great deal of activity which, when they succeed, have great results but if they fail have little outcome. There are others that involve little activity but also can have great results when successful and poor results when not so. He goes on to give examples of each, suggesting that farming is an occupation that involves a lot of activity, contrasted with trade which involves little activity. Household life is like farming whereas the life of the recluse is like trade. It is an occupation that involves relatively little activity and has little outcome when it fails but has major outcomes when it is successful. Crucially, here the Buddha extends the concept of ‘occupation’ to the religious life rather than leaving it as a term for secular livelihoods.\[13\]

This rather sparse picture for the mūla texts of the canon contrasts greatly with what we find in the commentaries, i.e. the atthakathā. If we conduct searches for our term in this layer of the literature, the results are rather overwhelming. Where before there was a scarcity that allows close examination, we are now faced by a superfluity of hits that we can only begin to explore in the present article. Table 1 summarises the data from two simple searches conducted through the Vipassana Research Institute’s

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Tipitaka Search facility (TS) and Ajahn Yuttadhammo’s Digital Pali Reader (DPR), respectively (see note 9).

Differences between the two sets of results are too numerous to discuss, but we can nevertheless draw some broad conclusions that must begin with the observation that kammatthāna is undoubtedly a commentarial term. Decidedly scarce in the mūla, our search tells us that DPR finds well over 1000 paragraphs of text in the atthakathā to the three pitakas that contain at least one occurrence of it. Those sections of the canon in relation to which it is most frequently discussed are the Majjhima and Khuddhaka Nikāyas, which appears to suggest that kammatthāna was used as freely by the authors of the commentaries on the latter as by Buddhaghosa, the acknowledged author of the atthakathā on the Vinaya, the other four Nikāya and the Abhidhamma. These results intentionally exclude Vism itself, Buddhaghosa’s treatise on the path, for which DPR returns hits for 130 paragraphs.

Quite what the phrase ‘commentarial term’ means also warrants some thought. It is widely known that Buddhaghosa summarised earlier commentarial sources available to him in Sri Lanka, and it is apparent that the authors of the Khuddaka Nikāya atthakathās also drew on the same usage known to him. This means the term cannot be seen as a neologism coined by Buddhaghosa. In the present case, ‘commentarial’ appears to mean a term used throughout the atthakathās and that developed within commentarial discourse to be broadly established prior to the fifth century CE, the period of Buddhaghosa’s activity as the earliest recorded commentator. It is used by him to denote a rationalised grouping of some 40 meditation topics or subjects that are derived from the canonical scripture (mūla) where they are discussed variously and piecemeal.14 This same usage appears to be assumed in the non-Buddhaghosa commentaries too. In other words, the commentarial literature reveals to us what is by that time a well-established technical usage for kammatthāna, i.e. as ‘meditation subject’.

We cannot see the point of departure for this particular usage, except in the Subhasutta’s extension of the reference for kammatthāna from secular occupation (farming etc.) to occupation in a rather broader sense that includes the general ‘work’ of being a recluse. By the time of the composition of the atthakatthās that we know, this usage had narrowed again to point to the ‘meditative work’ of the Buddhist monk, as was summarised in Buddhaghosa’s 40-component taxonomy in Vism. It is worth noting that the ‘late’ components of the canonical mūla text, amongst which we might include commentaries and treatises such as the Mahā- and Cūla-Nīdesa, Patisambhidāmagga, Milindapañña, Petakopadesa and Nettipakaranā (not to mention the later parts of the Vinaya or the Abhidhamma treatises) which might have bridged this gap, do not recognise the term.15 Yet the so-called *Vimuttimagga (Jié tuō dào lùn, hereafter JTDL; see Kim in this volume), seen
by some as a precursor to Vism, does recognise it. That JTDL can be dated tentatively to the second to fourth centuries CE begins to narrow the chronological window within which this change of reference evolved.

Following Buddhaghosa’s account in Vism (Ñañamoli 2010, 104–105) the \textit{kammatthāna} are as follows (see Table 2).

\textbf{Table 2. The contents of the seven groups of \textit{kammatthāna}.}

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\text{Kammatthāna} & \text{Content} \\
\hline
10 & \textit{kasīna} ‘wholes’ i.e. 4 elements, 4 colours, light and limited space \\
10 & \textit{asubha} the ‘offensive’ stages of decomposition of the human body \\
10 & \textit{anussati} ‘recollections’ of positive topics: \textit{tiratana}, etc. \\
4 & \textit{brahmavihāra} the ‘divine abodes’ of universal love, etc. \\
4 & \textit{āruppa} the four ‘immaterial abodes’ \\
1 & \textit{āhārepatikulasaṅgāna} ‘perception’ of repulsiveness in food \\
1 & \textit{dhātuvavatthāna} ‘analysis’ of the four elements \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

Typically, a \textit{kammatthāna} is now seen as mental (or verbal) work, to be ‘taken up’ \textit{ganhāti}, and one’s mind applied to it \textit{manasi karoti}. It can be increased \textit{vaddheti} and developed \textit{bhāveti}. One can give oneself over to it \textit{anuyuñjati}, and ultimately succeed by entering concentration \textit{upacārasamādhim pāpunāti} or becoming an Arahat \textit{kammatthānañca gahetvā arahattam patto}.\footnote{Buddhaghosa briefly explains the taking of a meditation subject as follows:}

\begin{quote}
But mundane concentration should be developed by one who has taken his stand on virtue that is quite purified in the way already stated. He should sever any of the ten impediments that he may have. He should then approach the good friend, the giver of a meditation subject, and he should apprehend from among the forty meditation subjects one that suits his own temperament. After that he should avoid a monastery unfavourable to the development of concentration and go to live in one that is favourable. Then he should sever the lesser impediments and not overlook any of the directions for development. This is in brief. (Ñañamoli 2010, 87)
\end{quote}

His extended explanation enjoins the learner to seek instruction in a specific meditation subject by approaching a teacher (\textit{kalyānamitta}) who is qualified by virtue of having used that meditation subject to attain all the \textit{jhāna} and realise insight (\textit{vipassanā}). If such a person is not available, then via a descending order of attainment, one can at the least take it from someone who knows one Nikāya and respects the tradition. All the same, the petitioner is not allowed to ask directly for the \textit{kammatthāna} but should serve the meditation teacher for at least a couple of weeks before subtly hinting that there might be a reason for his attendance. Only after the teacher asks what he wants can he mention his quest for a meditation
subject: ‘Sir, explain the meditation subject to me’ – kammatṭhānam me, bhante, kathetha (Visuddhimagga, 100).

At this point Buddhaghosa introduces an interesting distinction that resonates through to the Siamese texts which we will examine shortly. He explains that kammatṭhāna are divided into two categories: those that are generally useful, and special topics. He explains this distinction as follows:

meditation subjects are of two kinds, that is, generally useful meditation subjects and special meditation subjects. Herein, loving-kindness towards the Community of Bhikkhus, etc., and also mindfulness of death are what are called generally useful meditation subjects. Some say perception of foulness, too. … What is called a ‘special meditation subject’ is that one from among the forty meditation subjects that is suitable to a man’s own temperament. It is ‘special’ (pārihāriya) because he must carry it (pariharitabbattā) constantly about with him, and because it is the proximate cause for each higher stage of development. (transl. Nānamoli 2010, 93–94)\(^{17}\)

The ‘general’ category (sabbatthaka-kammatṭhāna) is different from Buddhaghosa’s category of ‘being suitable for any temperament’ and instead refers to general benefits that accrue to the practitioner.\(^{18}\) Mettābhāvanā ensures that those around the practitioner, whether fellow monks, deities or lay people, are supportive to him. Mindfulness of death, one of the 10 anussati, gives the practitioner a sense of urgency. The offensive (asubha) meditation objects save him from temptation by any kind of sense object (ārammanā).\(^{19}\) While of interest in itself, the Paramatthajotikā, in its commentary to the Sutta Nipāta’s Khaggavisānasutta, has a lengthy discussion of meditation and the kammatṭhāna which both shows a slight divergence from Buddhaghosa’s account on this particular topic, and introduces another important term in the presentation of meditation in later centuries:

A meditation subject is of two kinds: the generally useful and the personalized. Those generally useful are loving-kindness and recollection of death. [It is called ‘generally useful’ because it is a desideratum in all circumstances.\(^{20}\)] … But the ‘personalized’ subject is one taken up in accordance with one’s temperament and which is to be always maintained. It is called pārihāriya because it is to be always maintained, protected and developed. It may be one of the ten unattractive objects, the kasinās, or the recollections, or the delineation of the four elements. It is also called one’s root meditation [mūlakammatṭhāna] subject. Having first attended to the meditation subjects that are generally useful, afterward one attends to the personalized meditation subject, … (transl. Bodhi 2017, 409–10)\(^{21}\)

The author of this commentary recognises as generally useful only mettā and maranassati, unlike Buddhaghosa not even tentatively including asubhabhāvanā in the list. Moreover, if we do the arithmetic of his list it becomes apparent that this author’s list of personalised kammatṭhāna is more restrictive. Where Buddhaghosa says any of the 40 can function in this
way, the Paramatthajotikā author says the ‘personalised’ subjects consist of the 10 kasina, 10 asubha, 10 anussati and dhātuvavattāna only (= 31 subjects). The significant terminology here is his gloss of ‘personalised’ pārihāriya as ‘root’ or ‘basic meditation’, mūlakammatthaṇa. This otherwise enigmatic term appears in some 35 paragraphs of ātthakathā material: mostly in Buddhaghosa’s Majjhima and Samyutta Nikāya commentaries, but also three times in Vism and four in its commentary, where it remains undefined. Other than the two definitions given above, the mūlakammatthaṇa as one’s personalised meditation subject is taken for granted. The identification between pārihāriya and mūla is only made in the Khuddaka commentaries to the Sutta Nipāta and the Apadāna, i.e. seemingly not by Buddhaghosa, although his usage of the term throughout his commentaries and Vism is consistent with the meaning given in the Paramatthajotikā. Besides these two occurrences there is only one other non-Buddhaghosa reference to mūlakammatthaṇa, leaving us with the impression that its usage should be associated in some way with him. This may account for the need of later commentators to explain the referent of mūlakammatthaṇa, i.e. it was perhaps not so familiar to them. We might also note its complete absence in Buddhaghosa’s commentaries on the Vinaya and Abhidhamma, although it does appear in the tīkā or sub-commentary of the Vinaya.

A common understanding of the kammatthaṇa is that they are conducive only to samatha or calming meditation. This is based on the function given them within the path structure as outlined by Buddhaghosa in the Viśuddhimagga, where they are employed for the cultivation of jhāna. There they are explained by him in the context of his exposition of samādhi, concentration, within the standard framework of sīla – samādhi – paññā, i.e. the kammatthaṇa function as a mental technology for the practitioner to acquire concentration prior to, or as the basis for, wisdom, paññā. It is therefore interesting to find that elsewhere, in his commentary to the Anguttara Nikāya, Buddhaghosa at one point claims that one kammatthaṇa, recollection of the Buddha, buddhānussati, has a twofold function: for uplifting or cheering up the mind (cittasampahamsana) or for insight (vipassanā): buddhānussatikammatthaṇam duvidham hiti cittasampahamsanatthaṅceva vipassanatthaṅca (Manorathapūrani, ii.20). He cites a case of a meditator whose personal meditation (mūlakammatthaṇa) is the asubhabhāvanā, and who becomes dissatisfied with the meditation which has become dull. He takes up the buddhānussati-kammatthaṇa by reciting the itipiso formula of praise of the Buddha’s qualities. This calms or tames his mind and in turn allows him to take up his mūlakammatthaṇa again, this time successfully. On the other hand, Buddhaghosa continues, when recalling the Buddha’s virtues, one might begin to ask just who it is that is recollecting the Buddha, and end up pitched into an existential analytic enquiry through which one eventually
realises the Truths, and then ‘for him this meditation subject has the purpose/benefit of insight’ *tadāssa imam kammatthānam vipassanattham nāma hoti*. We can guess that similar possibilities exist for any of the *kammatthāna*, which seems to raise the possibility that while Buddhaghosa presents them as a means for achieving calming (*samatha*), he also saw the potential for them to serve the ends of insight too (*vipassanā*). (It is therefore of great interest to note that JTDL sees the same potential for most of the *kammatthāna*.)

This speculation is borne out in his account in Vism of mindfulness of the body, *kāyatāsati*, one of the 10 *anussati*. Here, Buddhaghosa recognises that this topic is approached in two ways in the *suttas*, with reference to analysis of the elements of the body or with reference to its repulsiveness – the former approach makes it an insight meditation topic, the latter, a calming topic.

In his commentary to the *Samyutta Nikāya*, Buddhaghosa addresses this distinction from another point of view in a simile he relates concerning a king who assigns a son to govern a border town but the son goes off the rails. Eventually the king has to send two messengers to sort the son out, one a learned minister (*panditam amaccam*) and the other a powerful soldier (*balasampannam yodham*). When they find the rogue son, the minister delivers the king’s message but the son ignores him. The soldier takes over, grabs his head and tells him either to follow the instruction from his father or have his head removed, holding up his sword to make clear the outcome. The son is overcome with fear and his roguish companions flee. The son now accepts the father’s instruction. When unpacking the simile, Buddhaghosa likens the king to the Buddha and the son to a monk whose mind is untamed. The cheating companions of the son are the five hindrances or *nīvaraṇa*, and the two messengers are the calming and insight meditation subjects, *samathakammatthānañ ca vipassanākammatthānañ ca*. The soldier grabbing his head is like when the mind becomes motionless with the arising of the first *jhāna*. When the son’s bad company runs away, this is like when entry into the first *jhāna* disperses the hindrances. The son’s acquiescence to the king’s instruction is like when one emerges from the first *jhāna*, and the point where the minister successfully delivers the king’s message is like when the mind has been made ready by concentration, the insight meditation subject is cultivated. *Samathakammatthāna* is the brute force of the soldier, while *vipassanākammatthāna* is the message to which one does not listen until taken in hand (*Sāratthappakāsini*, iii. 61).

However, this discussion gives a false impression if one assumes that the term *vipassanākammatthāna* was widely used by Buddhaghosa. The Vism and Samyutta Nikāya *attakhathā* references are his only uses of the term, apart from a stray and duplicate reference in his commentary to the *Vibhaṅga*, and a search of the corpus suggests that it was only a little
more familiar to commentators on the Khuddaka Nikāya. This is not saying much as it only appears there in commentaries on six texts. Nevertheless, the seeming banality of the usage is well shown in Dhammapāla’s commentary on the Viṃānavatthu in a sentence that describes a woman called Lakhumā who ‘heard the teaching from some monks, became firmly established in the refuges and precepts, became concentrated, took up an insight meditation object, and arousing insight, from that support was before long established in the fruit of stream entry’. 25 A passage from the commentary to the Dhammapada is of interest both for its use of a term, yogāvacara, that was to have far greater usage in later Theravada tradition, and for its reference to vipassanā meditation subjects. 26 Holding forth to Ānanda on the reason that a particular piglet is so white in colour, the Buddha explains that ‘[in a former existence] she heard the sound of the teaching from a meditation practitioner (yogāvacara) who was reciting (sajjhāyanta) his insight meditation subject, passed away from that life and [and as a result] was reborn in a royal family as the daughter of the king, and was called Ubbarī’. 28 Subsequently, while using a communal toilet area one day, she saw a worm-infested corpse dumped there and as a result achieved the first jhāna in which she remained for the rest of her life! Afterwards she was reborn in a brahma-loka and from there reborn as pig. Ānanda and the other listeners were greatly moved by the story.

As a last example, the commentaries to two texts, Theragāthā and Apadāna, 29 repeat verbatim a passage in a story concerning a personal disciple of the Buddha, the therā Vaṅgisa, in which the two kinds of kammatthāna are referenced directly in an interesting way: ‘Then the Teacher explained to him the 38 meditation subjects and the insight meditation subjects. Just reciting the 38 he became established in insight’. 30 The commentator is Dhammapāla, who undoubtedly postdates Buddhaghosa, and, although he knew the latter’s works, his own commentarial tradition clearly did not reflect his predecessor’s taxonomy of 40 kammatthāna. 31 Moreover, Dhammapāla seems to be saying that the practitioner concerned developed insight just through reciting (sajjhāyanto eva) the samathakammathāna.

Now, the effect of these examples of the use of the compound vipassanākammathāna that have been explored over the last few pages is twofold. Firstly, it is quite unclear what the vipassanākammathāna might be, except perhaps in the case of buddhānussati and kāyagatāssati (since we have seen above that both are explicitly described as such), although we will see shortly that Siamese meditation teachers had a different answer to this question. However, it may also be that we should reflect on the statement of the Buddha in the Cetanāsutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, in which he lays out a fundamental proposition concerning the cultivation of insight, when he says,
For a person whose mind is concentrated, there is no need for an act of will, ‘May I know & see things as they actually are’. It is in the nature of things that a person whose mind is concentrated knows & sees things as they actually are. … Concentration has knowledge & vision of things as they actually are as its purpose, knowledge & vision of things as they actually are as its reward. (Aṅguttara Nikāya, 11.2; transl. Thanissaro 1997)

In other words, there is no need particularly to specify techniques for the cultivation of insight (i.e. knowing and seeing things as they actually are) as it will happen naturally and inevitably once the mind is concentrated. All that is needed perhaps is to list and explain the aspects of vipassanā on which the concentrated mind will reflect. And this is certainly what we find later in the Siamese meditation texts, where vipassanākammāthāna are simply listed, sometimes with a minimal definition but no associated techniques for cultivation.

Secondly, the discussion may have blurred the edges between samatha and vipassanā. To counteract this we should recall that Vism clearly intends to reserve kammāthāna for samatha meditation subjects, despite the single extension in Vism of the term to vipassanā, in relation to kāyagatāsati, as mentioned above. It seems fair to say that, for Buddhaghosa at least, kammāthāna and samatha were close bedfellows – although vipassanā was in the same room.

Our discussion so far has shown us the early usage of the term kammāthāna as found in the mūla text of the Tipitaka, where it occurs rarely as a general term for secular occupations but in one instance is extended to include the ‘work’ of professional renouncers like the Buddha and his followers. Our next sitting of the term is in the commentarial layer of literature, in Buddhaghosa’s commentaries to the mūla text and in his summary of the religious path, Vism, between which there are minor discrepancies. Buddhaghosa stands as a ‘far horizon’ to our knowledge of commentary on the canon, because he made predecessor commentators redundant and their texts do not survive. We cannot know more about the emergence of the commentarial usage, although the presence of the term in the same usage in the JTDL (*Vimuttimagga) confirms that it predates Buddhaghosa. Later post-Buddhaghosa commentators also use the term kammāthāna, notably Dhammapāla, and for all of them, Buddhaghosa included, the term appears to denote the 38 or 40 meditation subjects (summarised, for example, in Vism) and employed for calming, samatha, meditation. However, from a survey of commentarial usage, we have also seen that there is a persistent, albeit minor, trend to: (a) accept that some kammāthāna may have not only a samatha function but also an insight, vipassanā, function; and (b) use an expression, vipassanākammāthāna, that looks anomalous if we think that kammāthāna are only employed in relation to samatha meditation, but also pre-visions the same usage in much later meditation manuals from Siam and elsewhere. We have seen that kammāthāna can be recited aloud and in
that respect can form a potent litany of transformation. We have also seen the term yogāvacara as a designation for the meditation practitioner, a term which is to become important in later meditation contexts, emerge in the commentarial layer of texts.

**Kammathan**

What then of kammathan, the meditation referred to by Alabaster and discussion of which I promised earlier in this article? It is time to turn to that, but in doing so we must also bear in mind some general historical background. Henry Alabaster landed in Siam in 1857, at the tender age of 21, and thus arrived in the country only a quarter of a century after the founding by Mongkut (1804–1868, r. 1851–1868) of the Dhammayuttikanikāya. The explicit rationale of this new monastic ordination lineage, which was to receive special royal patronage from its start through to the present day, was the modernisation of the monastic community with a focus on canonical and vinaya studies rather than meditation. In an essay in Pali, Mongkut differentiated his Dhammayuttikanikāya, as ‘the lineage consistent with the Teaching’, from the rest who were an ācīṇṇakappikanikāya, ‘a lineage that followed customary practices’, i.e. what we can see as the historically developed forms of Theravada of the day. He goes on to claim that whereas the ācīṇṇakappikas do not restrict themselves to the teachings of the canon, commentaries, etc., and follow local practices, the Dhammayuttikanikāya does not accept customary practices of former teachers, and moreover only accepts the readings of the tikā if they conform with the atthakathā, and those of the atthakathā only if they conform with the mūla of the canon itself. Nor do they accept anything developed and written anywhere or by anyone that transgresses the character of what was spoken by the Buddha. The sense of this sentiment seems rather fundamentalist.32

However, we would be wrong to imagine that, initially at least, this was quite as restrictive as it might seem. We know that for much of the nineteenth century in Siam the inherited concept of the Tipitaka was far broader than scholars in the West now conceive it. We know both from Northern Thai (Lanna) catalogues of the Tipitaka and from royally sponsored manuscript copies of the Tipitaka produced through the nineteenth century that it included the mūla text of the canon, the commentaries and the subcommentaries, plus treatises like Vism and the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha – even the fourteenth-century Sārasaṅgaha33 – along with vamsa or chronicles, numerous apocryphal sutta, and also grammatical treatises.34 In the words of Peter Skilling, ‘The Tripitaka meant the complete corpus of Pali literature, divided into four – not three – main categories: sūtra, vinaya, paramattha, and saddā (Sūtra, monastic rules, Abhidhamma, and grammar)’ (Skilling 2014, 361). So this was an inclusive canon (not unlike the Tibetan and
Chinese Tripitakas) and consisted of everything written in what we call the Pali language. However, this situation changed radically at the very end of the nineteenth century, when a much narrower definition of the Tipitaka took its place, based on the account of what constituted the Tipitaka written by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century. There seems to be little doubt that this sudden transition to a narrow definition came about as the inevitable outcome of the principles outlined by Mongkut. Only what could be identified as the word of the Buddha would be accepted as Tipitaka, and ultimately this was the mūla text alone – i.e. the vinaya-, sutta- and abhidhamma-pitaka – and this in turn is the concept of the Tipitaka that early Western scholars accepted in their accounts of the Buddhist canon. Possibly reflecting some influence from Protestant missionaries with their own emphasis on the Bible as distinct from the literary output of the developed church, Mongkut had outlined a conservative textual agenda that prioritised and made authoritative only those texts that could be attributed to the Buddha. This position also produces an implicit preference for texts in Pali language.\textsuperscript{35} Against these criteria texts produced in later centuries, from the hands of teachers, practitioners and thinkers of the later Theravada tradition often in mixed Pali and local languages – the counterpart to Europe’s medieval and early modern ‘developed Church’ – had limited authority and were highly vulnerable to being sidelined.

While Mongkut’s modernisation was not intentionally extended to meditation per se, although he personally thought traditional contemporary techniques ‘confusing and over-complicated’,\textsuperscript{36} it nevertheless was a contributory factor to national and trans-national changes that undermined existing contemporary meditation practices and ultimately led to their replacement by Thai Forest Tradition and Burmese Vipassana techniques.\textsuperscript{37} As elsewhere, I shall refer to this pre-existing tradition as boran kammathāna, i.e. ‘the old meditation’, this being a term used for it in Thailand to distinguish it from the newer meditation traditions just mentioned. Although it is becoming clear that boran kammathāna was once widespread, probably across the peninsula, and was also transported to Sri Lanka at least once,\textsuperscript{38} it is now a shadow of its former self, attested largely through manuscript records and publications, and surviving either in small enclaves or in modernised forms.\textsuperscript{39}

Although, as the other contributions to this present volume demonstrate, one should not assume that boran kammathāna was the sole meditation tradition of its time, it was widespread, and we have concrete evidence for it from Mon, Lannā, Thai, Lao, Cambodian and Sri Lankan texts. It has distinctive characteristics which allow us to group these pieces of evidence together and, significantly for present purposes, one of these distinctive features is its use of kammaṭṭhāna.
In a wide variety of contexts, we can find boran kammathan texts that enumerate a list of kammatṭhāna beginning with pīti, yugala and sukha and proceeding through the kammatṭhāna with which we are already familiar from Buddhaghosa. As a starting point for this exploration, I outline above (see Table 3) the kammatṭhāna of the lineage of boran kammathan inherited from Sangharāja Ānānasamvara (1733–1822), known as Suk Kaitheun (hereafter Suk), and still taught in contemporary Thonburi at his former temple, Wat Ratchasittharam.

This list comes from a text seemingly called the *Samathavipassanā kammatṭhāna* (hereafter Suk 1) which is attributed to Suk in the preface to its publication, although we might reasonably infer that he brought it, or at least the meditation system it contains, to Thonburi from Ayutthaya, where he had trained as a junior monk prior to being installed as Sangharāja by King Rama I. There is no reason to believe that he is an innovator. The same publication claims that the text has been in use since the Rattanakosin period, the period in which Suk was resident in Bangkok, i.e. 1782–1822.

There are of course a number of interesting developments here, the most noticeable of which is that the list of samathakammatṭhāna has been rearranged and supplemented. The list now begins with three meditation subjects that are never mentioned as such in Vism and the commentarial accounts: pīti, yugala and sukha. The first and last of these three are well known as components of jhāna, or at least of the lower jhāna. Strangely, it would seem, these components of the concentrated mind have now become kammatṭhāna in their own right. Yugala, the ‘pairs’, are not immediately recognisable at all from accounts of jhāna. Furthermore, the order of the 38/40 kammatṭhāna has been changed in other ways. These three formerly unknown meditation subjects are immediately followed by two forms of sati – ānāpāna and kāyagatā – while the anussati group as a whole, from which buddhānuussati has seemingly vanished altogether and thus is reduced to seven members, is now

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<th>Table 3. The kammatṭhāna in Suk 1.</th>
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<td>samatha kammatṭhāna</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) pīti delights</td>
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<td>(2) yugala pairs</td>
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<td>(3) sukha happinesses</td>
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<td>(4) ānāpānasati</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) 32 kāyagātā sati</td>
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<tr>
<td>(6) 10 kasina</td>
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<td>(7) 10 āsūbha</td>
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<td>(8) rūpa-jhāna</td>
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<td>(9) anussati</td>
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<tr>
<td>(10) brahma vihāra</td>
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<tr>
<td>(11) 10 dhārepatikulasanā</td>
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<td>(12) dhātu</td>
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<td>(13) 4 āruppa-jhāna</td>
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pushed down the list by the four jhāna themselves. In other words, here the states that are the explicit goal or product of using the samathakammatthāna in Vism, i.e. the successive states of the concentrated mind, the jhāna, are now incorporated as kammatthāna themselves. The repulsiveness of food is now counted as 10 components, and the dhātu analysis as four. If we are inclined to total the number of kammatthāna now listed as samatha meditation subjects, as their numbering invites us to do, it would seem that, rather than 40 kammatthāna in seven groups, we now have 100 in 13.\textsuperscript{42}

Under the heading for each group the text offers a litany for the practitioner to recite which helps invoke (ārādh) the meditation subject. This typically involves the taking of five refuges (the tiratana, plus the lineage of meditation teachers and the kammathāna), a statement of resolve and an invitation to the kammatthāna to appear, followed by recitation of the itipiso formula and repetition of mantra (e.g. araham), after which a description of the kammatthāna is given.

In the case of the five pīti this involves the enumeration of its five forms as described in commentarial sources. A feature not explicit in this text, but well attested by other boran kammathan texts and the contemporary teaching of Suk’s lineage, is that the kammatthāna are expected to appear to the practitioner as nimitta, in the form of coloured lights, particularly in the form of spheres of light.\textsuperscript{43} Once the kammatthāna have appeared, the practitioner then moves them individually and en masse around his/her body according to a series of patterns and complex numerical sequences, both forwards and in reverse (anuloma/patiloma). The mantra to be used for the five pīti meditation subject is buddho.

In the case of ānāpānasati, the ‘invitation’ ārādhana etc. is given, and the practitioner is enjoined to focus on the breath at nine specified points in the body, from the upper lip through to the navel (nābhī), counting from one to five on the inbreath and from five to one on the outbreath. Specific nimitta should appear at each specified point, although they are not described in this text, and the teacher will confirm when the correct ones have appeared at the specified locations. The mantra to be used for this meditation subject is sammā arahant.\textsuperscript{44}

Of particular interest is how the jhāna themselves are to be used as a meditation subject. In part the answer is that they are to be invoked and experienced by the practitioner as nimitta, i.e. bright lights or spheres of crystal. The procedure given here assumes that the practitioner has achieved the first jhāna as a result of the preceding asubha meditation subject. The expressed intent (in the litany) of taking up the rūpajjhāna is to allow the practitioner to move on from the rūpajjhāna themselves to develop the āruppajjhāna! The practitioner makes a dedication, nibbānapaccayo hotu ‘May this be a cause of [my] nibbāna’, and recites the mantra vitakka in the first stage of this practice.\textsuperscript{45} For each successive jhāna one recites a litany and a mantra – jhāna 2: vicāra; 3:
pittī; 4: sukha; and 5: upekkhā ekaggatā. The litany for invoking the second jhāna is as follows,

The rūpavacara-pathama-jhāna in the recollection on a swollen corpse, which consists of five factors, is not permanent; it is coarse and destructible, and still causes suffering. I am tired of it; I am going to meditate with the purpose of attaining second jhāna consisting of four factors: vicāra, pittī, sukha and ekaggatā. May the Lord Buddha be my refuge, etc. May the noble graded practice come into me. Nibbānapaccayohotu. (Ronruen, Evans, and Nangnoi, n.d., 37–38)

However, as the kammatthāna list above shows, the practitioner works through four more meditation subjects – anussati, brahmavihāra, āhārepātiṇḍu, dhātu – before coming to the āruppa jhāna. A litany is provided and the practitioner uses the following mantras (with explanatory notes) for the four āruppa jhāna, respectively:

ākāso ananto (no air, no earth), viññānam anantam (concentration suppressing space), natthikiṅci (meditation in utter silence), and etam santam etam panītam (a state that is utterly calm, and it is not possible to feel whether there is any breathing or not or where one is). (Ronruen, Evans, and Nangnoi, n.d., 50–51)

Standard Theravada doctrine, from at least the time of Vism, explains that in taking up a meditation subject, the practitioner experiences two stages of attaining the nimitta for that subject: there is the ‘learning’ phase called uggahanimitta in which the sign is created as an eidetic image in the mind’s eye; and the successful stage in which the sign, now referred to as the patibhāganimitta, has become pure, self-luminous and full. Every procedure in relation to the kammathān in Suk 1 is to be performed twice over: once for seeing the uggahanimitta and once for the patibhāganimitta for each meditation subject. The entire samatha meditation enterprise now seems to be built around acquiring the nimitta for each meditation subject. Suk’s section on samatha finishes as follows:

End of Samatha Kammathāna by Phra ṇānasamvara according to the original teaching. Having finished practicing samatha kammathāna, the practitioner will be so well experienced that he can effectively teach samatha kammathāna. If he wants to further practice vipassanā, he should bring a tray of khandhas to the vipassanā teacher and learn to practice. (Finished is the thirteenth level: the four formless jhāna.) (Ronruen, Evans, and Nangnoi, n.d., 51)

Quite how the procedures outlined up to this point are to be understood as being ‘according to the original teaching’ is not clear, particularly in the light of the next text to be examined. Also, Suk assumes a cumulative practice experience running on from each meditation subject to the next. This is radically different from Buddhaghosa, who prescribes that kammathāna are divided between generally useful and personalised subjects, the latter being the practitioner’s primary practice (pārihāriya) and determined by their
temperament. A substantial part of his exposition of the *kammatthāna* is exploring which meditation subjects are suitable and effective for which temperaments. Suk’s approach assumes that the entire list of *samathakammatthāna* will be taken up in sequence by the practitioner, and in this sense it is more akin to a syllabus for meditation – while Buddhaghosa’s approach is that the list is more like a menu, from which items are to be selected as appropriate.  

In addition, while not mentioned in this text, the Suk tradition at Wat Ratchasittharam understands that the entire list of *samathakammatthāna* is divided into the three sections: subjects 1–3 are connected with qualities of the Buddha (*buddaguna*); 4–8 are considered *rūpakammatthāna*; and 9–13 are *arūpakammatthāna*.

Having dealt with *samatha*, we should also note that the list is continued with another 33 components which are explicitly *vipassanākammatthāna*. This shows that the tentative commentarial coinage of this term, a seeming anomaly if *kammatthāna* are used only for *samatha* meditation, is by now well established. The components of each category are simply listed, without instruction, and in this list we can see also that our Siamese meditation tradition had a clear idea of what constituted the appropriate *kamatthāna* for *vipassanā* (see Table 3). If we look for a source for this list, the immediately obvious reference is Anuruddha’s *Abhidhammatthasanāgaha*, a twelfth-century treatise on the path that is nowadays well known as an instruction and Abhidhamma manual for monks. In the ninth and final chapter of this work, which deals with meditation, Anuruddha assembles a highly abbreviated and somewhat cursory overview of *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation. He gives an account of *samatha* that is completely consistent with Vism, listing the *kammatthāna*, the applications to temperament, and the stages of *jhāna*. In the section on *vipassanā*, entitled *vipassanākammatthāna*, he relates a list of topics that constitute the contents of insight, these being: seven *visuddhi*, three *lakkhana*, three *anupassanā*, 10 *vipassanānā*, three *vimokkha*, and three *vimokkhamukha*. At this point Anuruddha explains how the seven *visuddhi*, ‘purifications’, provide an overarching structure for *vipassanā* (as in Vism), and finishes with a verse of which the first line is *maggam phalaṁ ca nibbānam paccavékhati paṇḍito* – ‘The wise person reflects on the Path and its Fruit and on Nibbāna’ (Nārada 1980, 410 and 414). This last is undoubtedly the equivalent of Suk’s *maggaphalapaccavēkkhananikkhetā*. In other words, the entire list of Suk’s *vipassanākammatthāna* coincides with and possibly derives almost verbatim from Anuruddha. While Anuruddha’s text gives us a twelfth-century waypoint for the emergent usage of the expression *vipassanākammatthāna*, we should note that it is also used on about 19 occasions in the *tīkā*, the sub-commentaries to the *suttas* and the *vinaya*. Fifteen of these are in Dhammapāla’s sixth–ninth-century *Linatthappakāsīni*.
and Sāriputta’s twelfth-century Sāratthadīpani. The expression is also used in Siddhattha’s early fourteenth-century Sārasaṅgaha.

The usage, vipassanā-kammatthāna-lived-kammatthan, is not restricted to this one text of Suk, but is repeated again explicitly in another text by Suk, the Samatha-Vipassanā Kammatthan Magga Palimutta iae Vithi Aratthana Phra Kammatthan [The Path of Samatha-Vipassanā Meditation and Methods for Invoking Phra Kammatthan Objects Related Independently of the Arrangement of the Canonical text]; hereafter Suk 2). This text runs much closer to Vism in that it gives a completely standard account of the kammatthāna, even imploring readers in the verses that conclude the exposition of samatha,

O Expert Ones, don’t ridicule me!
Check them all with the Pali,
Judge them as they are, and work it out accordingly . . .
(Mettānando 1998, 65)

The word ‘Pali’ in this context refers not to the language but to the earlier usage of the term to mean ‘canonical text’. Suk’s nervousness presumably arises from giving his account ‘free from the arrangement of the canonical text’ – palimutta – and we can assume that it was just this sort of text that was the target of the Dhammayuttikanikāya textual fundamentalism mentioned above. Piti etc. are not mentioned as part of the samatha section here, but an exposition of the five piti, initially explaining them in a traditional fashion but also mentioning the distinctive colours of their nimitta, follows after the conclusion of the section on vipassanā. The five are also then equated with the five Buddhas, the five elements, five numbered groups of the attributes of the Buddha (as represented by the 56 syllables of the itipiso formula), and with the five syllables of the homage na mo bu ddhā ya. While these last features take us beyond the topic of kammatthāna per se, they indicate that this material comes from a system in which ‘magical’ micro-macro correspondences are harnessed to soteriological ends.

This second text by Suk also has a variant list of vipassanākammathan (Table 4). They are explained in traditional fashion in accord with Vism. They seem to follow the list of the first text, but are cut short, possibly because the text from Mettānando, and of Yasothararat on whom he was dependent, was itself incomplete or faulty in some way. The section on insight is followed by a lengthy account of a variety of healing strategies which

| Table 4. The vipassanākammathāna in Suk 2. |
|---|---|
| 7 visuddhi | 3 lakkhana |
| 3 anupassanā | 10 vipassanāraṇa |
| 3 vimokkha |
employ the samatha meditation techniques of boran kammathan discussed in brief above. These techniques explicitly require competence in the pīti meditations and the capacity to move components around one’s body. Therefore the appearance of normativity given by his account of samatha in this text is undermined by the detail of the second part of the work on healing. This second text by Suk is equally committed to its boran kammathan heritage, despite the normative appearance of its account of the samatha and vipassanā kammathāna. Taken together, Suk’s texts suggest a developed tradition that is in dialogue with authorities, a dialogue in which meditative forms and processes not discussed in medieval source texts, e.g. Vism, or the canon are expounded, but in which due acknowledgement of normative texts is also made. We can speculate that, assuming that Suk is the author of both of these texts, he wrote them at different times and probably for different purposes. A possible consideration is that, despite its claim to be a translation, the first Suk text discussed here (Suk 1) has been adapted by successive teachers in his lineage at Wat Ratchasittharam. While this may be a significant consideration in understanding Suk’s own writing on meditation, it does not affect our general understanding of the features of boran kammathan, as material from elsewhere will soon show.

As a final comment on Suk’s texts, the modern preface to the first text that I discuss here (Suk 1) tells us that it was published ‘under the guidance of’ two important monks: Phra Vinayadhara Banjong, who we know was the lineage holder of Suk’s tradition at Wat Ratchasittharam as head of section 5 of the monastery, which the preface refers to as ‘the Vipassanā Division’. The other monk is the Abbot himself, described as ‘president of the Vipassanā Division’ (Ronruen, Evans, and Nangnoi, n.d., 4). Should we understand from this that meditation in this lineage of boran kammathan is assimilated to vipassanā, which has now become its general designation?

The texts of Suk are not the only representatives of boran kammathan on which we can draw for an understanding of its use of kammathāna. Western scholars have now studied a number of these texts, and an ongoing joint project between King’s College London and the Manuscript Conservation Association of Bangkok has uncovered quite a few more which remain to be studied. For present purposes I shall draw on those texts which have been studied and for which there are bibliographic sources, and show in tabular form their lists of kammathāna. They fall into several groups which I shall now briefly describe.

The first group of sources consists of Thai, i.e. Siamese-era, texts, of which Suk’s are the most well known to me, plus another in manuscript by King Taksin called Lakkhana Dhamma. The latter presumably dates to the period of his kingship in which he taught meditation in Thonburi, i.e. 1767–1782.56 (A notice of its discovery and contents is being prepared by Skilton and Choompolpaisal; see also Terwiel in this volume.) These can
be supplemented by two manuscripts from Wat Ratchatiwat with the title *Mūl-kammatthān*. They are all mixed language texts, in Siamese Thai with some Pali terminology (see Table 5).

Table 5 is laid out so that the second row contains *samatha* and the third row *vipassanākammatthāna*. It is clear from this set of texts, and will be borne out by those that follow, that Suk 1’s neat account of *vipassanākammatthāna* seemingly derived from Anuruddha is not typical for a broader selection of teaching traditions within *boran kammathan*, and that further research elsewhere will be needed to identify sources for other teaching lineages.

The second group of sources is from Sri Lanka, to which *boran kammathan* was transmitted in the middle of the eighteenth century by a party of Siamese monks invited to help reinvigorate the *sāsana* on the island. The earliest known of these is the so-called *Yogāvacara’s Manual*, an otherwise untitled mixed Pali and Sinhala text from Sri Lanka. To these can be added two pure Pali texts, the *Amatākaravanṇanā* and the *Samathavipassanābhāvanāvakkapprakarana*, both studied by Kate Crosby in her doctoral thesis (Crosby 1999). In his catalogue of the Nevill Collection, Somadasa describes an untitled manuscript of this same tradition (see Crosby in this volume).

The lists in columns 2 and 3 of Table 6 appear to be identical. This is probably explained by the fact that they are transmitted together in the same manuscript, the one the meditation manual and the other the attendant litanies. It should also be noted that both texts are written in pure Pali.

### Table 5. The *kammatthāna* in five Siamese texts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suk 1</th>
<th>Suk 2</th>
<th>Taksin</th>
<th>Wat Ratchatiwat 1</th>
<th>Wat Ratchatiwat 2</th>
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<td>abhiriññā 3.</td>
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In the Yogāvacara’s Manual, sukha consists of käya- and citta-sukha, buddhānussati and upacārasamādhi. Buddhānussati is covered again in the 10 anussatī. As a group there is strong consistency among the four, probably because they reflect a single Ayutthaya meditation teaching tradition transmitted by the Siamese monks.

The third and largest group consists of Cambodian texts. The reason for the greater number is that the Cambodian boran kammathān tradition is that which has been studied for the longest. Work began on it as early as 1975 with a string of publications by François Bizot, and continued more recently with an important study by Olivier de Bernon. In Table 7 I arrange a group of four kammattāna lists mentioned in various publications by Bizot. These are all Khmer-language texts with some Pali terminology. A number of these are found in variously titled – or often un-titled – manuscripts. The first is in a volume concerned with the retelling of the Rāmāyana, known as the Rāmaker, in the introduction to which Bizot offers a list of kammattāna, source not specified. Bizot also studies a text with the Khmer title mūl phlūv brah dhamma laṅkā (hereafter dhammadalankā), in the introduction to which he records three distinctive sets of kammattāna, found in different manuscripts.

Dhammadalankā 1 and 2 appear to be lists found in manuscripts of the text of that name. Ms 3 is probably from a manuscript of another text, drawn on by Bizot to illustrate the diversity of the kammattāna listings. Bizot points out that the allocation of kammattāna to the categories samatha and vipassanā in this manuscript is explicit (see Bizot 1989, 18, 1992, 48–49).

The second set of Cambodian sources is recorded by Olivier Bernon in his study of the untitled boran kammathān text which he calls ‘Manual for the interpretation of nimitta’ (Manuel pour l’interprétation des signes). Bernon records a very rich diversity amongst the late nineteenth- and early

<table>
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</table>
twentieth-century manuscripts used in his work (a total of 14), and I sample four of these below (see Table 8). These are all Khmer-language texts with some Pali terminology.


The process of exemplification could go on, specifically listing the kammatthāna from Lao and Mon texts, some published and a number of which have been identified only recently, along with more texts from Cambodia, although I think the point is made with the examples we have just reviewed. What is absolutely clear from this survey of kammatthāna lists from Siam, Sri Lanka and Cambodia is that there was very considerable

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**Table 7.** The kammatthāna in four Cambodian texts described by Bizot.

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>dhātuvavatthāna 4</td>
<td>dhātuvavatthāna 4</td>
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**Table 8.** The kammatthāna in four Cambodian texts described by Bernon.

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<td>Buddhagna 3</td>
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<td>mātāguna 12</td>
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<td>dasabalarāna 10</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
internal diversity within *boran kammathan*, this doubtless in part reflecting distinct teaching lineages of the system and vindicating the research principle that *boran kammathan* should not be treated as a monolithic entity. The list of 40 meditation subjects derived from Vism can be seen embedded in these later lists, but it is freely supplemented with new categories and the order changed. A higher degree of alignment with normative textual authorities, e.g. Vism or *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, is visible only in Suk’s texts, and in relation to vipassanā seems pretty much absent elsewhere. The single component that links them all (bar one) is that they open with *pīti* as a meditation subject, very often followed by *yugala* and *sukha*. I would go so far as to say that any text that opens its account of meditation with (or simply includes) a discussion of *pīti* as a *kammatthāna* belongs to the *boran kammathan* tradition, although I would not go so far as to say that the absence of *pīti* excludes it. Furthermore, as a pragmatic note on searching archives and catalogues for *boran kammathan* texts, the presence of *pīti*, *yugala*, *sukha* and *jhāna* as *kammatthāna* is a decisive feature for identification.62

Having given an overview of how the *kammatthāna* occur in a range of *boran kammathan* texts, there remain a few loose ends that I would like to tie up. I have just mentioned that a number of manuscripts of the *boran kammathan* system have recently been identified in manuscript searches in Thailand and Laos.63 Many of these have been identified mainly because they bear the title *Mul-kammathan* (also *Mun-k*. or *Munla-k*.), i.e. ‘basic/ fundamental meditation subject’. Clearly this title is not used in the same sense as in Buddhaghosa and other commentarial sources discussed above, to mean a personal meditation subject, since many of them offer an overview of the whole *boran kammathan* system rather than an account of a single technique.64 Nevertheless, the title remains a useful diagnostic tool for trying to identify *boran kammathan* texts when searching in manuscript libraries in mainland Southeast Asia. From this last point of view it is apparent that variants of the terms *kamma(t)than*, *samatha-* or *vipassanā-kammatthān*, and *samatha-* or *vipassanā-bhāvanā* can also be helpful in the identification of new *boran kammathan* texts as all are used as title components. We have seen this above for texts from Siam and Sri Lanka, where we have found *Samathavipassanakammatthan* and *Samathavipassanābhāvanā*, respectively. It seems that, with these title examples in mind, *kammatthāna* has undergone yet another transition of referent in these usages, i.e. to denote ‘meditation in general’ rather than specific meditation subjects, whether personal or not. This is especially clear in the latter examples – *samathavipassanākammatthan*, ‘calming and insight meditation’ – but probably also in the case of *mul-kammathan* titles, where we also need to take into account the non-Pali-language environment in which the syntax of items in a compound is reversed, i.e. *mūla-kammatthāna* should be
unpacked as ‘the basics of meditation’ (hence the very general contents of some texts with this title), rather than ‘the meditation subject that is basic’. And of course this is also apparent in the very name that we are using for this meditation tradition, boran kammathan, i.e. ‘the old meditation’ (see Crosby 2013, 3–4). It is possible that this broadening can be traced back as far as the fourteenth-century Sārasaṅgaha. That text’s 20-page chapter on meditation, covering samatha and vipassanā and following the practitioner’s mental development from the beginning of the path up to arahat status, but only dealing with the kammatthāna as meditation topics in three lines of text, is nevertheless titled kammatthānasasaṅgahanayo, ‘guide to the digest on meditation’. We may even be able to push this interpretation as far back as Anuruddha’s twelfth-century Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha. We have already had reason to discuss the ninth chapter, which like the Sārasaṅgaha gives a complete overview of meditation from samatha through vipassanā to awakening. The kammatthāna as meditation subjects are dealt with in short order in the first few paragraphs, the bulk of the chapter detailing further progression along the path of mental cultivation. This chapter is entitled kammatthānasasaṅgahavibhāgo, ‘the section that is the digest on meditation’.

Returning to the task of identifying boran kammathan texts, we can also use the phrase pāḷimutta or pālimuttaka, ‘freed from the arrangement in the canonical text’, as another diagnostic feature that may help us identify boran kammathan texts in archival searches. It is abundantly clear from the evidence reviewed above that accounts of the kammatthāna in this tradition (excluding Suk 2) are described in an order and with practices that are not found in the canonical sources. We have seen that this is occasionally acknowledged by adding the phrase pālimutta to the title. While this usage is not restricted to boran kammathan texts and is seen from the commentarial period onwards in relation to Vinaya – where there is a predictable pressure on authors to re-arrange the relatively haphazard exposition of disciplinary issues in the Vinaya Pitaka into thematically arranged handbooks – the boran kammathan tradition, in contrast, uses the same term to describe moving away from relatively organised canonical presentations of kammatthāna, such as in Vism, towards the customary practices of developed tradition.

Another seeming peculiarity of Suk’s boran kammathan method for dealing with kammatthāna as described above is to work with them in forward and reverse order, anulomapatiloma. However, this is a feature of practice throughout boran kammathan approaches to kammatthāna. Varying details of how the practitioner should proceed forwards and backwards through the meditation subjects is a standard feature of all the boran kammathan texts at which I have looked. This is so much the case that the presence of this term in a text is another of the diagnostic features that have been successfully used by the present author and colleagues to identify untitled
boran kammathan texts in libraries and archives. However, while distinctive, this technique is not unique, and in fact it too, like a number of other features of the tradition, has roots in commentarial sources. There the expression is used most frequently in reference to the practice of reviewing the components of the paticcasamuppāda in forward and reverse order. It also occurs with reference to reviewing the jhāna and the paccaya ‘conditions’, and even the heavenly realms. But we also find a few occasions where it is used in relation to kammathāna. For example, in the Sammohavinodani (the Vibhaṅga-atthakatha), in the Satipatthāna section, Buddhaghosa relates a story in which a pair of theras are advised to take the components of the body in groups of five and reflect on them for five days in forward order and for five days in reverse order, thus working their way through the full list of components (Sammohavinodani, 224). In his commentary to the Anguttara Nikāya, he relates a story in which a monk, motivated by gratitude towards a lay supporter for his support on a journey, when he reaches his vihāra sets out to practise his mūlakammattāthāna, although which one is not specified. However, finding that he was unable even to produce the light [of insight] (obhāsa), he gives up on alms collection altogether to focus on his kammathāna. Gaining insight by focussing on the kammathāna in forward and reverse directions, he achieves awakening within seven days. In the commentary on the Vāngīsasutta of the Samyutta Nikāya he relates a story concerning that elder, in which the Buddha explains the meditation subject on the ‘32 forms’ [of the body], i.e. the kāyagatāsatikammatthāna. Turning his mind to this in forward and reverse order, Vāngīsa develops insight, and in due course becomes an arahat. In Vism Buddhaghosa reports using the kasinakammatthāna in forward and reverse order (Visuddhimagga, 374). So, it is clear there was a tradition going back at least to Buddhaghosa that two kammathāna at least could be practised anulomapatiłoma.

Finally, I noted above in my discussion of the post-Buddhaghosa commentary to the Dhammapada that the author refers to the meditation practitioner as the yogāvacara. That usage was not isolated, since it is used frequently in the same way throughout the commentaries. As we might already have noticed, this same term is used as the editor’s title for the mixed Sinhala-Pali text from Sri Lanka, The Yogāvacara’s Manual. It is clear from examining a number of boran kammathāna texts that yogāvacara had become the standard term used by this tradition for the meditation practitioner. Again, in manuscript searches occurrence of this term can be used as another diagnostic tool to identify boran kammathan material.

**Conclusion**

It seems appropriate to revisit Alabaster, who helped us on our way at the start of this review of the scope of uses of the term kammattāthāna from the
canon and commentaries forward to the pre-reform meditation of pre- and early modern Theravada. What can we now say about Alabaster’s notes on meditation? Although he did not know it, he was writing at a time when boran kammathan was still the dominant meditation tradition in Siam. It seems highly likely that the majority of monks whom he may have observed meditating or with whom he discussed meditation were probably practising one lineage or another of boran kammathan. We know of plenty of texts of this tradition produced during the nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries. Poised on the brink of a collapse that was to see boran kammathan almost vanish in Siam, it was still active and productive of literature in his day.

Are his comments now as strange as they might have seemed on first glance? He makes a distinction between bhāvanā and kammatthāna, which at first may not seem justifiable, but we know that both brahmavihāra and asubha methods are commonly known as forms of bhāvanā ‘cultivation/development’. This terminological usage can be traced back to the commentarial period where these two are both designated forms of bhāvanā, the brahmavihāra ubiquitously, but the asubha also. Other kammatthāna are forms of anussati – ‘recollection’, saññā – ‘awareness’ or vavatthāna – ‘analysis’. So, Alabaster is guilty of not knowing that bhāvanā methods are also forms of kammatthāna. But is it only a coincidence that the two meditations that he mentions as bhāvanā are also pointed out by Buddhaghosa as known to be ‘generally useful’ or sabatthaka meditation subjects, i.e. likely to be more widely used than the others?

His account of both kammatthāna and bhāvanā seems to emphasise two aspects: firstly, that they involve significant recitation and repetition of ‘set forms or texts’. His language here is quite disparaging – he refers to ‘the mere mumbling of formulas’, and writes that ‘the monks of Buddhism have converted this meditation into a formal rite, with an elaborate ritual’, possibly hinting at a degree of Protestant disapproval of what reminded him of the Church of Rome. But now we can understand better that the meditation performed by the monks around him involved the extensive use of litany, invoking the nimitta of the meditation subjects and employing multiple mantras at each of up to 13 stages of samatha meditation, if Suk’s system is representative. But this kind of verbal recitation is not a late innovation, and the verbal recitation of kammatthāna is not restricted to Siamese boran kammathan. In the passage from the Sammohavinodani discussed above, the pair of theras who are taught the kāyatāsati are told first to recite it verbally for four months, and it is on the basis of verbal recitation alone that they achieve Stream Entry. Buddhaghosa therefore concludes in this passage that the teacher should always tell their meditation pupils in the first place to recite the kammatthāna. Later in the same section, he calculates that the recitation period should last for six months:
evam cha māse sajjhāyo kātabbo – ‘In this way the recitation should be performed for six months’ (*Sammohavinodanī*, 224 and 249).

This knowledge would doubtless not have stayed any personal reservation on Alabaster’s part, but it should perhaps ameliorate the implicit colonialist attitude that assumed the Western observer better understood Buddhist tradition than the poor old Buddhists themselves. That said, we should also understand that Alabaster’s primary informant, Chao Phya Thipakon (also known as Chao Phya Phraklang), was a reformer highly influenced by King Mongkut, under whom he had served as minister, and under whose modernising influence he had written his *Kitchānukit*. This popular text engaged with the modern Western sciences so as to give ‘the modern Buddhist’ of Alabaster’s original title (i.e. the modern Buddhists of the Dhammayuttikanikāya) a basis for refuting Western missionaries (see Dhammasakiyo 2004, 38). Then again, Alabaster surely met Mongkut personally since he served as British Deputy Consul (and translator) to Mongkut’s court for 11 years, and so he could have been familiar with Mongkut’s views at first hand. Elsewhere in the book Alabaster is explicitly critical of the monastic community:

> We find monastic Buddhism sharing the fate which must attend all religions which encourage a professional class of monks, or men who lead unnatural lives, that is cumbered with dogmas and absurdities, the result of warped, fantastic and prurient minds…. we find that the professional religious class, in the absence of a useful occupation, has invented an intolerable terminology, has multiplied ridiculous distinctions, has twisted the elementary principles into all manner of shapes, and has invented a system of meditation which, in lieu of expanding the mind, tends to contract it almost to idiocy. (Alabaster 1871, xxviii–xxix)

It is therefore quite probable that in Alabaster’s disdainful words on contemporary Siamese meditation we can hear echoes of Mongkut’s personal critique of *boran kammatthan*.\(^7^0\)

Secondly, Alabaster’s definition of *kammattāna* as ‘analytical meditation’, in which the practitioner ‘fixes his mind on any one element, and reflects on it in all its conditions and changes, until, so far as that element is concerned, he sees that it is only unstable, grievous, and illusory’, has a strong taste of *vipassanā*, perhaps reflecting not just the possibility that all meditation subjects might have a dual *vipassanā* application as well as *samatha*, but that in the contemporary Siamese world with which he was familiar meditation was understood as essentially a *vipassanā* enterprise, as perhaps hinted at in our look at Suk (Alabaster 1871, 204). We may also be justified in thinking that Alabaster had been advised to see the broad field of meditation as falling into two types, *bhāvanā* and *kammattāna*, and it may even be that these roughly corresponded to the old division into *samatha* and *vipassanā*. 
Looking beyond Alabaster and these considerations, the present study has tracked the word *kammathāna* from its early usage in the core Theravada canonical texts where it primarily designates secular ‘work’. We have followed it into the commentarial layer of the canon where it is widely used, specifically to denote the meditation subjects used for *samatha* meditation, but with an undernote of reference to *vipassanā* too. We have also seen that the term travels on beyond the period of the commentaries (fifth to twelfth centuries) to emerge in a little-known and little-studied Theravada milieu, which I am calling *boran kammathan*. Here the extension to *vipassanā* is normalised, the meditation subjects have changed, how the meditation subjects are employed has radically evolved, and a wide internal diversity is evident. Ultimately, it seems, *kammathan* comes to be used as a general term for meditation.

It seems that *kammattāhan*, the meditation subjects, are a rich area of research that offer interesting insights into the development of Buddhist practice, and warrant further investigation. Doubtless more remains to be discovered about the broader commentarial understanding of *kammathāna*, since I have here restricted myself to cherry-picking passages that shed light on later Siamese and Southeast Asian usages of the term. I also have no doubt that the topic of *kammathāna* offers us a handy tool that could be used to begin to unpick and follow the lineages of meditation teaching in the early modern period of Southeast Asia, and that further exploration of the commentaries would begin to give us an understanding of the roots of those developments. All this should be supplemented by data culled from local chronicles (*vamsa*), hagiographies and manuscript colophons, the latter only possible if we continue our search for manuscripts of the post-canonical literature of Siam and beyond.

The world of Siamese meditation into which Alabaster took a peek was both rich and strange, more so even than his own comments suggest. For some time in the West we have been looking at Theravada meditation through a set of reformist, not to say textually fundamentalist, spectacles that have led us to expect a simple monolithic meditation structure and practice closely rooted in the canonical texts as narrowly conceived. While Kim (present volume) has shown us some diversity in the use of *kammathāna* in and before the era of Buddhaghosa, the current discussion has shown how usage continued to evolve beyond Buddhaghosa, despite his presumed hegemony in the realm of Theravada orthodoxy. Indeed, the study of *kammathāna* offers just one window onto a whole new discussion of what constitutes orthodoxy in Theravada. 71

Notes

1. I will be using the name Siam/Siamese to reference Thailand prior to the adoption of that more familiar name in 1939.
2. Alabaster appears to have translated the first 10 chapters of this Pali biography, but from the recension revised by the Siamese Prince Paramânujit in 1845. However, while the latter has 29 chapters, Alabaster says that his manuscript source finishes at chapter 10, with the Awakening of the Buddha, in the manner of shorter and earlier recensions (1871, xxv–xxvi). See Coedes (2003, lvi–lxvi) and Laulertvorakul (2003) on the recensions of the Pathamasambodhi.

3. Alabaster refers the reader to Spence Hardy’s Eastern Monachism (1850, 243ff.) for an authoritative description. We should note that Hardy himself, writing about Sri Lankan Buddhism, describes bhāvanā as consisting of the same five components. Alabaster has other notes that relate to the topic of meditation, notably a long one on jhāna and another on satipatthāna (Alabaster 1871, 192ff. and 197ff.).

4. The Wheel of the Law consists of three sections: the original publication, The Modern Buddhist (1870), plus the translated section of the Pathamasambodhi accompanied by 79 pages of notes, followed by an account of the Phrabat (i.e. the Buddhapāda, at Wat Phra Phutthabat, Saraburi, Thailand) prefaced by a charming account of his visit there. As he and his wife pass a night amongst flooded fields, Alabaster laments their lack of the infusion in alcohol of *pyrethrum roseum* that ‘makes a varnish for the body which effectually keeps the vermin away’ (1871, 274–275). (The cost of this Victorian insect repellent was such that, in order to make applications last as long as possible, one had to refrain from washing more than twice a week.)

5. Chao Phya Thipakon was foreign minister for Siam from 1856 to 1869, and had been involved in the negotiation of the Bowring Treaty of 1855. See Anderson (1991, 181).


7. He explains that he is not a Sanskritist and hopes he will not be criticised too harshly for his attempts at etymology (Alabaster 1871, xxvii–xxviii). On the title page of the book he is described as ‘Interpreter of Her Majesty’s Consulate General in Siam’.

8. S.v. thāna in Cone 2010.

9. A note on method: to facilitate searching I have employed the search facilities of both Ajahn Yuttadhammo’s Digital Pali Reader (DPR; https://pali.sirimangalo.org/ accessed 3 August 2018.) and the Vipassana Research Institute’s Tipitaka Search facility (TS; http://tipitaka.org/search) accessed 3 August 2018.) The two search facilities, which both evidence the contemporary Buddhist community’s commitment to the use of digital media for the dissemination of learning, give slightly different results and are best used to complement one another. Thus, TS discovers only four ‘hits’ in the mūla text for this search term, seemingly missing the Majjhima Nikāya occurrence altogether, while DPR records 10 hits. This disparity is explained by the practice in DPR to number every paragraph of the mūla text containing the search term as a single hit. Thus if a single text contains four separate paragraphs in which the search term occurs, this will be counted by DPR as four hits for the term. All this means that a researcher must be very cautious in citing figures for searches from either platform without careful investigation as to what is being pointed to by these results. That said, I and many others have found both search facilities extremely helpful, and I will be discussing results from such searches through this article, albeit with care.
In fact, the text of the *Petakopadesa* is notoriously problematic and it is likely that the text is corrupt at this point, the correct reading being not *kammatthāna* but *kammasamādāna*. I will not discuss this passage further, but refer the reader to Ñānāmoli’s notes (1964, 46, n.119/5).

For the other instances of this phrasing, see AN 8.55 and 8.76. Here and throughout, I quote the text of the *Chatthaṅgāyaṇa* Edition as available online, but giving Pali Text Society (PTS) volumes and page numbers as embedded in that text.

Given this very specific usage I am even tempted by the possibility of translating *kammatthāna* as ‘vocation’.

To return briefly to the issue of method: DPR counts this text as three hits for the term *kammatthāna* because the term occurs in three separate paragraphs (albeit adjacent), whereas in fact the term itself is repeated some 22 times through those three paragraphs. However, they all occur within a single coherent discussion that was doubtless composed as a single piece, and could therefore be considered a single occurrence by that criterion.

In Vism, Buddhaghosa writes of 40 topics and lists that many, but on one occasion refers to an earlier tradition of 38 *kammatthāna* (see Kim in this volume for a detailed discussion of Vism’s taxonomy.) The earlier list is referred to elsewhere in the commentarial literature.

One cannot engage in any detailed discussion of the chronology of individual Pali texts while trying to maintain a coherent discussion of other matters. I therefore defer by and large to the chronology of texts used by von Hinüber (2000).

These terms are used frequently throughout the *attakhathā* and can be found by simple searches.


Buddhaghosa assigns 30 various *kammatthāna* to different temperaments. One could say that temperament of the practitioner is the primary arbiter of use in his system. The remainder, he says, are suitable for all kinds of temperament. These are the four immaterial abodes and the six *kasīna* excluding the colours (Ñānāmoli 2010, 109; see Kim in this volume on the temperaments etc.).

See Kyaw in this volume, who describes two Myanmar meditation teachers’ experiences of mindfulness of death and *asubha* meditation resulting in the benefits mentioned here.

The words in brackets are in the source text but not translated in Bodhi.

kammatthānam nāma duvidham – sabbatthakam, pārihāriyaṇaṃ. sabbatthakam nāma mettā ca maranassati ca. tam sabbattha icchitabbato ‘sabbatthaka’nti vuccati. … yam pana sādā pāriharitabbam cariṭānuṅkūlenā gahitattā dasāsubhakasīnānussatisu aṇātaram, catudhātuvavathānameva vā, tam sādā pāriharitabbato, rakkhitabbato, bhāvetabbato ca pārihāriyaṇi vuccati, mūlakammattabhotāntipī tadeva. tattha yam pathamabḥsabbathakakammattabhotānāṃ manasi karitvā pacchā pārihāriyakammattabhotānāṃ manasi karoti, . . . *(Paramatthajotikā* II.1, 54)
22. See Kim in this volume. This information only came to my attention during the compilation of this volume. For the anussati at least we also cannot ignore the Anguttara Nikāya passage that asserts that all 10 of the anussati can lead to nībbāna (see Bodhi 2012, 116).


24. The commentary repeats the point he makes in Vism about the twofold character of the kāyagatāsati meditation subject.

25. sā bhikkhūnām santike dhammam sutvā saranesu ca silesu ca patiṭṭhāya samāhītā huttvā vipassanākammaṭṭhānaṃ uggahetvā vipassanam uussukkāpentī upaniṣayasampannatāya na cirasæva sotāpattiphale patiṭṭhahi (Paramatthadipani, iv, 98).

26. The Dhammapada commentary is attributed to Buddhaghosa, but that attribution is not credible. See von Hinüber (2000, 131).

27. The verb sajhiyati covers activities that include rehearsing something, repeating it verbally (either aloud or mentally) as a means of studying a subject. In an oral culture this is a verbal activity whether mental or oral, and a number of stories require that such repetition is audible. In order to make this clear, I therefore translate it as ‘reciting’ despite a marginal preference for the more ambiguous and inclusive ‘rehearsing’.

28. sā ekassa yogāvacarassa vipassanākammaṭṭhānaṃ sajhiyantassa dhammaghosam sutvā tato cutā rājakule nibbattitvā ubbarī nāma rājadhitā ahosi (Dhammapadatāyata cutā, 240).

29. The commentary to the Theragāthā is attributed to Dhammapāla, while that to the Apadāna is anonymous.

30. athassa satthā ‘mantaparivāram tāva ugganhāhi’ti dvattimākāram matthānām vipassanākammaṭṭhānaṃca ācikkhi. so dvattimākāram sajhiyantava vipassanam paththapesi (Paramatthadipani, iii.182).

31. For references to Dhammapāla’s knowledge of Buddhaghosa’s works, see von Hinüber (2000).

32. Imasmin pi syamaratthe bhikkhūnam dve nikāyāva honti porānarājakālaṃ yāvajijanā dvihi laddhihi pavattā ācinnakappikaniyā ca dhammayutikanikāyā ca ganissaratherasamuhavasena pana cattāro ganā honti. Tattha ācinnakappikaniyākā nāma yesam pāliatthakathādisu āgatavacanam appamāṇaṃ sakadesanavāsinām patipattiyeva pamāṇe te ca evam vattāro yam yam porānakam tam tam pāliatthakathādihi viruddhampi hotu . . . Dhammayutikanikāyā nāma ye evamvādino porānānān ācinnasamācinnām na sabbaso pamāṇato gahetabbam . . . tasmā tikāya āgatavacanam atthakathāsamentam eva gahetabbam atthakathāya āgatam pi pāliyā samentam eva gahetabbam pāliyām pi katthaci kecīhi vaṭṭhāvetvā likhitam gārayathāhāṃ pi bhagavato vacanalakkhanam atikamma atthānadhāvanavasena pavattamānāṃ na gahetabbam. From Mongkut’s collected articles in Pali (vol. 2, 510–515), as quoted in Dhammasakīyō (2004, 43 n.52).

33. I follow Hinüber’s date here, although I note that Neri classifies it as twelfth–thirteenth century (Neri 2014, 336).

34. See Pakdeekham (2011) for a Lannā Tipitaka catalogue, the Pitakamālā, that demonstrates this inclusive principle.
35. This was also the case for Buddhaghosa himself, who had translated the old commentaries from their local languages into Pali in order to create his own new commentaries.


37. These changes have been discussed in a number of publications. See Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014) for a discussion of this in relation to one lineage of meditation teaching in Thonburi, and Crosby (2013) for a broader assessment of the decline of this pre-existing tradition across peninsular Southeast Asia.

38. See Crosby, Skilton (2012) for a discussion of a non-meditation text transmitted to Sri Lanka, and Crosby in this volume on meditation texts proper.

39. See Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014) on boran kammatthana in contemporary Thonburi, and Choompolpaisal in this volume on survivals of the boran kammatthana in Ayutthaya and in the Dhammakaya organisation.

40. This text by Suk was published as an English-language translation in Ronruen, Evans, and Nangnoi (n.d.), by the lineage holder of the day, Panāvuddhakun (Banjong), during his tenure (i.e. 1966–1997). The original title is uncertain, the publication giving ‘How to Practice Samatha-Vipassanā Kammatthāna’.

41. See Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014) for an account of how these meditation subjects are to be used by the practitioner.

42. To explore the reasons for some at least of these changes is beyond the scope of the present article, but I hope to do so in a future article. Note that some texts in the boran kammatthana tradition that follow a breakdown of numerous kammatthāna similar to that described here nevertheless still refer to the 40 kammatthāna, e.g. in the title of a Sri Lankan text, Kasinabhāvanāpota Cattālisakammatthāna (see Crosby in this volume; and Nyanatusita 2008, 28).

43. See Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014) for a detailed account of this pīti meditation at Wat Ratchasittharam. Regarding light spheres in this tradition, see Choompolpaisal and also Terwiel in this volume.

44. See Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2015) for a detailed account of the ānāpānasati meditation at Wat Ratchasittharam.

45. Vitakka and the other mantra used in this meditation subject are the mental components that make up the first jhāna.

46. The material in parentheses is presented as a translation of Suk’s text.

47. I tentatively identify the ‘tray of khandhas’ with the ritual tray (plateau rituel) carried by the pupil when approaching the meditation teacher as described by Olivier de Bernon in his account of the rituals of interaction between pupil and teacher in the Cambodian boran kammatthana tradition. This tray is loaded with symbolic offerings in groups of five. These include candles, incense sticks, puffed rice, cigarettes, betel and areca. The exact contents seem to vary according to the reason for the visit. See de Bernon (2000, 475 ff.).

48. One could also interpret Suk’s position as being consistent with Buddhaghosa’s claim that all 40 kammatthāna are suitable as a personalised meditation subject, i.e. a pārihāriya- or mūla-kammatthāna.

49. On Anuruddha’s samatha kammatthāna, see Kim in this volume.


51. This text is translated in a doctoral thesis by Mettanando (1998), who takes as his source text the version published by Yasothrarat (1936). The vipassanākammatthāna section begins at Mettanando (1998, 65). See also Choompolpaisal in this volume.
52. On this term see von Hinüber 2000, 108 (218 and n.390) and 158, where the author records the phrase pālimuttaka in the title of the twelfth-century vinaya handbook, Palimuttakavinayavinichyasangaha – Disciplinary Judgements Independent from the Arrangement of the Canonical Texts.

53. I note that the two Suk texts that I draw on in this discussion look as though they have had their titles swapped. That published by Ronruen et al. undoubtedly looks as if it is ‘independent of the canonical texts’ palimutta, i.e. the subject matter is discussed according to the developed customary meditation traditions of Siam, whereas that translated by Mettānando looks to me to follow the canon, i.e. Vism at least, very closely in the first part. In this connection there is an ambiguous statement in Mettānando’s translation of the preface to Yasothatarat’s book in which our Suk 2 is found, where Yasothatarat writes: ‘Having collected all these manuscripts from various places, I then tried my best to edit them by making sure that they agreed with the Tipitaka, in particular the Abhidhammasaṅgaha [sic], and the Visuddhimagga’. This phase of his work lasted 12 months. There remains the possibility that the seemingly normative sections of our Suk 2 are the result of Yasothatarat’s editing, although why he might have done this is very unclear to me (Mettānando 1998, 9). Elsewhere, Mettānando says he himself compared Yasothatarat’s edition of this text with that published for Wat Ratchasittharam by Khunwisāndarunkon (see Choompolpaisal in this volume) and that they are identical apart from five concluding paragraphs omitted by the former. We should not forget that according to pre-modern Thai tradition, texts such as the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha and Vism were considered to be a part of the Tipitaka.

54. See Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014) and Choompolpaisal in this volume on the role of nimitta in this meditation system.

55. Readers interested by this aspect of the material are directed to Bizot and von Hinüber (1994) and Crosby (2013).

56. See Choompolpaisal (forthcoming) for a more detailed account of Taksin’s involvement in boran kammathan.

57. The Wat Ratchatwiwat texts are discussed in de Bernon (2002), and the shorter one is translated.

58. This text is edited in Rhys Davids (1896). At present it is moot whether or not boran kammathan existed in Sri Lanka prior to this importation.

59. Ms Or. 6601(85) I. On this manuscript see Somadasa (1987 I, 370) and Crosby in this volume. There are a number of other Sri Lankan manuals of this same tradition in the Nevill Collection of the British Library currently being studied by Kate Crosby and Amal Gunasena. A list of titles etc. is provided in Nyanatusita (2008).

60. This contrasts with all the other texts discussed here and possibly reflects the need for the Ayutthaya mission to find a lingua franca to facilitate the transmission of their meditation method into another Theravada culture. Once transmitted we find the production of new mixed language meditation manuals and texts combining Pali technical terminology with the new local language, Sinhala, but still bearing traces of Siamese Thai (see Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena 2012).

61. On the works of Bizot see the bibliographic study in Crosby (2000). See also de Bernon 2000 (especially 23–29).
62. To this list of distinctive, if less common, non-Vism *kammatthāna* we can add *upacārasamādhi*, *pitāguna*, *mātāguna* and *vātā*, as these are also evidenced in Cambodian texts of this tradition.

63. Lao examples of this type of manuscript are easily found by searching the online Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts collection using this text title. See http://www.laomanuscripts.net/

64. Indeed, some of these texts are quite voluminous and contain a large quantity of material relating to the *boran kammathan* system. I am thinking here of Rod’s *Mūlakammatthāna* manuscript held at Wat Ratchasittharam. (Rod, also known as Sua, was abbot of Wat Pradusongtham, Ayutthaya, in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century; see Choompolpaisal forthcoming and in this volume.) I am grateful to Olivier de Bernon who shared with me his unpublished translation of a manuscript entitled *Mahāmūlakammatthāna-sutta* (private correspondence, 17 October 2015). This is clearly a post-canonical text (despite the title) which is not immediately identifiable as *boran kammathan*, despite sharing some elements that are found in it, and which offers a *vipassanā*-style reflection on the body, closely related to the *kāyagatāsati* of the standard *samathakammatthāna*. In that it focuses on a single meditation subject, this text could be seen as conforming more to the commentarial sense of *mūlakammatthāna*. In private discussion Olivier expressed the strong opinion that only texts incorporating *pīti* as a *kammatthāna* could be considered to belong to the tradition described in this article as *boran kammathan*.

65. so tāya rattiyā obhāsamattampi nibbattetum nāsakkhi. punadivasato pathṭhāya bhikkhācārapalibodham chinditvā tadeva kammatthānam anulomapatilomam vipassi. etenupāyena vipassanto sattame arune saha patisambhidāhi arahattam patvā cintesi (*Manorathapūrṇi*, i.276ff.).

66. athassa satthā dvattimāsākārakammatthānam acikkhi. so tam anulomapatilomam manasikaronto vipassanām vaṭṭhethvā anukkamena arahattam pāpuni (*Sāratthappakāsīni*, i.286).

67. It appears to be used as many as 153 times in the *atthakathā* material, across all three *pitaka* but primarily amongst the *sutta* commentaries, especially to the Khuddaka Nikāya. In the *mūla* texts it occurs well over 200 times, but except for three these are all in the *opammavagga* of the *Milindapanha*.

68. There are references to *asubhabhāvanā* in three texts in the *mūla*, but in commentaries on 21 texts in the *atthakathās*. The *kasina* are described as forms of *bhāvanā* in only five texts in the commentaries.


70. On Mongkut’s personal attitude to *boran kammathan*, see the similar conclusion arrived at by Bernon (de Bernon 2000, 454).

71. See Skilling et al. (2012) for an exploration of Theravada orthodoxy from other angles.

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Notes on contributor

Andrew Skilton has a long-term interest in Buddhist literature in Pali and Sanskrit, and has for several years been pursuing research into Theravada meditation and the boran kammathān traditions of Southeast Asia.

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A COMPARISON OF THE LISTS AND CATEGORISATION OF MEDITATION PRACTICES (KAMMATTHĀNA) IN THE VISUDDHIMAGGA AND *VIMUTTIMAGGA

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the term kammatthāna discussed in the Visuddhimagga and the Jiě tuò dào lùn or *Vimuttimagga. Although these two texts provide similar lists and expositions for the kammatthāna, the Visuddhimagga also offers different views and criticisms. The first noticeable difference is in the 10 kasinas, which differ in relation to the last two kasinas. Furthermore, the Visuddhimagga systematises its own discussion by simplifying or specifying that of the Jiě tuò dào lùn and raises some criticisms of views found in the Jiě tuò dào lùn in the process. All of these features imply that the discussion of meditative practice, especially of the kammatthāna, has been diverse within the Theravāda tradition.

Introduction
In this article, I shall scrutinise the meditative subjects called kammatthāna that are discussed in two meditative manuals of Theravāda tradition. The term kammatthāna or its Chinese translation 行處 consists of two terms, kamma or 行 (an action) and thāna or 處 (a place), and consequently refers metaphorically to a ‘workplace’ for achieving the meditative attainment. As the term comes to be a technical term in the commentarial texts, it subsequently becomes the standard collective term referring to meditative activities and techniques. In this manner, the term is defined as ‘the meditation practice,’ ‘a subject of meditation or contemplation’ or ‘the meditation topic’ by modern scholars.

Although various subjects of meditation are mentioned in the Canon, they are scattered and not designated by the technical term kammatthāna. The Visuddhimagga (hereafter Vism) has been regarded as the first text providing a definitive list of meditative topics with sophisticated expositions, categorised by the term kammatthāna. While Vism, regarded as the most influential treatise written by Buddhaghosa from the fifth century CE...
Towards mainstream Theravāda, presents a fixed list of 40 kammatthānas and offers an exposition influential in Theravāda countries to this day, it is not the earliest extant Theravāda text to provide such a fixed list of meditative topics.

A text extant in Chinese under the title Jiē tuō dào lùn (解脫道論, hereafter JTDL), may lay claim to preceding Vism in providing such a list of kammatthānas, and that list is very similar. As such JTDL constitutes the earliest evidence of this technical usage for the term kammatthāna. The JTDL, edited in the Ronshū-bu (論集) of the Taishō shinshū daizōkyō (大正新修大藏經, T32 no.1648), is considered to be the Chinese translation of a text possibly titled in its Indic original *Vimuttimagga. However, such an Indic original has not survived, and apart from a few quotations in other texts, the Chinese translation, namely, the JTDL is the only evidence for it. Its author Yō-bō-di-sha (優波底沙; Upatissa?) is possibly an Indian monk and its Chinese translator Sēng-qié-pó-luó (僧伽婆羅) is a Funan monk living during the Liang dynasty (梁, 502–587 CE).

As we shall see, the Vism criticises some views which are found in the JTDL and the Vism-mahātikā explicitly identifies one such position as belonging to Upatissa’s Vimuttimagga (see below). On the basis of this evidence, the JTDL has been often attributed to the Abhayagiri fraternity by some scholars. The Abhayagiri fraternity is considered to a rival to the Mahāvihāra fraternity, the mainstream of Theravāda tradition, in which the Vism was composed and transmitted. However, the origin and school affiliation of the text are still debated between certain modern scholars. Nevertheless, the fact that the JTDL employs an exclusively Theravāda abhidhamma technical subject, bhavaṅga, in its discussion of the cognitive process indicates its Theravāda affiliation. As I have argued elsewhere, on the basis of this evidence, the JTDL should be considered to be a Theravāda text composed not long after the 200 CE. This deduction therefore also locates the earliest use of kammatthāna in its technical sense found in the later commentaries. We cannot assume that Upatissa was the first to use the term in this way in his JTDL, and it is more likely that we should understand that the usage had already been established prior to this date in commentarial sources which no longer survive.

The Vism and JTDL enumerate a similar list and exposition of kammatthānas but there are also crucial differences between them. P.V. Bapat examines these differences and similarities in his pioneer book Vimuttimagga and Visuddhimagga a Comparative Study published in 1937, which provides useful material on this subject. Since he discusses the kammatthānas only briefly in just five pages; however, a more detailed comparison and interpretation of them is needed. I shall therefore compare the third chapter of the Vism to the seventh chapter of the JTDL, wherein the kammatthānas are discussed, and on this basis draw out their implications for diversity within Theravāda meditative traditions. Furthermore, in order to highlight the fact that the developmental discussions found between the JTDL and Vism were continued through to the twelfth century
CE, I shall compare the final chapter of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* with them in the conclusion.

I shall mainly use English translations through the article rather than Pāli or Chinese terms. Pāli terms will be used when their English translation first occurs, or is confused or not established, and the Chinese term will be mentioned when it is helpful to our discussion.

**Enumeration: 40 vs. 38**

The *Vism* enumerates 40 *kammatthānas* in seven groups or types, namely, the 10 *kasiṇas*, 10 kinds of foulness (*asubha*), 10 recollections (*anussati*), four divine abidings (*brahmavihāra*), four immaterial states (*āruppa*), one perception (*saññā*) and one analysis (*dvātavatthāna*; all translation of *Vism* follows Nāṇamoli’s translation here). The *JTDL* also enumerates the same groups of *kammatthānas*. The only difference between them is found within the group of 10 *kasiṇas* and the immaterial states.

The *Vism* mentions 10 *kasiṇas*, namely, earth (*pathavī*), water (*āpa*), fire (*teja*), air (*vāya*), blue (*nīla*), yellow (*piṭa*), red (*lohiṭa*), light (*āloka*) and limited space (*paricchinnākāsa*). By contrast, two *kasiṇas*, namely, light and limited space, are missing in the *JTDL* and two of the immaterial states that are found in *Vism* in the set of four immaterial states are inserted in the *kasiṇa* group instead. These two are therefore absent from the *JTDL*’s list of immaterial states. As a result, the *JTDL* has 38 *kammatthānas* as distinct from the 40 in the *Vism*, as shown in Table 1.

In fact, as Bapat and Karunaratne have already pointed out in their previous studies, the number of ‘38’ *kammatthānas* seems already to be well known to the Pāli commentarial tradition. Not only the *Vism* but also the *Atthasālinī*, the commentary on the first book of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* also attributed to Buddhaghosa, acknowledge the canonical origin of the

| Table 1. Forty and 38 *kammatthānas* (*Vism* 3.104–105; *JTDL* 411a10–16). |
|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| *kammatthāna*     | *Vism* (40)     | *JTDL* (38)     |
| *kasiṇa*          | Earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white (8) | Light, limited space (2) infinite space, infinite consciousness (2) |
| Kinds of foulness | The bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton (10) |  |
| (*asubha*)        |  |  |
| Recollections     | The Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity, deities, death, the body, breathing, peace (10) |  |
| (*anussati*)      |  |  |
| Divine abidings   | Loving-kindness, compassion, gladness, equanimity (4) |  |
| (*brahmavihāra*) |  |  |
| Immaterial states | Infinite space, infinite consciousness (2) | Infinite nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception (2) |
| (*āruppa*)        |  |  |
| Perception        | The perception of repulsiveness in nutriment (1) |  |
| (*saññā*)         |  |  |
| Analysis          | The analysis of the four elements (1) |  |
count of 38 *kammatthānas* (‘amongst the 38 objects classified in the canonical texts’, *pāliyam hi vibhatta-atthatimsārammaṇesu*. *Vism* 6.56; ‘amongst the 38 meditation subjects handed down in the canonical texts’, *pāli-āgatesu atthatimsāya kammatthānesu*. Atthasālīni (1979, p. 168). The commentarial reference above implies that a list of 38 *kammatthānas* was replaced by Buddhaghosa with the list of 40.

The *JTDL* seems to represent a transitional stage from the list of 38–40. In the beginning of the seventh chapter, the *JTDL* alludes to the 40 *kammatthānas* enumerating the general 38 *kammatthānas* and indicating two optional *kammatthānas* (二行相應) without mentioning what these two additional *kammatthānas* are. We can assume one of two options, as we shall see, from the fact that the *JTDL* suddenly introduces limited space (分別虛空一切入) in enumerating those *kammatthānas* which can be the bases, or conditions, *paccayas*, for supernatural power (see below). This transitional stage implies that the discussion on the *kammatthānas* found in the *JTDL* is less developed than that of the *Vism*.

Regarding the immaturity of the *JTDL* on this topic, it also should be noted that the *JTDL* sometimes uses an inconsistent technical term for discussing *kammatthānas*. For example, the Chinese translation for access concentration (*upacāra*) is *wàidìng* (外定) in chapter four (406c20–408a27), but *wàixíng* (外行) in chapter seven (411a07–412b13). Even within the seventh chapter, the recollection of breathing is translated using two different terms, namely, *guānshēn* (觀身) and *niànshēn* (念身). Although the term *guān* (觀) corresponds to *vipassanā* and *niàn* (念) to *sati*, the *JTDL* equates the two terms here. Given that the original text is lost, these inconsistencies imply either an original text with inconsistent and hence less mature terminology or an unskilled Chinese translator.

The *kammatthānas* are explained explicitly through an organisational taxonomy that employs 10 categories or perspectives in the *Vism*, but only nine explicit categories in the *JTDL*. The *Vism* uses: (1) enumeration, (2) access/absorption concentration, (3) *jhāna*, (4) transcending, (5) increasing, (6) condition, (7) object, (8) plane, (9) seizing and (10) temperament. By contrast, the *JTDL* mentions: (1) *jhāna*, (2) transcending, (3) increasing, (4) condition, (5) object, (6) speciality, (7) plane, (8) seizing and (9) temperament, i.e. it does not explicitly employ the categories of enumeration or access/absorption concentration that are used in *Vism*. I shall explain what these categories or perspectives mean below. Their correspondences are shown in Table 2.

Although the first way, i.e. enumeration, is not explicitly mentioned in the *JTDL*, the beginning of this section plays the same role as Vism’s category 1, the list of 40 *kammatthāna*, in that it enumerates its 38 *kammatthāna*. The second and third perspectives of *Vism* are combined in the *jhāna* (禪) category in the *JTDL*. However, *Vism* does not mention
the category of speciality (勝) found in the JTDL, and provides no equivalent.

**Access/absorption concentration and jhāna (upacāra/appanā, jhāna, 禪)**

This category or perspective identifies those *kammatthāna* that can be employed to achieve *upacāra*- or *appanā*-samādhi. According to Vism (3.23 and 4.32) and JTDL (407b14–16 and b25–28), concentration (*samādhi*, 定) consists of two levels: access (*upacāra*, 外定 or 外行) and absorption (*appanā*, 安定). The latter level or absorption concentration covers three kinds of meditative absorption or *jhāna* (hereafter I shall use the Pāli term *jhāna*): namely, fine-material (*rūpāvacara*), immaterial (*arūpāvacara*) and unincuded (*apariyāpanna*) *jhāna*. Based on this shared presupposition, Vism and JTDL describe exactly the same *kammatthāna* that can lead to access concentration and the first three states of fine-material *jhāna* as below:

1. **10 kammatthāna** can lead to access concentration
   - 8 recollections: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, virtue, generosity, deities, death, peace.
   - 1 perception: the perception of repulsiveness in nutriment.
   - 1 analysis: the analysis of the four elements.

2. **11 kammatthāna** can lead to the first fine-material *jhāna*
   - 10 kinds of foulness: the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton.
   - 1 recollection: the body.
(3) three kammatthānas can lead to the third fine-material jhāna

- 3 divine abidings: loving-kindness, compassion, gladness.

Meanwhile, the JTDL also lists nine kammatthāna as suitable for developing all of the states of jhāna, i.e. fine-material, immaterial and unincluded jhāna. These are the eight kasinas (excepting two immaterial states) plus the recollection of breathing. However, Vism mentions 11 kammatthānas, namely, the 10 kasinas and the recollection of breathing here. This difference is derived from their different list of kasina.

Furthermore, Vism does not distinguish the immaterial jhāna from the fourth fine-material jhāna. Indeed, according to the Vism, there are five kammatthānas for the fourth jhāna, i.e. one divine abiding (equanimity) and four immaterial states. By contrast, the JTDL separates the immaterial jhānas from the fourth fine-material jhāna, and enumerates four kammatthānas for the immaterial jhānas, namely, two kasinas (infinite space and infinite consciousness) and two immaterial states (infinite nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception; Table 3 and 4).

The sentence ‘the fourth divine abiding and the four immaterial states bring the fourth jhāna’ (Ñānamoli’s translation; catutthabrahmavihāro cattāro ca dṛuppā catutthajjhānikā ti. Vism 3.107) conveys that the Vism includes the four kinds of immaterial jhāna in the fourth fine-material jhāna.

Table 3. kammatthānas for the fourth jhāna in Vism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammatthāna</th>
<th>Vism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th jhāna</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine abidings</td>
<td>Equanimity (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaterial states</td>
<td>Infinite space, infinite consciousness, infinite nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. kammatthānas for the fourth fine-material and the immaterial jhāna in JTDL.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammatthāna</th>
<th>JTDL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th fine-material jhāna</td>
<td>Divine abidings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaterial jhāna</td>
<td>Equanimity (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kasina</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaterial states</td>
<td>Infinite space, Infinite consciousness (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaterial states</td>
<td>Infinite nothingness, Neither perception nor non-perception (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Transcending (*samatikkama*, 超)

In this section, *Vism* and *JTDL* explain what a meditator transcends when (s) he practises various *kammatthānas*. According to *Vism* (3.108), a meditator who practises eight *kammatthānas* transcends either constituent (*aṅga*) or object (*ārammana*) as below.

Firstly, to practise the three divine abidings, namely, loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*) and gladness (*muditā*) is transcending constituents of *jhāna*. This is because the third fine-material *jhāna* is attained by transcending *vitakka* and *vicāra* which are the constituents of the first and second fine-material *jhānas*. Simultaneously, the third fine-material *jhāna* is attained by practicing three *kammatthānas*, namely, the loving-kindness, compassion and gladness as already mentioned. Therefore, to practise these three *kammatthānas* allows the practitioner to transcend the constituents of the first and second fine-material *jhānas*.

In a slightly different sense, the fourth divine abiding or equanimity (*upekkhā*) is also included in the transcendence of constituent. According to *Vism* (9.88), a meditator can practise equanimity when (s) he has practised and overcome the joy of loving-kindness, compassion and gladness. Therefore, to practise equanimity means to transcend the other three divine abidings, namely, the three constituents of divine abidings.

Secondly, the four immaterial states can be attained by transcending the object (*ārammana*) of concentration. This is because a meditator attains infinite space by transcending an object such as a *kasina*, and infinite consciousness by transcending an object such as space.

In relation to transcendence, the *JTDL* suggests three different lists of *kammatthānas*. The eight material *kasinas* – namely, earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red and white – help a meditator transcend *rūpa*, but the remaining 30 *kammatthānas* are of no use for transcending *rūpa* since they are not material. The two immaterial *kasinas* and infinite nothingness help a meditator transcend the object, which is the same perspective as the *Vism* has mentioned above. By contrast, the *JTDL* asserts that the immaterial state of neither perception nor non-perception (*nevasaññānaṃsaññāyatana*) helps a meditator transcend one’s perception (*saññā*) and feeling (*vedanā*) since perception and all the other mental states have become so subtle in this immaterial state. These are shown in Table 5.

Although the *Vism* does not discuss the transcendence of perception and feeling here, it does in fact provide the same perspective as the *JTDL* when it enumerates the *kammatthānas* by their function as a condition (*paccaya*), as we shall see below.
Table 5. *kammathānas* for transcending.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcending</th>
<th><em>kammathāna</em></th>
<th>Vism</th>
<th>JTDL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>rūpa</em></td>
<td>Kasia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ārammaṇa</em></td>
<td>Kasia</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Infinite space, infinite consciousness (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immaterial states</td>
<td>Infinite space, infinite consciousness, infinite nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception (4)</td>
<td>Infinite nothingness (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>saññā &amp; vedanā</em></td>
<td>Immaterial states</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Neither perception nor non-perception (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ānāga</em></td>
<td>Divine abidings</td>
<td>Loving-kindness, compassion, gladness, equanimity (4)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increasing (*vaḍḍhanāvaḍḍhana*, 增長)

*Vism* asserts that only the 10 *kasinās* should be increased or extended, i.e. once one has achieved the counterpart sign (*patibhāganimitta*), which is the mental image or conceptual object derived from a visible form (*Vism* 4.31). For the *kammathāna* in question one expands and manipulates one’s experience of it. In contrast, the *JTDL* mentions its own, different list, consisting of its 10 *kasinās* plus the four divine abidings, as possible candidates for this treatment (Table 6).

As Bapat briefly mentions (Bapat 1937, 39), the *Vism* criticises the *JTDL*’s advice to increase the four divine abidings. By this is meant increasing the field of reach of one’s loving-kindness, compassion etc. to include more and more beings, since living beings are the object of the four divine abidings. Indeed, *Vism* (3.113) asserts that the result from increasing the four divine abidings is useless. This is because if a meditator practises so as to increase the four divine abidings then (s)he would simply have just a greater mass of the increased image of living beings. The *Vism* regards the increased image of living beings as being of no value for the meditator.

Table 6. *kammathānas* for increasing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>kammathāna</em></th>
<th>Vism (10)</th>
<th>JTDL (14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kasina</td>
<td>Earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light, limited space (10)</td>
<td>Earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, infinite space, infinite consciousness (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine abidings</td>
<td>Loving-kindness, compassion, gladness, equanimity (4)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Furthermore, given that infinite space and infinite consciousness are grouped among the 10 kasinās in *JTDL*, the *Vism* does not recommend increasing these two immaterial states. According to the *Vism* (3.115), the space which is the object of the infinite space should not be increased since it is just a removal of the *kāsaṇa*. Therefore, a meditator should simply practise the removal of the *kāsaṇa* rather increasing the space. The consciousness which is the object of the infinite consciousness also should not be increased since it is ‘a state consisting in an individual essence, and it is not possible to extend a state consisting in an individual essence [dhammas that have own-being]’ (*Vism* 3.115, Nāṇamoli’s translation).

These criticisms of the position found in the *JTDL* by the *Vism* are much more detailed than other explanations (3.109–116). And the criticisms of the other views found in the *JTDL* are mentioned *passim* in the *Vism* (2.79, 4.114, 14.71; 23.11 etc). It is as if the author of *Vism* wanted to focus on the difference and otherness from the *JTDL*. Based on this evidence, some modern scholars attribute the *JTDL* to the Abhayagiri fraternity, known as the rival to the Mahāvihāra fraternity which has transmitted the extant Pāli texts including the *Vism* (as mentioned above, Introduction).16

**Condition (paccaya, 緣)**17

The *Vism* mentions various kammatthānas that can be categorised according to how they variously act as conditions, i.e. as the cause of specific attainments, as below:

1. nine *kasinās* can be a condition for the arising of immaterial states (āruppa) – earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white and light.
2. 10 *kasinās* can be a condition for supernatural power (abhiññā) – earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light and limited space.
3. three divine abidings can be a condition for equanimity (upekkhā) – loving-kindness, compassion and gladness.
4. each lower immaterial state can be a condition for each higher immaterial state (uparima āruppa) – infinite space for infinite consciousness; infinite consciousness for infinite nothingness; infinite nothingness for neither perception nor non-perception.
5. the state of neither perception nor non-perception can be a condition for the attainment of cessation (nirodhasamāpatti).
6. all 40 kammatthānas can be a condition for living in bliss (sukhavihāra), for vipassanā and for fortunate kinds of becoming (bhavasampatti).
By contrast, the JTDL has a more limited analysis of paccaya relationships. It states that nine of the kasinas can be conditions for supernatural power, and that almost all the kammathānas with the exception of neither perception nor non-perception, i.e. 37 kammathānas can be conditions for vipassanā. Regarding the nine kasinas as conditions for supernatural power, the JTDL’s list of nine here includes only eight of its aforementioned kasinas, by excluding the two immaterial kasinas, and reaches the total of nine by adding a new kasina all of a sudden here. This new kasina is called 分別虛空一切入. The Chinese term corresponds to the Pāli term paricchinākāsakasina, namely, 分別 for paricchīna ‘limited’, 虛空 for ākāsa ‘space’, and 一切入 for kasina. Therefore, this new kasina corresponds to the limited space kasina of Vism.

Object (ārammana, 事)

Here the author designates the actual object employed within one kammathāna or another by the term ārammana ‘object’. So, for example, one can practise the foulness meditation subject (asubha), but one’s ārammana would have to be one of the 10 different components of this category, e.g. ‘the festering’ or ‘the bloated’.

According to Vism, a meditator can attain as object the counterpart signs (see above) of 22 kammathānas i.e. 10 kasinas, 10 kinds of foulness and two recollections, namely, recollection of body and breathing. On the other hand, the JTDL confines attaining of a counterpart sign to nine kasinas, namely, earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white and the base consisting of infinite space (Table 7).

The Vism and the JTDL both enumerate 12 kammathānas which are states of individual essence (sabhāvadhamma) as their objects. The state of individual essence is not conventional and conceptual (samutti) but ultimate and irreducible, for example, citta, cetasika, rūpa and nibbāna. According to the Vism, if a meditator practises kammathānas which have the states of individual essence as their object, (s)he cannot attain the absorption concentration but just access concentration (8.40; 11.42). By

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammathāna</th>
<th>Vism (22)</th>
<th>JTDL (21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kasina</td>
<td>Earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light, limited space (10)</td>
<td>Earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, infinite space (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinds of foulness</td>
<td>The bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>The body, breathing (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
contrast, if a meditator practises kasiṇas which have conceptual states as their object, (s)he attains the absorption concentration (4.29–31).

Although the list initially appears different, they are in fact the same, as can be seen in Table 8. The JTDL had to mention both the kasiṇa group and the immaterial states groups in order to enumerate the four immaterial states since these are dispersed between the two groups in the JTDL’s original listing.

The Vism and JTDL provide a list of ‘not-so-classifiable objects (na-vattabbārammaṇa, 不應說)’ for this aspect of the object. The Pāli term na-vattabba is an Abhidhammic shorthand for items, e.g. items in a list, which cannot be categorised under any of the corresponding headings or categories. Therefore, this list represents the kammamatthānas which are neither counterpart signs nor states of individual essence (for these two terms, see above) i.e. which do not fit in with this analysis. The Vism mentions the six kammamatthānas that can be the basis of neither as follows: the four divine abidings and two immaterial states, namely, infinite space and infinite nothingness, while the JTDL excludes infinite space which it already included in the counterpart sign list.

Meanwhile, both texts distinguish kammamatthānas by mobile and stationary objects. The mobile object (calitārammaṇa) means literally moving kammamatthānas, such as flowing water, blazing fire or wriggling worms. The Vism regards eight kammamatthānas as mobile objects, namely, the fester¬ing, bleeding, or worm-infested corpse, the recollection of breathing, plus water, fire, air and light. By contrast, the JTDL mentions only four kammamatthānas as mobile objects, namely, the two kasiṇas of fire and air, one stage of foulness and the recollection of breathing. Both acknowledge that, although these kammamatthānas are mobile, the counterpart signs attained from them are stationary. The remaining kammamatthānas of Vism (32) and JTDL (34) are stationary (Table 9).

I am unclear whether the stage of foulness mentioned by JTDL corre¬sponds to the scattered or worm-infested stage of foulness, since the JTDL mentions a mixed term 蟲爛 here which does not correspond clearly to one of the known 10. Since these are mobile or moving objects, it might seem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammamatthāna</th>
<th>Vism (12)</th>
<th>JTDL (12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kasina</td>
<td>Recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity, deities, death, recollection of peace (8)</td>
<td>Infinite consciousness (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>Recursive Infinite consciousness, neither perception nor non-perception (2)</td>
<td>Neither perception nor non-perception (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaterial states</td>
<td>Perception of repulsiveness in nutriment (1)</td>
<td>The analysis of the four elements (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
natural to assume it is the worm-infested, since the worms themselves will be moving. However, the act of the bones becoming scattered might also be regarded as a mobile object.

In contrast to *Vism*, the *JTDL* discusses two categories of relationship pertaining to the *kammatthāna* and their ārammana: interiority vs. exteriority, and time. Bapat asserts that they correspond to the objects mentioned in *Vism* 13.107ff., but there Buddhaghosa is discussing the temporal aspects of the development of the divine-eye, and is not relevant to this discussion (1937, 40). The various objects mentioned in *JTDL* are as below, followed by the designated *kammatthānas*. The two terms 内 and 外, which come at the start of the name of the object, refer to ‘internal’ and ‘external,’ and 事 to ‘object’ or ārammana. However, the other two terms 營 and 設 are ambiguous. Given that the term 營 literally refers to ‘a house’ or ‘to cultivate,’ and the term 設 to ‘oblige’ or ‘establish,’ Ehara et al. translate them with the broad terms ‘developed’ and ‘prepared’, respectively.\(^{20}\)

Internal vs. external:

(1) An internal ārammana developed internally (內營事內事) applies in the case of two *kammatthānas*, namely, infinite consciousness and neither perception nor non-perception.

(2) An external ārammana developed internally (內營事外事) applies in the case of two *kammatthānas*, namely, recollections of breathing and body.

(3) An internal ārammana developed externally (外營事內事) applies in the case of one *kammatthāna*, namely, recollection of death.

(4) An external ārammana developed externally (外營事外事) applies in the case of 21 *kammatthānas*, namely, 10 kinds of foulness, four divine abidings, four colour *kasinas* (possibly the blue, yellow, red and white), space *kasiṇa* (which seems to be the option, namely, ‘the limited space’ as mentioned above), recollections of the Buddha and Sangha.

(5) An internal or external ārammana developed internally (內營事內事 設外事) applies in the case of four *kammatthānas*, namely, recollections of virtue and generosity, analysis of elements and perception of repulsiveness in nutriment. (I regard the Chinese term 設 or 設 or which corresponds to vā hereafter.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammatthāna</th>
<th>Vism (8)</th>
<th>JTDL (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kasina</td>
<td>Water, fire, air, light (4)</td>
<td>Fire, air (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinds of foulness</td>
<td>Festering, bleeding, worm-infested (3)</td>
<td>Worm-infested? (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>Breathing (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{20}\)
(6) An external ārammanā developed internally or externally (設內營事 設外營事外事) applies in the case of four colour kasinas (possibly the blue, yellow, red and white kasina).

(7) An internal or external ārammanā developed internally or externally (設內營事設外營事設內事設外事) applies in the case of two kammaṭṭhāna, namely, recollections of the Dhamma and peace.

(8) An internal ārammanā developed internally and externally (內外營事 內事) applies in the case of one kammaṭṭhāna, namely, recollection of deities.

(9) Not classifiable according to internal or external ārammanā developed internally and externally (不應說及內事外事) applies in the case of one kammaṭṭhāna, namely, infinite nothingness.

Time:

(10) A past object is taken up by infinite consciousness and neither perception nor non-perception.

(11) A future object is taken up by the recollection of death.

(12) A present object is taken up by the recollection of deities.

(13) Past, future and present objects are taken up by the four recollections of the Buddha, Sangha, virtue and generosity, analysis of elements and perception of repulsiveness in nutriment.

(14) Past and present but not past and future objects are taken up by the two recollections of Dhamma and peace.

(15) There are 26 kammaṭṭhānas not classifiable (na-vattabba) according to past, present or future, as follows: nine kasīnas, 10 kinds of foulness, four divine abidings, two recollections of breathing and body, and infinite nothingness.

**Speciality (no Pāli correspondence, 勝)**

The *JTDL* assigns 12 kammaṭṭhānas, namely, the 10 kasīnas and two immaterial states to this category 勝. Ehara et al. translate this category as ‘speciality’ (1961, 67–68) and Bapat suggests viṣesa for its Pāli correspondence (1937, 40). However, given that there is no correspondence to 勝 in the Vism, more research is needed here since the term is used in various meanings in the *JTDL*. For example, in the cognitive process section of *JTDL*, the term conveys ‘an active state’ of mind.21

**Plane (bhūmi, 地)**

This category relates to which meditation practices can occur in which higher realms of Buddhist cosmology, partly on account of the physiology of beings in
those realms. The *Vism* mentions 12 *kammatthānas* which do not occur among the deities, namely, the 10 kinds of foulness, the recollection of body and the perception of repulsiveness in nutriment. These are all invalid for the divine realms because of the refined nature of the body in these realms. The *Vism* adds the recollection of breathing to the list for the Brahmā-world. The *JTDL* has the same list as that of *Vism*, but it mentions the term 色有 instead of the Brahmā-world (see below). Thus, we can see with most of these *kammatthānas* that their exclusion is because deities do not fester and also, since gods are nourished by *piṭī*, joy, and do not require organs to excrete the waste products that derive from material food, they do not have the available object to meditate on repulsiveness in nutriment.\(^{22}\)

Presumably recollection of the body and of breathing are similarly restricted by physiology (Tables 10 and 11).

The *Vism* mentions 36 *kammatthānas* which do not occur in immaterial existence, namely, the 10 *kasinas*, the 10 kinds of foulness, the 10 recollections, the four divine abidings, the one perception and the one analysis. The *JTDL* mentions 34 members here, by excluding the two immaterial *kammatthānas* in the *kasina* group.

The discussion above suggests that, rather than seeing a substantial difference between the two accounts, the *Vism* is more specific in subdividing further the rough category suggested by the *JTDL*. For example, the Pāli term *brahmaloka* is subsumed within the Chinese term 色有. The term 色有 covers all planes of *rūpāvacara*, namely, the four kinds of *jhāna* plane, while the Pāli term *brahmaloka* only refers to the first *jhāna* plane of *rūpāvacara*.\(^{23}\) Indeed, the *JTDL* presupposes the three levels of the planes roughly, namely, the heavens of *Kāmāvacara* (天上), *Rūpāvacara* (色有) and *Arūpāvacara* (四無色處). By contrast, the *Vism* enumerates a more detailed list of *Kāmāvacara* and *Rūpāvacara*, giving a separate, special status to humans as below:

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**Table 10. kammatthānas** not occurring in the worlds of deities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammatthāna</th>
<th>Vism (12)</th>
<th>JTDL (12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinds of foulness</td>
<td>The bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>The body (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>The perception of repulsiveness in nutriment (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 11. kammatthānas** not occurring in the Brahmā-world (*Vism*) or 色有 (*JTDL*).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammatthāna</th>
<th>Vism (13)</th>
<th>JTDL (13)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinds of foulness</td>
<td>The bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>The body, breathing (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>The perception of repulsiveness in nutriment (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(1) Kāmāvacara: ‘the twelve...do not occur among deities.’
(2) Brahmaloka of Rūpavacara: ‘These twelve and recollection of breathing do not occur in the Brahmā-world.’
(3) Arūpavacara: ‘But none except the four immaterial states occur in the immaterial becoming.’
(4) Manussa: ‘All occur among human beings.’ (Vism 3.118; Ñāṇamoli’s translation)

Seizing (gahana, 取)

This category refers to the manner in which a practitioner grasps or accesses the meditation. In other words, through what sense organ or sensory process is a meditation subject known or understood? The *Vism* mentions 19 kammatthānas being seized, i.e. perceived or understood, through sight, i.e. by looking at the meditation, such as nine kasinas minus the air kasīna, and the 10 kinds of foulness. By contrast, the *JTDL* mentions 17 kammatthānas by including seven kasinas, namely, the earth, water, fire, blue, yellow, red and white as well as the 10 kinds of foulness. In other words, the *JTDL* list is slightly shorter, because its list of kasina is shorter, but the two otherwise correspond in recognising sight as the primary basis for most of the kasina and all of the stages of foulness (Table 12).

The *Vism* divides the components of the recollection of the body into two groups. The first group is the first five items (hair, body hair, nails, teeth and skin) which it advises should be understood by seeing. The other group, consisting of the remaining components of the body, should be understood by hearing. The *JTDL* is silent on this subject.

The *Vism* and *JTDL* identify the same kammatthānas as being understood by touching and by both seeing and touching. For example, the recollection of breathing is understood by touching, and the air kasīna is understood by seeing and touching.

The *Vism* enumerates 18 kammatthānas to be learnt by hearing, namely, the eight recollections excepting the recollection of body and breathing, the four divine abidings, four immaterial states, one perception and one analysis. The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammatthāna</th>
<th><strong>Vism (19)</strong></th>
<th><strong>JTDL (17)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kasina</td>
<td>Earth, water, fire, blue, yellow, red, white (7)</td>
<td>Light, limited space (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinds of foulness</td>
<td>The bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
JTDL adds one kammatthana to this list, namely, the recollection of body, while the Vism says this is to be understood by seeing and hearing.

Both the Vism and JTDL identify equanimity and the four immaterial states as kammatthana beyond the comprehension of a beginner.

**Temperament (cariyānukūla, 人)**

Both the Vism and JTDL also analyse the kammatthanas according to their suitability for each of the six kinds of temperament into which ordinary beings can be categorised, namely, the greedy, hating, faithful, intelligent, speculative and deluded temperaments. For the first four temperaments, their lists are identical (Table 13).

For the deluded temperament, the Vism mentions the recollection of breathing and 10 kasinas. The Vism (3.77) regards the deluded and the speculative temperaments as being fundamentally alike (sabhāga) since both are unsteady (anavatthita) and vacillate (cañcala). So it advocates the recollection of breathing for both the deluded and the speculative character. In the case of 10 kasinas, the size of kasina should be decreased for the speculative and increased for the deluded (Vism 3.121, Table 14).

By contrast, the JTDL does not mention any relationship between the deluded (癡行人) and the speculative (覺行人). Furthermore, it forbids the deluded temperament from practising kammatthanas by him or herself.

### Table 13. kammatthanas for the temperament.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperament</th>
<th>Vism</th>
<th>JTDL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greedy 欲行人</td>
<td>Kinds of foulness</td>
<td>The bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hating 瞋行人</td>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>The body (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faithful 信行人</td>
<td>kasina</td>
<td>Blue, yellow, red, white (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine abidings</td>
<td>Loving-kindness, compassion, gladness, equanimity (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent 意行人</td>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>The Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity, deities (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>The perception of repulsiveness in nutriment (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>The analysis of the four elements (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 14. kammatthanas for the deluded and speculative temperaments in Vism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kammatthana</th>
<th>Deluded</th>
<th>Speculative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kasina</td>
<td>Unlimited 10 kasinas (10)</td>
<td>Limited 10 kasinas (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>Breathing (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rather, the deluded person must practise *kammatthānas* with a teacher and, in this case, the recollection of death and analysis of elements are most effective (412a18–20; a26–28). The speculative temperament should practise the recollection of breathing which cuts off discursive thought (Tables 15).

The *Vism* mentions 10 *kammatthānas* which are suitable for all temperaments, namely, earth, water, fire, air, light, limited space and four immaterial states. The *JTDL* has no mention of *kammatthānas* that are suited for all temperaments. Rather, it creates six types by applying two different levels (lower and higher) to each three temperaments, namely, the greedy, hating and deluded. Then the *JTDL* provides detailed descriptions for them which are not found in the *Vism*, as shown in Table 16.

Furthermore, the *JTDL* explains the reason why the *kammatthānas* are suitable or not allowed for their corresponding temperaments. By contrast, the *Vism* just designates the *kammatthānas* to their suitable temperaments without explaining the reasons.

**Conclusion**

This article has investigated and compared the expositions of *kammatthānas* found in the *Vism* and the *JTDL*. Overall, these two texts provide very similar analyses of their respective, closely overlapping lists of *kammatthānas*, which both categorise into the seven groups: *kasina*, kinds of foulness, recollections, divine abidings, immaterial states, perception and analysis of the four elements. Nevertheless, some differences are also found between them, as summarised below.

Firstly, the *Vism* has 40 *kammatthānas*, but the *JTDL* has 38. This difference occurs because of the different enumeration of *kasina*. The *Vism* enumerates 10 *kasinas* as earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light and limited space. By contrast, the *JTDL* mentions infinite space and

Table 15. *kammatthānas* for the deluded and speculative temperaments in *JTDL*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>kammatthāna</em></th>
<th>Deluded (with a teacher)</th>
<th>Speculative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recollections</td>
<td>Death (1)</td>
<td>Breathing (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>The analysis of the four elements (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16. six new kinds of temperaments in *JTDL*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperament</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greedy</td>
<td>Kinds of foulness</td>
<td>Recollections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hating</td>
<td>Divine abidings</td>
<td>勝處 (specialty; not from the 38 list, see above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deluded</td>
<td>No <em>kammatthāna</em> practice allowed</td>
<td>Recollection of breathing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
infinite consciousness instead of light and limited space in the list of Vism, meaning that it places within the kasina list two kammathāna that the Vism places in the immaterial states.

These 10 kasiṇas suggested by the JTDL cause complicated discussions. For example, it had to reference two different groups in order to treat all of the immaterial kammathānas, or it had to exclude the two immaterial states in order to treat the eight material kasiṇas. Therefore, the JTDL lacks the consistency within the kasiṇa group that the Vism achieves. Above I had mentioned that although there have been debates about the school affiliation of the JTDL, particularly over whether JTDL is an Abhayagiri text, I observed that the use of the bhavanga in JTDL places it firmly within Theravada Abhidhamma, regardless of any other differences. The disagreements that we do find between their listing and categorisation of kasiṇas does not guarantee a different school affiliation or hostile rivalry between the two texts. It should be noted that even the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, which is successor to the abhidhamma perspectives and meditative tradition of Vism, has a list of kasiṇas which is different from that of the Vism. Overall, the similarity indicates a strong closeness between the texts.

Secondly, the Vism either simplifies or explains in detail the same discussions also found in JTDL. In other words, the two texts often contain overlapping discussions but differ according to the amount of detail they have for them and also the degree of attention they pay to them. Concerning jhāna, for example, the JTDL presupposes the five-fold fine material jhānas and the four immaterial jhānas, while the Vism only presupposes the four-fold fine material jhāna. Discussing the conditioning factor for supernatural power, the JTDL provides a complicated exposition excluding the two immaterial kasiṇas and inserting an optional kasiṇa into the list, while the Vism has a neat list of 10 kasiṇas here. Furthermore, the JTDL has detailed descriptions for various kinds of object and their suitable temperaments, but the Vism just provides the simple list without those descriptions. On the other hand, in the case of the planes of existence, the JTDL enumerates three planes such as kāmāvacara, rūpāvacara and arūpāvacara. By contrast, the Vism makes more detailed discussion by specifying the manussa, human realm from the kāmāvacara, and the brahmaloka from the rūpāvacara separately.

It is interesting that this kind of systematising is also found in the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha. It adopts the kammathānas of Vism and calls them collectively the samatha-kammathāna. Then it introduces a new list, namely, the vipassanā-kammathāna. The vipassanā-kammathāna consists of a list of visuddhi, ‘purifications’, namely, the purification of virtue (sīlavisuddhi), of mind (cittavisuddhi), of view (dīttthisvisuddhi), by overcoming doubt (kaṅkhāvitaranavisuddhi), by knowledge and vision of path and not path (maggāmaggañānadassanavisuddhi), by knowledge and vision of the
way (patipadāṇānadassanavisuddhi), and by knowledge and vision (nāṇādassanavisuddhi). 26

Thirdly, the Vism criticises some views found in the JTDL. The JTDL offers four divine abidings and two immaterial states for increasing (vaddhana). The Vism regards them as useless for this purpose. Although there are some scholars who consider the JTDL to be attributed to a rival of the mainstream Theravāda that derives from the Mahāvihāra monastic tradition of Sri Lanka, the criticism voiced here of views found in JTDL are not sufficient to lend support to such an argument since this kind of variation in the detail of a list or application in relation to kammatthānas is found in various Theravāda texts, including the Nikāyas, Vism and even the later text Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha. Furthermore, the discussions of kammatthānas between the Vism and JTDL have more in common than in difference. Therefore, regardless of the origins of the JTDL, the divergences between the two texts within the otherwise overarching similarity appear simply to reflect an internal diversity within Theravāda systematisations of meditation from the third to the fifth century CE, a development of systematisation which continued to develop at least through the twelfth century CE, as seen in the finetuning of the samathavipassanā divide in the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha.

This leaves the interesting question of whether such internal diversity represents a meditative flexibility experienced by individual or groups of meditators or some other factors. Since these texts present systematisation, another possibility is that the meditative perspectives also had been affected by a systematic logic or by sophisticated abhidhamma texts although those texts may still be directly attempting to represent a meditator’s insight and experience.

Notes
5. See Skilton in this volume on the development of this term in the commentaries.
6. Yōu-bō-di-sha can be reconstructed as Upatissa who is attributed to the JTDL in the commentary on the Vism as follows: ekace ti upatissattheram sandhāyāha. tena hi vimuttimagge tathā vuttam. (http://tipitaka.org/romn/cscd/e0103n.att3.xml).
7. Sēng-qię-pō-luō is generally regarded as Samghabhara by modern scholars. For more on this topic, see Skilling (1994), 171–172.
9. For more detail on this topic, see Kim (2015), 236.
10. For more details on this affiliation and chronology of JTDL, see Kim (2018).
14. JTDL 411a8–9.
15. On the translator’s lack of skill, see Mizuno (1978[1964]), 886–887.
17. The condition or paccaya is being treated with great importance in Theravāda Abhidhamma treatises. Especially in the Patṭhāna, it is analysed by 24 types providing their possible combinations. For more details on this topic, see Kyaw (2014).
18. See also Skilton in this volume on vipassanā-kammatṭhāna. This evidence allows us to push back the time frame for understanding that the kammatṭhāna can function as subjects for vipassanā meditation beyond the evidence reviewed by Skilton.
21. For more details on this topic, see Kim (2015), 235 and 238.
22. Kong discusses the deterioration of the state of food and the subsequent change of living beings and world found in the early Buddhist narratives. For more details on this topic, see Kong (2016), 55–68.
24. kāmāvacara devesū ti kāmāvacaradevesu. VismA, 47.
25. The Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha enumerates the 10 kasinas as earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, space and light. (9.6).

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Notes on contributor

Kyungrae Kim research has focused on the Theravāda Abhidhamma and Pāli Commentaries. His recent publications include ‘Observations on some technical terms in the *Vimuttimagga* and their English translations: An examination of Jiā (夾) and Visayappavatti’ in Buddhist Studies Review (2015); ‘Avīci Hell and wújiān (無間) in the cognitive process: Observations on some technical terms in the Jiē tuō dào lùn (*Vimuttimagga*) in Journal of Indian Philosophy (2016); ‘Observations on the term Bhavana as described in the Jiē tuō dào lùn (*Vimuttimagga*): Its proper English translation and understanding’ in Journal of Indian Philosophy (2018).
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ABSTRACT

This article explores the changing treatment of a meditation practice, the contemplation of the repulsiveness of food, āhārepatikūlasaññā, from its presence in lists of saññā in canonical texts to its detailed explanation in post-canonical texts of the first millennium CE. We observe two main developments: the limitation in the benefits attributed to the practice within commentarial-period Theravada, and two entirely divergent branches in the way the practice is treated. In the Visuddhimagga of Theravada Buddhism, we see a somewhat practical approach that identifies the unpleasant aspects of the monk’s experience of seeking, eating, digesting and excreting food, and takes them as the focus of a 10-stage meditation practice. In the Sarvāstivāda texts, we see a conceptual aversion created by the association of specific food items with other items treated as impure within meditation practice. This article explores all these divergences, drawing conclusions about what this says in terms of the understanding of food in these two branches.

Introduction

Buddhism includes a number of teachings and methods to address the problem of craving for, and over-indulgence in, food. These include the mythological role of greed for food in the decline of the world in Buddhist cosmogony (Aggañña Sutta, DN 27), the vinaya which regulates the day-to-day eating habits of Buddhist monks, extra permitted ascetic restrictions to allow monks to practise more severe limitations on their intake of food, and meditation to undermine positive associations with food and remove the craving for food. It is the last of these that we shall examine here, by examining the ‘contemplation on the repulsiveness of food, āhārepatikula saññā’. There are a number of variations relating to this meditation. These include the difference between early and commentarial-period texts in the evaluation of the benefits that can accrue from practising this meditation. The second is a divergence that emerges between Theravāda sources and Sarvāstivāda and...
Mahāyāna texts. This paper will examine these differences, focusing on the divergence in practice, and ask what this says about underlying attitudes to food within these two branches of Buddhist schools.

**Variety of saññā in Buddhist texts**

In general, saññā is defined as ‘recognition’, and in the context of meditation, it means recognition of the quality and characteristics of sense objects accompanying the interpretation of sense objects. So, a saññā meditative practice is a method through which practitioners recognise the quality and characteristics of external objects and use them to eliminate a problematic aspect of their disposition, such as gluttony, lust, belief in permanence and so on. The Pali nikāyas record a variety of saññā lists, including four lists of saññā contemplations, which each include meditation on the repulsiveness of food or nutrition as one component. The four consist of five, seven, nine and 10 saññā, respectively. For example, the contemplation of 10 saññā enumerates the following contemplation practices:

1. the contemplation on foulness (asubhasaññā), 2. the contemplation on death (marāṇasaññā), 3. the contemplation on repulsiveness of food (āhārepatikulasaññā), 4. the contemplation on non-delight in the entire world (sabbaloke anabhīratasaññā), 5. the contemplation on impermanence (anikkasaññā), 6. the contemplation on suffering in the impermanent (aniccasaññā), 7. the contemplation on non-self in what is suffering (dukkhe anattasaññā), 8. the contemplation on abandoning (pahānasaññā), 9. the contemplation on dispassion (virāgasaññā), and 10. the contemplation on cessation (niruddhasaññā). AN. V, 105, translation Vajiraṃṭha 1962, 64–65

In three accounts in the Dīrgha and Ekottara Āgama we also find similar lists of saññā contemplation, i.e. of five, seven, nine and 10 saññā practices. By the time of Mahāyāna literature, there is only a single set of 10 saññā contemplation.

As well as varying in the number of saññā listed and what saññā are enumerated, the different bodies of literature attribute different merits or benefits to the same saññā practices. Table 1 gives some indication of this variety. What stands out is that the Pali canon, the Āgamas and the Mahāyāna texts all attribute significant spiritual results to the practice of saññā, making them important mechanisms for making progress on the path. For, in addition to addressing attachment to food and greed, the saññā can, among other benefits, lead to removal of defilements and attainment of nīrṇāṇa. This makes sense in terms of saññā being about the recognition of the true nature of things. What stands out against this pattern is the Visuddhimagga account.

The Visuddhimagga does not attribute such high achievements to the saññā practice. Rather, it itemises the following results:
### Table 1. Types and benefits of the *saññā* in various Buddhist texts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of <em>saññā</em></th>
<th>Pāli canon</th>
<th>Viśuddhimagga</th>
<th>Āgamas</th>
<th>Mahāyāna</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>5 <em>saññā</em></strong> (AN. III, 79, 83; SN. V, 129–131, 345)</td>
<td>1 <em>saññā</em> as an independent meditative subject (^1) (Vism. 341)</td>
<td>5 <em>saññā</em> (T. I, 51b)</td>
<td>10 <em>saññā</em> (T. V, 12a; T. XII, 588a; T. XXV, 229a)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7 <em>saññā</em></strong> (AN. III, 46)</td>
<td>7 <em>saññā</em> (T. I, 11c, 52a, 54b, 546b)</td>
<td>9 <em>saññā</em> (T. I, 56c)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>9 <em>saññā</em></strong> (DN. III, 289–290)</td>
<td>9 <em>saññā</em> (T. II, 780a)</td>
<td>10 <em>saññā</em> (T. II, 780a)</td>
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<td><strong>10 <em>saññā</em></strong> (AN. V, 105)</td>
<td>10 <em>saññā</em> (T. V, 12a; T. XII, 588a; T. XXV, 229a)</td>
<td>10 <em>saññā</em> (T. V, 12a; T. XII, 588a; T. XXV, 229a)</td>
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</table>

| Merits of practising *saññā* | Leading to detachment, lack of greed, cessation, tranquility, wisdom, enlightenment and Nirvana, (AN. III, 83) cessation of defilements, (AN. III, 83) the deliverance of the mind and deliverance of wisdom (AN. III, 84) leading to the deathless and having the deathless as one’s final end (AN. IV, 387) | The hindrances are suppressed, the mind is concentrated in Access Concentration (*upacāra samādhi*), escape from craving for flavours, complete understanding one’s greed for the five senses, full understanding of the material aggregate by the complete understanding of five-sense desire (Vism., 347) | Removing all defilements, obtaining enlightenment, gradually reaching *nirvāṇa*; behaving without defilement; being able to arrive at the realm of *nirvāṇa* (T. II, 780a); delivering from the mind with defilement (T. II, 780b) | Eliminating gluttony, lust, etc. (T. XXV, 217c); removing the Three Poisons like lust (T. XXV, 217c); removing desires (T. XXV, 217c); removing 10 obstacles (T. XXX, 437a); support attaining *nirvāṇa* (T. XII, 588a); discriminating the wholesome and the unwholesome, ultimately obtain nirvana (T. XII, 588a) |

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1. Vism. = *Visuddhimagga*
(1) His mind retreats, retracts and recoils from craving for flavours.
(2) His greed for the five cords of sense desire comes to be fully understood.
(3) He fully understands the materiality aggregate.
(4) Development of mindfulness occupied with the body comes to perfection in him through the repulsiveness of ‘what is uncooked’ and the rest.
(5) He has entered upon a way that is in conformity with the perception of foulness.
(6) He is at least bound for a happy destination of rebirth. (Vism., 347. Translation Bhikkhu 1991)

It also mentions that the āhārepāṭikūlasaṅṇā only leads to access concentration (upacārasamādhi), which is the stage before absorption concentration (appanāsamādhi):

The eight recollections (anussati) except ‘the mindfulness occupied with body (kāyatāsati)’ and ‘mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati), ‘the contemplation of repulsiveness in food (āhārepāṭikūlasaṅṇā)’ and the analysis of the four physical elements (catudhātuvavatthāna), these ten meditative subjects result in access concentration (upacāra samādhi). (Vajrañāṇa, 1962, 90)

Thus, all the benefits attributed to saṅṇā are at the more practical end of practice or involve lower attainments. There is no mention of the higher levels of removing defilements or attaining nirvāṇa found in association with the saṅṇā in the other texts, namely the canonical, Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna texts.

On the other hand, given that the Visuddhimagga reduces the list of saṅṇā to one – only the contemplation of the repulsiveness of food – this may partially account for the more limited scope of the effects attributed to it. We do find equivalents for some of the other saṅṇā in the Visuddhimagga under other names and in other sections, as can be seen in the list of Visuddhimagga meditation topics below. Thus, the asubha/foulness practices have their own section and the maraṇa/death practice is among the 10 anussati.2

For the Visuddhimagga, the āhārepāṭikūlasaṅṇā is of practical importance because attachment to food may create obstacles that hinder the pursuit of religious ideals. Therefore, monks need to understand how much food they should consume, and how to control their sense organs in order to perform pure religious practices and attain meditative goals. It includes the āhārepāṭikūlasaṅṇā meditation in relation to this, drawing on earlier texts. The Majjhima Nikāya and the Aṅguttara Nikāya also recommend the practice of āhārepāṭikūlasaṅṇā in order to increase our understanding of the appropriate intake of food and how to avoid indulging in the flavour of food (MN. I, 354; III, 2ff; AN. I, 113ff.). The Sri Lankan scholar monk Vajirañāṇa writes,
The main goal of this meditation is to eliminate the greed and sensual excitement which may be caused by food, and to free the mind from physical attachment’ (Vajirañāṇa 1962, 56).

**The development of āhārepatikūlasaṅnā within Theravada texts**

Let us now see how the āhārepatikūlasaṅnā develops within the Theravada tradition leading up to the Visuddhimagga. As already mentioned, in Pali nikāya texts such as the Aṅguttara Nikāya, it is enumerated as a component of 10 contemplations (saṅnā) which have an external object as a meditative subject (AN. I, 34–40). These 10 contemplations are listed along with the four jhāna, the four brahma-vihāra, the four bases of mindfulness (satipatṭhāna), the four efforts (sammappadhāna), the four bases of psychic powers (iddhipāda), the five faculties (indriya), the five powers (bala), the seven constituents of enlightenment (bojjhanga), the noble eightfold path (ariya atthaigika magga), the eight stages of release (vimokkha), the eight spheres of mastery of control (abhibhāyatana), the 10 devices (kasiṇa), the six recollections (anussati) and the four mindfulnesses (sati). Thus, the āhārepatikūlasaṅnā meditation is enumerated as one of numerous items listed in relation to meditation in the nikāya texts (Vajirañāṇa 1962, 58–66).

The canonical Pali Abhidhamma texts do not mention āhārepatikūlasaṅnā meditation in their meditative systems. For instance, the Dhammasaṅgaṇī does not mention āhārepatikūlasaṅnā meditation in its meditation list, which consists of the four jhānas, the eight kasiṇa, the eight objects of mastery (abhibhāyatana), the first three stages of release (vimokkha), the four brahma-vihāra, the 10 asubha and the four arūpa-jhānas (Vajirañāṇa 1962, 68–70; Ds.166–264).

The āhārepatikūlasaṅnā meditation is also mentioned in the *Vimuttimagga*, which, although the original is lost, can be identified as a Theravada text through its use of the technical concept of bhavaṅga and is considered the source for composing the Visuddhimagga (see Kim in this volume). Although extant only in Chinese, it is believed to have been composed in Pali and to have been available to Buddhaghosa. The seventh chapter of the Vimuttimagga mentions 38 meditations, of which the āhārepatikūlasaṅnā is one. The meditative items in the list are the 10 elements, the 10 impurity saṅnā, the 10 recollections, the four brahma-vihāra, the two arūpa-jhāna, analysis of the four elements (as a single item), and the āhārepatikūlasaṅnā. These meditation subjects are taught as objects on which a practitioner may concentrate the mind and which should be selected according to the disposition of the individual. The Visuddhimagga systematised meditation into a similar system of 40 meditation subjects. The others in the list are the 10 kasiṇa, the 10 asubhas, the 10 anussati, the four brahma-vihāra, four arūpa-jhāna and the analysis of the four physical elements (Vajirañāṇa 1962, 71).
The āhārepatikūlasaññā meditation is listed as one of the 40, but stands on its own. No longer one of a list of five, seven, nine or 10 saññas, it has become an independent meditative subject and is given its own section. Whereas the Pali nikāyas, like the āgamas, do not provide detailed information about the practice of the āhārepatikūlasaññā beyond its name, the Visuddhimagga explains in detail how to practise the āhārepatikūlasaññā. Because of the lack of earlier discursive information about this meditation we cannot tell how much Buddhaghosa is innovating and how much he is drawing on an existing practice in his explanation. However, by comparing the Visuddhimagga account with accounts found in Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna, to which I shall turn later, we can see that by the first half of the first millennium CE, a significant divergence had developed in the understanding of how āhārepatikūlasaññā should be practised.

While relating āhārepatikūlasaññā to mindfulness of the body (kāya satipatthāna), the Visuddhimagga states that one should practise āhārepatikūlasaññā through contemplating the different stages in repulsiveness of the context of acquiring alms-food, its ingestion, undigested state, digested state and so on (Vism., 347). This is in contrast with Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna sources, which directly relate the practice to the meditations involving observance of impurity in our bodily parts, organs and secretions through the practice of Body Mindfulness, as I shall explain in more detail below. Before exploring the methods of practising āhārepatikūlasaññā in two contrasting Buddhist traditions, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between the āhārepatikūlasaññā and kāya-satipatthāna, because they have overlapping and contrasting functions and different degrees of effectiveness in coping with the craving for food.

The Dīgha Nikāya mentions that there are 14 kinds of practice to establish mindfulness of the body, as follows:

A. Breathing (breathing in and breathing out)
B. The four postures (walking, standing, sitting and lying)
C. Clear awareness (being clearly aware of what one is doing, e.g. eating, drinking, chewing, savouring, etc.)
D. Reflection on the repulsiveness of the parts of the body (observance of bodily organs or bodily parts)
E. Review of the four elements (reviewing the body as consisting of the earth, water, fire and air elements)
F. The nine charnel-ground contemplations:
   a. bloated body
   b. discoloured body
   c. festering body
   d. body eaten by crows, hawks or vultures
   e. body eaten by dogs or jackals
   f. skeleton with flesh and blood
g. skeleton detached from flesh and blood
h. bones whitened
i. bones rotted away to a powder.

Three among these 14 practices – (1) reflection on the repulsiveness of the parts of the body, (2) review of the four elements, and (3) the nine charnel-ground contemplations – bear a similarity to āhārepatikūlasaṅñā in terms of function in that they are all based on the practice of repulsiveness of objects. As we shall see, the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna draw on this similarity of function in their instructions for āhārepatikūlasaṅñā, while the Visuddhimagga does not.

The Visuddhimagga states that the aim of eating food is maintaining our body, but that eating food causes attachment to it (Vism., 341). It then instructs in the practice of āhārepatikūlasaṅñā through reflection on 10 progressive aspects of repulsiveness of food (below). Through this method we observe the change of state of food, (a) before eating, through the environment of the alms-round (1 and 2); (b) ingesting and digesting (3–7); and (c) products, by-products and excrement (8–10). The 10 aspects are as follows:

1. The dirtiness by which one is confronted on leaving the monastery, e.g. animal excrement and carcasses en route.
2. The mud and dirty water in the village where you seek alms.
3. The colour and smell when chewing is like vomit.
4. The nauseating substances of the digestive process after swallowing.
5. When in the stomach to undergo digestion.
6. When in the stomach, still undigested.
7. When excrement fills the intestines.
8. Its physical products, i.e. as parts of the body and disease.
9. The repulsiveness of food when left in contrast to when fresh.
10. The repulsiveness of food when urine and faeces have been smeared at the ‘bodily doors’. (Vism., x 342–346)

This practice is therefore very much focused on the monk’s experience of the alms-round. Only in item 8, when one reflects on the products of the food, does the use of the impurity of the components of the body play a role in this practice.

The āhārepatikūlasaṅñā in Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna

The Sarvāstivāda treatises offer a significantly different way of practising the āhārepatikūlasaṅñā in comparison with the Visuddhimagga. Moreover, in contrast to the Pali tradition, where we see a development in the function and practice of this meditation, the approach in Sarvāstivāda texts, from its
earliest extant Abhidharma text, the c. second to first century BCE Abhidharma-saṅgītī-panyāya-pāda Śāstra, to the full-fledged scholarly treatise, the Abhidharma-mahāvibhāsa Śāstra, dated to around the first century CE, remains consistent. Mahāyāna texts inherited this method.

The Abhidharma-saṅgītī-panyāya-pāda Śāstra contains two lists of saññā meditations, the five saññā meditations and the six saññā meditations. The āhārepatikūlasaṅnā is the fourth item in both these lists. The list of five saññā meditations, called ‘the five contemplations of mature deliverance’, is as follows:

a. contemplation of impermanence
b. contemplation of suffering due to that impermanence
c. contemplation of non-self which is suffering
d. contemplation of the repulsive and nauseating in food
e. contemplation of death (T. XXVI, 423c.)

The list of six saññā meditations simply adds the contemplation of detachment from the whole world (T. XXVI, 432c).

The Abhidharma-saṅgītī-panyāya-pāda Śāstra advises that monks should observe material food through the contemplation of impurity (T. XXVI, 423c). It explains the method of practising āhārepatikūlasaṅnā as follows:

What is the process of the meditation?

One should with conviction (adhimokṣa, 胜解) consider porridge and steamed rice as a swollen dead body.

One should with conviction consider gruel, soup and meat broth as watery stool.

One should with conviction consider buttermilk and curd as bone marrow and brain.

One should with conviction consider butter, oil, molasses and honey as the fat of a human being.

One should with conviction consider barley flour as bone powder.

One should with conviction consider flat bread as human skin.

One should with conviction consider salt as broken teeth.

One should consider lotus roots, lotus stalks, vegetables, branches and leaves as connected hair and skeleton.

One should consider juices and drinks as pus and blood.

One should pay attention to material food with the conviction that material food is repulsive and damaging, and observe material food through the contemplation of impurity. (T. XXVI, 423c)
When the Pali and the Sarvāstivāda schools mention the practice of āhārepatikūlasaṅñā, they also remark on the mental factors which are associated with various meditative factors. The Visuddhimagga says that two mental factors, vitaka (尋) and vicāra (伺), accompany the practice of āhārepatikūlasaṅñā (Vism., 346). On the other hand, the Sarvāstivāda text, the Abhidharma-saṅgītī-paryāya-pāda Śāstra, mentions that manasikāra (作意) and adhimoksa (勝解) function when practising the āhārepatikūlasaṅñā. All of these mental factors are related to ‘paying attention to the object’ and have the function of making our mind recognise the nature of the object (T. XXVI, 423c).

Rather than inculcating awareness of the change of the state of food, as described in the parallel instructions for this meditation in the Visuddhimagga, what we find in the Abhidharma-saṅgītī-paryāya-pāda Śāstra is a correlation between important food items and bodily impurities. The Abhidharma-saṅgītī-paryāya-pāda Śāstra juxtaposes food items with elements of our body using the impurities of the inner and outer body mentioned in the practice of mindfulness of the body. This latter includes reflection on the repulsiveness of the parts of the body and the nine charnel-ground contemplations, both of which are drawn on here. Thus, the awareness of repulsiveness in this take on āhārepatikūlasaṅñā comes not from the repulsiveness of food per se but through its association with the impurities of the inner and outer body, from a swollen dead body and bone powder as parts of the outer body, and pus, blood, skin and marrow as parts of the inner body, as in the practice of body mindfulness.

Adopting the methods of the contemplation of impurity from body mindfulness practices for practising āhārepatikūlasaṅñā suggests that the Sarvāstivāda school views the nature of the two meditations as the same. The Abhidharma-mahāvibhāsa Śāstra explains that the two meditations, the āhārepatikūlasaṅñā and the asubha saṅñā, differ in terms of both their aim and their object. The aim of the contemplation of impurity is to eliminate sensual lust, but the aim of āhārepatikūlasaṅñā is to eliminate greed for food (T. XXVII, 842b). However, in practice – the text explains – the two meditations share the same method, in order to induce revulsion at their objects (T. XXVII, 842b).

The Abhidharma-mahāvibhāsa Śāstra expands on the earlier correlation of food with bodily impurity found in the Abhidharma-saṅgītī-paryāya-pāda Śāstra. It explains:

When one obtains cakes during taking alms, one should consider those as a human stomach.

When one gets barley flour, one should consider it as ground bones.

When one obtains salt, one should consider it as human teeth.

When one receives rice, one should consider it as maggots.
When one obtains vegetables, one should consider those as human hair.

When one gets soup, one should consider it as bodily fluid.

When one obtains milk and yoghurt, one should consider those as human brains.

When one gets curd and molasses, one should consider those as human fat.

When one obtains fish and meat, one should consider those as human flesh.

When one gets drink, one should consider it as human blood.

When one obtains sweetmeats, one should consider them to be dried excrement.

When one gets clean grass, when eating with the Saṅgha, one should consider it as human hair.

One should consider a bed and chair one uses as a pile of bones.

One should practise the contemplation of impurity on food obtained. (T. XXVII, 840a–b. The translation is my own.)

Compared to the method of the āhārepatikūlasaṇṇā meditation in Pali texts, which examines the visual, olfactory, tactile, and cognitive senses and social situation of the food being consumed and digested as well as the alms-round undertaken to find food, in order to achieve an understanding of the repulsiveness of nutriment, this Sarvāstivāda method is mainly based on cognitive aversion through learnt semantic knowledge, i.e. by learning to associate the names of foodstuffs with specific impure aspects of the human body. Another difference is that the method of the āhārepatikūlasaṇṇā meditation in Pali tradition demands continuous observance of the change in the state of food before and after ingestion, whereas that of the Sarvāstivāda tradition does not need the observance of the change of the state of food. Rather, it repeatedly imprints the mind with the repulsiveness of foodstuffs connected to bodily parts, organs, fluids and secretion.

The method of practice of the āhārepatikūlasaṇṇā in the Sarvāstivāda appears to have been inherited by Mahāyāna as can be seen in its literature. For example, the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra (大智度論), dated c. second century CE, describes the āhārepatikūlasaṇṇā as follows:

The contemplation of repulsiveness in food is to observe that food is produced from impure stuffs. One sees that meat is produced from sperm and blood and it is the place where pus and worms live. Further, butter, milk and curd are produced by the change of blood and they are not different from decomposed pus. (T. XXV, 231b)

Here we again see the equation of different items of food with specific components of corporeal impurity, although it attempts to explain the
association rather than simply give a one-to-one correlation. This association of specific food items with specific physical components contrasts with the analysis of the process of seeking, eating and digesting food taken by the Pali tradition.

Why do the two traditions, the Pali and the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna, have different methods of cultivating the āhārepatikūlasaññā meditation? The Visuddhimagga does not define food as something which is pure or impure in itself, but points out that ‘when there is physical nutriment, there is attachment, which brings perils’ (Vism., 341). The Visuddhimagga describes the impurity of the environment within which one seeks food and the results of food once ingested. Similarly, the Vimuttimagga describes food as becoming impure once we consume it: ‘Even food which has various flavours, which pure people cherish, which has colours and flavours, when it enters inside our body, it becomes impure’ (T. XXXII, 44b).

So, while the Pali texts do not express the view that food has the property of impurity in its nature, they tackle the problem of greed by an analysis of the repulsion at impurity that arises through considering its acquisition, ingestion and digestion. Meanwhile, the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna traditions have a totally different approach to the problem of greed, which relies on an understanding of material food as being impure in and of itself. The Abhidharma-mahāvibhāsā Śāstra explains this aspect of food further in relation to the origins, i.e. the causal factors that form the food:

A monk should investigate where food derives from, whether in the hands or in the bowl, when he cultivates the contemplation of repulsiveness in food. Having realized that it comes from grains, he should again look at where the grains originate. Having understood they derive from seeds in the field, he should again review where the seeds originate from. He comprehends that they originate in excrement and filthy things in the mud. Having understood thus, he should investigate how material food derives from impurity in sequence. Again, food in turn produces impurity. How could the wise obsess about food? (T. XXVII, 840a)

This Sarvāstivāda text gives an account of how material food originates from impurities, and therefore the food itself has the nature of impurity. That food produces impurity is also mentioned, but is not the focus of the chain of impurity; rather, the impurity of the causes is the focus. The Mahāyāna texts also share this point of view regarding food, as we have seen in Nāgārjuna’s Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra (T. XXV, 231b). The difference between the two traditions seems to lie in divergent views of the nature of food. The āhārepatikūlasaññā meditation in the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna traditions first equates food with specific impurities in the body, then emphasises material food as originating from impurities, some bodily but also those of the soil in which the food was grown. From this perspective, in which food itself is inherently impure, it seems that there is no need to observe the
repulsiveness of food from the beginning of eating through its digestion to its excretion, as in the *Visuddhimagga*, but only the need to imprint the mind with the repulsiveness of food (see Table 2).²

The extent to which either way of practising āhārepatikūlasaññā works in undermining craving for food, and how, remains an open question. However, modern psychology explains that food aversion occurs mainly in two ways: (1) sensory aversion and (2) cognitive aversion. Sensory aversion is based on actual experience through the sense organs: for example, the experience of being poisoned by red berries may create an aversion to red berries; or the pain of indigestion after eating fatty food may lead to avoidance of fatty foods. On the other hand, cognitive aversion involves a negative association in the mind, irrespective of direct experience of actual harm: for example, a mother warns her child of poisonous berries and thereafter the son dislikes berries, or the belief that pork is impure and dirty in relation to religious dietary prohibitions may cause a physical aversion to pork. Such cognitive aversion can be both addressed and harnessed in therapy relating to food. We could define the method of the āhārepatikūlasaññā in the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna traditions as cognitive aversion which causes repulsiveness through semantic information about food-stuffs. The food psychologist Richard J. Stevenson says that cognitive aversion is more powerful and enduring than sensory aversion. (Stevenson 2009, 160–168).

**Conclusion**

The meditation practice āhārepatikūlasaññā, ‘contemplation on the repulsiveness of food’, is regarded in the Buddhist texts explored here as an appropriate countermeasure to craving for food. There is little detail on the practice of āhārepatikūlasaññā within the canon, where it occurs as one of a number of sets of lists of saññā to which a variety of benefits are attributed, including the removal of defilements and the attainment of nirvāṇa. It is in later, more developed texts that we find in-depth instructions. In these, Theravāda sources such as the *Visuddhimagga* offer significantly different

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<th>Theravāda</th>
<th>Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna</th>
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<td>(1) Accepts that fresh food is attractive</td>
<td>(1) Food itself is made repulsive in the meditation by identifying it as disgusting substances.</td>
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<td>(2) The process of seeking food brings one into contact with horrible things</td>
<td>(2) One should investigate where nutriment derives from, in the hand or in the bowl</td>
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<td>(3) Food becomes repulsive as soon as you start eating.</td>
<td>(3) One should investigate how food derives from impurity in sequence.</td>
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<td>(4) Even though food is cherished when fresh, it is found repugnant when it enters inside our body or is left to go off.</td>
<td>(4) Practice of cognitive repulsiveness.</td>
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<td>(5) Practice of sensory and cognitive repulsiveness.</td>
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guidance from Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna sources, with the *Visuddhimagga* exploring the repulsiveness of the means of acquiring food as well as its context, ingestion, digestion, putrefaction and excretion, rather than assuming that food itself is impure. These meditations, in 10 stages, follow the course of action of a monk setting off to a village where he receives alms-food. At first sight, this seems to be the more realistic approach, and the *Visuddhimagga*’s emphasis on the practical is seen also in the list of benefits it attributes to āhārepatikūlasaṅnā, which include suppression of attachment to food and upacārasamādhi, a relatively low level of concentration. Gone are the claims to the removal of defilements and the attainment of nirvāṇa. This reduced scope of benefits may, however, correlate with another change in the *Visuddhimagga*. It treats āhārepatikūlasaṅnā in isolation, in contrast to its grouping with other saṅnā in the canonical sources. In contrast to the *Visuddhimagga*’s analysis of food in terms of the stages of acquisition, eating and waste products, the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna emphasise the inherent impurity of food. This is done by making direct equivalents with components of other impurity meditations, i.e. the components and/or stages of decomposition of the body. A later development of this extends the understanding of food as impure by looking at the impure causes that give rise to food. While this makes use of non-proximate information, i.e. one has to actively juxtapose food items with other imagined or remembered concepts rather than observe the actual state of food, modern food psychology identifies cognitive aversion through negative conceptual associations as effective in deterring enjoyment of foods, by linking them with something dangerous, unpleasant or impure.

**Notes**

1. Translations are from Bhikkhu (1991) unless otherwise indicated.
2. The other nine *anussati* are: the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, virtue, generosity, deities, the body, breathing and peace.
3. The Pali name *Vimuttimagga* is constructed from the title of the Chinese translation T. XXXII (解脫道論).
4. T. XXXII, 411a. Again, see Kim in this volume for a more detailed discussion of this list and how the *Vimuttimagga* and *Visuddhimagga* compare in relation to meditation topics.
5. DN. II, 292–298, translation Walshe (1995, 335–339). Clearly these overlap to a significant extent with the 10 *asubha* practices in the *Visuddhimagga*, with different emphases in each.
6. Hirakawa (1993, 131–132). The Sarvāstivāda abhidharma has seven treatises which are called the ‘Six feet (pāda)’ and one ‘body (śarīra)’. The *Abhidharma-saṅgīti-parāśā-pāda Sāstra* is one of the six ‘feet’ treatises and this is the earliest *abhidharma* text among the seven. The *Jñānaprasthāna* is considered the most important text, and this is ‘the body’. These texts were established from the second to the first century BCE and are all extant in the Chinese *Tripitaka*. 
Beside the Pali, and Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna positions, there is a third source on the āhārepatikūlasaṅñā in the Satyasiddhi Śāstra (T. XXXII 1646) (誠實論). In this text, we can find the viewpoints and methods of the Sarvāstivāda, Mahāyāna and the Pali as follows:

Question: how should one cultivate the contemplation of repulsiveness in food?

Answer: the nature of this nutriment is impurity, even good flavoured dishes and fruits are all impurities. Therefore one should loathe it. When clean, fragrant, palatable food is pure, it does not benefit the body. Food which is chewed, wetted with saliva is like a vomit and when it enters the organs, it could benefit our body. Therefore one should understand that [food is] impure.

The Satyasiddhi Śāstra, which belongs to Sautrāntika school and dates to around the fourth century CE, shows that it has a viewpoint on food similar to that of the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna in which food is considered as impurity. However, the method of observance of impurity of food is similar to that of the Pali tradition.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Following his first doctorate, Man-Shik Kong was a post-doctoral researcher (2006–2007) and then a research professor (2008–2010) at Dongguk University, Seoul. He obtained his second PhD, on food in Buddhism, at King’s College London in 2016 and is now a researcher at the Institute for Jogyejong Studies at Dongguk University.

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ABHIDHAMMA AND NIMITTA IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MEDITATION MANUSCRIPTS FROM SRI LANKA: A CONSIDERATION OF ORTHODOXY AND HETEROPRAXY IN BORAN KAMMATTHĀNA

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ABSTRACT
The Nevill Collection of manuscripts from Sri Lanka housed in the British Library includes seventeen texts, in eleven manuscripts, related to a type of Theravada Buddhist meditation referred to here as boran kammajhāna, ‘the old meditation method.’ This article offers the first detailed survey of these texts and finds a close correlation between the practices they advocate and commentarial Abhidhamma, a surprising finding given the modern reputation of these practices as heteroprax. It is less surprising when we observe that the texts represent the form of Buddhism introduced into the Kandyan kingdom from Ayutthaya, the then capital of Siam (Thailand), in the mid-18th century at the time of the revitalization of Buddhism and the Sangha in Sri Lanka. A distinguishing feature of boran kammajhāna is the use of nimitta, ‘signs’, experienced in meditation or as omens of death, previously taken as an indication of heterodoxy. However, a close examination reveals that the interpretation of nimitta corresponds with Abhidhamma. Moreover, the lengthy meditation manuals formulate an extensive and detailed realization of the Abhidhamma path to becoming an arhat, harnessing the Abhidhamma understanding of progression through sequential substitution of lower citta, states of consciousness, and cetasika, mental factors that attend consciousness, with increasingly pure citta and cetasika. The nimitta function as diagnostic tools and as means to guide the embodiment of the increasingly purified states of consciousness within the practitioner’s body. The findings present a new understanding of the system of transformation underlying boran kammajhāna and also challenge the understanding of Abhidhamma as merely scholastic or descriptive.

Introduction
This article considers the evidence provided by Sinhalese manuscripts for understanding the form of Theravada meditation referred to here as boran kammamatthāna, ‘the old meditation method’, which predates the reforms and revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Sinhalese manuscripts
examined here derive from a branch of *boran kammatthāna* that was introduced into the Kandyan kingdom of Sri Lanka from Ayutthaya, the then capital of Siam (Thailand), in the mid-eighteenth century. These texts reveal how this practice was understood to harness meditation experiences in ways that differ from the strands of exoteric meditation that emerged in reform and revival periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The range and detail of these texts allow us to examine the extent to which *boran kammatthāna* complies with the formulations of the path to enlightenment found in Abhidhamma, which represents the formulation of Theravada doctrine from the perspective of ultimate truth – in other words, Theravada orthodoxy. At the same time, the texts provide more information on the techniques that confounded the imagination of those outsiders who first studied them, such as T. W. Rhys Davids, who published the first modern edition of one of these texts as *The Yogāvacara’s Manual* in 1896. What is perplexing about *boran kammatthāna* is its treatment of nimitta, the ‘signs’ experienced in meditation, in ways unattested in the Pali canon or the *Visuddhimagga*, as discussed elsewhere in this volume.\(^2\) It also uses representations of concepts with syllables, as will be explained, in a way reminiscent of seed syllables in tantra. For these reasons, the tradition has in modern times gained a reputation for heteropraxy. This article seeks to challenge that stance by looking closely at the evidence provided by the texts from this transmission available in the rich Hugh Nevill collection of Sri Lankan manuscripts, held in the British Library. I will explore some of the features that appear orthodox in relation to Abhidhamma, and some that at first sight appear heteroprax. I shall suggest that familiarity with pre-Cartesian, South Asian understandings of consciousness and with Abhidhamma models of conditionality allows us to shed light on some of these latter characteristics, challenging our understanding both of these practices and of Abhidhamma. This is the first close examination of the correlation between the system of soteriology represented by *boran kammatthāna* practice and the understanding of the same in Abhidhamma. It examines its application of the Abhidhamma understanding of causality in relation to *citta*, states of consciousness and *cetasika*, mental factors that attend consciousness.\(^3\) This article is also the first survey of the Sri Lankan materials.

**The significance of Sinhalese *boran kammatthāna* manuscripts**

The Sinhalese branch of *boran kammatthāna* that came from Ayutthaya to the Kandyan kingdom in the mid-eighteenth century arrived with a series of three missions aimed at revitalising Sri Lankan Buddhism (Blackburn 2001, 54–55). The first mission established a fresh ordination lineage with the founding of the Siyam Nikāya, now the oldest of the three main divisions of the monastic Sangha in Sri Lanka. Among the Siamese monks on the second mission in 1756 were a number associated with teaching meditation. By compiling various Thai and Sinhala sources we can identify four by name
as Visuddhācariya, Varāṇāsa, Mahānāma and Brahmasvara (Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena 2012, 182–185). We know from contemporary accounts that King Kirti Śrī Rājasīhha provided a forest monastery for the monks Mahānāma and Brahmasvara to teach meditation to 24 local monks (Jayatilake 1916, 150). In fact, a number of monastic rock caves were redecorated under Kirti Śrī’s patronage during this period (Holt 1996).

The local monks who studied with the Siamese meditation masters documented the more complex levels of the meditation technique in great detail. Presumably the Sri Lankan monks documented this complexity because they anticipated that their time with the Siamese meditation masters would be limited. This is very important for us, because while we can access some of the lower levels of these practices, such as how to induce nimitta experience, through the living remnants of these practices in Southeast Asia, these are mostly in modernised or simplified forms. We must rely on texts if we wish to investigate the full complexity of these practices in the pre-modern period. The Sinhalese manuscripts provide lengthy details of each manoeuvre to be made at every stage of the advanced practice. Many of the manuals from Southeast Asia are extremely terse. But combining these mid-eighteenth-century Sinhalese materials with some of the more extensive manuscripts and early twentieth-century publications from Thailand (see Choompolpaisal and Skilton in this volume) allows us to piece together evidence for the extensive range, variety and sophistication of pre-modern meditation found in the Theravada world, and to begin to understand the mechanisms presupposed in boran kammathāna practices.

These important manuscripts, then, attest to boran kammathāna as transmitted from Ayutthaya in the 1750s, only a little over a decade before the Siamese capital was sacked by the Burmese, further enhancing their value as testimony to the practices prior to the Thonburi and Ratanakosin periods in Thailand. Meanwhile, in mid-eighteenth-century Sri Lanka, providing support for the Sangha throughout the island through the institution of the Siyam Nikaya allowed King Kirti Śrī to exert influence beyond his own kingdom in the interior into the Dutch-controlled territories which surrounded it. We thus see the dispersal of texts from this period throughout the island, including these meditation manuals, which would have initially travelled with the individual monks who compiled them. The living tradition from the meditation imported from Ayutthaya survived at least 150 years in Sri Lanka. The most recently dated manual considered here was copied towards the end of this period, in 1888 (Manuscript Or6601(7)).

The journey of boran kammathāna texts to the British library

As monks in Sri Lanka ceased to use the manuals for practice, perhaps as teaching lineages died out, the manuscripts found their way into monastic
libraries or even the national collection. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the practice was on the brink of disappearing in Sri Lanka, a moment which Woodward dates to the death of ‘Doratiyāveye, Thera, incumbent of Hangurangketa Wihāra […] living so recently as 1900’ (Woodward 1916, xviii). Anagarika Dharmapala had a copy of one of these texts made from Bambaragala Vihara in Teldeniya and handed it over to Rhys Davids while on his way to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, but at that point there was no obvious living tradition and he was not aware that Doratiyāveye was in the teacher lineage related to it (see Kemper in this issue). This left both him and Rhys Davids struggling to comprehend this boran kammathāna text through the theosophical lens that then dominated English-language understandings of Buddhist meditation. This period that saw the disappearance of the practice in Sri Lanka coincided with the manuscript-collecting activities of the British colonial officer Hugh Nevill.

At the time when Rhys Davids was preparing his edition of The Yogāvacara’s Manual on the basis of the copy lent by Dharmapala, Hugh Nevill was District Judge in Batticaloa, and had been in the Ceylon Civil Service for 30 years, since the age of 17. Rhys Davids and Nevill had briefly been contemporaries in the Service. Throughout his career, Nevill had enthusiastically studied different aspects of Sri Lankan history, culture, languages and natural history. With the expert help of a Sri Lankan called Wijeratne, he collected a large number of manuscripts, taking the trouble to acquire or have copied rare texts or early manuscripts.

When Nevill left Ceylon in 1895 he took the manuscript collection with him to France. After his death, just 2 years later, the collection was purchased by the British Museum. It is now housed among the Asia and Africa Collections of the British Library. An invaluable resource for the study of the literature of Sri Lanka and particularly the Theravāda tradition, its 2227 manuscripts form the largest collection of Sinhalese manuscripts outside of Sri Lanka (Somadasa, 1987–1995, vol. 7, x). Lionell Barnett, Keeper of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts at the library from 1908 to 1936, produced a handlist in 1908. An extensive descriptive catalogue of the Nevill Collection in seven volumes was completed in meticulous detail by K. D. Somadasa in 1995. The collection includes at least eleven manuscripts containing boran kammathāna texts, and it is these we shall be examining here. This collection represents a unique deposit of boran kammathāna materials, since it probably reflects the transmission of just a single lineage of boran kammathāna practice, the one from Ayutthaya that was chosen for the mission that arrived in 1756. Such a wealth of documentation of a single lineage is unparalleled elsewhere, including in Southeast Asia because the Thai and Cambodian sources are more fragmented, with the possible exception of manuscripts at Wat Ratchasittharam in Thonburi, Greater Bangkok. The latter also represents a lineage from Ayutthaya, that of
the former supreme patriarch Suk Kaithuean (Somdet Phrasakharat Ṇṇasamvara, 1733–1822 CE (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 86).}

**Boran kammatthāna meditation manuscripts in the Nevill collection**

There are seventeen texts spread over eleven manuscripts in the Nevill collection that we can identify as relating to *boran kammatthāna*. Some of these texts are closely related and contain overlapping material, but no two are completely identical. Whereas in general it is quite common practice to copy multiple texts onto a single manuscript, no non-*boran kammatthāna* texts are found in these manuscripts. Both the variety of formulations and the absence of non-*kammatthāna* texts in the same manuscripts suggest that most of these texts originated as personal manuals. Nonetheless, some of their colophons contain the usual scribal requests for particular outcomes of the merit of copying the text, such as rebirth under the future Buddha Metteyya. Most of the texts are in a mixture of Pali and Sinhala, with Sinhala dominating the instructions and Pali being used for the litanies and technical terms. Some of the texts are almost entirely in Pali, with only the occasional word of Sinhala. These include the *Amatākaravāhanā*, ‘Account of the Mine of Immortality’, and the *Vākkappakaranā*, ‘The Litany,’ which together form manuscript Or6601(85); the similar litany in Or6601(23)II, catalogued as *Kammatthāna*; and two commentaries found in Or6599(12), which explain the meaning of the apocryphal *Maranāṇāṇasutta* Or6600(90), although this sutta is itself mainly in Sinhala with some phrases in Sanskrit and Pali (Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena 2012, 186).

Of the seventeen texts, only the *Maranāṇāṇasutta* Or6600(90) is a narrative text. Two (Or6599(12)I and II) are commentaries on this text. All the others are practice manuals to be used for the devotional rituals associated with meditation or for the practice of meditation. Two, Or6601(23) II and Or6601(85)III, provide litanies to use when making preliminary offerings and prayers to the Buddha. These litanies are also found to a lesser extent in many of the other manuals, so the difference between them and the meditation manuals reflects the way that the litany and meditation instructions are organised and recorded. They do not necessarily reflect differences in the ritual. Some parts of the litanies, and aspects of these rituals, are recognisable in the few examples of living practice in Thailand and Cambodia today. The remaining manuals all provide meditation instructions. All are abridged representations of the practice, but the variations among them, being to some extent complementary, help us to piece together a more complete picture of the practice.

The type of information the manuals provide includes litanies for addressing the Buddha and the teacher in preparation for each practice, the order of the practices, the visual appearance of the *nimitta*, i.e. the signs indicating
that a particular meditation has been achieved, the locations in the body where these nimitta should be seen and to which they should be moved, and how and where these nimitta should be bound into the body.

We can make a broad distinction between those manuals that cover the entire practice and give a fairly full set of instructions, such as the Amatākaravānnaṇā (Or6601(85)) and the Vidarśanā pota (Or6601(6)1 and Or6601(43)I), and those that just pick out particular details, such as the Cattāḷīsa Karmasthāna (Or6601(6)III). The latter type focus on the parikamma, the phrase or mantra to be recited in relation to a particular meditation exercise, kammathāna, the appearance of the nimitta and the ultimate location in the body where these should be moved around and located. The titles given to the texts in Somadasa’s catalogue tend to either be descriptive or come from the final phrase of the text, even if this is not a title as such. The Amatākaravānnaṇā, ‘Account of the Mine of Immortality’, is an exception, since the text is punctuated by poetic verses, and the concluding verses provide this title. We thus find texts that are quite similar under very different titles, such as the two nimitta-focused manuals, Cattāḷīsa Karmasthāna (Or6601(6)III) and Parikamma Bhāvanā (Or6601(23)III).

At first sight one might assume that a text catalogued under the title Cattāḷīsa Karmasthāna (‘Forty Meditation Exercises’) concerns the 40 kammathāna of the Samādhi section of the Visuddhimagga (see Kim in this volume), or that the Vidarśanā bhāvanā pota (‘Book of Insight Meditation’ or ‘Book of Meditation to See Clearly’) relates to categorisations of certain meditations as leading to vipassanā (‘insight’) from either the commentarial period, in such treatises as Buddhaghosa’s fifth-century Visuddhimagga or Anuruddha’s c. eleventh-century Abhidhammatthasaṅgha, or modern periods (see Skilton, in this volume). However, this correlation does not apply, even though the topics used in meditation are all recognisably Theravada and the overall categories of kammathāna comply with those two Abhidhamma-based manuals, even if subdivisions on the applications of those meditation topics do not.10 The Sinhalese term vidarśanā, though formed from the same verb as vipassanā, i.e. vi-dṛś (in Sanskrit), ‘to see clearly’, appears to be used for meditation more broadly.11 The category of vipassanā is found separately in these manuals. For the most part, titles given in the catalogue are descriptive or based on words found at the end of the text, where a title would usually be found, but few of the texts provide a title for themselves.

Table 1 provides a list of the different texts in order by manuscript accession number, a number that also corresponds with the relevant entry in Somadasa’s catalogue (1987–1995). In the discussion below, I look at the texts in terms of genre, describing them and discussing what they tell us about the practice. On the basis of the evidence they provide, I shall discuss the implications for the issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxy that have
Table 1. *boran kammaṭṭhāna* manuscripts in Nevill Collection, British Library. This summarises the 17 texts that are preserved in 11 manuscripts from the collection. The order follows that of the accession or catalogue number given to each manuscript. Titles preceded by "(Catalogue:)" are titles provided by the catalogue entry (Somadasa 1987-1995), not in the manuscript itself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text No. 1, MS 1</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><em>Maraṇāṇasutta jīkā</em> Commentary on the Discourse on Understanding Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catalogue No.</strong></td>
<td>Or6599(12)I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content/genre</strong></td>
<td>Commentary explaining the allegories of some parts of the narrative parts of <em>Maraṇāṇasutta</em> Or6600(90).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Places/people/dating</strong></td>
<td>None, but must be post Or6600(90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length (folios = ff.)</strong></td>
<td>1-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagrams</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Printed version or publications about</strong></td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text No. 2, MS 1</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><em>Maraṇāṇasutta dipani</em> Exposition of the Discourse on Understanding Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catalogue No.</strong></td>
<td>Or6599(12)II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content/genre</strong></td>
<td>Commentary expounding on pre-death prognostications in greater detail, a topic only touched on briefly in <em>Maraṇāṇasutta</em> Or6600(90). Ignores other aspects of the <em>Maraṇāṇasutta</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Places/people/dating</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length (ff.)</strong></td>
<td>8-11, but really runs on from folio 7, the author of the two texts being identical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagrams</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Printed version or publications about</strong></td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text No. 3, MS 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><em>Maraṇāṇasutta</em> <em>Discourse on Understanding Death</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catalogue No.</strong></td>
<td>Or6600(90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content/genre</strong></td>
<td>Apocryphal sutta/ Narrative around metaphor of Princess Citta in tree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Places/people/dating</strong></td>
<td>c.1757 (Crosby et al. 2012, 186). Composed by Varahānāmuni senior Siamese meditation monk from Ayutthaya, for chief Queen of King Kirti Śrī in honour of chief Queen of his predecessor King Vijaya Rājasimha. This copy belonged to ‘the virtuous monk of Henegama’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length (ff.)</strong></td>
<td>1-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagrams</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Printed version or publications about</strong></td>
<td>Description, dating, discussion, and identification of parallels with SE Asian narratives in Crosby, Gunasena and Skilton 2012.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text No. 4, MS 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td><em>(Catalogue:) Vīrāśāṇā bhāvanā potā</em> Book of Meditation for Clear Sight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catalogue No.</strong></td>
<td>Or.6601(6)1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Places/people/dating</strong></td>
<td>Somadasa (Vol. 1 p.240) suggests some features indicate Kurunāgala period [14th century], but the content otherwise fits with the 18th-century evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length (ff.)</strong></td>
<td>1-256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagrams</strong></td>
<td>Yes. Images comparatively more detailed. With flowers and animals/ birds in the different <em>jhāna</em> and <em>nimitta</em> circles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Text No. 3 and Text No. 4 are continued on the next page.*
### Text No. 5, MS 3

**Title**

*Cattālīsa Karmasthāna “Forty Meditation Subjects”*

**Catalogue No.**

Or6601(6)II

**Content/genre**

Nimitta and parikamma manual.

Meditation Manual focusing on which nimitta are to be seen for which meditation stage and how to bind them into the body.

Includes protective texts, paritta, instructions for use of candles, and the beings that one sees when doing brahmavihāra meditations.

Provides details of how to use candles with small sticks inserted into them above a bowl of water for one phase of meditation.

Similar to Or6601(50).

**Places/people/dating**

Copyist: Dampitiye Āraccila, Āraccila of Dampiya (place name), a typical Kandyan period name.

**Length (ff.)**

258-267

**Diagrams**

Yes. The diagrams give a bird’s-eye view showing the placing of the nimitta on top of one another and also movement from side to side within the body. Thus they are in the form of concentric circles with lines moving out to single points at the side, like simplified eyes.

**Printed version or publications about**

No. But lists of nimitta qualities are found in Southeast Asian manuals (see Choompolpaisal this volume, de Bernon 2000).

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### Text No. 6, MS 4

**Title**

*(Catalogue: Vidarśanā bhāvanā pota)*

"Book of Meditation for Clear Sight"

**Catalogue No.**

Or.6601(7)

**Content/genre**

Meditation Manual, version of Or.6601(6)1

**Places/people/dating**

Date 1809 Saka Era and January 1888 Christian Era

**Length (ff.)**

1-242

**Diagrams**

Yes

**Printed version or publications about**

Rhys Davids 1896, Ratanajoti and Ratanapāla 1963, 3.

---

### Text No. 7, MS 5

**Title**

*(Catalogue:) Vidarśanā bhāvanā pota “Book of Meditation for Clear Sight”*

**Catalogue No.**

Or6601(23)I

**Content/genre**

Meditation Manual

Shorter version of Or.6601(6)1

Begins with litany for rituals with teacher (*pubbakicca*).

Some overlap with Or6601(6)II in providing nimitta equivalents, candle exercise, locating nimitta of 4 stages of the path in the body. In order, similar to *Amatākaravāyana*, including similar litany and requests. Like full manuals, it starts with 5 pīti. Mostly in Pali, small amounts of Sinhala.

**Places/people/dating**

**Length (ff.)**

1-31

**Diagrams**

None with this text, but some at the end of the entire manuscript (see below).

**Printed version or publications about**

Rhys Davids 1896, Ratanajoti and Ratanapāla 1963, 2 and 3.

---

### Text No. 8, MS 5

**Title**

*(Catalogue:) Kammaṭṭhāna “Meditation Exercises”*

**Catalogue No.**

Or6601(23)II

**Content/genre**

Pali Litany to precede meditation.

Shorter version of Or6601(85)II with differences in the manner of presentation but not in substance.

**Places/people/dating**

**Length (ff.)**

32-48

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(Continued)
Table 1. (Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Parikamma Bhāvanā “Preparatory Chant and Meditation”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catalogue No.</td>
<td>Or6601(23)III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content/genre</td>
<td>(Given as the third text but numbered II in Somadasa p.279)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed version or publications about</td>
<td>No. But lists of nimitta qualities are found in Southeast Asian manuals (see Choompolpaisal 2019b, this volume, de Bernon 2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places/people/dating</td>
<td>Length (ff.) 49-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagams</td>
<td>Yes. Diagrams show the locating of multiple nimitta and movements thereof. One diagram has akāsamaṇīṃ, ‘gem of space’, providing the terminology of ‘gem’ for the nimitta, a term found in mainland Southeast Asian boran kammaṭṭhāna traditions but not otherwise found in the Sinhalese transmission, except in the Maraṇañāṇasutta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed version or publications about</td>
<td>Rhys Davids 1896, Ratanajoti and Ratanapāla 1963, 3.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text No. 10, MS 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>(Catalogue:) Vidarśanā bhāvanā pota “Book of Meditation for Clear Sight”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catalogue No.</td>
<td>Or6601(43)I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content/genre</td>
<td>Meditation Manual, version of Or.6601(6)1. Incomplete by about 1 folio at end (Somadasa Vol. 1, 297). Starts part way through the 10 anussati (so anussati prior to maraṇa are missing). Provides the litany of request for the nimitta and samādhi and also the confession to the teacher very briefly in Pali, gives explanation in Sinhala on how the nimitta from the different stages appear parallel to those from meditation on the elements and which parikamma phrase to use for each meditation. The practitioner must do these in order and reverse order repeatedly, then see these in the navel then move them inch by inch to the heart where he ties them up and finishes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places/people/dating</td>
<td>Length (ff.) 1-91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagams</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed version or publications about</td>
<td>Rhys Davids 1896, Ratanajoti and Ratanapāla 1963, 3.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text No. 11, MS 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Parikamma Bhāvanā “Preparatory Chant and Meditation” in final line of text (Catalogue:) Kammaṭṭhāna bhāvanā “Meditation [using] Meditation Topics”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catalogue No.</td>
<td>Or6601(43) II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content/genre</td>
<td>Meditation manual mainly on nimitta. Also includes preparation of place of meditation, e.g. meditation walk, like Or6601(50). Partial overlap with Or6601(6)II but some different material at start.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places/people/dating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text No.</td>
<td>Catalogue No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12, MS 7</td>
<td>Or6601(50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, MS 9</td>
<td>Or6601(64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, MS 10</td>
<td>Or6601(76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
affected the survival and thwarted attempts at revival of these practices in the modern period.\textsuperscript{12}

**Examination of texts by genre**

**Narratives and their commentaries**

*Maraṇāṇaṇasutta* (Or6600(90)) is a narrative describing the experiences of Princess Mind, *Cittakumāri* in Pali, who represents our consciousness and lives in the five-branched tree (our body) until she dies and is reborn in another fruit (the mother’s womb) and in turn grows into/inhabits a new tree. She is attacked by Māra’s messengers, three old women symbolising birth, sickness and old age. She is sent visions intended to terrify her to death, and eventually, when she does die/go between trees, she is grabbed and raped by Māra, the god of death and saṁsāra. This horrific experience leads her to seek out some escape, and she sees the four gems held by the
Buddha, far above her. These four gems are interpreted variously as the four truths or as the four stages of spiritual realisation, from stream entrant to arhat. This version of the Maraṇāṇaṇāṇasutta contains a padārtha, a commentary on ‘the meaning of individual words’, that explains some of the symbolism interwoven into the text, though the evidence of the tikā (see next) suggests that versions without the padārtha also circulated in Sri Lanka. To date this manuscript is the only known witness to this text from Sri Lanka.

This Maraṇāṇaṇāṇasutta, ‘Discourse on Understanding/Knowledge of Death’, bears no relationship to the similarly entitled Maraṇassatisutta, ‘Discourse on Recollection/Mindfulness of Death’, in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. This latter focuses on monks making the most of every moment before death to benefit from the Buddha’s teaching. The connections between the content of our text and its title, Maraṇaṇaṇa (‘knowledge of death’), are multiple: the understanding of the inevitability of death; the horror of death as the motivation to find a method of escape; the signs of death, i.e. how to prognosticate when death will occur. The text contains some guidance on how to prognosticate the gati or place of the imminent rebirth on the basis of what people see shortly before they die.

As we have observed elsewhere (Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena 2012), this narrative, rendered into Sinhala for one of the queens of King Kīrti Śrī in the mid-eighteenth century, circulated widely in mainland Southeast Asia, associated with the broader ritual and narrative context of boran kammatthāna. Khmer and Lanna versions, along with translations into French, have been published by François Bizot (1976) and François Lagirarde (1994), respectively.

In the Southeast Asian versions, the relationship between this narrative and boran kammatthāna is more clear, with the descriptions of the body, represented as the five-branched fig tree, going into greater detail and providing locational equivalents between parts of the body and spiritual attainments, such as the location of enlightenment, nirvana, at the forehead. This kind of anatomical understanding underlies the method of incorporating the nimitta, ‘signs’, resulting from different stages of meditation practice, into the body. This somatic incorporation of elements of the path to nibbāna is one of the primary distinguishing features of boran kammatthāna, as will be seen from the discussion of the meditation manuals (below).

Maraṇaṇaṇasuttatikā Or6599(12)I

This tikā, or commentary, explains the allegories and symbolism of some parts of the narrative of the Maraṇaṇaṇasutta (Or6600(90)). For example, it explains that citakukumārī’s rebirth in a sāl flower represents the taking of rebirth after the mother- and father-to-be have sex after the mother’s menstruation has finished, and that the four gems held by the Buddha are
the four stages of spiritual development from stream entrant to arhat. This last interpretation fits better with boran kammatthāna practice than the interpretation of the gems as the four noble truths, the interpretation of the padārtha (Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena 2012, 190), because at the final stages of the practice, one incorporates four gem-like nimitta representing these four stages into the body. (For illustrations from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Thai manuscripts of arhats, enlightened followers of the Buddha, each holding a gem close to the heart or navel, including one with a symbolic letter, see Terwiel this volume, figure 8). Thus, while the tikā partially duplicates the padārtha commentary included in the Maraṇāṇānasutta (Or6600(90)) in its explanation of some of the symbolism, their interpretation does not always coincide. It may be that the padārtha is therefore an exoteric text, as we previously conjectured (Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena 2012, 194–195), and that the interpretation of the gems as the attainment of the four advanced spiritual states reflects the esoteric meaning taught only to those initiated into the meditation practices. The repetition of the almost identical interpretation of the red sāl fruit as the womb of the mother found in the padārtha suggests that this commentary was made in relation to a different version of the Maraṇāṇānasutta from Or6600(90), one that did not contain the padārtha. Within the context of explaining the sāl flower and tree imagery, this tikā also explains that while babies born after 8–10 months usually survive, some of those born at 6–7 months do not.

Maraṇāṇānasutta dīpanī (Or6599(12)II) is also a commentary on the Maraṇāṇānasutta (Or6600(90)) and really follows on from the Maraṇāṇānasutta tikā, with the tikā ending: Maraṇāṇānasuttatikā nītthitā. Puna adhippāyaṃ kathissāmi, ‘The commentary on the Sutta Knowledge of Death is complete. Now I shall explain its purport’. Whereas the tikā explained the analogies of the narrative, the dīpanī focuses entirely on pre-death prognostications, a topic also touched on in the sutta itself. The dīpanī supplements the omens identified in the sutta, with ways of predicting when death will happen:

If the tongue can not distinguish sweet and sour tastes, death will take place within four [days]. If the entire body is insensitive to cold like a sword lying in its sheath, life will be cut short within one day and one watch. […] If, on being inspected three times each day, one’s shadow is clearly visible, then all will be well. […] But if one doesn’t have a shadow one will die within three days. In the morning, at midday and in the evening the shadow should appear as follows: in a western direction and long; close to the body and short; in the eastern direction and long respectively. If they appear in the reverse lengths and directions, it’s a bad sign. Life will be cut short on the seventh day. (Translation by Kate Crosby and Amal Gunasena)
Unlike the *sutta*, the *dīpanī* does not contain the discussion of signs auguring the future state of rebirth, but it does explain that if one understands the signs of impending death and makes merit, one can avoid rebirth in hells.

**Nimitta as omens, visions and signs**

Overall, the *Maravijñānasutta* and its commentaries provide us with the broader religious and cultural contexts, and the narrative frameworks, within which the *boran* meditation practices flourished. The Sri Lankan versions are less obviously related to meditation than their Southeast Asian counterparts, where the details of the body symbolism are drawn out more. What is clear, however, is the culture in which signs, *nimitta*, are understood as signifying some kind of truth about the present, past or future, providing information that those suitably qualified may accurately interpret. The term *nimitta*, meaning ‘mark/sign’ in Pali and Sanskrit, is used in multiple contexts: omens, visions in dreams, and the visual/physical experiences of meditation are all referred to with this one term.\(^{14}\) That they indicate something real, even if subject to misinterpretation, fits with the Theravada Abhidhamma view of consciousness as consisting of consciousness of something, and of the external world as real (as opposed to something illusory or generated by our consciousness, understandings developed within Mahāyāna Buddhism), a point we shall return to when considering other contexts in which *nimitta* arise in this body of texts.

The understanding that one may see omens of one’s future destiny, *gati-nimitta*, when dying is accepted within Abhidhamma, and the process whereby this is possible is explained in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgha* (chapter V, *Vithimuttasāṅgha*, Bodhi et al. 1993, 222–223). According to the c. twelfth-century commentary on the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgha*, the Vibhāvini-*tīkā*, such signs can only be visual. However, this is one of the points taken up by Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) in his commentary on the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgha*, the *Paramatthadipani-*tīkā*, undertaken specifically to rectify errors in the *Vibhāvini-tīkā*, which at that time was the most authoritative interpretation of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgha* (Visuddha 2018, 3). Ledi affirms the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgha*’s position that these *nimitta* can be perceived by any of the senses – in other words, they can include physical, olfactory and auditory signs as well as visual ones (Bodhi et al. 1993). This debate, which accepts *gati-nimitta* as valid, highlights for us that the possibility of witnessing signs indicative of one’s future destiny is in no way unorthodox in Theravada Abhidhamma.

**Litanies**

Two manuscripts each contain a text that is dedicated exclusively to providing litanies, i.e. wordings for rituals. The rituals are to precede the
meditation practices. These are Or6601(23)II, to which Somadasa allocated the title Kammatṭhāṇa in his catalogue (Somadasa 1987–1995, Volume 1, 279), and Or6601(85)II, the colophon of which provides the descriptive title Vākkappakaraṇāṁ or ‘Speech procedure’, i.e. ‘Litany’. Each of these texts, though different in several ways, is clearly providing the same litany. I shall henceforth refer to this shared litany as Vāk. The differences between the two manuscripts result primarily through their method of abbreviation, with Or6601(23)II making more use of the standard abbreviation pe, a convention found in many Pali texts.¹⁵ The result is that Or6601(23)II is shorter than Vākkappakaraṇāṁ Or6601(85)II even though it includes a wider range of litany (below).

In both cases, the meditation manual that accompanies our litany is recorded as the previous text in their respective manuscripts. Thus, for these two manuscripts, the litany and meditation instructions have been separated. In the other manuscripts the litanies are mainly embedded piecemeal within the meditation manuals, with the relevant sections of litany being placed in their order of performance prior to the specific meditation exercise before which they are to be recited. The litany varies according to the practice being undertaken, with requests that the meditation experience with its corresponding nimitta successfully appear, and that the practitioner achieve dhammasaṅña (recognition of the dhamma), the meditation attainment, which is a particular state or aspect of consciousness.¹⁶ These components of the litany are referred to in brief as the ārādhana, the ‘invitation’, i.e. the invitation for the relevant meditation objects in their various stages to appear. As Choompolpaisal and Skilton have explored with reference to the branch of this transmission preserved at Wat Ratchasittharam in Thonburi, Greater Bangkok, a transmission that can also be traced back to eighteenth-century Ayutthaya (Choompolpaisal 2019a), the objects one sees in meditation are treated as autonomous entities rather than something created by the practitioner (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 93). They thus need to be invited to appear and treated with respect.

The ritual for which Vāk provides the litany is the pubbakaraṇa, one of the two rituals that must be undertaken before – and repeatedly while – engaging in the meditation practice. The pubbakaraṇa, or ‘preliminary action/ritual’, is directed to the Buddha and the meditation objects. The other ritual, which follows it, is the pubbakicca, ‘preliminary obligation/duty’, directed to the meditation teacher. In the case of the Vākkappakaraṇā and its associated manual, the Amatākaravāna (Amat), the pubbakaraṇa and pubbakicca are clearly separated, with the latter entirely embedded in Amat. These two texts, the Amatākaravāna and Vākkappakaraṇa, offer the most organised presentation of the practices in any of our manuals, although not necessarily the fullest instructions – we glean different
information from different texts. *Amat* and the *Vākkapprakarāṇa* are also presented almost entirely in Pali, with poetic verses marking the chapter beginnings and endings in *Amat*. Manuscript Or6601(85), containing these two, thus presents also the most polished version of this meditation system from Sri Lanka. In Or6601(23)II, the division between *pubbakarāṇa* and *pubbakicca* is less complete and a part of the *pubbakicca* is also included. In other versions of this meditation manual both the *pubbakarāṇa* and *pubbakicca* are embedded in the meditation manual itself, interwoven with the instructions for the practices that they precede. The *pubbakarāṇa* litany also circulated separately in Cambodia.\(^{17}\)

Since the *pubbakarāṇa* must, like the *pubbakicca*, precede each meditation exercise in its corresponding manual, we find in the *Vākkapprakarāṇa* one chapter, or liturgy, provided for each of the 13 chapters of the *Amat*. Since each chapter of *Amat* instructs the performance of the *pubbakarāṇa* not only once before the whole set of meditations given in that chapter, but also before each individual stage in the meditation, *Vāk* must be employed several thousand times in putting into practice the entire course of meditations in *Amat*. From this it would seem that the practice of *Amat* is expected to take months, if practised continuously. This suggests that the practitioner must be in a position to either temporarily or permanently withdraw from the usual duties of a lay person or village monk. Current practice and oral history about recent practice in Cambodia confirms this pattern: the method is undertaken during specific periods to allow intensive practice. In Cambodia the two specific periods mentioned by most informants are the rains retreat, when it may be practised for up to three months, and just after the rice harvest in January/February, when it was customary within living memory for villagers to take advantage of the lull in the agricultural activity to practise for a period of 9 days (Crosby and Long fieldwork 2012). The expense of the materials and the amount of time required for these devotional practices was cited by several informants as a factor in the demise of the tradition in favour of Burmese-derived *vipassanā* methods, bringing to an end a brief revival in the 1990s following the restoration of Buddhism after the Khmer Rouge period (Crosby and Long fieldwork 2012).

Although *Vāk* is presented entirely as a litany, i.e. as the words spoken by the practitioner, *vākkapprakarāṇa* literally means an ‘activity of speech’, and the litany is very rich, taking us through the anticipated stages of the path and also the bodily movements involved in the performance of the *pubbakarāṇa*. In other words, the litany includes details of the aspirations and anticipated experiences of the practitioner, the structure of the overall practice, and instructions on what he or she should do during the performance of the litany. One of the things we can therefore find out from *Vāk* is the understanding of the religious path that forms the context for these practices. This will help with our assessment of the degree of orthodoxy to heterodoxy of this practice tradition.
The following are the principal sections into which the *pubbakaraṇa* can be divided:

(1) Homage to triple gem.
(2) Offerings to the Buddha.
(3) Worship of the Buddha’s qualities using standard Pali formulae.
(4) Acknowledgement of *akusala* (*citta*) – ‘unwholesome states of consciousness’ – and failure to follow the Buddha’s teaching.
(5) Request for Buddha’s help in removing *akusala* (*citta*) and gaining purity.
(6) Request for *kusala* (*citta*), ‘wholesome states of mind’.
(7) Request for the meditation exercises, both general and specific.
(8) Requests for success in the meditation practice.
(9) Request for wisdom.
(10) Request for the four *magga* and *phala* (‘paths and fruits’), i.e. the two stages of achieving each of the four stages of spiritual attainment en route to enlightenment, from stream entry to arhatship.
(11) Transference of the merit gained by worshipping the triple gem to all beings, for their good rebirth and attainment of *nibbāna*.
(12) Invitation to the four world protectors to rejoice in the merit of the practitioner and consequently remain attentive, so that the *sāsana*, the Buddhist religion, will last the full 5000 years.
(13) A selection of protective *paritta* texts.
(14) Confession of faults.
(15) Reaffirmation of the continuing possibility of attaining *nibbāna*. (This relates to anxiety that *nibbāna* may cease to be possible as the *sāsana* declines.)
(16) Request for *nibbāna*.
(17) Request for the Buddha’s support.
(18) Invocation of the protection of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, the meditation instructor, and meditation practice.
(19) Specific request for the entire set of meditation practices found in one chapter of the corresponding meditation manual. (For the first chapter, this is the five kinds of *piti* – joy – which form a component of the first *jhāna*.)
(20) Specific request for the set of meditation practices found in one section of one chapter of the corresponding meditation manual, e.g. for just one of the five *piti*.
(21) Request for each of the subdivisions of the meditation exercises within that one section.
(22) Request for the *lakkhana*, ‘mark or characteristic’, i.e. the physical and visual experience of the *nimitta* that marks the successful accomplishment of the meditation.
(23) Vow to perform the practice successfully or die.
(24) Invocation of the power of the vow.
(25) Repetition of parikamma (sacred/powerful formula specific to each practice) ‘hundreds or thousands of times’.
(26) Focusing of mindfulness (sati) on the hadayavatthu, the heart-base, regarded as the physical location of consciousness in Theravada commentarial abhidhamma (Karunadasa 2010, 48).
(27) Request that the meditation practice and successful attainments in it become an inalienable part of the practitioner’s person (the khandha, the five aggregates of conscious embodiment that make up the individual) and become the condition that causes the practitioner’s attainment of nibbāna.

All the terminology here complies with commentarial abhidhamma. Only some of the processes, such as part 25, the extended repetition of the parikamma, or part 27, the requests that the practice and attainments become part of the khandha, alert us to something distinctive about the practice. The use of standard Pali verses of praise, paritta, merit-transference and vows also places this squarely within standard Theravada practice. We shall return to some sections in more detail below, to see how important the abhidhamma context is for the structure of the path along which the practitioner is to progress.

In the Vākkapparakaṇa Or6601(85)II, the pattern outlined above is repeated almost exactly for each of the 13 chapters, each of which corresponds to a chapter in its attendant manual, Amat. The only variations between chapters are the names of the meditation exercises requested in the specific requests, the parikamma phrases to be used for those exercises and the number of repetitions of these requests, according to the number of sections within each chapter of Amat. The Or6601(23)II version and other versions shorten the number of repetitions.

**Use of candles**

In addition to providing the litany, the Vākkapparakaṇa Or6601(85)II lists the number of candles needed for each practice. Here we see that the candles are used in two ways, firstly as offerings to the Buddha and secondly to time different stages of the meditation practice. Further uses are indicated in some of the other manuals, namely as gifts for teachers and in the empowering of the water in the bowls over which the candles are burnt, this water then being used to bathe the teacher and the practitioner.\(^{19}\)

The offering of five candles to the Buddha, conforming to the pentadic symbolism characteristic of boran kammatthāna and its broader practice culture, is one of the most distinctive visual features of this practice across different regions. In the meditation manuals themselves, the practitioner is
given instructions on how to use the candles to time the meditations. Amat explains that small sticks must be inserted along the side of the candle. The candle is then placed in or above a bowl containing water. As the candle burns, the wax holding the sticks into the side of the candle melts and the stick drops, making a sound as it hits the water. When the meditator has heard one or more of the sticks drop, he moves on to the next stage of the meditation. In recorded practice from Thailand and Cambodia, small balls of metal are inserted into the candles rather than sticks and the bowl may not contain water, meaning that the sounds of the inserted metal dropping is a far louder sound (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 105–107).

**The Abhidhamma construction of the path in Vāk**

One of the questions I have had throughout the time I have worked on *boran kammatthāna* and observed its Pali vocabulary is whether the practice has developed within an Abhidhamma/Pali Theravada context or outside of it. In other words, is the Abhidhamma and Pali that pervades *boran kammatthāna* crucial to how it functions or have methods found elsewhere, for example in some form of Mahāyāna or Śaiva tantra, had the Abhidhamma Pali vocabulary imposed on them? In the latter case we would be speaking of a practice that has been Abhidhammicised in order to adopt ritual and meditation developed in another context in a form acceptable to a Theravada context. The reason that this question arises is because of the tendency among scholars who have worked on this material to see this practice as unorthodox, as in some way more akin to tantra and ultimately both heterodox and heteroprax. For while Rhys Davids was fairly agnostic, unsure of his own expertise in matters of meditation, others have either dismissed its value (see Crosby 2013, 35 and 116–117) or seen the type of Theravada in which they found it as fundamentally heteroprax (e.g. Bizot 1992, 26ff.)

Borrowing of tantra between different religious traditions has been convincingly documented, for example between tantric Hinduism and Vajrayāna Buddhism (Sanderson 1994, Mallinson 2019). While the absence of a pantheon is striking in *boran kammatthāna*, and might be used to argue against the superimposition of Abhidhamma upon a tantric base, we know that Śaivism and Vajrayāna flourished in regions later dominated by Theravada, providing the kind of juxtaposition, rivalry and switching of royal patronage that could have led to just such a development. So did such borrowing create *boran kammatthāna*? The litanies we are examining here provide important information for answering this question. The way in which they map out the practitioner’s path of progress is particularly significant. For if we return to the series of requests and vows that make up that path in Vāk, we can assess the intended goals of the meditator and its vision of the path against formulations of the
path considered orthodox in Theravada, such as the path presented in Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* and Anuruddha’s *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*. I shall therefore provide full translations of a few sections of the litany, interspersed with explanations of the Abhidhamma terminology they include, in order to elucidate the path as envisaged in *boran kammatthāna*. This will allow us to assess whether or not this corresponds with Abhidhamma in terminology alone or in its fundamental conceptualisation of the process of the transformation of the individual from an ordinary being to one who has reached the supramundane levels from stream entrant to arhatship.

We start our examination with the first substantial requests to the Buddha found within the litany, which follow on from an initial homage to the Buddha:

> By your leave, venerable, omniscient Gotama, since these fourteen unwholesome factors, namely, delusion, unscrupulousness, shamelessness, distraction, greed, false view, pride, hate, envy, selfishness, restlessness, torpor, languor, and doubt, have flooded my mind, like a blind man or one deranged, I do not see the path of the four truths. Therefore, I cannot follow the Buddha’s advice.

By your leave, venerable, omniscient Gotama, out of compassion for me accept my material offering.

The unwholesome factors listed here comprise the four primary ‘general unwholesome mental factors’, *akusala-sādhāraṇa-cetasika-saṅkhāra*, and the 10 secondary *akusala-sādhāraṇa-cetasika*, found in the Abhidhamma analysis of *cetasika*. *Cetasika*, ‘mental constituents/factors’, are one of the three categories into which Abhidhamma divides conditioned *dhamma*: form (*rūpa*), consciousness (*citta*), and mental factors (*cetasika*). The *akusala-cetasika* are listed in *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, chapter 2 (Bodhi et al. 1993, 83ff.). The unwholesome mental factors are what bring about unwholesome states of mind and, in turn, unwholesome actions. They are analysed in Abhidhamma according to whether they have their origins in one of the three underlying causes of our continuation in the round of rebirth, *samsāra*, namely greed, hatred or delusion (Bodhi et al. 1993, 31). They hinder our progress towards *nibbāna*, the fourth, unconditioned, type of *dhamma* according to Abhidhamma. Here the *akusala cetasika* are identified at the start of the ritual as the cause of the practitioner having ignored the Buddha’s teachings previously. He continues:

> By your leave, venerable, omniscient Gotama, ascertain any defect in my three gateways. If, on investigation, there is one, then take it and place it before me. After placing it there, weaken it either by overcoming it with its opposite or by overcoming it by starving it, destroy it, annihilate it. Make me pure without blemish. When I have been made pure like silver or gold burnished in the mouth of a furnace, may I have a radiance like the spotless orb of the moon over [the cloudless] Mount Yugandhara.
In this section, the practitioner, having confessed the unwholesome mental factors, turns to possible hindrances to meditation. The term ‘defect’ translates dosa, a fault or obstacle, in particular one preventing success in meditation. The term gateway translates dvāra, ‘door’ or ‘access point’. The gateways encompass the mind and sense organs, i.e. the gateways through which we experience and cognise. There are six: eye, ear, sense of smell, tongue, body and mind, often divided into the five and mind, because of the different function of the mind in enabling consciousness through the other five senses, as explained in the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha (Bodhi et al. 1993, 125–127). Here the group is shortened to three farther down in the text: the gateway of the eye, the mind and the body. The sense organs other than the eye are incorporated in the body-access point. The list of three thus incorporates the entire list, but focuses on the main access points through which meditation results, including nimitta (the signs resulting from meditation), arise, namely the eye, body and mind. Obstacles can arise in these access points if the practitioner is not mindful, preventing him/her from succeeding in his/her practice. To understand the expectations here in terms of the practice itself, let us look ahead to the practice manual, the Amatākaravanaṇanā, when it first mentions the appearance of nimitta.

With his eye consciousness focused on the tip of his nose, he should establish the consciousness of his mind on the supports [ārammaṇa, objects of cognition] that are the in and out breaths. While watching in this way drops of foam or rays of smoke-like lines appear. He should recognise this as the acquiring sign (uggahanimitta). (Amatākaravanaṇanā, ch. 1, verses 65–66, my unpublished translation)

This first description of how to recognise the nimitta occurs in the piti (‘delight’) section, the first stage of the practice. One distinctive feature of boran kammattthāna practice, as will be explored further below, is that it begins with the five piti, joys or delights, which progressively develop with the arising of the first jhāna. Here, after making the appropriate requests to the Buddha and teacher, and invitations to the dhamma (the desired phenomena) to appear, the practitioner uses his in and out breath as a support to gain concentration while focusing on the tip of his nose. The experience of the nimitta varies according to the individual, so the text provides a range of possible appearances and sensations. These nimitta will then be drawn from the tip of the nose through the nostril and down into the body (below). The boran kammattthāna process thus depends on the establishment and manipulation of nimitta.

For this reason, the practitioner, here in the preparatory rituals recorded in the litany Vāk, aims to be rid of any faults in the dvāra before beginning the meditation. This is because the nimitta can only be experienced if the dvāra are free of obstacles, because the nimitta are caused by external
phenomena, i.e. by the dhamma. In other words, they are not the product of the imagination of the practitioner. Rather, the nimitta represent and relate to the dhamma, in this case the first piti, which is a cetasika (a mental factor), one of the four types of dhamma found in Abhidhamma analysis. We shall explore the role of nimitta in more detail below. For now, we notice that the practitioner invites these dhamma to appear and seeks to clear the pathway for them to enter the practitioner's senses.

There is a parallel version of the litany found in Vāk in the Cambodian text translated into French by Bizot as the Chemin de Laṅkā. At this point, the Cambodian litany adds another Abhidhamma term: the practitioner asks the Buddha to turn the faults into ahosikamma, ‘defunct kamma’, i.e. kamma (action) with no further potency, no possibility of producing a consequence, vipāka (Bizot 1992, 214 §4.4.). For arhats, those who achieve enlightenment, all kamma become ahosikamma, defunct kamma which did not meet the appropriate conditions to ripen, which explains how arhats may not suffer all the consequences of their previous actions (Bodhi et al. 1993, 205). In other words, the practitioner wants to avoid faults, dosa, based on kamma that has not yet come to fruition, from arising in the future. This request indicates an understanding of the process of cognition as well as a detailed vision of the path to enlightenment firmly grounded in the Abhidhamma understanding of causality. In Vāk the practitioner then continues with Abhidhamma understandings of how to remove dosa, listing two of the five pahāna (‘overcomings’; Nyāṇatiloka 1980, s.v. Pahāna), overcoming it by emphasising the opposite, or by starving it, i.e. removing its support and not fuelling it. The parallel passage in the Chemin de Laṅkā includes a third method of overcoming, samucchedapahāna, ‘cutting out’ (Bizot 1992, 214, §4.5).

Let us now turn to the next set of requests to the Buddha found in Vāk.

Venerable omniscient Gotama, after destroying the five hindrances in me, cause to arise wholesome (consciousness) regarding the sphere of desire, wholesome (consciousness) regarding the sphere of form, wholesome (consciousness) regarding the sphere of no-form, wholesome (consciousness) regarding the supramundane sphere.

This request is the key to understanding the ultimate purpose of boran kammathāna practice. It summarises the Abhidhamma path to liberation, to becoming an arhat, by listing the different categories of wholesome consciousness, from the ordinary level of an ordinary person up to the higher levels of consciousness culminating in the supramundane states including enlightenment. There are 21 karmically wholesome states of consciousness, subdivided into these four levels of consciousness, each level also corresponding to the four spheres of Buddhism cosmology, namely the spheres of (1) desire, (2) form, (3) no-form and (4) supramundane, respectively. The 21 wholesome states of consciousness are grouped as follows: (1)
regarding the sphere of desire, there are four types of joyful and four types of indifferent, making eight types; (2) regarding the sphere of form, there are the five jhāna (Bodhi et al. 1993, 52–53); (3) regarding the sphere of no-form, there are four: infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception; (4) regarding the supramundane sphere, there are the four paths, i.e. stream entrance, once-returning, non-returning, arahatship. Kusala-citta are attended by kusala-cetasika, wholesome mental factors, just as the akusala-citta are accompanied by the akusala-cetasika, unwholesome mental factors, met above. When the practitioner here requests the kusala citta to arise, having destroyed the five hindrances, he/she is asking to move on to the next stage, to abandon akusala-citta and to start to build up the kusala-cetasika, the wholesome mental factors that will allow the practitioner to reach the wholesome citta, the states of consciousness which, at the highest level, lead to the spiritual attainments from stream entrance to arahatship. The four kusala-citta at the supramundane level, i.e. the path of stream entrance, once-returning, non-returning, and arahatship, lead in turn to their corresponding resultant states, the phala, the fruition of these four paths, the final objective of the practitioner.

These requests for the wholesome states of consciousness and their corresponding resultant states are not just intended in a generic way. Rather, the request is specific, and will structure the very path itself. When we proceed to the boran kammattāna meditation manuals below, we will see that the meditation at each stage is combined with all of the relevant kusala-cetasika and kusala-citta for that stage of the meditation. The repetitive nature of these manuals, with small progressive changes, therefore reflects the mathematics of Abhidhamma, in which certain combinations and permutations of dhamma are seen as possible, and in which those combinations at one moment may be replaced or substituted by another combination at the next. The combinations of dhamma being replaced by new combinations of dhamma is what constitutes causality in Abhidhamma and enables a positive progression on the path by means of substitution of one set of dhamma, particularly states of consciousness and their concomitant mental factors, by increasingly beneficial states. We can see this analysis of progressive types of positive, beneficial or – in Abhidhamma terms – beautiful (sobhana) states of consciousness, including wholesome consciousness and corresponding resultant and functional consciousnesses, in the first chapter of the Abhidhammatthasaṅga, which is dedicated to citta, states of consciousness (Bodhi et al. 1993, 23ff.). Here in boran kammattāna, the wholesome mental factors and states of consciousness combine and are progressively substituted with the next to enable the practitioner to progress step by step on the path.
Let us now turn to the next stage in the litany, where the practitioner moves on from the request for the *kusala citta* to the request for meditation and its results:

I request the meditation on the meditation subjects for *samatha*, tranquility. Then I ask to receive [the *pīti*, five kinds of rapture] beginning with slight rapture and the meditation exercise on impurity, both with the *nimitta* and without *nimitta*. Furthermore, may the acquired sign and the counterpart-sign appear before me. Furthermore, I ask to receive access-*samādhi* and application-*samādhi* regarding the letters and all syllables. In addition, I request the wisdom of the omniscient one, which arises from insight meditation, and that [succession of spiritual purification] which begins with purification of conduct and culminates in the knowledge in conformity [with the truth].

Venerable omniscient Gotama, I ask for moral conduct, meditation and wisdom, knowledge of the characteristics [of impermanence, non-self and suffering], the break-up of name and form, and not coming into existence again. I ask also to receive every day either the *dhamma* that is the path or the *dhamma* that is the fruit.

In this section the practitioner requests success in the stages of the path, beginning with *samatha* meditation and ending with ‘not coming into existence again’. He asks for one of the eight stages towards this path every day, the eight being the path and fruition of the four stages from stream entrant to *arhat*. Let us unpack some of these requests further in order to see how they again correspond to an Abhidhamma formulation of the path.

The meditation exercises for tranquility, *samatha*, are requested here in chapter 1 and the next seven chapters; the meditation exercises for insight, *vipassanā*, are requested in chapters 9 to 13. While this division does not at first sight appear to correspond to the categorisation of meditation subjects in the *kammathāna* chapter of *Abhidhammatthasangaha* (chapter IX, Bodhi et al. 1993, 329–265) or chapter divisions of the *Visuddhimagga*, other aspects of the construction of the path even in this paragraph confirm an understanding of *vipassanā* in accordance with those two texts. I shall return to this point in a closer examination of the second part of this passage below.

Staying for now with the first part of the litany above, we notice that the practitioner asks for the meditation with and without *nimitta*. *Nimitta*, as noted above, is often translated as ‘sign’. The term may derive from the Pali verb *ni-mā* (‘to create’) and means the image or experience created by meditation on a meditation object. These are usually associated with *kasina*, external devices used as the basis for meditation, because the *Visuddhimagga* provides its fullest explanation of *nimitta* in the chapter on *kasina* (chapters IV and IV, Ṛṇānamoli 1975, 113–168). However, the *Visuddhimagga* also mentions them in relation to other types of meditation object, including meditation on breathing. The *nimitta* may appear
differently to different practitioners, such that a range of colours, visual appearance and sensation may all be signs of successful attainment. In boran kammatthāna, the use of nimitta recognisably builds on the understanding of them found in the Visuddhimagga, with identical descriptions of some nimitta. However, the use that boran kammatthāna makes of the nimitta is very extensive and they are recognised as appearing in relation to almost all meditation practices. The repetition found in the Visuddhimagga, with nimitta of different meditation practices having identical appearance, is extended in boran kammatthāna manuals. They are not only signs that a particular state has been achieved. They have then a subsequent application or use as a tool for embodying the meditation for which they are the sign, as we shall see below when examining the manuals.

The Visuddhimagga and other commentarial period texts classify the nimitta that arise in meditation into three kinds according to their stage on a spectrum from dependence on the external object to internalisation, as well as how they relate to access concentration, upacārasamādhi, and the development of jhāna. Initially, the nimitta observed by the meditator is the result of his direct perception of the external object and is totally dependent on the presence of the external object. At this stage, what he sees is termed the parikamma-nimitta (‘preparatory image’ or ‘sign’). As the meditation progresses this is replaced by a mental image, termed the ‘acquired image’ or ‘acquired sign’, uggaha-nimitta. At the most advanced development the image is held entirely in the mind of the meditator and is no longer reliant on the external object that formed the basis of the preceding two types of nimitta that it replaced. This is called the patibhāga-nimitta, ‘counter-image’ or ‘counterpart-sign’, and is the object of jhāna citta, the states of consciousness that constitute the experience of jhāna (Bodhi et al. 1993, 56). At this stage, the nimitta acquires important properties. It is purified and has enhanced vibrancy, so it is not a direct reproduction of the object but something more special than that, free of the limitations of the original object. As such, it can be manipulated and transformed by the meditator. In the Visuddhimagga such manipulation involves expanding the nimitta over progressively larger delimited areas (Nāṇamoli 1975, 145). While the Visuddhimagga advocates the practice of extending the nimitta in the case of the kasiṅa practices, it does not agree to the same expansion in relation to other practices, such as the brahmavihāra, as observed by Kyungrae Kim when identifying how this contrasts with the position of the Vimuttimagga, a Theravada text now extant only in Chinese which is thought to predate the Visuddhimagga (Nāṇamoli 1975, 107; Kim in this volume). In boran kammatthāna, the meditator manipulates all the nimitta, primarily internally to different locations around the body, and sometimes externally, for example in its brahmavihāra practice. As we shall see below, this process of moving the experience, represented by the nimitta, relates to the South Asian model of consciousness underlying this practice.
Erik Greene, in the context of discussing the significance of visions as signs of meditative attainment in fourth- to fifth-century Chinese accounts, notes the parallels with the *nimitta* in the *Visuddhimagga*. He summarises the special qualities of the *patibhāga-nimitta* as follows:

The counterpart sign is *not* the perfect, ‘eidetic’ visualization [...] of the initial object of meditation, but rather something like the purified essence of the object. For the water *kasina*, for example, both the original object and the ‘acquired sign’ have bubbles, froth, and other such details, while the counterpart sign ‘appears inactive, like a crystal fan set in space’. [...] (There is thus actually a *loss* of visual ‘resolution’ relative to the original physical object, as one moves from the acquired sign to the counterpart sign.) Significantly, the counterpart sign is sometimes described in visual terms even when the initial mediation object itself is not in any sense a ‘visual’ one. Thus in the case of meditation on the breath, [...] it is said that the counterpart sign appears ‘to some like star or a cluster of gems’, and to others ‘like a stretched-out cobweb or a film or cloud or a lotus flower or a chariot wheel or the moon’s disk or the sun’s disk’. (Greene forthcoming, ch. 2, p. 14, citing the translation of the *Visuddhimagga* by Nāṇamoli 1975, 277).

Greene’s observation that the *nimitta* does not necessarily share visual qualities with the initial object and that the counterpart *nimitta* represents a purified essence is important for our understanding of the use of *nimitta* in *boran kammatthāna*. It is the quality of the *nimitta* as an essence that appears to make possible incorporation of the meditation attainment in the practitioner’s body during the practice, as we shall see when turning to the manuals. *Boran kammatthāna* thus seems to extend the application of the *patibhāga-nimitta* already found in the *Visuddhimagga*. Here in the litany, the practitioner requests that the acquired sign and the counterpart sign appear before him, and does not request the *parikamma-nimitta*. This is because the *parikamma-nimitta*, preparation sign, arises automatically by looking at the meditation object or undertaking the meditation, as long as there is no fault in his ability to perceive (an issue previously covered by the request to remove faults, *dosa*). It is only the next two stages in the development of the sign that are uncertain, the attainment of them reflecting progress in the meditation.

The litany reflects this, with the practitioner at this point asking to ‘receive access-śamādhi and absorption-śamādhi regarding the letters and all syllables’. Śamādhi means concentration and refers to the focused state of consciousness crucial in transforming the individual. The two levels of śamādhi mentioned here in the litany are upacāra-śamādhi (‘access śamādhi’) and appaniśa śamādhi (‘absorption śamādhi’). The relationship between the *nimitta* and these two types of śamādhi is explained in the *Visuddhimagga* (IV 31–34, Nāṇamoli 1975, 120–123). Access śamādhi is attained as a result of realisation of the *uggaha-nimitta* and leads to the transition from the *uggaha-nimitta* to the *patibhāga-nimitta*. The attainment
of patibhāga-nimitta may also lead to absorption samādhi. Access samādhi is the meditational focus that results from the absence of hindrances, and so relates to the discarding of akusala-cetasika and dosa in the earlier part of litany. Access samādhi is also the basis for further progress, but its own benefit is provisional, in that one can fall back into the bhavaṅga, the factor (for continuation) of existence. The bhavaṅga is the state of mind, citta, at rest, when someone is making no mental, verbal or physical effort. It is a distinctly Theravada concept found within Abhidhamma, used to explain continuity of the individual both in life and on to the next life, as each moment of consciousness disappears to be replaced by another. The potential of substituting a more wholesome citta (state of consciousness) in this train of momentary states of consciousness is what allows for progress along the path. In contrast, the next level of samādhi, absorption samādhi (appanāsamādhi), can interrupt the bhavaṅga, and thus lead out of saṁsāra.

The modern Burmese meditation master Pa-Auk Sayadaw (b. 1934), whose practice is based very closely on the Visuddhimagga (Pa-Auk 1998, 1), explains this stage in the context of the breathing meditation as follows:

At this stage [i.e. once the practitioner has attained patibhāga-nimitta] you will reach either access (upacāra) or absorption (appanā) concentration. It is called access concentration because it is close to and precedes jhāna. Absorption concentration is jhāna. Both types of concentration have the patibhāga-nimitta as their object. The only difference between them is that in access concentration the jhāna factors are not fully developed. For this reason bhavaṅgas still occur, and one can fall into bhavaṅga (life-continuum consciousness). The yogi will say that everything stopped, and may even think it is Nibbana. In reality the consciousness has not stopped, but the yogi is just not sufficiently skilled to discern this, because the bhavaṅgas are very subtle. (Pa-Auk 2010, 39. I have added diacritics and italics for consistency with the technical terms used in this article to aid their recognition.)

Since absorption concentration can interrupt the bhavaṅga, and lead to the supramundane stages, the next request at this point in our litany is for the insight and knowledge of a Buddha, ‘the omniscient one’.

At this point I wish to return to the request for vipassanā, insight, in order to examine the correlation between the understanding of vipassanā here and that found in more familiar presentations in Abhidhamma. The litany’s phrase ‘that [succession of spiritual purification] which begins with purification of conduct and culminates in the knowledge in conformity [with the truth]’ summarises six of the seven purifications (visuddhi) found within the vipassanā section of the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha (Bodhi et al. 1993, 344), and indicates a detailed familiarity with these. The first of the seven purifications is easily recognisable. It is the purification of conduct. ‘Knowledge in conformity’ requires more detailed familiarity with the seven purifications for it is the final stage in the subdivisions of the sixth purification (ibid. 345).
Thus, Vāk initially requests the first six purifications, not all seven in one go. The reason for this is that after the sixth purification, as explained in the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha presentation of the transformation of the individual, comes the ‘change of lineage’. The change of lineage is extremely important because it marks the transition of the individual from an ordinary worldling who is subject to saṃsāra into one who has attained the supramundane states from stream entrant to arhat (ibid. 168 and 345), i.e. one by whom saṃsāra has been transcended. Here in Vāk this transition in clearly marked after the sixth visuddhi by a separate request which culminates in the wish not to come into existence again. It is the anulomañāṇa (‘knowledge in conformity [with the truth]’) that triggers the change of lineage. Its content is the understanding of the three lakkhana of impermanence, no self and suffering, the realisation of which affects the bhavaṅga (‘factor [for continuation] of existence’), leading the practitioner directly to the path out of saṃsāra.

This change of lineage, forming the hiatus between worldly and supramundane status, is therefore coterminous with the beginning of the final and seventh purification, that of knowledge and vision, which entails the attainment of the highest of the kusala citta (wholesome states of consciousness), namely the four ‘paths’ and fruits’, from stream entry, sotāpatti, to arhat, and their corresponding ‘fruitions’, phala, i.e. the full attainment of those stages. It is these, rather that the purification by name, that Vāk requests here. Thus, while the components of meditation practice in boran kammatthāna initially seem different from, though overlapping with, those provided in the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha and Visuddhimagga, we can see that the transformation process envisaged is the same.

The correlation between boran kammatthāna and Abhidhamma

This correlation with the analysis of citta and cetasika can be seen from the very start of the first set of meditations in the Vāk litany and its corresponding manual, the Amatākaravāmanā. As is typical of boran kammatthāna practices, they begin with the five kinds of pīti, delight (cf. Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 91). Delight is a type of cetasika, mental factor. Whether it is wholesome or unwholesome depends on context. It arises in the first jhāna. Since the jhāna are wholesome citta, mental states, here pīti is wholesome. The division of pīti into five kinds or stages is a commentarial period analysis, with the highest being the full pīti attained on the full attainment of the first jhāna. Andrew Skilton has convincingly suggested that the reason that this practice begins with pīti is that the practice is intended as progressive, so that rather than aim to achieve the first jhāna in one go, progress is broken down into the components of the first jhāna (Skilton 2016). Conforming with Theravada understanding of momentariness, one disappears and is substituted by the next as the
practitioner’s attainment progresses. In boran kammathāna manuals, while invoked progressively, they are combined within the body, as we will see next. I am also interested by the crossover between mental and physical here, and the notion of piti as nutriment for high-level beings, as found in the canonical Aggaññasutta, as well as for embryos (Kong 2016, 47–52). This might be relevant here in that the practice aims to nourish and construct an enlightened being physically, a point I shall return to below, and has parallels with the ayurvedic treatment of embryos in the womb as I have explored elsewhere (Crosby 2013).

From a close examination of some of the passages of the litany of requests to the Buddha that precede each stage of boran kammathāna meditation practice, we can see that the understanding of the path to Buddhahood that structures the practice is entirely in accordance with Theravada Abhidhamma. The focus of these requests is to ensure that the meditations lead directly to the interruption of the bhavaṅga that enables the practitioner to leave samsāra. The understanding of how this happens is technical and entails a detailed understanding of the path according to Theravada orthodoxy. Thus, the boran kammathāna transmission from Ayutthaya in the eighteenth-century was not only orthodox, it was founded on a very solid and detailed understanding of the Abhidhamma analysis of enlightenment. From this, we must conclude that boran kammathāna at the height of its popularity in the eighteenth century was entirely orthodox. But was it orthoprax? To examine this question, we must turn to the practice manuals to see what further the practitioner was instructed to do with the nimitta during his meditation.

Meditation manuals

Above we have considered two types of text. The narrative texts broadly explain embodiment and death using the allegory of the princess (or prince), Cittakumārī/Cittakumāra, living in a tree, for our embodied state of consciousness, citta. They and their commentaries also offer details concerning the prognostication of when death will come and where one will be reborn after death. This prognostication is done on the basis of physical symptoms and nimitta, signs, primarily visual but also physical, experienced when dying. This practice might seem at first sight to fall outside of Theravada orthodoxy, but is in fact explained through the Abhidhamma understanding of how consciousness functions (see above). The second set of texts considered were the litanies. In invoking the different stages of meditation in a series of requests, the litanies offer a detailed understanding of an orthodox path, following commentarial Abhidhamma, and provide considerable detail about the ways in which different levels of nimitta, in relating to stages of samādhi, may allow the practitioner to progress to the
kusala citta, the wholesome states of consciousness, and their fruition, which marks the culmination of the path in the attainment of arhatship. The third set of texts are the manuals for the meditations proper, drawn on above to explain the anticipated experience of nimitta, and it is to these we turn here.

In the Nevill Collection there are 12 meditation manuals. Their catalogue numbers are as follows: Or6601(6)I, Or6601(6)II, Or6601(7), Or6601(23)I, Or6601(23)III, Or6601(43)I, Or6601(43)II, Or6601(50), Or6601(51), Or6601(64), Or6601(76), Or6601(85)II. These manuals overall provide three separate functions. They tell the practitioner (1) what parikamma or phrase for recitation to use for each meditation practice (the possible confusion between parikamma as a phrase for recitation and parikamma as type of nimitta does not occur in these texts because of the automatic nature of parikamma nimitta as long as one’s cognition is not faulty); (2) how to recognise the nimitta that indicate one has attained dhammasaṅñā, ‘perception of the [relevant] dhamma’, the elements of the path in terms of Abhidhamma’s categories of citta and cetasika dhamma; and (3) how to internalise this in the body. Many of them contain elements of the litanies to differing degrees. They may also provide additional material, such as additional instructions on how to use the empowered water and candles, and on forms seen during the brahmavihāra meditation, in which nimitta turn into specific classes of beings such as deities.

Four manuals focus on parikamma and recognising nimitta (functions 1 and 2 above): Or6601(6)II, Or6601(23)III, the final sections of Or6601(51), and Or6601(64) (see Table 1). The parikamma, literally ‘preparatory work’ or ‘attendant work’, are phrases to be recited to induce the correct meditation experience. Some of these, such as sukhī homi (‘may I be happy’) or ananta ākāsa (‘infinite space’), are familiar from other meditation contexts, such as the instructions for brahmavihāra and formless jhāna in the Visuddhimagga. Their meaning is clearly connected to the practice. Other parikamma are less clear in their connection. The most common parikamma in boran kammatthāna is the simple three syllables araham, literally ‘worthy one’, but with each syllable representing different elements of different sets of three, such as the three breaths. This use of language as representative of a further esoteric meaning, harnessed in the use of symbolic symbols or letter alchemy, is a feature of boran kammatthāna I noted at the outset. While not a focus of the present article, I shall touch on this usage in this section.

In providing information on which nimitta should appear for which meditation practice these texts overlap with the short diagnostic manuals kept by meditation teachers in Cambodia. Most of the texts, even the extensive manuals (below), treat the experience of nimitta itself with this brevity, as can be seen from the quotation above from the Amatākaravanṇā. Only occasionally does a text provide more detail and the sequence of experiences the practitioner might feel in particular stages
of meditation, such as progressive stages of pervading happiness and horripilation described in, for example, manual Or6601(43), folio 9. For the most part the texts condense this experience into simply the colour, visual quality and possibly physical experience of a nimitta at one meditation stage and then later provide the information that the nimitta for a later stage is the same as that.

How these nimitta are to be treated is the subject of the most extensive meditation manuals, which mostly range from around 100 to over 200 folios in length. Their British Library acquisition numbers are: Or6601(6)I, Or6601(7), Or6601(23)I, Or6601(43)I, Or6601(50), Or6601(51), Or6601(76) and Or6601(85)I. All but the last are in a mixture of Pali and Sinhala. Somadasa has mainly given them the title Vidarśanā bhāvanā pota, ‘Book of Meditation for Clear Sight’, with both titles Cattalīṣa Karmasthāna (‘Forty meditation subjects’) and Kaśīṇa Bhāvanā Pota (‘Book of kaśīṇa meditation’) for Or6601(51) and Or6601(76). The name for the Pali-language version, Or6601(85)I, is the Amatākaravanṇanā, ‘Account of the Mine of Immortality’. There are overlaps among the manuals as well as the same general patterns, and yet they all vary. Examining all the manuals has contributed to greater clarity of the processes involved as different compilers chose to explain different aspects.

The manuals indicate that the nimitta are to be internalised and moved around the inside of the body, beginning with the tip of the nose, then entering the nasal passage and following pathways down to the heart and womb (regardless of whether the practitioner is male or female). The ‘womb’ is a point about two fingers’ breadth from the navel. The nimitta are to be moved between different points in the body in certain set patterns (see Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 104). Diagrams in some of the manuals indicate these movements. The nimitta are not moved in isolation but in combination with other nimitta; with the physical elements, earth, water, heat, wind and space; with wholesome mental factors, kusala cetasika, such as the pairs of physical and mental tranquility, lightness, softness, malleability, proficiency and upright-ness (kāya- and citta-passadhi, -lahutā, mudutā, kammaññatā, pāguññatā, ujukatatā), and finally with the wholesome mental states, kusala citta, such as the jhāna and the four magga (‘paths’) of the four supramundane states from stream entrant to arhat, and their corresponding resultant citta, the phala or fruition of the four supramundane states from stream entrant to arhat (the lokuttaravipāka citta; Bodhi et al. 1993, 66). In this process, the nimitta are represented by spheres of light, like gems, which may be designated either with a number or with the five syllables na mo bu ddhā ya, the exoteric meaning of which is ‘homage to the Buddha’, each syllable of which represents one of a set of five, e.g. the five pīṭi.

It is this movement of the nimitta in combination with the elements, mental factors and mental states that appears unorthodox, or rather, heteroprax, in boran kammaṭṭhāna. However, as we ascertained when examining
the litanies above, the detailed working out of the path to enlightenment that these texts use is the path as formulated and understood in Abhidhamma. This alerts us to an important basis for understanding the process envisaged here. Commentarial Abhidhamma understands that all dhamma, phenomena into which it analyses reality, including experience, fall into the following categories: rūpa, cetasika, citta, and nibbāna, i.e. form, mental factors, mental states and nibbāna. The first three are all momentary, with the momentariness being relative: form is replaced less rapidly than mental states. Each dhamma which falls into these three categories arises, endures then dies in quick succession. The apparent continuity of our experience and existence comes from the rapidity with which each dhamma is replaced by another. In this process of causality, one dhamma giving rise to the next, change in quality takes place when, rather than one dhamma being replaced by an identical one, a different dhamma takes the place of the preceding one. This substitution of dhamma also allows for a process of positive change. If increasingly more wholesome mental states (kusala citta), and their concomitant cetasika (mental factors), including the wholesome ones, replace the preceding mental states, and give rise to their corresponding resultant states, we progressively move towards the state of enlightenment. How different dhamma may co-arise or lead to other dhamma is the subject of the Abhidhamma analysis of conditionality, with the seventh book of the canonical Abhidhamma providing for 24 types of conditioning relationship (paccaya) between dhamma.28

Two aspects of consciousness as understood in Theravada Abhidhamma are important here. The first is one common to early South Asian understandings of mind-consciousness: that mind-consciousness is mobile, moving within and on occasion beyond the body, even after the development within commentarial Abhidhamma of the idea of the hadayavatthu, the heart-base, as the primary physical base for mind consciousness. The mobility of mind-consciousness is crucial for sense perception to function, because of the role it plays in enabling cognition to arise in relation to any of the five physical gateways of perception – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body (Bodhi et al. 1993, 151–152) – as noted above. This means that consciousness in relation to the physical senses requires the coordination of both mental and physical. Only in the case of mental phenomena is the correlation with the physical not required. This is called ‘pure mind-door process’ (suddha-manodvāra-vithi; Bodhi et al. 1993, 163). One consequence of this is that the physical cognitions are confined to the experience of the present, whereas mind-based consciousness is not. The complexity of the processes of purely mind-door consciousness also enables the progression of levels of consciousness, a process we shall return to below. We have already seen how Buddhaghosa, in the Visuddhimagga, expects the practitioner to be able to delimit and expand certain states of consciousness that
arise in meditation. In *boran kammathāna* the degree of manipulation is much greater.

The other aspect of consciousness in Abhidhamma that is crucial to understand the practice outlined here is that consciousness is composite. For each *citta* to arise there must be a minimum of seven attendant *cetasika*, mental factors. Thus the combination of *citta* and *cetasika* is characteristic, and indeed fundamental to Abhidhamma. What we appear to have in the *boran kammathāna* manuals are instructions on how to direct the constant replacement of *citta* and its associated *cetasika* through their possible combinations towards the higher, most wholesome and beautiful (sobhana) mental states. If we combine these two aspects, the mobility of consciousness and the composite nature of consciousness, then the moving of the states of consciousness and concomitant mental factors around the body makes sense both in terms of South Asian models of consciousness generally, and in terms of Abhidhamma in particular.

This process may seem strange to those inhabiting a Cartesian worldview with its distinctive mind–body divide and sense of a single consciousness being located in the brain, but the manuals not only instruct the combination and movement of aspects of consciousness, the *citta* and *cetasika*, they also integrate these aspects of form, *rūpa*, the third of Abhidhamma’s three categories of conditioned *dhamma*. The manuals instruct the combination of *citta* and *cetasika* both with the elements of form, i.e. earth, water, wind, fire, and space (e.g. Or6601(6II), folio258), and with composite form, i.e. the body. While the primary locations in the body are the heart and navel/womb and the areas between them, some of the manuals extend this binding of these *citta*, *cetasika* and *rūpa* (in the form of the elements) into wider areas of the body, from the top of the head around the mouth and down to the groin. Our manuals repeatedly instruct that the practitioner is to bind the *nimitta* and its combinations into one part of the body, e.g. the heart, before moving it gradually to another, e.g. the middle of the navel. The practitioner requests that these *dhamma* become an inalienable aspect of their *khandha*, the five aggregates that make up the individual. These five aggregates are form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*citta*). The middle three are all *cetasika*, so the individual comprises the three categories of *dhamma*: *rūpa*, *cetasika* and *citta*. Elsewhere, the potential of harnessing these movements to address imbalances in the body found in *boran kammathāna* is applied to medical ends. In other words, the mobility of consciousness is harnessed to apply the wholesome *citta* and *cetasika* to the bodies of people other than the practitioners themselves (Mettanando 1999; Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2017).

To understand these methods of incorporating aspects of the path developed through meditation into the body, we will need to pay more attention to how Abhidhamma conceives the relationship among *citta*, *cetasika* and *rūpa*,...
i.e. how one generates certain types of rūpa from certain types of citta or consciousness. What is clear is that in boran kammatthāna the practitioner seeks to develop the highest attainments of the path in this very body. In other words, the practitioner seeks to be physically transformed through the practice. The aim is to transform the embodied individual by substituting their conditioned khandha with the supramundane states through a detailed, progressive process of combinations and substitutions. Through closely studying the litany and manuals we can see that the thousands of progressive steps that make up this transformation are a practical realisation of the processes of change in state of consciousness, citta, from the mundane to the supramundane levels, with the corresponding cetasika, already familiar to Theravada scholars in such representations of Theravada orthodoxy as the Visuddhimagga and Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha. While treated discretely there, in boran kammatthāna they are part of a single system of practice. Thanks to the level of detail provided by the Sri Lankan manuals, we can confirm that this system, corresponding with orthodox accounts of the process of transformation, offers an orthoprax manifestation of the Theravada path.

**Conclusion**

This article has provided the first survey of all the boran kammatthāna texts from Sri Lanka that were collected by Hugh Nevill and are now housed in the British Library. The article has focused on the role played by nimitta, ‘signs’, and by Abhidhamma in this form of Theravada. We have looked at three different genres of texts. In the narrative text and its commentaries, we could see the emphasis placed on nimitta in the prognostications of death and future states of rebirth. This gave some indication of the serious attention paid to nimitta, visual signs, as representations of external reality that can be accurately interpreted by someone with the appropriate expertise.

Examining the second genre of texts, the litanies used for devotion to the Buddha along with the invitations to the meditation objects to appear, allowed us to see how practitioners of boran kammatthāna understood their practice as a detailed realisation of the path to arahatship as extensively analysed in Abhidhamma, with both the terminology and the understanding of the process and progress of transformation reflecting a close familiarity with Abhidhamma of the commentarial period. This evidence supports the theory that boran kammatthāna is an organic system within Theravada Abhidhamma rather than a pre-existing system on which Abhidhamma has been imposed. The use of nimitta here as representations of the successful experience of dhamma again indicates the treatment of the meditation experiences as external realities, to be treated with respect and invited to appear.
The understanding that the nimitta represents those experiences, and relates directly to the attainment of samādhi and the interruption of the process of falling back into the bhavaṅga states of consciousness that maintains saṃsāric existence, helps us understand their treatment in the manuals, our third genre of texts. It is the treatment of the nimitta in the manuals, using them to incorporate stages of practice into the body, which has most confounded scholars looking at these materials, leading to the understanding of the practices as heteroprax. On closer examination, however, using the details uniquely preserved in these Sri Lankan manuals, we can see that this incorporation is based on South Asian models of consciousness as mobile and on the Abhidhamma understanding of consciousness as composite and momentary. Again, then, a close examination of these manuscripts indicates how detailed a realisation of the Abhidhamma path to arahatship is envisaged in these practices. While the Abhidhamma understanding of citta, states of consciousness, and cetasika, mental factors, clearly underlies the model of transformation set out in these texts, more work needs to be done on the Abhidhamma understanding of the relationship between citta and cetasika, on the one hand, and rūpa (form) on the other. Such work should elucidate the understanding of physical transformation, the embodiment of enlightenment, that shapes these practices, both those aimed at soteriological or lokuttara (supramundane) outcomes, and those aimed at lokiya or worldly aims, such as medicine and protection.

The key to understanding the degree of correlation and difference between boran kammatthāna and such authoritative Abhidhamma texts as the Visuddhimagga and Abhidhammatthasaṅgha is to recognise that a different approach to Abhidhamma is witnessed in the boran kammatthāna manuals. Rather than offering an account of meditation practices, or describing how they are done, as is found in the former text, or an account of the processes of the different dhamma, primarily the citta and cetasika, as found in the latter, boran kammatthāna manuals approach the meditation subjects according to the corresponding cetasika and citta that constitute the successful attainment of each stage of meditation. Seen this way, we find a considerable degree of correlation between the meditation topics found and the analysis of the states of consciousness (citta) and mental concomitants (cetasika) found in both the Visuddhimagga and the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha, yet here the latter are embedded within the meditation practices as the process of transformation is followed through the different stages from our starting point of ordinary individual (puthujjana) through to the attainment of enlightenment as an arhat. Skilton and Choompolpaisal, in their study of the pīṭī in the transmission of boran kammatthāna that survives at Wat Ratchasittharam in Thonburi, Greater Bangkok, had observed the close correspondence of the term dhamma
and related terminology with the terminology of Abhidhamma. They conclude,

We could say that we are looking at a tradition of Abhidhamma-based meditation that has forgotten that it is Abhidhamma – or, less contentiously, a tradition of practice that draws on Abhidhamma in its terminology and possibly in its original conceptualisation, but which has privileged solely the experience of the meditation practitioner in its interpretation of terms employed in its core texts. (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 112–113)

My examination of the presentation of the entire path in the Sri Lankan materials confirms their speculation. Its detailed attention to the different types of dhamma, especially the citta and cetasika, in ways entirely consistent with the Abhidhamma understanding of causality and progression on the path indicates that the practice is Abhidhammic in its original conceptualisation.

The detailed working out of the Abhidhamma path in this meditation system therefore offers us a different understanding of Abhidhamma itself. There has been a tendency to see Abhidhamma as dogmatic and scholastic, rather than as practical. Even where its relationship to practice is recognised, it has primarily been seen as descriptive (see Kyaw in this volume). Here, however, we can see Abhidhamma as prescriptive, as offering a detailed working out of techniques that enable the transformation of the unenlightened into an enlightened being.

It places Abhidhamma, with its focus on understanding how change takes place and how to harness that potential for change, at the heart of practice.

Notes

1. The phrase boran kammatthāna is composite and unsatisfactory in that it does not occur in the tradition itself, and is a combination of Khmer/Thai renderings of Pali purāṇa (‘early’) and Pali kammatthāna (‘meditation practice’). Elsewhere in this volume, Choompolpaisal and Skilton use Thai variants of this phrase, boran kammathan and boran kammathan, which do occur in the Thai materials on which they base their accounts. In scholarship so far this tradition has – for want of a self-defining name of its own – variously been referred to as yogāvacara, variations on boran kammatthāna, dhammakāya and even tantric Theravada meditation, each name reflecting a particular historical perspective or association. Within the tradition it is simply referred to by terms for meditation including kammatthāna (Skilton, this volume) and, in Sri Lanka, vidarśanā (see below) as well as the more general term bhāvanā. This lack of a separate name until the retrospective labelling as ‘boran’ traditional in the early twentieth century indicates that the tradition does not see itself as doing something other than the meditation traditions handed down from the Buddha, and hence needs no specific identifying name.

2. See contributions by Choompolpaisal (2019b) and Skilton (2019) in this volume.

3. I have observed the use of Abhidhamma terminology in boran kammatthāna materials before (e.g. Crosby 2013). This observation of the correlation has been
taken further by Skilton and Choompolpaisal in analysing the pīṭṭi practice of Wat Ratchasittharam in Thonburi, where they observe how the use of the term dhamma and related terms corresponds closely with Abhidhamma usage of the term but has a different, practice-derived understanding in the interpretation of the current head of that practice lineage (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014). I shall return to their observations in my conclusion.

4. Modern remnants of this tradition include the practices at Wat Damrei Sar, Kandal Province, Cambodia (see Crosby 2013), the practice at Wat Ratchasittharam in Thonburi, Thailand (see Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 2015), the method at Wat Paknam, and the method originally developed by Candassaro Bhikkhu at Wat Paknam that has been popularised internationally by the network of Dhammakaya temples.

5. The Colombo National Museum was established on 1 January 1877, with the incorporation of the Government Oriental Library soon after. It contains another copy of the Amatākaravannāṇā, Or6601(85)I of the Nevill collection: Colombo Museum Cat. no. 687, (116 leaves) W. A. de Silva (1930, 119).

6. Rhys Davids (1843–1922) entered the Ceylon Civil Service as a Writer in 1866, but was dismissed in 1871 (A. Wickremaratne 1981, 11 and 137). Nevill (19 June 1847–10 April 1897) began his career as private secretary to the Chief Justice 1 September 1869 and became a Writer 1 year before Rhys Davids. He left after 1895. See K. D. Somadasa 1995 (vol. 7) for an outline of his life and work.


8. The manuscripts are held in section 5 of Wat Ratchasittharam. The Suk lineage also includes evidence for the use of these practices in healing (Mettanando 1999; Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2017). Its importance is enhanced by the presence of a living practice tradition.

9. On the difference between scribal and authorial/compiler front and end matter on Sinhalese manuscripts see Crosby (2012).

10. Because of the similarity of name, I would like to clarify that the meditation text Vimuktisaṅgrahanamvū vidarsanā bhāvanā saṅgrahaya (Or6601(55)), which can be dated to the fourteenth century, is not related to the boran kammaṭṭhāna manuals.

11. The Sinhalese vidārśanā is from the Sanskrit root drś, to see, with the prefix vi-. The Pali vipassanā is from this same root (or rather the Pali equivalent), but formed from the participle of the present stem (pass rather than dis).

12. On the disappearance of boran kammaṭṭhāna practice in the modern period, see Crosby 2013, ch. 4.

13. The texts and practices recorded by François Bizot, mainly from Cambodian sources, provide far more extensive esoteric interpretations of key Theravada formula and teachings. See, for example, the reinterpretation of the four truths in the Chemin de Lankā, where the truth of suffering is the exhaustion felt as a result of suppressing the breath; the second truth, the truth of the arising (of suffering), samudayasacca, is explained as the eventual absence of breath at the navel leading to the experience of great pain and exhaustion (Bizot 1992, 131, §43.11–45.5).

14. The term nimitta is not confined to this range either. It can mean a ‘sign’ in terms of a gesture, or a marker, for example in simā-nimitta.
15. On the unusual abbreviation system found in the Amātakaravānāṇā, the meditation manual that accompanies the Vākkappokaraṇāṁ, see Crosby (2005, 2007).
16. For an explanation of the use of dhamma in this context, see Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014, 96).
17. It appears as the first of the two texts edited by François Bizot in his Le Chemin de Laṅkā (1992, 211–224).
18. The litany I refer to here is presented in full in Crosby (1999, ch. 6). Skilton and Choompolpaisal translate the very closely related litany still in use in Wat Ratchasittharam in Thailand in their examination of the pīti practice (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 97–103), referring to this version in footnote 28.
19. The only current practice reminiscent of this last use of the water that I have come across is at Wat Damrei Sar in Cambodia, where a ritual lustration can be used to mark the ‘attainment of the five khandhas’, a stage treated with great significance and sometimes as the culmination of practice in this temple’s transmission of the practice.
20. For an edition and translation see Crosby (1999, ch. 6). The translation and some of the notes are adapted from there.
21. The term okāsa (‘permission/opportunity’) is used throughout Theravada texts as a polite way of opening speech addressed to the Buddha or a teacher.
22. Presumably the four truths of suffering, the arising (of suffering), the cessation (of suffering) and the path (to the cessation of suffering). There is no evidence here that any esoteric interpretation is intended.
23. The Yugandhara mountain range is one of the seven rings of mountains which encircle the four continents of the earth in Theravāda Buddhist cosmology. An additional reason for the particular brilliance of the moon (and sun) over Yugandhara is given in the Chemin de Laṅkā as the absence of clouds. The phrasing there is slightly different: ‘ou encore, qu’ils nous purifient de ces entraves comme la lune et le soleil sur le mont royal Yugandhara dont la lumière scintillant à l’infini est exempte des nuages qui pourraient voiler et obscurcir son éclat’ (Bizot’s translation, 1992, §4.7, 214).
24. i.e. anicca, anatta, dukkha, the three characteristics of existence.
25. i.e. maggamahamma, phaladhamma. Here dhamma is used in the sense of abhidhammahma category. The paths are the four paths of stream entrance, once-returner, non-returner, and arahant, and the fruits are the four realisations of these paths.
26. On the use of the names of the five pīti to refer to five positions in the body used for the movement of nimitta between the heart and the position two inches below the navel, see Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014, 104).
27. Amal Gunasena and I are currently working on the edition and translation of these different manuals.
28. On the Patt kho and paccaya, see Kyaw (2014).
29. See Bodhi et al. (1993, 101) for a table of possible citta-cetasika combinations based on the Abhidhammapratītisamagaha exposition of this subject.
30. We can see the Abhidhamma as prescriptive in the development of advanced meditation practice in modern Burmese traditions such as among current Theingngu practitioners (personal communication Pyi Phyo Kyaw June 2019), and as with Pau-Auk Sayadaw (noted above). However, in these cases, the Abhidhamma is already available to the practitioner (although see the account of the confirmation of Theingung’s practice in Kyaw, this volume). What we do not
know is the way in which the development of Abhidhamma went hand-in-hand with practice. In the case of boran kammatthāna, while we can see the relationship between it and Abhidhamma, we cannot know whether it also rests on a pre-existing formation of Abhidhamma or was itself the process of the development of Abhidhamma.

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References


Nimitta and visual methods in Siamese and Lao meditation traditions from the 17th century to the present day

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on a range of meditation practices in Siam and Laos from the early sixteenth century to the present, using primarily published materials from the early twentieth century, especially a survey of traditional or boran meditation published in 1936 by the Thammayut monk Phramahachoti Jai Yasothararat (1897–1963). The works he compiled stem from high-ranking Lao and Siamese clerics including three Supreme Patriarchs: Sivisuddhisom (Laos; sixteenth century), Suk (Siam; 1733–1822) and Don (Siam; 1771–1852). All are examples of what might be called the boran kammatthan, i.e. a traditional and somewhat technical form of meditation that had flourished widely prior to the encroachment of monastic and social reforms, eventually losing out to Burmese Vipassana and Thai Forest tradition meditation techniques. To facilitate the comparison, the study focuses on nimitta and other visual aspects of meditation in the systems, revealing considerable diversity even within boran kammatthan. Continuities with contemporary meditation systems amongst three living traditions are then explored. These include meditation lineages at Wat Ratchasittharam, Wat Pradusongtham and the network of temples that adopt Sodh Candasaro’s (1884–1959) Dhammakaya meditation method.

Introduction
This article explores the theme of variety in Siamese and Lao Theravada meditation traditions that appear in a number of Thai publications from the 1930s. These books present materials on pre-modern meditation techniques, based on original manuscripts dating from the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries, from various locations in both Siam and Laos. This article primarily draws on material contained in a single Thai publication. This is Phramahachotipanya Jai Yasothararat’s (1897–1963) Nangsu Phuttarangsri Tritsadiyan Waduay Samatha lae Vipassana-kammatthan si yuk, published in 1936. The title could be rendered in English as Book on the Theory of Perception of the Buddha’s Halo Relating to Samatha and Vipassana Meditation during the Four Reigns. The work surveys a wide
range of pre-modern meditation traditions and practices. Yasothararat was a scholarly Thammayut monk based at the temple Wat Baromnivat in Bangkok. He brought together a valuable body of material, largely from Siamese and Laotian manuscript sources, offering us a precious window onto meditation traditions still familiar – though disappearing – at the start of the twentieth century, but now mostly forgotten. As the book’s title suggests, it is based on historical, i.e. textual, sources originally produced during four eras from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. These are (i) Vientiane-Luang Prabang texts from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries; (ii) Ayutthaya texts in the eighteenth century; and (iii) Thonburi and (iv) early Bangkok texts, both from the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries (see below for further discussion). Although we have recently identified many other sources relating to the meditation practices of this period, particularly in pre-modern manuscripts (see below), these have not yet been studied in detail, so to facilitate further study, including how to tackle the processes and variety of meditation practice attested in such manuscripts, it is convenient to utilise Yasothararat’s publication as a witness to resources and records available at a known point in time, i.e. 1936.

Given the diversity of the material that Yasothararat records for us, it is also a methodological convenience to focus specifically on one aspect of practice. For this purpose, I have selected the visual dimension, which includes both nimittā – the visual ‘signs’ of the various meditation objects that arise as part of the meditators’ experience – as well as consciously ‘visualised’ aspects of meditation. As we will see, this gives us an overview of a wide variety of approaches to, and functions and uses of, visual content in Siamese-era Theravada meditation. While this may seem like an historical exercise, in fact at least three of the meditation systems that I will examine below in this article have descendants in the modern world of contemporary Thai meditation practice. These three meditation systems survive amongst practitioners at Wat Ratchasittharam (Thonburi), Wat Pradusongtham (Ayutthaya) and the network of temples that adopt the Wat Paknam style of Dhammakaya meditation.

Major Thai and Lao publications in the early twentieth century on pre-modern meditation

My examination of varieties in pre-modern visualisation techniques in this article builds upon existing literature on pre-reform meditation in Southeast Asia. By pre-reform I mean the practices that circulated prior to changes in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries which saw new forms of meditation adapted to the modern status quo, such as Burmese vipassanā and the reform practices of Thai forest monks, which gained popularity globally from the second half of the twentieth century. The subject of pre-
reform Theravada meditation has been examined by Kate Crosby, Olivier de Bernon, Andrew Skilton, the present author and other scholars over the last three decades, building in turn on the work of François Bizot from the 1970s. Initially, Crosby uses the term yogāvacara (lit. ‘practitioner of spiritual discipline, i.e. meditation’) as a way to describe this form of pre-modern Theravada meditation in South and Southeast Asia (Crosby 2000, 141, 178–179). In recent publications, Crosby, Skilton and I refer to this form of meditation using various forms of the phrase boran kammatthan, ‘ancient Theravada meditation’ (Crosby 2013; Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 2015). The phrase derives from the types of publications of the early twentieth century that I shall be examining here, contrasting this type with the new meditations gaining ground then as part of reform and revival movements. The types of meditation covered by this phrase have some distinctive features that one may not see in modern Theravada meditation. These features include the internalisation of nimitta usually seen as outcomes of meditation but in these systems used as an extension of the meditation process, to – according to Crosby’s analysis – incorporate the stages of the path into the body (Crosby 2013, 15–16, 91–100).

As Skilton and I have explained elsewhere, this physical placement of the nimitta within the body is done in a range of different orders and subjected to different movements in and around the body (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 96, 103–107, 111). These movements are made between specified locations lying between the heart and navel or the nose and navel, and vary in number and location according to the meditation subject. Such use of the nimitta is often carried on through multiple – but not always in all – stages of meditation. Major meditation stages include, for example, pīti – ‘delights’ (often also yugala – ‘pairs’ and sukha – ‘happiness’), anāpānasati – ‘mindfulness of the breath’, brahmavihāra – ‘divine abidings’, asubha – ‘loathsomes’ and anussati – ‘recollections’ (Crosby 2013, 14–15; Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 91–93, 109–111).

The textual evidence of boran kammatthan in Thailand and Laos can still be found in at least 100 palm-leaf and paper manuscripts in different locations in Thailand, Laos and Europe, although very few of them have so far been the subject of research. In the early twentieth century, with the rise of printing technology in Thailand, a number of Thai publications on boran kammatthan appeared seeking to document such materials, mostly with book titles that include such phrases as mul kammatthan (‘basic/personal meditation’) and samatha-vipassana (‘calming and insight’). Based on original meditation manuscripts dating back to the seventeenth century, these books offer edited translations of meditation texts in Pali-Siamese language in modern Thai script. I will review them briefly in sequence by date of publication.
Two important publications on mul kammatthan came out in the 1930s from Wat Rachativat (formerly known as Wat Samorai), a royal Thammayut temple in Bangkok. The first of these appeared in 1931 under the title Mul Kammatthan Chabab lan Khongkao an mee yu nai Wat Rachativat [Mul Kammatthan, an Ancient Palm-Leaf Version as Kept in Wat Rachativat]. It was a small book (fewer than 10 pages) that was subsequently republished in 1956 as one of the texts included in Thammavarodom’s Uppakon Kammatthan Khong Phra Thammavarodom (Uttamathera), Wat Rachativat [The Kammatthan Devices of Phra Thammavarodom (Uttamathera), Wat Rachativat]. The book offers a translation of a short meditation text, dated 1661, as kept in Wat Rachativat (Bernon 2002, 149–160; Thammavarodom 1956, 1–10). The second important book published from Wat Rachativat in the 1930s appeared in 1934. Its title was Mul Kammatthan Chabab Samnak Rachativat [Mul Kammatthan, Wat Rachativat Version] and it was published by Phrayakosakonvijan (Boonsri Praphasiri, 1882–1963), a senior officer in the Thai government. This publication provides a translation of the meditation texts that Phrapanyavisanthera (also known as Sri or Nag), a famous meditation monk and the abbot of Wat Rachativat, authored in the late eighteenth century during the reign of King Rama I. Comprising over 72 pages, this publication describes Wat Rachativat’s meditation techniques in detail. The contents on samatha techniques, covering 65 pages, include pīti (‘delights’), anāpānasati (‘mindfulness of breath’), kasiṇa (‘devices’), arūpājñāna (‘formless absorptions’), asubha (‘loathsomeness’) and kayagatā (‘mindfulness of the body’). Only a few pages are on vipassanā meditation (Phrayakosakonvijan 1934, 1–72).

Around the same time as these two Wat Rachativat texts, in 1932, Prince Vivitthavanpreecha (other name: Jantharathattajuthathan, 1860–1932), the 51st son of King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868), published Kaen Traiphob [Core of the Three Realms], a small book on meditation. It includes in a brief form texts on the meditation practices taught by 56 Ayutthaya meditation monks during the late Ayutthaya period in the eighteenth century. These texts cover two meditation methods, the first one on Buddha-ghuna (guna) (‘recollections of the qualities of the Buddha’), Dhamma-ghuna (‘recollections of the qualities of the Dhamma’) and Sangha-ghuna (‘recollections of the qualities of the Sangha’), and the second on an alternative, simplified meditation method. According to the texts, 56 anonymous Ayutthaya monks agreed that these two methods should be taught to practitioners (Vivitthavanpreecha 1932, 9–18). Yasothararat (1936) included the republication of the entire contents of this volume, expanding on them with further detail. I will discuss texts by these 56 Ayutthaya monks below.

Also around this time, in September 1935, Luang Visan Darunnakon (other name: An Sarikkabut; hereafter Darunnakon, 1884–1950), an officer in the Thai government, published Samatha-Vipassana Kammatthan Magga
Palimutta lae Vithi Aratthana Phra Kammatthan [The Path of Samatha-Vipassana Meditation and Methods for Invoking Phra Kammatthan Objects Related Independently of Canonical Scripture (Palimutta)].

This publication is on the meditation of the Supreme Patriarch Somdet Phraariyavongsayan Suk Kaithun (hereafter Suk; 1733–1822). It is based on original manuscripts that Darunnakon received from Phrasangwaranuwongthera (Chum; 1853–1910s), the abbot of Wat Ratchasittharam, Thonburi, in 1913 (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], kho (<td>); Darunnakon 1935, kho (td>). Similar to Phrayakosakornvijan (1934), Darunnakon (1935) covers contents on ṗīti, anāpānasati, kasīṇa, arūpa, asubha and kayagatā meditation, as well as a short description of vipassanā.

Each of the publications mentioned above covers one specific meditation tradition. In contrast, in 1936, Phramahachatipanya Jai Yasothararat published Nangsu Phuttarangsri Tritsadiyan Waduay Samatha lae Vipassana-kammatthan si yuk [Book on the Theory of Perception of the Buddha's Halo Relating to Samatha and Vippassana-kammatthan during the Four Reigns] which, for the first time, brings together various meditation techniques as recorded in different texts and as taught by different teacher lineages. Since 1995, Yasothararat (1936) has been reprinted six times, most recently in 2006. Each reprint has the same contents but with different page numbers, and as the last of these is available online while the others are difficult or impossible to find even in libraries, in this article I use Yasothararat (2006), the sixth edition.

Yasothararat (1936) includes major meditation texts originally from different locations and authored in the four different periods identified above, thus covering the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries and the areas centring on the Lao and Siamese/Thai capitals of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Bangkok. In his preface, Yasothararat explains that he edited all the meditation texts by comparing them with the Abhidhammasaṅgaha and the Visuddhimagga (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], ‘Preface’, ix). This naturally brings in a possible element of contamination from these two manuals regarded as arbiters of Theravada orthodoxy in the presentations of these pre-modern meditation texts, although this does not seem to have obscured the treatment of nīmitta.

The first set of texts in Yasothararat 1936 is those from Vientiane-Luang Prabang (see Yasothararat (2006a [1936], 41–128). This set of texts documents traditional meditation techniques that used to be mainstream practice in the Lao Sangha tradition. It is significant that in 1974, the year prior to the declaration of the Marxist Lao People’s Democratic Republic and the abolition of the Sangha hierarchy, the Vientiane State published Samatha-kammatthan lae Vipassana-kammatthan Chabab Boran (Muang Vientiane-Luang Prabang) [Samatha and Vipassana Meditation, Traditional Version (Vientianne-Luang Prabang City)] as the official version of Lao meditation techniques, building
on the Vientiane-Luang Prabang texts in Yasothararat (1936) (Vientiane State 1974, k (น)). In Lao sources, scholarly monks, including Sayadej Vongsophana and others, refer to this publication using the title The Manual of Ancient/Traditional Samatha and Vipassanā meditation of Luang Prabang and Vientiane (hereafter ‘Lao Meditation Manual’; Sayadej 2016, unpaginated). This publication brings together major Vientiane-Luang Prabang meditation texts as published in Yasothararat (1936) and other meditation manuals of influential Lao monks from the early to mid-twentieth century.

According to the Vientiane State (1974), the Vientiane-Luang Prabang texts in Yasothararat (1936) are based on 10 manuscript bundles that one Laotian meditation monk (name unknown) brought from Vientiane (Laos) to Wat Banbuawat, Warin District, Ubonratthathani (Thailand) (Vientiane State 1974, k (น); Yasothararat 2006a [1936], Chapter ‘At Wat Maneechonlakhan (Lopburi)’, v). The transmission of these texts to Thailand happened through the influential Thammayut monk Phraubali Jan Sirijanto (1854–1932), the abbot of Wat Baromnivat in Bangkok, who, in the 1890s, had brought these 10 manuscript bundles from Ubonratthathani Province to keep at Wat Sirijantaramanimit (other name: Wat Khao Phra Ngam) in Lopburi (Thailand) (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], ‘Preface’, viii). From 1903 to the 1930s, Jan, Phraphrommuni (Tisso Uan) and other senior Thammayut monks at Wat Baromnivat took a keen interest in boran kammatthan texts (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], ‘Preface’ and ‘At Wat Maneechonlakhan (Lopburi)’, v, vii–xi). This interest was what led to Yasothararat’s publication in 1936, which also includes Jan’s own writing from 1932 and his analysis of some of the texts that would be included in Yasothararat (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 27–41, 197–199; see below).

The names of original authors or redactors of all the texts in these 10 bundles of manuscripts were preserved therein, and their names and titles indicate that they were senior monks in positions of authority in the Sangha, meaning that the meditation practices the texts contain were at the time of their composition – and into the 1970s when they were republished in Laos – authorised at the highest level of the Lao Sangha. The authors were Supreme Patriarch Rachathibbadee Sivisuddhisom, Somdet Phramaha Vichaithat Ratchamahamuni and Phramahathera Phuttarangsi Bavonmuni. These authors recorded their teachings in 1501, 1694 and an unknown year, respectively. From c. 1637–1714 CE, during the reign of King Suriyavongsa Dhammikarat of Vientiane, Sivisuddhisom’s and Vichaithat’s texts were copied. It is unclear if the works attributed to Phuttarangsi were copied or composed by him (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 244; Vientiane State 1974, k (น)- ng (ส); Sayadej 2016, unpaginated). In Luang Prabang, the Supreme Patriarch Pane (1911–1963) and others claimed to be successors of this tradition and adapted these techniques to be taught in Vientiane in the early twentieth century. In Champasak, Somdet Lun (1833–1921) also used
these texts as the authority for his meditation teachings (Sayadej 2016, unpaginated).\(^{16}\)

Turning to other texts in Yasothararat (1936), which are not of Lao origins, we find documented meditation teachings that used to be significant in Siam prior to its change to a constitutional democracy in 1932. This second set of texts is from Ayutthaya and derived from an original manuscript kept at Wat Pradusongtham in Ayutthaya. It recorded the teachings of 56 anonymous meditation monks in Ayutthaya during the late Ayutthaya period in the eighteenth century (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 181–196, 202–203, 260–263). The third and fourth include a long set of texts from the Thonburi and early Rattanakosin periods, and are based on meditation manuscripts of the two Supreme Patriarchs: Suk Kaithun (1733–1822) and Don (1771–1852) (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 129–181, 218–259). One part of Suk’s manuscripts was passed on to Inthachoti (Pring), and the other to Darunnakon through Chum (see above). We can see that the two parts had similar contents, since Yasothararat presents a diplomatic edition, rendered into modernised Thai, of both manuscripts. The fourth long set of texts in Yasothararat comes from the paper manuscripts that had belonged to Supreme Patriarch Don which were collected by Inthachoti (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], ‘Preface’, viii). Apart from these four long sets of texts, there are several other miscellaneous texts that are relatively short, three of which I shall explore below.

The distinctive terminology and practice of boran kammatthan

All the above texts show features that would lead one to categorise them as boran kammatthan. However, while I mentioned above that one of the main indicative features of boran kammatthan texts is that they apply complex movements of objects around the body in the context of various meditation techniques, this is not always the case. As will be demonstrated below, there are also texts that represent simplified versions of boran kammatthan.

Based on research he conducted from 1903 to 1935, Jan Sirijanto discusses another form of simplification. In addition to the choice between full or simplified methods just mentioned, he observes that in pre-modern times Siamese meditation monks categorised various meditation techniques into two major groups: sandot (Thai; Pali santutthi; literally, ‘contentment’) and andub (literally, ‘ranked’; to be differentiated from lam dub ‘in (full) sequence’). Practitioners did the former, sandot, by devoting their practice solely to one, or even just one aspect, of the following meditation techniques: pīti (plus yugala and sukha), anussati, brahmavihāra, kasiṇa or asubha. This would be based on personal preference for one meditation subject over the others. A practitioner would practise andub, by choosing
several meditation subjects and working through them in the full sequence of procedures specified by their meditation lineage. Most practitioners who performed andub considered the five pīti (plus yugala and sukha) and/or the 10 brahmavihāra to be essential practices that should not be left out (Yasotharat 2006a [1936], 25–26). For the sequential method, in many cases, diagrams are used to help practitioners understand how to practise in a sequential way.

Even if I focus just on those texts included in Yasotharat, rather than surveying all the other publications here, I can demonstrate significant variety in meditation practice by examining their varied practices of visualisation and use of nimitta (eidetic signs). However, the use of the term nimitta in boran kammatthan texts is more sophisticated or complex than the use of the term in more widely known Buddhist texts such as the fifth-century Pali treatise, the Visuddhimagga, by Buddhaghosa. So, in trying to understand the texts in Yasotharat, we need to adjust to the terminology being used in very specific ways, including some standard Theravada terms that are used in ways that are unfamiliar outside of boran kammatthan. These include the terms dhamma (‘the experienced meditation subject’ or ‘the essential entity’ emerging during meditation), nimitta (eidetic signs), lakkhaṇa (‘visualised form sign’) and certain Thai honorifics (on all of these features see Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 94–96). In standard Theravada Abhidhamma, we are familiar with the technical usage of the term dhamma to designate those phenomena into which the conventional world can be resolved under analysis conducted through meditation. These dhāmass are ‘ultimate’ in the sense that they cannot be further reduced under analysis to component parts. In boran kammatthan texts, the term dhamma is generally applied to the meditation object as experienced in meditation and so means ‘the essential entity’ in the sense of ‘the experienced meditation subject’. We can see this usage in expressions such as duang tham (Thai) ‘dhamma spheres’, a term used for spheres of light that can be experienced as the meditation deepens. These are a type of nimitta or sign. In classical Theravada meditation such experiences are also called nimitta but are considered incidental to progress in meditation. In contrast, in boran kammatthan, samatha meditation is built around the cultivation of these nimitta, which are also designated lakkhaṇa (visualised ‘form sign’) with reference to their specific appearance. Crucially, these various signs, which are often designated in detail in manuals of this tradition, are treated as phenomena, i.e. they have an independent existence, even their own agency, and so boran kammatthan manuals also give much attention to procedures for giving rise to them, or invoking them (ārādhana). This typically involves a process of invitation or invocation in which they are addressed as highly honoured guests, employing standard Thai honorifics.

In *boran kammatthan* practices, the use – and usually manipulation – of *nimitta* at specific points in the practitioner’s body is crucial, and they often involve different patterns of sequential movements. Meditators begin by locating their mind at a specific point in their body. Once their minds become still and *nimitta* emerge, the practitioner moves the *nimitta* to other points in their body in the following patterns: *kao lamdub*, *kao sab*, *kao keub* and *kao ruab*. The *kao lamdub* technique is a simple, straightforward pattern of movements in forward (*anulom*) and reverse (*patilom*) orders. The *kao sab* and *kao keub* techniques are two different patterns of complex movements in forward and reverse orders along a set of locations between the ‘heart’ (*hadaya*) and the navel (*nābhī*) (see Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 104–105). In the *kao ruab* stage, practitioners are to integrate several *nimitta*(s) into one (see below). Examples of the use of *nimitta* and different patterns of movement will be given below.

**A closer look at seven core texts**

To conduct my analysis I have selected seven core meditation texts from Yasothararat, excluding the others. My reason for choosing them is to cover as many diverse lineages and different periods as possible.

Text 1 is *Baeb Somdet Phramaha Sangharachajao Sutthisom Phramanajan 12 Kawee* [*A Version of Somdet Phramaha Sangharajajao Suddhisom Brahmanajara in 12 Poems*] (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 41–90). The original author is the Supreme Patriarch Suddhisom Brahmanajara (other name: Somdet Phrasangharat Rachathibbadeejao Sivisuddhisom; hereafter Sivisuddhisom) of Vientiane. Sivisuddhisom’s text in Yasothararat (1936) is based on the manuscript that was composed c. 1637 to 1714 CE (see above). His text is orientated towards spiritual progress rather than healing or yantra (magical protection) and therefore is a meditation manual exclusively.

Text 2 is *Phra Thamma Osot baeb Somdet Phramaha Vichai That Mahamuni* [*Phra Dhamma Osatha in a Version of Phramaha Vichai Dhâtu Mahâmuni*] (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 114–128). The author is Somdet Phramaha Vichaithat Mahamuni (other names: Yakru or Phrakru Luang Phonsamek; hereafter Vichaithat). Vichaithat was a senior monk of the late seventeenth century in Vientiane. He is one of the original authors of the texts in the Lao Meditation Manual. His text focuses on meditation both as a spiritual practice and as a method for healing (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 114–128; see also Mettanando 1998, 103–287).

Text 3 is *Hong 8 baeb Vientiane* [*Lesson 8 in Vientiane Version*] (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 90–103). The author is Phramahathera Phuttarangsi Bavonmuni.
Phuttarangsi was a monk who used to live at Wat Pa Daeng Luang in Chiang Mai. His date is not known (see above). The text is a meditation manual.

Text 4 is *Samatha-Vipassana Kammatthan Magga Palimutta* [*The Path of Samatha-Vipassana Meditation Related Independently of Canonical Scripture*] (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 129–178). The author is Supreme Patriarch Suk, 1733–1822 CE. Suk composed the text in Bangkok during the early Rattanakosin period (late eighteenth to early nineteenth century) and it was to become an authoritative source for the tradition that he established at Wat Ratchasittharam in Thonburi. Suk’s meditation techniques were inherited from his teachers, including Rod and others, in Ayutthaya where he was trained (Choompolpaisal forthcoming). The text covers meditation both as a spiritual practice and as a method for healing.

Text 5 is *Baeb Khuen Phra Kammatthan Hong Phutthakhun Thammakhun Sanghakhun* [*Practising Meditation in the Stages of Buddha-khuna[-ga, passim], Dhamma-khuna and Sangha-khuna*] (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 182–198, 260–263; Mettanando 1998, 295–299). Authorship of this text is ascribed by Yasothararat to a group of 56 anonymous Ayutthaya meditation teachers. There was a congress of 56 meditation monks in Ayutthaya at Wat Pradusongtham, where they agreed the contents of this and other texts. Their meeting date was on Thursday, sixth lunar month, in May, in the year of horse, 572 years after the coronation of one of the kings (unnamed in the text), who possibly reigned in the thirteenth century (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 260–261). Other texts dealt with meditation and/or yantra, but this one deals with meditation and the litany and ritual for meditation.

Text 6 is *Vithi khuen Kammatthan* [*Methods for Meditation Practice*]. The author of this text is Jan Sirijanto and it was written in 1932 (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 197–199), i.e. it is one of the writings of Jan in 1932 mentioned above. Jan was active through the early twentieth century and created links between the Thai northeast where he was born and Bangkok where he eventually became abbot of Wat Baromnivat (Crosby 2013, 125–131). This short text is a meditation manual. It is much shorter than most other texts in Yasothararat (1936). Another, far longer text composed by Jan is included in Yasothararat. It is called the *Nangsue Vipassananaphum* [*Book on the Vipassana Bhūmi*] (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 26–41), but it is not considered here.

Text 7 is *Phra Kammatthan Magga Palimutta* [*The Path of Meditation Related Independently of Canonical Scripture (Palimutta)*] (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 214–250). The author is Don of Wat Hong. Don was a Supreme Patriarch during the Rattanakosin period, although he learnt meditation in the mid/late eighteenth century during the late Ayutthaya period (Choompolpaisal forthcoming). This is a meditation manual for spiritual attainment.
Coverage and *nimitta* in each of the seven texts

I will now discuss the broad contents of each text, focusing on the treatment of visualisation and/or *nimitta* in each.

**Text 1, by Sivisuddhisom**

Sivisuddhisom’s text covers a range of topics including the following *kammatthāna*: brahmavihāra, *pītī* (plus *yugala* and *sukha*), ānāpanasati, *arūpajhāna* and *vipassanā*. The text includes dedicated litany for the *kammatthāna*, guidance for meditation, and diagrams used to help understand the meditation techniques. In his discussion the path begins with the practice of locating the *citta* (mind) at the navel (*nābhi*). The second step is the meditation on *pītī*.

**Sivisuddhisom’s practice of *pītī*, *yugala* and *sukha***

In the second step, the practitioner starts with verses of litany, for example:

> Okasa (Permission), I wish to attain *phra upacāra samādhi* (‘the honorable temporary concentration’), *phra appanā samādhi* (‘the honorable full concentration’) and *phra lokuttara samādhi dhamma jao* (‘the honorable supra-mundane meditation subject’) in the *hong* (‘room/stage’ of) *khuddakā pītī jao* (‘the honourable minor delight’) … May *phra dhamma jao* (‘the honourable essential entity’/’the experienced meditation subject’) arise fully in my five *khandas*. (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 72)

Having recited verses of litany, the practitioner meditates by using different colours for each of the five *pītī*: *khuddaka* (‘minor’) yellow, *khanikā* (‘momentary’) red, *okkantika* (‘showering’) white, *ubbegā* (‘uplifting’) pale yellow, and *pharaṇā* (‘pervading’), the colour between orange and red, and moves between the *pītī* going forwards (*anulom*) and in reverse (*patilom*). The text uses the word for room/stage (*hong*) to indicate moving around a structure, as a metaphor or model, possibly as a mnemonic, for moving through the different stages in the sequence of meditation practices. One must use the patterns of movement called *kao sab*, *kao keub* and *kao ruab*, to locate the *nimitta* along particular paths within the body (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 72–73). The *kao sab* and *kao keub* techniques are two different patterns of complex movements in forward and reverse orders (see Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 104–105). In the *kao ruab* stage, one integrates all the colours into one (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 73).

The third step for Sivisuddhisom is to take up the *yugala* (pairs) *kammatthāna*. This consists of six states each experienced in body (*kāya*) and in mind (*citta*), hence the ‘pairs’. These are: *kāya*- (body) and *citta*- (mind) -*passaddhi* (‘calmness’), -*lahutā* (‘lightness’), -*mudutā* (‘softness’), -*kāmaññatā* (‘malleability’), -*pāguññatā* (‘skillfulness’) and -*ujjugatā*
(‘straightness’). The nimitta for this meditation subject are bi-coloured, presumably reflecting separate colours for body and mind. Thus, the first nimitta (kāya and citta passaddhi) is white both inside and outside; the second (lahutā) is red inside and green outside; the third (mudutā) is green inside, red outside; the fourth (kāmaññatā) is green inside, yellow outside; the fifth (pāguññatā) is yellow inside, green outside; and the sixth (ujugatā) is white inside, yellow outside. Practitioners then do kao sab, kao keub and kao ruab. Again, in the kao ruab stage, all six nimitta should be integrated into one nimitta (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 73–74). The fourth step is to take up the sukha kammatthāna, ‘happiness/contentment meditation’. Kāya-sukha is yellow and citta-sukha is white (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 75).

Sivisuddhisom’s ānāpānasati

The fifth step is ānāpānasati, mindfulness of breathing. In this, the practitioner follows the breath up from the navel to the nose or lip as many as 100 or 1000 times until achieving the uggahanimitta (‘learning sign’). At this point the practitioner will see a ‘pure white Buddha, the size of the golden Buddha statue’ (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 76). Presumably this is a reference to a specific statue, well known to the author and others at the time of composition, thus useful as a comparator at the time, but I do not know what image this might be.

Sivisuddhisom continues by associating colours with jhānas, although it is unclear whether he is writing about nimitta for these jhāna. That they are eventually integrated, on the model of previous nimitta, suggests that they probably are. The first jhāna is as white as the perfume flower (scientific name Fagraea racemosa Javanica; or ‘kaewmukda’ in Thai). The second jhāna is as green as rock crystal, the third as white as a conch shell, the fourth as bright as sunlight, the fifth bright gold. All five should be integrated into one (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 76).

Sivisuddhisom’s brahmavihāra

All this so far is one technique. The second technique is meditation on the brahmavihāra, ‘abodes of Brahma’. This begins with verses of chanting, followed by entry into the hong (‘room/stage’) of mettā brahmavihāra. Each of the four vihāra has a distinctive coloured ray: mettā, white; karuṇā, red; muditā, yellow; and upekkhā, green. One uses kao lamdab (simple movement), kao sab, kao keub and kao ruab in which one integrates the colours. In Sivisuddhisom’s text, diagrams are used to help provide guidance for meditation practitioners (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 41–70).
Text two, by Vichaithat

Vichaithat applies meditation techniques to the components of the physical body to promote health. His technique involves using the experience of nimitta together with the practice of one of four main techniques: pīti, buddhaguṇa (‘the virtues of the Buddha’), ānāpānasati and/or brahmavihāra to work out the proper balance of dhātu (elements), i.e. earth, water, wind, fire and air (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 114–128). Overall, Vichaithat’s text offers guidance suitable for advanced practitioners who have a good understanding of boran kammattan and are ready to apply it for the science of healing. They are supposed to have knowledge of the balance of elements, as well as how to do each of these techniques in a fluent way. Although the text mentions several forms of nimitta such as uggahanimitta ‘learning signs’ and patibhāganimitta ‘counterpart signs’, it does not describe the shape and colours of nimitta. Sequential movements such as anulom (forward order), patilom (reverse order) and kao sab (switching order) are used in the practice of healing.

Text 3, by Phuttarangsi

Phuttarangsi provides instructions for the 10 kasīṇa, 10 asubha and, briefly, ānāpānasati, anussati and brahma vihāra. He then offers protective verses for chanting as a forest dweller or when confessing faults. This is followed by guidance on how to meditate on the Buddha’s footprint (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 90–103). There is no description of the shape and colours of uggahanimitta and other forms of nimitta except that the text links each of the 10 kasīṇa to different colours. For example, pathavī kasīṇa, the earth kasīṇa, is described as green inside, white in the middle and green outside (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 92).

Text 4, by Suk

Suk’s text provides instructions for both spiritual attainment and healing. It provides meditation litanies for invoking the nimitta. It mainly comprises a samatha section, which starts with the pīti yugala sukha sequence and is followed by ānāpānasati, kāyagatāsati, 10 kasīṇa, anussati and brahmavihāra vipassanā. The text ends with a very brief explanation of vipassanā. Details of Suk’s teachings have been looked at elsewhere (Mettanando 1998, 20–102; Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 83–116).

Overall, there are some similarities between Suk’s text and Sivisuddhisom’s, especially in the practice of pīti and ānāpānasati. Similarities include such terms for nimitta as phra pīti dhamma jao (‘the honourable majesties, the [5] delights’); the nine locations within the body (located between the nose tip
and the navel) that act as bases for nimitta in the practice of ānāpānasati; and most of the sequential movements, i.e. kao lamdub, kao sab and kao keub. The difference in sequential movements is that Suk excludes kao ruab, the practice that integrates various forms of nimitta into one, whereas Sivisuddhisom includes it. Suk’s brahmavihāra practice is far shorter than Sivisuddhisom’s, and there is no mention of nimitta in Suk’s brahmavihāra practice.

Suk’s text on healing is far shorter than Vichaithat’s, but Suk’s gives an explanation of meditation for spiritual progress while Vichaithat’s does not. There are some similarities between Suk’s text and Vichaithat’s on healing. Both texts suggest that illness is caused by the disorder and imbalance of dhātus (elements), i.e. earth, water, wind, fire and air, so it is important to work out the balance of dhātus for healing. Both texts use nimitta such as the pīti dhamma jao (‘the honourable majesties, the [5] delights’), together with ānāpānasati and/or brahmavihāra for healing. In both texts, once nimitta and the breathing are focused at specific points in the body, they help heal several types of illness that are gas, wind and air related. The use of nimitta, together with brahmavihāra, is helpful for reducing the fire element arising from anger (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 115–122, 146–149, 166). However, Vichaithat’s text covers more types of illness than Suk’s. Vichaithat also gives more detailed, step-by-step practical instructions than Suk. Suk only gives a brief overview, without practical detail. Moreover, Vichaithat’s techniques for the treatment of ākāra 32 (‘32 components of the body’) include buddhaghuna (‘the virtues of the Buddha’) (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 123–129), while Suk’s does not.

What is worth pointing out is that although Suk does not describe the appearance of nimitta in most of the contents, there are two specific places in the text where Suk explicitly describes experiences of nimitta emerging:

(1) At the end of Suk’s text on pīti, yugala and sukha, Suk describes an experience of nimitta as ‘seeing your own refined body, wearing a crown and necklace’ (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 171). This sentence is repeated twice.

(2) At the end of Suk’s text on ānāpānasati, Suk describes a series of multiple experiences of nimittat(s) as seeing ‘one star’, ‘half the moon’, ‘the full moon’, ‘half the sun’ and ‘the full sun’. Once a practitioner sees ‘the sun’, first ‘locate it at the nose . . . then move the sun to the base at the navel’ (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 171). This suggests that nimitta are used throughout but mentioned explicitly only for these special and unusual nimitta.

**Text 5, by 56 Ayutthaya monks**

The methods as guided by the 56 anonymous Ayutthaya monks are simplified visualisations including visualisation of sacred letters, as well
as anāpānasati and meditation on dhātus (the four elements). My interview with Surat (see below) suggests that pīti meditation was part of these monks’ practice, although Yasothararat does not include any texts on pīti ascribed to them. Below, I draw attention to three sections in this work.


Section 1 teaches anāpānasati in a way similar to that found in the manuals of Sivisuddhisom and Suk (see above) and Don (see below). Similarities include sequential movement, nine locations as the mental base in meditation, breathing techniques and the use of diagrams (Mettanando 1998, 299–303).20 We might therefore expect their entire system to parallel the others. However, if we look more closely at two other meditation techniques it offers, we find significant divergence. The first appears to be a simplified meditation method for inducing nīmitta actively, and the second is a ‘meditation on the Triple Gem’.

The second is section 2 in Text 5: ‘Burapakit khong kammathatan baeb Yo’ ['Simplified Meditation Method'; hereafter SMM].

According to the main text of this section (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 195–197), practitioners start by reciting a meditation litany and reciting verses on the recollection of the Triple Gem. For the litany, one prepares five incense sticks, five candles, and five sets of popped rice and flowers.21 The first ritual of offering using this meditation litany should take place on a Thursday during the half of the month when the moon is waxing. Practitioners should place a Buddha statue on a platform. The Buddha image is necessary as it is to be used as the basis of the nīmitta in meditation. In this case the nīmitta (eidetic sign experienced in meditation), rather than arising spontaneously, is actively visualised on the basis of the image. This method of using an external basis for the nīmitta is more akin to the use of kasina discs as described in the Visuddhimagga, i.e. one starts with an external form that one seeks to reproduce mentally. One sits facing east, with crossed legs, right hand on the left hand, and right leg on the left leg. One then visualises the nīmitta of the Buddha image about one inch either above or below the navel, but not lower than one finger’s width under the navel. At the same time, the practitioner recites arahāma or any other words they feel comfortable with. Once the mind calms, the ‘dhamma will appear’ (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 196). The text also describes how nīmitta could be experienced using the term ‘dhammakāya’, ‘body of the dhamma’, in the extract below:
The honorable practitioner (yogāvacara) who knows that dhammakāya ('body of the dhamma') is within ‘the boundary of the heart’ (hadaya-prathet) of all beings, and that it [dhammakāya] causes the dynamic movement of all beings like puppets, these yogāvacara will focus on cultivating vipassanāñāna for attaining dhammakāya, which is the great refuge … the dhammakāya is immortal/everlasting. (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 195)

**Commentary section**

The commentary that follows the main manual adds that there are three types of gems that could also be used as nimitta in the place of the Buddha image. They are a bright crystal ball, chrysoberyl (cat’s eye) and diamond (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 263; see below).

Next is section 3 in Text 5 on ‘Buddhaghuna, Dhammaghuna and Sanghaghuna and the Use of Sacred Letters for Visualisation’ (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 182–195, 260–263).

The text consists of three parts, including three lessons: Buddhaghuna, ‘the virtues of the Buddha’; Dhammaghuna, ‘the virtues of the Dhamma’; and Sanghaghuna, ‘the virtues of the Sangha’. Here, I give an example of the part on Buddhaghuna.

The practice of Buddhaghuna begins with the visualisation of a table of letters that spell out the buddhavandanā (‘homage of the Buddha’) for the recollection of the Buddha’s qualities. The letters are in the sacred Khom script, the script used for copying canonical texts. This begins with ‘itipiso’. The practitioner zooms in and out of the image, fixing each syllable in its proper sequence. The table consists of 56 syllables in total, i.e. the same number of syllables as in the Buddha section of the itipiso formula, arranged in a pattern of 7 × 8. The practitioner then employs the kao lamdab procedure to move forwards and backwards along each line of the table. Then they employ the kao sab method, moving between adjacent lines, also forwards and backwards, until completely fluent in the sequence of syllables. Eventually the mind begins to calm and the practitioner starts to experience contentment (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 182–187).

At the start of the text on the Buddhaghuna lesson, the text suggests that practitioners aim to attain and contemplate dhammakāya, ‘the body of dhamma’, as nimitta in the vipassanā stage, although the text does not explain how to proceed to vipassanā. The following provides a translation of the selected extract:

contemplating on dhammakāya in/through its rūpakāya (‘form/physical body’) through the 7 bojjhanga (‘factors of enlightenment’). Citta (‘mind’) will then have wisdom of rūpadhamma and nāmadhamma. (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 183)
Text 6, by Jan Sirijanto

Jan’s text covers *Buddhānussati*, ‘recollection of the Buddha’; *Dhammānussati*, ‘recollection of the Dhamma’; *Sanghānussati*, ‘recollection of the Sangha’; *ānāpānasati*; and *pīti*. It is a very short text of only two pages. The following extracts give examples of verses of litany prior to meditation:

I wish to cultivate *Buddhānussati kammatthan* (‘meditation on the recollection of the Buddha’), *Dhammānussati kammatthan* (‘meditation on the recollection of the Dhamma’) and *Sanghānussati kammatthan* (‘meditation on the recollection of the Sangha’). May I attain *pīti dhamma jao* 5 (‘the honourable five delights’), *yugala dhamma* 6 (‘the honourable 6 pairs’) and *sukha* (‘the happiness’). (Yasothararat 2006 [1936], 198)

Now, I wish to attain *sukha* (‘happiness’), *uggahanimitta* (‘learning signs’) and *patibhāganimitta* (‘counterparts signs’) in the great *phra khuddaka pīti dhamma jao* (‘the honourable minor delight’). May they [*uggahanimitta* and *patibhāganimitta*] appear. (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 199)

The two extracts above indicate that, similar to texts by Sivisuddhisom and Suk, Jan’s text includes verses of litany that practitioners should recite prior to meditation. These verses not only function to help calm down the mind in preparation for meditation, they also express the practitioners’ goal, or what they are aiming to achieve at each stage of the meditation. Like Sivisuddhisom and Suk, Jan uses terms for associating the *nimitta* with the different stages of meditation, including *pīti dhamma jao* 5 (‘the honourable five delights’), *yugala dhamma* 6 (‘the honourable 6 pairs’), *uggahanimitta* (‘learning signs’) and *patibhāganimitta* (‘counterparts signs’). However, Jan’s text does not describe the shapes and colours of each *nimitta*.

Overall, Jan only covers three techniques, i.e. *anussati*, *ānāpānasati* and *pīti*, and excludes the *brahmavihāra* technique that Sivisuddhisom and Suk cover. Jan’s emphasis on *anussati* is like that of the 56 Ayutthaya monks. However, unlike the 56 Ayutthaya monks, Jan does not cover the visualisation of sacred letters. Instead, his technique is to develop *nimitta* internally without external visualisation.

Text 7, by Don

Don’s text covers meditation litany, *pīti*, *ānāpānasati*, *kasiṇa*, *asubha*, *kāyagatānussati*, *buddhānussati*, *brahmavihāra* and *vipassanā*. For the *samatha* sections, Don’s practices are arranged in the following order: *pīti*, *ānāpānasati*, *kasiṇa*, *asubha*, *kāyagatāsati*, *buddhānussati* and *brahmavihāra*. Practitioners see different colours of *nimitta* in various *samatha* stages. For example, *khuddakā pīti* (‘minor delight’) as *nimitta* is green, *khanti pīti* (‘momentary delight’) is red, *okkantikā pīti* (‘showering delight’) is yellowish gold, *ubbegā pīti* (‘uplifting delight’) is pure white, and *pharanā pīti*
‘pervading delight’) is yellowish white. In the vipassanā stages, the nimitta is colourless (Yasothonrat 2006a [1936], 214–243). Like Suk and Sivisuddhisom, Don does not describe the shapes of each nimitta. The major difference between Don and other authors (Sivisuddhisom, Suk, etc.) is that Don mentions colourless nimitta in vipassanā, while others – with the exception of the 56 Ayutthaya monks – do not mention nimitta in vipassanā. The 56 Ayutthaya monks use the term dhammakāya for nimitta in vipassanā, but do not provide a description of it.

Table 1 provides basic information about these texts and a summary of visualisation and nimitta as explained in these seven texts.

**Observations and analysis of visualisation and nimitta in these seven texts**

From the seven texts above, as summarised in Table 1, we can see that the standard terms for nimitta used in the Visuddhimagga, including uggahani-mitta and patibhāganimitta, appear in all seven texts. However, the way that nimitta are treated in these texts varies significantly from their treatment in the Visuddhimagga.

A striking feature is that these seven texts introduce several other terms for nimitta and often ascribe specific colours or appearance to them. In pīti, yugala and sukha stages of meditation, such terms as pīti dhamma jao (‘honourable delights’), ong phra pīti (‘the entity of the delights’) and other synonymous terms are used to refer to nimitta (see Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 83–116). This is the case for Text 1 by Sivisuddhisom, Text 4 by Suk, Text 6 by Jan and Text 7 by Don. There is no description of the shape of pīti dhamma jao as nimitta. However, in Text 1 by Sivisuddhisom and Text 7 by Don, each of the five pīti jao is described as having its own colour. Text 1 by Sivisuddhisom describes nimitta in each of the six yugala as being bi-coloured. For example, lahutā yugala dhamma jao is red inside and green outside.

A further striking aspect is the location and movement of the nimitta according to prescribed patterns within the body. The texts by Sivisuddhisom, Suk and Don include similar patterns of sequential movement. These are kao lamdab, kao sab and kao keub. The kao lamdub technique is a simple, straightforward pattern of movements in forward (anulom) and reverse (patilom) orders, along a line of fixed points in the body. The kao sab and kao keub techniques are two different patterns of complex movements in forward and reverse orders (see Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 104–105). However, only Sivisuddhisom’s text introduces the kao ruab technique, which is performed at the end of each meditation stage and involves merging all the nimitta together as one, in one specific place. In terms of location for the pīti stage, Sivisuddhisom and
Table 1. A Summary of Seven Texts and Nimitta

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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Text’s name in brief</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Author date</th>
<th>Text date</th>
<th>Visualised objects</th>
<th>Terms for nimitta</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Locations</th>
<th>Movement</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>Baeb</td>
<td>Sivisuddhisom</td>
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<td>1637–1714</td>
<td>jhānas – colours</td>
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<td>colours: mettā – white ray, etc.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>Thamma Osot</td>
<td>Vichaithat</td>
<td>17th c.</td>
<td>1637–1714</td>
<td>uggaha, patibhāga</td>
<td>No description</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>Hong 8 baeb</td>
<td>Phuttarangsi</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1637–1714</td>
<td>Colours in 10 kasi a</td>
<td>uggaha, patibhāga</td>
<td>No description</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Thonburi</td>
<td>Samatha-Vipassana</td>
<td>Suk</td>
<td>1733–1822</td>
<td>Early 19th c.</td>
<td>piti dhama jao, ong phra piti, etc.</td>
<td>uggahanimitta</td>
<td>'Seeing one’s own refined body, wearing crown and necklace’ ‘star’ ‘moon’ ‘sun’</td>
<td>Navel, and 9 location base</td>
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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Text’s name in brief</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Author date</th>
<th>Text date</th>
<th>Visualised objects</th>
<th>Terms for nimitta</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Locations</th>
<th>Movement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ayutthaya</td>
<td>5.1 anāpānasati 5.2 simplified method 5.3 Buddha-ghuna, dhamma-, sangha-</td>
<td>56 monks</td>
<td>18th c.</td>
<td>18th c.</td>
<td>Sacred letters (ı, ti, pi, so, etc.)</td>
<td>‘Buddha’, ‘dhamma’, ‘dhammakāya’ in vipassana, 3 types of crystal/gems uggahanimitta piti dhamma jao, uggaha, patībhāga, etc.</td>
<td>No description except verses explaining ‘dhammakāya’</td>
<td>anāpānasati–9 locations base; ‘simplified’–one inch above navel</td>
<td>9 anulom, patilom, kao sab, kao keub</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>Kuen Kammatthan</td>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>1854–1932</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>No description</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>anulom, patilom, kao sab, kao keub</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Thonburi</td>
<td>Samatha-Vipassana</td>
<td>Don</td>
<td>1771–1852</td>
<td>Early 19th c.</td>
<td>Only colours mentioned</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>anulom, patilom, khao sab, khao keub</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>anulom, patilom, khao sab, khao keub</td>
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</table>
Suk mention that the first bodily base at which to start locating the mind in pīti meditation is at the navel. Other authors do not mention specific locations to start with. Unlike other authors, Suk explicitly mentions that a practitioner will see nimitta – that is, ‘one’s own refined body, wearing a crown and necklace’. According to Suk, this nimitta emerges at the end of sukha meditation stage.

In the ānāpānasati stage of meditation, Sivisuddhisom, Suk, the 56 Ayutthaya monks, and Don all offer a similar description of the nine bodily bases. The term ānāpānasati dhamma jao (‘its majesty, the meditation subject the mindfulness of breath’) is used in these texts but there is no description of it. Unlike other authors, Sivisuddhisom and Suk explicitly describe an experience of seeing nimitta emerging at the end of ānāpānasati practice. Sivisuddhisom says that one will see the white Buddha, after having seen the uggahanimitta. Suk states that one will see a nimitta in the form of a star, the moon or the sun.

In the brahmavihāra stage of meditation, Sivisuddhisom associates colours to each of the four meditation subjects; for example, mettā brahmavihāra emits a white ray. Don also mentions colours. For example, Don describes mettā brahmavihāra as having a colour like the sun (Yasothararat 2006a [1936], 218). In contrast, no other author mentions colours of nimitta in the brahmavihāra stage.

In vipassanā meditation, two texts, by the 56 Ayutthaya monks and Don, also make clear that nimitta emerge here and not only during samatha. The 56 Ayutthaya monks use the term dhammakāya to refer to its form. They provide no description, in contrast to their explanation of the visual aspects of the nimitta to be generated at the very start of the meditation. Don says that the nimitta that emerges in vipassanā is colourless. (Otherwise, the texts selected for this study do not discuss nimitta in relation to vipassanā. See Skilton in this volume on vipassanā kammatṭhāna in late Siamese meditation texts.)

Text 5, by the 56 Ayutthaya monks, does not include a pīti section. This is unusual since the five pīti are usually a defining feature of boran kammatthan practices. However, it does offer two other techniques that are excluded from the six other texts. The first is a simplified meditation method in which one only focuses on a nimitta at one inch above the navel. Practitioners are to choose one of the following objects to be visualised at the start of the meditation: three types of gems (bright crystal, chrysoberyl or diamond) or the Buddha image. The text suggests that during meditation, dhamma as nimitta will emerge in samatha stage(s), and dhammakāya as nimitta will emerge in vipassanā meditation. The second technique that Text 5 gives is a meditation on Buddhaghuna, Dhammaghuna and Sanghaghuna. In these, one is expected to visualise Khom letters, i.e. i-ti-pi-so, etc. Again,
the text suggests that at an advanced level in vipassanā, dhammakaya as a nimitta will emerge, but provides no description of it.

Another important feature of each of the seven texts is that verses of chanting often provide terms for various forms of nimitta. Practitioners are expected to recite these verses prior to meditation, and then such nimitta are described as emerging during meditation. For example, the term pīti dhamma jao appears in verses of chanting to invoke success in the meditation, and then practitioners are supposed to see the pīti nimitta emerging. In other words, verses of recitation not only function as litany, but also describe the phenomenal experience of nimitta in meditation. Such experience is usually what practitioners aim to achieve at each meditation stage.26

A further feature is that although visualising nimitta can be treated as one particular technique in its own right, in practice advanced practitioners may opt for practising the visualisation of nimitta in conjunction with any other technique. For example, texts by Vichaithat and Suk combine the use of nimitta with the practice of ānāpadasati and/or brahmavihāra. This is because the combination of various techniques enables practitioners to adjust the proper balance of elements (dhātus) in an effective way, especially in the science of healing. Once experienced in achieving and moving nimitta, one is able to master one’s own mind at any specific bodily base, and so allow other meditation techniques to function in an increasingly effective way. The proper breathing enables one to improve the capacity to control and adjust the wind and air elements in the body. The pīti and/or brahmavihāra help reduce the fire element arising from anger. So, the two texts by Vichaithat and Suk highlight the benefits of combining more than one technique available to advanced practitioners.27

**Examples of living meditation traditions**

We are limited when studying the seven texts above in that we are trying to understand the experience and practice of meditation through the restricted expression of them in texts, rather than through direct access to what practitioners do or experience. However, many of these texts have exerted an influence on – or reflect traditions which have influenced – the teachings and practices of living traditions in Thailand and Laos until relatively recently. Moreover, there are some living expressions of these traditions in Thailand and Cambodia.

In 2006 a Lao scholar monk, Venerable Sayadej Vongsopha, pointed out that the Lao Meditation Manual (i.e. the texts by Sivisuddhisom, Vichaithat and Phuttarangsii) had had an influence on meditation traditions in Laos in the twentieth century (Sayadej 2016, unpaginated). Influential monks in Laos – including, for example, the Supreme
Patriarch Thammayanna Mahathera (1891–1985) – developed their own meditation style, drawing on the Lao Meditation Manual. Phramaha Boontheung Kaewkasemsuk (1917–1974) then adopted Thammayanna’s meditation. As mentioned above, the short text on traditional ānāpānasati by Thammayanna was published in Vientiane State’s Samatha-kammathan lae Vipassana-kammathan Chabab Boran (Muang Vientiane-Luang Prabang) [Samatha and Vipassana Meditation, Traditional Version (Vientianne-Luang Prabang City)] in 1974 (Vientiane State 1974, 39–40). There are similarities between Thammayanna’s text and Sivisuddhisom’s text on ānāpānasati. Both of them have a meditation litany prior to ānāpānasati practice, and their verses of litany are similar to one another. Moreover, both emphasise the practice of locating nimitta at the nine bodily bases (1974, 39–40). Disappointingly, neither my colleagues nor I have found living lineages of these practices in Laos.

In Thailand, there are at least three living traditions whose meditation techniques have links to and/or share some similarities with at least one of the seven texts above. These include meditation traditions at Wat Ratchasittharam in Thonburi, Wat Pradusongtham in Ayutthaya, and the network of Dhammakaya practitioners who drew their practices from Wat Paknam.

At Wat Ratchasittharam, the meditation lineage of Supreme Patriarch Suk Kaithun (1733–1822) has been unbroken since his lifetime, and continues today. The present lineage holder of Suk’s tradition is Venerable Phrakhrusangkharak Veera Thanaveero (Veera Sukmeesap; 1949–; hereafter Veera). Veera refers to his tradition by the phrase Kammathan Majjima baeb Lamdub (lit. ‘The Middle Way Meditation in Sequence’; hereafter KMBL). Veera’s teaching of KMBL follows Suk’s text at least in terms of the major structure of procedures. According to Veera, practitioners proceed through three major steps: hong buddha-guna (‘the lessons relating to the Buddha’s virtue’ or ‘meditating on the Buddha’s virtue’), hong rupa-kammathan (‘the lessons for meditation on form’), and hong arupa-kammathan (‘the lessons for meditation on formlessness’). Practitioners begin with ‘the lessons relating to the Buddha’s virtue’, and aim at bringing their mind to a standstill. Once the mind reaches upacāra-samādhi or ‘temporary standstill’, one achieves the first stage of form jhāna (pathom chan in Thai, pathama-jhāna in Pali). Up to this level, the mind spontaneously visualises what Veera regards as the ‘temporarily developed form’ (rup tiam; literally meaning ‘pseudo form’ in Thai) of the first jhāna, pathama-jhāna. ‘The lessons relating to the Buddha’s virtue’ includes three consecutive stages, in the first of which the practitioner’s mind is focused on piti (enjoyment). Throughout these stages, practitioners move their mind in specific patterns around the body, through which they achieve and demonstrate absolute control.
over their mind. Each individual’s success is expressed through their capacity to invoke nimitta (signs) in the form of spheres of coloured light (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 87–92). Once one succeeds in mastering one’s mind in the lessons relating to the Buddha’s virtue, one then proceeds to the ‘lesson for meditation on form’, the step that starts with the ānāpānasati stage.30

There are similarities between Suk’s text and Veera’s teachings. They use the same terms for nimitta, including phra piti dhamma jao (‘the honourable majesties, the [5] delights’) etc. These terms appear in verses of chanting, to be recited prior to meditation. Following Suk, Veera teaches that one expresses one’s intention to attain piti dhamma (‘the essential entity of delights’) in reciting these verses, and one is expected to experience it in meditation (Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2014, 97–104). Similar to Suk, Veera also practises ānāpānasati at nine bodily bases, and the skills to control nimitta at these bases are crucial lessons. Adopting Suk’s technique, Veera’s lessons include the practice of sequential movements, including anulom, patilom, kao sab and kao keub. Veera explains that several forms of nimitta can emerge during meditation. According to him, one may see ‘a star’, ‘one’s own body from within’ and other forms of nimitta but, importantly, one should not be attached to any of it (interview in July 2014).31 Again, Veera’s explanation of the nimitta experienced is similar to that mentioned in Suk’s text.

While meditation teachings at Wat Ratchasittharam may have relied heavily on the textual authority of Suk, at Wat Pradusongtham meditation techniques have relied only in part on textual authority. The only meditation text that still survives at Wat Pradusongtham is Text 5 by the 56 Ayutthaya monks. The lay meditation teacher Surat explains that this text is important for advanced practitioners. He also suggests that due to the loss of many of the meditation texts of Wat Pradusongtham, especially texts which give guidance for beginners, meditation teachers have had to base their teachings mainly on a practice/experiential basis (interview with Surat, 26 February 2015).

Unlike Veera, at Wat Pradusongtham Surat neither begins meditation practice with the ‘lessons relating to the Buddha’s virtue’, nor follows the structure given in Suk’s text. Surat uses the phrase kammathan 40 baeb piti 5 (lit., ‘the 40 types of meditation in a version of the five delights’) to denote Suk’s technique. According to him, Suk’s method is over-complicated for beginners. In contrast, the meditation lineage at Wat Pradusongtham preserves a simplified method called kammathan 40 baeb ong ruam (‘the combined approach to kammathan 40’, hereafter KBOR), or kammathan 40 baeb tang pramual (‘the adapted methodologies of kammathan 40’). According to Surat, although this method is simple at beginner levels, it becomes complex at advanced levels. It begins with the ānāpānasati
practice, by observing the breath, together with visualising nimitta. Surat acknowledges the nine bodily bases as explained in Yasothararat, but does the practice in a simplified way by seeing nimitta at only one location, which is the stomach – the location at the end of the path of the breath. According to him, once the mind is still, one will see nimitta as a bright, light object located at the stomach. This is to be practised until the mind reaches upacāra-samādhī or ‘temporary standstill’ and so achieves the first stage of form jhāna (pathom chan, pathama-jjhāna). According to Surat, once one’s mind experiences enjoyment (pītī), the mind spontaneously visualises light and the meditation object which Surat refers to as ‘ong phavana (bhāvanā)’ (the ‘meditation entity’). Once the mind reaches this stage, one uses the ong phavana(s) as nimitta(s) to invoke the more refined kammatthan jao (‘meditation subject(s)’) and move it (them) to different locations. At advanced levels, practitioners are to proceed through different techniques, including brahmavihara, kasiṇa, asubha, buddhaghuna, etc. The principle of anulom and patilom, forward and reverse action, applies in the sense that one has to move the mind in forward and reverse order, as well as going through different techniques in forward and reverse order (interview with Surat, 26 February 2015).

In the case of the Dhammakaya tradition, the tradition includes practitioners who follow the teachings in the network of three temples: Wat Paknam in Thonburi, Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Pathumthani, and Wat Luang Po Sodh Dhammakayaram in Ratchaburi. The tradition began in 1916 when Phramongkhonthepmunit Sodh Candasaro (1884–1959), the abbot of Wat Paknam, began to teach Dhammakaya meditation. By the mid-twentieth century, Sodh’s teachings had become popular. Subsequently, Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Wat Luang Po Sodh Dhammakayaram were established in 1970 and 1991, respectively. By the 1990s, Wat Phra Dhammakaya had established an international network expanding into several countries in Europe and Asia, as well as the USA, Australia and New Zealand. At present, the network of the tradition has spread to countries on every continent of the world.

There are a number of similarities between Dhammakaya meditation practice and the SMM found in the text by the 56 Ayutthaya monks (Text 5 above). The first similarity is the meditation posture, though this is probably not specific enough to be indicative of a link. Like SMM, Dhammakaya meditation posture is sitting cross-legged, with the right leg on the left leg, and the right hand on the left hand. Much more significant is what practitioners are then to visualise, and in this case they are to visualise actively, rather than just allow nimitta to arise. In SMM, practitioners are to visualise nimitta at one inch above the navel. In a similar way, Dhammakaya practitioners are to visualise nimitta at two fingers’ width above the navel, which is in fact very close to one inch above the navel. At the start of
meditation, SMM and Dhammakaya practices use the same types of nimitta as objects of visualisation. These include the Buddha image and a crystal ball (Jayamangalo 1997, 57–58).

For Dhammakaya practitioners, in the samatha stage, one will first see duang tham (a dhamma sphere). After that, one will experience eight forms of nimitta. These are manussa kāya (‘crude human body’), panīta manussa kāya (‘refined human body’), dibbakāya (‘crude celestial body’), panīta dibbakāya (‘refined celestial body’), rūpabrahmakāya (‘crude form Brahman body’), panīta rūpabrahmakāya (‘refined form Brahman body’), arūpabrahmakāya (‘crude formless Brahman body’), and panīta arūpabrahmakāya (‘refined formless Brahman body’). In vipassanā stages, one will see dhammadāya. There are 10 forms of dhammadāya bodies that one will see in meditation (Jayamangalo 1997, 67–74).

So, there are similar explanations of the experience of nimitta between Dhammakaya teachings and SMM, and Dhammakaya teachings and Suk’s text. In SMM text, in samatha stage, practitioners will see dhamma arising. Dhammakaya practitioners use the term duang tham (dhamma sphere) to refer to this type of nimitta. Another similarity between SMM and Dhammakaya meditation is that in the vipassanā stage, an advanced practitioner will see dhammadāya emerging as a form of nimitta.

Another significant similarity between Suk’s text and Dhammakaya meditation lies in an experience that takes place in a samatha stage. In Suk’s text, it describes one of the nimitta as ‘one’s own refined body, wearing a crown and necklace’ (see above). This is similar to an experience described in Dhammakaya meditation in stages two, three and four. In stage two of Dhammakaya meditation, practitioners are to see their ‘refined human body’ without a crown and necklace. In stage three, they are to see the crude celestial body, wearing a crown and necklace, and then in stage four, the refined celestial body, wearing a crown and necklace (Jayamangalo 1997, 68).

Conclusion

This article has explored texts of the pre-reform boran kammatthan meditation practices of Theravada as preserved in Thai and Lao publications from the 1930s, at the point when these meditations were still present but beginning to disappear. I have shown how these texts share distinctive features while also reflecting significant diversity. I have done this by focusing on the main distinguishing feature of these practices, namely their sophisticated and complex use of nimitta, the eidetic signs seen in meditation. These nimitta are usually understood to emerge spontaneously as one successfully achieves particular stages of meditation, although the litanies that invoke them may give practitioners in some systems some indication of
what to achieve. As spontaneously occurring entities, the nimitta are treated with respect, as if they were living entities with their own agency. Once successfully experienced, they are then placed in certain positions in the body, and moved and combined in different ways. Different meditation systems, as evidenced through my selection of seven texts by way of example, record different diagnostic colours and appearances for the nimitta and use a spectrum of movement patterns. Some guide advanced practitioners on how to use their skill in these practices to perform healing. Not all the texts use nimitta movement and some use active rather than spontaneous visualisation. This is the case with Text 5, of the 56 Ayutthaya monks, which begins not with the five pītī – one of the otherwise diagnostic features of this family of practices (see Skilton in this volume) – but with the meditation on an external Buddha image, which is then internally visualised just above the navel. The texts vary in whether they expect nimitta to arise in the vipassanā stages of meditation.

My analysis of the texts reveals a family of practices that share an understanding of the transformative effect of nimitta as a crucial component of the spiritual path. This use of nimitta presupposes a mind–body relationship that is unfamiliar in most modern, reform meditation practices, a shift which Crosby has linked to changes in understandings of technology and the mind–body relationship with the advent of colonialism and modernity (Crosby 2013). Only a few examples of these practices survive into the modern period.

Beyond showing the rich diversity within this family of boran kammatthan practices, my study allows us to connect the modern living practices as found in Thailand with specific branches of boran kammatthan. The link between the practices at Wat Ratchasittharam and Suk’s practice was already known to scholars (see Newell 2011, 103–104; Ong 2011, 135). The practitioners at Wat Pradusongtham are also familiar with the importance for them of Text 5 by the 56 Ayutthaya monks, which they keep and relate to their advanced practices, while also stating that it is insufficient for beginners and less advanced practitioners. They, like Text 5 and in contrast to Wat Ratchasittharam, follow a simplified method, but still allow nimitta to emerge spontaneously.

A striking new finding of my research, presented in this article, is the link between the simplified method of Text 5 by the 56 Ayutthaya monks of the eighteenth century, and Dhammakaya practices derived from Sodh Candasaro (1884–1959), the abbot of Wat Paknam. The origin of these practices has been obscured by the account of Sodh’s experience, which stood by itself in narratives about this important teacher among his followers, rather than indicating how it built upon practices Sodh had learnt at different temples as a young monk. His study at the temples that preserved boran kammatthan has been established, and advanced practitioners at the
temple have been aware of the link in general with a broader network of pre-reform practices. It was this that inspired Mettanando Bhikkhu – at the time a senior monk within Wat Phra Dhammakaya – to conduct his research on Yasothararat’s text (Mettanando 1998). However, we can see here that Sodh’s dhammakāya method relates closely to one very specific tradition, the simplified method of the 56 Ayutthaya monks, with details including the active visualisation of the nimitta, its initial location above the navel, and its appearance both at the simplified and at the advanced stages.

The boran kammatthan traditions of Siam and Laos represent a rich and diverse heritage of Theravada meditation practices. Much of this is now lost, having been replaced by simplified reform practices often based on a reading of canonical sources. Just as these new meditations are themselves ‘textual revivals’, there remains the possibility that now-lost practices of the boran kammatthan might also be revived from textual sources. In the meantime, we can see that a number of contemporary meditation traditions are themselves based more or less directly in the tradition of boran kammatthan teaching and practice.

Notes

1. The name of the country changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939, seven years after Siam’s political change to democracy. In this article, I use the term Siam to emphasise pre-reform religio-cultural traditions and reflect all developments prior to the 1930s, and the term Thailand for anything from the 1930s onwards.

2. In this article, I transcribe Thai terms by following the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) which also elides most diacritical marks for easy reading. This system, which is the official one for rendering Thai in the Latin alphabet, is often used in highway signs and official government documents. It also closely follows international library standards. I follow RTGS in my transcription of most names of Thai and Lao figures and their official ranks (lay official or clerical ranks). However, I make a few exceptions, for instance when referring in particular to Thai monks (e.g. Sodh), as their practitioners spell their names in official websites and publications in a certain way; I leave such spellings unchanged. For Pali terminologies on meditation and terms used in the Visuddhimagga and meditation texts, I keep them in Pali spelling and romanise them with the use of diacritical marks.

3. The term Buddha-rangsi in the book’s title is a short form of the phrase Buddha-chabbana-rangsi. So, I translate it as the Buddha’s halo. I translate the term driśatīnāṇa as ‘theory or knowledge of perception’.

4. In Thai and Lao meditation texts/manuscripts that I have reviewed in this article, the terms kammathan and kammatthan are used interchangeably to refer to meditation. To Thai scholars, the former is a way of spelling in Thai-style language, while the latter is in Pali without diacritic marks. For consistency in this article, I choose the spelling kammatthan as it is used throughout Yasothararat (1936).
5. In 2015–2017 I identified around 100 relevant texts in handlists of Thai/Tai manuscripts. An example of work which examines boran kammatthan by researching palm leaf manuscripts includes Urkasame’s *A Study of Elements in Yogavacara Tradition from Tham Scripts Palm-leaf Manuscripts* (2013).

6. On the phrase *mūla kammatthāna* and the variable use of the term *kammatthāna*, including in relation to *samatha* and *vipassanā*, see Skilton (this volume). For contents in Thai publications on *boran kammatthan* in the 1930s, see Skilton and Choompolpaisal (in preparation).

7. Here I only cover major publications in the 1930s and treat them as examples of *boran kammatthan* texts. I do not cover other texts, especially those on King Taksin’s meditation, that I have discussed elsewhere (Choompolpaisal forthcoming). Nor do I cover articles on meditation as published in journals in the 1910s and 1920s. These articles are still accessible in the National Library of Thailand (my research 2011–2015).

8. For the role of Thammayut monks in relation to *boran kammatthan*, see Skilton in this volume.

9. For Vivitthavanpreecha’s life, see Bureau of Literature and History (2011, 68).

10. On the term *pañimutta* see Skilton in this volume.

11. For Suk’s life, see Choompolpaisal (forthcoming).


13. With the support of the Laotian Supreme Patriarch and the governor of Vientiane, a Special Committee was set up to produce this publication. The committee was led by Yathan Phralakkham Janthaburi Methajan, Head of Sangha in Vientiane District, and Uthong Suvannavong (Jao Phraya Luang Muang Jan). See Vientiane State (1974, k (n)).


15. The text *Pritsana Tham Khong Nak Prat Boran [Ancient Intellectuals’ Questions on Dhamma]* published in Yasothararat (1936) refers to the king by name, ‘Dhammikkarachathiratjao’. This text was copied from the original manuscript (unknown title) by Phrayanarakkhit (Piyatharo Rang).

16. For a monastic discussion of meditation in Laos, see also Vientiane State’s *Meeting Notes of 200 Participant Monks from around the Country at Wat That Luang 1976* in Sayadej (2016). These meeting notes were loose, i.e. unpublished, papers in Lao language.

17. The former is his name as it appears in Yasothararat 1936, the latter how it appears in Vientiane State 1974.

18. Given that Wat Pradusongtham was built during the reign of King Baromkot of Ayutthaya who reigned 1732–1758, and that Ayutthaya collapsed in 1767, this congress must have been held in the eighteenth century, and 572 years before that takes us to the thirteenth century.

19. For a translation of each phrase that has its root in the term ‘samādhi jao’, see Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014, 91, 94).

21. For the offerings of five sets of items as part of the preparatory ritual in the litany, see Crosby (1999, chapter 6) and Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2016, 218).

22. On the use of the itipiso syllables in similar fashion for protective purposes, see Bizot and von Hinüber (1994, 69–84) and Crosby (2000, 161–165). The graphic representation of this meditation survives in traditional Thai tattooing practice.

23. For the extensive use of litany for this purpose in boran kammatthan, see Crosby (1999, chapter 6), where she edits and translates an extensive Pali litany preserved in Sri Lanka for the practice of boran kammatthan as transmitted to Sri Lanka from Ayutthaya in the mid-eighteenth century.

24. See Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2015) for a description of these nine according to Suk's system.

25. For a translation of terms that have their roots in ānāpānasati jao ('its majesty, the mindfulness of breath'), see Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2016, 212–216).

26. For this issue, see also Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014).

27. Elsewhere, in the Lakkhana Dhamma manuscript, nimitta are used in conjunction with the asubha practice.

28. For Dhammayan Mahathera's life, see Yukhonthon (2014).

29. For the history of Suk's transmission of meditation and his life, see Choompolpaisal (forthcoming).


31. Interviews at Division 5 at Wat Ratchasittharam. The most similar other living practice to this, in terms of the range of emerging nimitta, is the practice at Wat Domrei Sar mentioned but not discussed in detail by Crosby (2013; personal communication).

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**Web resources**

THE CITY OF NIBBĀNA IN THAI PICTURE BOOKS OF THE THREE WORLDS

(สมุดภาพไตรภูมิ)

Barend Jan Terwiel

ABSTRACT
Throughout its long history, Buddhist meditation has been a lasting source of happiness, and its ultimate goal has been the imperturbable stillness of mind after the fires of desire, aversion and delusion have been finally extinguished. This state is called in Pali nibbāna, the place of perfect peace and happiness. In his classical book on Thai painting, Jean Boisselier confidently states: ‘Artists are of course unable to depict any aspect of nibbāna, since that world is by nature without form’. This article will show that more than two centuries ago Thai artists did just that which Boisselier proclaimed to be impossible. Thai artists drawing the cosmos in Picture Books of the Three Worlds (สมุดภาพไตรภูมิ [Samutphātraiphūm]) did indeed depict nibbāna. Some drew an ‘empty space’, but among the older manuscripts most drew a complex ‘City of Nibbāna’. It will be determined what this elaborate City of Nibbāna stands for. Finally, the question is raised whether or not the City of Nibbāna is part of a type of Buddhism that was suppressed in early modern times.

Nibbāna

Nibbāna is voidness, the epitome of purity, enlightenment and peace, where all mental defilements and suffering have been overcome (Swearer 1989, 75–76). The Buddha frowned upon all speculations as to whether or not there would be joy in nibbāna. As nibbāna is a kind of extinction, it precludes the practice of virtues (it is beyond good and evil) such as charity. It is an escape from the wheel of rebirth, eternal peace.

There is, bhikkhus, that base where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air; no base consisting of the infinity of space, no base consisting of the infinity of consciousness, no base consisting of nothingness, no base consisting of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor another world nor both; neither sun nor moon. Here, bhikkhus, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering.
Or, more poetically:

Consciousness without feature, without end, luminous all around:

Here water, earth, fire, & wind have no footing.
Here long & short, coarse & fine, fair & foul, name & form, are all brought to an end.
With the cessation of [the activity of] consciousness, all is here brought to an end.¹

Thus, in the Buddhist context nibbāna refers to the imperturbable stillness after the fires of desire, aversion and delusion have been finally extinguished.

In his classical book on Thai painting, Boisselier (1976, 142) confidently states: ‘Artists are of course unable to depict any aspect of nibbāna, since that world is by nature without form’. It will be shown that this statement is too generalised and sweeping. On some occasions Thai artists did make images of nibbāna, notably when they depict all levels of the universe according to the Buddhist cosmography in the genre Picture Book of the Three Worlds (สมุดภาพไตรภูมิ [Samutphāpraiphūm]). They may add nibbāna above the highest heaven as an empty space, but also there are a number of occasions where, in an elaborate opening section, they drew a ‘City of Nibbāna’.

**Nibbāna depicted as an empty palace or as empty space**

In this section I examine two Samutphāpraiphūm manuscripts showing how Thai artists used different techniques when they attempted to depict an empty nibbāna. They place this realm (if realm it may be called) on top of the highest heaven, at the summit of the uppermost regions of the universe. The 31 levels of the universe have been known in Thailand since at least the fourteenth century when the classical work Traiphūmikāthā was composed (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982). Figure 1 shows the first two leaves (of more than 50) of a Traiphūm manuscript.

On top of all heavenly levels, nibbāna is here depicted as a palace containing a single urn, which symbolically we may take as a receptacle holding the ashes of the Buddha. Above is written one line: kharue phra niphān an sūn laew lae prathān, or: ‘the house nibbāna, it is empty and preeminent’. At the right side is written niruephān bo midai koet phra arahan. mā koet tang 2 thi nueng phra anākhā. mi koet 7 ti phra sodāban tamrā nueng wā lae, meaning ‘In nibbāna arhats will not be reborn. Those who are without blemishes twice or once. Sotāpanna will be reborn seven times according to one treatise’.² Underneath is written Atchadākāt antara yojana lae, meaning ‘unentangled space, inside: space of a yojana’.

In the second picture book depicting the universe that is chosen to illustrate this section, the nibbāna level is completely empty. The manuscript is undated, but Thai experts, basing their judgement on the execution of the drawings and the character of the writing, date it to the twenty-fourth
century of the Buddha era (i.e. 1757–1857). The uppermost part of the universe is shown in Figure 2.

The city of Nibbāna

In 1965, Klaus Wenk published a depiction of an elaborate City of Nibbāna from the Berlin Traiphūm manuscript. This manuscript is clearly dated to the year 1777 (see Figure 3). The Spencer Library New York possesses an early twentieth-century copy of the cosmography also with this type of the City of Nibbāna, and in the Bangkok National Library there are at least six more.

Wenk translated the text written on both sides in the upper half of the picture:

This city of Nibbāna is not near, not far away, not deep, not high, but to reach it is very difficult. There are walls five layers, eight layers, ten layers. There are town gates, a tower, four layers of moats, 24 main roads, 37 markets, a stockade, strong walls, a palace of seven layers with a proper sleeping place on the floor. The sleeping quarters are always clearly lit up.

There is a floor with mosaic, there is a lotus pond full of cool water and lots of lotus flowers. Swarms of several types of bees fly around, they suck from the calyxes of lotus flowers. There are flocks of peacocks, cranes, Chakraphāk-ducks and the royal Hamsa-geese, both red and white. They come at all times to sing beautifully.
Wenk offers no explanation why Nibbāṇa should possess an array of unusual features such as several types of bees, four kinds of birds, more than 20 main roads and no less than 37 markets.

Joseph Schwartzberg has also dealt with the question of the great City of Nibbāṇa, which he illustrated from a Thonburi illuminated Traiphūm text, offering a translation of part of the same text:

- Its grounds laid with sands of crystal.
- A lake filled to the brim with clear cool water, blooming with lotuses.
- Bees are busy fondling the stamens;
- Melodious songs are heard from peacocks, cranes, and wild ducks
- And white and red hansas [swans]. (Schwarzberg 1994, 730)

Schwartzberg addresses the problem of the ‘crowded empty space’:

This is a far cry from the canonical idea of Nibbāna characterized by the absence of consciousness, although some suggestion of formlessness for one attaining that goal is conveyed by the divan with no reclining figure. The idea of a city is conveyed by the walls, the gates therein, the paved paths, and the fact that there are buildings shown in addition to just a single palace.

It is appealing because it represents the ultimate goal towards which all good Buddhists aspire. Yet there is a paradox in its being visibly portrayed in cosmographies such as the Trai Phum, in that it represents the highest level of Arupadhātu (Sanskrit: Ārupadhātu), the ‘Realm of Nonform’, even above the level of ‘Nothingness’.

Figure 2. From Samutphap Traiphum Akson Tham Lannā lek thi 9 [AS1] [Picture book of the Three Worlds, in Lannā Tham script, number 9] in Samutphap Traiphum chabap Akson Lannā lae Akson Khom, B.E. 2547, 2004, 29. Here only the upper levels of the universe are shown, with nibbana on top.
Schwarzberg then assumes that this concept was too difficult for lay Buddhists and that therefore they must have taken recourse to a *nibbāna* with a substratum of life remaining. Here, Schwartzberg supposes, they relied on a passage from the classical *Traiphūmikāthā*:

As for Nibbāna, there are two kinds that are gained by those who have completely rid themselves of the multitude of defilements .... one kind is called the Nibbāna with some substratum of life remaining, and the other kind is called the Nibbāna in which there is no substratum of life remaining. That which is attained as the fruit of fully perfected sainthood is said to reach the first treasure ... That which is attained when the five aggregates are left behind is said to reach the Nibbāna in which there is no substratum of life remaining (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982, 329–330).

Both Wenk and Schwartzberg fail to explain the remarkable diversity within the City of Nibbāna, such as the presence of the couch, the lamp, insects or birds, and they do not linger over the unusual numbers 24 and 37 in the text. However, the key towards understanding these objects, animals and numbers is found when taking note of the context, looking more closely at the pages before and after the depiction of the City of Nibbāna.
Figures 4, 5 and 6. The end of the preamble with the sermon (top); the depiction of the City of Nibbāna (middle); the stages towards becoming an Arahant (bottom). The Thai reader would read them in this sequence, from top down (Terwiel 2014, 41–66).
The context

In several of the cosmographies that depict the City of Nibbāna, the city is preceded by a preamble and a long sermon. Immediately following the City in all these cosmographies there is a double page on which eight figures are drawn, showing the eight stages of reaching nibbāna. The full sequence is shown in Figures 4–6 (Terwiel 2014, 41–66). It will be shown that the preamble, the lengthy sermon, the City of Nibbāna and the stages to become an Arahant are a closely knit set.

The preamble

In the first seven lines of the Thonburi Manuscript it is stated that King Taksin expressly ordered the preparation of a new Picture Book of the Three Worlds (See Figure 7).

On the 26th day of the fourth month of the [Buddha] year 2319 (Chulasakarat 1138) [5 March 1777] his majesty the king in his palace in Thonburi, surrounded by a multitude of courtiers considered the state of the old books of the Three Worlds. Let the ordinary people and Buddhist monks understand about the three worlds, the five existences and the various forms of rebirth as god, human, in a hell, as asura or as an animal. Therefore, the king ordered chief minister Chaophayā Si’thammathirat to select a good manuscript and to send it to the section scribes to create a beautiful Trai Phūm, then send it to the office of the Sangkharat [the head of the Buddhist church] let him write the Pali version, copy and verify the Pali, let him explain all painstakingly.

King Taksin’s motivation in ordering a new Picture Book of the Three Worlds in 1777 should be considered in conjunction with his growing interest in meditation which eventually led him into a controversial confrontation with...
a large part of the Sangha. We may assume that he must have learnt some Buddhist meditation techniques already as a young man, because from the age of 20 he spent three years as a monk in Wat Kosawat.

Also in 1777, Taksin was presented with the most authoritative texts on meditation (Reynolds 1973, 32). Around this time, Siam’s ruler began practising meditation in all seriousness and the rumour went about that he had the qualities of a Buddhist saint. When the Sangkharāt was asked to assess the king’s progress on the path of meditation, he found that, of the 32 marks of a mahāpurisa (a man born to greatness), 12 were found on the king’s body (32–33). Two monks, Phra Wannarat (Thongyu) and Phra Rattanamuni (Kaew), took Taksin’s meditating skills to be proof that the king had already reached the status of sotāpanna, the stream-enterer, a person of whom it was certain that he would eventually enter nībbāna.

Taksin is described as a bodhisattva in the ‘Praises offered by the Sangha to Somdet Phra Chao Krung Thonburi’ dated Lesser Saka Era 1141 (1779; Skilling 2007, 190). By 1779, the king’s meditation skills had become common knowledge, as the Danish botanist Jean Gerard Koenig reports in his diary (Koenig 1894, 164–165):

he believes that according to their religious creed he will one day be a god. To be able to draw breath so that one does not perceive any movement in the pit of the stomach is considered a sign of his commencing divinity. Moreover there are some other sure signs thereof, consisting in his being able to sit perfectly rigid for hours like the idol Rill, with meditative features and fixed eyes, and lastly he believes that by reading he is going to have white blood, as their gods are said to have that too. With these capacities he believes he will finally succeed in flying.

He relates all this nonsense to all who appear before him, and asks them whether they do not think them possible, and whether they do not believe that one day he will be able to fly, whereupon he is assured by all his courtiers, doctors and Talapoins [Buddhist monks] that he surely is right.

Two years later Taksin asked the Sangha whether or not his status of sotāpanna would be superior to that of a Buddhist monk. The Buddhist church answered him that all monks who observe their rules wore the superior guise, meaning that they were superior to all lay persons. Taksin did not accept this judgement, and had thousands of monks file into his presence. Those who did not raise their hands to acknowledge his superior status were demoted, among them three of rātchakhana or ‘royal’ ranks, i.e. the highest monks in the land, namely the Sangkharāt (supreme patriarch), Phra Phutthachan, and Phra Phimonlatham. In their stead, he appointed those who supported his claim to ritual superiority. Other monks were given up to 100 lashes and more than 500 were sentenced to cart dung.

In view of these events, the preamble may be regarded as an important document, marking an early stage of Taksin’s strong emotional involvement
with the stages of reaching nibbāna. It helps explain why his version of a book depicting the whole universe should begin with the City of Nibbāna and the stages of becoming an Arahant.

In 1782 Taksin was deposed and beheaded. The new ruler, now known as Rama I, immediately reinstated those monks who had been dismissed from office. The two monks who had led Taksin to believe he was a sotāpanna were ordered to leave the Sangha. All monks who had been promoted to high positions under Taksin were either demoted or defrocked (Wenk 1968, 39). In 1783, even before his official coronation, Rama I ordered a new compilation of the fourteenth-century Traiphūmikāthā (Reynolds 1976, 209–211). In the first two years of his reign, Rama I issued no less than seven decrees concerning Buddhist monks: in the first he forbade, among other things, the unruly chanting of Phra Malai texts. New versions of the Samutphāpraipūm no longer began with the sermon, the City of Nibbāna or the stages of becoming Arahant (the only exception being a copy of Taksin’s Samutphāpraipūm apparently made in the twenty-fourth century of the Buddha era).

The sermon

The sermon that immediately follows the foreword in the text of 1777 begins with the words Somdetphraphutthichao trat Phra’thammathetsanā Phra’Nakhon Nipphān, or ‘The Lord Buddha uttered the Sermon on the City of Nibbāna’. Both Wenk and Schwartzberg would have drastically revised their arguments if they had taken note of it. A translation of the relevant paragraphs follows (the emphases are mine):

The 5 precepts, 8 precepts, 10 precepts are the walls five storeys high, eight and ten storeys high.

Transcendental wisdom (lokiya-lokuttara paññā) the fourth of the ten pāramitā is the (half-opened) town gate.

Supermundane absorption (lokiyalokuttara samādhi) is the palace.

The method of conditional relations (sammā paṭṭhāna naya) is the stockade.

The four immeasurables are the four moats.

The 24 conditions (samanta pathāna catuvāsati paṭṭhāna) are the 24 main roads.

The 37 sets of qualities that are needed to reach enlightenment (bodhipakkhiyā dhammā) are the 37 markets.

The seven books of the Abhidhamma form the 7 storey palace.

Knowledge of release (vimuttiñāṇa) is the throne in that room.

Renunciation (nekhamma pāramī) is the sleeping place on the floor.

Wisdom (paññā-pāramī) is the candle giving light in that room.

Generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, equanimity, patience, persistence, truth, determination and goodwill are the jewel mosaic on the floor.
Various types of bhāvanā is the pond. 
Mahākaruṇā is the cool water.
The arahants who have escaped all evil deeds are the types of bees who suck honey. 
Arahants who have successfully abandoned all blemishes and sinfulness are the peacocks, cranes, ducks and hamsas who sing beautifully.

The Buddha’s Sermon on the City of Nibbāna is therefore an essential component of the opening pages of these cosmological texts. Only when reading it can the pictorial version of the City of Nibbāna be understood. We are dealing with a complex series of figures of speech, all related to a structured analysis of the path to Nibbāna. The artists were guided by this set of metaphors.

The text published by Wenk, which mentions the presence of 37 markets in nibbāna, should have led the attentive reader to the type of metaphor that was meant, because 37 is a well-known cypher known to all who are familiar with Buddhist meditation. It refers to the bodhipakkhiyā dhammā, the list of all that is needed for an individual to reach nibbāna. They are:

The four earnest meditations, sometimes called the four bases of awareness (satipatthana).
The fourfold great struggle against sin, or the four proper exertions (sammappadhāna).
The four roads to sainthood, or the four roads to success (iddhi pāda).
The five moral powers, or the five faculties (indriya).
The five organs of spiritual sense, or the five powers (bala).
The seven kinds of wisdom, or the seven factors of enlightenment (bhojjangā), and
The noble eightfold path (āriya magga) (Rhys Davids 1881, 61).

They are listed in the Mahāsakuludāyasutta (Majjhima Nikāya, sutta 77). They are also enumerated and extensively commented in the Milindapañha (Rhys Davids 1963, 207, 218).

While the concept of the City of Nibbāna is an expression often found in Theravada literature such as the Traiphūmikāṭhā (Reynold and Reynolds 1982, 187, 209, 326), it is used as a simple epithet. Early uses of this metaphor can be found in the standard texts stating that this City can be entered through a gate, of which the door can be opened by those reaching a required state of saintliness (Collins 1998, 227–229). An elaborate version of this metaphor, but quite different from the sermon in the Samutphāpraiphūm, is found in the Milindapañha.

The wording of the Buddha’s Sermon on nibbāna with the extensive list of similes may be regarded as an augmentation of the standard Theravada literature. However, Charles Hallisey found in the École Française d’Extrême-
Orient (EFEO) library in Paris a Pali text that he translated, calling it a ‘non-canonical Sutta on Nibbāna as a Great City’ (Hallisey 1993). He assumed its origin to be Thai or Cambodian and tentatively dated it to the eighteenth century. He identified a precursor in the thirteenth-century Sinhalese Dhammapāda Atthakathā (Hallisey 1993, 106–107). The sutta relates a story of a person who, on his way to nibbāna, saw a dreadful tree of defilements. After he is described destroying these defilements by cutting the tree down, the description of the city follows (Hallisey 1993, 128–129):

The great city of Nibbāna has an encircling wall, a gate, a watchtower, a moat, streets, a bazaar, a pillar, an interior (place), a bed, a couch, the brightness of lamps, a lake filled with cool water and sand: it is frequented by bees and by flocks of geese, cakkavāla birds, pheasants, cuckoos, peacocks and heron. What is this encircling wall? The wall of virtue. What is that gate? Knowledge is that gate. What is that watchtower? The watchtower of concentration. What is that moat? The encircling ditch of loving kindness. What are those streets? The streets of the forty meditation topics. What is that bazaar? The bazaar of the constituents of enlightenment. What is that pillar? The pillar is effort. What is that interior (place)? The interior place of the books of the Abhidhamma. What is that bed? The bed of renunciation. What is that couch? The couch of release. What is that brightness of lamps? The brightness of the lamps of the vision that comes with liberating knowledge. What is that lake? The lake of meditation. What is that cool water which fills it? It is filled with the cool water of compassion. What is that sand? The eighteen kinds of Buddha-knowledge are the sand. What are those bees that frequent it? Those who are free of the cankers are the bees that frequent it. What are the flocks of geese, cakkavāla birds, pheasants, cuckoos, peacocks, and heron which frequent it? Buddhas, arahants and those who are free of defilements and faults are the flocks of geese, cakkavāla birds, pheasants, cuckoos, peacocks, and heron which frequent it. Thus the great city of Nibbāna is peaceful, a refuge, the topmost, and thus the final goal.

The similarities between Buddha’s Sermon on Nibbāna written in the various Siamese Picture Books of the Three Worlds and the Pali text that Hallisay’s discovered are striking. It is likely that this Pali text or one quite like it functioned as the source for those who prepared the Thai Picture Books of the Three Worlds.

The stages of reaching Nibbāna

However, the pages that immediately follow the city in the picture books, showing eight robed individuals, also form an essential part of the sequence. Not only in the text made on King Taksin’s behest, but in all older manuscripts where the City of Nibbāna is depicted, directly following the city, prior to the section where the heavens are drawn, the artists have inserted a page showing eight figures in the stages of becoming an arahant. These stages are:
(1) He who has entered the stream (sotāpattimagga).
(2) He who has reaped the fruit of entering the stream (sotāpattiphala).
(3) He who has reached being reborn only once (sakadāgāmimagga).
(4) He who has reaped the fruit of being reborn once (sakadāgāmiphala).
(5) He who has reached not being reborn (anāgāmimagga).
(6) He who has reached the fruit of not being reborn (anāgāmiphala).
(7) He who has reached the level of arhat (arahattamagga).
(8) He who has reached the fruit of the level of arhat (arahattaphala).

In six manuscripts where these stages are presented, the final figure is depicted holding a crystal ball, as shown in Figure 8.

All six representations of the arahant show the enlightened person holding the ball in front of the body at about navel height; the weight of the object rests the right palm, the left palm rests on top.

This points to a meditation school that had been in existence at least since Ayutthaya times and that lasted beyond the execution of King Taksin, eventually in remote pockets into the twentieth century. In all depictions of the Arahat, he holds a crystal ball in front of his stomach. It is tempting to think that this represents the meditation school that inspired Taksin to intervene in multiple appointments in the Thai Sangha, ending in the attempt to coerce all monks and novices to acknowledge the superior status of a sotāpanna.

**Afterword**

The crystal ball, so prominent in the texts that show the City of Nibbāna, is also an important object in the teaching of the modern Buddhist Dhammakāya movement in Thailand and abroad. Their meditation derives from the teachings of the Thai Buddhist monk Luang Pu Sodh Candasaro, later known as Phra Mongkhonbophit (Dhammakaya Foundation 2010). He is said to have discovered his own dhammakāya on the full moon night during the middle of the rain retreat of 1916, after having discovered an ancient meditation manual, reputedly dating from eighteenth-century Sri Lanka. He claimed it was based on the original teaching of the Buddha and called it the vijjā dhammakāya (Knowledge of the Proper Body). He practised this method, which he called vijjā dhammakāya, whereby he visualised a crystal ball in the centre of the body, two finger widths above the navel. The bright crystal ball guided him to deeper insight, eventually visualising a massive crystalline Buddha. Nibbāna, according to Phra Mongkhonbophit, is a huge shining crystal sphere inhabited by dhammakāyas of the Buddhas of the past, present and future.

There has been much discussion regarding to which school of thought this dhammakāya meditation form belongs. Catherine Newell established a link between Phra Mongkhonbophit and methods preserved at Wat
Ratchasittaram (Newell 2011, 103–105), known to preserve a branch of the yogāvacara/borān kammaṭṭhāna school, in which the practitioner is expected to experience the meditation subjects (kammaṭṭhāna) as lights or balls of crystal. Andrew Skilton and Phibul Choompolpaisal (2014, and their contributions to this volume) have further explored the varieties of yogāvacara/borān kammaṭṭhāna and possible connections with dhammakāya meditation. It is just possible that what I tentatively call the

**Figure 8.** Six Arahants, as shown in the available manuscripts. (a) Ayutthaya period; (b) early eighteenth century (letter Jha); (c) early eighteenth century; (d,e) 1776; (f) mid-nineteenth century.
‘City of Nibbāna school’, where invariably the crystal ball represents the ultimate goal of meditation, is also a branch of the yogāvacara/borān kammathān school.

Notes

1. In the Brahmajāla Sutta (Digha Nikāya, 1) the Buddha mentions five types of speculations on whether there is the feeling of joy in nibbāna and calls them vain and baseless.


3. In the Theravada cosmology, our universe consists of 31 levels, grouped, from high to low:
   - 4 worlds without material factors. (jhānas 8,7,6 and 5)
   - 16 worlds with only a remnant of material factors (4th, 3rd, 2nd and 1st jhāna)
   - 11 realms of desire: 6 heavens of devatā, the realm of the four guardian deities and the realm of men, and finally: 4 realms of loss and woe: (asura, ghosts, animals and hells).


5. A sotāpanna or streamwinner will at most have seven rebirths before reaching nibbāna.

6. New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, Thai (Siamese) MS 1 Phra Samut Traiphūm.

7. On 18 May 2012, in a lecture presented in the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, I discussed the history of chanting Phra Malai texts (Terwiel 2012). There I suggested that these texts were often chanted during funerals by Buddhist monks who guided the soul of the deceased to Metteyya. In many older Phra Malai texts Buddhist monks are depicted performing wildly. The best description of their antics is in the classical poem Khun Chang Khun Phaen (Baker and Pasuk 2012, 50–54).

8. The fourth of the 10 perfections (pāramitās) that lead to the shores of nibbāna. These 10 are dāna (charity), sīla (keeping precepts), nekkamma (renunciation) paññā (wisdom), viriya (energy), khānti (patience), sacca (honesty), aditthāna (determination) mettā (loving-kindness) and upekkhā (equanimity).

9. Mettā karuṇā, muditā (here: matutta), and upekkhā: loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.

10. The Patthāna is an Abhidhamma text, analysing 24 types of conditioning. They are: hetu paccaya, ārammana paccaya, adhipati paccaya, anantara paccaya, samannantara paccaya, sahajāta paccaya, aṇñamaṇḍhāna paccaya, nissaya paccaya, upanissaya paccaya, purejāta paccaya, pacchājāta paccaya, āśevana paccaya, kamma paccaya, vipāka paccaya, āhāra paccaya, indriya paccaya, jhāna paccaya, magga paccaya, sampayutta paccaya, vippayutta paccaya, atthi paccaya, natthi paccaya, vigata paccaya and avigata paccaya.

11. These are the bodhipakkhiyā dhammā; see below.

12. The third of the 10 practices of perfection.

13. The fourth of the 10 practices of perfection.

14. The metaphor of a (five-)branched tree is well known from boran kammathan texts. See Bizot (1976), and Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena (2012).
15. See, for example, the meditation manual of the sixteenth-century Lao supreme patriarch Sivisuddhisom, discussed by Phibul Choompolpaisal in this volume.

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Buddhist Meditation and the British Colonial Gaze in Nineteenth-Century Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT
This paper argues that the multiple orientalist expressions that flowed from British pens in nineteenth century Sri Lanka are of use to the scholar of Buddhism, in that they can not only shed light on the growth of Buddhist modernism and the use of the term ‘meditation’ within it, but also on Sri Lankan Buddhist practice on the ground. It first surveys the preconceptions of the British about the concept of ‘meditation’. It then examines the writings of a representative selection of scholar civil servants and Christian missionaries who were resident in Sri Lanka within the century. This data reveal that a vibrant culture of Buddhist devotion and preaching existed throughout the century, together, among the laity, with the practice of ‘meditation’ on objects related to insight into reality. Additionally, it suggests that the jhānas, although hard for westerners to understand, were an important part of Buddhist self-understanding. The paper, therefore, argues that the priority given to vipassanā as the essence of meditation within Buddhist Modernism is a reduction of the diversity within traditional practice and a distortion of the traditionally recognised interrelationship between the jhānas and other forms of mental culture.

Introduction
During the nineteenth century, numerous westerners resident in Sri Lanka – administrators, evangelical Christian missionaries, members of the military, doctors, planters, teachers and, towards the end of the century, tourists – wrote about Buddhism in diverse genres, from memoirs of dubious quality to scholarly treatises informed by fluency in Pāli and Sinhala. Some wrote purely from hearsay and casual observation. Others engaged in rigorous conversation with members of the monastic Sangha. Yet others poured over texts with the advice of Buddhist monastic teachers or converts to Christianity. Their agendas and preconceptions varied, conditioned by the strength of the British hold over the island, their level of support for the imperial project and their relationship to the evangelical Christian missionary enterprise. Not unsurprisingly, the representations of Buddhism that resulted from these diverse encounters and textual studies were...
characterised by a ‘radical multiplicity’ (Harris 2006, 4). Admittedly, all who wrote were part of one orientalist ‘family’ (Clarke 1997, 10) but it was a dysfunctional family, with different members contesting each other on ideological grounds (Harris 2006, 4).

Key to this paper on Buddhist meditation and the colonial gaze is that the multiple orientalist expressions that flowed from British pens in nineteenth century Sri Lanka are of use to the scholar of Buddhism, in that they can not only shed light on the growth of Buddhist modernism and the use of the term ‘meditation’ within it, but also on Sri Lankan Buddhist practice on the ground. Disciples of Edward Said might dismiss this as misguided: the British were simply too blinded by the power relationships of an aggressive and hegemonic imperialism to accurately observe and record what Sri Lankan Buddhists were practising. I take this critique seriously. There can be no doubt that the arrogance of the imperial project – the British sense of superiority and the conviction that imperial power was God-given – influenced the writing of imperialism’s children. Yet, I beg to differ from the Saidian position that British writing about Buddhism in this period is useful only because it provides data about Victorian needs and sensibilities (e.g. Almond 1988). Such a judgement not only unjustly subordinates Sri Lankan agency and the referent of the orientalist gaze but also the ability of some British visitors to accurately, even sensitively, observe Buddhism and converse about its meaning. The British who came to Sri Lanka cannot simply be dismissed as the ideological marionettes of imperialism or the Christian missionary project. Their interactions with Buddhists, their curiosity, their scholarship and their powers of observation should be respected, albeit judiciously, taking into account their Christian formation, and their preconceptions about the religious and ethnic Other, for these conditioned both their seeing and hearing, and what their Sri Lankan mentors and informants might have withheld as a result. I, therefore, walk a middle path between Said and Said’s critics, such as Ibn Warraq (Warraq 2007).

In this paper, I judiciously use nineteenth century British writings to throw light on the practice of meditation within the monastic Sangha and lay Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka before the full flowering of Buddhist modernism in the twentieth century, with its tendency to reduce meditation practice to insight meditation, *vipassanā*, and also use the same data to illuminate the process through which a reductionist use of the term ‘meditation’ occurred. The story of Buddhist modernism has largely been told (e.g. Obeyesekere 1970; Bond 1988; Harris 2006; McMahon 2008) and I will not digress into its larger narrative history, except to re-emphasise my own argument that Buddhist modernism was neither the product of ‘western’ or ‘eastern’ agency but emerged through the interaction of the two at a critical moment in global history, characterised by British imperialism, the rise of scientific rationalism and free thought in Europe, and an evangelical Christian missionary representation of Buddhism as nihilistic, irrational and ethically impotent (Harris 2006).
First, I examine western understanding of the words that were eventually used to translate terms such as bhāvanā, jhāna, samādhi and kammaṭṭhāna namely ‘meditation’ or ‘contemplation’, and will add to this the growing Victorian interest in spiritualism and the esoteric. I then focus on two or three representative writers from each of three nineteenth century periods: 1800–1833; 1834–1866; 1867–1900. I have no hesitation in drawing on my previously cited 2006 monograph on the encounter between Buddhism and the British in nineteenth century Sri Lanka (Harris 2006), since I am utilising its data for a more specific purpose than intended within the original work, but add further research to this, arising from my ongoing academic engagement with Sri Lankan religious landscapes.

**Meditation and contemplation within ‘western’ Christian tradition**

The terms that were used by western orientalists to translate bhāvanā, jhāna, samādhi and kammaṭṭhāna namely contemplation and meditation, had Latin roots: contemplatio and contemplari (verb): meditatio and meditari (verb). *Contemplatio* originally denoted an intellectual examination of phenomena, in contrast to activist engagement. Within Christianity, however, the term came to refer to a life that was devoted to God in prayer and study, and, eventually, to a form of prayer that was different from verbal or mental prayer, in that it was characterised by a ‘waiting on God’ (Scott 2005, 970). The term *meditatio* was also linked to the intellect and largely retained this connotation. It could include, within Christianity, the recitation of scripture and reflection on doctrines but also came to denote a form of prayer that was intellectually active. The 1611 King James Bible (the Authorised Version) for instance, used the term quite freely to translate Hebrew words that Jewish scholars prefer to render as ‘study’, ‘examination’ or prayer.1

To assess the nineteenth century reception of these terms by British visitors to Sri Lanka is fraught with difficulty, given the theological and educational differences between them. Only a handful would have known classical Latin. Most, however, would have been familiar with the King James Bible and its use of the term ‘meditate’. Yet, in nineteenth century Protestant Christian writings, both ‘contemplate’ and ‘meditate’, were used almost interchangeably to refer to reflection on the power or the mercy of God. An anonymous letter printed in 1834 in the first issue of *The Gospel Standard*, for instance, declared:

> Once we were blind, but now we see; we were dead to trespasses and sins, but now we are made alive by the mighty power of God. When I am brought to meditate on these things, I feel astonished that the Lord should ever have brought such a wretch as myself out of nature’s darkness…. (Anonymous 1835 in Bebbington, Dix, and Ruston 2006, 175)
In the 1860s, the Wesleyan Methodist, Mary Porteus similarly cried out that ‘while contemplating the Great Being’ she was led into prayer for her own salvation (Porteus in Lightfoot (1862) 2018 in Bebbington, Dix, and Ruston 2006, 174) and Catherine Booth, a Wesleyan Methodist who helped to found the Salvation Army, resolved, in 1848, when she was only 18, that she would ‘meditate on it [the Bible] day and night’ (Larsen 2011, 90).

In nineteenth century western Christian culture, therefore, ‘contemplate’ and ‘meditate’ were used to describe scrutiny of and reflection on God, doctrine or biblical truth. This could include ‘contemplation of death’ and, particularly within Christian evangelicalism, the biblical ‘truth’ of ‘human depravity and divine punishment for sin’ (Sugirtharajah 2005, 72), leading to an emphasis on the conversion experience, although, within the Wesleyan Methodist tradition, this was complemented by an emphasis on holiness, namely the ongoing ‘sanctification’ of converts as they studied the Bible and lived according to its teachings.

These emphases in nineteenth century Christian spirituality were both a help and a hindrance when it came to the observation and understanding of Buddhist practice. It was a hindrance in that it conditioned evangelical British Christians particularly to direct their attention towards faith, belief, the experience of sin and moral action, rather than mental culture. It was a help in that the practice of meditating on an object was not unfamiliar, giving a point of contact with the Pali term, sati, as remembrance and ‘intentness of mind’ (Rhys Davids & Stede ((1925) 2015, 607). To the aid of the British who observed Buddhism in the latter part of the century also came Victorian interest in spiritualism, the esoteric, psychical research, mesmerism and the mystic. These were dismissed or condemned by most evangelical Christians, although there were Christian as well as anti-Christian forms of spiritualism (Oppenheim 1985, 63–110, cited in Larsen 2011, 278). Whether these new forms of spirituality were dismissed or embraced, however, they offered observers of Buddhism a further vocabulary bank on which to draw, informed by terms such as ‘trance’, ‘clairvoyance’ and the ‘supernatural’.

1800–1833

Within this period, I focus on two British writers. John Davy (1790–1868) resided in Sri Lanka between 1817 and 1819 as an army surgeon and doctor to the Governor and his wife, spending time in Kandy soon after the British take-over. Although a Christian, he came without a proselytising agenda. William Harvard (1790–1857) was a member of the first group of Wesleyan Methodist missionaries who arrived on the island in 1814 and 1815. On his return to Britain, he wrote a history of that early mission, published in 1823 (Harris 2006, 21–22). Both gained their information about Buddhism through conversation with ‘learned’ members of the monastic Sangha and observation
Davy’s account of Buddhism concentrated on cosmology as empirical ‘fact’. ‘Meditation’ was first mentioned by name within the biography of the Buddha, within which Davy represented the Buddha-to-be as already practising the ‘Maddiama-prati-padarwa’ (majjhimā-paṭipadā – the Middle Way) before enlightenment, describing it as:

> [A]bstaining from evil, in practising what is good, in gaining a subsistence by such actions, in meditating on them and on good intentions, in the enjoyment of happiness resulting from the consciousness of having done good, in the absence of covetousness, anger, and rashness, and in the exemption from the passions. (Davy 1821, 211)

It is significant that Davy’s monastic informants chose to evoke verse 183 of the Dhammapada, which, therefore, as early as this, was being used as a summary of the Buddha’s teaching. What these informants may have said about cleansing the mind (sacittapariyodapanaṃ), however, may not have been understood by Davy, although his reconstruction of what he was told nevertheless touches the concept of sati as remembrance.

No specific mention of ‘meditation’ occurred in Davy’s description of the Buddha’s enlightenment. After enlightenment, however, Davy stated, ‘During the first seven weeks, which he passed in meditation, Boodhoo ate nothing nor required anything...’ (Davy 1821, 214), adding that, as a Buddha, ‘He passed his time in meditation, in occasionally visiting other countries, and in preaching not only to men but the gods’ (Davy 1821, 214).

Davy, therefore, ‘heard’ that ‘meditation’ was an attribute of Buddhahood. We cannot know what Sinhala word had been used by his informants, but, for Davy to have used the term at this point in the century, it probably communicated ‘meditating on’ an object. When he came to describe the duties of the monastic Sangha, ‘meditation’ is not mentioned. ‘Priests’ mainly paid attention to and worshipped ‘the relics and images of Boodhoo’, as well as the texts. ‘So scrupulous are they in their respect to books’, he stated, ‘that they will not touch them till they have made their obeisance, as to a superior; nor sit down, unless the books present are placed, as a mark of distinction, on a shelf or table above them’ (Davy 1821, 222).
As for lay practice, the role of the monastic Sangha in preaching to the laity was stressed but Davy added that ‘the people in general are not taught any of the mysteries of religion’ (Davy 1821, 226). They were expected to ‘believe the Tisarana’ and follow ‘the Panchaseele’, and also combined ‘their worship with offerings’ of ‘sweet-smelling flowers’. Significantly, however, he added, almost as an afterthought, that there were other ‘rules’, including alms-giving and ‘meditating on the uncertainty of human affairs; living in a manner profitable to one’s self and others; loving others as one’s self, &c. &c.’ (Davy 1821, 227).

William Harvard

The first group of Wesleyan Methodist missionaries brought an exclusivist Christian theology and an imperative to proselytise. With preconceptions informed by their leader, Thomas Coke (1747–1814), who died on the journey to Sri Lanka (Harvard 1823, 13–14, cited in Harris 2012, 277–279), they made a strong distinction between Buddhism and what they termed ‘kappooism’ or ‘devil worship’, into which they placed the devāle system and exorcist practice, and were convinced that ‘kappooism’ – a form of Satanism in their eyes – was stronger than Buddhism in popular practice (Harvard 1823, l).

Harvard’s description of Buddhism and ‘kappooism’, which became part of the preface to his history of the Wesleyan mission, did not use the term ‘meditation’ at all, possibly because his informants did not use a word that he recognised as similar to ‘meditation’ in the Christian tradition. What he saw as the horrors of ‘kappooism’ were vividly described, with reference to ‘Satanic beings, of the most horrible forms and propensities’, some of whom were ‘monsters with tremendously large eyes, mouths, and teeth, in the act of devouring a human being’ or ‘feeding on the reeking entrails of expiring men, whom they have massacred for the purpose...’ (Harvard 1823, I-li). The reliance of Sinhala Buddhists on astrology and amulets was linked to this by Harvard. From the perspective of contemporary religious studies, this part of his narrative demonstrates that what scholars such as Obeyesekere and Gombrich have termed ‘spirit religion’ was flourishing in Sri Lanka at this time in the south of the island (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988).

As for the Buddha, Harvard represented him as a ‘reformer’ of ‘kappooism’ and teacher of ‘amiable and humane’ morals (Harvard 1823, lxi, cited in Harris 2007, 31). Practice, according to Harvard, for ordained and lay, primarily consisted respectively in preaching Buddhist doctrine and listening to it. Other aspects were then added. Lay practice additionally enjoined ‘the support of priests, whose business it is to disseminate those doctrines; and the erection of temples to Budhu...’ (Harvard 1823, lvi), plus offerings of flowers and prostrations. To the practice of the monastic Sangha, Harvard added expertise in herbal medicines and, for the ‘higher’ members, cultivating ‘native literature’. He also gave a detailed description of a formal textual
reading, vivid enough to suggest that he had witnessed it: the construction of a temporary preaching hall with two raised pulpits and lodgings for the invited monks; the monks rotating in pairs, with one reading from the texts in Pali and the other giving a vernacular explanation; food in ‘great quantities’ being cooked for the monks; lay people squatting for hours on their heels to listen (Harvard 1823, lviii).5

Another almost throw-away remark suggests that Harvard saw a preponderance of women in the vihāras and bana maḍuvas (preaching halls) and an apparent lack of commitment to religion among the men (Harvard 1823, lx).6 What Harvard could have been witnessing, however, was the greater visibility of women within the devotional dimension of Sri Lankan lived religion. Lay men, who would have found it far easier to hold direct conversations with the monastic Sangha, could well have expressed their sense of religion differently.

Given that Davy and Harvard observed Buddhism and conversed about it largely before translated Pali texts were readily available, their writings are significant. Their accounts reveal the kind of questions they asked their monastic informants, namely about the nature of the cosmos in Buddhism and the practices that were most visible to them, such as the engagement of the monastic Sangha with the people through public preaching, health advice and the recitation of the texts. Their resulting representations demonstrated that bhāvanā in its wider meaning of personal spiritual development was certainly practised in Sri Lanka at this time, through devotional practices and a love of hearing the Buddha’s teaching. In addition, Davy’s remark about meditation on ‘the uncertainty of human affairs’ suggests lay people, at least in the former Kandyan Kingdom, were being encouraged by their monastic teachers to meditate on topics that could lead them to greater insight into reality, a form of vipassanā. That no mention is made of sitting meditation or of the attainment of the jhānas is important, possibly signifying that this was not a visible part of Buddhist practice at this time. However, it could also mean either that the monastic informants of the two withheld information about this form of practice or that Davy and Harvard did not understand what they were told.

1834–1866

Within this middle period, I examine two Wesleyan Methodist missionary scholars and, more briefly, one self-styled historian: Daniel John Gogerly (1792–1862), Robert Spence Hardy (1803–1868) and William Knighton (d. 1900). I have already written extensively on Gogerly and Spence Hardy (e.g. Harris 2010, 2014) but have not concentrated explicitly on their representation of Buddhist meditation. The two men differed in character and their relationship was at times acrimonious (Harris 2014, 85–86). Both, however,
sought to understand through scholarship the religion they sought ‘to replace’ (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, vii, cited in Harris 2006, 64).7

Gogerly arrived in Sri Lanka in 1818 and studied Pali in the 1830s when he was stationed in Dondra, near Mātara. Soon afterwards, he was translating texts. Spence Hardy arrived in 1825. He became a keen collector of religious and literary manuscripts in Ceylon, and chose the study of Sinhala to enable him to read non-canonical indigenous texts, in the belief that they would ‘reveal the sentiments, and illustrate the manners, of the present race of priests’ (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, ix, cited in Harris 2006, 64). In these endeavours, both experienced hospitality and help from the Buddhist monastic Sangha. Gogerly never returned to Britain and died in Sri Lanka. Spence Hardy returned home twice, once between 1847 and 1863, when he wrote the two books examined here.

In Gogerly and Spence Hardy, a move to the textualisation of the study of Buddhism in Sri Lanka can be seen. Both held the stereotypically orientalist position that authenticity was to be found in the texts. They then used the knowledge gained from their textual study to challenge practitioners (Harris 2006, 65). Admittedly, Gogerly learnt Pali from members of the monastic Sangha, which meant that his understanding of Buddhism was in part mediated through the lived tradition. His translations of the Dhammapada, for instance, reveal this pupil–teacher relationship, since they appeal to traditional interpretations of the verses as well as their literal meaning (Harris 2010). As for Spence Hardy, he worked on Sinhala texts with an ‘ex-priest of Budha’ by his side (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, vii). As the linguistic knowledge of the two improved, however, they tested their conversations with members of the monastic Sangha against the texts and, if there was divergence, the texts rather than the living voice were trusted. Gogerly, for instance, came to believe that the monastic Sangha was largely ignorant of their own doctrines and that the teaching given to lay people was limited (Bishop 1908, II, 222–233, cited in Harris 2006, 65), which meant that they were in the thrall of a spirit religion, which rendered ‘them earthly, sensual and devilish’ (Gogerly 1837, 46).

As I stated in 2006, ‘both Gogerly and Spence Hardy recognised that meditation had an important place in Buddhism’ (Harris 2006, 73) and were among the first British people in Sri Lanka to do so. However, their ability to locate it at the heart of Buddhist practice, even after they had encountered it in the texts, was limited, both because of their Christian preconceptions and, I would argue, because what they found in the texts was not clearly visible within the Buddhist practice they witnessed.

Daniel John Gogerly

Gogerly’s published works mainly consisted of translations, records of talks given on Buddhism and apologetic Christian works in Sinhala, such as Kristiyāni Prajñāpti (1849).8 I have examined elsewhere the missionary agenda behind his
translations (Harris 2010) and will not concentrate on this here. With reference to ‘meditation’, his translations from the *Dhammapada* are significant. These show that Gogerly had little problem with the idea of ‘meditating on’, since this resonated with Christian models, and was happier with the idea of controlling or subjecting the mind than working with the mind (Harris 2010, 191–192). The first clauses of verse 8, for instance, were translated: ‘He who lives meditating on the evils of existence, with restrained passions…’ (*asubhānupassīṁ viharantam indriyesu susaṅvutam*) (Gogerly 1840, 22). There are several infelicities in this translation but his rendering of *anupassīṁ* (from the verb *anupassati*, to see or to recognise) as meditation is accurate, although it draws from his own western understanding of the term. It also anticipates western approaches to the term, *vipassanā* (lit. seeing clearly). He had more difficulty with the translation of *appamāda* in *Dhammapada* verses 21–32, rendering it as ‘religion’ rather than ‘carefulness’ or ‘heedfulness’ (Harris 2010, 190). As I argued in 2010, however, it was probably not Gogerly himself who initiated his reduction of this term. It was his monastic mentors, following the traditional commentarial interpretation (Harris 2010, 190).

When faced with the term, *jhāna*, Gogerly was even more at a loss. Generally, he avoided the term. In a presentation given in 1861 to the Colombo YMCA, however, he categorised the *jhānas* as ‘meditation’, mentioning them in connection with the Buddha’s enlightenment, when the Buddha ‘bent his mind to intense meditation’. He continued, utilising the vocabulary of ‘trance’:

>This profound meditation is termed *jhāna*, and while the devotee is engaged in these exercises he becomes insensible to all external things; he can neither see, hear, nor feel, but is in a state something similar to that which is called the mesmeric trance, and no means exist by which he can be aroused from this state until the meditation is ended. (Bishop 1908 I, 17)

A brief description of the *jhānas* followed, with Gogerly implying that the insight and ‘knowledge’ gained by the Buddha at his enlightenment lay in direct progression from the fourth *jhāna*. He did this through moving directly from the Buddha attaining this *jhāna* to his recollection of his own previous births, his seeing humans moving between births and then his ‘ascertaining the cause of sorrow’, albeit adding in his later survey of Buddhist cosmology that the fourth *jhāna* in itself led only to rebirth in ‘the remaining seven Brahma-lokas and the four Arūpalokas’ (Bishop 1908 I, 25).

Robert Spence Hardy

Spence Hardy wrote two books that incorporated large sections of Sinhala texts (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, Spence Hardy 1853), albeit without the use of quotation marks! The first, *Eastern Monachism*, contained three chapters
relevant to bhāvanā and meditation: ‘Modes of Worship, Ceremonies and Festivals’; ‘Meditation’; ‘Ascetic Rights and Supernatural Powers’. Spence Hardy also mentioned ‘meditation’, when describing the duties of a novice monk, where his use of the term, in a similar way to Gogerly, drew on his western understanding. The ‘sāmanera novice’, for instance, used a Pali manual to ‘meditate on the corruption of his own body’ (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 33). At another point, ‘reflect’ was used: the novice ‘is to reflect on the eight things that produce sorrow, on the infirmities of the body, on death, and on all that is declared in the Dasa-dharmma-sūtra’ (Dasasikkhāpada within the Khuddakapāṭha) (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 29). He was also the first British writer that I have found to use the term ‘kammaṭṭhāna’, a term used in the commentarial tradition to describe exercises in meditation, which Spence Hardy no doubt encountered through his use of a Sinhala commentary on the Visuddhimagga, the ‘Wisuddhi Margga Sanné’ in Spence Hardy’s words (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 270).11 A novice, therefore, before sleep and on rising, repeated the ‘four karmasthānas’ (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 29), which Spence Hardy later defined as ‘abstract meditation…..on the four important subjects, Budha, kindness, evil desire and death’ (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 31).

To return to Spence Hardy’s three chapters that, more specifically, dealt with meditation, the division of material between the three is most interesting. The first focussed on what lay people did when they entered a ‘wihāra’, namely prostrations, repeating the ‘tun-sarana’ (Pali tisaraṇa) i.e. the 3 refuges, taking ‘ten obligations’ (dasa sila), i.e. the 10 precepts, and offering flowers, rice and money (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 232–233). Narratives followed this about devotion to Buddha images, bo-trees, stūpas and relics, bringing in the concept of ‘meditation’ in the following way:

The Budhists teach, that they who, according to their ability, offer to the dāgobas seats, flowers, lamps and similar articles, which acts of worship, made with an affectionate mind, and accompanied by meditation, will be rewarded in this world and the next, and by receiving nirwāna. (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989), 251)

Listening to ‘bana’, the intensification of practice on full moon days – on ‘days called poho’ (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 263) – together with ‘Pirit, or in Pali Pāritta’ (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 267), were also described in detail in this chapter, to which he added a moving account of a 7-day Pirit ceremony that he attended, although, in stereotypical missionary fashion, he stressed that it had ‘no beneficial result’ because devotees could not understand the Pali (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 268–270).

In spite of the mention of ‘meditation’ in lay practice above, the chapter on ‘Meditation’ represented the practice as the preserve of the monastic Sangha. Claiming that his translations were principally taken from the Sinhala
commentary, a *sannaya*, on the *Visuddhimagga*, and the ‘Sāleyya Sūtra Sanné’, a *sūtra sannaya* on the *Sāleyyaka Sutta* (MN I 285–290), he stated at the outset, ‘There are five principal modes of bháwaná, or meditation: – 1. Maitri 2. Mudita 3. Karuná. 4. Upékshá. 5. Asubha’ (Spence Hardy 1850 1989, 270), all of which he classified as ‘Brahma-wihara-Bháwaná’ (*brahmavihāra-bhāvanā*) (Spence Hardy 1850 1989, 277–278). A detailed explanation of each followed, drawing on the *sannayas*.\(^1\) The material is similar to that given in Chapter Nine of the *Visuddhimagga* (Vsm. 295–325), which consists of an examination of the four *brahmavihāras*, but is condensed, in the mode of a *sannaya*. It is important that Spence Hardy was not using observation in this part of his account but rather Sinhala commentaries on canonical Pali texts. No specific reference, however, was made in this chapter or the last to *kammaṭṭhāna*.\(^1\) In the chapter on ‘Ascetic Rights and Supernatural Powers’, Spence Hardy began, ‘The Budhists believe that it is possible, by the performance of certain ceremonies, and the observance of a prescribed course of moral action, to arrive at the possession of supernatural powers’ (Spence Hardy 1850 1989, 281). Without mentioning the term ‘meditation’, he then focussed on the *kasiṇa* (external devices or objects used as the basis of meditation exercises, *kammaṭṭhāna*, to produce a concentrated mind suitable for the attainment of *jhāna*), and the *jhāna*, again linking the practice of both to the monastic Sangha rather than the laity. His description of the *kasiṇa* also included the concept of *samādhi*, which he authentically represented as the destroyer of enemies to the *jhāna* (Spence Hardy 1850 1989, 285), adding later:

> Samādhi is that which keeps the thoughts together, as the drop of water that causes the grains of sand to adhere together and form a ball; It is like the flame of a lamp that burns steadily….samādhi is the chief of the attainments possessed by him who seeks nirwána…. (Spence Hardy 1850 1989, 286–287)

For Spence Hardy, therefore, *samādhi* was both linked to the *jhānas* and to the attainment of *nibbāna* without any friction between the two. In neither form, however, was it considered by Spence Hardy to be a form of ‘meditation’, although he recognised that the *jhānas* could be linked to meditation, declaring later in the chapter:

> The word dhyána [*jhāna*] is said to mean, “that which burns up evil desire, or the cleaving to existence.” It is sometimes used in the sense of meditation, and at other times is allied with samādhi; in some places it is a cause and in others an effect. (Spence Hardy 1850 1989, 300)\(^1\)

The only point at which lay practice was mentioned in this section was in connection with what Spence Hardy called ‘Sacha Kiriya’, the Act of Truth, which he claimed could ‘be exercised by the laic or the priest; but it is most efficient when accompanied by bháwána’ (Spence Hardy 1850 1989, 304), which he has excluded the laity from!
A more detailed account of what Spence Hardy termed kammaṭṭhāna was also given in this chapter in a description of ānāpānasati-kammaṭṭhāna, in which he clearly communicated the combination of concentration on the breath with ‘reflection’ on such things as ‘the impermanency of the five khandas’ (sic.), ‘evil desire’, the arising of nibbāna and the impurities of the body that this form of practice required. Within this, one of the only references to vipassanā that I have found appeared: ‘Reflecting that by the abstract meditation called wipasenā, he may, as it were, leap to nirwāna, he makes an inspiration and an expiration’ (Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 298).

Spence Hardy’s second book, A Manual of Buddhism, published in 1853, hardly mentioned the term ‘meditation’, not even in the context of the biography of the Buddha, to which two thirds of the book were devoted, using Sinhala textual material. The enlightenment experience, for instance, was described by Spence Hardy as a ‘reception’ of wisdom and ‘the divine eyes’, although the power to ‘investigate’ causality (Spence Hardy 1853, 179), an action linked with meditation both in western traditions and the Pali canon, was included within this. Only on page 387 did Spence Hardy move to ‘The Ontology of Buddhism’ with the words, ‘We have, for a time, to shut out from our vision the various orders of existence that have flitted before us in bewildering profusion [in former chapters], and to chain down our attention to a silent contemplation of the elements of our own being’ (Spence Hardy 1853, 387). Spence Hardy was not, however, talking about Buddhist practice here but was using the term in a western sense to describe what his readers would have to do to understand the khandha!

What followed again drew on a variety of Sinhala sources with forms of mental culture implied but never explicitly examined. For instance, on the arising of wisdom, he wrote: ‘There are eight causes for the increase of prajñāwa:- age, the company of the wise, investigation, association with the good, reflection, conversation, the friendship of the kind, and the aid of the three gems’ (Spence Hardy 1853, 416) but there is little amplification, for instance, of what ‘investigation’ involved.

At the end of A Manual of Buddhism, within the chapter on ‘The Ethics of Buddhism’, Spence Hardy included a section headed, ‘Terms and Classifications’, into which he placed several terms linked with mental culture. Under ‘Tilakuna’ (Pali tilakkhāna – the three marks of existence, i.e. impermanence, suffering and no-self, anicca, dukkha, anattā), he explained that the mind of the ‘ascetic’ ‘ought constantly to dwell’ on the three (Spence Hardy 1853, 495). Under the ‘Satara-satipatthāna’ (Pali cattāri-satipaṭṭhāna – the four foundations of mindfulness), he pointed to the ‘four subjects of thought upon which the attention must be fixed, and that must be rightly understood’ (Spence Hardy 1853, 497). Under the ‘Panchindra’ (pañca-indriya-samatta), which Spence Hardy called ‘five moral powers’, more accurately translated as ‘five spiritual faculties’, sati was translated as ‘the ascertainment of truth’ and
*samādhi*, as ‘tranquillity’ (Spence Hardy 1853, 498), although, in a later section, the meaning of *sati* was expanded to ‘ascertainment of truth by mental application’ (Spence Hardy 1853, 498). The term *kammaṭṭhāna* was not mentioned in the section and the term ‘meditation’ was also absent.

Taking Gogerly and Spence Hardy together, Gogerly’s examination of ‘meditation’ betrays more about Gogerly’s struggles to understand textual material in the light of western understandings of ‘meditation’ than Buddhist practice on the ground, although what emerges from the teacher/pupil relationship is significant and his difficulty with the concept of the *jhānas* may indicate that he could not find anyone who could talk convincingly about them. Significantly, however, the path connected with the *jhānas* is seen as a prelude to enlightenment. In contrast, Spence Hardy’s publications, taken together, demonstrate that Spence Hardy’s awareness of Buddhist devotion and mental culture, as represented by Sinhala texts and with the help of former Buddhist monks, was extensive, although I sense that he experienced difficulty in creating unity out of the diverse terms he encountered. The consequence is that he refused to place under the label of ‘meditation’ all that he observed and found within these categories. Lay devotion, which could include some ‘meditation’, was different in his eyes from meditation on the *brahmavihāras* and *kammaṭṭhāna*, which he believed was undertaken by the monastic Sangha alone, and this was different again from the nexus of related practices connected with the *kasiṇa*, the *jhānas* and *samādhi*. Although he realised that the *jhānas* were sometimes linked with the concept of ‘meditation’ and with *kammaṭṭhāna*, he judged that *samādhi* and the *kasiṇa*, which he did not see as one set of *kammaṭṭhāna*, could not be placed within the same category of ‘meditation’.

I would suggest that we can deduce from his work that formal meditation was present in lay practice but was not central, and that the monastic Sangha considered the *jhānas* to be part of their self-understanding, even if their practice of them was limited. More significantly, his work points accurately to a radical diversity within Buddhist mental culture, a diversity which can be lost in Buddhist modernist discourse on meditation. Spence Hardy’s unwillingness to classify the *kasiṇa*, the *jhānas* and *samādhi* as ‘meditation’ may partly be due to the preconceptions he brought about the meaning of the term but it was also, I would argue, due to the diversity that he encountered in text and practice, which belied the use of a single term.

**William Knighton**

William Knighton, who became the first Secretary of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (CBRAS) in 1845, dared, just 2 years after he arrived in the country, to write one of the first histories of Sri Lanka in the colonial period, drawing on orientalist work on the *vanīsa* tradition, namely the Sri Lankan historical chronicles translated by George Turnour in the 1830s (Harris 2018,
It contained the following, significant statement, ‘Buddhism is essentially a philosophical religion. Its virtue is meditation, and its perfection an entire victory over the senses and passions’ (Knighton 1845, 338, cited in Harris 2006, 76). Knighton does not expand at this point on what he believed ‘meditation’ meant in Buddhism. There is a clue, however, in a later publication, Forest Life in Ceylon, a semi-autobiographical novel, in which he stated that the duties of a novice monk, in addition to reading ‘the Pitakas to the people in the temple’ and keeping the temple clean, included ‘above all to meditate on the vanity of earthly things, and the folly of cleaving to existence’ (Knighton 1854, 30). His representation of lay observance, however, was similar to the other writers of this study, in that it focused on worship in the ‘temples’, ‘at the changes of the moon’ and the erection of temporary buildings for textual readings (e.g. Knighton 1854 II, 52–53).

Knighton claimed his interest in Buddhism arose from a Buddhist friend, whom he called Marandhan in his ‘novel’, and visits to ‘the chief seats of Budhistic worship’ (Knighton 1854 II, 2), but it is obvious from internal evidence in his writings that he also read western accounts avidly. Significant to the topic of this paper is that Knighton, in his generalisation about the heart of Buddhism, can almost be seen as kick-starting the process through which the single term ‘meditation’ comes to describe a diverse collection of practices and a diverse set of Pali terms.

1867–1900

British writers in the last third of the nineteenth century used the translations of Spence Hardy and Gogerly. However, by this point in the century, stark differences had emerged between the evangelical missionaries and those who sought to represent Buddhism in a positive light. This had begun mid-century with the writings of George Turnour (1799–1843), Knighton and Jonathan Forbes, all of whom sought the positive in Buddhism (Harris 2006, 76–85). In the last third of the century, it can be seen clearly in my first chosen writer, civil servant, John Frederick Dickson (1835–1891), who created a furore within the Christian missionary community when he claimed that missionaries compared ‘unfavourably’ in ‘education’ and ‘self-denial’ with the Buddhist monastic Sangha (Dickson 1889, 25, cited in Harris 2006, 1).

John Frederick Dickson

Dickson learnt Pali and was President of the CBRAS but chose to focus on lived Buddhist practice rather than the texts. As I wrote in 2006, it was this lived practice that ‘led him to the texts for secondary information about what his eyes had witnessed’ (Harris 2006, 118). Unlike most evangelical missionaries, he refused to condemn contemporary Buddhist practice. He translated the
text of a Pāṭimokkha ceremony after witnessing one in Anurādhapura in 1874 (Dickson (1876) 1963, cited in Harris 2006, 122) and explained lay practice through the non-canonical but popular dasa kusala kamma (ten wholesome actions). I would argue that these accurately represented the practice he witnessed and, indeed, the practice that most writers in this study witnessed. The third ‘wholesome action’ is bhāvanā but it was not here that Dickson demonstrated anything new in British writing, since he relied on Spence Hardy’s fivefold identification, although he differed from Spence Hardy in linking meditation on impurity with the elimination of craving and an orientation to ‘Nirvāṇa’ (Dickson 1884, 205, cited in Harris 2006, 123). How this is done was not explained but that lay people were involved in such self-examination he had no doubt. The practice of what would now be termed ‘meditation’ is implied, although Dickson did not use the term at this point.

Robert Caesar Childers

My second British writer in this last period, Robert Caesar Childers (1838–1876), arrived in Sri Lanka in 1860 as a civil servant and returned to Britain to save his health in 1864. His 4 years in the island, nevertheless, gave him time to develop friendships with 2 prominent Buddhist monks, Yātrāmulle Dhammārāma and Vaskaḍuvē Subhūti (Guruge 1984, 21 & lxxiii, cited in Harris 2006, 117). In Britain, he devoted himself to the study of Pali and published a Dictionary of the Pali Language, in two volumes in 1872 and 1875. Throughout this process, he engaged in rigorous conversation with Subhūti, as Guruge’s collection of his letters demonstrates (Guruge 1984, 3–40). What resulted combined the scholarship of both Childers and Subhūti (Harris 2006, 119; Gornall 2015, 468) and, therefore, is a better witness to the Sri Lankan tradition than a purely western project would have been. It was also much more than an exercise in philology; the dictionary was a ‘compendium of Buddhist doctrine’ (Gornall 2015, 483).

With reference to ‘meditation’, Childers’s entries on bhāvanā and bhāveti (the causative of bhavati) were relatively brief but communicated diversity nevertheless, through embracing both devotion and mental culture. The former was explained as, ‘producing, increasing, developing, being devoted to, realizing, attaining; earnest consideration, meditation’ (Childers (1875) 1909, 85). The explanation that followed, however, was largely dependent
on Spence Hardy’s fivefold classification of bhāvanā, a reduction that suggests that Childers could best understand bhāvanā as consideration of or meditation on an object. Bhāveti was represented as ‘to cause to exist, to produce, to obtain; to increase, to enlarge, to perfect; to be occupied with, to practise, to be versed in; to develop the idea of, to dwell upon, to contemplate’, embracing a breadth of practice that included contemplation rather than meditation (Childers (1875) 1909, 86).

Childers described ‘Jhāna’ as ‘Meditation, contemplation; religious meditation or abstraction of the mind, mystic and abstract meditation, ecstasy, trance’, again seeking to communicate diversity (Childers (1875) 1909, 169). He continued, ‘Jhāna is a religious exercise productive of the highest spiritual advantage, leading after death to re-birth in the heavens, and forming the principal means of entrance into the four Paths’ (Childers (1875) 1909, 169). His lengthy explanation amplified this, drawing on canonical descriptions but using some terms drawn from western descriptions of the mystic and the esoteric, such as ‘supernatural’ and ‘ecstasy’. The first jhāna, for instance, was characterised by ‘supernatural ecstasy and serenity’, while the mind still reasoned on and investigated ‘the subject chosen for contemplation’ (Childers (1875) 1909, 169). Each was then linked with different heavens, before the fourth was represented as giving ‘the power of working miracles (iddhi)’. Towards the end of the entry, the phrase ‘mystic meditation’ was again used. Childers, in effect, saw the jhānas as moving from contemplation of an object, which he could incorporate into traditional western models, to what he termed ‘mystic and abstract meditation’, with no specific object. His description of the kasiṇa shared the same vocabulary, as a preparation for ‘mystic meditation’, namely the jhāna. Concentrating on ‘one predominant idea’, Childers stated, the mind continues until it reaches ‘a state of absorption or mesmeric trance’ (Childers 1875, 191). Spence Hardy did not place the jhānas under the term ‘meditation’, although he realised that the two touched at some points. Childers made another judgement, showing a willingness to see the ‘abstract’ or the ‘mystic’ as ‘meditation’.

Childers, unlike Spence Hardy, recognised the kasiṇa as a form of kammaṭṭhāna. His entry on kammaṭṭhāna began, ‘This term is applied to certain religious exercises or meditations, by means of which Samādhi, Jhāna and the four Paths are attained’ (Childers 1875, 179). It then referred extensively to the classification found in the Visuddhistimagga. His description ended with ‘From all of the above it will be seen that kammaṭṭhānam is a term of wide significance, embracing a succession of rites and exercises, which form the basis or frame-work of all these modes of mystic meditation by means of which sanctification is attained’ (Childers 1875, 180). In this entry, Childers made clear that ‘karmasthāna rites’ were linked with the attainment of the jhānas and that the ‘mystic meditation’ connected with the jhānas, in its most difficult form, led to the enlightenment of the arahant.
Childers’s entry on ‘Samādhi’ can be contrasted with both above entries, adding important qualifications to his understanding of what the term ‘meditation’ could encompass. He described it as, ‘Agreement, peace, reconciliation; tranquillity, self-concentration, calm’, adding that it was ‘a state of supernatural tranquillity or calm, and was one of the most characteristic attributes of the Arhat’ (Childers (1875) 1909, 423). As Spence Hardy, he, therefore, linked it at the beginning of his entry neither with ‘meditation’ nor ‘contemplation’. He then stated that the term was wider than jhāna. It was ‘a necessary preliminary to the attainment of Jhāna’ and an accompaniment of jhāna but also an attribute connected with ‘entrance into the Paths’. He then made a most important distinction, ‘This calm [of samādhi] may amount to absolute unconsciousness as the higher Jhāna, or may, as in the Arhat, consist in the annihilation of passion, and a mastery over the emotions which influence ordinary men’ (Childers (1875) 1909, 423). This suggests that Childers identified two separate paths within the practice of samādhi. The first was samādhi as accompanying jhāna, when the term could be linked with ‘meditation’ but not necessarily with arahantship. In connection with this, he also mentioned ‘[t]he samādhi of ecstatic meditation’, explaining this with appeal to upacāra-samādhi (access concentration, namely to the jhānas) and appanā-samādhi (attainment concentration) (Childers (1875) 1909, 423). The second was the samādhi that was connected with the eradication of taṇhā, craving, and the attainment of arahantship. This, he was unwilling to categorise as ‘meditation’. Internal and external evidence, however, points to an uncertainty or an internal ambiguity about this within the dictionary. Guruge found in Childers’s letters to Subhūti the following question: do all who attain the Fourth Trance become Arahants? (Guruge 1984, 20). I do not have Subhūti’s answer and it would take more research than I have done to find it. The quote above would suggest a ‘No’. Two paths existed, with ‘meditation’ applicable, according to Childers, only to the path that involved the jhānas. However, Childers’s entry on vipassanā and kammaṭṭhāna contradicted this. The former stated ‘Seeing clearly, spiritual insight. . ..V. is produced by the successful exertion of ecstatic meditation, and is an attribute of the Arhatship’ (Childers (1875) 1909, 580). Here, Childers affirmed an interweaving of the jhānas with the path to enlightenment through insight, and, as I have pointed out, his entry on kammaṭṭhāna affirmed that ‘mystic meditation’, the term he continuously linked to the jhānas, could lead to ‘sanctification’ or enlightenment. I fancifully see the hand of Subhūti in this, stressing the importance of the jhānas and the link between their attainment and the path to liberation.

In the scholarship of Childers, therefore, there is a willingness to use the term ‘meditation’ for more practices than in Spence Hardy’s account but both shared the same hesitancy about categorising the samādhi that was linked to the attainment of nibbāna as ‘meditation’. Childers, particularly,
sought to distinguish between what he saw as ‘the supernatural tranquillity’ of the samādhi that was linked with the arahant and the ‘mystic or abstract meditation’ that he linked with the jhānas.

Within this period, I could have included two magisterial scholars – Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843–1922) and Bishop Reginald Stephen Copleston (1845–1925). I examined them in detail in 2006 (Harris 2006, 125–138). The former founded the Pali Text Society (PTS) in 1881, after serving as a civil servant in Sri Lanka, offering a remarkable contribution to Buddhism in Europe. However, he came to believe that his PTS translations could be a corrective to Buddhist practice on the ground, since he was convinced that much Sri Lankan practice was ‘altogether outside Buddhism’ (Rhys Davids 1896, 188, quoted in Harris 2006, 137). Furthermore, in his early understanding of samādhi, he was less nuanced than Childers, dismissing it as ‘a self-induced mesmeric trance, supposed to be a proof of superior holiness’ (Rhys Davids (1877) 1894, 177, cited in Harris 2006, 135). Bishop Copleston claimed that his writing was guided by conversation with ‘those who had been familiar all their lives with the traditional interpretation’ (Copleston (1888) 1953, 113–115, cited in Harris 2006, 126) but his representation of ‘meditation’ was rooted in textual descriptions of the jhānas, which he judged to consist of ‘unmeaning, and indeed, impossible states of abstraction’, in effect going no further than Gogerly (Copleston 1892, 149, cited in Harris 2006, 134). Both, I would, therefore, argue, are unfit guides to what Buddhists in Sri Lanka actually practised and do not add much to an understanding of how the use of the term ‘meditation’ developed, although Copleston does offer, at the end of his book, a useful account of the Buddhist revivalism he witnessed, one that was committed to education, social work, preaching and denouncing ‘the Christian missionary’ but did not stress meditation, since that part of revivalism came later than 1892 (Copleston 1892, 275).

**Concluding thoughts**

I began this paper with the assertion that nineteenth century British accounts of Buddhism in Sri Lanka could aid scholarship in two ways, first in shedding light on Buddhist practice on the ground before the arising of Buddhist modernism, and second in aiding our understanding of the development of Buddhist modernism, particularly its tendency to use the term ‘meditation’ for diverse practices, with priority being given to vipassanā. In connection with the former, my chosen writers point, throughout the century, to a vibrant, lay devotional practice that placed importance on preaching, and the recitation and interpretation of texts. Not only this, Davy and Dickson point to the practice of ‘meditation’ among the laity on topics related to insight. With reference to the jhānas, all my writers, with the exception of Harvard and Davy who did not mention them, struggled to
understand their meaning, drawing on western vocabulary connected with the mystic, the esoteric and spiritualism. I would suggest that this is not because the jhānas were not practised, although my chosen writers suggest that their practice was not visible in the more activist monastic communities they witnessed in towns and villages. Rather, I would argue that the very struggle that my writers experienced is evidence not only of their own textual study but also of the importance of the jhānas to the monastic community if only as an aspiration. They were far more important, for instance, than the practices that Buddhist modernism links to vipassanā, evidenced not least by the fact that vipassanā as a separate practice was not emphasised in any of my writers, although both Spence Hardy and Childers mention it. Also significant are the struggles within my writers to understand whether the path of samādhi and the path of the jhānas were interlinked or separate and whether ‘meditation’ could be used for both, in all their forms. I would argue that this issue of terminology remained a live question in the period I have examined, however accurate my writers’ descriptions were of Buddhist practice, with most affirming that the practice of the jhānas could lead directly into the path to nibbāna.

With further reference to Buddhist modernism, the unwillingness of some of my chosen writers to attribute the term ‘meditation’ to the diversity of practices they witnessed, conversed about or discovered in their textual reading must be taken seriously. Buddhist modernism tended to elide diverse practices under the term ‘meditation’ and eventually gave priority to vipassanā as a separate practice. The result was that diversity was reduced and the jhānas subordinated. My writers, in their recognition of diversity and their consequent struggles with how to apply the term ‘meditation’ offer a narrative that enjoins caution in the face of easy generalizations about the labels given to Buddhist devotion and mental culture within European languages.

Notes

1. Psalm 119 v. 15 can be taken as an example. The King James version of the Bible translates one clause in the verse as: ‘I will meditate on thy precepts’. The contemporary New Revised Standard Version retains this: ‘I will meditate on your precepts’. A contemporary Jewish Study Bible, however, avoids any mention of ‘meditation’, preferring to translate the line as ‘I study Your precepts’ (Berlin and Brettler 1999, 1416).
2. See, for example, an obituary from The Congregational Magazine, 1825, in Bebbington, Dix, and Ruston (2006, 189).

4. I have examined his representation of Buddhist doctrine elsewhere. Human destiny was fixed by ‘an uncontrollable fatality’. ‘Transmigrations were regulated according to their moral character’ and ‘nirri-wana’ was the Buddhist heaven, which the Sinhala people believed to be annihilation (Harvard 1823, Iy, cited in Harris 2006, 28).

5. This may be the twin-pulpit preaching apparently no longer found but discussed by Deegalle (2006).

6. ‘With the exception of females, and those who support Budhuism from interested motives, the generality of the people manifest great indifference to every system of religion; and may at present be considered more inclined to infidelity than to superstition’. The predominance of women among temple attendees has also been noted in contemporary Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka, for example, Crosby (2014, 242).

7. For a detailed account of Spence Hardy’s early work, see Coplans (1980).


9. This can also be seen in his translation of the Mahāsatipāṭṭhānasutta, published only after his death, in which he consistently translated forms of passati as ‘meditation’. For example: katham ca pana, bhikkhave, bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati becomes ‘How does he meditate respecting the body?’ (D. ii 291; Bishop 1908 II, 584).

10. For example, Gogerly translated verse 26 as ‘Ignorant and foolish men live in the practice of irreligion, but the wise man guards religion as the most valuable treasure’. Norman’s translation in the Pali Text Society edition is: ‘Fools, stupid people, apply themselves to carelessness; but a wise man guards his carefulness as his best treasure’ (Norman 1997, 4).

11. On the history of the term kammaṭṭhāna, see Skilton’s contribution to this volume.


13. See also the distinction made between ‘meditation’ and the jhāna in the following: ‘In like manner, by the exercise of meditation the breathing is tranquillised, as well as by entering upon the dhyānas’.‘Spence Hardy (1850) 1989, 296–297.

14. The 10 are: generosity (dāna), morality (sīla), meditation (bhāvana), giving or transferring merit (patti), rejoicing in another’s merit (pattānumodana), performance of religious obligations and rituals (veyyāvaccca), paying homage (apacāyana), preaching (desanā), listening to preaching (suti), right belief (diṭṭhi).

15. For an excellent account of Childers’s motivation for his Pāli research based on his letters to T. W. Rhys Davids, see Gornall 2015.

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Anagarika Dharmapala’s Meditation

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ABSTRACT

Dharmapala was the son of a pious Buddhist family, although educated in missionary schools where he acquired knowledge of English and Christian scripture. English gave him access to Western scholarship on Buddhism and made him a useful member of the Theosophical Society, which arrived in Sri Lanka in 1880. Wanting to be a religious worker, Dharmapala served as Colonel Olcott’s translator, and he soon came to be influenced by Madame Blavatsky’s highly imagined interpretation of Buddhism. The upshot was that Dharmapala’s lifelong practice of meditation was shaped by Theosophical interest in esoteric Buddhism and the moral course of the advanced spiritual seeker.

The boy who would become Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) had a solitary boyhood, moved from one school to the next on a nearly annual basis. The eldest son of a newly arrived and prosperous family in Colombo, he does not speak of having friends or playing with siblings in accounts of his growing up, emphasising instead his pleasure in spending time alone in his family’s garden, keeping company with birds and snakes. As he later put it, ‘evil companionship I abhorred’ (Sarnath Notebook No. 4).

Blavatsky was both a medium for messages from ‘masters of the ancient wisdom’ and the source of her exuberant and erudite collection of esoteric knowledge that drew on Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Egyptian religion, and Kabbala. She published that vision in Isis Unveiled in 1877, reconciling religion and science, while looking for the ideas that link all religions, following the esoteric logic that lay behind Hermeticism. Religions appeared to be many; on Blavatsky’s interpretation they were all one, once the mahatmas (adepts, ‘great ones’, Himalayan brothers, masters) revealed to her the ancient wisdom.

Olcott served Theosophy as an energetic administrator, and as the 1870s went on, Blavatsky and Olcott became increasingly interested in Buddhism.
They moved to Bombay in 1880, soon sailing to Sri Lanka and taking Buddhist vows. He saw Sri Lanka as a place where he could learn Buddhism from Buddhist monks, while also guiding his new co-religionists in their struggle to fend off Christianity and missionary domination. Dharmapala was drawn to both Blavatsky and Olcott, she providing him with messages from the Himalayan mahatmas of her revelation, Olcott embodying resistance and strategic skill. Dharmapala’s favourite mahatma was one Blavatsky described as a follower of the Buddha, Koot Hoomi, and for Dharmapala engaging with Koot Hoomi was at one with venerating the Buddha. His belief in Koot Hoomi gave him a paradigm for the advanced spiritual states that could be achieved by celibacy, compassion for others, and meditation. No other Sri Lankan showed much interest in Theosophical belief. Members of the Buddhist Theosophical Society were motivated by Olcott’s humanity, Western allure, and ingenuity. Dharmapala was invested in both Olcott’s organisational projects and Blavatsky’s imagined world. But he was also a Buddhist, born and bred. Just as Blavatsky had drawn on Buddhism to construct Theosophical belief and practice, Dharmapala drew on Theosophy to animate Buddhist belief.

On Blavatsky’s description, she was merely an amanuensis. When the mahatmas called, she went into “a trance or abstracted state,” … “her body possessed or overshadowed by the Masters,” and “whenever I am told to write, I sit down and obey, and then I can write easily upon almost anything—metaphysics, psychology, philosophy, ancient religions, zoology, natural sciences and what not”.

Judging from the texts she produced, Blavatsky could also write easily on many varieties of Buddhism, not to say other religious traditions. Gombrich and Obeyesekere call the process overwriting or overcoding, and that strategic act goes beyond appropriation. If a Buddhist nowadays says ‘Buddhism is not a religion’, having taken the notion from a Theosophist (who took it from Protestant missionaries), he overcodes. A term borrowed from one tradition gains rhetorical force in another, enjoying unearned legitimacy as soon as it appears in the new context. The strangeness of such expressions—karma would be a well-known example when used in English—give them immediate power without explication or context. Where Gombrich and Obeyesekere emphasise how Buddhists use appropriated language to their advantage, Aravamudan emphasises the transidiomatic effects of borrowed language itself. Because he learned much of his Buddhism from Western scholarship and Theosophy, Dharmapala had a relationship to his religion dependent on overcoding and transidiomatic effects. In what follows I want to consider how Dharmapala negotiated those complications in regards to meditation practices that could be parcelled out as Buddhist, Theosophical or Tantric.
Dharmapala was especially close to a few Buddhist monks, Migettuvatte Gunananda, Hikkaduve Sumangala and Ilukvatte Medhankara. In 1887 he had plans to travel to Bodh Gaya with Ilukvatte after the Theosophical convention in Adyar. Olcott convinced him not to make the pilgrimage, and Ilukvatte died soon after. But it is useful to note the connection because Ilukvatte was the only Sinhala monk interested in the mahatmas and travelling to Tibet to meet them. Tibet was important to Dharmapala because Blavatsky made it the centre of her highly-imagined landscape of advanced spiritual adepts, practising what she termed dhyana meditation and looking out for the interests of humankind in spite of their remote location in the Himalayas. Sinnett located the mahatmas similarly – “They constitute a Brotherhood, or Secret Association, which ramifies all over the East, but the principal seat — I gather to be in Tibet.” That vision was alluring enough for one Hindu boy to set off for Tibet the only way it could be reached, by foot, never to be seen again.

When he reached Bodh Gaya in 1889, Dharmapala was inspired by the place – its antiquity, its very existence – but much of what he saw came from Edwin Arnold’s own reaction to Bodh Gaya. The Light of Asia (1879) gave him context for understanding the awesome nature of the diamond throne on which the Buddha sat while attaining enlightenment. India Revisited (1886) left him with images of desolation that shaped the way he viewed the terrain. Seated at the diamond throne, Dharmapala made a vow that resonated with the Buddha’s vow not to leave until he had achieved Enlightenment. Dharmapala vowed instead not to leave Bodh Gaya until he had returned it to Buddhist control. His experience at Bodh Gaya left him with new ideals. He wrote of beginning his practice of rising at 2 a.m. to meditate soon after his stay at Bodh Gaya (Diary, 6 March 1891). His commitment to reducing the amount of food he ate and limiting himself to one meal a day followed (Diary, 12 August 1891). Where the generality of Sinhala monks believed that nirvana was either unattainable or a thousand lifetimes away, Dharmapala acted on the need to start striving now, even if the goal was not ready to hand. Where most accounts of his life stress his efforts at Bodh Gaya, his preaching Buddhism in the West, his reviving Sinhala pride in their religion, for him his spiritual quest came first, and meditation was a central part of that quest.

Dharmapala traced his interest in advanced spiritual states, Tibet, and dhyana meditation to Ilukvatte (Diary, 1 September 1897). In a Memorandum to his Diaries of 1918 (p. 4), he lays out the chronology of his interest in Tibet and dhyana meditation,

The Tibetan trip – It was in 1885 that I desired to visit Tibet and I was very anxious to come across any one who would tell me about Dhyana Yogis. I heard that the Thero Doratiyawa [Doratiyaveye] was practising Dhyana – I sincerely believed in the existence of the Himalayan adepts. To work for them was to me a great privilege, and I was assured by Col: Olcott that the Masters had accepted
me as a Chela. In 1889 I received a presentation copy of the Voice of the Silence by HPB with the words – “Lanoo” [disciple].

Koot Hoomi authorised a full set of practices—dhyana meditation, celibacy, vegetarianism—all were essential to the regimen of the uttari manussa dhamma [the morality/status of the advanced seeker] and the parama vijñāna [ultimate wisdom] such seekers sought.

The uttari manussa dhamma notion appears repeatedly in Dharmapala’s diaries, and it bears on his doubly liminal status. In a South Asian context where the distinction between householders and renouncers is over 2000 years old, Buddhist monks regard celibacy and self-discipline as constitutive of their vocation. But most monks live close by laypeople, interacting with them on a regular basis. Dharmapala’s renunciation was even more betwixt and between because his social status—was he a layman who practised asceticism or a monastic manque?—was itself ambiguous. The uttari manussa expression has several sources in the Tipiṭaka, the texts of the Theravada Buddhist canon. The reference most pertinent to Dharmapala, I suspect, comes from the Citta-samyutta. An accomplished lay preacher Citta comes upon a naked ascetic Kassapa after not having met for 30 years. Kassapa confesses that he has not achieved any ‘superhuman knowledge and vision befitting the noble ones’ (uttarimanussadhammā alamariyañānādassanavisesa). When he asks Citta whether he has any attainments, Citta replies that he can ‘enter and dwell in the four jhānas.’ By practising meditation, in other words, a Buddhist layman can achieve at least the lowest jhāna of the ‘world of forms’ (rūpāvacara) — and a full-bore renouncer can only wander about naked.

In an article in The Maha Bodhi about the uttari manussa dhamma Dharmapala insisted on the need for asceticism as a precondition for spiritual progress. The Buddha spoke in different registers for different sets of followers. He enunciated the Dhamma in its twofold form—one for the Bhikkhus, the other for the men of the world; the former the Uttari manussa dhamma, the latter the Manussa dhamma. The former for the superman, the latter for the householder. The uttari manussa doctrine was not for the laymen, and this Uttari Manussa Dhamma may therefore be called Supra-normal.

Those monks who practised meditation—using dhyana techniques—gained phenomenal powers (iddhi); laypeople were not entitled to those dhyana techniques. Keeping the distinction, Dharmapala redrew the line between householders and renouncers—“This is the Uttari manussa dhamma which is Supra-normal and only confined to the Brahmacaris, who have renounced the fetters of lay life.” Replacing ‘bhikkhus’ with ‘brahmacaryas’ broadens the actors who can attempt meditation, allowing a brahmacarya like himself access to meditation and its benefits. I take Dharmapala’s identification with the uttari manussa dhamma as a reaction to the decline
he saw around him, justifying his meditation, and providing a textual warrant for his idealism in a world where local renouncers were monks and indifferent to their responsibilities. He was not.

If the bhikkhu saṅgha would not reform itself and preach Buddhism in India and the West, Dharmapala would. Towards that end, he started a brahmacarya order for men willing to follow his example and renounce ‘all ties of home and worldly pleasure.’ In 1899, he had five brahmacaryas.14

These were men who came forth after Dharmapala established the Ethico-Psychological College just outside Colombo. They would practise asceticism and meditation. After being trained in Buddhism, Pali, and foreign languages, they would spread the Dhamma across the world as the first modern dhammadūtas. He told them to keep their hair short and dress in a light yellow tunic coat with a uturasaluva (which Dharmapala described as a ‘toga’) over their left shoulder. The most notable was Valinsinghe Harischandra, Dharmapala’s most committed follower. He died as a young man, and the other brahmacaryas soon defrocked themselves. Having started with a bang – almost 800 monks and 100s of elephants attended the opening – the Ethico-Psychological College failed in quick order.

The transidiomatic character of Dharmapala’s meditation is of a piece with his transidiomatic Buddhism. As this entry in his diaries late in life suggests he was as much of an imaginative genius as Blavatsky, ready to cross borders and reinforce the wisdom of Buddhism with the wisdom of Theosophy (17 January 1926):

Reading “Blavatsky Letters”. She sacrificed everything for the Master. The Master KH gave our Buddha’s teachings to the West through Sinnett, and master M[Moriya] gave occult teachings through HPB. Theosophy at first was nothing but Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Crystal gazing and Kabbala. The early volumes of the Theosophist are evidence thereto. Master KH through Sinnett opened the door of the “Occult World”. Since then the world came to know of the existence of the Adepts beyond Himalayas. The Secret Doctrine has very little of Buddhism, more of Puranic Cosmology. The Voice of the Silence is 99 percent Buddhism. The Mahatma Letters contain more of Buddhistic knowledge than even “Secret Doctrines”. Theosophy of Mrs. Besant is an exoteric [sic] hotch potch. It is inclined more to ceremonial Christianity. She is sacrificing the Masters to gain her own selfish ambitions and acquire more power in Christendom by preaching the new doctrine of the alleged incarnation of Jesus. Reading Visuddhi Magga.

It would be hard to call the man who wrote these words a Buddhist pure and simple, but it is important to remember that he thought Blavatsky and Sinnett were Theosophists who understood Buddhism – specifically the Blavatsky of The Voice of the Silence and the Sinnett of The Occult World, Esoteric Buddhism and The Mahatma Letters.

The roster of what Dharmapala read and when he read those sources provides a picture of his evolution as a seeker of knowledge. The list below
is only representative because he read so many books – my index of the books he references in his diaries during his lifetime runs to 70 pages, single spaced – that I cannot capture his career as a reader fully. I will simply extract a few examples from the many:

(1) Arnold, *The Light of Asia* (1882)
(2) Charles Leadbeater gave him two volumes of the *Secret Writings* after his return from Japan in June 1889.
(4) Oldenberg, *Buddhism* (20 August 1891).
(6) *Saddharmapundarika* (23 May 1893)
(7) Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism* (2 January 1894)

Beyond the tacking between Buddhist texts and Theosophical expositions of Buddhism, what stands out here is the central place of the *Visuddhimagga*.\(^{15}\) He read it early and late. He does not mention the two meditation manuscripts he found in Lankan monasteries, to which I shall return below (I think he may have left them out because they were not meant to be read but ‘thumbed’ after oral instruction).\(^{16}\) By contrast references to the *Visuddhimagga* – sometimes reading the text, other times making reference to it – appear regularly.\(^{17}\) The opposite is true of the terms for meditation traditions. He almost never mentions *vipassanā* (a name just coming to the fore). He speaks instead of dhyana.

Sinnett’s influence on Dharmapala has been underappreciated, even if part of that influence came from Blavatsky speaking through Sinnett. Dharmapala wrote, ‘The Sinnett [Mahatma] Letters from KH [Koot Hoomi] brought me in touch with the Himalayan Brotherhood’ (Diary 9 May 1924). One passage from *Esoteric Buddhism* speaks directly to Dharmapala.\(^{18}\)

The fact is that Ceylon is saturated with exoteric, and Tibet with esoteric, Buddhism. Ceylon concerns itself merely or mainly with the morals, Tibet, or rather the adepts of Tibet, with the science, of Buddhism.

Blavatsky herself thought that Tibet was the land of the kind of Buddhism Western scholarship and Southern Buddhists did not understand, esoteric Buddhism. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* – as Blavatsky put it, ‘an excellent work with a very unfortunate title’ – made public that which had been private.\(^{19}\) Fortunately, Sinnett revealed ‘only a few tenets from a hitherto hidden teaching.’ Blavatsky favoured a distinction between Buddhism (the
ethics the Buddha preached) and Budhism (wisdom or knowledge, vidyā) and it was a small part of the knowledge that Blavatsky divulged in 1880 to Sinnett, eventually to appear in Esoteric Buddhism (1883). She claimed to have learned it during her sojourn in Tibet, where high in the Himalayas the mahatmas still practised it. By making the distinction between Buddhism and Budhism, she did something more cunning than overcoding. She invented a new Budhism—the one she spelled with a single "d," outflanking the mundane Buddhism of Western scholars and Southern Buddhists. Hers was knowledge Dharmapala sought.

Dharmapala’s meditation was motivated by forces beyond Tibet, wanting to meet ‘the Great Ones,’ and Theosophy. Part was a product of circumstance. Because he was not a monk (at least not until the end of his life), he was not likely to have found a meditation teacher to guide him. Had he been a monk, his chances for becoming a student of a meditation master were hardly better because he would have had a struggle finding a teacher. Another constraint was the limited nature of what any Sri Lankan knew of meditation as a practice. He took guidance where he found it. His first guide came at the Adyar convention of 1889 – “Bro. S. Ramasamier of Chela fame in the evening...Ramasamier showed me how to sit in ‘Siddhasana’ – at the Adyar convention of 1889, so we can say that he was the first Buddhist to learn the practice from a Saivite Theosophist (Diary 2 January 1891). Days later, he received instruction in ‘dhyanabhavana’ from ‘my Burmese friend’ (Diary 9 January 1891).

Dharmapala’s search for instruction went well beyond Ramasamier, his Burmese friend, and the two manuals he found. These we now know were left behind by pupils of Siamese monks who in the mid-18th century brought to Sri Lanka the meditation transmission that scholars now refer to as boran kammathan, which Dharmapala, on the basis of these two manuscripts, calls dhyana. To start at the beginning, we might say that the first influence on Dharmapala’s interest in dhyana meditation was the Buddha himself, Dharmapala modelling his life on the Buddha and thinking that the Buddha’s meditation followed dhyana techniques. A more proximate paradigm was Koot Hoomi, the mahatma said by Blavatsky to practise dhyana meditation in his Himalayan ashram. Dharmapala was aware that the Sri Lankan monk Doratiyaveye practised dhyana as transmitted in the manual that Rhys Davids edited as The Yogāvācara’s Manual, derived from the mid-18th-century boran kammathan transmission from Thailand.[?] Burma had its own allure for him because of its reputation for meditation with the rise of Burmese vipassanā under the influence of Ledi Sayadaw – “The Bhikkhu who had spent 15 years in Burma came. He is translating Lidi [sic] Sayadaw’s book into Sinhalese” (Diary, 29 November 1911). Beyond the Burmese reputation for knowledge of abhidhamma and enthusiasm for meditation, the
guidance of any Burmese had another thing to recommend it. At Bodh Gaya Dharmapala met a Burmese monk who told him that he intended to make the pilgrimage to Tibet because he believed that there were three arhats living there (Diary, 25 February 1891).

**Meditations**

In his account of Buddhism in a village to the east of Kandy, Gombrich evaluates the status of meditation in Sri Lanka at the end of the nineteenth century. That historical moment is doubly useful because it coincides with Dharmapala’s early career and just precedes the arrival of Burmese meditation techniques in Sri Lanka. The Burmese tradition, which took form only in the 19th century, follows vipassanā techniques, cultivating a deep calm before pursuing insight. Bechert, Coplestone, Sangharakshita (relying on Dharmapala’s judgment), and Woodward all conclude that meditation had disappeared from Sri Lanka by the end of the nineteenth century, meaning that Dharmapala would have been looking for it during a vacuum, prior to the new arrival of vipassanā from Burma, which would have contributed to his search for it beyond Sri Lanka. On the basis of what monks told him during his fieldwork in the 1960’s, Gombrich says that he is not as certain as Bechert that meditation had disappeared by Dharmapala’s time, meaning that Dharmapala may have missed local living practice. Gombrich concedes that, by the time of his own fieldwork, few Kandyan monks did meditation of any kind, but the ones he found doing meditation in Teldeniya, the village where he worked, followed instructions laid down by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga*. Teldeniya is also in the vicinity of the Bambaragala temple where Dharmapala found one of two meditation manuals (Sinhala *vidarshana pot*). The two meditation manuals Dharmapala found were his attempt to find practical guidance about a meditation tradition he understood from Western sources, absent oral instruction for doing meditation. Why he did not seek instruction from Doratiyaveye – who lived until 1900 – is a question for which I have no answer. It transpires that there were also still practitioners of related meditations in central and eastern mainland Southeast Asia at the time, whence it only began to disappear in early 20th century. However, the practice does not appear to have survived in Burma by the time of Dharmapala’s quest, hence the possible contrast between his ‘dhyana’ and the vipassanā that a Burmese man told him to practice (Diary 14 April 1891, see note 20). Dharmapala did not (and could not) understand the richness of a tradition only more recently brought to light.

In his diaries, Dharmapala never made a reference to the distinction between the two meditation techniques. He ignores the word vipassanā, except when recording the words of others. Instead, he refers to either dhyana meditation or bhāvanā (a Sanskrit and Pali word for meditation in general and other forms of cultivation). All things considered, Dharmapala seems...
comfortable discussing Buddhism and meditation in general in a Theosophical vocabulary, although his reading, particularly of the Visuddhimagga, provided him with a technical Pali vocabulary for specific practices.

In the 1892, a Chinese monk arrived in Sri Lanka and began a six-year meditation in a cave on Sri Pada, and I suspect he provided a compelling example for Dharmapala. He may have met the Chinese monk, but even if he did not, he read of him. Most newspaper readers knew of him, and Dharmapala was an inveterate consumer of newspapers, reading Lankan newspapers even while in Calcutta. The monk occupied a cave some 100 ft below the summit, but he did not live in isolation – several members of his family lived with him. When a group of European hikers approached his cave, they could not talk to him because he had no English, Sinhala or Tamil, but he offered them firewood and water.

Sing Hin’s arrival in Colombo after six years on Sri Pada brought him wide attention. His meditation was severe, and his daily routine more so. Local Buddhists were drawn to more than his self-discipline – he arrived at a point where religious reform was gaining momentum – and set an example for his local peers:

Great excitement has been created amongst Buddhists of the Island by the arrival of Hermit Priest Sing Hin from Sri Pada where he has devoted his time in prayer and meditation in one of the caves on top of the Peak.

The Priest is accompanied by his brother Rev. Hang Hin who was the High Priest of Foochow before he left for the Peak, also his father, mother, sister and a few attendants have come with him. The strange part of the behaviour of this Hermit Priest is that he has been seated in one place and in the same posture (without moving his limbs for the last six years, while he was meditating, and undergoing his penance, exposed to the sun and rain in an open cave on Adam’s Peak.

This Priest takes one meal a day consisting of particular kinds of leaves boiled without any ingredients, but it is strange to find that his body is well developed and he is in a very healthy state. When questioned as to his mode of meditation, his attendants state that he is determined to gain the knowledge and wisdom attained by Buddha.

Mr Louis Perera of the Oriental Boat Company, who himself is a . . . Buddhist of Galle has accommodated the Hermit Priest and his party in his commodious house Home Wood in Havelock Town where thousands of people of every denomination are assembling daily to see this strange Phenomenon, and those who have seen this Priest testify to the fact that they have seen no other Buddhist Priest either in Ceylon or elsewhere undergoing such privations and hardships for the sake of his soul and those of others.

The personal appearance of this Priest is just the same as of the Buddhist Images built in Temples in a sitting posture.

The High Priest who is along with him says that the Hermit Priest has only accomplished his first penance and he has to undergo several more before he
gains his ends. The Hermit Priest and his party will sail for Foochow in China, his native place, via Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Hongkong, Shanghai and Amoy on or about the 14th instant.\textsuperscript{30}

The Priest is obliged to call at the above ports to comply with the request of the leading Buddhists of these ports, who are convinced, even with other Priests in those places, that the hermit Priest is an exceptional one and above the grade as to his attainments, even with other Priests in those places.\textsuperscript{31}

Sing Hin’s virtues are virtues that would have appealed to Dharmapala’s sense that local monks were lethargic and uninterested in both meditation and the asceticism essential for achieving advanced spiritual states.

**Dharmapala’s daily life and times**

As a boy Dharmapala had wanted to be ordained but was kept from doing so by a physical impairment – a disabled right leg made him walk with a galloping gait. Instead, he took up the practice of *brahmacarya*, which entailed celibacy, a vegetarian diet, reading Buddhist texts, wearing ochre robes and meditating. Denied lower ordination, Dharmapala had higher aspirations. He regularly calibrated his life against the 80-year life of the Lord Buddha, tied his robes after the Buddha’s fashion, and vowed to become either an enlightened being, a Buddha, or the Buddha. In his diaries he sometimes referred to himself as Dharmapala bodhisat. When he appeared at the World’s Parliament of Religions, he wore white robes, but adopted ochre two years later and wore it for the rest of his life. The colour bears on his thinking about meditation. He thought of himself as a world renouncer whose spiritual progress depended on doing good works. He was not a social reformer who did asceticism on the side. His meditation was regular and serious. He concentrated on basic mindfulness of breathing, using the method of counting from 1 to 10 with each breath. He observes a ‘new experience’, which may have been *nimitta*, with which he then experimented, noting that it could be achieved by continuing with the counting of mindfulness of breathing: ‘The counting should never be stopped; but must be carried on through until the appearance of the mental picture.’\textsuperscript{32}  

\[I’m unsure why this reference is appearing as an endnote. I have run references to Dharmapala’s diaries in parentheses in the text. This should be consistent with the other references, no?] *Nimitta*, are explained in the *Visuddhimagga*, but emphasised in *boran kammathan* as described in the *Yogāvacara’s Manual*. It is not clear here whether either text is particularly influential in his understanding of his experience at this point, and nowhere is there any indication of him internalising *nimitta* along pathways to the navel as advocated in the latter text.\textsuperscript{33}
No meditation should be attempted without understanding the Dhamma, Dharmapala knew, just as he knew that Dhamma knowledge motivated the status advantage monks held over laypeople and furnished the rationale for their meditation. But he also held on to a distinction between Buddhist laypeople in general and those few men who practised *brahmacarya*, a role that entailed celibacy, vegetarianism and if not homelessness in the strict sense of the word, then minimal attachment to the things of this world. Dharmapala may have appeared to Sinhalas as a religious figure of some kind or a layman in the dress of a world renouncer. By his own reckoning, he was a *brahmacarya* (in a society that had no such tradition).\(^34\) It has been argued Dharmapala intended the laicising of the Buddhist sangha and practised a Protestant Buddhism, but his views on the religious life follow the contours I have already laid out. To the extent that he honoured the religious privilege Buddhist monks had always enjoyed, he was a traditionalist. To the extent that he felt that men – and it was men – who practised *brahmacarya* were entitled to both meditation and doing *sāsana* work, he was an innovator. What he did not intend was blurring the difference between ascetics and laypeople.

When he advised his acolyte Devapriya on the *sāsana* work that his acolyte had been trained for, Dharmapala told him he must remain a *brahmacarya* or become a *bhikkhu* – “as a householder you cannot do any work for the sasana.”\(^35\) Meditation was not something that one could practise independent of *brahmacarya* either. In the category ‘*sāsana* work’ I would include activities Dharmapala himself undertook – missionising the Dhamma, asserting the interests of Buddhism – as well as most Buddhist activities beyond giving *dāna* to the monkhood. When he established the Ethico-Psychological College in Rajagiriya in 1898, he insisted that the missionary work that students would be trained for would include a commitment to *brahmacarya* – and that burden accounts for the lack of interest the opening of the College provoked.

Dharmapala’s search for dhyana instruction led him to the Holy Ones. The problem was they lived in the high Himalayas, and Tibet was beyond reach for any outsider but the most intrepid. The prospect that he would make a trip to the Himalayas to meet the mahatmas so disturbed his father that he offered to build a meditation hall for him if he would give up the idea (Sarnath Notebook No. 101).\(^36\) By the time the meditation hall was constructed in 1890, Dharmapala had found the two meditation manuals in Hanguranketa and Bambaragala. He used the meditation hall, but he says almost nothing in his diaries about visits to the meditation hall or other places where he meditated. When he arose at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, it is a fair guess that he did not leave his residence and meditated on the spot.
The second meditation manual interested him more than the first, and he had D.B. Jayatilaka arrange for its being copied. On his way to the World Parliament of Religions, he carried that text with him, leaving it with T. W. Rhys Davids in his Kentish village. Rhys-Davids wrote Dharmapala that he was the man for the job (The Maha Bodhi, III:II, June 1894, p. 9):

I have looked into your MS. and come to the conclusion that it must be transliterated, edited and translated; but it must be done by some one who knows not only enough Pali, but enough Buddhism, and enough psychology. It is the very next text that I shall do or get done as its subject is so interesting.

T.W. Rhys Davids edited the Pali/Sinhala text that became The Yogavacara’s Manual of Indian Mysticism as Practised by Buddhists (1896). F. L. Woodward later published a translation in English as Manual of a Mystic (1916) with a preface by and Caroline Rhys Davids. Woodward followed D.M.D.Z. Wickremasinghe who identified it as a sixteenth or seventeenth century text, brought to Sri Lanka during the reign of Vimaladhammasurya II (1687–1707). More likely it was brought to the island by a later delegation of Thai monks during the time of Kirtisrirajasinha (1747–82). What is more instructive is that it was a manual that guided the practitioner to samatha/jhāna and vipassanā, the subject of the last section of the text.

Having no teacher, Dharmapala could not use the text as intended. According to Eliade, the Yogavacara’s Manual ‘...is more a list of technical formulas than a manual... The yogavacara practitioner undoubtedly received oral instruction; the text was only a mnemonic aid.’ The appeal of the manuscript was surely its promise of powerful and immediate results, a promise hard to realise absent any explanation of the technical formulas. The text assumes that the practitioner, seated in the yogic position, will proceed through three stages – preamble, entrance and ecstasy, each stage with a corresponding colour. The practitioner verifies that he has accomplished the meditation – according to T.W. Rhys Davids’ estimation there are some 1344 meditations in all, 112 mental states accomplished in 12 different ways–by knowing that he has produced the appropriate colour. Distinctive to the tradition is the production of those colours and the use of heart syllables, which Crosby explains as ‘the representation of some greater spiritual potential by a syllable, such as the initial syllable of the names of the books of the Abhidhamma Pīṭaka.’ As Crosby says, this form of meditation was the dominant form of meditation at court and in court-sponsored Buddhism in the eighteenth century in Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, as attested by the evidence of manuscripts and manuals belonging to the supreme patriarchs and members of the royal families.

It makes perfect sense that the tradition Thai monks brought to Kandy was dhyana meditation, transferring knowledge from one court to another.
Dharmapala kept the two dhyana manuscripts with him and used them to construct meditation exercises that he practised both in India and while traveling (Sarnath Notebook No. 23). Although he owned an astonishing number of houses in his lifetime – he left over a dozen buildings to the Dharmapala trust – he was frequently away from whatever place he was occupying at a particular moment. To that extent he was homeless. Certainly he was homeless, if we understand ‘anāgārika’ to refer to Sri Lanka, which is the one place he seldom visited or stayed for a long period, his two-year stay in the island – December 1904 to November 1906 – the big exception. Rising in the middle of the night, he found a place to practice nearby. On one occasion, he used the ānāpānasati method not to enter into the world of corresponding taxonomies or to blur the distinction between self and other, but to remember a word (Diary 11 November 1911).

Got up at 2 AM. For nearly ¼ of an hour I tried to remember the word “Sannidhikara”, and to get the word I adopted the Anapanasati method, and went on repeating with each inspiration the letters of the Pali alphabet and at last I got the word.

Elsewhere he writes ‘anapana is not good for evening,’ and he favoured certain days of the week for particular meditations – “Friday is good for kamatan bhavana. Always sit facing the east” (Diary 10 April 1891).

There are regular references in the diaries to meditation and indications of the hour at which Dharmapala began his practice. Most entries between August and September 1891 begin with such references (and this stretch was the time of his most regular practice, although he meditated throughout his life). Over longer stretches of the diaries there are sporadic references to dhyana meditation. The most exuberant reads: ‘Dhyana, Dhyana, Dhyana everywhere’ (Diary 12 May 1919). The first mention of meditation is a reference to dhyana meditation, ‘I began to inquire about Dhyan books in 1885’ (Diary 26 January 1919). Many entries refer to meditating on kāsinās (disks of various colours) – “I practised at 7.30 Am the Pita Kasina” (Diary 27 February 1919) and ‘Practised the Odata Kasina’ (Diary 3 March 1919). For the former, the yellow kāsiṇa, he uses a bouquet of yellow flowers as the external basis for his meditation. Besides studying the Visuddhimagga, he tried to spread knowledge of the text early in his life – “In 1894 May, the Buddhist began publishing Buultjen’s translation of the Visuddhi Magga. Sent letter to YMBA, Colombo, asking them to publish in pamphlet form Buultjen’s translation” (Diary 26 January 1919). That same year Dharmapala praised Lakminipahana (a leading Sinhala language newspaper) for publishing the Visuddhimagga with Sinhala commentary, following on his interest in making the text accessible to laypeople.

His preference for night was motivated both by his commitment to asceticism and his identification with the Lord Buddha, who Dharmapala
thought had been a man with little tolerance for sleep. For the Buddha there was too much work to be done for sleep:

The Blessed One worked daily for 22 hours, from His 35th year to His 80th Year... He preached day after day for 16,200 days, and each day He was engaged in doing good to the world of gods and men twenty-two hours... During the forty-five years His blessed life was spent for 256400 hours in working for the welfare of the world.

As with tying his robes like the Buddha (or how he imagined the Buddha did so), practising dhyana gave him another way to imitate the Buddha. Sleep was the obstacle to spiritual progress – “Read the Girmananda Sutta. It is splendid. I have to make the effort to keep up the whole night from going to sleep. Sleep is bad for Dhyana” (Diary 6 July 1924).

Sometimes he meditated at other times of day – ‘At 5.10 PM I was practising Anapana. It took nearly 12 min for 100 breathings. Then I thought of Mrs. Besant & CWL and I wrote a letter to Jinarajadasa at 6 PM’ (Diary 21 November 1919). He was fond of cultivating iddhis, writing ‘I have practised the viriya samadhi padhana sankhara sammanagata iddhipada’ (Diary 7 February 1920). He speaks of the progress he has made: ‘I practised the Sammapadana these three months and it had helped to bring about Mahapadana, Saccadhitthana (sic.) Drop the period following (sic) chanda Samadhi, indiriya samvara and metta’ (Diary 5 January 1920) and ‘When [during] my meditation the divine eye appears the distant worlds become visible as if seen through a telescope’ (Diary 7 August 1920). The Visuddhimagga speaks of the divine eye – without benefit of the telescope – revealing human beings passing away and reappearing (XIII. 72).

A few times, he meditated in public, once while he was traveling in a carriage or a bullock cart, ‘I started for Rajagiri [from Colombo]. All the way I meditated’ (Diary 4 October 1898). When he was living in Calcutta, he meditated in a public setting, writing that he ‘went to the Maidan at 7 a.m., and sat in meditation at the lion seat at the Prinsep Ghat and returned to the Maha Bodhi Society at 8:00’ (Diary 24 March 1919). He was not reluctant to meditate in public places, doing so on a train in India (Diary 12 March 1925) and in Zurich – “In the afternoon I went to the Park and sat on the bench and meditated. It was exhilarating to sit by the water” (Diary 12 July 1925). Public meditation has potential for outreach, and once he combined meditation with selling Maha Bodhi Society books, raising funds for Sarnath (Diary 8 January 1925)

We went to sell books at 9 AM. Dharmabandhu is useful, as a crier. He asked the people to buy books. The Mary Foster Caravan is most useful. I sit in padmasen and practise metta. People come and buy books and contribute to the Sarnath Vihara fund. Brampy Singhga (Buddhadasa), Somapala, Driver & Dharmabandhu sell books. Mr. Beddewela makes the entries.
Sometimes he uses the word ‘meditate’ loosely, to mean something like ‘concentrate on’ – meditating on one occasion on Buddhist propaganda (Diary 27 December 1893) and, on another, the future of Buddhism (Diary 15 June 1894). When he made his long stay in London in the 1920s, his preaching turned to wishing well of others, presumably an idiom that a Christian audience would find recognisable. His meditation took a similar turn – “Foster House. Got up at 2:30PM. Meditated wishing happiness to all” (Diary 20 October 1926). And (Diary 28 October 1926):

Foster House. Woke up at 1 AM. The nurse had forgotten to place the spittoon in my bed room and I had to go to the bath room to wash my mouth. I could not sleep after that and I meditated sending thoughts of love to all; and made the Patthana that I shall be born in a noble Brahman family and when I speak my breath be full of fragrance.

The interest in the *Visuddhimagga* continued through his life, beginning in 1889 (Diary 26 February 1920). He read it early, and he read it late. Just as he had sought out copies of the dhyana manual, he searched for a local copy of Buddhaghosa’s manual (Diary 7 December 1924):

Sumanatisssa Sami of Mapana called. I went with him to Talatu Oya in search of the Visuddhi Magga. Rambukpota RM & his son, Beddewela & his two sons accompanied us. I addressed the people there. Could not get the MS.

But he always linked dhyana to Tibet, even as circumstances changed (Diary 19 November 1897):

The Dhyana work is hard; and that is the very reason I wish to undertake the work. Wrote a letter to the Foreign Minister of China about my proposed trip to Tibet. The Prince Priest called and had dinner. He is willing to go to Tibet.

On one occasion, he spoke of dhyana meditation with regard to his work as a Buddhist missionary (Diary 8 May 1924):

The happiness of renunciation was the subject of my lecture this evening. Very poor audience. Nearly 4 years I have tried to disseminate the Dharma, but to no purpose. Had I followed the Dhyana Path it would have been better

It could be that Dharmapala is not referencing dhyana meditation in any strict sense, but using the ‘Dhyana Path’ notion to refer to a life of meditation. It is clear that he wanted to spread knowledge of meditation. Opening the new temple he built at Sarnath, he wrote ‘May Buddhists from all lands assemble at the opening ceremony of the Mulagandhakuti vihara. May the Devas cooperate to establish a Dhyana College there’ (Diary, 28 November 1930).

There are a number of issues here, but the central one remains whether Dharmapala made a distinction between dhyana and *vipassanā* techniques. If he was unaware of that distinction, why did he make so much of Tibet and
secret texts? The man Dharmapala describes as his ‘Burmese friend’ was also a meditator and a layman like himself. They met at the Theosophical convention at Adyar, and the Burmese ‘gave me instruction in kammatthana’ (Diary 14 February 1921). Of course, the notion of secret texts and esoteric teaching is not confined to Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhaghosa mentions ‘secret texts’ that stand separate from the Visuddhimagga itself, making that reference in three different places. Cousins suggest that the secret texts may be connected with boran kammatthan.47

While Dharmapala was familiar with the Visuddhimagga, neither he nor the Burmese friend is likely to have had any familiarity with the broader culture of boran kammathan that Cousins mentions. So it is even more tempting to suggest that the ‘spiritual path’ Dharmapala’s Burmese friend taught him to follow was Buddhism under Theosophical inflection.

Dharmapala was a man fixed on rebirth, not as the normal course of saṃsāra, but as the future context for both his attainments and the occasion for even more serious striving. In his notebooks, he made it a practice from time to time to lay out his future life and death against the 80-year life span of the Buddha (and world renouncers as such in South Asia), hoping that he could complete 45 years of preaching Buddhism before his death, on the model of the Buddha’s 45-year ministry. Elsewhere he envisioned his life ending soon, calculating how many lifetimes would take him to the Buddha Jayanti when the sāsana would reach the midpoint of its 5000-year historical career. Or he envisioned how old he would be in a future life at that moment, which both Burmese and Sri Lankans envisioned as an uptick in the well-being of the sāsana and the time of the appearance of a powerful reformer – Setkya-Min in the Burmese case, and Diyasena in the Lankan.48

The Buddha Jayanti had personal relevance for Dharmapala. Looking forward to 1956, he wrote ‘Everywhere there is trouble. When will all this cease? Thirty-six years hence there will arise the great Bodhisat. May I be born again to work with Him’ (Diary 19 August 1920). In another calculation, he foresaw meeting the Buddha Metteyya far in the future (Diary 9 May 1924):

If I die, say this year I shall take birth in India. I shall begin again the work in 1946. Then I shall be 22 years old. Add 40 years work. Then it will be 1986. I shall die & be re-born again. It will be then 2008 AC & 2551 AB. Life after life I shall continue the work of preaching the Dhamma & be ready to receive the Vivarana from the Buddha Metteyya

Many commentators have noted Dharmapala’s hopes for preaching the Dhamma lifetime after lifetime. They leave out his desire to take birth during the lifetime of a future Buddha for the sake of receiving the warrant that would lead to his becoming the Buddha.
Blavatsky was nothing if not a maker of worlds, reconciling the ‘this’ of “that and the ‘that’ of ‘this’, and the world she pulled together – the one that reached maturity in *The Voice of the Silence*–depended on a Buddhist vocabulary. Long before Theosophy came on the scene, that vocabulary was transidiomatic in a more local way, shuttling between different Buddhist traditions and communities. Buddhist meditation traditions are thoroughly entangled, and this entanglement suited Blavatsky to a tittle. Blavatsky saw no advantage in reading the texts closely. Her vision was broad, but not deep. Looking across the expanse of Western scholarship on Buddhism, she used her fine imagination to make something greater of the ideas she found there. Dharmapala never lost his affection for her ability to build worlds, Koot Hoomi, and Tibet, writing long after he was too in firm to make the trek that strike "that" at end of this sentence (Diary 9 March 1924):

In 1884 I was absorbed in KH. In 1924 I am again thinking of the Masters. The two Adepts are trying to revive the Sasana. How they love each other. M says of KH. “My brother, the light of my soul”. In this life I have not succeeded, but in the next life I hope to be born physically strong to climb the Himalayas and to study the sacred science.

I could sum this up by calling Dharmapala a Tantric Theravadin, but we could just as well call him a Theosophical Tantric Theravadin. He was simply up to his neck in transidiomatic vocabulary.

There are local motivations for Sinhala Buddhists making Dharmapala a mainstream Sinhala Buddhist. The conventional way of doing so is to take him at his own words. He wrote that he came to Bodh Gaya as a Theosophist and left a Buddhist, and that appears to settle the matter. Another rationale for his internal conversion is to take his falling out with Colonel Olcott in the late 1890s as the moment when he cast his lot with relic veneration, deva worship, and Buddhism without Theosophical influence. But Dharmapala never disavowed Blavatsky, Koot Hoomi, or the demands and privileges of the *uttari manussa dhamma*. He simply kept those thoughts to himself, squirreling them away in his diaries. Many of those entries begin with an aphorism from Koot Hoomi – “the only way to perfection is through the Lord Buddha.” Had he been the Buddhist of popular imagination, he would have said something similar without a mahatma’s endorsement. That he included that aphorism pretty much sums up the transidiomatic character of his Buddhism and approach to meditation.

Dharmapala’s words about his transformation from Theosophist to Buddhist at Bodh Gaya duly noted, I would prefer to put it this way. After his first departure from Bodh Gaya he confined his Theosophy to diaries, articles on Theosophy in *The Maha Bodhi* that he published without comment, or spoke of it publicly only when travelling in the West. The way
Theosophy disappears from his public life derives from the fluidity of his beliefs as such. His Buddhism, in Blackburn’s terms, was locative. Blavatsky was a medium for astral messages, but not a meditator. Nor was Olcott. Blavatsky describes the counting of inhalations and exhalations as a ‘useless practice.’ Speaking of the path to adeptship, she wrote that annihilating not only desire and memory, but also meditation itself – “so far as these are connected with any effort of the physical brain” – as if the final step was not a matter of self-striving or practice. Having argued that each Theosophist was entitled to follow his own path to truth, Blavatsky agreed that their common course was to practise a moral asceticism. The mahatmas, by contrast, were practising ascetics and meditators, and they had achieved their holy state by lifetimes of both. On her view, the task for Theosophists was to accept the wisdom she relayed in textual form. To that extent, Dharmapala revered Blavatsky, but imitated Koot Hoomi.

Viswanathan says that in a colonial setting spiritualism was able to loosen boundaries by appealing to Europeans and South Asians alike. As she has it, ‘the otherworldliness of the occult offered alternative possibilities for imagining colonial relations outside a hierarchical framework.’ The ‘universal brotherhood’ notion was Olcott’s work, not Blavatsky’s, and it was in Sri Lanka where Olcott had his greatest effect – the place he visited most often, had most of his interactions with local Buddhists, and where he made a stunning profession of Buddhism by taking pan sil. But the local Buddhists who established the Buddhist Theosophical Society never became Theosophists as such. The Buddhist Theosophical Society served not as a place for discussing ‘the otherworldliness of the occult.’ It served as an honest broker for Buddhist interests. Membership in the society offered a place for interacting with members in a non-hierarchical way, but there were no Europeans—local and otherwise—involved in the organisation, apart from visitors like Olcott, Powell and Leadbeater.

In Calcutta, the Theosophical Society and the Maha Bodhi Society ought to have been leading examples of equality and inclusion. Despite the capital of the Raj being home to a large European community, neither organisation had Europeans in positions of leadership or as members. Both were Bengali Hindu organisations – Dharmapala was an exception. Had A.O. Hume and A.P. Sinnett been members, Visvanathan’s argument might be more convincing, but they belonged to the Simla Lodge. Without European participation, both the Theosophical Society and Maha Bodhi Society produced a kind of ideological cosmopolitanism because Bengali Hindus were comfortable with Buddhism and Dharmapala’s advocacy of it. But even here things were not as cosmopolitan as they first appear. There were two motivations for Bengali Hindus embracing the Buddha. The old convention was their approaching the Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Visnu–Vivekananda had shown the way, even resenting Dharmapala’s presuming to speak for the Buddha at the World
Parliament of Religions when the Buddha was clearly the historical embodiment of Vedantic wisdom. The new convention derived from the gathering force of Indian nationalism, emphasising the Buddha as a world historical figure and native son of India. The Theosophical Society may have been non-hierarchical, but it was scarcely inclusive of local Muslims, Sikhs and Christians.

The Buddhist Theosophical Society in Colombo was a Buddhist group through and through, although an early photograph shows one Malay, several Japanese monks and three Europeans – Olcott, Leadbeater and a man I suspect is C.F. Powell, the Malay being the only local resident. The dominance of Sinhalas and their interests made joining the group unlikely for Hindus and Muslims, whatever the ‘possibilities for imagining colonial relations outside a hierarchical framework.’ Caste and region also worked against any far-reaching equality and inclusion. With the exception of Pandit Batuwantudave, the Buddhist Theosophical Society was composed of the Low Country caste groups – Karava, Durava and Salagama. Low Country Goyigama dominated the Maha Bodhi Society. Members of both groups were interested in reforming Buddhism but not mediums, meditation, Tibet or esoteric knowledge. Dharmapala was the exception. In his case, the Theosophical evocation of the otherworld gave him a world to imagine and legitimated his strivings. It could not speak to groups, create universal brotherhood, or avoid local forms of hierarchy.

Notes

1. Dharmapala’s notebooks are unpublished, but can be found at the Dharmapala library, Sarnath. His diaries have been transformed from English handwriting to English typescript. They exist as 30-odd hardbound volumes at the Sri Lankan National Archives and the Dharmapala library at the Maha Bodhi Society headquarters in Colombo. The most convenient guide to these materials appears in Kemper 2015: Appendix One.
2. Master Moriya and Koot Hoomi were presented as the two specifically Buddhist mahatmas, both attributed with the role of looking out for the interests of all people, while trying to re-establish the sāsana (Buddhism as a social formation) in India, which was also Dharmapala’s goal.
5. 2006, 6–10.
6. Lankan monks are identified by a first name indicating their birthplace, followed by an ordination name. Here I shall be using their birthplace name.
9. The Bambaragala ms. duly noted, most of what Dharmapala knew of the dhyana tradition came from Theosophy, which paid little attention to subtle distinctions between methods and types of practice.
10. Woodward says that Doratiyaveye had received the yogāvacara’s technique from his teacher, but refused to practise it because he feared receiving nirvana
immediately. Instead, he gave it to a student to practise and he soon died (p. xviii). That may have been the end of the yogāvacara technique as a monkly tradition, as Woodward suggests, but it lived on in Dharmapala’s practice.

11. As we shall see below, Dharmapala understood dhamma here to refer to teaching for uttari manussa, rather than the superhuman qualities/phenomena.


13. 1914, 212.


17. The Visuddhimagga is quite a lot more than a meditation manual. By way of explaining the path to purification, it explicates the whole of the Buddha’s teachings.


20. The esoteric wisdom that Blavatsky distinguished from mundane knowledge was not exclusively Buddhist, because ‘esoteric philosophy reconciles all religions…and shows the root of each to be identical with that of every other great religion’ (Neff, 1967, p. 43). Dharmapala was not interested in locating the core of all ‘great’ religions. He wanted the secret wisdom found in Tibet in Buddhist form.

21. The man Dharmapala described as his ‘Burmese friend,’ I suspect is the same man he later described as ‘the Arakanese upasaka.’ It was that same Burmese, I am assuming, who also told Dharmapala to practise vipassanā, implying that he saw a difference between what Dharmapala was practising and vipassanā (Diary 14 April 1891). The complication is that he later says the “Burmese upasaka gave him instruction in kammatthana (Diary 14 February 1921). There are four possibilities here – Dharmapala is misremembering, there were two Burmese at Adyar, he received instruction in both vipassana and kammatthana, or he uses these two words interchangeably.

22. On boran kammathan, see the contributions by Choompolpaisal, Skilton and Crosby and Gunasena in this volume.


26. Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena have shown that there were both monks and laypeople practicing boran kammathan techniques in Southeast Asia at Dharmapala’s time. There were also predecessor texts for these techniques, and they may have been brought to Sri Lanka by the 18th century monks who brought higher ordination to Kandy and stayed to teach. See Crosby 2000 and Crosby 2013.

27. My hesitation here comes from the disparate spellings used to transcribe the monk’s name—Sing Hin, Xian Hui, Pe Wang Sim and Wan Hui.
Dharmapala speaks in his diaries of having met ‘Wan Hui’ (14 February 1921).


29. ‘Arrival of Hermit Priest Sing Hin,’ *Ceylon Standard*, 13 April 1898, 5.

30. As it turned out, Sing Hin never made it home to Fuzhou. When the party reached Singapore, they were met by a leading local Buddhist, Lo Kim Pong who had built a temple in anticipation of the arrival, Lo said, ‘of a radiant man coming from the West.’ The Shuanglin temple has since become the largest Buddhist temple in Singapore, accommodating a lineage of ascetic monks deriving from Sing Hin and an ordination tradition that began at the Xi Chan Si temple in Fuzhou. See Kemper *forthcoming*.

31. As early as the seventeenth century Chan Buddhist masters began to send out monks from South China to Chinese merchant settlements in Southeast Asia. See Wheeler 2007, 303–24. It is worth contemplating whether those Chan masters brought meditation texts to Southeast Asia.

32. Diary 15 August 1897.

33. I owe this summary of nimitta usage in the *Yogavacara’s Manual* to Kate Crosby (personal communication).

34. Gombrich and Obeyesekere suggest a South Asian paradigm, a role known as naisthika brahmacharin, eschewing the householder stage of life, remaining celibate, and continuing to study, 217. Dharmapala shows no sign of knowing of this life choice. His paradigm was Damodhar Mavalankar, the Theosophists’ favourite acolyte, Dharmapala’s fellow chela, and the young man who disappeared on his trek to Tibet. While Gombrich and Obeyesekere looked to a South Asian paradigm, neither they nor Dharmapala seem to have been aware of diversity of statuses available to renouncers (bhikkhu, hermits, itinerants) in Thailand traditionally as documented in Bizot (1993).

35. Guruge 1965a, 415.

36. Dharmapala did not hide his hopes for traveling to Tibet, announcing at the Congress of Orientalists in 1897 that he intended ‘on going to Tibet in search of the truth.’ He added that he had the support of Sir Charles Elliot, who promised to write to the Commissioner of Darjeeling ‘to afford facilities for the carrying out of my project.’ ‘European Explorers of Tibet,’ *The Maha Bodhi*, April 1899, 115. He indicates that the princely Thai monk Jinavaravamsa had agreed to go with him (Diary 19 November 1897) and that he wanted to take a ‘Gramophone’ with him – “Mantras and pirit [protective verses] will be spoken to the cylinders” (Diary 11 September 1897).

37. I do not know what became of the Hanguranketa manuscript, nor what it contained.

38. Another point I owe to Andrew Skilton (personal communication).


40. Woodward’s translations of parikamma, uggahanimitta and appanāsamādhi respectively.

41. TW Rhys Davids 1896, xiii.

42. Crosby 2000, 180. Historians and anthropologists interested in the Kandyan period have argued about exactly how culturally alien were the Nayakkar kings who ruled from 1739 to 1815. They were Tamil by birth and followed Saivite practices in some contexts. But they met their responsibilities as Buddhist kings, and Kirti Sri Rajasinha was responsible for bringing Thai monks to re-establish
higher ordination among Kandyan monks. That members of the Kandyan court held Buddhist meditation manuals throws light on this question. See Cousins, 1997; Crosby, Skilton, and Gunasena, 2012; and Crosby, 2014.

43. He does not indicate in the diaries whether he made use of his copy of the Bambaragala manuscript when he meditated. After receiving it back from Rhys Davids, he handed it over to Palane Vajiranana, likely during his final stay in London (Diary 2 September 1930).

44. The Maha Bodhi, 1894, 51.
45. Guruge 1965b, 737.
46. The notion that sleep constitutes an obstacle to spiritual development is ancient, identified in the Mahābhārata (XII, 241, 3) as one of the five sins (sexual desire, wrath, greed, fear and sleep). Among the four dispositions, sleep stands out as a biological need and part of the diurnal cycle. Eliade says that the ‘five hindrances’ notion continues in the Dhammapada (151, n. 21). The Dhammapada uses the same metaphor, speaking of the yogin’s need to ‘cut off’ the ‘hindrances’. In Carter and Palihawadana’s (1987) translation, the five hindrances are given as ‘lust, hate, confusion, self-estimation, and [wrong] views’ (pp. 74 and 383). It is unclear why sleep remains a hindrance, but other ascetic monks have followed the same formula, including Ven. Lokanatha of Burma (born Salvatore Cioffi of Brooklyn, New York), ‘Never Goes to Bed,’ The Singapore Free Press, 1 September 1929, p. 3. Lokanatha renounced using a bed altogether, and spent the night meditating in a chair in the third-class lounge while traveling from the United States to Burma.

47. 1997, 193.
51. 1972, 152.
53. The contrast with early 19th century Sri Lanka is instructive. In early census records, Sinhala identified themselves as ‘Buddhist Christians.’ Besides Ilukwatte and Dharmapala, no one thought of themselves as Buddhist Theosophists in the full sense of those terms.

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References


ABSTRACT
This article explores the popular Sunlun and Theinngu meditation traditions in Myanmar. The founders, Sunlun Sayadaw Ven. U Kavi (1878–1952) and Theinngu Sayadaw Ven. U Ukkaṭṭha (1913–1973), both led a lay life until in their mid-40s and only then took up meditation, going on to become highly respected meditation teachers. Their meditation techniques are similarly distinctive in employing rapid, strong and rhythmic breathing. They combined this with the contemplation of the intense, usually unpleasant, bodily sensations that are thus induced. I document their techniques and application in detail, highlighting their complexity and diversity. I draw contrasts between the use of sati, mindfulness, in their methods and the way it is used in the modern Mindfulness movement. Finally, I discuss the ways in which the practices and experiences of both masters had to be authorised to survive where other meditation traditions have been outlawed. Senior members of the Burmese Sangha catechised both masters separately, using Pāli canonical and post-canonical texts as a benchmark to verify the popular belief amongst Burmese people that they were arahants. I locate this testing within the context of the concerns, sense of duty and status experienced by Burmese lay people in relation to defending Buddhism from decline.

Introduction
Burmese meditation practices exist along a spectrum from those that are heavily theory-based and informed by Abhidhamma analysis of a Buddhist teacher, at one end, to those that prioritise experience over theory. The internationally famous Mogok meditation tradition, founded by Mogok Sayadaw Ven. U Vimala (1899–1962), is an example of the former, having some form of doctrine or understanding of causality as their starting point. Meditation practitioners within the Mogok tradition begin with the study of the law of dependent origination (paṭiccassamuppāda) by listening to dhamma-talks given by Mogok meditation teachers. Here, I want to look at two meditation traditions dating from the mid-20th
century that have received scant scholarly attention, both of which have practical approaches as their starting point, in that neither practitioner had doctrinal training before commencing their practice, but rather experimented with the effects of experience. These are the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, founded by Sunlun Sayadaw Ven. U Kavi (1878–1952) and Theinngu Sayadaw Ven. U Ukkaṭṭha (1913–1973), respectively. Both employed rapid, strong and rhythmic breathing as a meditation technique, focusing on intense, usually unpleasant, bodily sensations (vedanā)¹ that are induced by and accompanied with the rapid, strong breathing. For them, having theoretical knowledge of Buddhist doctrines was not necessary for practice and progress along the Buddhist path. Yet their hagiographies as well as their own accounts report that the direct knowledge of the Dhamma they gained through practice without prior study was then verified by representatives of highest levels of scriptural learning within the Burmese Sangha. It will be observed below that, despite their practical approach to meditation, reflecting their barely literate origins, the way that their life-stories and teachings are expressed is also redolent with the Abhidhamma terminology that in Theravada explains the workings of the body and mind, cosmology and the spiritual path, a point to which I shall return towards the end of this article.

Despite their modest backgrounds, both Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw went on to become monks widely regarded as enlightened and with a substantial following. Even back in 1976, Gustaaf Houtman recorded the presence of 143 meditation centres in the Sunlun tradition throughout Myanmar (Houtman 1990, 292). The official number of Theinngu meditation centres to date is 32, the 32nd centre being founded in Aunglan by Aunglan Sayadaw Ven. Candimā (1952-). However, both figures underestimate the number of centres representing the Sunlun and Theinngu lineages, given that branches may develop from a given centre, as is the case with the Aunglan centre. For Ven. Candimā not only established the Aunglan centre, but also branch centres in Pyay and Yangon. Moreover, both the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions have decentralised organisational and management structures, allowing each satellite centre to operate independently. For instance, the Theinngu tradition has its headquarters in the founder’s native village of Theinngu near Hmawbi, but these headquarters do not operate a centralised management to organise co-operation between the centres that have sprung up within the tradition. This means some meditation centres in the Theinngu tradition such as the Vijjodaya Theinn ² Meditation Centre in Pyay are not officially registered with the headquarters. This contrasts with the level of organisation found in other meditation traditions such as internationally renowned Mahasi and Mogok traditions, the headquarters of which play a crucial role in their ongoing growth, with 564 Mahasi meditation centres registered by 2011 and 663 Mogok meditation centres by 2012.
in Myanmar alone (Nimala 2015, 149 and 234). Bearing in mind the lack of active organisation of expansion in the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, the relatively high numbers of officially registered centres gives some indication of how important these two traditions are.

This article explores the life-stories and meditation of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw. It examines how both meditation masters are believed to have transformed their lives through their practice with little help from others. I am looking at both meditation masters together because their practices share a distinctive feature: the use of rapid, strong breathing to enhance core meditative qualities such as concentration (samādhi) and mindfulness (sati) to deal with and harness intense, usually unpleasant, bodily sensations and mental feelings (vedanā) as a way of developing spiritual insight. That both of them share this approach may in origin reflect Theinngu Sayadaw’s early contact with Sunlun practice through his wife. However, the two masters extend and apply this feature in different ways. I shall pay particular attention to the ways in which Theinngu Sayadaw engaged with a range of meditation subjects, such as the breath, bodily sensations and mental feelings, the impure aspects of the decomposing body (asubha) and the elementary constituents of the experienced world (dhammas), to highlight the complex processes and mechanisms involved in his practice. In the case of Theinngu Sayadaw, we can also see how closely his progress through his development of this practice correlates with his progression through the four stages of the path to enlightenment, namely stream-entrant (sotāpanna), once-returner (sakadāgāmi), non-returner (anāgāmi) and arhat (arahant).

Sources on Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw

To examine the life-stories and practices of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw, I consulted traditional biographical materials produced by disciples within the Sunlun and Theinngu lineages. The Burmese term for such biographies is htei-rok-pat-tí, which means ‘biography of an elder (thera)’ or simply ‘monk biography’ (Houtman 1990, 334). As Houtman observes, htei-rok-pat-tí is used to convey that the biographical subject of the text is more sacred than subjects whose biographies are merely ‘biography’ (at-HTok-pat-tí), i.e. the biography of a lay person. Such monk biographies focus on the quality of the biographical subject’s sacredness and their place in cosmology (Houtman 1990, 333–4). Falling into the category of monk biography, the accounts of the lives of Sunlun Sayadaw and of Theinngu Sayadaw, while following the historical evidence for their lives fairly strictly, include traditional hagiographical elements such as how these two meditation masters were said to have reflected on their meditation achievements in relation to
the Buddhist cosmos and how the gods (deva) provided their support to them. Such elements are important in revealing how these practices are understood within a Buddhist cosmological framework and how they were authorised internally by the masters themselves and for their followers.

Another source I have been able to draw on is the preaching, or dhamma-talks, given by Theinngu Sayadaw himself between the early 1960s and the early 1970s. As far as I am aware, there is an audio recording of a dhamma-talk given by Sunlun Sayadaw, while there are at least 96 dhamma-talks by Theinngu Sayadaw, which were recorded and are now available online. These talks are a rich resource and it is these that have allowed me to give far more detail about how Theinngu Sayadaw processed his meditation experience in ways that allowed him to refine it as he progressed through various realisations, realisations that he correlated with different stages of spiritual attainment.

A third source I have drawn on is the works written by practitioners within the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, who were either direct disciples or follow the techniques they initiated. In addition to these sources, I draw on conversations and observations made in Myanmar over the past decade. Since April 2007, I have been practising meditation under the supervision of meditation teachers in the Theinngu tradition. I also gained some, though less extensive, experience in the Sunlun tradition, by joining several meditation sessions at a Sunlun Meditation Centre in Yangon in September 2011.

To contextualise the ways in which the teachings of both masters were catechised, we can draw on three types of sources. They are: (1) the works written by practitioners which sometimes include transcription of the catechisms that took place – e.g. Paññājota (2003, 149–164) includes the transcriptions of the dialogue between Theinngu Sayadaw and Ven. Osadha of Pahkàn Monastery in Hinthadá; (2) the audio recordings of the catechisms such as those between Theinngu Sayadaw and members of the Sangha from Kyauk-thin-baw meditation tradition; and (3) the records of a monastic trial (vinicchaya) case that involved Theinngu Sayadaw and his teachings in the 1960s (see below).

Transformation: from uneducated householders to enlightened monks

Before turning to the meditation practices of Sunlun and Theinngu Sayadaw’s, I shall summarise the biographies, primarily as they have been recorded within their own teaching lineages. These sources tend to combine their life-stories, practice and teachings into a single narrative. For the sake of clarity I have extracted the details of practice to present later, yet their life-stories contribute to our understanding both of their distinctive
teachings and of the ways in which those teachings needed to be verified for wider acceptance in Myanmar’s culture of highly scholastic, scriptural authority, even though these two practitioners stemmed from relatively humble, quasi-illiterate backgrounds.

The life of Sunlun Sayadaw

I shall draw on the following sources for my summary of Sunlun Sayadaw’s life: Kornfield (2007), Sobhana (1995) and Vara (2010). These three sources are written from different perspectives: Kornfield (2007), originally published in 1977, explores Sunlun Sayadaw’s life and teachings within the context of modern meditation teachers in South East Asia for western practitioners (see also under Sunlun technique below). The latter two present Sunlun Sayadaw’s life and teachings from the perspective of the Sunlun meditation tradition. Sobhana was the disciple of Sunlun Sayadaw, who succeeded Sunlun Sayadaw as the abbot of Sunlun Gu Monastery in Myìngyan. Vara is the abbot of the Sunlun Meditation Centre near Kaba-aye in Yangon.

Sunlun Sayadaw was born as Kyaw Din on 4 March 1878 in Sunlun village near Myìngyan, approximately 57 miles southwest of Mandalay. The biography written by Sobhana (1995) emphasises his early unpromising reputation as a ‘dullard’ and resulting poor education, despite having been sent to study with the monk Min-kyaùng Sayadaw in Myìngyan. This serves to emphasise his lack of book learning by way of contrast to his future spiritual prowess. For his turn to meditation came while he was living an ordinary lay life, working as a subsistence farmer. In the early 20th century, under the agricultural and economic policies of the British towards their then colony, Myanmar (then Burma) suffered many periods of famine between 1920 and 1940 (Richell 2006, 213). The Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1910–11 to 1919–20 (1922, 67) gives a figure of 505 pounds for the expenditure on famine relief in 1919–20 in Burma. The resulting vagaries of existence for Burmese peasants at the time may well have set Sunlun Sayadaw on the spiritual path, for it was apparently in response to one of these, in 1919, that, on seeing the failure of others’ crops, rather than feel relief at his own success, he reflected on the Burmese saying ‘when one’s worldly possessions increase, one will die’ (Sobhana 1995, 22). He feared dying without having done any meritorious act (kútho in Burmese)5 and having achieved any spiritual worth. For a Buddhist, having merit, i.e. the benefits of good acts, as one prepares for one’s death and/or at the time of death is crucial because the state of one’s rebirth to some extent depends on the amount of merit one has. In other words, one should have done wholesome acts such as religious and social giving (dāna), worshipping the Triple Gem and practising meditation, so that merit accrued from such good acts will lead to a good rebirth. Though married with four children to...
support, the future Sunlun Sayadaw therefore set about performing dāna, making offerings of food and other requisites to the Sangha, which is regarded as being the ‘highest field of merit’, i.e. most beneficil object of meritorious giving. In this manner, he ensured he made merit.

It was at one of his offering ceremonies that he heard of the meditation teachings of pioneering meditation master Ledi Sayadaw Ven. U Ngā (1846–1923). Reassured by his informant, a clerk from a mill, that his lack of familiarity with sacred texts would present no bar to meditation, he began following the mill clerk’s instructions on mindfulness of breathing. From this point on, he combined the advice he received from others with his own insights and enhanced his mindfulness of breathing practices, as I shall explain below, as well as developing mindfulness in every day life.

His biographies emphasise the importance of his experience in developing these practices, in contrast to his lack of formal education, and how his meditation experience led to him achieving the various stages of spiritual achievement that are precursor to enlightenment, arahantship. They include: (1) appearance in his mind’s eye of the ‘sign’ or ‘mental image’ (nimitta) of different colours, including red, golden, white and tawny (Sobhana 1995, 28 and 29); (2) gaining access to heavenly realms in his meditation (Sobhana 1995, 29) and (3) having clairvoyance (dibba-cakkhu), one of the six ‘higher knowledges’ (abhiññā) (Sobhana 1995, 30). According to the disciples of Sunlun Sayadaw, his attainment of each stage of liberation falls on the 13th day after every full moon (in the Burmese calendar) at 10 in the evening (Sobhana 1995; 31, 34 and 40; Vara 2010; 13), dating his attainment of arahantship to 9 November 1920 (Houtman 1990, 292). There is a belief in the tradition of practice that one remembers the date, time and place of one’s attainment of the stages of liberation. Yuki Sirimane’s (2016, 55–63) study of experiences of the stages of the Buddhist path in contemporary Sri Lanka also reports her informants’ claims that they remember the date, time and place of their attainment of the stages of liberation.

In the Nippapañca-vagga of the Milindapañhā, there is a section entitled khināsavabhāva-pañhā in which the issue of a lay arahant is addressed. It says that if one is a lay person who has attained arahantship, one has to die or receive ordination as a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī, i.e. higher ordination, on the same day as gaining arahantship. Therefore, recognising his own progress on the spiritual path, Kyaw Din persuaded his initially reluctant wife to grant him permission to ordain, and became a novice monk on 1 November 1920, eight days before he attained the final stage of liberation, arahantship. The biographies emphasise the miraculous events that took place and the visions he saw, confirming his enlightenment. For instance, Sobhana (1995, 40–41) writes that minutes before Sunlun Sayadaw attained arahantship, five gods (devas), including Sakka, king of the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, riding on a flying chariot, appeared in his mind’s eye. He knew
that they had come to protect him as he was about to achieve arahantship. Therefore, he continued with his own practice without being distracted by them. Once he had attained arahantship, he noticed that the gods disappeared. We are told that due to his attainment of arahantship he was able to see everything clearly from the highest point of existence (bhavagga) to the lowest point of existence, i.e. the Avīci Hell (Sobhana 1995, 41).

A few months later, on 4 April 1921, he received higher ordination in the ordination hall (sīmā) of Yei-le Monastery, Meikhtila Town, upper Myanmar. He was now aged 44. The following year, 1922, he moved to a monastery near his village, donated to him by his former wife. At the time it was known as Sunlun Chauk Monastery, but later became known as Sunlun Gu Monastery. Sunlun Sayadaw taught meditation at this monastery until he died 30 years later, on 17 May 1952, at the age of 74 (Sobhana 1995, 223).

His achievement of arahantship became known among learned monks (Kornfield 2007, 88). Sobhana (1995) records nine occasions where Sunlun Sayadaw was questioned by different people, including scholar monks such as the Aggamahāpuṇḍita Taung-tha Sayadaw Ven. U Aggavamo and Nyaung-lûn Sayadaw U Medhāvī as well as Prime Minister U Nu, on a range of topics, such as his own practice (106–107), practice of the 10 types of ‘visual objects’ (kasiṇa) (47 and 54), nibbāna (67–69), and the issue of suicide from the perspective of monastic discipline (vinaya) (130–131). Sobhana also describes how a learned monk, Nyaung-lûn Sayadaw, was initially doubtful of his replies, but when his answers were checked against the Pāli canonical texts, Nyaung-lûn Sayadaw found many important passages in the scriptures to support his statements (Sobhana 1995, 53–57). He was satisfied with Sunlun Sayadaw’s knowledge of Dhamma to the extent that he told his disciples about it and encouraged them to practise in the same way as Sunlun Sayadaw (Sobhana 1995, 57). Although it is a commonly accepted view among Buddhists in Myanmar that Sunlun Sayadaw was enlightened, Houtman (1990, 167) documents an informant’s claim that he was not. Notwithstanding this question, Sunlun Sayadaw had many followers, including some of the most learned monks in the country. I shall examine the details of how he developed his mindfulness of breathing practice in the section entitled ‘Sunlun Sayadaw’s meditation practice and experience’ below.

The life of Theinngu Sayadaw

I now turn to Theinngu Sayadaw’s life-story. I shall draw on the following sources: Paññājota (2003), Ōhn Khin (Undated), San Shin (1972), Theravada Buddhist (1992), and Theinngu Sayadaw’s own account of his biography. The first two authors certainly practised as senior disciples under Theinngu. Paññājota, as a lay person, wrote several books on the life and practice of
Theinngu Sayadaw under the penname ‘Maung Bho (Ákalíkàw)’. While I have not yet tracked down the specific affiliation of the second two sources, they all four present Theinngu Sayadaw’s life, practice and teachings from the perspective of the Theinngu meditation tradition.

Theinngu Sayadaw was born 35 years after Sunlun Sayadaw and his own practice was in part inspired by him. He was born on 16 March 1913 in Hnàwkone village near Hmàwbi, approximately 30 miles north of Yangon. He was named Aung Tun. When he was young, he was sent to a monastery in his village for his education. Again, we find a contrast between early academic promise and later spiritual prowess. Paññājota (2003, 16) writes that he was not a good student, skipping classes whenever he could. He soon started hanging out with the wrong crowd, and he started smoking and drinking. His studies suffered as a result, and when he left formal education he could barely read (San Shìn 1972; 22–23; Paññājota 2003; 16–17). Although he was not interested in study, he was astute, sociable and good at sport (Paññājota 2003, 17–18).

Before he undertook the practice of meditation, Aung Tun was married four times. He married his first wife, Ma Hpwa Nyunt, at the age of 14 (Theravada Buddhist 1992, 3). Paññājota (2003, 22) writes that while Aung Tun was finding it hard to make ends meet for his family, he was also involved in gambling. He therefore started committing robberies, and soon his criminal acts caught up with him. Although he was not formally charged for the crimes because of lack of evidence, he was transferred to a nearby village called Hlèlànkù and put under the surveillance of the village headman in 1932 for 2 years. By that time, he already had three children (Paññājota 2003, 22).

As soon as he was allowed to return to his family in 1934, he committed another robbery on the way home. His collaborators in this robbery gave evidence, and he was charged and sentenced to 7 years of imprisonment (Paññājota 2003, 25). Aung Tun was moved to different prisons around the country, and when World War II broke out, he was moved to Mandalay prison. In a general amnesty at the height of World War II in around 1940, all prisoners were released including Aung Tun (Paññājota 2003, 27). His journey home was delayed, however, when he was caught up in a battle just outside of Mandalay. By the time he arrived at his village, he found that his father had died, and his first wife and three children had left him (Paññājota 2003, 31).

Such difficult personal circumstances seemed to have pushed him further into the world of crime, for we are told that he continued to engage in all kinds of criminal activities not only around his village but also in Yangon. At the age of 28, he remarried and had a child, but both his wife and child died shortly after (Paññājota 2003, 32). He soon married for the third time to a Karen woman named Daw Si, who was from a nearby village (Paññājota 2003, 32).
At the same time, Aung Tun had another wife in Yangon, who was called Daw Than Shein (Paññājota 2003, 33). It was Daw Than Shein who became instrumental in Aung Tun's pursuit of meditation practice. She had been attending meditation retreats at a centre in Yangon.

Theinngu Sayadaw sometimes described in his dhamma-talks how he came across Sunlun Sayadaw's practice and achievement, and how that inspired him to undertake the practice of meditation, as follows.

When she [Daw Than Shein] came back from meditation, she bought Sunlun Sayadaw's biography from a book shop at the Shwedagon Pagoda. . . . She said, “This is the book [on] Sunlun. . . . Sunlun Sayadaw was said to be an arahant” . . . [I] flicked through the book, looking at the pictures [in it]. I came across [the words]: body, sensations, mind, and dhammas. When I finished reading about the four foundations of mindfulness, [I experienced] tingling sensations spreading across the whole body and then cessation [of those sensations] . . . [I thought], “If he [Sunlun Sayadaw] was an arahant, I too can be an arahant with practice”.

(Shin 1972; 34; Paññājota 2003; 44; translation mine)

Despite having a budding interest in meditation, Aung Tun committed another robbery in late August 1959 (Paññājota 2003, 47). During the robbery, the owner of the house attacked Aung Tun with a knife, injuring his head, as a result of which he developed what in Buddhist terms is referred to as ‘spiritual shock’ (saṃvega). In his dhamma-talks, Theinngu Sayadaw often retold how saṃvega developed in him:

I have to thank him [the man who attacked him]. I could have died, if he had attacked me with a spear . . ., but I am not dead. He did this to me so that I would meditate.

(Ukkāṭṭha 1962, 25:52–26:12; translation mine)

Even before his injury was properly healed, he left his wives, Daw Si and Daw Than Shein, to undertake meditation practice, telling them that they should no longer depend on him and that they were free to remarries if they wanted to (Paññājota 2003, 48).

On 7 September 1959, Aung Tun, having observed the Nine Precepts, started practising meditation in the ordination hall of the monastery in his village (Paññājota 2003, 51). Like Sunlun Sayadaw, he practised mindfulness of breathing, and tried to be mindful of both the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils and the awareness of the touch of breath (Paññājota 2003, 71). The rate of his in-breath and out-breath was very quick. According to Paññājota (2003, 51), it reached to approximately 120 times per minute. He did not change the rhythm of breath nor the place from which he breathed. Although he was breathing rapidly, he did not force the breathing, i.e. it was a natural, rapid breath. When he became sleepy or unfocused
with a wandering mind, he increased the breathing rate. When he had a better understanding of the rate of breathing, he experimented with various bases of the breath: (1) shallow breath coming from upper part of the lungs or from the throat; (2) medium length breath coming from the chest and (3) long breath coming from the navel (Paññājota 2003, 51). He spent 16 hours a day practising in this manner, and the remaining hours worshiping the Buddha, eating and sleeping.

Later, as Theinngu Sayadaw, Aung Tun would explain that he only achieved realisation of attaining the initial stages of liberation after he had already reached the third stage of liberation because at that point he reflected on his path and practice. As we shall see below, the first three stages of liberation came before his higher ordination, while he attained arahantship within 21 months of his initial practice, dating it to 20 May 1961 (Theravada Buddhist 1992, 6). As in the case of Sunlun Sayadaw, we find supernatural beings drawn on as witnesses to confirm his attainment. Theinngu Sayadaw said that gods, including those from the abode of the Brahmās, visited him, encouraging him to undertake higher ordination (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 2, 54:20–55:35). As in the case of Sunlun Sayadaw, many learned monks tested Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation practice and attainment, and checked his answers against Pāli canonical and commentarial texts. Eventually his practice and teachings were accepted by the most learned monks, including the Abhidhammaphraṭṭaguru Masoyein Sayadaw of Mandalay (Ōhn Khin Undated, 17–18).

**Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw’s life-stories compared**

Theinngu Sayadaw, like Sunlun Sayadaw, had two consecutive careers: both led a lay life until in their mid-40s then a religious career, resulting from a fear of death that prompted them to practise meditation. They later became meditation teachers and founders of two of the major meditation traditions of Myanmar. Though they were sent to the monasteries in their villages at a young age, so had a rudimentary background in Buddhist teachings, the biographies by their followers emphasise that they learned very little, and were barely literate. One difference between the lay life of SunlunSayadaw and that of Theinngu Sayadaw is that the former was a farmer, while the latter was a well-known criminal with a prison record.13

As for their religious careers, prior to their meditation practice, neither had much if any theoretical knowledge of either meditation techniques or Buddhist scriptures. Neither had formal meditation teachers to guide them during their practice. Yet with strong determination and continuous practice, both are believed to have achieved arahantship. The validity of their meditation practice and achievement is then said to have been confirmed by their answers to questions on Buddhist meditation and Buddhist
teachings from monastic and lay literati. The implication is that they gained doctrinal knowledge of the Buddhist teachings, because of their attainment of arahantship, which they were able to express in ways that tallied with the intellectual understanding of erudite monks steeped in scriptural study. Thus we have a story of contrasts: two semi-literate men achieving enlightenment through their own initiative and experience, the validity confirmed first by gods and then through investigation by learned monks and lay scholars. The former verification is clearly important for them, in their own accounts, yet the latter verification, the checking against Pāli literature, is what allows their meditation achievements to be widely accepted among people in Myanmar, as we shall see below.

Sunlun Sayadaw’s meditation practice and experience

Having summarised the biographies and how the validity of their experience was tested, I shall turn to the specifics of their meditation practices. Readers may notice a depersonalised way of expressing things. For example, practitioners within the Sunlun meditation tradition use impersonal expressions such as ‘the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils’ and ‘touch-consciousness-mindfulness’ (see below) to refer to the process of establishing mindfulness of the breath, rather than using pronouns ‘my’ and ‘I’. To illustrate how this affects description of experience, we may look at another example: rather than describing his experience by saying, ‘he became fearful of the asubha nature of his body’, Theinngu Sayadaw states, ‘the mind became fearful of the asubha nature of his body’. This impersonalisation shows that Theinngu Sayadaw is distancing himself from ‘me’ and ‘mine’, watching the process rather than being attached to his own mind and body. My experience within the Theinngu tradition at the Vijjodaya Theinn Meditation Centre in Pyay is that this impersonalised usage is particularly prevalent when talking about aspects of the mind, so I have retained it here when recounting Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw’s experience.

Kyaw Din started practising mindfulness of breathing after his encounter with the mill clerk who told him about Ledi Sayadaw. He began by verbally noting ‘breathing in’ and ‘breathing out’ (Sobhana 1995, 27; Kornfield 2007, 88). One day a friend told him that such verbal noting of breathing in and out alone was not sufficient, and that he had to be aware of the touch of breath (Sobhana 1995, 27; Kornfield 2007, 88). The Burmese expression used by his friend, as described in Sobhana’s biography of Sunlun Sayadaw, is athi-lite, which literally means ‘to be accompanied by awareness’. In the context of meditation practice, I translate the Burmese word athi as ‘awareness’, and its connotation is similar to the expression ‘choiceless awareness’ (Kornfield 2007, 12; Anālayo 2003, 58, f.n. 61) in the sense that one is aware of whatever arises without reacting with likes or dislikes. Non-reactive,
detached awareness as one of the crucial characteristics of sati, usually translated as ‘mindfulness’, forms an important aspect in the teachings of modern meditation teachers and scholars (Anālayo 2003, 58; Gethin 2011).

The *Visuddhimagga* and the *Vimuttimagga* analyse the recollection of mindfulness in relation to its understanding through touch (see Kim in this volume). A practitioner grasps the meditation subject, i.e. breath, through touch, and awareness of touch is the initial requirement in order to establish sustained mindfulness (sati). This awareness of touch needs to be guarded and watched by mindfulness. This corresponds with how, for Kyaw Din, the practice of mindfulness of breathing entailed two steps initially: (1) to be aware of the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils, and (2) to guard and watch this awareness with mindfulness (Sobhana 1995, 27). Although he had no teacher to instruct him, he added a further step which would later become integral to his teaching method. He took the breath as a meditation object, and tried to be aware of not only the touch of the breath but also the sense-consciousness of the touch of the breath.

When Kyaw Din as Sunlun Sayadaw taught his meditation system, he explained the job of a practitioner as follows.

Touch and sense-consciousness – one must be rigorously mindful of these two. When there is touch, sense-consciousness arises. When we guard and watch the sense-consciousness [of the object] with mindfulness, our job is done.14

(Vara 2010, 14; translation mine)

I translate the Burmese word hti-mhū as ‘touch’, rather than ‘contact’. Both English terms ‘touch’ and ‘contact’ are appropriate translation of the Pāli word phassa, conveying the idea that there is a contact between sense organs and sense objects. Here, it is touch, not contact, because it relates to an analysis of which senses are involved in the understanding of the meditation (see Kim in this volume).

I translate the use of the Burmese word thi-mhū as ‘sense-consciousness’ to refer to consciousness that arises through the senses. For example, when the breath touches the entrance of the nostrils, consciousness of the touch of the breath arises. The term ‘sense-consciousness’ here does not refer to the Abhidhamma classification of the ‘two sets of fivefold sense consciousness’ (dvi-pancavinñāna), which are based on the sensitive matter of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body (Bodhi 2000, 41) and whose functions are simply to cognise their respective objects in ‘its bare immediacy and simplicity prior to all identificatory cognitive operations’ (Bodhi 2000, 123). In contrast, the Burmese expression thi-mhū could be used in a broader sense, referring to the cognitive acts which identify the objects of sight, hearing, etc.
In addition to *htí-mhú* ‘touch’ and *thí-mhú* ‘sense-consciousness’, the expression used by Sunlun Sayadaw in his explanation of the job of a practitioner includes *thatí-kyát-kyàt-pyu-pa*, which literally means ‘to make *sati* rigorously’ in relation to the meditation object and the mind, referring to guarding the mind in a repeated manner and to maintaining continuous observation of the meditation object. Another expression often used is *thatí-htà-pa*, which literally means ‘to place *sati*’, asking the practitioner to place *sati* on a meditation object, so that there is ‘presence of mind’ (*upatthitá-sati*) (Gethin 2011, 270). We also find the expression *thatí-kát-pa*, which literally means ‘to stick *sati*’ to the object of awareness, requiring the practitioner to stay with the object of awareness so that there is ‘absence of floating’ (*apilāpanatā*), i.e. the mind does not bob about ‘like a gourd floating on the surface of water’ (Gethin 2011, 271). The mind of the practitioner with *sati* becomes steady with a minimum or absence of bobbing about. The capacity of the mind to stay with the object of awareness for a sustained period of time is related to the quality of not being forgetful, which is captured in the expression *thatí-myae-thí*, which means ‘having sustained presence of mind’. These – i.e. *thatí-kyát-kyàt-pyu-pa, thatí-htà-pa, thatí-kát-pa* – are several Burmese expressions describing what a practitioner should do with *sati* in their practice.

The Burmese expression, *htí-thí-thatí*, which literally means ‘touch-consciousness-mindfulness’, came to be used among the practitioners of the Sunlun method to refer to the process of establishing mindfulness of the breath (Vara 2010, 4). The guidance offered within the Sunlun system is that once one’s meditation practice becomes more established, the touch of the breath, the sense-consciousness of the touch of the breath and the mindfulness (*thatí*) of the two aspects of the practice, i.e. the touch (*htí*) and the sense-consciousness (*thí*), will coincide (Sobhana 1995, 29). In other words, a practitioner will become mindful of both the touch of the breath and the sense-consciousness of the touch of the breath as soon as they arise.

In addition to developing these three steps to mindfulness of breathing, the biographies emphasise how Kyaw Din tried to establish mindfulness not just during meditation but in everything he did (Sobhana 1995, 27; Kornfield 2007, 88). As he breathed, he tried to be aware of the touch of the breath at the entrance to the nostrils, or the touch of the sound of chopping at the ear as he chopped corn cobs, or the touch of the ground as he walked. With more intensive, continuous practice, the bodily sensations were sometimes intensely unpleasant. Such an experience of unpleasant sensations did not deter him. As with other meditation objects, he tried to be mindful of the awareness of the unpleasant sensations. Moreover, he found that by continuously breathing he generated more energy, enabling him to develop more rigorous mindfulness (Sobhana 1995, 30). In this manner, he was able to observe the unpleasant sensations with no or little reaction (Kornfield
2007, 88). Although the strong, rhythmic breathing has come to be associated as the meditation technique of the Sunlun tradition, as we shall see below, Sunlun Sayadaw’s hagiographies contain very little information on his breathing technique.

Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation practice and experience

There are reports of Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation practice and attainments in the accounts of his life and other writings by his disciples. Theinngu Sayadaw himself sometimes described his meditation experience and attainments in his dhamma-talks and in discussions with learned monks. Drawing on these accounts, this section presents his meditation practice and experience, documenting the ways in which Theinngu Sayadaw explained his own path and how the faithful understand and relate to their teacher’s meditation experience.

When Aung Tun started practising meditation in the ordination hall of the monastery in his village, he battled with intense, painful sensations during his first week of meditation practice. In spite of these, he continued with the strong, rapid breathing and did not change his posture. Sometimes the pain was so intolerable, he would fall to the floor, but even when he did this, he apparently maintained mindfulness of the painful sensations and only got up from the floor when they had completely disappeared (San Shin 1972, 36). Sometimes he experimented with different rates of breathing in order to deal with the unpleasant sensations. He adjusted the rate of inhalation and exhalation according to the intensity of the sensations (Paññājota 2003, 52). That is, he used strong and rapid breathing to face gross, intense sensations, while weaker and slower breathing was used when sensations were subtle.

He noticed that as he struggled to cope with these intense sensations, the mind was dominated by the pain. When that happened, he tried to enhance mindfulness of the touch of the breath at the nostrils by increasing the rate of breathing, so that the mind was no longer preoccupied with the painful sensations (San Shin 1972, 36). He soon learned that the mind does not stay at the nostrils for long; it becomes aware of the painful sensations (San Shin 1972, 36), which is a more obvious meditation object than the breath. As his awareness moved between his painful bodily sensations and the touch of his breath at the nostrils, he noticed his concentration (samādhi) became stronger, and that with stronger concentration, the tolerance of painful sensations increased. He realised that when concentration and mindfulness have become more established, the mind is no longer shaken by the intense, painful sensations. As we shall explore below, strong, rapid breathing is used in both the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions in order to develop sustained mindfulness and concentration.
Reporting on this stage, and on the meditation experiences of both meditation masters thus far, I have personalised the manner of expression, writing ‘his awareness’, ‘his painful bodily sensations,’ because without the personal pronoun it reads oddly in English. However, in Burmese it is unnatural to include this, and it also undermines the Buddhist approach, that these are non-personal processes, as explained above. From this point on, I shall therefore shift to writing in a more depersonalised fashion that more closely represents the Burmese manner of discussing this subject.

As Aung Tun continued with his practice, concentration became more established to the extent that he was able to mindfully observe the arising and disappearance of sensations without changing posture for three hours or more (San Shin 1972, 38). According to his own later account of his practice, he began to perceive the continuous arising and dissolution of bodily and mental processes, such as the arising and dissolution of bodily sensations, hearing, knowing, etc. When he realised the arising and dissolution of things that are within oneself, he also saw the nature of impermanence in things that are outside of oneself (Ukkattha Undated 1, 41:35–42:15). Once the knowledge of arising and dissolution arose in him, he noticed the nature of suffering in everything and its cause (44:00–46:00). He realised that suffering arises because of attachment, and that attachment arises because of perversion of perception (saññā-vipallāsa). He contemplated how he had formerly not realised this and held erroneous perceptions about the nature of suffering. He realised that he had not seen these sensations simply as sensations. He realised he had previously perceived his experience of bodily sensations such as heat, pain, and numbness as ‘I am hot’, ‘I am in pain’ and ‘I feel numbness’ (San Shin 1972, 51). In this sense, he had mistaken the natural process of the body and mind as unique to him, personalising the unpleasant sensations. With the realisation of impermanence and suffering as well as their causes and effects, Aung Tun came to see what we call ‘I’, ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘dog’, etc. are but a collection of the four elements (Paññājota 2003, 54). By the end of the first nine days of his practice, he is said to have gained an understanding that the arising and dissolution of both bodily and mental processes happen naturally, and that these processes occur because of the arising and dissolution of causes and of their effects (Ukkattha Undated 1, 47:30–48:13; San Shin 1972, 127). Later in his own account of his practice, Theinngu Sayadaw claimed that he attained the first stage of liberation on the ninth day of his practice (Ukkattha Undated 1, 1:17:04).

Although Theinngu Sayadaw did not explain the stages of the development of his insight – such as his realisation of the knowledge of the arising and dissolution of things, the knowledge of the nature of suffering and the knowledge of the nature of impermanence – as the stages of the vipassanāñāṇa, ‘insight knowledges’, these stages of the development strike
me as some of the stages of vipassanāṇāṇa. As we shall see below, Aung Tun gained the realisations of such insight knowledges at each stage of the path, and these stages of insight knowledges express the underlying structure of the progress through the stages of the path.

According to Paññājota (2003, 72), a nimitta, ‘mental image’ (see contributions by Skilton and by Choompolpaisal in this volume), of white light appeared as mindfulness (sati) and concentration (samādhi) became more established in Aung Tun. With more established concentration, the nimitta of asubha, ‘impure aspects of the body decomposing’, developed in him, seeing his own body decomposing. Theinngu Sayadaw’s (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 50:52–53:00) own account of his experience of asubha meditation can be summarised as follows: there appeared in his mind’s eye a nimitta of his own body, which became foamy and bubbling; a bloated stomach then appeared and the eyes began to bulge; smelly liquid and blood come out of the mouth; the bulging eyes popped out; the face became very large and foamy; colonies of maggots began to occupy the body; all the maggots and other foul-smelling liquids and blood then disappeared; and the body then started to burn in a scorching fire, turning the flesh into bones and then into ashes. The nimitta of asubha meditation is said to have become so strong and lasting that even when he was not meditating, there appeared in his mind’s eye a nimitta not only of the decomposed bodies of his own and others, including those of his former wives and of animals, but also of inanimate things such as trees, Buddha images, etc. (Ukkaṭṭha 1962; 36:07; San Shìn 1972; 139–143; Paññājota 2003; 72). The effect of these nimitta was that they weakened his sensual desire (kāma-rāga).

For Aung Tun, asubha meditation is a crucial step in removing craving (taṇhā). As asubha meditation became more established, according to Theinngu Sayadaw, the mind not only became fearful of the asubha nature of the body, but no longer wanted to see and meditate on the impure, repulsive aspects of the body. Moreover, he soon developed the wish to discard the asubha meditation experience, and to find a way to not have it (San Shìn 1972, 144). Theinngu Sayadaw used the word do-tha, dosa in Pāli, which means ‘hatred’ or ‘anger’, to refer to the aversion to the asubha meditation and the desire to escape from it because these desires are rooted in anger (dosa). Therefore, while rooted in anger, a negative or unwholesome mental state, this can be an important transitional phase on the path. Thus, one becomes disenchanted with one’s body (rūpa). In addition to disenchchantment with one’s body and those of others, asubha meditation leads to the realisation of what ordinary people take to be pleasant (sukha) as unpleasant (dukkha). For instance, when Aung Tun experienced the world through the sense organs, he experienced them as unpleasant bodily sensations and mental feelings (dukkha-vedanā) because he saw only their decaying and decomposing nature (San Shìn 1972, 147).
Theinngu Sayadaw claimed that he achieved the second stage of liberation 1 month and 3 days after the start of his practice, in which he saw everything as decaying and repulsive, and experienced them as dukkha-vedanā (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 1:17:5–10; San Shin 1972, 145–148).

Theinngu Sayadaw also describes how he overcame the desire not to meditate on the asubha nature of the body and moved onto another stage. As he continued to contemplate the impure aspects of the decaying body, he then came to realise that the pus and blood coming out from the body are water, the element with the characteristic of oozing; the scorching fire burning away the body is the fire element, with the characteristic of heat; the bloated body parts and bulging eyes are the wind element, with the characteristic of distension; and the bones are the earth element, with the characteristic of hardness (San Shin 1972, 165–166; Paññājota 2003, 88).

Once the realisation of the four elements with regards to the asubha nature of the body arose in him, he contemplated the whole process of asubha meditation in terms of the arising and dissolution of the five aggregates (San Shin 1972, 166–167). For example, when he saw in his mind’s eye his own body decomposing, he reflected that it was the arising and disappearance of the aggregate of form (rūpakkhandha); when he experienced unpleasant feelings with regards to seeing his body decomposing, he contemplated that it is the arising and disappearance of the aggregate of feeling (vedanākkhanda); and when he saw the body decomposing and the mind then labelled it as ‘decaying’, ‘disintegrating’, etc., he contemplated that it was the arising and disappearance of the aggregate of perception (saññākkhanda).

Once the knowledge of the arising and disappearance of the five aggregates arose in him, he started to investigate the origin of the mind that does not want to see and meditate on the decomposing body. He came to realise that it arises because of perversion of perception (saññā-vipallāsa) with regards to the asubha nature of the body (San Shin 1972, 167). How had an erroneous perception arisen in him? When the nimitta of asubha arose in him, he had perceived it as asubha and then labelled it as ‘decaying’, ‘swelling’, ‘decomposing’, etc. Such a perception is true at some level. Nonetheless, according to Theinngu Sayadaw, because of such labelling, clinging (upādāna) had arisen (San Shin 1972, 168–169; Paññājota 2003, 110). The mind erroneously had perceived and clung onto the nimitta of asubha to be a reality, rather than seeing it as a mere nimitta. Because of clinging, the asubha meditation had become so strong and lasting for him (see above) that he had spent several months meditating upon it and therefore the desire not to meditate on the asubha nature of the body and the desire to escape from it had developed in him. Although these components of the practice – i.e. the practice of asubha meditation, the desire not to see the asubha nature of the body, and the desire to escape
from it – are regarded as crucial steps in one’s practice, the practitioners within the Theinngu tradition regard these steps as means to achieve higher stages of the path, a raft that will later be discarded, as in the famous raft simile of the *Alagaddūpama-sutta* (MN 22) where the teaching or raft’s purpose is to cross a river, not for the purpose of holding onto after the river is crossed.

As Aung Tun practised to overcome the *asubha* meditation, he noticed that seeing the body decomposing is the working of the aggregate of form, and that labelling it as ‘decaying’ is the working of the aggregate of perception. He observed that these processes happen naturally due to causes and effects: the arising of the nimitta of *asubha* is the cause, seeing it is the effect; because of seeing, the mind perceives it and labels it as *asubha*; because of labelling, the desire not to see the *asubha* nature of the body arises; and because of the desire, the mind clings to the *asubha* nature of the body; because of clinging, the whole process repeats itself (San Shin 1972, 167–169; Paññājota 2003, 110). Once he gained this realisation of how causes and effects come about, instead of contemplating and perceiving it as *asubha*, he recognised the *asubha* meditation in terms of cause and effect. This means he observed the arising and disappearing of the causes and of effects with regards to the *asubha* nature of the body. According to Theinngu Sayadaw, this mere observation stops the cyclical process of cause and effect arising, as well as the arising of the desire to escape from the *asubha* meditation. In this manner, anger with regards to *asubha* meditation no longer arises. Moreover, he came to realise that the mind had constructed the mental image of *asubha*, which covers what actually is a complex and subtle matter or materiality (*rūpa*).

As Aung Tun continued with the contemplation of causes and effects, he came to see in his mind’s eye the arising and dissolution of the *rūpa-kalāpa*, ‘atomic units of matter’ (San Shin 1972, 169).18 Theinngu Sayadaw referred to his experience of seeing the arising and dissolution of the atomic units of matter in everything he did as the ‘disintegration of the appearance of solidity’ (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 1:19:21; San Shin 1972, 169). Theinngu Sayadaw used a Burmese loanword from Pāli, *ghana-kyae*, which literally means ‘disintegration of solidity’, referring to his realisation of the complex nature of separate, individual constituents, overcoming the appearance of unity or solidity. I therefore translate *ghana-kyae* as the ‘disintegration of the appearance of solidity’. As Karunadasa (2011, 44) – writing on Theravādin theory of dhamma – highlights, ‘With the dissolution of the appearance of unity (*ghana-vinibbhoga*), the oneness disappears and the complex nature is disclosed’. In terms of Aung Tun’s meditation experience, it means that when he looks at a woman or a tree or even the Shwedagon Pagoda, entities which ordinary people would perceive as stable and solid, he sees them in his mind’s eye as the mere arising and disappearance of the atomic
units of matter (San Shìn 1972, 171–172). For him, the appearance of a woman or tree or the Shwedagon Pagoda as discrete entities had disappeared, and the complex nature of their component parts, i.e. the rūpa-kal āpa, was disclosed. Theinngu Sayadaw explained that he was thus freed from concepts (paññatti) such as ‘woman’, ‘man’ and ‘beauty’. Being freed from such concepts, the attachment to and the craving to see them no longer arose in him. This in turn led to the abandonment of ‘sensuous desire’ (kāmarāga) (San Shìn 1972, 173).

According to Theinngu Sayadaw, he reviewed his practice and path when he gained the realisation of the disintegration of the appearance of unity, realising that he had reached the third in four stages of liberation, i.e. non-returner (San Shìn 1972, 176). We are told that in his meditation he also reviewed the past, present and future, as well as the different realms of the Buddhist cosmos.

When I looked at . . . the twenty heavens of the abode of the Brahmās, . . . the Avīci Hell, I can see everything. . . . I reviewed the past, [thinking] “Where did I come from?” What I saw was that because of the wish I made during the time of Padumuttara Buddha, I practised the Dhamma and reached this stage during the dispensation of this [Gotama] Buddha. . . . I looked into the future, [thinking] “Where will I go if I die now?” I saw twenty heavens of the abode of the Brahmās, [thinking], “It is a group of five heavens of the Pure Abodes” . . . I saw the heaven where I will be reborn. It is the Akaṇṭha Heaven, [where] the five factors of jhāna [‘meditative absorption’] are developed. . . . I saw my own body there [i.e. the Akaṇṭha Heaven]. . . . Although the body of a brahma is very big, it is extremely delicate [to the extent that] one cannot physically touch it. It is also very bright. . . . Thus, the mind of a noble person is said to have already inclined towards their destination of rebirth even before they die. Even before I die I knew that it is this place I will be reborn in. The noble people are never afraid of death. . . When I looked at the present moment, there was form-sphere consciousness and attachment to the aggregate of form [in me]. [Nonetheless], the mind at the present moment did not have vitakka [‘initial application’] and vicāra [‘investigation’]. With cessation, the mind had become fully present and calmed down. . . . I was aware that the mind no longer wanders.

(San Shìn 1972, 176–179; translation mine)

While Sunlun Sayadaw’s hagiography claims that he gained access to all the realms of the Buddhist cosmos from the highest to the lowest when he achieved arahantship (see above), Theinngu Sayadaw’s access to all realms is said here to have occurred when he achieved the third stage of liberation. This statement makes important claims about his status as well as confirming traditional Buddhist views about the cosmology and path. Padumuttara Buddha is the tenth of the 24 Buddhas. Malalasekera (1938, 136–137) writes, ‘Many of the eminent disciples of Gotama Buddha are said to have first conceived their desires for their respective positions in the time of
Padumuttara Buddha’. Therefore, through this statement Theinngu Sayadaw is claiming his status as an eminent disciple of a Buddha. The phrase ‘noble person’ (ariyapuggala) means a person who has attained at least the first of four stages of liberation, i.e. stream-entry (sotāpatti). Here, Theinngu Sayadaw is also claiming that he is such a noble person, who knows the realm in which his rebirth would take place after death and no longer fears death.

As Theinngu Sayadaw continued to observe the arising and dissolution of the atomic units of matter, fear arose in him. This time fear arose because he had seen how defilements such as delusion (moha) lead to renewed existence (jāti) (San Shin 1972, 182). He then noticed material and mental states as being impermanent, and became aware of the nature of impermanence all the time. As with the asubha meditation, the desire not to see the arising and disappearance of material and mental states developed in him. Despite such a desire, he continued to experience it in his mind’s eye. He thus came to see the nature of suffering and impersonality (San Shin 1972, 182).

Theinngu Sayadaw explained that non-returners still have defilements (kilesa) with regards to form (rūpa) and formless (arūpa) (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:15:47–2:16:02). Theinngu Sayadaw used the expressions rūpa-kilesa and arūpa-kilesa, rather than rūparāga, ‘passion for what is form’, and arūparāga, ‘passion for what is formless’ (Thanissaro 2000), which are the terms found in the Pāli canonical texts such as the Saṃyojana-sutta (AN 10.13). Rūparāga and arūparāga are often understood as passion for rebirth in the Form World and the Formless World respectively, and are 2 of the 10 fetters eradicated by an arahant. It should be noted that Theinngu Sayadaw, talking from the perspective of meditation practice, referred to rūpa and arūpa in terms of clinging to material and mental states, rather than the passion for rebirth in the Form and the Formless worlds. Although Theinngu Sayadaw related his meditative experience as a non-returner in both cosmological and psychological terms (see above), he emphasised psychological interpretations of Buddhist cosmology when he explained his practice to achieve the fourth and final stage of liberation.

Theinngu Sayadaw explained that the latent defilements (anusayakilesa) arise with regards to external bases (bāhirāyatana) and internal bases (ajjhāṭṭāyatana). This correlates with the Theravada Abhidhamma analysis of the relationship between the external world and one’s experience into the 12 ‘bases’ (āyatana) on which experience relies. The six sense organs, i.e. eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, are called internal bases (ajjhāṭṭāyatana), and the objects of these, i.e. visible object, sound, odour, taste, tangible object and cognisable object, are called external bases (bāhirāyatana). For Theinngu Sayadaw, he saw in his mind’s eye the external bases such as visible object, sound, odour, taste, tangible object, and cognisable object as the arising and disappearance of atomic units of matter.
(rūpa-kalāpa). However, he did not realise that these atomic units of matter are material states which originate from the mind (cittajarūpa) (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:18:26–2:18:32; Ukkaṭṭha 1969, 1:15:50–1:15:52). Not knowing the actuality, he clung to these material and mental states and contemplated them as being impermanent, subject to suffering and without a self. He realised that he was not yet free because he still perceived in his mind’s eye the arising and disappearance of mental states (San Shin 1972, 185). He therefore investigated the mental states that are associated with the internal bases such as the eye base, the ear base, etc. He reflected on his own mind, examining whether or not there are the mental states that wish to see, to hear, to kiss, to touch, to know good and bad, and to go here and there (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:19:30–2:20:15; San Shin 1972, 185). He noticed that such wishes to see, to hear, etc. were absent from his mind (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:20:17–2:19:21). Although such mental states did not arise in him, he knew that he was not free from the latent defilements. Therefore, he alternated repeatedly between the observation of the three characteristics of material states, i.e. impermanence, suffering, and non-self, and the investigation of mental states such as the wish to see, to hear, to touch, etc. (Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:18:15–2:22:55). Theinngu Sayadaw explained that this gradual, repetitive process of the contemplation and investigation of the material and mental states is a way of uprooting the latent defilements (Ukkaṭṭha 1969, 1:26:10–1:26:15).

As he continued to practise in this manner, a realisation appeared, as if someone had spoken into his ear:

What is “impermanence”? What is “suffering”? What is “non-self”? You cling onto the material states [i.e. the rūpa-kalāpa] which arise due to the mind. . . . Because of the mind, you perceive the material states as “arising” and “dis-solution”. You do not stop at simply seeing. You contemplate them as being impermanent, suffering and non-self. They [i.e. the three characteristics] are mere concepts.\(^{21}\)

(Ukkaṭṭha 1968, 2:25:32–2:26:07; translation mine)

Theinngu Sayadaw explained that this realisation led him to the understanding that there was nothing left to observe. Whatever arose at each of the six sense-doors was no longer attractive to him nor bothered him. He simply saw, sensed and cognised (San Shin 1972, 191). He thus concluded:

I take the material states that do not exist as being in existence, and mis-apprehend them as being impermanent. That is why mental states that label it as “impermanence”, “suffering”, and “non-self” arise in me. . . . “Impermanence” is a concept; “suffering” is a concept; “non-self” is a concept. . . . All defilements and cankers have dried up in me. No need to practise any more. I have reached the end of the path.

(San Shin 1972, 191; translation mine)
Expressions such as ‘all defilements and cankers have dried up’ and ‘no need to practise any more’ are similar to standard descriptions of the arahant, which are found in many places in the Pāli canon. For example, the Arahanta-sutta (SN 22.110) describes an arahant as follows: ‘a monk in whom the cankers are destroyed, who has lived the life to perfection, done what had to be done, put down the burden, gained the highest goal, worn through the fetters of rebirth, and is liberated by perfect insight’ (Walshe 2013). In this instance, Theinngu Sayadaw did not claim explicitly of having achieved the state of arahantship, but it is implied here. On other occasions he made this claim explicit (see above).

Based on these accounts, Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation practice and path can be summarised in the following stages. The first stage is the removal of self-centred views through the realisation of impermanence and suffering with regards to unpleasant bodily sensations, overcoming the notion of ‘I’, ‘hand’, ‘leg’ etc., with regards to bodily sensations. The weakening of craving (taṇhā) and sensuous desire (kāma-rāga) through the realisation of the nimitta of the asubha nature of the body and asubha meditation is the second stage, overcoming the notions of ‘I’, ‘beauty’, ‘pure’, ‘happiness’ etc. with regards to one’s body and those of others. The third stage involves the realisation of the disintegration of the appearance of unity, which means seeing the complex nature of what are conventionally regarded as stable and solid entities such as ‘woman’, ‘tree’, ‘mountain’, ‘Buddha images’ etc., overcoming the notion of oneness and sensuous desire. At the fourth stage, he contemplated and investigated the latent defilements such as the attachment to subtler material states and mental states, abandoning the notion of impermanence, suffering and non-self. Moreover, at every stage of the path, the contemplation and realisation of (1) impermanence, (2) suffering, (3) fearfulness, (4) causality, (5) perversity of perception (saññā-vipallāsa) with regards to concepts (paññatti) and (6) anger (dosā) seem to have played an important role. Mental qualities such as concentration (samādhi) and mindfulness (sati) also played an important role, especially in dealing with the unpleasant bodily sensation at the first stage. This does not mean that concentration and mindfulness become less important for the practice at higher stages of meditation attainments, for Theinngu Sayadaw often said that to achieve the second stage of liberation one needs to develop concentration twice as strong as that of the first stage of liberation (Paññājota 2003, 71), and that for the attainment of the third stage of liberation concentration needs to be twice more than that of the previous stage (Paññājota 2003, 101). According to his explanation, then, with each stage of transformation, the understanding and quality developed with regards to these factors becomes more and more refined.

When we look at the account of Theinngu Sayadaw’s spiritual life on the whole, we can see two structural aspects to it. They are (1) Theinngu...
Sayadaw’s progress through his development of the meditation practice closely correlates with his progression through the four stages of the path to enlightenment and (2) his specific meditative experiences described in this article are the stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa*, which are the underlying structure of the progress through the stages of the path. The correlation between Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditative experiences and the stages of the *vipassanāñāṇa* is worth further exploration. We should note that these levels of *vipassanāñāṇa* are regularly included as *vipassanākammajjhāna*, ‘insight meditation subjects’, in Siamese and other boran kammathan meditation texts (see Skilton in this volume).

### Meditation techniques taught in the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions

Now that I have provided accounts of the meditation experiences of Sunlun and Theinngu Sayadaws, and how they related this to their spiritual achievements, I want to turn to the meditation techniques as taught at some Sunlun and Theinngu meditation centres in Myanmar. As the meditation centres of these two traditions have come more established, it seems that the meditation techniques taught there have become more systematic and formalised in the sense that the practitioners are instructed to practise for a certain length of time – each sitting lasting between one hour and 30 minutes to 3 hours. Moreover, the practitioners are instructed to follow specific postures, ways of breathing and how they should deal with sensations, the wandering mind, etc. Such formalisation does not mean that there is uniformity in terms of the meditation techniques and instruction because each meditation teacher, especially those from the less-centralised Theinngu tradition (see above), develops his or her own method and/or stages of practice and gives their own instructions to the practitioners. Some teachers provide tailor-made instructions to advanced practitioners according to their temperament. In this sense, even within each meditation tradition, there is a variety of meditation techniques and instructions. Therefore, what follows in this section describes only some examples from a diverse range of meditation techniques and methods within the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions.

The renowned American meditation teacher Jack Kornfield, who explored Theravada meditation in Thailand and Myanmar for several years in the late 1960s to early 1970s, included a sojourn of about 3 months meditating at a Sunlun meditation centre in Yangon in the 1970s. He included the Sunlun technique among his survey of meditation masters first published in 1977. He begins his description of it, starting with posture, as follows.

A suitable posture is to sit with legs crossed. The back should be straight. . . . The right hand should be held in the left hand. This is to facilitate the
clenching of the fist as the meditator summons his strength to combat unpleasant sensation which may arise later. Do not mesh the fingers of the hands nor hold them lightly with each thumb against the other... . [The meditator should] assume a tight posture where the body provides a firm base, its circuit is closed and [so that] the meditator is alert.

(Kornfield 2007, 106)

Such tight, firm posture is recommended under the Sunlun meditation technique, ensuring the gathering of all of one’s resources and hard work. Based on my personal experience with both Sunlun and Theinngu meditation traditions, I would say that the Sunlun technique tends to be more forceful in terms of the posture and the breathing. According to the Theinngu technique, the posture should not be too tight or too loose. Although the back should be straight, one should not put force or energy into the back to keep it erect because the use of energy could create tension, which in turn restricts the flow of the inhalation and exhalation. However, it should not be too loose because a sluggish posture will not allow the smooth flow of the inhalation and exhalation, and will arouse sleepiness quickly. Both traditions recommend that once the posture has been selected and assumed, it should not be changed or altered in any way. It will have to be kept until the end of the session. Kornfield (2007, 107) writes that Sunlun Sayadaw said, ‘If cramped don’t move, if itchy don’t scratch, if fatigued don’t rest’. Such guidance was also given by Theinngu Sayadaw (Maung Bho 1987, hka). In both the Sunlun and Theinngu meditation traditions, posture is very important for the practice because it can have an impact on the breathing, which is an essential aspect in these meditation techniques.

One should follow a special breathing technique to gain momentum in strong, forceful and rapid breathing. Kornfield describes the Sunlun breathing technique as follows:

Commence by inhaling. It will be noticed that the breath touches the nostril tip or upper lip. Be keenly mindful of the touch of breath. With mindfulness vigilantly maintained, breathe strongly, firmly and rapidly.... Breathe in air attentively and fully as though water were being drawn into a syringe. Exhale sharply. Full and hard drawing-in of breath helps to establish concentration rapidly.... When these two [i.e. inhalation and exhalation] are balanced, the touch will be continuous. When they are balanced, the meditator will have reached the stage of smooth, effortless, self-compelled rhythmic breathing.

(Kornfield 2007, 107).

For students new to this breathing technique, it will take some practice to be able to breathe correctly. Fatigue may set in at the early stages of strong, forceful and rapid breathing because of either insufficient strength of
inhalation or excessive blowing on exhalation. The remedy is to increase the strength of the inhalation. When the inhalation and exhalation strengths are balanced to a high level, not only will the fatigue disappear, but concentration will also be strengthened.

In the Theinngu tradition, the meditator is also instructed to breathe more rapidly, in this case at two or three times the normal rate of breathing. The length and the rate of inhalation and exhalation should be equal, and they should flow smoothly and continuously. It is important not to put undue pressure on the body by tensing the muscles or stiffening the back. Therefore, in contrast to the Sunlun tradition where the posture is prescribed, the meditator is encouraged to choose a comfortable sitting position of their own choice and check the posture carefully before and during every meditation session by scanning the body with the mind. One should be able to hear one’s own breathing and the breathing sound should be rhythmic, which helps to overcome fatigue and wards off external noises. The meditator should be keenly mindful of every touch of the breath at the tip of the nostrils without naming ‘inhalation’ or ‘exhalation’. Mindfulness should be rigorously applied to the present moment. A simile of manually sawing a piece of wood has often been used to describe this breathing technique. There is the simile of the saw used in the *Visuddhimagga*, which is taken from the *Paṭissambhidāmagga*, also applied to how mindfulness is established at the tip of the nostril or on the upper lip by focusing one’s attention on the touch of the in-breaths and out-breaths (Ñāṇamoli 1991, 273–275). The simile of the saw used in Theinngu tradition seems to be an adaptation of the saw simile found in the above mentioned texts, showing a continuity within Theravada tradition. The breathing sound, if the breathing is done properly, is similar to the sound of sawing (Candimā 2005, 87–88; Kyaw 2009, 21). Therefore, there are some similarities between the breathing technique of the Sunlun tradition and that of Theinngu tradition.

Although the breathing technique is similar, the duration of the strong, forceful and rapid breathing differs. In the Theinngu tradition, the meditator will maintain this breathing throughout the whole 2-hour, or sometimes 3-hour, session. With the Sunlun technique, the strong, rapid breathing may be stopped after 45 minutes or an hour, and then the sensation should be observed for another 45 or 50 minutes. As we will see below, such a difference in the length of strong, rapid breathing means that the technique of observing sensations with mindfulness, i.e. *vedanānupassanā*, in these meditation traditions is also different.

In the Sunlun tradition, strong, rapid breathing should be stopped completely on the inhaled breath after about 45 minutes. Then, the practitioner should calm the body down and observe it rigorously. The mind will become aware of whatever sensation happens to be most dominant at this point, and one should be mindful of the awareness of that sensation.
When observing the sensation, one should neither reflect ‘this is body and mind’ nor consider ‘this is impermanence, this suffering, and this non-self’ (Kornfield 2007, 109). One needs to know it only as it is. Sunlun Sayadaw said, ‘If the sensation is weak, know the fact of its weakness. If the sensation is strong, know the fact of its strength’ (Kornfield 2007, 109). For him, all thinking, reflection, and consideration are conceptual.

As one has been sitting motionless for about an hour or more, unpleasant bodily sensations will arise, and the intensity of such unpleasant sensations may vary depending on the nature of the practitioner. The Sunlun technique of combating such intense, unpleasant sensations requires strong determination and unflinching energy. As the first step, one should watch the unpleasant sensation with bated breath (Tin Myint 2004, 51; Kornfield 2007, 112). By holding the breath as long as one can easily hold it, one’s attention is increased, enabling one to exercise greater awareness and more rigorous mindfulness to observe the unpleasant sensation. If the unpleasant sensation is too intense for proper attention while holding the breath, the meditator should stiffen her/himself against it (Tin Myint 2004, 51). By physically gathering oneself, one puts forth energy as one would in a physical struggle against a strong opponent. If such physical exertion does not work, then the meditator should directly observe the unpleasant sensation with a strong, firm mind. ‘With bated breath, tensed body and fortified mind, he [i.e. the meditator] should exert pressure against the pressure of the sensation until he is able to penetrate it, to dwell in it, watch it without thinking any thought connected with it, until finally the sensation is completely consumed or ended’ (Kornfield 2007, 113). Thus, the Sunlun technique of observing sensations involves direct contact with the reality of the sensation, and requires great physical and mental strength to persevere when experiencing intense sensations.

While the Sunlun technique involves a direct observation of pleasant or unpleasant sensations, the Theinngu technique is rather indirect because the strong, rapid breathing, which is maintained throughout the session, can be adjusted to develop stronger concentration. The enhanced concentration can then be used as what I call a ‘buffer’ to observe unpleasant sensations. When they become very intense during the sitting, according to Theinngu Sayadaw, the practitioner needs to balance the bodily sensations (vedanā) with concentration (samādhi) by adjusting the breathing. Maung Bho (1987, ca), who practised under the guidance of Theinngu Sayadaw, writes that when a meditator experiences intense vedanā, the meditation teacher would guide the meditator to increase the breathing rate up to 100 times per minute from the normal rate of breathing of 17 or 18 times per minute. My understanding of how the faster breathing rate increases concentration (samādhi) is that with the faster breathing rate, the touch of breath at the nostrils becomes more noticeable and thus the
awareness of the touch of the breath becomes more prominent. From the perspective of physiology, the faster breathing rate increases the inflow of air, increasing the volume of oxygen. This helps the mind to become more focused and alert. The guided meditation provided by a teacher in the Theinngu tradition is crucial to the practice, especially when the practitioner may experience a form of hyperventilation due to the strong, fast breathing. This kind of very fast breathing rate might be counter-indicated for elderly practitioners and practitioners who may have heart disease and asthma. Therefore, Candimā’s (2005, 50) guidance for those people is to breathe only slightly faster than the normal rate of breathing and to adjust the breathing rate according to one’s health condition as well as one’s meditation experiences. In addition, meditation teachers in the Theinngu tradition emphasise that practitioners should not get up immediately after a 2-hour sitting session because they may still experience the strong, intense bodily sensations, which could lead to dizziness and light-headedness. So, it is important that meditators check their bodily sensations have subsided before they get up from a sitting session.

According to Theinngu Sayadaw, it is crucial to balance vedanā with samādhī when the practitioner is struggling to deal with unpleasant sensations. Theinngu Sayadaw used the Burmese expression baung-hkein-thi, which literally means ‘balancing scales’, to refer to the above technique of adjusting one’s breathing in accordance with the intensity of vedanā one experiences. ‘If there is an increase in vedanā by one unit, the development of samādhi must be increased by one unit’ (Maung Bho 1987, ca). As the intensity of bodily sensations increases, the practitioner may wish to stop the practice, thinking ‘this is not working’, ‘it is painful’, ‘I am feeling dizzy’, etc. This is the time when the practitioner is encouraged to baung-hkein, i.e. to adjust their breathing so that vedanā is balanced with samādhi (Theravada Buddhist 1992, 17). With faster breathing and stronger samādhi, the practitioner comes to realise that the nature of the mind is such that it wants to run away from unpleasant sensations. The mind thus returns to the awareness of the touch of the breath at the nostril because the main meditation object, i.e. the in-breath and out-breath, is pleasant (sukha). However, the intensity of bodily sensations continues to increase, and the increased intensity of bodily sensations attracts the attention. The mind thus goes to the increasingly painful sensations. In this manner, the practitioner comes to understand that the mind goes back and forth naturally between painful bodily sensations (dukkha-vedanā) and pleasant sensations at the nostril (sukha-vedanā) (Paññājota 2002, 168). The image encapsulated in the expression baung-hkein is that of a pair of balance scales, which consists of a pivoted horizontal lever with a beam of equal length and a weighing pan suspended from each side. One increases or decreases things on the pair of balance scales in order to balance them. Like
balancing the scales, the meditator adjusts the breathing rate so that *vedanā* and *samādhi* are balanced and harmonious. When the meditator has established harmony between *vedanā* and *samādhi*, they have also achieved mental equilibrium, which is referred to in Burmese as *baung-hkein-kite-thi*.

Mental equilibrium can be used to investigate the behaviour of the mind with regards to *vedanā* as follows. Once the practitioner has achieved mental equilibrium, the mind turns inward, clearly comprehending that the bodily and mental processes, such as the breathing, and the unpleasant bodily sensations and mental feelings (*vedanā*), happen naturally. In other words, one is able to distance oneself from these processes, observing each process in an impersonalised manner. Ven. Candimā, the abbot of Theinngu No. 32 Meditation Centre, often says that it is like watching a puppet show. The spectator watches each character on the stage playing their own role, but does not become entangled with the strings, staying separate and enjoying the show. Similarly, while the practitioner experiences the in-breath and out-breath, and a wide range of bodily sensations as well as their associated mental feelings such as happiness, frustration, etc., they are no longer tangled and bound up with all those *vedanā*. Knowing and experiencing clearly how each component of the body and the mind functions, the practitioner no longer labels ‘my body is in pain’, ‘my legs are numb’, or ‘this is painful’, etc. We could consider the attainment of this mental equilibrium, i.e. the state of *baung-hkein-kite*, as an achievement of equanimity (*upekkha*) with regards to *vedanā* because the mind of the practitioner is neither pulled by pleasant sensation (*sukha-vedanā*) nor repelled by unpleasant sensation (*dukkha-vedanā*). According to Theinngu Sayadaw, wisdom (*paññā*) has arisen at the state of mental equilibrium, so that the practitioner has come ‘to see the true nature of the body and the mind’ and ‘is merely aware of *vedanā* as *vedanā*’ (Paññājota 2003, 172).

In the Sunlun meditation method, both new and old students are instructed to use a combination of mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) and mindfulness of sensation (*vedanānupassanā*) from the initial stages of their meditation practice until they have gained the final stage of the path, i.e. *arahantship* (Vara 2010). In the Theinngu method, while new practitioners are instructed to begin the practice with mindfulness of breath and of sensation, Theinngu Sayadaw and his successors often instruct advanced practitioners to use a combination of various meditation objects (*kammaṭṭhāna*) depending on their personal traits and experiences. Theinngu Sayadaw said, ‘With one type of medicine, you cannot be a doctor. For an elephant, [you have to] feed sugar cane. For a tiger, [you have to] feed meat’ (Kyaw 2009, 21). Some of the meditation objects given to meditators include contemplation of: (1) the breath (*ānāpāna*), (2) the sensation/feeling (*vedanā*), (3) consciousness (*citta*), (4) the impure nature of the body (*asubha*), (5) the 32 parts of the body and (6) the 4 great...
elements (mahābhūta). These meditation objects correspond with some of the 40 meditation objects (kammaṭṭhāna) listed in the Samādhi section of the Visuddhimagga (see Kim, and Skilton in this volume). Theinngu Sayadaw explained that his meditation path is based on samatha meditation and that it was through ‘yok-ka-ma-htàn’ (rūpa-kammaṭṭhāna) in Pāli (Ukkaṭṭha 1963, 0:20–0:25). While Theinngu Sayadaw did not explicate what the yok-ka-ma-htàn refers to, he emphasised the asubha meditation and the meditation on the rūpa-kalāpas in his own practice (see above). Therefore, we can reasonably suggest that the yok-ka-ma-htàn refers to the meditation practices on the asubha nature of the body and the rūpa-kalāpas. The meditation practices taught in the Theinngu meditation tradition are linked with those associated with samatha in the Visuddhimagga, but they lead to insight outcomes traditionally associated with vipassanā methods (see Skilton in this volume). It seems to me that part of the debate about whether these meditation practices are samatha or vipassanā comes from the fact that the terms samatha and vipassanā are being used both to account for methods and for outcomes. As we shall see below, the lack of clarity regarding the use of these terms leads to the debates among Burmese practitioners on Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation system.

One of the distinctive features of the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions is that almost all of their meditation centres offer guided meditation sessions at which the teachers provide on the spot guidance to suit the meditators’ experience at that particular time. According to Ven. U Siridhamma, the Abbot of Vijjodaya Theinn Meditation Centre in Pyay and a meditation master who practised with Theinngu Sayadaw, well-trained meditation teachers are able to give such close supervision because they have experienced these meditative stages and thus are able to relate to others’ experiences.

In sum, the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions employ a similar approach by using strong, forceful and rapid breathing to establish concentration and mindfulness. These mental qualities are then used to practise mindfulness of bodily sensations and mental feelings. Nevertheless, there are some differences in the breathing techniques and the method of observing sensations which I shall now highlight.

A comparison of Sunlun and Theinngu methods, contrasted with modern mindfulness

We have examined the ways in which both meditation masters employed rapid, strong and rhythmic breathing as their starting point, and how they combined it with the contemplation of bodily sensations and mental feelings, and the variety of meditation techniques developed by them and taught in their meditation traditions. We have also explored in detail how Theinngu Sayadaw engaged with different meditation subjects such as the
breath, and bodily sensations and mental feelings (vedanā), and the impure aspects of the decomposing body (asubha) as well as how his understanding of body and mind was transformed through his practice, corresponding to stages of insight that he experienced.

Sunlun Sayadaw’s method emphasises three elements, i.e. the touch of the breath, the sense-consciousness of the breath, and mindfulness (sati). In the Sunlun tradition, the practitioner should (1) be rigorously mindful of the touch of the breath and (2) guard and watch the sense-consciousness of the breath with mindfulness. This meditation method employs the broader functions of sati in the practice, rather than just being non-judgementally mindful of the present moment, the definition often used in modern Mindfulness literature. Sati in the Sunlun method can be considered as a general mental quality that the practitioner tries to develop as well as to use in their practice. For instance, the Sunlun method requires the practitioner to make continuous observation of the meditation object, i.e. the touch of the breath, and to stay with it, which would lead the mind of the practitioner with sati to become steady with a minimum of distraction or no ‘bobbing about’. A successful practitioner would then be able to use sati to engage with the object of awareness such as the breath or bodily sensations. Moreover, the practitioner in the Sunlun tradition is asked to guard and watch the mind with sati in a sustained manner, highlighting the rather active, instrumental nature of sati.

In terms of how to deal with intense, unpleasant bodily sensations, the Sunlun method requires the practitioner to assess the level of pain or unpleasantness and to respond to the bodily sensations accordingly with bated breath or tensed body or fortified mind. In the Theinngu tradition, the practitioner also needs to assess the level of pain and to adjust the breathing rate accordingly. There are a couple of differences between the Sunlun way of dealing with unpleasant bodily sensations and that of Theinngu. Firstly, the Sunlun method involves direct observation of the sensations and thus direct contact with the sensations themselves, which requires great physical and mental strength to persevere when experiencing intense sensations. The Theinngu method involves an indirect way of observing the sensations: one should increase the rate of the breathing, which would in turn enhance one’s concentration (samādhi); stronger, more established concentration (samādhi) could be used to observe the sensations. Secondly, the Sunlun method places more emphasis on the function of sati in dealing with the unpleasant sensations. For instance, when experiencing intense sensations the practitioner is encouraged to use sati to observe and stay with them (Vara 2010, 27–28). As we have seen above, samādhi not only has an important function in dealing with unpleasant sensations in the Theinngu method, but also was a key part of Theinngu Sayadaw’s practice.
The meditation practice in these contexts is more than a non-judgemental, present-centred kind of observation. It is active, engaging with meditation experience in ways that lead to a progression of specifically Buddhist insights about the nature of reality.

**Authority, Validation and Challenge**

In this section, I want to look at the issue of authority, how the experiences and practices of both masters underwent different forms of authorisation and how this relates to private, public and state practice in Myanmar. As we shall see below, the context provides striking contrasts with the development and promulgation of Mindfulness in the West. Such authorisation in Myanmar comes in two forms: internal authority which convinces the founder and practitioners and – as a system becomes more popular and gains wider attention – external scrutiny and authorisation. Both are important to the growth and survival of meditation traditions within Myanmar. Although there is considerable variety within Burmese meditation practice, that variety – once it has gained a degree of popularity – must be verified against a common set of criteria.

We can look to the hagiographical literature for internal authority, i.e. the ways in which the meditation masters themselves and their followers embed in their narratives episodes that specifically establish the validity of the masters’ teachings and experience. Drawing on Houtman’s analysis of the place of monk hagiography in the context of Burmese biographical literature and my own reading of the biographies of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw, I would suggest that the functions of ‘monk biography’ in Burmese Buddhism are manifold: (1) to invoke the reader’s or listener’s, faith in (saddhā) and reverence towards both the biographical subject and the Buddha’s religion (sāsana); (2) to establish the authenticity and legitimacy of the biographical subject as a sacred being with historical continuity back to the lineage of the Buddhas (see below) and (3) to educate the reader about the subject’s quality of sacredness, including the ‘practice’ or ‘training’ (kyin-sin in Burmese) as well as the meditative attainments.26

In these sources, the internal verification initially comes in two ways. One type of verification is through the accounts of the gods’ affirmation and support and through affirming visions. These all reference traditional Buddhist understandings of such subjects as cosmology, the life-story of the Buddha himself and the relationship of the historical Buddha of our era to previous Buddhas. Another is through the correlation between stages of meditation and stages of spiritual attainment, confirmed through decisions in the master’s life, specifically the decision to take ordination, a necessary step for someone on the brink of arahantship who wishes to continue to live. Sirimane (2016), combining a textual approach with field research in
contemporary Sri Lanka, explicates how meditative experiences of a noble person (ariya-puggala) and their supramundane attainments can be evaluated against the discourses from the first four Nikāyas of the Pāli canon. She also provides textual evidence that it is possible for lay people to attain stream-entry and continue in lay life until at least the stage of non-returner (anāgāmi) (Sirimane 2016, 164–167). It was the Sayadaws themselves who laid claim to the attainment of different stages of the path. Such claims by monks themselves of having achieved the state of arahantship are unusual. They are exceptions to the rule (Houtman 1990, 283) and somewhat risky, since to make false claims of such attainments is to break the fourth pārājika, the four rules on breaking which a monk is no longer a monk, but can be forced to leave the Sangha. It is not completely clear to me from the available sources when or why they started to make claims of having achieved these attainments. Perhaps their unconventional method of breathing – i.e. the strong, fast, rhythmic breathing – and their lack of formal monastic education might have prompted the monastic and lay literati to test their meditation achievements, which in turn might have encouraged them to make public claims. In contrast to these accounts given by practitioners in the modern period, there is a common perception in Theravada – based on the narratives about the decline and disappearance of the Buddha’s sāsana found in the post-canonical texts and in the later Southeast Asian Buddhist literature such as the commentary on the Anāgatavamsa, ‘The Chronicle of the Future’, a text that circulated widely throughout the Theravada world in Pāli and vernacular recensions – that awakening is no longer possible in this corrupt age.

The life-stories address the issue of external legitimacy and authority by including accounts of how Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw, with no prior study and from humble, almost illiterate backgrounds, correctly answered questions on their practice and the attainments of supramundane fruits posed by monastic and lay literati. That these catechisms took place is well recorded. For instance, there are 5 hours of audio recording of the catechism that took place in 1963 between monks from the Kyauk-thin-baw meditation tradition – whose teachings were subjected to a vinicchaya case in 198127 – and Theinngu Sayadaw, testing his meditation practice and achievements.28

The question of why the Burmese monastic and lay literati felt it was necessary to test and verify the meditation achievements of these Sayadaws needs further explanation. In Myanmar, specific presentations and interpretations of the Dhamma and those of the Vinaya, ‘monastic discipline’, made by individual monks and/or laypeople were, and still are, put under microscopic public scrutiny, resulting in decades-long scholarly debates and monastic trial (vinicchaya) cases.
The most important and famous of these debates revolves around a text called the Paramatthadipani, a critique written by Ledi Sayadaw of the Sri Lankan commentaries of the Abhidhammatthasangaha. The c.11th-century Abhidhammatthasangaha is the most authoritative, succinct account of the Abhidhamma in the Theravada literary corpus and the 12th century exposition of its content, the Abhidhammatthasangahaavivihāvīṇī-fikā was a mainstay of the Burmese monastic curriculum. This latter text was the primary object of Ledi Sayadaw’s critique and while in the West Ledi Sayadaw is primarily known as one of the founding fathers of modern Vipassanā, he is famed in Myanmar also for his brilliance in Abhidhamma and for having withstood the widespread attempts to discredit his critique. This history provides some of the background for the process of public criticism of monastic doctrinal claims in Myanmar.

Another significant element is the existence in Myanmar of formal monastic trial cases, known as vinicchaya. While these have a long history within the Sangha itself, the form they have taken in modern Myanmar, with state involvement, can be traced to a series of reform measures regarding the Burmese Sangha and Burmese Buddhism introduced by Ne Win’s government in the 1980s (Kyaw 2014, 109–110; Janaka and Crosby 2017, 200–205). In such vinicchaya cases, both sides, namely the defendant and the prosecutor, employ analytically their textual expertise in the Pāli canonical and commentarial literature in order to provide textual evidence in support of their respective arguments and views (Kyaw 2015, 418). A total of 11 of the 17 trial cases that took place at national level between 1981 and 2011 concerned the authenticity and orthodoxy of teachings on meditation (Janaka and Crosby 2017). In these 11 cases, the Burmese Sangha authority judged that elements of the teachings and meditation practices, which were taught by the meditation teachers involved, were ‘false doctrine’ (adhamma). With the exception of two, the remaining nine meditation traditions were completely banned from teaching their interpretations of the Dhamma and their meditation practice.

In my research, I came across a copy of a letter dated 17 July 1968, apparently from Ven. Āciṇṇa (1896–1978) of Hkyauk-htat-gyi-hpanyāgyi (literal translation: ‘The Great Buddha with Six Levels’) Monastery in Yangon. This letter says that Theinngu Sayadaw’s teachings are no longer restricted by specific rules. Although the letter does not describe what the rules were, it does mention the name of the vinicchaya court – Tha-tha-na Wipūlkāri Maha-thein-tāw-gyi Anu-nya-tá wi-neik-tha-á hkon-yon – that imposed the rules. According to this letter, these rules were imposed on 24 February 1966. The copy of this letter revealing that Theinngu Sayadaw’s teachings were subjected to a vinicchaya was reprinted in Deik-htí-pyók Ta-nha-khyók (Removal of Views and Cessation of Craving) by
San Shin published in 1972. The letter does not indicate the details of the accusations or the nature of the vinicchaya court involved in this case.

Given the dates, we know that this vinicchaya preceded the 17 modern cases tried under the system set up under Ne Win. Those modern cases have all been published, but information on previous cases and courts is less easy to come by. Despite the fragmentary nature of information on trial cases prior to the 1980s, I found three pieces of information that might help us to have a better understanding of the vinicchaya concerning Theinngu Sayadaw’s teachings and of the vinicchaya court mentioned in the letter. The first piece of information is this: Maung Maung’s The Buddha Trusted the Sangha, published in 1981, reports that senior monks agreed to design a set of bills to regulate the Sangha, collectively called wi-neik-tha-yá-ú-pa-de in Burmese (vinicchaya-upadesa in Pāli), at a meeting in 1945 held at Hpâyàgyi (literal translation: ‘The Great Buddha’) Monastery on Shwe-gone-taing Road in Yangon (Maung 1981, 132–133). Maung Maung writes that one of the monks involved in designing the bills was the Sayadaw from Hpâyàgyi Monastery, though he does not provide the name of the Sayadaw.

The second piece of information concerns finding who the Sayadaw from Hpâyàgyi Monastery could be. Based on my recent field research, we can reasonably suggest that it might be Ven. Koṇḍañña (1887–1957), who was the founder and the first abbot of Hpâyàgyi Monastery. The Hpâyàgyi Monastery is also known in its full name as Hkyauk-htat-gyi-hpâyàgyi Monastery because a well-known, big Buddha image called ‘The Great Buddha with Six Levels’ is located in the compound of the monastery. According to the inscriptions of biographies of the abbots of Hkyauk-htat-gyi-hpâyàgyi Monastery, Ven. Koṇḍañña was an officer in charge for the Department for the State Vinicchaya, and he also held a senior position on a working committee for the Sixth Buddhist Council held in 1954–56. The third piece of information provides the link between Ven. Āciṇṇa of Hkyauk-htat-gyi-hpâyàgyi Monastery, who signed and sent the letter to Theinngu Sayadaw, and Ven. Koṇḍañña, who was probably involved in drafting the 1945 vinicchaya bills. In the set of inscriptions mentioned above, Ven. Āciṇṇa was recorded as the second abbot of Hkyauk-htat-gyi-hpâyàgyi Monastery, who succeeded Ven. Koṇḍañña. Therefore, these pieces of information tell us that the senior monks from the same monastery on Shwe-gone-taing Road might have been members of the prosecution team in the vinicchaya cases, and perhaps it might have been where trial cases prior the 1980s took place.

These vinicchaya cases and the praxis of public scrutiny in Myanmar of Buddhist teachings and practices, including meditation practice, could be considered perhaps as expressions of the heightened fear and anxiety among the Burmese Buddhists since the colonial period with regards to the decline and disappearance of the Buddha’s religion (sāsana) and as
continuous attempts to safeguard the Buddha’s sāsana from what they perceived as threats – real or imagined, internal or external – to the survival of Buddhism in Myanmar. The trial cases of the Burmese meditation traditions as well as the testing of Sunlun Sayadaw’s and Theinngu Sayadaw’s practice and attainments paint a complex picture of the relationship between the tradition of learning and the tradition of meditation. In a number of the trial cases, as noted above, the Burmese Sangha authority – drawing on their textual expertise – decided that the interpretations and teachings of the Dhamma made by the meditation teachers concerned were false doctrines and posed dangers to the Buddha’s sāsana, which led them to ban these meditation traditions. As for the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, experts on the Buddhist scriptures and doctrines confirmed that Sunlun Sayadaw’s and Theinngu Sayadaw’s attainments and teachings were in accordance with the Pāli literature, resulting in what Robert Sharf (1995) calls a ‘symbiotic’ relationship between monastic and lay literati and meditation masters.

We have seen how authenticity and legitimacy of meditation traditions in Myanmar, including the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions, are tested and verified in the public domain involving monastic and lay literati, the practitioners in these traditions, and even gods. How can we understand such a public nature of the authentication of personal meditative experiences? Here, I should like to draw on observations I made and conversations I had with my respondents during fieldwork in Myanmar. My respondents often said that they are motivated to do meditation, and indeed other Buddhist practices such as doing charity (dāna) and keeping the precepts, in order to deal with ‘worldly conditions’ (loka-dhamma), i.e. the vagaries that beset us in everyday life, and as a way of preparation for death and rebirth. My respondents also related how they have strong faith (saddhā) in certain meditation teachers and/or in a specific meditation approach. These are concerned with the personal qualities that they hope to develop through the Buddhist practices and the ways in which they relate to and understand the Buddhist tradition. In addition, it seems to me that my respondents feel a sense of duty to maintain the Buddha’s sāsana, directly by learning Buddhist scriptures – including Abhidhamma – and meditating, or indirectly by supporting the Sangha and Buddhist institutions. This sense of duty and the related religious activities are embedded within the Burmese social structure in the sense that they are done collectively and there is almost always social status associated with such activities. These elements indicate that at least in modern Burmese Buddhism the personal aspects of the Buddhist practices and the meditative experiences are an integral part of public life.

This authorisation through the fire of literati scrutiny, the pervasive engagement with Buddhist doctrine and the defense of the sāsana by
Burmese lay people as well as monks begs the question of the language used in the sources we have for the lives and teachings of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw. From an outsider’s perspective, two possibilities emerge. The first is that the existing vocabulary within the meditation culture is used to verbalise non-verbal experience, regardless of any variety that may or may not be present between experiences thus similarly verbalised. Sharf (1995) points out that the key technical terms relating to Buddhist praxis such as ‘concentration’ (samādhi), ‘mindfulness’ (sati) and ‘stream-entry’ (sotāpatti) are interpreted phenomenologically to refer to discrete states of consciousness experienced by Buddhist practitioners in the course of their practice, and that the phenomenological approach to meditative experience should be understood in the wider context of social relations (268–270). The second possibility, which may not be entirely divorced from the former, is that the experiences and teachings of these masters have had to be couched in such terms to withstand the climate of scrutiny in Myanmar, a degree of scrutiny that would be anathema to the modern Mindfulness movement. Ironically, although the latter emerged from Vipassanā lineages tracing back to Mingun Jetawun Sayadaw Ven. Narada (1869–1954) and Ledi Sayadaw of the late 19th century Burma, it relies precisely on being able to divorce meditation from doctrine in popularising Buddhist-derived meditation practices within secular culture.

From an insider’s perspective, the striking use that I have observed here of Abhidhamma terms derived from Pāli and familiar primarily to literati to describe even the finest details of meditation and existential truths experienced by non-literate practitioners, is affirmation of the validity of those practitioners’ experience. In other words, since the teachings of the Pāli canon and important commentarial works such as the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha are true and since the experiences and teachings of enlightened teachers must be true, the correlation between the content of the authoritative texts and the teaching of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw is the natural coincidence of truth. It confirms the spiritual status and valid teachings of Sunlun Sayadaw and Theinngu Sayadaw for their respective teachers.

Despite the wide acceptance of Sunlun Sayadaw’s and Theinngu Sayadaw’s teachings and meditation practice both by their followers and through external testing including through a vinicchaya trial, there is an ongoing debate in Myanmar concerning whether or not their meditation methods are appropriate. One criticism is that strong, fast breathing and long hours of sitting sessions are a form of self-affliction (attakilamathānuyoga), self-affliction being rejected by the Buddha in narratives of his own spiritual journey. There is also debate about whether or not Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation practice – especially the asubha meditation and the emphasis on samādhi – is calming meditation (samatha), a debate that has drawn intense public interest. The context and nature of these debates as well as the ways in which the practitioners from
these two meditation traditions have responded to such debates are beyond the scope of the current article. Nonetheless, I wish to point out how the samatha-vipassanā division is understood in Burmese Buddhism, and if and how Theinngu Sayadaw’s meditation system differs from such a simple bifurcation. The Visuddhimagga’s and the Abhidhammatthasaṅгaha’s categorisations of samatha and vipassanā – i.e. the 40 meditation practices such as the mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati), the asubha meditation, the contemplation of the 32 parts of the body, etc., and the development of the associated jhānas as samatha and the contemplation of the dhammas in terms of the three characteristics as vipassanā – are widely used as a benchmark to contrast between samatha and vipassanā among the Burmese meditation traditions.

The Vipassanā movement since the late 19th century Burma has also led to the popular perception among laypeople in contemporary Myanmar that the practice of vipassanā – which emphasises direct practice and experience – is the emblem of Theravada Buddhist meditation. As we have seen above, the Burmese Vipassanā as a system of meditation practice has come to be known in the Western therapeutic context as the Mindfulness movement. In the context of these modern movements the now globalised practices of vipassanā and mindfulness are seen as the primary tool for transformation and for attainment of different stages of liberation. Crosby (2013, 14) writes, ‘Some go so far as to suggest that Vipassanā maintains that samatha is completely unnecessary, but samatha is used in a restricted fashion by some Vipassanā lineages, e.g. the Goenka system in the Ledi lineage’. For Theinngu Sayadaw, these distinctions are not so marked: practices using topics, such as breathing and asubha, traditionally classified as samatha nonetheless lead to liberating insight, and thus bridge or over-ride the rigid samatha-vipassanā divides found elsewhere in Burmese Buddhism (see Skilton in this volume). The common expectation of such a divide seems to lie behind a criticism of Theinngu Sayadaw reported by Öhn Khin (1970, 188). According to Öhn Khin, a learned monk from Nyaungdòn, 70 km northwest of Yangon, criticised the breathing and the asubha meditations taught by Theinngu Sayadaw as samatha meditation and that Theinngu Sayadaw’s teachings go against the Buddha’s Dhamma. From an outsider’s perspective, the rationale behind the criticism is not clear because the use of the breathing and asubha meditations is well attested in the canonical texts such as the Ānāpānasati-sutta (MN 118) and the Saṅña-sutta (AN 7.46) and the commentarial literature. From an insider’s perspective, two possible reasons emerged. Firstly, for Burmese Buddhists, the meditation practices associated with samatha are often done for power and protection, such as those found in the weikza practices.34 These samatha practices are often treated with suspicion, and have attracted public criticisms that such practices are for worldly powers, which goes against the Buddha’s teaching, though there is a distinction within the weikza tradition between an emphasis on mundane and supramundane goals (Rozenberg, 2010, 53-54; Crosby 2014,
159). Secondly, the meditation practices associated with *samatha* are judged against the highly validated *vipassanā* practices of the modern Vipassanā movement. Since the modern practices of *vipassanā* and mindfulness are regarded as the main, for some the only, path to achievement stages of liberation, it seems to me that any meditation system which is outside of, or at the margin of, the Vipassanā movement comes under fire.

As a final comment, I wish to highlight a couple of recent changes in terms of the growth of the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions within Myanmar and abroad. As we have seen above, the number of meditation centres in the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions was originally much lower than that of the Mahasi or Mogok traditions. Nonetheless, the congregations of certain Theinngu meditation centres such as Theinngu No. 32 Meditation Centre in Aunglan and Vijjodaya Theinn Meditation Centre in Pyay have been growing steadily over the past 15 years, drawing support from local communities as well as from successful business people across the country. Since 2013, their outreach has grown beyond Myanmar, attracting meditation practitioners from Burmese immigrant communities in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Australia, and western practitioners from the UK. The accessibility of the Internet and the popularity of Facebook in Myanmar in recent years have contributed to the current global growth of these Theinngu meditation centres. However, the outreach of the Theinngu tradition to western practitioners is still limited. A contributing factor is that virtually nothing had been published in English on Theinngu Sayadaw’s life and practice or on the Theinngu meditation methods. One of the aims of this article, therefore, is to fill this gap, a gap not only in scholarship but also in practitioner literature outside of Myanmar.

**Notes**

1. For exploration of different aspects of *vedanā* in meditation practice and psychology, see the special issue of *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, volume 19, issue 1, which is called “‘Knowing how it feels’: The Definition, Practice and Psychology’.
2. Sometimes the word *Theinn* is used, rather than *Theinngu*, within the Theinngu meditation tradition.
3. Here, I use the expressions ‘bodily sensations’ and ‘mental feelings’ to refer to the Pāli word *vedanā*, usually translated as ‘feeling’ or ‘sensation’, because the meditation techniques and processes in the Sunlun and Theinngu traditions deal with both bodily sensations such as pain, aches, etc. and mental feelings such as anger, joy, etc. The *Visuddhimagga* (XIV 127–128) classifies five types of *vedanā* in terms of its nature – bodily pleasant sensation, bodily unpleasant sensation, mentally pleasant feeling, mentally unpleasant feeling and mentally neutral feeling. The first two can be experienced ‘as direct responses to physical contact’, while the
remaining three ‘can be in response to physical contact, but also to all our experiences in the world’ (Samatha Trust 1996, 12).

4. Although ‘catechise’ and ‘catechism’ have a more technical meaning in learning Christian church doctrine, I use these terms in this article, rather than using the term ‘interview’. This is because I suspect there is an element of ‘catechism’ in the interactions between the learned monks and Theinngu Sayadaw to the extent that Theinngu Sayadaw learned Theravada technical terms through such interactions.

5. For Burmese Buddhists, the Pāli word kusala, kútho in Burmese, ‘wholesome’ or ‘skilful’, refers to the concept of the benefits of good deeds, i.e. puñña, ‘merit’. P. D. Premasiri (1976) has differentiated the usage of kusala and puñña, arguing that in earlier Buddhist texts kusala encompassed a broader spectrum of meaning than that of puñña, and that the later tradition tended to use them interchangeably, even synonymously. The usage of these two terms in contemporary Myanmar supports Premasiri’s observation.


7. Sobhana’s hagiography of Sunlun Sayadaw portrays his wife, Daw Shwe Yee, in a negative light despite her later donation of the monastery to him. During the period of his practice, she tried to disrupt his meditation, once by removing the floor of their house, and on another occasion by setting the cattle loose. She did these so that he would get up from his meditation (Sobhana 1995, 32). In contrast, Theinngu Sayadaw’s hagiography describes how his third wife became instrumental in encouraging him to pursue the path of meditation. See below for full details.

8. The honorary titles such as ‘Aggamahāpaṇḍita’, the ‘highest great scholar’, and ‘Abhidhajamahāraṭhaguru’, the ‘foremost teacher of the nation’, are conferred to scholar monks by the state.

9. Paññājota (2003, 27) writes that on the eve of World War II, prisoners across the country who were imprisoned for their involvement in various anti-British movements such as the Saya San Rebellion and Dobama Asiayone and for their criminal acts were moved to Mandalay prison.

10. Daw Si later practised meditation under the guidance of Theinngu Sayadaw and became a precept-nun (thilashin).

11. In Myanmar, laypeople and some precept-nuns staying at a monastery or a meditation centre observe the Nine Precepts, which are the set of Eight Precepts plus the practice of loving-kindness (mettā) as the ninth precept.

12. It should be noted that I have not come across other sources on the Theinngu tradition which mention such an experimentation with breathing by Theinngu Sayadaw.

13. Aung Tun was also accused of a robbery in 1959 and had to spend 45 days in Inn Sein prison. This was said to be after his attainment of the second stage of liberation (Ukkaṭṭha Undated 1, 57:24–1:08:12).


15. He used a Burmese loanword from Pāli, tha-mù-dà-yà, which is samudaya, ‘origin’, in Pāli. In Burmese, the term tha-mù-dà-yà-thìt-sa, i.e. samudaya-sacca, refers to the truth of the origin of suffering, the second Noble Truth. However, tha-mù-dà-yà on its own has come to mean ‘attachment’.
16. The Vipallāsa-sutta (AN 4.49) describes four perversions of perception (saññā-vipallāsa), of thought (citta-vipallāsa) and of view (dīthi-vipallāsa), which distort how the mind works and misapprehends what is impermanent as permanent, what is painful as pleasant, what is without a self as a self, and what is impure as pure. The Visuddhimagga (XXII, 47, 53, and 68) describes a stream-enterer as someone who has discarded these three levels of perversion. Mahasi Sayadaw in A Discourse of the Silavanta-sutta points out that although a stream-enterer is incapable of being deflected from the view of impermanence, he or she is not free from self-conceit derived from the view of the existence of ‘I’ (Bhikkhu Pesala 2013, 78).

17. The stages of the vipassanāñāna found in the Pāli canonical and commentarial texts vary in numbers: (1) the Paśisambhidāmagga lists eight stages of the vipassanāñāna, (2) the Visuddhimagga gives nine stages of the vipassanāñāna (Nāṇamoli 1991, 662ff.) and (3) the Abhidhammapiṭṭhāsaṅgaha lists 10 stages of the vipassanāñāna (Bodhi 2000, 345–347). The 10 stages of the vipassanāñāna are: (1) knowledge of comprehension (sammasanāñāna); (2) knowledge of rise and fall (udayabbayañāna); (3) knowledge of dissolution (bhayañāna); (4) knowledge of fearfulness (bhayañāna); (5) knowledge of danger (ādinañāna); (6) knowledge of disenchantment (nibbidāñāna); (7) knowledge of desire for deliverance (muñcitukamyatāñāna); (8) knowledge of reflection (paṭisankhāñāna); (9) knowledge of equanimity towards formation (sakkhārāpekkhāñāna) and (10) knowledge of conformity (anulomañāna) (Bodhi 2000, 345).

18. The term rūpa-kalāpa, which is generally translated as ‘material group’ (Nāṇamoli 1991, 836), is an Abhidhamma concept. It refers to a group of material dhammas that consists solely of the four great essentials – i.e. earth element, water element, fire element, air element, and four derivatives – i.e. colour, smell, taste, and nutritive essence. The material group made up of these eight material phenomena is known as ‘inseparable matter’ (avinibbhogarūpa) (Bodhi 2000, 246). Here, I use the phrase ‘atomic units of matter’ to refer to the rūpa-kalāpa because Theinngu Sayadaw sometimes used the term paramāṇu, which is translated as a ‘particle’ or ‘atom’, conveying the concept of subtle, minute nature of rūpa.

19. He used the Burmese expression nan-nyant-hta, which literally means ‘the mind is already inclined towards’. In the context of our discussion, it could mean that a noble person may often think about or contemplate the destination of their rebirth, and he/she may thus embody subtler states of consciousness.

20. The 121 varieties of consciousness (citta) in the classical Theravada Abhidhamma are subdivided into the four levels of planes of existence – i.e. the sensuous sphere, the form sphere, the formless sphere, and the supramundane level – seen in both cosmological and psychological terms (Gethin 1997; 192–193; Bodhi 2000; 28). Form-sphere consciousness (rūpāvacara-citta) belongs to the form sphere and beings exist in the form world (rūpa-loka).

21. Theinngu Sayadaw used the Burmese expression pyit-nyat, which refers to the Pāli word paññatti, ‘name’ or ‘concept’ or ‘designation’. As Karunadasa (2010, 52) observes, although the three characteristics are known as universal characteristics of all dhammas, i.e. elementary components that make up the experienced world, they turn out to be conceptual constructions with no objective reality.
A senior nun, Sayagyì Daw Eka, from the Vijjodaya Theinn Meditation Centre in Pyay normally demonstrates the Theinngu breathing technique during meditation sessions. See https://www.facebook.com/vizawdayatheinn/videos/1,680,647,638,856,622/ (accessed on 20/09/2018) for a video recording of the breathing demonstrated by her at a retreat in Singapore.

Personal communication with Aunglan Sayadaw Ven. Candimā on 05/09/2008.

See Skilton in this volume for how the rūpa-kammaṭṭhāna is understood within the meditation tradition at Wat Ratchasittharam in Bangkok.

Personal communication with Vijjodaya Sayadaw on 08/10/2011.

See Houtman (1990, 326–337) for a detailed analysis of the place of monk hagiography in the context of Burmese biography.

See Janaka and Crosby (2017, 217–219) for a summary of the vinicchaya case on Kyauk-thìn-bàw Sayadaw’s teachings.

See Ukkaṭṭha (1963) for an example of the recording between the monks from Kyauk-thìn-bàw meditation tradition and Theinngu Sayadaw. Based on the available sources on the catechism, we cannot be sure whether or not it was the first Kyauk-thìn-bàw Sayadaw Ven. Kesava (1902–1967) who tested Theinngu Sayadaw. Kyauk-thìn-bàw Sayadaw Ven. Visuddha (1930/31–2003) that Janaka and Crosby (2017, 217) mention in their article was the second abbot of the Kyauk-thìn-bàw Monastery in Kyaukse, which is now known as Nyein-chàn-yày (Peace) Monastery.

See Braun (2013, 46–76) for the detailed analysis of these debates. For examples of the burgeoning literature produced by such debate in other areas of Buddhist practice, see Nagasena Bhikkhu (2012, chapter 3).

The nature and frequency of monastic trial cases prior to the 1980s in Myanmar warrants further research.

See Carbine (2011), Braun (2013), Kyaw (2014) and Turner (2014) for detailed discussions of how multiple socio-political, religious and cultural factors have contributed to the Burmese Buddhist worldview of a continuous struggle to purify, preserve and propagate the Buddha’s sāsana.

My respondents use a Burmese loanword law-ka-dan-ta-ya, referring to the Pāli compound loka-dhamma, ‘worldly conditions’. The Pāṭhamalokadhama-sutta (AN. 8.5) and the Dutiyalokadhama-sutta (AN. 8.6) deal with the eight worldly conditions, i.e. gain, loss, repute, disrepute, praise, blame, happiness and misery.

The notion of ‘doing the work of sāsana’ (Carbine 2011, 3), what is called tha-tha-na-pyú in Burmese, has long been an important aspect of the Burmese Buddhist worldview and their Buddhist practices.

See Brac de la Perrière, Rozenberg, and Turner (2014) on the wiekza practices and cults in contemporary Myanmar.

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Audio


**Video**

MEDITATION IN TAI NUEA LAY BUDDHIST PRACTICE

David Wharton

ABSTRACT
The Tai Nuea ethnolinguistic group is found on the periphery of Theravāda Buddhist influence in parts of southwestern China, northern Myanmar, and in small communities in northwestern Laos. Their relative isolation from mainstream reform movements indicates that they may have much to contribute to the understanding of pre-modern local, and especially lay, Buddhist practices in mainland Southeast Asia. This article focuses on weekly days of lay practice during the annual rainy season retreat in a Tai Nuea village in Mueang Sing, northwestern Laos. The practice is undertaken with an awareness of ageing and approaching death by both women and men who are mainly over 50 years of age. It is distinctly lay oriented and takes place with minimal input from the monastic community. There is extensive use of litany and Pāli phrases to request and to take leave of specific activities throughout the day, and during formal meditation small kammaṭṭhāna (meditation) manuals are worn on the head and the entire body is covered with a white cloth. Within a holistic framework of devotion to the Triple Gem and the practices of generosity and morality, meditation is seen as one important component of meritorious activity rather than as a tool for personal transformation.

Introduction

imaiṁ dānakammapi nibbāna paccayo hontu no niccaṁ
imaiṁ sīlakammapi nibbāna paccayo hontu no niccaṁ
imaiṁ bhāvanākammapi nibbāna paccayo hontu no niccaṁ

May this act of generosity be a lasting support for nibbāna!
May this act of morality be a lasting support for nibbāna!
May this act of meditation be a lasting support for nibbāna!¹

These verses summarise the aspiration of Tai Nuea lay practitioners who gather in local temples in Mueang Sing, northwestern Laos, for devotional and contemplative practices during the annual three-month vassa or rainy season retreat period. While lay participation in temple activities on weekly lunar calendar ‘observance’ days is common throughout Theravāda Buddhist cultures, Tai Nuea practice is unusual in being organised by and

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for the lay community. The minimal role of local monks in the practices and related litany is significantly less than in mainstream Theravāda cultures and the self-reliance of the lay community is striking. In contrast to the low profile of most local monks, a small number of caw ton von, or monks who manifest great merit from previous lives, are very highly revered and in some cases are influencing changes in the traditional Tai Nuea practices described here.

Practitioners are traditionally over 50 years of age, and an awareness of ageing and approaching death is a central motivation in undertaking the practice. Young lay women also go to the temple to take part in the offering of food to monastics and laity but rarely stay to listen to the manuscript recitation; young lay men are rarely seen. Other distinctive features are the extensive use of litany and Pāli phrases to request and to take leave of specific activities, the wearing of small kammatṭhāna manuals on the head and the covering of the entire body with white cloths during formal meditation (Figures 1 and 2). There is also an elaborate form of prostration, starting in a standing position and raising the hands with palms together above the head before lowering to a kneeling position. The hands are then lowered, brushing the sides of the head, the shoulders, and down the sides of the body while lowering the body into a kneeling position, then raising the hands to the forehead before prostrating with the forehead to the ground. The body is then raised while drawing the palms up along the length of the legs and across the chest before raising them with palms together above the head while in a standing position. This cycle from standing to kneeling (known as nop long or ‘big bow’) is repeated three times and is then followed by three similar prostrations while maintaining a kneeling position (known as nop noy or ‘small bow’). The form differs from full prostrations found in Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism.

Progression on the Buddhist path is seen as the gradual accrual of merit or von (Pāli puñña) over innumerable lifetimes, taking place through devotion to the Buddha Dhamma Sangha and the cultivation of generosity, morality, and meditation. The resulting merit leads to improved status in future births and eventually to rebirth in the time of the future Buddha Metteyya and in the Jewel City of Nibbana. The formal acknowledgement and recording of meritorious acts is seen as an essential part of this process. When lay practitioners receive offerings they give verbal acknowledgement (in the form of anumodanā chants usually associated with monks), merit is dedicated through the pouring of water, and formal statements are made of the names of donors. These are similar to the written statements found in extensive Tai Nuea manuscript colophons, which also have the vital function of ensuring that the offering will be properly recorded by the deities and spirits and the results of the associated merit will therefore be received.
There are three separate groups of lay practitioners. A small number of senior villagers observe the eight precepts from the afternoon before the practice day until the morning after it, i.e. spending two nights and one full day in the temple each week, during which time they undertake 11 periods of formal meditation, each lasting 30–40 minutes. A second group who are committed to observing the five precepts stay in the temple for a single day from dawn until dusk and undertake three formal periods of meditation, while many other lay people (the third group) undertake to observe the five precepts for a single day, make offerings and listen to manuscript recitations, but will not undertake the formal meditation. 5 Outside of the three-month vassa period, lay people visit the temple only briefly on lunar observance days to offer food to the monastic community and few people maintain the meditation practices, mostly through the use of rosary beads rather than more formal sitting meditation. This article focuses on the second group of five-precept practitioners who spend a full day in the temple each week during the three-month rainy season retreat period. Although the practices are the same for both women and men, with equal

Figure 1. Lay practitioner wearing kammaṭṭhāna manual. Photograph by the author, 2014.
opportunities for five and eight-precept practice, interviews were mostly conducted with three elderly male scribes who were known to the author through previous research, and the experiences and perspectives of female practitioners and of different age groups also deserve further study. An additional area of special interest is the role of Buddhist practice for those who are no longer physically able to attend the temple practices and during the dying process itself.

The data presented is primarily from the village of Ban Silihueang, one of five predominantly Tai Nuea villages within the district of Mueang Sing in Luang Nam Tha province, situated in northwestern Laos close to the borders with China and Myanmar. Out of 83 households there were seven male and six female eight-precept practitioners during the vassa in 2017, together with 15 male and 24 female committed five-precept practitioners. Most of the villagers are descendants of migrants from Moeng Ka (Yongpingzhen) in the Jinggu Dai and Yi Autonomous County of Pu’er Prefecture, China, during the 1920s and 1930s. Speakers of related Tai Nuea dialects are also found in
other parts of Yunnan province in China as well as in parts of Kachin State and Shan State in Myanmar. In ethnolinguistic studies they are variously found as Tai Nuea, Tai Neua, Tai Nüa, Tai Nua, Tai Le\textsuperscript{7} and Dai Na, and are also called ‘Chinese Shan.’ Together with a number of related Tai groups, they have been largely overlooked in the field of Buddhist Studies. The practices described below differ from those of other Theravāda traditions and are as yet of unknown origin. They are an example of relatively few traditional Theravāda lay meditation practices which are not led by monastics.\textsuperscript{8} They also exemplify a long-term, communal view of the Buddhist path as a gradual accumulation of merit and place little emphasis on more tangible results such as calm (\textit{samatha}) or insight (\textit{vipassanā}). As a result, the role of meditation remains well integrated within a holistic practice rather than being isolated as the primary tool for transformation as found in modern lay practice traditions which developed in Myanmar and Thailand in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century and have led to the now globalised practices of mindfulness and \textit{vipassanā} (Crosby 2013, 42–3; and Eberhardt 2017). The geographical location of the Tai Nuea and their relative isolation from mainstream reform movements indicates that they may have much to contribute to the understanding of pre-modern local practices on the northern periphery of Theravāda Buddhist influence in mainland Southeast Asia.

\textbf{Meditation manuals and the ‘Great Storehouse’}

Lay people making a commitment to the five precepts and to weekly days of meditation during the \textit{vassa} traditionally undertake a 3-year period of preparation and initiation at the end of which they receive two small hand-made and personalised mulberry paper booklets from a scribe who is also an experienced practitioner. Most are approximately 10 cm in height and 20 cm in width, with 10–12 pages of writing, while others in a square 20 cm format are folded in half to achieve the same overall dimensions. Both booklets are usually kept wrapped in white cloths with binding cords and are rarely opened or read. The first, a \textit{kammajjhāna} manual containing litanies and meditation practices, has a cord allowing it to be worn on the practitioner’s head during formal periods of \textit{favana} meditation (Pāli \textit{bhāvanā}). The booklets are usually worn on the forehead, in a similar position to the brim of a cap (Figure 1), but in some villages men wear the booklet on the back of the head, while women wear it on the forehead. The wearing of these booklets and the covering of the head and body with a white cloth (Figure 2) are essential components of Tai Nuea \textit{favana} meditation.

Each booklet is a personal copy, containing the practitioner’s name and aspirations for their spiritual development and associated merit. They also contain details of the litanies used to make offerings and to request meditation subjects, together with the methods of practising a number of the \textit{anussati}
recollections, especially bhūdhānussati, dharmānussati, saighānussati, maranānussati, silānussati, cāgānussati, upasamānussati and anāpānānussati, i.e. the recollections of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, death, morality, generosity, peace, and the breath, as well as the four brahmavihāra (loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity), vipassanā (insight through contemplation of impermanence, suffering and not-self), and verses for dedication of merit, etc.

Although highly revered, the booklets are usually unwrapped only once per year and are rarely consulted other than during the period of preparation prior to becoming a five-precept practitioner. The contents of the books are followed more thoroughly by eight-precept practitioners who undertake 11 periods of favana meditation (see below) while staying in the temple each week, while five-precept practitioners are more likely to select additional practices for their three periods of meditation which are primarily devoted to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. It is also commonly held that when wearing the booklets it is not necessary to say all the litanies or to practise all the meditations in detail, since the very act of wearing them confers the same merit as though all were practised.

At the same time as receiving the kammaṭṭhāna manual, new practitioners also receive another personalised booklet of a similar size entitled Ye long ‘The Great Storehouse’ which is normally kept wrapped in white cloth and placed in a small white bag with candles and money which is then sewn shut. This bag is kept to be placed around the neck of the practitioner at death and serves as a kind of identity card or passport to be read by Lord Yama, the ‘god of death’ who judges the deceased according to their deeds. Having such a booklet is said to ensure swift processing (similar to the benefits of a biometric passport) with rebirth in the Tāvatiṃsa heavenly realm and the opportunity to meet the future Buddha Metteyya.

The full title of this text, which is apparently only found among the Tai Nuea, is ‘The Great Storehouse of Dhamma which was Brought from Moeng Fa Tang Fa Tor.’ It begins by requesting the protection of the Five Buddhas and then recounts the details of the King of the Island of Lanka’s visit to Moeng Fa Tang Fa Tor to pay respects to the Dhamma books there and continues with a very detailed account of the number of fascicles of particular books and the number of copies (usually much less) which he then took home. For example, for a work of 9,100 fascicles only 40 fascicles were brought back or for a work of 450 fascicles only 20 were brought. Most of the titles are not recognisable as canonical texts, such as Tham xam xuek (meaning unknown) or Tham amat lom kan ‘The Dhamma of the Counsellor’s Discussion,’ but several, such as Mahājāti (of which 6 out of 305 fascicles were taken to the Island of Lanka) or Mahāpāṭṭhāna (50 out of 100 fascicles taken) may be canonical.
The booklet continues with an extremely detailed account of the number of religious buildings in Moeng Fa Tang Fa Tor during the lifetime of the Buddha, such as 3,695,203 monasteries, 6,080,800 communities of white-robed nuns, etc. It concludes with a description of the benefits to those who pay homage to the booklets, such as receiving the protection of Sakka, and finally Pāli verses on the five devadūta or ‘divine messengers’ of birth, old age, sickness, suffering and death. Most elderly Tai Nuea keep copies of this text. The receipt of this booklet for use at the time of death, together with the marañānussati ‘recollection of death’ in the kammaṭṭhāna manuals, deepens awareness of the ageing process and the inevitability of death when villagers take up more intense practice at around the age of 50.

**Weekly days of practice during the rainy season retreat period**

On weekly observance days during the three-month rainy season retreat period (between July and October), five-precept lay practitioners gather in the temple before dawn and return home at dusk. The day’s practice begins before leaving home by wearing a special shoulder bag holding the white covering cloths, kammaṭṭhāna and Ye long booklets, rosary beads, candles, etc. and paying respects to one’s parents (or their spirits if they are deceased) and to the spirits who protect the house, requesting their support. A Pāli phrase is then recited to relinquish one’s home and the practitioner walks to the temple, carrying the shoulder bag, an offering tray with candles and leaves, and a larger bag with sitting and sleeping mats and cushions.

The day is structured around three formal favana meditation periods, in the early morning, mid-morning and late afternoon, which are for the recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, respectively, during which the personal kammaṭṭhāna manual and white cloth are worn. Before the first of these periods, the senior monk places the booklet on each practitioner’s head after they have undertaken the five precepts (Figure 3). This is one of the few roles for monks and novices during the day, the others being blessing chants at the meal offering and during the closing litany, and a short manuscript reading during the afternoon. The five precepts are again requested before the meal (at around 10 a.m.) and for a third time in the late afternoon. Following each period of favana, water is poured to dedicate the resulting merit and then rosary beads are used and water is again poured.

Liturgical and devotional activities occur throughout the day, during which numerous offerings are made, especially of sticky rice, small taper-like candles (lit and unlit), may can ku leaves, paper money, biscuits and boiled sweets. When arriving in the early morning, five-precept practitioners first offer these at two special trays in front of the main Buddha image and request to undertake the day of practice, then to the Buddha (in a large alms bowl)
near the main image, to the Dhamma (again in an alms bowl) at an image of Mahā Kaccāyana, then to each of the Buddhas of the days of the week. The offerings then continue to each of nine deities (beginning with Sakka) at a special shrine outside the main hall, and to the Sangha at three separate places, including the rice that the monks and novices will eat that day, while reciting verses for each specific offering. In total, devotional offerings are made at over 20 different places both inside and outside the main shrine hall. These same offerings are made later by all lay supporters visiting the temple, and candles and leaves are offered repeatedly throughout the day.

Groups of households are selected by lottery at the beginning of the vassa to be the main lay supporters for each day of practice throughout the three-month period. Members of this core group for a particular day and other supporting lay people offer food and refreshments to the monastic community, which recites a collective blessing in acknowledgement. Unusually for Theravāda traditions, the lay supporters also make similar offerings to each of the eight and five-precept practitioners, who recite blessings to each individual donor using Pāli verses

Figure 3. Monk placing kammaṭṭhāna manual on lay practitioner’s head before first favana meditation. Photograph by the author, 2014.
which are elsewhere generally the preserve of monastics. A very lengthy statement including the names of all the main sponsors is made in the morning and again at the end of the day’s practice and water is also poured many times to dedicate the merit from such acts of generosity. This statement and acknowledgement of offerings is considered essential as a way of recording meritorious actions, not only for the time of death but also because these bind the participants together and will be reciprocated in future lives.

Manuscript recitations take place for approximately two hours during the afternoon, the first being short sections of texts read by novices, followed by longer readings by laymen. Listening to the Dhamma is listed as one of the ‘Ten wholesome actions’ in Buddhism14 and is seen as an important part of the overall cultivation of merit. The most popular texts are jātaka tales portraying episodes in former lives of the Buddha,15 and the stories selected usually have interesting or beautiful passages which appeal for their emotional content and are approached through faith and reverence as vehicles of Buddhist teachings rather than through a strong interest in the exegesis of their doctrinal components. They exemplify the workings of kamma and the gradual accrual of merit over many lifetimes which mirrors the ‘long-term’ approach of Tai Nua villagers to Buddhist practice. The communal aspect of kamma illustrated in the jātaka stories is also mirrored in Tai Nua lay practitioners’ expressions of supporting each other on the path and of consciously developing good kamma together and building relationships which will be of mutual benefit in future lifetimes.16

Following the manuscript recitation there is a short break to wash one’s face and hands before the final favana meditation, dedicated to the Sangha, after which the senior monk returns and the statement of offerings and dedication of merit is repeated, the monk gives another blessing in acknowledgement, and the practitioners undertake the five precepts for the third time. After the monk then leaves, the lay practitioners gather their belongings in the shrine hall and sweep the hall together while circumambulating the shrine. Finally there is another communal circumambulation of the main shrine with joyous chanting while holding lit candles and making many offerings of may can ku leaves, followed by a litany paying homage to the Five Buddhas before leaving the temple to return home.

‘words of request’ and ‘words of taking leave’

Statements known as kam xo and kam la or ‘words of request’ and ‘words of taking leave’ in Tai Nua are used to formally acknowledge the beginning and ending of a number of activities throughout the day of practice. These include entering the temple grounds, entering the main shrine hall, sweeping, placing one’s mat and cushion on the floor to mark a personal space for sitting and resting during the day, lighting a candle on floor immediately in
front of the sitting mat before practising favana meditation (seen as illuminating the path to nibbana), placing the kammaṭṭhāna booklet on the head, placing the white cloth over the head, undertaking specific meditation practices, pouring water, using rosary beads, etc. Single phrases are also continuously repeated during some on-going activities, such as walking to the temple or sweeping.

While these short phrases undoubtedly function as aids to ‘setting up the mind’ and the cultivation of mindfulness and clear comprehension in associated activities, this is not their explicit aim. Within Tai Nuea practice their main function appears to be as statements to properly delineate and announce the undertaking of these meritorious activities so they may be properly recorded by the deities. That is, they formalise these actions in a similar way to the statements announcing the names of donors on the practice days or in manuscript colophons. Some are very similar to the monastic use of phrases ending with adhiṭṭhāmi and paccuddharāmi for ‘determining’ and ‘relinquishing’ possessions such as robes, alms bowl, sitting cloth, etc. Most are in Pāli, although a few are in Tai Nuea.

The first phrase to be used is sādhu imaṁ gehagharaṁ paṭikkhipāmi ‘It is well! I relinquish this house and home,’ which is repeated three times before the practitioner leaves home to walk to the temple. This statement is made with the understanding that even if their house would burn down the practitioner would not be concerned about it and would continue with their practice. However, with a typical combination of good humour and seriousness, informants noted that while this used to be taken literally, nowadays, ‘due to the decline of the sāsanā,’ people would most probably return home to extinguish the fire. In this case the kam la or ‘words of taking leave’ are used first, and the corresponding kam xo or ‘words of request’ are used when arriving home following the day’s practice: sādhu imaṁ gehagharaṁ adhiṭṭhāmi ‘It is well! I adopt this house and home.’ After relinquishing their home, while walking to the temple, the practitioner continuously repeats sabbe sattā avera sukhitā hontu ‘May all beings be free from hatred and be at ease!’ In addition to the cultivation of kindness and compassion, this is explained as protecting the practitioner from the adverse kammic effects of unintentionally killing insects while walking. At the entrance to the temple grounds, the practitioner stands with palms together and repeats three times sādhu ārāme samādiyāmi ‘It is well! I undertake [to enter] the temple grounds’ before entering. Likewise, sādhu vihāre samādiyāmi ‘It is well! I undertake [to enter] the temple building’ is repeated three times before entering the doorway of the main shrine hall.

When sweeping, the broom is first raised between the palms while standing at the entrance to the hall and the ‘words of request’ sādhu imaṁ iccinilaiṁ adhiṭṭhāmi ‘It is well! I take up this broom’ are repeated
three times before beginning to sweep, during which sādhu imāni paṭipadāni jāti jarā vyādhi maraṇa dukkhamā parimuttisāmi ‘It is well! I will be released from the suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death through this practice’ is repeated throughout. This conscious, focused activity is seen as a simile for sweeping away one’s mental defilements. Before returning the broom, the ‘words of taking leave’ sādhu imāni iccinila paṭikkhipāmi ‘It is well! I give up this broom’ are repeated three times. Sweeping is practised together while circumambulating the main shrine.

Several alternative phrases are found, such as imāni rajukaiṁ samādiyāmi paṭipadā adhiṭṭhāmi for the sweeping practice. In these cases, the terms iccinilaṁ and rajukaiṁ are both understood by practitioners as Pāli terms for ‘broom’ and are rendered as such here although no cognates have been identified (raju(all)aiṁ perhaps being related to rajo ‘dirt, defilement’). Other minor variations commonly found include replacing adhiṭṭhāmi ‘I determine’ with samādiyāmi ‘I undertake,’ and similarly for paccuddharāmi ‘I relinquish’ and paṭikkhipāmi ‘I reject,’ or the addition of mayaiṁ bhante following the initial sādhu. None of the Tai Nuea practitioners in Mueang Sing are scholars of Pāli, but they have a good overall understanding of the meaning of each phrase and the occasions for their use, with importance laid on the associated mental resolve. A small number of terms, such as those for ‘broom’ mentioned above, or the Tai Nuea hybrid Pāli term fūsācīvaṁ for rosary beads, do not have readily identifiable Pāli derivations.

**Sitting meditation with a cloth covering**

For five-precept practitioners there are three formal periods of sitting meditation, known in Tai Nuea as favana, or simply fa (from Pāli bhāvana), held in the early morning, mid-morning and late afternoon, and devoted to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, respectively. These periods are only for those lay people who have made a commitment to the five-precept practice and who have received personal kammaṭṭhāna manuals, while other lay supporters and visitors to the temple leave the shrine hall and the doors and windows are closed. Before practice, the manual is placed on a small ceremonial offering tray together with the folded white covering cloth, rosary beads, five pairs of candles and five leaves (or flowers).

To prepare for the first sitting meditation period, lay practitioners wear the rosary beads around their necks and request the three refuges and five precepts from the senior monk. Then each offers their tray to the monk who attaches the booklet to the practitioner’s head (Figure 3). They then return to their sitting places and recite a lengthy dedication before lighting a candle on the floor directly in front of the sitting place, which is said to light the path to the City of Nibbana, and the monk leaves the hall. The tray is then raised in the practitioner’s hands while reciting three times sādhu sabbañṇu buddho mama.
sīse tiṇḍhatu dhammo mama sīse tiṇḍhatu saṅgho mama sīse tiṇḍhatu kannirajhāna mama sīse tiṇḍhatu ‘It is well! May the Omniscient Buddha remain upon my head! May the Dhamma remain upon my head! May the Sangha remain upon my head! May the meditation object remain upon my head!’ before placing the tray on the floor and fully covering the head and body with the white cloth (Figure 2). Then the palms are raised together while first reciting the phrase pañca māre jine nātha patto sambodhimuttamaiṇi ‘having defeated the five Māra, [our] protector attained the ultimate awakening’ three times and then the xo favana words for ‘requesting the meditation subject’ in both Pāli and vernacular.

The first of the three sessions, which is dedicated to the Buddha, begins with the commonly found Theravāda litany iti pi so bhagavā arahatii sammāsambuddho vijjācaranīsampanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisa-damma sārathi satthā devamanussānāni buddho bhagavā’ti, which is repeated three times. The hands are then lowered and so bhagavā and arahati sammāsambuddho are each repeated three times followed by repetition of arahatii (or now commonly bud-dho) for several hundred or ‘up to a thousand’ times with the in and out breaths. Then the xo la ‘words for taking leave’ of the meditation subject and a blessing and protection are repeated following each practice. Likewise for the later meditation sessions dedicated to the Dhamma and Sangha, the commonly used liturgies svākhātō bhagavatā dhammo sanditthiko akāliko ehipassiko opanayiko paccataiṇī veditabbo viññūhiṇīti and supañjipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho ujupaṇipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho nāyapaṇipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho sāmipañjipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho yadidaṁ cattāri purisayugāni apiha purisapuggalā esa bhaga-vato sāvakasaṅgho āhuneyyo pāhuneyyo dakkhiṇeyyo anjalikaraṇīyo anuttaraṇī puññakkhettaṇi lokassā’ti are repeated followed by repetition of dham-mo and sai-gho, respectively. For these later sessions, practitioners also recite an additional litany before placing the meditation booklets on their heads without the aid of the monk.

For each session, initial homage to the Buddha, Dhamma or Sangha may be followed by other practices, depending on the individual, such as silānussati ‘the recollection of morality,’ maraṇānussati ‘the recollection of death,’ ānāpānānussati ‘recollection of the breath,’ and the brahmavihārā ‘the divine abodes.’

For silānussati the phrase aho vata me silāni ākanlāni asitāni asampalāni akamasāni fuensisāni apalamatāni viññūniyopasatāni samattisāniyovatānkāni (meaning unidentified) is repeated three times followed by many repetitions of silā me paṇisuuddhā ‘I am pure in the precepts.’ Similarly for maraṇānussati the phrase adhuvaiṇi me jīvitaṇi maraṇaiṇi dhuvaṇi jīvitaṇi me nirujjhissati ‘my life is uncertain, death is certain, my life will cease’ is followed by many repetitions of maraṇaiṇi ‘death.’ For ānāpānānussati the phrase dighaini vā assasanto dighaini vā assasāmi’ti pajānā’ti rassaṇi vā assasanto rassaṇi vā
assasāmi ‘Breathing in a long breath, one knows “I am breathing in a long breath,’’ breathing in a short breath, one knows “I am breathing in a short breath’’ from the Ānāpānasati sutta (MN 118) is repeated either three or seven times after which the in and out breaths are counted from one to ten and back down to one, then from one to nine, then from one to eight, etc., down to ‘one two,’ which is then repeated for many breaths before simply focusing on the in and out breaths without counting.

For the brahmavihārā, the practice is more complex, beginning with three repetitions of sādhu ahaśi sukhiha homi ahaśi niddukkhho homi ahaśi avero homi ahaśi abyāpaįjiho homi ahaśi anigho homi ahaśi sukhih attānāni parihaŕāmi ‘It is well! May I be at ease, may I be free from suffering, may I be free from hatred, may I be free from oppression, may I be free from anxiety, may I preserve my own well-being!’ then repetition of ahaśi sukhaśi many times. The practice continues with five more sets of phrases repeated three times followed by shorter words repeated many times: sabbe sattā sukhiha hontu ‘May all beings be well’ and then sattā sukhi are each repeated three times, followed by sa suk repeated many times; dukkhā pamuńcantu pānino ‘May living beings be released from suffering!’ and dukkhā pamuńcantu are each repeated three times, followed by pamuńcantu repeated many times; aho satthā sukha apathā (meaning unidentified) is repeated three times, followed by sukha apathā repeated many times; hontu yadisā kathāthā (meaning unidentified) and then yadisā kathāthā are each repeated three times, followed by yadisā repeated many times; and finally upaįjhācariyā me sukhi hontu ‘May my preceptor and teachers be well!’ and mātā me sukhi hontu ‘May my mother be well!’ are each repeated many times.

Next the practitioner requests to practise the tilakkhaṇa vipassanā kammāṇāhāna or ‘insight meditation on the three characteristics’ based on the Dhammapada verses 277, 278 and 279. The first verse sādhu sabbe saįkhārā aniccaįti yadā paṇṇāya passati atha nibbindati dukkke esā maggo visuddhiyā ‘It is well! All conditioned things are impermanent. When this is seen with wisdom one becomes weary of suffering. This is the path to purity’ and nāmarūpaįni aniccaįni khayattthena niccaįni vata nibbānaii ‘name and form are impermanent in the sense of destruction, nibbāna is permanent’ are each repeated three times, followed by many repetitions of niccaįni. Then sabbe saįkhārā dukkhāįti yadā paṇṇāya passati atha nibbindati dukkke esā maggo visuddhiyā ‘All conditioned things are suffering. When this is seen with wisdom one becomes weary of suffering. This is the path to purity’ and nāmarūpaįni dukkhānī khayattthena sukhaįni vata nibbānaii ‘name and form are suffering in the sense of destruction, nibbāna is happiness’ are repeated three times followed by many repetitions of dukkhānī. Then sabbe dhammā anattāįti yadā paṇṇāya passati atha nibbindati dukkke esā maggo visuddhiyā ‘All dhammas are not self. When this is seen with wisdom one becomes
weary of suffering. This is the path to purity’ and *nāmarūpāni anattā asārakkhatthena sāraṇī vata nibbānaii* ‘name and form are not self, in the sense of being without essence, *nibbāna* is the essence’ are each repeated three times, followed by many repetitions of *anattā*.

Each time the meditation is changed, the practitioner requests that the merit from that practice ‘may be placed upon the head’ (recited in Tai Nuea rather than Pali) and then the new subject is formally requested using its specific litany. At the end of the session, this is done in general for the whole practice, followed by three repetitions of *thi me khaikho nibbānaii nāmakaii mayhaii khipaii me* (meaning unidentified) before removing the white covering cloth and reciting another litany to ask forgiveness for any wrongdoing during the practice. Water is then poured into a vessel while reciting the verses for dedication of merit arising from the meditation, the candle is extinguished, and the practice continues with the use of rosary beads.

The practice of attaching *kammaṭṭhāna* manuals to the head and of covering with a white cloth is also found among Tai Nuea communities in the Jinggu Dai and Yi Autonomous County of Pu’er Prefecture, Yunnan, China, from which the communities in Mueang Sing are descended. However, the practice is reportedly not found in the otherwise closely-related Tai Nuea regions of the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture or Kachin State in Myanmar, nor among the Shan or other Theravāda traditions. Although Tai Nuea practitioners say that these forms date from the time of the Buddha, there is no canonical or commentarial source for them, except for the striking resemblance to the simile for the fourth *jhāna* found in the *Maha-Assapura Sutta* and elsewhere:

> Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; even so, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness.¹⁸

The *favana* sessions, which are usually only 10–15 min in length, are considered extremely important, especially as a source of merit. The attitude to meditation practice is ‘to do enough, but not too much.’ Prior to the early twenty-first century there was a 3-year preparatory period, during which time practitioners would undertake the five precepts and memorise the litany and meditation subjects but only use rosary beads, before receiving the *kammaṭṭhāna* and *Ye long* manuals and using the white cloth for *favana* meditation. This tradition is kept in three out of the five Tai Nuea villages in Mueang Sing, whereas in the other two villages it was abandoned on the advice of a respected visiting *caw ton* von monk because some people might pass away and therefore miss the opportunity to gain such merit if the wait was so long. Nowadays in these two villages interested lay people are allowed to practise inside the temple using rosary beads first, perhaps by simply
reciting **bud-dho** (itself also a recent change from the traditional **arahaiin**)

before later taking up the full **favana** practices, the preparation for which still takes place informally with more experienced lay people. Similarly, a further 3–5-year traditional preparatory period for the transition from five to eight precept practice has now been reduced to only 1 year.

A similar **favana** practice, covered by a robe (but without wearing a **kammaṭṭhāna** manual) and using related ‘words of request’ and ‘words of taking leave’ is undertaken by monks and novices during the first three days following ordination. Local informants report that one to two generations ago, monks and novices would also practise more regularly but this has now been abandoned in local temples around Mueang Sing. On the whole, local lay people are resigned to the loss of traditional monastic practices, which is seen as an inevitable result of the deterioration of the Buddhist religion during this age.

The use of rosary beads

Five-precept practitioners use rosaries of 108 beads, or **mak nap** in Tai Nuea, four times during the day: following each sitting meditation session and following the meal, each time for 20–25 minutes (Figure 4). Before use, the ‘words of request’ **sadhu imain fūsācīvai adhiṭṭhāmi** ‘It is well! I take up these beads.’ are repeated while rubbing the beads between the palms at the level of the forehead. The beads must only be held in the left hand during use by lay practitioners although monks and novices may use either hand, and the ‘head’ bead (where the thread is knotted) must not be crossed over while ‘counting’ the beads, which is seen as ‘crossing the head of one’s parents.’ The following description is taken from a **kammaṭṭhāna** manual, while actual practices may be simplified depending on the individual’s experience.

In the early morning, immediately after the meditation session dedicated to the Buddha, the following Pāli phrases are repeated each for one round of 108 beads: **namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa** ‘Homage to the Blessed One, the Arahant, the Fully Enlightened Buddha,’ **sīlā me pārisuddhā** ‘I am pure in the precepts’ (**āṭṭhasilā me pārisuddhā** if keeping the eight precepts), **kesā ‘hair of the head,’ buddhaiin saranaii gacchāmi** ‘I go to the Buddha for refuge,’ **buddho me nātho** ‘the Buddha is my protector,’ **sattā hontu sukhitā averā** ‘May beings be free from hatred and at ease,’ **adhuvaiin me jīvitaaii maraṇaii dhuvaaii** ‘my life is uncertain, death is certain,’ **nāmarūpaaii aniccaii** ‘name and form are unstable,’ **niccaii vata nībbānaii nībbana is stable,’ and **nībbānaii paramaii sukhaaii nībbana is the highest happiness.’ Then **buddho** is repeated many times according to the practitioner, followed by **mātāguṇaii pitāguṇaii** ‘virtues of the mother, virtues of the father.’ When the practice is completed, the ‘words of taking leave’ are
It is well! I relinquish these beads and water is poured to dedicate merit.

Practice after the morning meditation session dedicated to the Dhamma is largely similar, with the following changes: dhammāṁ saranāṁ gacchāmi ‘I go to the Dhamma for refuge,’ dhammo me nātha ‘the Dhamma is my protector,’ nāmarūpaṁ dukkhaṁ ‘name and form are suffering,’ sukhaṁ vata nibbānaṁ ‘nibbana is happiness,’ and repetition of dhammo rather than buddho. Likewise, after the late afternoon meditation session dedicated to the Sangha, the following changes are made: saṅghaṁ saranāṁ gacchāmi ‘I go to the Sangha for refuge,’ saṅgho me nātha ‘the Sangha is my protector,’ nāmarūpaṁ anattā ‘name and form are not self,’ sāraṁ vata nibbānaṁ ‘nibbana is the essence,’ and repetition of nibbānaṁ and then saṅgho before the final mātāgūṇaṁ pitāgūṇaṁ.

The individual use of rosary beads varies considerably, while maintaining the overall themes of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha and anicca, dukkha, anattā ‘impermanence, suffering, not-self.’ An example of a simpler practice might
be namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa for one round, sīla me pārisuddhā for one round, then kesā, lomā, nakhā, dantā, taco, taco, dantā, lomā, nakhā, kesā ‘hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, skin, teeth, nails, hair of the body, hair of the head’ for three beads followed by kesā for the rest of that round, adhuvai me jīvitaī maraṇaī dhuvaiī for one round, buddho (or dhammo, saṅgho) for one round, nāmarūpaī aniccaī (or ...dukkhaī, ...anattā) for three beads, then niccaī vata nibbānaī (or sukhai... , sāraī...) for three beads followed by nibbānaī for the rest of that round, and ending with sattā hontu sukhitā avera for one round. Other practitioners might repeat metta karunā ‘kindness and compassion,’ muditā upekkhā ‘empathy and equanimity,’ maṁsaī paṭikulaiī ‘the flesh is loathsome,’ or maraṇaī dhuvaiī ‘death is certain,’ for example.

For five-precept practitioners there is an additional period of rosary practice following the meal, during which the practice may be even further simplified to the repetition of a single phrase or word such as buddho. For these periods, unlike the formal sitting meditation, the doors and windows to the main shrine hall are opened and other lay people are free to enter the hall. This means that these morning sessions are often quite busy with offerings being made at the various shrines or offerings of food to the individual practitioners who then temporarily suspend the practice to formally receive the offerings and recite a short blessing in acknowledgement. At the end of each period of practice, water is poured to dedicate the associated merit.

**Conclusion**

Tai Nuea lay meditation in Mueang Sing remains integrated within a holistic practice which aims to gradually accumulate merit as part of a ‘long-term’ view of the Buddhist path rather than focusing on more immediate tangible results in terms of improved mental well-being, collectedness or insight. This is primarily achieved through devotion to the Buddha Dhamma Sangha and the cultivation of generosity, morality and meditation on weekly days of communal practice in local temples during the annual vassa retreat period. Other than the use of rosary beads, meditation is rarely practised outside this time, which may in part result from the fact that the meditation technologies have not been isolated or extracted from this overall framework and are seen as an integral part of communal practices to cultivate merit rather than as the primary tool for progress on the Buddhist path as in modernised and globalised mindfulness and vipassanā meditation traditions.

For local practitioners, this long-term progress is envisaged in terms of cultivating one’s field of merit, leading to improved status in future births and especially to rebirth in the time of the future Buddha Metteyya and
finally in the Jewel City of Nibbana. The practice is, however, also clearly transformative for individuals as well as for their families and communities, and although the period of communal practice is only for an annual three-month period, practitioners report that the positive effects continue throughout the year. Among these more tangible results, practitioners describe increased mental stability and patience, and associated reduction of irritation and anger, which lead to better relationships within households and to the responsible completion of daily work. However, these are clearly also viewed as benefits or blessings of one’s increased field of merit rather than as directly attributable to the psychological effects of meditation exercises. Additional benefits such as protection from physical disease, maintenance of good mental health into old age, and success in trade or farming, are also anticipated for those who cultivate sufficient merit.

The origin of these practices, and in particular the distinctive wearing of kammaṭṭhāna manuals and covering oneself with a white cloth during favana meditation, the use of ‘words of request’ and ‘words of taking leave,’ and the particular style of prostration, is unknown. They are reportedly not found among the closely-related Shan and other Tai groups such as the Tai Dehong and Tai Maw. Local practitioners hold that these practices were passed down this way by their ancestors but have no written or oral record of where they originated, other than the commonly held belief that are from the teaching of the Buddha during his lifetime. Comparison of living practices found in Moeng Ka (in Yunnan) and in Mueang Sing suggests that they are well-preserved in both locations, despite the suppression and destruction of local cultural and religious forms in Tai Nuea communities in China during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

Since the early twenty-first century, innovations to the traditional practices have been introduced in Ban Silihueang, such as abandoning the 3–5-year preparatory periods for five and eight-precept practitioners and the addition of the litany paying homage to the Five Buddhas at the end of the day. In a neighbouring Tai Nuea village in Mueang Sing more extensive additions to the litany were reportedly introduced in 2017, influenced by modern publications from Thai, Lao and Shan traditions. Nancy Eberhardt (2017) examines the role of related rainy season retreat practices in the lives of Shan village elders in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand. Her study focuses on the social and cultural contexts within which the practices take place (rather than their techniques) and expectations about the normal course of life and the ageing process. In particular, she discusses the implications of recent changes in the traditional practices introduced by a local abbot and the impact of a new international meditation centre which provides an alternative venue for merit making and meditation. For the time being, the traditional practices are surviving both these changes and the external pressures of modernisation in the Shan communities she studies,
and in fact younger people are beginning to meditate. While the communal days of practice also continue in Tai Nuea communities around Mueang Sing, younger family members in the village studied express reservations about taking up the practice of their parents due to inflexible hours of employment and the need to work into old age. A large number of young people are also migrating to work or study in other parts of Laos or in neighbouring countries, and the potential loss of these traditions within the next generation is therefore a very real concern for these communities.

As Crosby and Khur-Yearn (2010, 13–15) observe for traditional styles of teaching among the Shan, such local practices challenge perceptions of Theravāda as identical to an ideal ‘early Buddhism’ and related preconceptions about both monastic and lay practice. They reveal the importance of vernacular, and especially lay, Buddhist practices within traditional Theravāda societies which were long neglected in Western Buddhist scholarship in favour of ‘essentialised’ Pāli sources (Hallisey 1995; Braun 2009) and a surprising diversity which is now increasingly threatened by the globalisation of local cultures and of meditation practices themselves.

Notes

1. All translations and standardised renderings of Tai Nuea hybrid Pāli are the author’s unless otherwise acknowledged. For ease of understanding the following examples are provided in standardised Pāli equivalents rather than the Tai Nuea rendering of the Pāli, which can differ considerably from its canonical form. Here, for example, the plural verb form hontu is found in the verse despite the singular noun.
2. These caw ton von include Caw Khuva Von Com (Khruba Bun Chum), Caw Khuva Von Phet, Caw Aya Tham Kham Ngoen, Caw Bun Mi, Caw Von Kaew, and Caw Bun Noy. See Cohen 2000, 2001, 2017 for these enigmatic monks in and around Northern Thailand, and especially Khruba Bun Chum.
4. The lay manuscript tradition and the recitation of manuscripts which takes place in the afternoon on these days of practice is a central feature of Tai Nuea Buddhist culture. The author’s research of lay manuscript literature in this and other Tai Nuea villages in Laos, China and Myanmar has been on-going since 2005, including an in-depth study of a Buddhānussati apocryphal jātaka text (Wharton 2017).
6. Smaller numbers are descendants of migrants from Moeng Tuy and Moeng Lo (Yizhixiang and Minlezheng, both also in Jinggu). The first report of Tai Nuea migrants in Mueang Sing is from 1878 when the ruler of nearby Chiang Khaeng ordered his Tai Nuea subjects to go to establish settlements there (Grabowsky 1999, 241–246). The most recent and larger waves of Tai Nuea migration were from Moeng Ka, Moeng Lo, and other districts in Jinggu (in some cases via Kengtung in Shan State, Myanmar) in the 1920s and especially
the 1930s, which elderly villagers in China attribute to widespread banditry at the time.

7. Tai Le and Tai Loe are cognates of ‘Tai Nuea’ used in relation to the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, where initial /l/- occurs for /n-/ found in other dialects. They are not to be confused with Tai Lue, a separate but closely-related ethnolinguistic group mostly found the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan.

8. See Crosby and Khur-Yearn (2010) and Nancy Eberhardt (2017) for a Shan predominantly lay practice tradition. Although the Shan and Tai Nuea are closely-related, the practices found here are restricted to certain Tai Nuea communities.

9. Pāli forms such as ānāpānānussati which differ from the commonly found ānāpānasati are retained here to reflect actual Tai Nuea usage.

10. This ‘storehouse’ refers to the place where Dhamma books were stored, and is unrelated to the ālayavijñāna (sometimes translated as ‘storehouse consciousness’) of the Yogācāra school of Buddhism. I am not aware of references to a kingdom of ‘Moeng Fa Tang Fa Tor’ in other Tai Nuea texts or elsewhere.

11. The five Buddhas of the present world cycle are Kakusandha, Konāgamana, Kassapa, Gotama, and the future Buddha Metteyya (see Martini 1969). They are found in a number of Tai Nuea Buddhist texts.

12. This is Cordyline fruticosa (Asparagaceae) in Mueang Sing, but may differ elsewhere. Flowers are rarely used as offerings, and incense is not used on these days.

13. This may be due to Mahā Kaccāyana’s status as the most eminent of the Buddha’s disciples in explaining in full those teachings which were only given in brief by the Buddha.

14. See, for example, Crosby (2014, 118–121).

15. A relatively small number of these are vernacular retellings from the classical corpus of birth stories or jātaka; most are apocryphal, modelled on the canonical stories but transmitted separately such as found in local paññasasā-jātaka collections in several regions of Southeast Asia. There is generally no distinction between ‘canonical’ and ‘apocryphal’ in Tai Nuea Buddhist literature. Although clearly ‘birth stories,’ the Tai Nuea versions often lack elements of classical jātaka such as the paccuppannavatthu or ‘story of the present’ referring to an event in the lifetime of the Buddha and gāthā or verses and the veyyākarana commentary; they contain the aitivatthu or ‘story of the past’ (which would normally explain the ‘story of the present’) and usually have a samodhāna linking the past and present and identifying the characters.


19. This is one of a number of changes to the traditional litany have been introduced in some villages since around 2017, sometimes inspired by modern Buddhist publications in Thai, Lao, and Shan.
20. This occurred throughout the Tai Nuea areas in China and the author heard remarkable accounts of villagers risking their lives to conceal and preserve manuscripts, for example, when they were collectively forced to throw them onto bonfires.

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References


Traditional and Modern Meditation Practices in Shan Buddhist Communities

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ABSTRACT
This article explores how meditation is inculcated throughout the life of Shan Buddhists using poetic phrasing and texts, culminating in several forms of meditation as part of the practice of temple-sleeping undertaken by lay Buddhist seniors from the age of 40 upwards. I look at how the poetic texts, lik loung, that form the basis of temple-sleeping practice, may have shifted in content in the 19th to 20th centuries to focus on meditation topics, in a move parallel to the development of vipassanā in lowland Burma in reaction to the threat colonialism posed to Buddhism. I then document the rise of separate vipassanā meditation centres in Shan regions from the 1930s and their ambiguous status as either representatives of Burmese hegemony or drivers of Shan revival. I note the influence of Shan lik loung on practice at such centres, as well as a more recent development, the uptake of vipassanā within temple-sleeping contexts.

Introduction
Buddhist meditation is part of daily life for members of the Shan ethnic group, whose homeland straddles northeast Burma and northern Thailand. As we shall see, from early life Shan children learn such practices as the recitation of meditative words in bed before falling asleep, while in later life they may undertake the more dedicated practice of ‘temple-sleeping’, which includes various types of meditation. This practice appears to date back centuries, although new texts composed on the subject of meditation informed the practice from the 19th century. At the same time, reformed or modern methods of meditation became widely available in the early 20th century, mainly through the Mingun Meditation Association (MMA) (see below), founded by Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw Ven. Narada (1868–1955). Alongside these, we also find meditation among particular monastic lineages, such as the 16th-century Zawti Shan Buddhists, which I touch on very briefly. I shall first describe how meditation is gradually inculcated into Shan life from childhood, then explore Shan temple-sleeping practices,
which forms the focus of this paper, turning finally to the MMA, and how it has come to influence Shan practice.

**Shan meditation in daily life**

A common Buddhist practice in Shan communities is that both monks and laypeople pay homage to the Triple Gems of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha in front of the Buddha shrine twice a day, i.e. once in the morning and again in the evening. The contents of this ritual practice include the chanting of a series of formulae or poems. As in other Theravada Buddhist communities, the Shan use Pali formulas for the recitation of the Triple Gem and Precepts. However, formulas used for other purposes, such as ‘the words of prayer’ (kwam wai phra) for paying homage at morning and evening chanting or at any religious ceremonies, and ‘the words for sharing merit’ (kwam yat nam) at the end of merit-making ceremonies, are usually composed in Shan poetry. In poetic form, the formulas are easily memorised and help the reciters or listeners to gain more devotion or faith in the Buddha and his teachings. Such faith is an important factor for Buddhist practice and meditation. For the morning and evening ceremonies of paying homage to the Triple Gem, there is a specific Shan poem. Beginning with the word okāsa, it is sometimes known in short as okāsa, ‘permission’, or more fully as kwam kan taw ratana sam sao, ‘paying homage to the triple gem.’ It is chanted to request pardon in case one has committed wrong toward the Buddha, the Dhamma or the Sangha. Pali words expressing the qualities of the Triple Gem are also chanted, as well as paritta, texts believed to offer protection against a variety of troubles. Shan also chant Pali words to aid the development of loving-kindness toward all living beings (mettā bhāvanā).

From these contents we can see that several parts of this ritual practice are related to the practice of meditation, namely the buddhānussati (recollection of the qualities of the Buddha) and other anussati practices, as well as mettā bhāvanā.

The incorporation of aspects of meditation in daily life in Shan communities begins early in life, as children. Shan Buddhists learn to memorise the Pali formula of the three characteristics anicca, dukkha, anattā, ‘impermanence, suffering, not-self’, from their parents or senior members of the family from an early age. They say these words every night, as they lie down in bed, before falling asleep, as witnessed by British anthropologist Leslie Milne (1860–1932), who conducted research into Shan ritual practices in the Shan States: ‘Someone recites a few lines on the changes and uncertainties of life, then everyone goes to bed’ (Milne 1910, 112). More recently the anthropologist Nicola Tannenbaum, working in the Thongmaksan area of Maehongson
in northern Thailand, observes that the words *kung phra, kung tara, kung sang kha* (standard Pali: *Buddhagāṇa, Dhammagāṇa, Saṅghagāṇa*), ‘Noble qualities of the Buddha, Noble qualities of the Dhamma, Noble qualities of the Saṅgha’ also form part of the formula for chanting in bed. This is also true of Shan communities in the Panglong area where I grew up. We can consider it as a daily meditation practice among Shan Buddhists. In other words, we may call this type of practice ‘meditation in bed’. The Shan refer to these words that they say in bed as *kwam yawn su*, ‘formulæ for making wishes’, or *kwam mathan*, ‘meditative words’. The word *mathan* is a short form of *kammathan*, ‘meditation’.

Another example of this introduction of meditation into daily life can be witnessed when a boy or a girl sneezes or stumbles while walking. Sometimes their parents would say ‘*anicca*’ for them or ask them to say it. Although the children learn to memorise and say the word, they would not make any attempt to understand it nor take its meaning seriously. However, as the habit is there throughout their life, they could later catch the sense of it at some point and learn more and practise more as they grow and get old. They would say not only the Pali formula of ‘*anicca, dukkha, anattā*’ but also the meaning in Shan next to each word in poetic style: ‘*anicca am-man-am-mye, dukkha khan-zai-sang-re, anattā to-ha-am-lai-wa*, ‘*anicca* not steadfast, *dukkha* being distressed and suffering, and *anattā* not my body’. This tradition of practice is initially learnt orally in one-to-one interactions, i.e. the more experienced people pass on such teachings to the less experienced, rather than through the formal listening to the recitation of Shan poetic literature or sermons from the monks that comes with more serious practice. Even for more formal practice, which I shall explain later, people first learn informally from senior peers before they commence. In this vein, Tannenbuam records an example of this custom. When a friend of hers in Thongmaksan was going to take up more serious practice at the temple, before she actually undertook the practice, she talked to more experienced practitioners, who taught her the words she would need to recite, how to finger beads, what to say, etc.

One could interpret the recitation of these formulæ in these various contexts – the shrine, in bed, when sneezing, etc. – as a kind of protective, or apotropaic practice, yet these small rituals set the seeds for the presence of meditation in the life of the individual. From these seeds, the level of meditation will grow, becoming more extensive as the individual ages. Meditation becomes particularly important from middle age. Usually from their forties and fifties onwards, Shan people will stay overnight in the temple on precept days (Buddhist holy days) to spend more time pursuing religious practices including meditation. From this time, they are better known as temple sleepers, as whom they may learn in-depth Buddhist teachings and meditation from listening to Shan poetic literature on
Buddhist topics while at the temple. Temple sleeping is the culmination of the process that begins with Shan Buddhists learning the Buddha’s teaching on the three characteristics of the world since their early days.

**Temple-sleeping**

Temple-sleeping (*naun kyaung*) is the most popular and extensive way of practising meditation in Shan Buddhist communities. The tradition of temple-sleeping refers to undertaking religious practices at the temple while staying overnight. It includes a practice called *haw lik*, ‘the reading of poetry’, which conveys Buddhist teachings including meditation. The poetry in question is *lik loung*, ‘great poetic literature’, and the existence of such poetry, designed for public recitation, particularly on holy days, dates from at least the 16th century. While this suggests that the temple-sleeping tradition may also date back several centuries, the first eye-witness account by an outsider is that of Leslie Milne in the early 20th century, mentioned earlier, who also observed traditional meditation practices and the associated ritual of listening to poetic texts.

Describing practices in the northern Shan State over a hundred years ago, Leslie Milne wrote:

> Shans do not sleep with their wives during the nights of the fast days of each month; they carry their beds and mosquito curtains to the zayats near the monastery. There they spend the night in reading aloud or listening while others read portions of their holy books. The reading continues the whole night, as they feel inclined. During these nights of fasting, women sometimes sleep in other zayats set apart for women. (Milne 1910, 106)

The tradition thus observed is still preserved and practised among the Shan communities of the present Shan State, Myanmar and northern Thailand. As Milne observes, during temple-sleeping periods it is very usual that a poetry-reciter reads out passages of poetic literature in a pleasant voice while the audience, consisting mainly of temple sleepers, sits and listens quietly in an appreciative manner. Since I have grown up with the tradition of temple-sleeping, I have seen how often it involves the recitation of *lik loung* literature. I observed this while a novice monk at Wat Panghoo in Panglong in Shan State in the Union of Burma in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recently during fieldwork in Northern Thailand in 2006, at Wat Piang Luang (a temple on the Thai-Burma border near Chiang Mai), and Wat Pang Mu (a village temple near Maehongson town, 2006). Again in 2009, I was a member of a research group investigating the transmission of Shan poetry, and we observed the practice of temple-sleeping at the temples in Huai Suea Thao and Huai Pha villages, both in the Maehongson region, the latter being the long term research site of an anthropologist of Shan culture, Nancy Eberhardt. My accounts below draw on all these experiences.
The importance of temple-sleeping as a component of the Theravada Buddhist practice of the Shan is reflected in the architecture and layout of Shan temples, especially in the Shan State. The place where the temple sleepers stay is called sala, or ‘hall’ (Pali sālā), also called zayat or salaup. In the Shan State, as far as I have observed, there are usually several sala buildings located in the compound of a monastery or near to it, some for men, some for women. During temple-sleeping periods, which fall within the 3 months rains retreats, they are reserved for the practitioners to stay in overnight, while, at other times of the year, these buildings are also used for other purposes, such as class rooms or halls for preparing offerings. By contrast, in Shan temples in northern Thailand, men often sleep in the main temple building, i.e. the main shrine room. In Nicola Tannenbaum’s experience in Maehongson, men always sleep in the main temple building, women in the sala.\(^8\) The purpose of sala or salaup buildings in a monastic complex is to provide a quiet place suitable for the meditation practised by temple sleepers. This gives them a space apart from the main temple building, which, in Shan temples, contains not only the Buddha shrine, but also the abbot’s room and his formal space (usually just outside his room) for meeting with guests and lay devotees as well as rooms for monks and novices. Therefore, the main building, while not very noisy, may not be particularly quiet either. Nonetheless, this pattern of the men sleeping in the main shrine room in northern Thailand is found even in well-established temples such as Pang Mu, believed to be the earliest established Shan temple in the Maehongson area. While Pang Mu temple is believed to have been founded in 1467, it has new buildings and I do not know if these new buildings copied an earlier pattern.\(^9\) I speculate that allowing temple sleepers to sleep in the main temple building rather than in dedicated sala indicates a change to Shan Buddhism rather than reflecting a regional difference, more likely to be found on the Thai side of the border and perhaps influenced by wider Thai temple layout or customs concerning the use of temple space.

**How to be a temple sleeper**

Temple sleeping usually takes place on the ‘precept days’ (wan sin)\(^10\) that fall during the three months that make up the period of the ‘rains retreat’ (wā or wāsa).\(^11\) According to the Buddhist calendar, there are four precept or sabbath days per month, i.e. the 8th day of the waxing moon, the full moon, the 8th day of the waning moon, and the dark moon or the last day of the month. In the Shan Buddhist calendar, the 3-month period of the rains retreat followed throughout the Theravada Buddhist world starts on the first waning moon of the 8th lunar month and lasts till the full moon of the 11th lunar month, usually coinciding with a three month period within July to October. For the duration of the wā, as elsewhere in Theravada Buddhism, monks reside in just one
place to observe the rains retreat and try to avoid travel requiring an overnight stay elsewhere.

Among Shan lay Buddhists this is also an important time when they take their religious practice more seriously, particularly by supporting the monastery and including the practice of lay people undertaking temple-sleeping. For the laity, whether they partake in the temple-sleeping or not, the temple is not only a place for religious activities but also for social gathering. For the temple sleepers, staying overnight in the temple is not only a great chance to temporarily stay away from their home, considered worldly, but it also offers a chance for having peace of mind and relaxation, with the *dhamma* in heart, under the shade of the monastery. They take on the eight precepts and follow the restrictive eating practices of monks. Meanwhile other laypeople make merit by supporting them.\(^\text{12}\)

The following account is based on my observation of the religious rituals performed at different temples, beginning with one precept day, the 25 July 2006, during the rains retreat at a Shan village in Wiang Haeng district, Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. On that particular precept day, there were 202 temple sleepers, about two-thirds of them women. Venerable Phra Mahā Kraison, the head monk of Wat Piang Luang, reported that this number was slightly less than that of the previous full moon day, which had been the first day of the rains retreat. Generally, more people are expected to attend religious ceremonies on the more highly regarded *wan sin*, such as full moon days.\(^\text{13}\)

Early in the morning of the precept day, laypeople from the village carried offerings in their hands and made their way to the local temple, Wat Piang Luang. Soon after arriving in the preaching hall (the main temple building), each of them offered popped rice and flowers on three trays – one for the Buddha, one for his teachings and one for the monks. Individual prayer then preceded the start of a formal programme for the collective performance of religious rituals. The programme of the day was divided into two sections. The first was for all people attending the ceremony and the second was for the temple sleepers only, as preparation for their subsequent observation of the eight precepts and overnight stay.\(^\text{14}\)

When everyone had arrived, at around 9 am, the first part of the formal programme started with a request for silence. This was made by a lay leader known as the *pu mauk*, ‘flower man’, or *pan taka*, a Burmese and Pali loanword that has the same meaning (Tannenbaum 2001, 31, 76). His name derives from his practice of always holding a bunch or tray of flowers in his hands while leading the performance of religious rituals. He then led the assembly to pay homage to the Triple Gem, observe the Five Precepts and listen to the chanting of *paritta* by the monks. After that, the laypeople made formal offerings of specific items such as food and other requisites to the monks. Finally, the laypeople shared merit with all creatures – each of them chanting their own words of transferring merit, usually while pouring water, and then all chanting
together the formula of sharing merit while some pour water. This transference of merit signified the end of the first section. At this point, many young people left the temple, and only those who were going to observe the eight precepts, mostly older people, remained in the preaching hall.

After a short break of 15 min, the second part of the ceremony commenced. This entailed the temple sleepers undertaking the eight precepts under the instruction of a senior monk (Figure 1).

The next event in the programme is lunch which for both monastics and temple sleepers takes place about 11 am. Like monks, temple sleepers are offered food by the lay supporters.

In general, temple sleepers spend their afternoon doing various things – it is a ‘free’, or rather, flexible time that they can spend according to their own choice, within the expectations of conduct for temple sleepers. While some talk, others may be seen practising meditation or counting their rosaries. Others
might listen to recorded sermons from a tape or CD player. However, there are certain times when they are required to perform collective religious activities, which usually take place in the main temple building. Such collective religious activities usually take place late in the afternoon and in the evening and the activities include the repetition or reaffirmation of observing the eight precepts or listening to the sermon on meditation given by a monk or the recitation of poetic literature by a zaray, a lay poet-scribe (see below). At Wat Piang Luang on that day, after having their lunch, most of the temple sleepers had a rest lying on their bedding, while some sat around a tea tray discussing various subjects. On the basis of my observation at other temples, it seems that conversations often involve the interpretation of matters concerning the dhamma and meditation.

Later the same month, on the 9 August 2006, I had an opportunity to observe the practice of temple-sleeping at Wat Pang Mu, a village which is about 5 miles away, to the north of Maehongson town. It was the 9th full moon day, one of the biggest precept days according Shan Buddhist calendar, and there were 120 temple sleepers. I observed here that a small group of temple sleepers spent their afternoon listening to an informal reading of lik loung poetic literature on the veranda of the main building of the temple. The lik loung text they were reciting that day was a story of a jātaka, i.e. one of the Buddha’s former lives, in this case the Sao Maho (Mahosatā Jātaka). It was recited in turn by two zarays, Zaray Oo and Zaray Sang Ken. As it was an informal recitation event, the reciters and the audience were just sitting around a tea tray as they enjoyed listening to the tale of Mahosathā. They stopped the recitation at the end of almost every paragraph to discuss the content of the texts (see Figure 2). All the temple sleepers listening to the jātaka were male. The division between male and female participants, who stay in different buildings during the ritual of temple-sleeping, pervades the rest of the activities. Even when engaging in shared activities, they also sit apart. Such separate groups of male and female can be seen in Figure 1.

Returning to the programme at Wat Piang Luang on the 25 July 2006 as afternoon turned to evening, at around 7 pm, all the temple-sleepers, men and women, gathered in the preaching hall for the ritual of listening to poetic texts on meditation. This time, the recitation of poetry was formal, with the zaray, sitting at the front, in a special enclosure, facing the Buddha image. As a novice, learning to read Shan and taking primary monastic education, I observed how such recitation of lik loung, great poetic texts, took place at almost every occasion of temple-sleeping, usually in two sessions: together as a mixed group, then as the night progresses and the women retire to separate accommodation, the male zaray may continue with the male temple sleepers and the female temple sleepers may continue on their own or with a female zaray where one is available (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 8). Hence, sometimes more than one zaray (lay reader) is
Figure 2(a). A group of temple sleepers (above), led by Zaray Oo (in Figure 2(b) below), having an informal reading and listening to a lik loung poetic text on the terrace of Wat Pang Mu on the 9 August 2006. (Photo: On Khur-Yearn).

Figure 2(b).
required to recite the *lik loung* texts at the temple.\(^\text{18}\) When needed, young monks and novices who had done some training and practiced reading *lik loung* were also invited to read *lik loung* texts for temple sleepers.\(^\text{19}\)

Most members of the audience for the recitation sat still in meditation posture. This involves sitting with crossed legs rather than legs tucked to one side, the usual position of respectful sitting. They sat with the upper half of their bodies upright, not bending nor leaning on anything, placing their hands palm-up on their lap, and facing the shrine, with their eyes closed as they listened to the poetry. They did not interrupt. Unlike the earlier tea-time gathering, any questions or topics that arose were discussed between the poetic reader and the audience only at the interval or tea break, in a way equivalent to the question time at lectures or meditation courses.

The temple sleepers eventually go to sleep at the temple, and usually leave after receiving an offering of breakfast the following morning, after re-observing the five precepts. Sometimes they will continue until the next lunch, with another sermon and further rosary-based meditation (see below).

In addition to the ritual of listening to poetic literature, some laypeople memorise Pali or Shan poetic formulas for their own recitation. For instance, they learn to memorise the formulas they should recite during the practice of temple-sleeping. Some of these are the same as those mentioned earlier, the ‘words of prayer’ (*kwam wai phra*) for paying homage at morning and evening chanting or at any religious ceremonies, and ‘the words for sharing merit’ (*kwam yat nam*) at the end of merit-making ceremonies. However, some are specific for temple-sleeping. The following is an example of a Shan poetic formula called *kwam long kyaung*, ‘words of leaving temple’, that a temple sleeper should recite before leaving the temple to return home.

**Kwam Long Kyaung**

*Muea wa kha ma kham sin paet, kha te sim maet wai nai zai,*

*Sao akha kang nai, mon kham phra tra sum mung mai hom kan,*

*Sin paet kaw am pha, sin ha kaw am wang,*

*Sin saeng saung mang mang aun kwa na, na mueang sao pai la, kha te kham ao pin sin ha khuen muea kha aw.*\(^\text{20}\)

**The formula for leaving the temple**

Yesterday, I came to observe the Eight Precepts; I will keep them in my mind.

At dawn, the blessings of the Buddha and the Dhamma are my shelter.
They are in fact like the leaves [of a tree] covering the branches.
I neither give up the Eight Precepts nor abandon the Five Precepts.
The light of the Jewel-Precepts leads me forward.
Now, this morning, I will re-observe the Five Precepts, as I have to return home. (Translation J. Khur Yearn)

The meditation of temple sleepers

The meditation practised by temple sleepers can be divided into two kinds in terms of the support or aid used, one type being individual meditation usually done using a rosary as an aid. It may be done collectively but the choice of topic is individual. The other type of meditation is collective, practised during and after poetic recitation, with the recitation being the focus of the meditation.

Rosary-aided meditation

The former types of meditation practised by temple sleepers commonly include ‘recollection of [the qualities of] the Buddha’ (buddhānussati) or ‘reflection on the three characteristics of the true nature of the world’ (tilakkhanā), subjects which are also familiar in other forms of Theravada. It is usually accompanied by the counting of a rosary or ‘prayer strand’ called mak nap, traditionally containing 108 beads. During retreat periods, a Shan practitioner might sit quietly in front of the Buddha shrine and reflect on the qualities of the Buddha with his or her hands counting the rosary. One of the most well-known qualities of the Buddha that is used as a meditation object is ‘araham’ which literally means ‘worthy one’. A meditator recites araham in their mind repeatedly using the rosary to count the number of repetitions until the final bead is reached. Each cycle of the repetitions is then called nueng haup in Shan. By completing one cycle of the rosary with the recitation of araham, one has then reflected on the quality of the Buddha 108 times. In this way, a meditator usually determines to recollect the qualities of the Buddha for over a thousand times by completing 10 cycles of the rosary in one sitting meditation alone. The Shan also believe that this type of meditation practice helps to accumulate merit, which brings good results to them later on in this life or subsequent lives. As with other forms of merit making, the ritual of sharing merit follows at the end of meditation practice.

Listening to the recitation of poetry as meditation

I noted above that in the evening, temple sleepers – and sometimes a few others, including monks and other lay people – gather to listen to the
recitation of poetic literature, *haw lik*. This practice is in itself a form of meditation, recollection of the Dhamma, whether or not the topic of the text is meditation or another aspect of Buddhist teaching. This type of meditation falls into the category of meditation with ‘reflection’ (*anussati*), and in this case, the listeners are meditating on the *dhamma*, reflecting either on the noble qualities of the *dhamma* (*dhammānanussatikammaṭṭhāna*) or on the contents of the dhamma contained in the texts. Some *lik loung* address meditation practices directly (see below). During fieldwork in 2009, temple sleepers told us that initially they could not understand the actual content, but that as they gained experience as temple sleepers they also gained the ability to understand and appreciate the content of poetic literature. Be that as it may, both new and experienced temple sleepers listen to the recitation in meditation posture. The person who recites the *lik loung* poetry is usually the *zaray*, the lay poet-scribe, who also participates in the practice of temple-sleeping.

On that day at Wat Piang Luang in 2006, the text recited to the temple sleepers sitting in meditation while was Sao Worakhae’s *Kyam Ne Tang Nibbān* ‘A Guide to Nibbāna’. There are other popular texts for recitation at the practice of temple-sleeping in this region according to our survey during the fieldwork in 2009; these include *Uk puk khan ya* ‘The dialogue on Upokatha’, *Mu suea khuen sin* ‘The hunter observing precepts’ and *Kaya sungma* ‘A sermon on the body’.24

Once the recitation is over, the temple sleepers at Wat Piang Luang, having learned about specific aspects of Buddhist teachings from the ritual of listening to poetic texts, continued to sit quietly either alone or with other meditators, practising their meditation in front of the Buddha shrine. So, I have the impression that at the ritual of listening to poetic texts, the meditators would learn or pick up some essential words of doctrine and/or meditation, reflect on the qualities of the *dhamma*, the *dhamma* content or use a specific meditation practice, if the poetic text in question relates to the techniques of practising meditation. This is different from present day modern-style intensive meditation courses where a teacher gives the instruction first and then the meditators practise meditation using that specific technique afterwards. While the way of learning and practising meditation with modern meditation techniques or centres is more direct, the way of learning and practising meditation through the tradition of temple-sleeping and listening to poetic literature is a gradual path of meditation development.

**Use of Shan poetic literature by the Zawti monastic sect**

While I have associated poetic literature with lay meditation practice in Shan communities, I would like to note the importance of *lik loung* for the Zawti sect or movement. The Zawti sect is named after its founder Varajoti – *joti* and
Zawti are the same word, the alternative spellings reflecting the Pali and Burmese/Shan pronunciation, respectively. Varajoti lived and taught in the 16th–17th centuries CE, but the sect continues to this day, even though it is not one of the nine monastic lineages officially recognised by the Burmese government in 1981. Zawti monks as well as their lay followers are regarded by many Shan people as ‘extremists’ in that they are over strict in their rejection of traditional ritual and their rigorous practice of meditation. Mendelson observed that one of their meditations focuses on controlling the six indriya (faculties): eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind (Mendelson 1975, 231). The monks get up at 4 am in the morning to start their daily routines including the chanting of prayers and practising meditation (Hlaing 1991, 379–380). While I plan to examine Zawti practice more on another occasion, I want to note here that a number of members of the Zawti movement have attended our Lik Loung conferences, the annual conference of the Shan poetic literature held since 2013 and I know, from growing up in the Shan State, that they had a reputation for using poetry in their practice. The Pannyalankara monastery, the Zawti’s headquarters in Mong Yang, is a well-known place for teaching and learning lik loung poetry as well as producing lik loung texts. Therefore, while I have reported on the use of lik loung as an aspect of Shan temple-sleeping, further work is needed on its role in the Zawti sect, with its reputation for strict discipline and dedicated practice of meditation.

Changes to meditation within poetry – the impact of the 19th century revival?

In her account of people listening to poetry during temple-sleeping noted earlier, Milne does not discuss the topic of the lik loung recitation she was observing, and whether or not it was on meditation. While we can take Shan poetic poetry in the form of lik loung back to at least the 16th century and it is possible that temple-sleeping, which has left its mark on temple layout, also goes back to that date, the content of lik loung may well have varied to a certain extent over the centuries. It is difficult to judge with complete conviction, since early texts are mostly undated, meaning that most extant, dated manuscripts are from the 19th century. However, as far as I can tell, it seems that Buddhist stories and Abhidhamma feature from the earliest texts onwards, while meditation as the main subject of lik loung came to be more emphasised in the 19th and 20th centuries. The 19th–20th century revival of meditation in Burma, which led to modern Vipassanā and the modern Mindfulness movement, developed primarily on the basis of important Pali canonical texts such as the Mahāsatiyaṭṭhānasutta and the 5th-century commentary thereon by Buddhaghosa. The revival has been understood as a response to the destruction wrought by British colonialism, and the attendant fear that Buddhism, the sāsana, was under threat of
disappearance (Crosby 2013, 38–39; Kyaw 2014, 111–112). It is also associated with the loss of the Buddhist king in Burma, who acted as primary patron and arbiter of the Buddhist Sangha, giving rise to the emphasis on lay patronage and Abhidhamma and meditation as core Buddhist practices. Although the Shan territories also fell to the British, they continued to be ruled by local rulers or saopha, who continued to act as patrons to composers of lik loung. While vipassanā meditation from Burma would separately influence Shan Buddhism from the 1930s onwards, my research on lik loung suggests that, before the arrival of vipassanā as a distinct activity from lower Burma, Shan Buddhist culture was already responding to the heightened emphasis on meditation, both through Burmese influence and independently. Below I present two lists that reflect my findings from cataloguing Shan lik loung manuscripts.27 The first list (Table 1) provides selected lik loung texts on the topic of meditation, arranged in alphabetical order. (Where there are multiple of copies of texts with the same title, they are arranged by date of the existing copy, starting from the oldest copy first.) What will be noticed is the great variety of poetic meditation texts composed in this period, with the earliest dated 1862 and the most recent dated 1970, and new texts being composed in 10 of the 12 decades covered in this period. The only gaps are in the 1940s and 50s, a period which saw major and repeated upheaval with the Second World War, invasions by the Japanese Imperial Army and then the Chinese Kuomintang, independence from the British, and the beginnings of Shan insurgency against the lack of implementation of federal governance within the Union of Burma. The gaps may either be in composition or in collection.

The second list (Table 2) focuses on just a single text, the Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta, the locus classicus within the Pali canon for the practice of meditation and taken as the main source for the revival of Buddhism in Burma in the 19th–20th centuries. The Shan lik loung texts listed here are all versions based on or inspired by the Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta and/or its commentary. Aside of the first manuscript, which, though undated, I suspect may go back to the 18th century, most are dated to the late 19th to mid-20th century. This date range is slightly narrower than the period for composition of meditation texts in general seen in the previous list and closely reflects the dates of the Burmese revival by such masters as Ledi Sayadaw Ven. Nāṇa (1846–1923), Mahasi Sayadaw Ven. Sobhana (1904–1982) and Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw Ven. Narada (1868–1955, see below). Indeed, some of the texts, such as that by Sao Amat Long, were directly drawn from Burmese writings composed during this period (Khur- Yearn 2012, 209–210). It will be noted that the apparent rise in meditation texts in general predates the active period of Ledi and Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw, whereas the focus on Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta appears to coincide more closely.
Table 1. A select list of lik loung texts on the topic of meditation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Translation of the title in English</th>
<th>Location (temples/Zaray’s houses)</th>
<th>Date of this copy</th>
<th>Authors/earlier or original date</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amatavā-pakāsāni shu-phoi</td>
<td>Commentary on the Way to immortality</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>1880</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Amatavā shu-phoi</td>
<td>Contemplation of the Way to Immortality</td>
<td>Zaray Mu Aung, Lashio, Shan State</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Zaray Zam</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ānāpāna-shu-phoi</td>
<td>Contemplation of In and Out Breathing</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Anik za sa phaw (Anicca-sabhāva)</td>
<td>The nature of impermanence</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1864</td>
<td>Zao Kaw Li</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Anik za sa phaw (Anicca-sabhāva)</td>
<td>The nature of impermanence</td>
<td>Wat Tapung, Lashio, Shan State</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Zao Kaw Li</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bhāvanāyana Asubha vatthu</td>
<td>The story of practising mental development on corpse</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Zao Puññasāra Wan York/1909</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Buddhānussati</td>
<td>Reflection on the Buddha</td>
<td>British Library, UK</td>
<td>1885</td>
<td>1866</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Buddhānussati</td>
<td>Reflection on the Buddha</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
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<td>Zaray Kyauk Saung</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Buddhānussati</td>
<td>Reflection on the Buddha</td>
<td>Wat Jong Klang, Maehongson</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>Mun Zao Kyaung Taw</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Buddhānussati</td>
<td>Reflection on the Buddha</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1887</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Buddhānussati</td>
<td>Reflection on the Buddha</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Buddhānussati</td>
<td>Reflection on the Buddha</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1904</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Jātiddukha akyaung</td>
<td>The sermon on the suffering of birth</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Jātiddukha saṅgvega, tūtīya toi</td>
<td>The spiritual shock on the suffering of birth, volume two</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>Zao Mueang Naung (Zao Amat Long)/1877</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Kāya sung ma sutta saṅgha</td>
<td>Teaching on the body</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1878</td>
<td>Zaray Kham Aw</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Kāya sung ma</td>
<td>Teaching on the body</td>
<td>Wat Jong Klang, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Zaray Sang Aw/1871</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Kammaṭṭhāna dipani</td>
<td>Commentary on meditation</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1879</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>Kammaṭṭhāna zarit</td>
<td>Habits and Meditation</td>
<td></td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Zao Kaw Li</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>Khandha dipani mae daw chut khan</td>
<td>Commentary on aggregates, section of sermon to (the Buddha’s) mother</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Zaray Kham Saii (Tang Yan), lived in Mae Ai/1878</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>Khandhāpūra</td>
<td>The city of aggregates</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td>Khandhāpūra myo pye</td>
<td>The city and sate of aggregates</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1918</td>
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<td>22.</td>
<td>Khandhāpūra</td>
<td>The city of aggregates</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Zaray Mueang Na/1883</td>
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<td>24.</td>
<td>Khandhā phoi</td>
<td>Composition on the aggregates</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>1864</td>
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<td>25.</td>
<td>Khandhā phoi</td>
<td>Composition on the aggregates</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1904</td>
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<td>26.</td>
<td>Khandhā phoi</td>
<td>Composition on the aggregates</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
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<td>28.</td>
<td>Marana-yakkha</td>
<td>The demon of death</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1970</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>Paticcasamuppata (Paṭiccasamuppāda)</td>
<td>Dependent Origination</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1864</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Paticcasamuppata (Paṭiccasamuppāda)</td>
<td>Dependent Origination</td>
<td>Wat Ta Pung, Lashio, Shan State</td>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Zaray Na Kio</td>
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<td>32.</td>
<td>Paramat zu</td>
<td>A Collection of Profound Teachings</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Zaray Mueang Naung/1882</td>
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<td>33.</td>
<td>Paramat zu a-mye a-phye</td>
<td>A Collection of Profound Teaching: Questions and Answers</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1862</td>
<td>Zao Kang Suea</td>
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<td>34.</td>
<td>Patipatti-pakāsani</td>
<td>The commentary on (meditation) practice</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>Zaray Saya Kyauk Myaung</td>
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<td>35.</td>
<td>Patipatti-pakāsani</td>
<td>A commentary on (meditation) practice</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>Sra Subhinna Maung Lao, Keng Taung</td>
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<td>36.</td>
<td>Patipatti-pakāsani</td>
<td>A commentary on (meditation) practice</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Kyaung Taka Pannya/1866</td>
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<td>37.</td>
<td>Patipatā-pakāsani</td>
<td>A commentary on (meditation) practice</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Zaray Subhinna/1905</td>
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<td>38.</td>
<td>Patipatā-pakāsani dipani</td>
<td>Subcommentary on the comprehension of (meditation) practice</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1931</td>
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<td>39.</td>
<td>Patipatā-pakāsani vatthu</td>
<td>The story of commentary on (meditation) Practice</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1932</td>
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<td>40.</td>
<td>Sang khaeng ko pa</td>
<td>The Nine Cemeteries</td>
<td>Wat Ta Pung, Lashio, Shan State</td>
<td>1908</td>
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<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Sang khaeng ko pa</td>
<td>The Nine Cemeteries</td>
<td>Zaray Mu Aung, Lashio, Shan State</td>
<td>1963</td>
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<td>42.</td>
<td>Saṅgvega vatthu</td>
<td>The story of religious emotional shock</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Saṅgvega vatthu</td>
<td>The story of religious emotional shock</td>
<td>Wat Pang Mu, Maehongson, Thailand</td>
<td>1917</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Sung ma Saṅgvega</td>
<td>The teaching on religious emotional shock</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Vipassanā Kammaṭṭhāna</td>
<td>Insight meditation</td>
<td>Fragile Palm Leaf Foundation, Bangkok, Thailand</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>46.</td>
<td>Visuddhi mak kyan</td>
<td>The treatise on the path of purification</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Vipassanā Ovāda shu-phoi</td>
<td>The teaching on insight meditation</td>
<td>Zaray Mu Aung, Lashio, Shan State</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>Vipassanā nyan sip pa a nak</td>
<td>The nissaya commentary on the insight meditation of the 10 stages of knowledge</td>
<td>Wat Tiyasathan, Mae Taeng, Thailand</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>Vipassanā Phoi</td>
<td>A glimpse of insight meditation</td>
<td>Zaray Mu Aung, Lashio, Shan State</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
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</table>
In addition to the earlier texts, we should perhaps note the Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta-nissaya, by the Shan Tipiṭaka Translation Committee composed in 1957 and published in 1958. Unlike other versions, this was written in Shan prose. It is not suitable for haw lik, because it follows strict rules concerning Pali grammar and relies on Burmese nissaya. This latter feature has led to it being criticised by some Shan nationalists (see below).

The interaction between traditional Shan culture and modern meditation practice

Having explored traditional methods of learning and practising meditation in Shan communities, as well the flourishing of texts on meditation in the 19th–20th centuries, I want now to explain the presence in Shan communities of the modern, intensive meditation practices, which usually come under the umbrella term vipassanā. I shall discuss the ways in which the two systems – temple-sleeping using poetic literature and vipassanā – have interacted. On the one hand, we might see intensive methods as a threat
to the preservation of Shan Buddhism and culture. On the other hand, they were initially introduced by reformists seeking to protect Shan communities and not necessarily in hostility to traditional practice. This is particularly true of the Mingun meditation centres (see below), where we now sometimes see the two methods of meditation practice – both traditional and modern intensive – integrated with each other. I shall also note the role played in preserving Shan poetic culture by some of the most famous teachers of modern revival methods of meditation.

Modern meditation instruction is available at specialised centres that run intensive meditation courses and operate independently of traditional monasteries. The actual meditation techniques that are practised and taught in these centres derive from the same ultimate source, the teachings of meditation in the Pali canon, especially the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta*, but they will vary in the detailed manner of their delivery and focus in accordance with the lineage or tradition, the expertise and the experience of the teachers. Teachers may belong to different meditation traditions including Mingun, Mahāsi, Mogok and Sunlun (see Kyaw in this volume). Gustaaf Houtman discusses these traditions and the lineage of meditation masters including Mingun Zeidawun (Jetawun) Sayadaw, U Nārada (1869–1954, henceforth Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw), whose methods of intensive meditation practice has been recognised as the root of Shan modern intensive meditation practice.28 Houtman also gives us some of the historical context for this development of meditation among the Shan. He mentions the pious Shan Buddhist ruler Sao Shwe Thaik (also spelt ‘Thaike’),29 who went on to become the first president of the Union of Burma. Sao Shwe Thaik patronised Shan Buddhist activities such as the Shan Tipiṭaka Translation Project in the 1950s (Yawnghwe 1987, 7) and the promotion of meditation (Houtman 1990, 275 and 297–298). Here we shall find other members of the Shan ruling elite playing a crucial role in the spread of modern meditation methods in the early to mid-20th century.

The tradition of Mingun meditation is named after its founder, Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw, who lived and taught meditation in the early 20th century, with his base in Thaton,30 a town in lower Burma (Houtman 1990, 289). Amongst the meditation traditions emerging in the Burmese region during the early 20th century, the Mingun has reached furthest and penetrated most deeply into Shan communities and, for this reason, will be explored in most depth here. Although the official name of the tradition is known as Sathung Mūla Mingun Zetawun Sāsana Man Aung ‘The Origin of Sathung Mingun Zetawun’s Teaching for the Defeat of the Evil One’,31 it will here be referred to as ‘Mingun Meditation Association’ (henceforth MMA).

The origin of the MMA in ethnic and geographic terms is mixed because of the nature of the complexity of Mingun Sayadaw’s biography. Despite the fact that he is ethnically a Burman and most (if not all) of his early education
was undertaken in Burmese at several monasteries in Mandalay and other parts of Burma, his establishment of and reputation for his method and practice of meditation began in Thaton, a small town in the Mon State. Hence we tend to think of MMA as being of Mon/Burmese or Burmese/Mon origin, rather than purely Burmese. Although MMA was introduced into Shan Buddhism from the Mon/Burmese part of the Union of Burma, and is associated to some extent with Burmese language and nationalism, it has played an important role in the revival of Shan Buddhism and the maintenance of Shan Buddhist identity.

The Mingun tradition of meditation practice was first introduced to Shan Buddhist communities in 1936. It was brought by U Myat Kyaw, a pupil of Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw. U Myat Kyaw, who also taught meditation courses in Yangon (Rangoon), which seems to have been his main base, travelled to Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State, where he gave a talk on the meditation method that he had learned from Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw. After the talk, at the request of some of the audience, including two local Shan leaders, Lung Heing Yan-pe and Khun Htun, a 7-day intensive meditation course in this practice was conducted at the Yawnghwe Palace under the instruction of U Myat Kyaw. It is interesting that the Yawnghwe Palace, 20 miles away to the south of Taunggyi, was used as a room for the first modern meditation course, indicating royal patronage in meditation from one of the most well-known Shan royal families at that time. Today, there are 33 MMA centres in Shan State and 1 in bordering Kayah State, operating under the same tradition and a single administration. Teachers at these centres include monks, novices and laypeople.

Teachers, meditators and supporters of MMA in Shan State have been mostly Shan, who are familiar with the tradition of poetic literature. However, the method of meditation instruction given at MMA centres is mainly based on the works of U Nārada and his pupils U Myat Kyaw, U Khun Htun and U Sucintā, and most of these works particularly those by U Nārada and U Myat Kyaw are in Burmese. All teachers employed at MMA centres have been advised to read those works and understand them clearly. However, for Shan teachers as well as for the teachers at the handful of MMA centres in the Pa-O and Dhanu areas in the far south and southwest regions of Shan State, this recommendation seems to be advice rather than a strict rule. One reason for this is that most of the recommended books were written in Burmese while many MMA Shan and Pa-O teachers cannot read or understand Burmese language. Another reason is the political sensitivity of privileging Burmese over Shan and other minority languages (Khur-Yearn 2012, 196–204). Only one recommended book on the list for MMA teachers is written in Shan. It is U Sucintā’s Satipaṭṭhānādīpanī: a thik pae lae khaw sap laeng man. Despite the fact that Shan literature on meditation is barely mentioned on the MMA reading lists, the performance
of Shan poetic meditation literature does take place at MMA centres. So while neither Sao Amat Long’s famous version of the Mahāsatipaṭṭhānā (1875) nor Sao Wora Khae’s Kyam nae tang nibbān (c.1930s), both written in Shan Lik Loung poetry are mentioned in the MMA’s recommended reading list, both have in fact been performed and are available at some MMA centres. In fact, the audio recording of Sao Wora Khae’s Kyam nae tang nibbān was sponsored by a meditation centre. It is apparent that the recitation of poetic literature performed at MMA centres was influenced by the Shan traditional method of meditation practice. What we see here, then, is that while MMA appears on the surface to represent Burmese revival Buddhism, beneath the surface we see it is closely engaged within Shan culture.

As the traditions of modern intensive meditation, particularly the MMA, grew rapidly among the Shan, their impact was increasingly felt outside the immediate community of meditators. Shan people from different backgrounds, including those with political motivations and a nationalist agenda, came to recognise the social power of these traditions. This growth in interest and awareness, particularly in the Mingun meditation tradition, resulted in a number of consequences, more complex than my question about its relationship with Shan temple-sleeping suggests. One of the most significant consequences may have been that it forced issues of nationalism and cultural identity into a much more public sphere. On the one hand, those who were involved in the MMA movement had a view that MMA had been a key to the revolution and reformation of Buddhist meditation practice as well as a means for the revival of Shan Buddhist identity. On the other hand, those who worked promoting Shan culture or the nationalist movement saw MMA as another era of Burmese influence on Shan culture, or in other words, they saw MMA as a threat to Shan nationalism and cultural identity. Alongside this, many Shan nationalists, especially those involved in the resistance movement against Burmese oppression from the 1970s onwards, criticised MMA practitioners as ‘selfish’ because of the emphasis on self-transformation and personal liberation rather than communal and national transformation and liberation. Among the Shan nationalists, perhaps Zai Long (a pseudonym) is a good example for his criticism of Shan monks for leading Shan people in the wrong direction for the revival and development of Shan communities.

Such Shan nationalists saw MMA as a threat to Shan nationalism and the movement for freedom from Burmese oppression. They argued that meditators, kon kammatthān, were only practising for themselves, i.e. to attain Nibbana, and ignored all other things, such as politics, culture and other social welfare issues.

In part in response to this criticism, some prominent meditation teachers engage in social welfare activities. These meditation teachers have played important roles in the struggle for the revival of Shan Buddhist identity.
Among these meditation teachers, there are four monks of particular significance, who have made a particularly important contribution to the development of monastic affairs, such as leadership in Buddhist organisations, reformation of monastic education, building of Buddhist monuments and places of worship, and teaching meditation. The four monks are Sao-sra Pañḍita (also known as Sao-sra Mueang Naung), Sao-khuwa Boonchum Nānasangvaro, Saokhu Khammai Dhammasāmi and Saokhu Sukhaminda. The inclusion of these four masters here is intended to show that they are not only respected as meditation teachers but also as spiritual and social leaders of Shan communities of their times. From my point of view, they can be even considered as ‘modern Shan Buddhist reformists.’ Of them, only Sao-sra Pañḍita of Mueang Naung has passed away and the other three are still alive and active, continuing their labours in religious activities, such as leading their devotees to work on the propagation of Buddhism, the practice of meditation and other social welfare matters.

An interesting aspect of these three meditation teachers in relation to Shan poetic literature, especially those on meditation, is that, despite their limited knowledge of Lik Loung poetic dhamma, they often show their appreciation of it. While Khruwa Boonchum was often involved in rituals of poetic performance, Dhammasami and Sukhaminda encourage and support the efforts to retain and revive poetic literature. For example, a little over a decade ago, Dhammasami asked Zaray La Tun or known as Zaray Haipa, a modern Shan Lik Loung poet, to compose the 10 jātaka stories in Shan poetry to commemorate his 40th birthday. Meanwhile, Sukhaminda, as the secretary general of the Shan State Saṅgha Council, conferred honorary degrees and awards to poet-readers and composers, thus using modern tools for the recognition of learning to mark the recognition of traditional scholarship. This support has extended to the promotion of research in the area. Dhammasami helped in the design of the 2009 SOAS research project on the transmission of Lik Loung expertise in Maehongson (noted earlier) and he is also the founding Chair of the Organising Committee for Lik Loung Conference, an annual conference held since 2013 on Tai Lik Loung literature largely covering the Shan poetic texts on meditation. These three teachers, Khruwa Boonchum, Dhammasami and Sukhaminda, are often referred to as the ‘three lotuses’ (mo sam loung), which indicate their important status in Shan Buddhist communities.

The influence of modern intensive meditation on Shan temple sleeping

While these debates relate to Shan identity, it remains to be seen to what extent the emergence of MMA and other forms of modern meditation will eventually influence or undermine the practice of meditation through temple-
sleeping. As I have observed, we initially find Shan poetic literature performed at MMA centres. However, modern, intensive meditation centres are a more visible, obvious and accessible resources for finding out about meditation practices among the Shan. Moreover, while temple-sleeping is aimed at older members of the community, i.e. those aged 40 and over, and require commitment, the meditation centres are also aimed at younger people and, not requiring an ongoing commitment or role in society, are more convenient, as Nancy Eberhardt has recently explored (Eberhardt 2017, 296–297).

While the MMA spread to Shan State in the 1930s, it is only over the past decade that the broader popularity of meditation through modern methods seems to have had a direct impact on temple-sleeping practices. While revising this paper, I decided to follow-up on the tradition of temple-sleeping at Wat Panghoo, in Panglong in Shan State, where I had observed temple-sleeping practices as a novice monk. I was able to have an online interview with a local lay reader, Zaray Ping Nya, one of the most respected lay readers in the area at present. This allowed me to observe changes in three aspects of the tradition as follows.

The first change is that the number of temple sleepers at this temple seems to have well increased in the last few years. In part this is due to an increase in the number of households and population in the area. During the late 1970s and 1980s, there were around 300 households attached to and attending this monastery for religious, educational and cultural activities, and I remember that the number of temple sleepers at that time was around 80. As of 2018, while the number of the households has been increased to nearly 500, i.e. almost doubled, the number of temple sleepers has also increased to around 350, over a 4-fold increase. Zaray Ping Nya thought the marked increase of temple sleepers above the factor of increase in households was because people seem to have a better understanding of the rituals and practices, not something one normally expects to hear as society modernises. Perhaps his term ‘understanding’ here also refers to the nature of social changes and transformation, in that there are more educated people in the community and they are also able to manage how they spend their time better, such that they balance work and other social activities with religious services, including the more serious practices such as temple-sleeping and meditation practice.

The second aspect of temple-sleeping on which Zaray Ping Nya updated me is the choice of which lik loung poetic texts are recited during the temple-sleeping. He mentioned titles such as Khandhapura (The city of aggregates), Kuai wan (Sweet banana), Sasana ha heing (Five thousand years of the teaching), Kyam nae tang nippan (A guide to Nibbana), Mahasatipatthan (Great Foundation of mindfulness), Pu thao tham nouk (An old man who asks a lot of questions), Jatibhava sangvega (Spiritual shock on the nature of birth), Khao tang nippan jet wan (Seven days journey to Nibbana), Sao Upagut
Eight arahant monks: four old not dead, four dead not decayed) and Buddhanussati (Reflection on the qualities of the Buddha). Interestingly, most of these lik loung texts are also found in the temple collections of Shan manuscripts in northern Thailand (Khur-Yearn 2012, 79–86). During our fieldwork in 2009, zaray told us that audiences on the Thai side of the border preferred more accessible texts than those on the Burmese side of the Shan culture region. Whether we are seeing a shift in taste on the Burmese side of the border in this selection, or whether the Thai manuscript libraries reflect earlier taste on the Thai side, remains a subject for further research.

The third aspect of the temple-sleeping at Wat Panghoo as reported by Zaray Ping Nya is the introduction of ‘modern’ vipassanā or mindfulness meditation to the temple sleepers. This is both interesting and perhaps alarming, depending on your perspective. At Wat Panghoo, vipassanā has been introduced as one of the activities included within the temple-sleeping programme by the zaray himself. Traditionally, as we have seen, the Shan ritual of temple-sleeping includes a number of activities, including the more flexible ways of practising meditation but not the ‘modern’ intensive vipassanā meditation. Zaray Ping Nya told me that while the number of temple sleepers has increased, there were also some changes to the programme of temple-sleeping. He said in addition to the traditional programme, he also gave a short introduction to vipassanā meditation practice to the temple sleepers early in the afternoon before listening to the sermon from the monks. For this, all temple sleepers gather in the hall of the main building where he taught them the technique of vipassanā meditation practice, specifically the practice of observing breathing in and breathing out, which is the basic technique of vipassanā meditation. He then led them to practise sitting meditation for about 30 min at first, which he later extended to 1 h per session. This adds to information about the recent uptake of modern meditation practices by Shan on the Thai side of the border documented by Nancy Eberhardt, who has documented Shan practices in the Mae Hong Son area of northern Thailand over the last four decades (Eberhardt 2017, 296–97). Eberhardt has recently observed two ways that vipassanā is becoming more popular among the Shan there, both within temple-sleeping and as an alternative to it. In the case of the former, she noted the introduction of vipassanā meditation by the abbot to the temple sleepers at Wat Huai Pha, a short distance from Mae Hong Son. She also observed that some women were choosing to visit centres to learn meditation as an addition or alternative to temple-sleeping. As Eberhardt points out, there are a number of factors, such as modernity, changes to schooling and working patterns and the convenience of vipassanā meditation centres, which must be taken into account to understand the changing face of meditation among the Shan. It looks to be certain that we are witnessing changes to the Shan tradition of temple-sleeping in our age. Nevertheless, as Eberhardt has suggested, we
have to wait and see whether the recent changes will prove a threat to the tradition of temple-sleeping.

**Conclusion**

Shan Buddhism meditation instruction is mostly provided in two, to some extent contrasting contexts in Shan communities. One is the traditional way accompanied by the ritual of listening to poetic texts on meditation, which takes place at a monastery, and the other is modern intensive meditation practice, which mostly takes place at specialised meditation centres independent from monasteries. For the former, I have mainly discussed my observation of the ritual of temple-sleeping at Wat Panghoo in Panglong, Shan State, Myanmar and two temples in northern Thailand: Wat Piang Luang in Wiang Haeng District and Wat Pang Mu in Maehongson. For the latter, I have outlined some of the history and development of *vipassanā* meditation centres, focusing on MMA centres. I first explained how these are seen in terms of Shan identity and then how these are beginning to affect temple-sleeping and the choices Shan make in their meditation practice.

While both meditation contexts have been influenced by the revival of meditation in the 19th to 20th centuries, with a new repertoire of texts from the 19th century and the introduction of *vipassanā* from the 1930s, there are key differences in the way that these two systems for meditation are followed. In the case of temple-sleeping, it follows on organically from the early use of poetry to convey Buddhist doctrines in the life of Shan from the age of their infancy, building up to the practice of temple-sleeping in middle age. Most Shan Buddhists start joining the ritual of temple-sleeping and meditation practices in their forties or fifties. Temple sleeping involves precept-taking, restrictive eating and staying at the local monastery, with meditation forming part of the practice. However, temple-sleeping is only observed during the three months of the Buddhist rains retreat, the *vassa*. The content and nature of meditation practice during temple-sleeping varies according to individual and collective choice, the latter influencing which poetic sources are read to the attendant practitioners. The forms of meditation done on an individual basis include rosary counting for such practices as *buddhānussati*. Collectively temple sleepers then listen to poetry on Buddhist teachings including meditation, both as a meditation in itself as well as being the basis of further meditation. There is a huge variety of texts that are recited as the basis for *haw lik*, poetry reading, for these sessions. Temple sleeping is more flexible in that it includes less structured time, where people can follow their own religious practice, whether that involves individual practice or listening to and discussing Buddhist texts with a learned poet-scribe, a *zaray*, most of whom are lay people. Meanwhile, *vipassanā*, first introduced in the 1930s is taught in dedicated centres, often involves a strict routine and specific, timed
sessions which all must attend, and finds its scriptural authority primarily in the Mahāsatipāṭhānasutta and commentaries thereon. However, it fits with modern lifestyles more easily since it can be taken up by anyone of any age and does not require a specific commitment outside of the period of attendance, whereas becoming a temple sleeper is a change of status that affects expectations of Shan lay people even outside of the vassa season.

So we have two strands of meditation influenced by the Buddhist revival of this period, meditation texts in the form of poetry, lik loung, from the 19th century, intended for temple-sleeping, and vipassanā practices, such as the MMA, which came to the Shan region later, in the early 20th century, and are mainly taught in dedicated meditation centres. Of the two, the practice of temple-sleeping is a more flexible type in terms of meditation practice and routine on the day, but vipassanā is more flexible in terms of age, status and commitment. While Shan poetic readings found their way into centres of the Mingun tradition, as MMA and other vipassanā traditions from lower Burma spread in the Shan region throughout the 20th century, it is only in the 21st century, specifically the past decade, that the popularity of modern vipassanā meditation practices has been on the rise to the extent that it is influencing practice by temple sleepers at monasteries or is seen as an alternative to temple-sleeping. The effect of this is that we are witnessing changes to the components and programmes associated with the traditional Shan ritual of temple-sleeping and meditation practices at local Buddhist monasteries. It may even be that traditional temple-sleeping will be undermined by the rise of vipassanā. However, while further research is needed to confirm changes to lik loung poetic composition and temple-sleeping over the centuries, it does appear that this will not be the first time that changes to meditation culture have influenced temple-sleeping. A survey of recently created catalogues suggests that at the same time as the meditation revival in lower Burma that gave rise to modern vipassanā, the Shan were also responding to the perceived threat of the loss of Buddhism by composing lik loung poetry dedicated to meditation for recitation out loud to temple sleepers, nearly a century before the first modern vipassanā, in the form of the Mingun tradition, was taken up among the Shan.

Notes

1. This article builds on and updates material from chapter two of my PhD thesis (Khur-Yearn 2012). The Romanisation of Shan terms used in this article is different to that used in my thesis; here I follow the sound of words as more commonly used by other researchers, while those used in my thesis followed the ways how the Shan scripts are written and the standard of the Library of Congress Romanisation system.
2. Personal communication with Nicola Tannenbaum 2012.

3. We also find the phrase *kwam wauk mathan*, 'poetic words on meditation', in the context of more formal Shan poetic texts, for example, in the *lik loung* text *Ma hok tua* 'The Six Horses', a 19th-century Shan manuscript from the Wat Papao Collection in Chiang Mai, Thailand. (The digital version of this manuscript is available online from the Digital Library of Northern Thai Manuscripts, www.lannamanuscripts.net.)

4. From my own experience. This is perhaps similar to when English people say 'bless you' to someone when he/she sneezes.

5. Personal communication with Nicola Tannenbaum 2012. See also Eberhardt (2017, 295–296).

6. 'Zayat', a Burmese term equal to Shan word 'salaup' or Pali word 'sālā', was also used by Shan of that time as recorded by Leslie Milne (1910, 106).

7. Other members of the group were Kate Crosby (project leader), Nicola Tannenbaum, Nancy Eberhardt and On Khur-Yearn. Huai Pha village is Nancy Eberhardt's long-term fieldwork site.


9. Wat Pang Mu was founded in 2010 BE (1467) according 'the History of Buddhist Temples in Thailand' published by the Thai Sangha Council. A copy of this book is kept by the abbot of the temple. However, the oldest remaining building of the temple is the *sīmā* or ordination hall, which was built in 2400 BE (1857). The list of known names of the last 10 abbots of the temple only dates back to 2405 BE. (Interviews with the abbot and a lay reader, Zaray Sang Ken, 2006.)

10. For more information on Buddhist precept days, see Tannenbaum (2001, 21).

11. The term wā or wāsā is derived from Pali ‘vassa’ or Sanskrit ‘varṣa’ literally meaning ‘rain.’ The Thais follow the Sanskrit term *varṇa* and pronounce it in Thai accent ‘phan-sā’. For more information on the Buddhist rains retreat, see Gombrich (1991, 326–7).

12. On what becoming a temple sleeper means in term of a longer term change of status and position in society, see Eberhardt (2006, 157–160). The Eight Precepts are: 1) refraining from killing, 2) refraining from stealing, 3) refraining from sexual misconduct, 4) refraining from telling a lie, 5) refraining from taking alcohol, 6) refraining from eating solid food at the wrong time (after mid-day until sunrise), 7) refraining from singing or listening to music and dancing as well as using make-up and perfume and 8) refraining from using a higher seat or bed. For more information on the Eight Precepts, see *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, No. 8.41 translated Hare (1935, 170–171), and Gombrich (1991, 77–79).

13. Of the four *wan sin* or Buddhist holy days, the full moon and the dark moon days are considered as bigger *wan sin*. Again, there other differences of status between the bigger *wan sin*. For instance, during the 3 months’ rains retreat, the first day and the last day of the rains retreat, both of which are full moon, are considered more important than other *wan sin*.


15. There are variety of formula for sharing merit, most of which are in Shan poetry although some are also mixed with Pali in the style of Burmese *nissaya*, word-by-word embedded commentary. Recently, Khuwa Bunchum’s formula of sharing merit has been widely used in Shan community diaspora, and most
notably the Pali term bhāvanā, which refers to meditation in this case, is also used in the formula. For the full text of Khuwa Bunchum’s formula for transferring merit in Shan script, see the Appendix Five of my thesis (Khur-Yearn 2012). On Khuwa Bunchum see below.

All temple sleepers have to bring their own bedding, which consists of a mat, a pillow and a blanket (also a mosquito net in some areas, where there are mosquitoes). See also Tannenbaum (2001, 139–143). Tannenbaum also learned from temple sleepers during her fieldwork that people do not take naps until after lunch, because if they sleep before lunch, the phi li (devata), who writes down the names of the temple sleepers, will miss them. Personal correspondence with Tannenbaum in 2012.

Wat Pang Mu also has a large collection of lik loung manuscripts (see Khur-Yearn 2012, Chapter One).

On the training of zaray, see Crosby and Khur-Yearn (2010)

I myself received some training during my final year staying at Wat Panghoo but did not have an opportunity to perform any recitation as I left the temple soon afterwards for my further education at temples in other towns that had no temple-sleeping practice.

For the formula in Shan script, see Khur-Yearn (2012): Appendix Four. I recorded this formula from a temple sleeper at a Thai-Burma border village, where the Shan tradition of temple-sleeping is maintained to this day.

There are numerous interpretations of the 108 beads, on which see Dubin (2009). Here, the practice is said to be complete by counting 100 and the remaining are said to cover errors or omissions.

Although rosaries are not commonly found in Sri Lankan Buddhism these days, the practice of counting rosaries with the word ‘arahaṃ’ was also found among Sinhalese Buddhists in the 19th century as observed by L. A. Waddell (1896), suggesting that this was once a much more common practice across the Theravada world.

On the use of the word arahaṃ in other forms of Buddhist meditation and ritual practice, see Crosby (2000, 147).

Information acquired from SOAS research group’s zaray survey as part of ‘Shan Buddhism at the Borderlands Project’ in Maehongson, 2009.

The name zawti, probably from Pali joti, ‘light’ or ‘radiance’, was recorded by Sangermano (1893, 111) as ‘Zodi.’ Most Burmese and Shan pronounce it as ‘zawti’ although some would pronounce it ‘zodi’. For more information on the Zawti sect, see Htay Hlaing (1991, 367–386) and Mendelson (1975, 73–77 & 231–234). Neither the Zawti sect, nor the other Shan sect, the Khun/Tham sect, are among the nine sects officially recognised by the government of the Union of Burma in 1981 (Ashin and Crosby 2017, 209).

This requires confirmation, which should be possible by conducting research into the long preambles that often occur at the start of lik loung and identify the occasion for which the text in question was composed or copied.

For more on both lists and for a detailed discussion of Sao Amat Long’s text see Khur-Yearn (2012). Both tables are simplified forms of the lists provided in Khur-Yearn (2012), Chapter Two.

Houtman (1990, 289, 308).

Sao Shwe Thaik was the ruling prince of Yawnghwe state and became the first president of the Union of Burma after its independence 1948. He also played an important role in the Sixth Buddhist Council. For more information on the
biography of Sao Shwe Thaik (or Chao Shwe Thaik), see his children’s autobiographies, Yawnghwe (1987).

30. Thaton, called by Shan as Sathung, is located in modern Mon State, between the cities of Pegu (Bago) and Molemine, of Burma. It is a historical town within the area that has been identified by some scholars as Suvañubhūmi, to which Emperor Asoka of the 3rd century BC is said to have sent two senior monks, Sōṇa and Uttara, for Buddhist missionary work in the region. See, for example, Donald K. Swearer’s discussion of such legendary accounts of the arrival of Buddhism in mainland South East Asia in ‘Thailand’ (2004).

31. The Sāsānānuggaha Organisation, which is the root of Mahasi Meditation centres, was founded by Sir U Thwin and Prime Minister U Nu in November 1947, about three months after the establishment Mingun Kammathan Centre in Lang Khur, Shan State. See MMA (1967) and MMA (1998). More information can also be found on the Mahasi Centre’s website: http://www.mahasi.org.mm.

32. For more details of Mingun Sayadaw’s biography, see Houtman (1990, 289).

33. MMA (1998, 17–18). U Myat Kyaw was formerly known as U Pandidama when he was a monk, see Houtman (1990, 44). Another well-known pupil of U Nārada is Mahasi Sayadaw, whose meditation centres are found through Burma and internationally. See Kornfield (1977, 51) and Kyaw in the volume.


35. Personal communication Venerable Pandita August 2018. Ven. Pandita is an active MMA leader and current Abbot of a newly built MMA Branch in the Kayah State, bordering Shan State. He also told me that there is currently a plan to open a new MMA branch in Namsang Township in central Shan State.


37. I obtained a copy of this recording in CD Rom from Sao-sra Nandiya of Wat Muoi Taw, Panglong during my fieldwork in 2004. I am grateful to Sao-sra Nandiya for his generosity, giving me a copy of each of his CD collections on the recitation of lik loung texts and other Shan Buddhist sermons.
38. The person whom I here call Zai Long is in fact a very influential figure in the Shan literacy movement, who after 1988 was also an active member of a Shan political party.

39. Such claims were common and widespread in Shan communities of Shan State in the 1970s and 1980s.

40. Note that Sao-sra, Saokhu and Sao Khuwa are Shan terms for the titles used in front of monks’ names to indicate their ranks and the degree of respect afforded them. ‘Sao-sra’ usually refers to the abbot of a temple, but sometimes it also refers to a senior monk who has been a monk at least for 20 years. However, the monk who has been appointed an abbot of a temple is called Sao-sra even though he may be less than 20 years in the monkhood. ‘Saokhu’ refers to a teacher or scholar monk, while ‘Khuwa’ (also pronounced as ‘Kruba’ in Thai communities) specifically refers to ascetic monks, usually who follow the Yuan Buddhist tradition in the eastern Shan State and northern Thailand.

41. This loung, which is a numeral marker, is different from loung ‘great’ as in lik loung ‘great writings’. The pronunciation differs in tone.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jotika Khur-Yearn was born in 1969 and grew up in Panghoo village, Panglong, Shan State, the Union of Myanmar. He started his primary education at Wat Panghoo, and
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**References**


Tradition and Experimentation: the Development of the Samatha Trust

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ABSTRACT

Theravāda Buddhism has travelled. This article gives some history of the practice of samatha breathing mindfulness, in the Theravāda tradition, in the UK. It first gives some background in Britain to the arrival of the meditation in the 1960s, then summarises the life of Nai Boonman Poonyathiro, who introduced this method into the UK, a story that is not generally known. The paper describes some aspects of the development of the Samatha Trust in the UK, attempting to show ways a system that was popular in Thailand when it arrived in a new region has prospered, even while becoming markedly less prominent in its own regions. As I am a practitioner in this tradition, before the conclusion I make some personal comment. To conclude, I speculate about features which appear to characterise Buddhist groups in general in the UK, before considering ways that this specialised tradition has adapted in a new setting.

Background

The Samatha Trust, founded in 1973, has as its present aim the perpetuation of the teachings of Boonman Poonyathiro, a Thai meditation teacher who came to the UK in 1963. He started teaching meditation in the UK shortly after he arrived, at the request of the Buddhist Society. At that time, Buddhist meditation was not generally available, and was largely a recent development (Bluck 2006, 4–24). Indeed, until the twentieth century, meditation, as it is understood in Buddhist traditions, was largely unknown in the UK, although there were some early twentieth-century precedents. By the sixties, however, there were a few small groups in the various Buddhist traditions. The Buddhist Society in London, formed in 1907, now offered classes in Japanese Zen. A group that had started in 1951 in Sale, Manchester, with Connie Waterton and Russel Williams (1925–2018), practised some samatha meditation, using at first methods taught at Wat Pak Nam, Bangkok, where the group had funded one of their number, William Purfurst (1906–1971), to practise meditation. He ordained as Ven. Kapilavaddho 1954, initiating the modern trend of
those going to South-East Asia from the UK to ordain, and returned after a few months, teaching in Britain (Snelling 1987, 313; Skilton 2013). The Sale group subsequently moved to insight practice. Other groups included a few Tibetan lineages, after the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese: there were 24 Northern, or Tibetan, Buddhist groups by 1974 (Bluck 2006, 12). Kagyu Samye Ling was founded in 1967 and the Majushri Institute in 1976. Throssel Hole Priory, dedicated to the practice of Soto Zen, was founded in 1972. Youth ‘hippy’ culture supported experimentation associated with Buddhist practice, as Eastern religion, music, meditation and culture became fashionable, an interest bearing fruit in the centres cited above. Some also interested in learning meditation were older, retired from the military and civil service, whose travels had taken them to India, Burma and Sri Lanka. Many involved in Buddhist groups were also associated with Western occult organisations originating in the late nineteenth century (Bluck 2006, 4–24; Cousins 1994; Shaw 2006b, 2010). Before the ‘New Age’, greater international mobility, internet and the recent surge of interest in secular mindfulness therapies, such interests were still considered eccentric. The numbers involved were so small – around 22 lay groups (Bluck 2006, 12) – that it was highly likely that most practising meditators in these groups knew one another, or of one another. The prime interest for participants was meditation, at that time publicly unrecognised, or at any rate unpublicised, in indigenous Christian traditions. While generalisation is risky, the diaspora groups, at that time from Burma and Sri Lanka, who had historic links with Britain, tended to focus on other aspects of practice (bhāvanā), such as merit-making, generosity (dāna) and festivals. This does not apply now: the Oxford Buddha Vihāra, for instance, Venerable Khammai Dhammasāmi holds frequent meditation classes and retreats, attended by longstanding Burmese, Sri Lankan and Thai communities, British practitioners, and all sorts of combinations thereof. This appears to be a reflection of a global as well as a local trend: while statistics are not available, meditation is simply more widely practised by laypeople in any community.

The contrast between the 1960s and the early twenty-first century is made clear by looking at early Buddhist Society directories of Buddhist groups in the UK. One, from 1981, lists only a handful of British groups; by the end of the twentieth century, Robert Bluck’s excellent study, Buddhism in Britain, notes there were now over 30 traditions represented, with almost 1000 sub-groups (Bluck 2006, 3). In the 1960s, the cultural climate was only just beginning to be receptive to meditation practices, in the first generational interest in the West in Eastern religions. There was at that time, however, little on offer from a practical point of view for those who wanted to learn meditation. It was in this atmosphere that Nai Boonman arrived in the UK in 1963 and started to teach the methods he had learnt in Thailand.
So let us move to a brief summary of the life, taken for the most part from a privately printed autobiography, published in Bangkok with parallel Thai and English text (Boonman 2004).

**Nai Boonman Poonyathiro**

Boonman Poonyathiro was born on Thursday, 5 August 1932 in Ta Prik district of Trat Province in north-east Thailand (Figure 1). His father was Nid Apibarnsri, who had come from Cambodia to marry a local girl, Teang Samma. They had three children, with Boonman the youngest. Shortly after Boonman’s birth his mother died. His father, convinced that he had incurred bad luck by hunting a gibbon to satisfy his wife’s food cravings, left the region with Boonman’s siblings, and he was entrusted to the care of a relative. In the absence of formula baby-milk he was breastfed by other mothers around the village. When he was four his adoptive mother died, and his uncle, Wug Samma, brought him up. He went to school at Wat Ta Prik, following the local custom of children going to local monasteries for their education, until he was 11. From an early age his interests were in the old Siamese traditions: his autobiography states, as well as his school subjects, he was drawn to ‘mysticism, sorcery and magic spells’ (Boonman 2004, 8). On his own admission, as he grew up he became unruly and rough, chanting spells as curses against anyone who opposed him, as well as taking up the perhaps more practical method of dancing at the end of the plank that served as the village bridge so opponents would fall in the river as they

![Figure 1. Paul Dennison, L.S.Cousins and Boonman Poonyathiro at the Samatha Centre, Greenstreete, Powys.](image)
attempted to cross. At the age of 11 he also tried abducting a local girl, and was beaten for it.

Throughout his teens he tried to become the village gangster, getting magical Khmer characters tattooed on his arm to help secure victory in fights. After school he minded buffaloes, as his uncle vainly attempted to see that he controlled himself, too. One night, at the age of 15, he overheard his uncle saying that he did not want Boonman to muddy the family name by using his surname. This proved a turning point, and Boonman made the long walk to a faraway village in the hope that he could find some way to make merit (*tham boon*), by staying in monasteries, but he still felt his uncle was disappointed with him. So, saving money from selling water melons, he took the boat to Chantaburi. He walked to Trat province, took a bus to Cape Ngor, and a boat to Ta Chalaep, until he came to Wat Pailom, where he stayed as a temple boy. As well as his other duties, there was time to study too. In order to gain a prize at the temple he memorised in a week a book called the *Dhammaviparg*, considered at the time particularly important reading for laypeople and aspirant monks. Now 16, he spent the prize money on a camera so he could take pictures of beautiful women.

Despite his ‘bad boy’ approach to life, the monks were beginning to notice his skills, and he started to learn meditation:

I had also become interested in meditation practice. The rough boy in me was gradually disappearing. The meditation I practiced was pure *samatha*, mentally noting Bu on the inbreath, and Ddho on the outbreath. I was taught this way by the older monks who, after instructing others, found time to practice themselves. There were no forced or disciplined rules about this, but for me meditation was the most exciting thing in my life apart from studying the Pali language...It was now my life’s goal to be a good and educated person. (Boonman 2004, 18)

The senior monks and his step-brother, Phra Maha Phum, wanted him now to become a novice monk to gain an education. He returned to his village to get the necessary permissions, but as his uncle, suspicious of his motives, refused to give it, he returned to Wat Pailom and ordained anyway, with the Abbot providing the necessary requisites. One condition was that the tattoo had to go. After ordaining at Wat Bhoat he returned to Wat Pailom as Samanera Boonman Samma. During this period he became totally committed to meditation, and as well as studying, used ‘every spare minute to practice’:

I discovered that meditation gave me the most peaceful feelings I had ever experienced, and, furthermore, I came to know the way of arousing inner psychic power, and the ability to use this to empower amulets. (Boonman 2004, 20)

He learnt a number of techniques from other monks, experienced in the *samatha* practices he says were then so widespread in Thailand, as well as reading widely in religion and astrology. He took full ordination at the age of 21, now a highly regarded member of the community. He studied Pāli
and meditation, completing the Parien 4 level of Pāli when he was 24. He wrote plays for the local company, and novels. During this time he developed his meditation further, learning the basics of jhāna practice and the formless meditations. He wanted to study in India, so stayed at Wat Chanasonkram, Bangkok, fulfilled all the requirements in Vipassanā laid down at Wat Maha That for those travelling abroad, and bought a ticket to Varanasi from the sales of two plays he had written.

He spent 5 years at the university in Varanasi, completing a bachelor degree. Boonman did not want to return to Thailand, and knew he would not be given permission to travel to the UK as a monk. At that time there was no policy of sending meditation teachers to teach abroad. So he took the difficult decision to disrobe, having spent half his lifetime, 15 years, as a monk. All his papers were in the name Phra Maha Boonman Poonyathiro, so he kept the name Nai Boonman Poonyathiro. A friend of his, Ajahn Vichian, who wanted to go to America eventually, had a Triumph motorbike. They left India in August 1962, and travelled together on the bike. Sleeping out to save money, they travelled through Pakistan and Iran to Iraq. But there Boonman was accused of spying, taken to Baghdad and interrogated. They sat him in the sun all day, but, finally realising he was innocent, gave him money for a train ticket to Turkey. Here he and his travelling companion were knocked from their bike, spent time in hospital and without the bike, had to hitch to Greece. There were no Thai embassies at that time in most European countries. Eventually, receiving much kindness from strangers, they arrived in Britain. His friend went to the States, and Boonman started work first as a window cleaner, and then, after some setbacks, at the Thai Embassy.

Rather feted after his strange journey, he visited Ananda Bodhi (later Namgyal Rinpoche, 1931–2003) at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara (Dharma Fellowship 2005–2015). He introduced him to Maurice Walshe (1911–1998), the chairman of the English Sangha Trust. Given his background, they asked him to be a meditation teacher. Reflecting on this, Boonman decided to adapt the methods he learned as a monk for British lay people, and started teaching. He did not introduce the refuges and precepts, just teaching samatha breathing mindfulness practice. Eventually, some of the meditators became Buddhist too. Students started to come from Cambridge University, including Paul Dennison and Lance Cousins (1942–2015), who later founded the Samatha Trust, and Boonman taught at the Hampstead Vihara until May 1964 (Figure 1). After that he started a class in Cambridge University on Sundays, and travelled there each week. Christmas Humphreys (1903–1983) was chairman of the Cambridge Buddhist Society, and Boonman became vice-chairman. Boonman took his first retreat in Cambridge in 1971. Through a period of over 50 years, samatha breathing mindfulness classes at the Cambridge University society have continued. The classes were well attended, and he became a mild cult figure, with a lecturer at King's
College praising him for encouraging so many students to give up LSD! In 1973, the Samatha Trust was set up, at that time with five trustees: Boonman, Lance (L.S.) Cousins, Paul Dennison, Chris Gilchrist and Richard T. Wallis. By then Boonman had married, and had a child, Rosalyn, but the marriage was unsuccessful. In 1973 he married Aramsri (Dang) Sriuthai, and, after resigning from the Thai Embassy, returned to Thailand in 1974, where the couple had two daughters, Oranet and Boonyarat. He left in the very week another meditation retreat had been organised. Just before he caught the flight he surprised Paul Dennison and Lance Cousins by asking them to take the retreat instead of him, and suggested they continue as teachers for practitioners in the UK in his absence. At Lance’s funeral, Paul noted that it had been a very skilful strategy, as it meant that two men of radically different temperaments worked from the outset of Boonman’s departure closely together; this they continued to do for decades afterwards.

Boonman had had a lifelong interest in minerals, and as his father-in-law was a jewellery cutter, on his return to Bangkok he developed an interest in tektites. Boonman found and owns the two largest tektites in the world, both weighing 24.1 kg, and one of the smallest, weighing 0.0005 g. Another interest was dinosaur droppings (coprolites), which used to be called the ‘dung of the Buddha’s cow’ by Thai peasants, who found them strewn over NE Thailand. Boonman’s shop in Bangkok, ‘House of Gems’, specialises in both these items. He has never taught meditation, or discussed it publicly, in Thailand. (At an anecdotal level, however, I noticed he was highly regarded by the few monks who knew of him when he visited me while working in the office at Wat Mahathat in Bangkok in 2008 and 2009. They called him ‘Ajahn’, indicative of deep respect.) Although Cousins and Dennison both visited him in Thailand in his years away, he decided not to return to the UK until the Trust had established a national centre.

By 1996, the Samatha Trust had two centres, one in Manchester, and a national meditation centre in Llangunllo, Powys, Wales. The shrine hall was completely rebuilt from a barn, and the house restored and extended. It was officially opened as a National Centre for the Samatha Trust on 3–4 August 1996. So, Boonman returned for the first time in 22 years, to a now much larger group, most of whom had not met him before. There were now groups in London, Cambridge, Oxford and Manchester, as well as many in other parts of the UK. At the time of writing he has returned every year, bar one when he was ill, for a period of 2 months, to teach extended courses at Greenstreete, Manchester and also in Northern Ireland, where there is a samatha group taken by Dermott Murphy. Since the mid 1990s, there have been groups in San Francisco, taken by Dr Chris Morray-Jones, and in Chicago, taken by Dr Jas Elsner and Dr Tom Lockhart. Other groups are forming in the New York area. Boonman has taken courses in the States, and
was present for the formation of the USA Samatha Foundation in 2011 at the Bright Dawn Home Spread Centre, near Plymouth, Wisconsin.

Boonman’s life story itself is idiosyncratic, propelled by his creative sense of timing, some considered long-term planning, but also a willingness to make the most of chance events. These have all had unanticipated effects. Boonman’s life took a strange pattern, and, with a combination of will and good luck, or, in Buddhist terms, opportune *kamma*, this happened to land him in the UK. Using this opportunity to introduce Thai meditations at a time when South-East Asian Buddhists had not yet considered the possibility of teaching Westerners, he then took a considered gamble. He left the UK when there were few *samatha* meditators, on the grounds that it was right to entrust the task of establishing the method he taught to ‘locals’ until such time as he was needed. As a result of this, the meditation method he taught, the product of his immersion in old Siamese traditions, also became established here. But he has always encouraged a ‘British Buddhism’. He did this in 1974, by leaving his two most experienced meditators to take over the task of teaching and, if they wished, finding a national centre. He also does so now, largely leaving the style of the organisation and the content of any associated theory to those in Britain. There are still strong links between the Samatha Trust and Thailand. Ten *samatha* members have at different times taken 3-month ordination in Thailand, or longer, and the Trust has close links with Rāma IX temple in Bangkok. While the Samatha Trust is largely funded by local groups and individuals, they have helped in various fund-raising appeals. The Samatha Trust can, however, be seen as a British offshoot of Southern, or Theravada, Buddhism. This paper explores some aspects of this more.

**Samatha breathing mindfulness in the UK**

After Boonman’s departure in 1974, the Samatha Association and Trust extended the range of groups, principally under the guidance of Cousins and Dennison, who assumed his role as the teachers of this practice. For a number of years, the axis operating in the group was Manchester and Cambridge. At that time, Cousins was a lecturer in Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester, while Dennison, who had trained as a radio-astronomer, worked as a jeweller in Cambridge. Their groups formed the main body of *samatha* practitioners, and at that time reflected their somewhat different approaches. Lance enjoyed group work, exploring the textual base of Pāli literature, and drawing on other traditions to explain and operate his groups: Gurdjieff and his interest in Kabbalah, and friendship with those studying it, were important. Abhidhamma was a great passion for him, and he related this to experiential psychological observation. Paul, however, married to a Thai, Arunee, preferred a more Thai, practice-based
form of teaching. In the early nineties he took ordination in Thailand for 10 months, and after that introduced a number of chants and practices he had learned during his time there. These two approaches complemented one another, and most samatha meditators liked to go on practice weeks with both of them, as they often taught such weeks together.

Two significant events increased the scope of the tradition in the UK and affected the style of teaching over the next three or four decades.

The first was the acquisition of a centre in Manchester, the Manchester Centre for Buddhist Meditation, in Chorlton, in 1976. An old spiritualist church hall, with some odd covenants attached, was up for rental. Despite its poor condition, the building was taken and became at first the Samatha Centre, Manchester. As well as students and recent graduates a wider demographic became involved: longstanding Manchester residents, people visiting for a while and locals in Chorlton, and a variety of age-groups. This had numerous advantages. There really were ‘real’ plumbers, electricians, decorators, and builders involved, at a time when their advice was sorely needed! The centre was refurbished by meditators in ‘mindful’ work sessions. This physical work ensured theory and practice of the group became more grounded, more varied, and richer. This trend, incidentally, has now spread throughout the UK, though the group still has a large amount of teachers, social workers and academics. The presence of a new centre supported groups that arose in towns and areas around Manchester, who took the centre as a basis.

Another feature was that the Manchester centre could also have all kinds of visits: from monks, nuns, and other speakers and practitioners in various traditions, as well as larger events. Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Viradhamma have been long-term friends of the centre, and they, and other monks and nuns from the Forest Tradition, have been frequent guests since and including its opening in 1977. Ajahn Candasiri, one of the first four Buddhist ‘nuns’ in the Forest Sangha, is much loved as a speaker. Ajahn Chah, their teacher, stayed overnight and gave a talk in May, 1979 (Jayasaro 2017, 753–755). In 1982, Ven. Anandamaitreya (1896–1998) stayed, enchanting those present with his beguiling and occasionally mischievous accounts of samatha practices in Sri Lankan jungle temples. His recollections evoked a very different meditative background in Ceylon/Sri Lanka, full of diversity and a great breadth of samatha practice, from the early part of the twentieth century. He made another more extended visit of two weeks in June 1983. Visits from figures in other traditions also became possible. The sixteenth Karmapa, His Holiness Rangjun Rigpe Dorje (1924–1981), the ‘Black Crown’ lama, visited the centre to perform the Bhaisajayaguru empowerment in 1977; a group of samatha meditators undertook the associated practice, and, with new members, this still meets. Ato Rinpoche (1923–), an old friend of the Cambridge Samatha Group, has also stayed. From the late 1980s, such visits had
become well established. Ven. U Ñañika stayed for a period in 1986, giving an introduction to the Abhidhamma Yamaka for those interested. Since the 1990s, Ven. Ajahn Maha Laow (King’s Bromley, Staffordshire) has taught Thai chanting methods to many samatha meditators, and has had several stays at the Manchester centre to continue teaching on the chanting of the Dhammacakkapavattana-Sutta, the Mahāsāmaya-Sutta and the funerary Abhidhamma and Mātikā chanting for those that wish it. Other visitors from the late 1970s onwards have included, in alphabetical order: Venerable Ajahn Amāro (Amaravati Buddhist Monastery), Venerable Bodhidhamma (Satipanya Buddhist Trust), Venerable Candavaṇṇa (Cambodia), Dr Ajahn Dhammasāmi (Oxford Buddha Vihāra), the samatha practitioner nun Sister Dipaṅkarā (Pa Auk temple, Moulmein, Burma/Myanmar), John Garrie, Sister Kovidā, Venerable Kusala (New Zealand), Venerable Ānanda Maṅgala, Venerable Ajahn Mahāmanop, Namgyal Rinpoche, Venerable Piyatisa (Sri Lanka), Venerable Hamalawa Saddhatissa (1914–1990), Venerable Ajahn Sriyansobhon (‘Tan Suvit’, Rāma IX), Venerable Ajahn Sudhiro, Venerable U Titthila and Russel Williams, who continued his strong links with the group until his death in 2018. The Samatha Centre was purchased from the Council, and became the Manchester Centre for Buddhist Meditation, with an opening ceremony celebrating also the building of the new extension, in 2017. Cousins’ family donated his collection of books for the new library, which includes also a range of books originally chosen for the centre by him from 1977 onwards. The library, supervised by Keith Munnings, is now being made available to visiting scholars and practitioners. It is presently being professionally catalogued. These factors have all contributed to a sense that the Manchester centre has benefited from international connections and had contact with a wide variety of Buddhist groups, without losing a commitment to local community work and practice.

The next significant event was the purchase of Greenstreete in 1987. This hill farm, set in 80 acres of Welsh countryside, had an extendable farmhouse, barns and many outstanding natural features, surrounding it, such as cascades from the hills. One of the barns was converted and made into a vast shrine hall, largely with work conducted by meditators on ‘mindful work’ sessions and weekends. The house was greatly extended, and now has eight bedrooms. Near the house a wooden chalet and sedum house provide more accommodation, and there are six huts to stay in dotted around the land too. The centre is home to a number of rare or threatened species, which the Trust tries to support. There is a wetlands area, providing a natural habitat for many kinds of birds, insects, water-plants, trees, flowers and animals. No hunting has been permitted on the land for some time. It was now possible to hold meditation courses there, and every year the centre is in continuous use from early Spring to the late Autumn for these, as well as weekends at other times of year. Some
are classical meditation retreats, other theory sessions, yet others devoted to mindful singing, gardening, walking (around the Welsh landscape) and movements such as T’ai Ch’i, supported by samatha practice. In 2001, the Thai government, in kind acknowledgement of the rootedness of the tradition after 50 years, sent some relics of the Buddha, which are housed in safekeeping in Greenstreete. The Samatha Trust is the only lay organisation outside Thailand which has been honoured in this way. The large Buddha figure in the main shrine room, Phra Buddha Dhammacakra, was sponsored in part by the then King of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927–2016). A festival celebrated the arrival of the relics and the new Buddha figure in the summer of 2001. Ven. Phra Sriyansobhon has also generously donated three Buddha figures he made himself to this and the Manchester Centre. Having a national centre brought tangible and intangible benefits: it put the Trust on the map, literally, attracted new interest and encouraged new groups, and less quantifiably, made people feel that the Samatha Trust had a real ‘home’ in the UK.

A third centre, for the South, has now been bought in Milton Keynes. Also residential, it is set in an unremarkable suburb, near, however, some lovely walks and a lake. After an appeal, largely to European and British meditators, the necessary money was raised for the purchase in 2018. It remains to be seen what effect this has. As it is easily accessible from Cambridge, London and Oxford, with drives of around an hour for each, it is hoped it will sort out a perennial southern problem, room hire and accessibility, allowing people from all the southern regions of the UK to meet together within practicable timings. So far, the centre is being used for meditation days, and for Paul Dennison, now trained as a psychotherapist, to conduct his continuing research on electro-encaphalogram studies on meditators and the effects of samatha breathing mindfulness meditation. These have yielded interesting results, and have focused on the meditations for the rūpa jhānas and the arūpa jhānas (Dennison 2017). At the time of writing change of use applications are being made for the property.

Other recent developments have been the extension of the website to include more of the Trust’s published material as online resources, and more recordings of chants by samatha meditators. There is now a chanting book, intended to be a resource for scholars too, as well as a practical manual (Samatha Trust 2014). There are some occasional publications too (Rowlands 1982; McNab et al. 1996; Samatha Trust 2012). A journal has issues available online. An online meditation course, whereby samatha meditation is taught on Skype to people unable to attend local classes was developed by Professor Peter Harvey, who manages it alongside a group of teachers. Many others, largely from Europe and the States, who have chosen not to enrol on the formal course, practise with Skype with other samatha teachers. The Trust has just now become a Charitable Incorporated Organization, in order to
make financial matters and the growing administrative demands more manageable: the Manchester centre now has its own, affiliated Trust. Most of the work on the centres and on the administration is taken on a voluntary basis by meditators, but the Samatha Trust has a paid part-time administrator. Broadly speaking, the practice of meditation is not considered so arcane now, and the group has become a fairly established lay meditative tradition in the UK. Teaching is always free, in line with canonical recommendations (A III 182–4). A charge is made for courses, and donations are asked for room hire in local groups without a centre. Courses, however, are run by donations only. Such moves, so far successful, means that many elements of traditional practice, such as free teaching, free distribution of publications and reading matter, and courses freely available to those that would like to attend them, can be employed in the UK too. This step was taken to encourage dāna, so often the foundation of all meditation practice in South and South-East Asia, in order that it becomes natural too amongst meditators and newcomers to the tradition in the UK.

The samatha breathing mindfulness method

Although Boonman has discussed the origins of his methods little, they are, he says in part the result of his own adaptations (Boonman 2004, 48). The method is a form of samatha breathing mindfulness. Samatha means calm, and broadly speaking, works as a practice through mindfulness of feeling and the cultivation of higher states of concentration (samādhi) known as jhāna. It encourages emotional strength, and a still centredness and alertness in changing states. His practice is of a type, Boonman says, that was very popular in his youth in Thailand. Nowadays, for reasons importantly delineated by Kate Crosby in a recent book on the subject, such meditations have become marginalised, to say the least, in South-East Asia (Crosby 2013, 1–45), though the popularity of the Pa Auk and the Maung-taung Myae Zin meditations in Burma/Myanmar suggest there is something of a renewed interest in them in some areas (Crosby 2013, 154). Followers of Ajahn Lee Dhamadharo (1907–1961) in Thailand also teach a samatha practice (Harvey 2013, 339). The techniques indicate origins in some ancient, and some more recent, practices in South-East Asia. At the time of writing full details and an account of the method have not been published, on the grounds that it requires a teacher, with careful monitoring and discussion at each stage. Recently, however, the online course in the method, planned by Peter Harvey, has included its own manual, with sections relating to each stage given on a weekly basis, in conjunction with Skype teaching. The basics can be taught over a period of 16 weeks; other aspects of the practice take much longer.
The system, termed simply by practitioners ‘Samatha’, is a technique to arouse both calm and insight. It follows the traditional pattern established in the early commentarial manuals in Pāli on teaching breathing mindfulness for the purpose of attaining access concentration, the four form jhānas, and then insight (Cousins 1973; 1984a; 1984b; Shaw 2006a, 146–158). The method is also employed, in adapted form, as a basis for the cultivation of the formless spheres of meditation, also taught by Boonman in the UK. Many aspects of the meditation are described in the Pāli canon, in the locus classicus for breathing mindfulness, the Ānāpānasati Sutta (M III 78–88), and other texts (see Cousins 1973; 1984a; 1984b; Shaw 2006a, 146–158). The commentaries say that the method the Buddha, as Bodhisatta, used to obtain the first jhāna spontaneously, as a child, was ‘following the breath’ (ānāpāne parīgghatvā pathamajjhānān nibbattesi Ja I 58). It was, the Buddha said, remembering this state, and, perhaps, that method too, that prompted him to forsake the extreme ascetic practices before the awakening, and overcome his fear of happiness, freed from sense-desire. He wondered if this, rather than self-mortification, could offer a possible route to awakening (M I 246–7). The practice works on the balance of concentration (samādhi) and mindfulness (sati), an ancient pairing of factors that appears to predate the emergence of specific meditative schools. Some, more technical, aspects of the method are described in meditation manuals dating from the fifth to the sixth centuries CE, Buddhaghosa’s The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga) (Ñāṇamoli, 1991) and Upatissa’s The Path to Freedom (Vimuttimagga) (Vism VIII 189–212; Ehara, Thera, and Thera Trans 1977, 155–166). The most notable of these are the four stages of counting (gaṇānā), following (anubandhanā), touching (phusanā) and settling (ṭhāpanā). These ancient means of approaching and experiencing the breath, described in detail in the commentaries, are broadly followed in the same way by the Samatha Trust. Each of the stages provides different ways to balance concentration and mindfulness in order to develop jhāna (Bluck 2006, 51–52). Only the method for the first stage, the counting, is undertaken slightly differently in the Samatha Trust from commentarial sources, involving the arousing of concentration by counting while undertaking each breath, rather than making a count of each at the end, as suggested by the early manuals (Vism VIII 190–5; Ehara, Thera, and Thera Trans 1977, 159). So the practitioner counts up to a given number during the inbreath, and counts back down from it during the out-breath. It is possible that this adaptation was made as part of Boonman’s adjustments of the practice for Westerners, whom he may have considered more prone to discursive thought. The other stages are taught largely as they are in the manuals, for the development of the breath as a meditation object leading to jhāna.

Another axis is involved. This involves taking some care in ensuring that each stage is consciously chosen, according to four breath lengths found by the meditator him or herself, set by the longest breath that can be
comfortably taken at a given time. Insight schools usually do not suggest any alteration in the length of breath during meditation; the use of some control over the breath usually appears to accompany those traditions where the attainment of meditation states requires some measure of flexibility to move between and from different attainments, for which changes in the length of breath are helpful.\textsuperscript{13} So, alongside the four commentarial modes, over a period of time the meditator becomes accustomed to the ‘longest’ breath, to the meditator’s own count of nine, the ‘longer’, to the count of six, the ‘shorter’, to the count of three, and the ‘shortest’, to the count of one. The lengths of breath are specifically linked in the meditation to entrance points to particular states. The breath is felt to reflect the mental state; if there is an adaptable approach to the breath there is also the ability to move in and out of meditation as one wishes, and so one can feel that the practice is something that one can control and that different states can be obtained in one sitting. The breath, at the threshold of the unconscious and conscious mind, is considered both something to trust and also, within this practice, something that is helpfully monitored, in order to arouse the necessary mindfulness and balance to attain the meditations. There is an avoidance of the length of the ‘normal breath’ itself during the actual meditation, in order that the practitioner is better able to differentiate the sitting practice from usual daily activities, and to help a clear entry and departure from the sitting. While one would not try to argue precedent, some differentiation between short and long could be extrapolated from the Ānāpānasati-sutta, where the first two stages are described as a ‘long’ breath and then a ‘short’ breath; there is no ‘middle’ length breath in that text (M III 78–88).

The presence of these lengths also suggests a common heritage with some other traditional South-East Asian practices, but evidence is, perhaps satisfyingly, elusive. Correspondences appear to emerge between the choice of lengths of breath and the Cambodian Fig Tree material translated by François Bizot (Bizot 1976[1980]). For instance, mention is made in these texts of four key areas of the body: the nostrils, the neck, the sternum, sternum and the coccyx (Bizot 1976[1980], 248). The four lengths of breath and their turning points in the body could be taken as consonant. Borān Kammaṭṭhāna meditation systems (see articles by Choompolpaisal and Skilton, and Crosby and Gunasena, in this volume), dating back it appears at least two or three centuries, employ symbology, practice instructions and mantras found throughout South-East Asia, and have a number of affinities with the breathing mindfulness method introduced by Boonman. The use of the numbers one to nine in association with the breath, for instance, seems related to the traditional Borān Kammaṭṭhāna texts, though sources currently available employ them differently from the way Boonman does (Boonman 2004; Bluck 2006, 51–52; Skilton and Choompolpaisal 2015).

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Such features are suggestive that the practice introduced by Boonman derives from some common sources, or, perhaps more likely, a shared pool of techniques, symbols and narratives taught in various ways historically throughout these regions. Whatever the origins and comparability of these practices, much of the content of these texts and associated yantras, or magical diagrams, are considered particularly helpful for those more experienced in undertaking Boonman’s method of samatha breathing mindfulness (Dennison 1996, 1997). Certainly the texts have an intuitive, mythical and often devotional style, grounded nonetheless in very traditional Abhidhamma (Crosby 2013, 46–55). Boonman has said that kin methods were widely practised when he was a monk in the 1950s throughout rural regions of Thailand, but, in a good tradition of Buddhist meditation teaching, does not say more. Given the way that the Borān Kammaṭṭhāna texts share so many features in common but also demonstrate considerable diversity of practice and detail, one imagines that monasteries and teaching traditions had their own local variations.

Accompanying the main practice there is also a stress on the brahmavihāras, the ‘divine abidings’ of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. The insight element is included as part of the attentiveness to the breath: the school terms itself a ‘samatha-vipassanā’ school. The breath is moving, and so manifests the mark of anicca, or impermanence. It is not always satisfactory, and so provides a ground for the observation of dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness. The breath is also not ‘owned’ and thus manifests the mark of non-self, anattā.

The active emphasis for this practice, however, is on the cultivation of calm and a particular kind of investigative curiosity – in some cases one could almost say a sense of playfulness with the object of the practice. The traditional words that describe the ‘play’ or ‘sport’ of jhānas (jhanākīḷā: e.g. Ja I 343, 361, Ja II 55) denote an attitude of mind considered helpful for any stage. The style has been described as placing emphasis on a ‘alertness and joyful contentment’ throughout (Cousins 1984a, 283). Because the practice of the meditations involved is potentially so powerful, and involves the sustained purification of the emotional base so as to ensure strength (viriya) and equipoise (tatramajjhātā), this lightness of touch and a care in ensuring there is no rigidity or heaviness in the practice are considered important at all times in a way that they might not be with other methods. A close link, made in the Ānāpānasati-sutta, to the cultivation of the seven factors of awakening, of mindfulness, investigation, vigour, joy, tranquillity, concentration and equanimity, is also explored. Continued contact with the teacher, or ‘good friend’, is always a necessary accompaniment, as indeed it is seen in meditation manuals. But this is flexible: people often attend retreats given by a particular teacher, whether or not they usually discuss their meditation with them (Bluck 2006, 56).
This emphasis on one-to-one consultation about one’s practice, alongside group work, is a hallmark of the group. One could find canonical precedence for the importance of this, particularly for samatha meditation (Ud 34–7). One text implicitly draws attention to the importance of consultation when working with a practice involving nimittas, translated variously as ‘mental images’ or ‘eidetic signs’ (A III 316). In this regard this tradition differs perhaps from some insight schools. Indeed, if one were to say what the particular identifying feature of the samatha breathing mindfulness groups is in the UK, it is the importance placed on ensuring that at each stage the practitioner has someone with whom to consult, and so a friendly basis for the pursuit of individual practice. This feature comes from Boonman, and is considered essential at all stages:

The personal reporting relationship remains important even for teachers, who continue to report either to their own initial teachers, to other more experienced meditators or even to ‘someone with the same level of experience as you’ where this can bring a helpful reflection to support mindfulness. (Bluck 2006, 52)

Group work, and samatha theory and doctrine

If the techniques of the practice the Samatha Trust approach can be seen as traditionally Theravāda, despite their rarity in Thailand now, there are some supporting features that are markedly different from many Asian comparables. Most Southern Buddhist groups are centred around temples, and monastic teaching. Kate Crosby’s study of lay groups in South-East Asia indicates some strong affinities in some regions, and there are lay groups in Burma and Bangkok; this emphasis is, however, less usual in South and South-East Asian Buddhist contexts. But what does seem distinctive, and perhaps particularly European, is the use of a particular kind of group work. To begin the practice, and for two or more years afterwards, the practice needs to be learnt through a teacher who guides the sitting practice in the class. There is a slightly different approach once the practice is well established. An experienced teacher will still guide the practice, and perhaps guide the discussion, but the emphasis moves to personal responsibility for one’s meditation, and the mindful discussion of the practice under varying degrees of disciplined approach. In many ways this approach demonstrates the heritage of the Gurdjieff and Western Kabbalah groups which have influenced the way Samatha has adapted ‘on the ground’ (Samatha Trust 2012, 21–23). It certainly feels somewhat different from Asian models. Discipline under such circumstances is important however. For it is important to keep to some basic rules to ensure the group works well: to stay the whole course of the meeting, to be mindful of others in the group while making points, to address the whole group and not any one
individual, to listen to others in the group carefully, and not to interrupt. The intention is in part to encourage practitioners to think of meditation and theory as something they can both understand and offer creative comment upon, based on their own experience. It is regarded not as an ornament on someone else’s head, to be admired and revered, but rather visible only in one’s own mind (Vism VII 85; Ehara, Thera, and Thera Trans 1977, 235). Group work also, importantly, encourages the move away from not just ‘work for self’, but work for and with others: mindfulness of the feeling of the group as a whole, the material being discussed and the interplay between participants are key.

Content of groups

What is actually discussed in the groups, or done, varies greatly. Some are chanting groups for instance, and the way the chanter has to be aware of others, of the movement within the body of the chant, the contact with the ground and the chant as something to be guided and made good, is itself a group work. Others might discuss the techniques of the practice, and ways different aspects of the meditation may be explored. There is a great interest in various theory systems, always applied to experience that is tested through discussion, amongst many samatha meditators. As Bluck notes:

This inquisitive approach reflects the interests of individual teachers, but also owes something to Nai Boonman’s intellectual and spiritual curiosity, which led him to study mysticism, psychic powers and astrology (as well as Buddhist philosophy and Pali) during his years as a monk (Boonman 2004, 20, 24). Such an approach also points to a commitment to study and teaching which characterises the Samatha Trust as a whole. (Bluck 2011, 56)

Alongside this interest, there has always been a conscious emphasis on reinterpreting and rearticulating Buddhist principle for modern times. Bluck notes that the group is more open to theory beyond the four noble truths and the three signs, and also investigative of a wide field of Buddhist texts (Bluck 2006, 52–56):

The Samatha Trust places a high value on traditional Theravada teachings, but sees no need to downplay aspects which might be seen as problematic in the West. Teachers and members often have the confidence to choose teachings which seem particularly helpful to lay people, rather than accept a pattern which may apply primarily to monastics. (Bluck 2011, 56)

So, subject matter such as the realms of the sense-sphere gods (devaloka), where beings are said to be reborn for keeping ethical precepts (siła), investigation, generosity and faith, and the meditative heavens (brahma-loka), have not been simply rejected as unnecessary, as many modern Buddhists had done. Rather they are actively studied and explored. What
can they tell us about the nature of the mind involved in acts of generosity and faith? Do they reveal anything about the meditative heavens in one’s own experience? The cosmology can then be seen to provide a precise vocabulary to describe different mental states and their capacity (Gethin 1998, 112–132). The 32 marks of the Buddha are also discussed in groups and reinterpreted as areas of experience and skill in meditation; the universal monarch symbology is applied as a way of applying a kind of mandalic understanding of the awakened mind and its relationship to the world around (McNab et al. 1996). In the 1970s, Cousins invited a Cambodian monk studying in Manchester, Ven. Candavāna, to help introduce the Abhidhammatthasaggaha to a group of meditators. The emphasis was on relating each element carefully to experience, and to finding new approaches to psychologies indigenous to Buddhist systems such as this, that provided a more helpful ‘map’ of meditational development and its possibilities in daily life than Western psychological models. What does the skilful mind (kusala citta) mean in practice? Do the skilful, or healthy factors said to accompany an awake mind apply in daily life and meditation? Much of our group work since then has discussed such issues, in the light of experience (Rowlands 1982). Such approaches to theory, and the principle that the teaching is something to be reapplied in new circumstances, so that it is understood and integrated into one’s experience, do seem to follow a particularly European model and taste.

**A personal note**

To conclude this part of the paper, as the practice is one I have been involved in now for a few decades, as a final note I will make some first-person observations about the way it has developed in the UK. I came to meditation when going through extreme family difficulties and tragedies, when I was young, in the 1970s. My meditation teacher, Lance Cousins, helped me through these, as did other members of the samatha community. If I try and think about the ways this happened, and try and think how they work in this tradition, a few points have been crucial for me.

The first is the practice itself. Like many westerners, I really needed calm. I found it only in this practice. I needed to stop thinking and worrying so much about things all the time, and just enjoy being. There was also something very cheerful and restorative about it, that made me feel moments of happiness and stillness at a very unhappy time of my life. I now put that down to the factors of awakening, found in breathing mindfulness. At the time, it was quite simply a lifeline. Finding stillness for me was simply not possible at the time, but the practice showed me how to feel comfortable with it in meditation. The other thing was the care with which teachers and friends helped me. I say teachers, because although in this
tradition we have one teacher that we discuss our meditation with, we also
go on courses with others, and sometimes discuss our meditation with other
teachers. When I started teaching, remembering how helpful this was to me,
I try and ensure those I teach also have a sense there are other people they
can go to. Some teachers teach some aspects of the practice well, and
others have other strengths, so this seems important. Other theory systems
have helped with this too. The West is rich in its own traditions, of practice,
and we often looked at these.

When I consider the character of the group, it seems to me there are
a few key elements. Although we fall into the traditional Southern
Buddhist pattern in many ways, in others we differ somewhat. We are
not based around a temple or monastic environment. This has been very
important to me: lay teachers have lay problems, and so can help more.
There seems to me something very positive about being a lay person
too, particularly if one takes it over the perspective of possibly many
lives. Ven. Dhammasāmi, a monk whom I have visited and consulted
with a great deal, summed it up rather well for me. ‘It is the duty of lay
people to be happy. That way they help the sangha more, and the
sangha can help them more’. (Conversation, Oxford 2005). So I find
contact with monks and nuns essential, but feel my own path is one
as a laywoman; I have been helped in my meditation in various ways by
people in all four assemblies of laymen and laywomen, monks and nuns.

From the group perspective, a number of factors seem to me character-
istic. The first is the transition from being a ‘student’, and going to
classes, to being a group member, and feeling responsible and inter-
ested in the welfare of others in the group. This is an important devel-
opment and can and in many cases should take years. It seems to me
like the principle of work for oneself, and work for others. The next
stage, work for the sake of the work itself, or for all sentient beings,
perhaps one could say a Bodhisatta ideal, can also of course take years,
but represents a really important element too. People have different
skills and excellences to contribute, whether through teaching or provid-
ing administrative support. It has been a great delight to me over
decades to see friends doing interesting things that are true to the
teaching, and to themselves too.

A primary interest in meditation is another key factor, though again, there
are now many groups with such an interest in South-East Asia. In this regard, for
this practice, creativity and a willingness to see things with fresh eyes is another
key factor. I like the way people do not neglect features of Southern Buddhism
that seem odd, but to try and look at them with new eyes. For me, doing a
practice involving the breath helps this: the breath is always new, and brings a
fresh approach – there is always yet another breath, and so a chance to start
again. So the attitude of others in the group to investigative discussion
(dhammavicaya) which also helps see the world with fresh eyes, have been essential to me. The narrative element in any tradition is important, and people really vary in their responses to traditional stories. But I have found the Buddha’s life story, and the many jātakas about his past lives, as well as Dhammapada stories, helpful. People create their own paths; this feels a conscious possibility in the samatha breathing mindfulness tradition. If one looks for the principles involved – the cultivation of the 10 perfections, perhaps over many lives, then any situation one is in is one where something can be cultivated; a bad time might need forbearance (khanti), another time might need resolve (adhiṭṭhāna). I wonder if this sense of everyone being involved in actively creating their own ‘story’ on the way to awakening is rather a samatha style. It gives, I feel, a tolerance to people whose emphases and interests are different from one’s own, and a sense that one’s own path has its own trajectory and narrative, just as other people’s do.

Lastly, I would say we have been greatly helped by an organisational element introduced about 25 years ago, in the role of the ‘Seekers of Ways’, or ‘Sowers’, as they are called. We have never been a monolithic or teacher-based tradition, finding trust rather in a sense of sangha and a variety of individual teachers. But how then do you avoid the inevitable politics and argument about authority? So, every 3 years, the teachers as a whole body draw by lot seven people who will be in charge of deciding the pattern of meditation courses and policies regarding that within the Samatha organisation. The ballot is run on an ‘opt out’ method so that if anyone is unwilling to do the job over the next 3 years their name is confidentially withdrawn. Two extra ‘Sowers’ are drawn by lot as visiting members, for the next meeting. So there are nine in all at each meeting. They decide the direction of practice nationally and how courses go. This has had a really important effect. Of course people grumble about any one policy; but no one can complain too much about partisan choices if the group is chosen in this way and is itself obviously impermanent. The lottery has brought together some very unusual and interesting combinations, from the varied geographical regions. Sometimes the group has mostly very experienced teachers, sometimes young ones. I like it as a demonstration of trust in action. These teachers really do, with the occasional assistance of the Trust, set directions and styles of approach. There are of course, as in any group, people that one goes to at times of need, and people one quietly asks for advice, an informal kind of ‘elders’, that may vary in different places and for different people. Boonman Poonyathiro is greatly revered, but is not taken as a sole authority, and indeed he has not encouraged that, preferring to leave the evolution of the organisation ‘on the ground’ to those involved locally. This seems good too, and again has helped me through inevitable conflicts and difficulties that can arise.
Conclusion

The sections of this account have been largely narrative and descriptive, rather than analytic: the group is at early stages, and basic information is still not widely accessible. Only time will tell how it fares over the next few decades. Some observations are worth making, however. The primary noteworthy feature of this method and its establishment in the UK is that it now makes the more traditional Thai *samatha* breathing mindfulness tradition more obviously accessible to the newcomer in the UK than is the case in South-East Asia. Changes detectable even in the nineteenth century have created a particular understanding of modernity there, favouring insight models (Crosby 2013, 1–45). Halvor Eifring in *Meditation and Culture*, which attempts to build a vocabulary for the way meditation and prayer systems evolve and change, would classify such a practice as a ‘travelling practice’, in that it has been transported and adapted into an entirely new context (Eifring 2015, 7). With its occasional use of supplementary practices and theory systems from other traditions, it is also perhaps a ‘cultural mosaic’ practice (Eifring 2015, 8). Given the history of Buddhism, and the fact that, for instance, at the end of the first millennium it went into severe decline in India while flourishing in other regions such as Tibet and China, the evolution of Buddhist praxis in different geographical and cultural settings during times of temporary or long-term decline in ‘home regions’, must have some historical comparables, though I suspect each case really is unique.

Secondly, it is also, importantly, a lay tradition. As with such traditions in South and South-East Asia, strong links with the Sangha and monastics are also sustained. Bluck has noted that amongst his ‘familial’ traits that he feels distinguish emerging Buddhist groups, this movement towards lay practice and an emphasis on meditation as a primary motivation are clear characteristics of the seven varied Buddhist groups he took for his sample (Bluck 2006, 182–185; 191). So I suspect Samatha does, despite its own idiosyncratic traits, share with other UK groups these basic features. Indeed it has a mode of practice, humour and an intangible ethos that does feel rather British. As in all other Buddhist groups I know, ‘tea ceremonies’ are taken very seriously as an essential part of the meeting! In my experience the British, famously without a constitution, also like to see how things work practically, without too much external imposition of structure or ethos, and then carry on from there. Despite the now necessary codifications, data protection procedures and health and safety guidelines, there is something in most British Buddhist groups in general that I have encountered that seems still a little experimental and adaptive. Perhaps they are not quite ready to be subjected to very close and systematic analysis.
There are distinctive features, however to Samatha, amongst these others. Samatha hopes the meditation system is available for anyone, and aims to be easily accessible and welcoming. But the method has a notably different style from some of the larger international movements now associated with the vipassanā traditions and secular mindfulness groups. It takes patience, and a while to master. It has not followed the path of extensive publicity or popularisation. A very few groups now dismiss traditional elements such as devotion, mythology and symbology; Samatha seeks to understand them and reapply principle in a new setting. It does not claim to be ‘more scientific’, the ‘only’ or ‘fast’ way to achieve awakening, or to be ‘better’: the policy is based on the way the Buddha accommodated a large variety of approaches in his teaching, tended to adapt practices for particular people and needs, and did not insist on one approach (Shaw 2006a, 92–96; 194–198). The group has tried to emulate this, and is, most of the time, happy with some diversity. Some are more devotional; some are not. Some prefer scientific psychological discourse; others prefer the Abhidhamma, geared as it is to meditators and their mental states. Perhaps Samatha in the UK then follows more the pattern that appears to apply in the very early days of Buddhism, when teachings were made available to those that are interested, rather than employed as part of an actively missionary path: as Graham Dixon notes in his study of the careful tact with which Buddhism was transmitted and travelled historically, ‘coercion sits uneasily within a tradition which insists on exploration and personal transformation’ (Dixon 2015, 100).

The method requires mindfulness of feeling, and, through this, develops patience, resilience and a good-humoured willingness to experiment. It is not in a hurry, and there are no ‘short cuts’. Several years of experience are needed to move on to some of the more advanced stages of the practice, and teachers are only invited to teach, if they wish to, after they have had considerable experience. Private discussion with a teacher, group work and other aspects of practice (bhāvanā) that strengthen the meditation take time to evolve, and methods vary from group to group. Perhaps as a result of these varied factors, the Samatha group, while advertising courses and making itself available in a number of regions, has not shown great interest so far in becoming a largescale movement, though it is now a significant lay practitioner organisation in the UK. With three centres now, it is trying to build a strong base within the UK for retreats, group work and short courses. It aims to be there for those who would like to practise; each of the centres tries to work and offer classes within the local communities.

In 1958, Christmas Humphreys said ‘a definitely Western form of Buddhism must in time emerge’ (Humphreys 1958, 126). He could not have anticipated the way the Internet, online teachings and international travel make this perhaps more a globalised, international Buddhism, but
there does seem to be some sense that this is taking place. There are standard ways of comparing traditions in such cases. Bluck, for instance, using Ninian Smart’s ‘dimensional analysis’ of world views, examines seven dimensions which can be assessed for comparative purposes: the Ritual or Practical; Doctrinal or Philosophical; the Mythic or Narrative; the Experiential or Emotional; the Ethical or Legal, the Organisational or Social and the Material or Artistic (Smart 1996, 8–14). This template certainly asks interesting questions of varied groups, as Bluck’s careful work on seven traditions in the UK, which applies these dimensions, attests. Like Bluck, however, I find the model a little unsatisfactory and formulaic, for Samatha at any rate:

The complex mixture of elements here shows the difficulty of placing this tradition on a simple ‘spectrum of adaptation’ and suggests that a more sophisticated model may be needed for comparing the different traditions of Buddhism in Britain. (Bluck 2006, 64)

There really are different approaches, and different mixes of tradition and experimentation that go on in such cases. To my mind, one crucial factor is significant here: it seems to me Buddhist groups differ from one another in part simply because they are doing different practices, that cultivate and encourage particular elements needed for that practice, as well as those one could more generally describe as Buddhist. This is bound to affect the way they develop, grow and adapt in a new environment. A breathing mindfulness calm meditation makes you aware the breath is always new, and that situations can look different after a while, and that you can try new ways of experimenting in the practice. Finding stillness in the middle of change is at the centre. This is bound to affect the style of those involved in the group, and different groups within the Samatha Trust approach their own conditions differently from the way others do: it is not homogeneous as an organisation.

Clearly Samatha is a Theravāda group, and our chanting, refuge taking and Pāli text base is traditional. Many elements of the practice, such as reliance on close discussion about meditation, are also mostly traceable to canonical precedent. Our deployment of ‘local’ theory systems and other traditions in Buddhism, though, is perhaps unusual, as is, it seems, our emphasis on group work. We do emphasise the sense of community of the group, in varying degrees of formality. So, with regard to the Samatha groups I know around the country, there are certain shared ideals – a commitment to the five precepts, to group practice, and to personal discussion between those learning the practice at every stage, including the teachers. There is also a kind of familial trait of a shared lineage, that is, as in all such cases, somewhat unquantifiable: a stress on good humour, resilience, and an attempt to find the creativity of the middle way in difficult situations. The beautiful, surprising and sometimes exasperating impermanence and changeability of British weather, an appreciation of the natural
landscape, a natural propensity to make jokes in crises: all these somehow affect the tenor of the tradition too, and our way of coping with difficulties, struggles and pain, as well as happiness, through finding stillness sometimes in peaceful awareness of the breath. In my personal experience most UK samatha practitioners, and possibly most Buddhists in these regions too, are somewhat ‘free-spirited’ and not very institutionally minded. But in Samatha I have found most are utterly dedicated and committed to service where administration and teaching are concerned. So it seems to me we are consciously part of an experimental process, and see the meditations taught by Boonman as rather exciting as well as calming, perhaps because they are so new to this country. If I think about it, it is this sense of adventure which most marks the group for me.

So, in this rather adaptive way, by one of those curious quirks of historical evolution, the Samatha Trust retains in a new setting a meditative tradition which has been in most areas of Thailand sidelined, and in some completely forgotten. Essential to this has been extensive one-to-one teaching, group support, some active re-application of principle and a flexibility in what is quite literally a different climate. I do not think we would have lasted so long without the playful enjoyment of theory, attempts to translate Buddhist principle into daily life, very practical work sessions at Greenstreete, and an underlying appreciation of the creative possibilities of the middle way in daily life and meditation, in lay life and on retreat. Close discussion of meditation with teachers, and friendship through group work, with perhaps a more European preference for this rather than the ‘class’ work needed for beginners, are central.

It is not easy to find places now in South-East Asia to practise samatha breathing mindfulness. But it is interesting that it is in the UK, in a new soil, that these practices seem to have fulfilled such a deep need in those wishing to pursue meditation seriously. For many it has become part of a lifelong, yet largely lay, path.

Notes

1. Three newcomers were brought to Thailand by Ven. Kapilavaddho to receive monastic and meditative training at Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen, Thonburi, Thailand, on 26 January 1956 (Trafford 2017).
2. In this article ‘Northern Buddhist’ refers to culturally related Tibetan Buddhism, and ‘Southern Buddhist’ to Pāli, or Theravāda Buddhism.
3. I am grateful to Dr Pyi Kyaw for information regarding ‘Oxford Sayadaw’ as he is known in Burma.
5. The Parien Pāli course is undertaken by monastics in Thailand, and involves close reading of texts alongside translations into Thai. The full course takes 8 or 9 years, and the fourth level would be at the completion of 4 years.


7. This was one of his principal academic interests too: at Lance’s funeral, Professor Richard Gombrich noted that in Lance’s case the usual superlatives at such occasions were genuinely necessary: he was the world expert outside Asia on Abhidhamma (funeral speech, 28 March 2015, Wolfson College, Oxford). See also his obituaries: Gethin 2015, Harvey and Cousins 1942[2015] and Shaw and Lance 2015.

8. My own recollections of this visit are still startlingly vivid. His evening talk basically put a rocket under us all, as his biography attests. But it was a skill in means: his lambast at our intellectualism, and insistence on the need to get real, was accompanied by a gentle appreciation of what we were doing that is not so evident in the otherwise magnificent biographical account. The next morning, for the morning meal (dāna), he was kind, approving of our work in establishing a centre and tranquilly happy to play the quietly genial monk. An unforgettable man, of many parts.

9. He not only introduced us to a very difficult book of the Abhidhamma, but also, in his free recollection of this and other Abhidhamma texts at will, effortlessly drew on material that seemed to lie in some vast memory system behind his head. It was a tour de force, impressing on us the many qualities that the Burmese method of systematic memorisation still so admirably maintains. Since that introduction, the first of a three-volume translation of Yamaka into English has now been published, by two people who attended those classes, C.M.M. Shaw and L.S. Cousins (Shaw and Cousins 2018).

10. It has an associated website: www.samatha-trust-library.org.


13. Conversation, Dr Paul Dennison, July 2018, Greenstreete, Llangunllo, Powys.

14. Kate Crosby discussed her work in a workshop entitled ‘Buddhism, Meditation and Ageing’ at King’s College, London, 27 October 2017. I am grateful to Dr Pyi Kyaw for comments on Burmese lay groups.

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Pali texts

A = Aṅguttaranikāya
Ja = Jātakatthakavāṃṣanā
M = Majjhimanikāya
Ud = Udāna
Vism = Visuddhimagga (cited according to Ñāṇamoli translation)

References


The Cavendish banana has already been evoked as an analogy for therapeutic mindfulness, alluding to the consequences of restricting commercial production to this single variety. One might extend the banana analogy. As a European, one might recall one’s first trip to tropical climes, where one first met some local cousin of the Cavendish. One’s hitherto unchallenged trust in the commercial banana as the epitome of the colour ‘yellow’ and of the ‘banana’ flavour may have been usurped by the Blue Java which is a blue-skinned banana that tastes of vanilla ice cream, or the Latundan banana of South America that is reassuringly yellow on the outside but pink on the inside, and tastes of apple, and then of strawberry as it ripens; or the eponymous Cuban Red, red skinned and with taste highlights of raspberry. Everything one thought one knew about bananas is turned upside down. And there is the plantain, the functional counterpart of which in European cuisine is the potato. All these are bananas.

In one sense this discussion is just an instance of the problems of definition – what characteristics do or do not make an instance of ‘x’ (banana/Theravada meditation technique or topic). Both the outer and inner appearance and even the taste and function of what might seem familiar can be completely contorted once one ventures beyond the familiar.

In the case of Theravada meditation what is most familiar to the popular imagination in the West is some version of ‘mindfulness’, followed pretty closely by an older trope of meditation as a species of relaxation therapy – both senses are ubiquitous now. In practitioner circles, there can be little doubt that the most familiar forms of meditation are some variant of satipatthāna, most likely ānāpāna-sati, followed by mettā-bhāvanā – and in all likelihood these are integrated with inspirational liberation stories, that of the Buddha being the most widespread. In the academy the primary referents of the category Theravada meditation may also be ānāpāna-sati.
and mettā-bhāvanā, but supplemented by textual awareness of other medita-
tion topics and by the same liberation stories that motivate practitioners,
and also embedded in an historical narrative that implies some kind of
continuity between ‘original’ Buddhism and contemporary Theravada.
Advanced studies might problematise varieties of contemporary popular
meditations or the assumptions of continuity.

So the challenge that these reflections offer concerns whether and what
there might be of Theravada meditation that is unfamiliar. As the articles in
this volume have shown, there is indeed considerable variation in techni-
ques and goals of meditation, some more unfamiliar than others. Moreover,
some of these are not necessarily modern innovations or responses to
modernity. Some are themselves a matter of tradition, but of an active
local tradition, or a trans-national tradition that has recently been eclipsed.
Without doubt, a major desideratum in Theravada meditation studies is the
‘discovery’ (to the western eye at least) of hitherto unrecorded techniques
and topics of meditation, and the communities that practise them. Almost
by definition these will be localised, probably peripheral in some way to
mainstream normative narratives of centralised, state-supported and cano-
nically authorised Buddhist practice. Nowadays they are probably also under
threat from globalised Theravada meditation techniques such as the most
widely recognised forms of Vipassana or even the ubiquitous ‘mindfulness’.³

But if these considerations pertain to the ‘what’, then whither the meth-
odology of Theravada meditation studies? In the Introduction we tried to
delineate important parameters that have, for better or worse, shaped such
studies over the last century or so, but are there positive avenues of address
that we think couldvaluably inform the study of Theravada meditation as it
moves forward?

The editors of this collection take Buddhism to be ‘an inhabited action-
influencing world view’, quite reasonably subject to critical examination
from both insiders and outsiders.⁴ We also see it as a coherent and valid
liberative path, and, as a part of that, acknowledge the central importance
and validity of its transformational agenda, implemented through medita-
tion. Without this kind of acknowledgement, critical engagement can lose
touch with the meaning of its practices for the practitioner – for the
practitioner, meditation can be about a potentially profound transformation,
possibly external as well as internal.

Undoubtedly, whether historically or in the present, meditation has never
been the focus of practice for many – quite possibly for the majority – of
Buddhist practitioners. Also, for many Buddhists meditation has been ‘just’
a topic of scholarly discourse – much as it has been for many scholars in the
West. Against this we should also understand that many people – even if
a minority – have taken it as a primary aspect of their practice and dedicated
years and in some cases entire adult lifetimes to meditational development.
Without rejecting the value of past and future text-based, historical, clinical or sociological studies of meditation for our understanding of Buddhism, we therefore would also like to see future work on this subject that proceeds via any of these methods or disciplines, but with sensitivity to the goals, values, application and experience of senior and advanced practitioners.

All meditation takes place within a context, and much light has been and can be shed on past and present meditators by the study of such contexts. While the context of meditation is important, focusing on it risks emphasizing what is peripheral at the cost of what is considered central by the practitioners themselves. It is not that the text-historical method or social science is ‘wrong’, but that one needs to study with an awareness of the limitations of how one is grasping one’s subject. When studying context, one may well be sidelong what the practitioners themselves think is important. While we can locate practices within a social, political, historical and cultural milieu, for the practitioners themselves it is often the transcendence of that milieu, the personal transformation on the model of the Buddha or their teachers, that directly inspires these efforts. Therefore, we would like to see studies that respect the purposes, practices and values of the practitioner. In compiling this volume, and organising the workshops and conferences that underlay it, this has been our assumption. This has also meant that we have eschewed grand theory and overarching structures to either explain or integrate all the material. All the articles herein seek to uncover the purposes, practices and values of the practitioner (or interpreter, in those articles not directly about practice).

Descriptions of entry-level practice are easy to make, and the literature abounds with them. One might ask: What is their value? Do they risk obscuring diversity and depth? In all meditation traditions within a Buddhist context – aside from the provision that is responding to modern, global popularity and expectation – there is a high-level practice that in all likelihood will be somewhat different from entry-level practices initially disclosed to beginners and outsiders. Quite possibly the high-level practice may only be disclosed if appropriate respect, dedication and development are shown by the investigator. For the study of meditation, Theravada or otherwise, this high-level practice needs to be explored and understood, for one could argue that only there is its broader functioning within the religion ultimately justified. If we reflect on the energy and expertise that go into developing the path, we should reasonably anticipate that we are dealing with practices that require considerable application, skill and subtlety, just like other forms of technical expertise.

In writing this we are aware that these methodological considerations represent a personal challenge to the individual insofar as they appear to require such a researcher to be a participant, if not a practitioner, or at least highly sensitive to what being an advanced practitioner might mean. If they
acknowledge the soteriological meaning and transformative value of the practice that they study, does this not mean that they must be a ‘Theravada Buddhist’ of some sort?

Now, just as an increasing number of western academic scholars of Buddhism feel free to disclose a personal Buddhist affiliation, so this gradual ‘infiltration’ of the academic field by insiders is also fed by an increasing number of Asian Buddhist practitioners who seek to develop a career within the western or global academy. In the case of the latter they have acquired their Buddhism first, prior to their scholarship (a characteristic that also applies to a significant number of western scholars in the field). Leaving aside whether or not high-level meditation practice is compatible with the rationalising cares that must underlie valid scholarly writing, seemingly the field is more than ever ripe for the emergence of a new level of informed scholarship. So, while being a Theravada Buddhist clearly cannot be a requirement for research, there is considerable potential for the practitioner participant to offer meaningful accounts of meditation practice beyond the beginner’s level.

But what if a scholar practitioner does their research and writes about high-level practice and experience? To what extent would the academy accept or welcome his or her work? What factors would determine a positive or negative response to such writing? Would either party need to compromise and, if so, over what? The last would probably be a matter of engaging with one’s own worldview and paradigm for each side. To use the categories of the western academy, this could be characterised as the reconciliation of the need for objectivity in disciplines such as religious studies or Southeast Asian studies with the assumptions of faith in theology. Here, perhaps we need to step back and agree that this is a matter for future consideration and maybe experimentation. Beyond recognising that such work would require the reconciliation of competing systems of authority, we might perhaps look to the broad principle of ‘reproducibility’ as a common ground on which both ‘scientific’ scholarship and Buddhist practice might approach one another with some degree of recognition.

Given the current state of the field, in which former bugbears such as insider status and subjectivity have been overcome, the time may well be ripe for research on meditation to breach new territory by integrating scholarly objectivity with the personal exploration of high-level meditation practice. But in doing this the researcher would thus engage with the practice, accepting the potential for personal transformation which is, in some way or another, the expected outcome. One is drawn back to Swearer’s characterisation quoted in the Introduction (note 26) of the attitude of Winston King, that ‘the adherent of a particular faith is better able “to penetrate to the centrally important features of another religion” that might be opaque to the “nonreligionist”’. What is it that might differentiate
the attitude of the religionist from the non-religionist? It is precisely here, in
the acceptance of the possibility of transformation through following
a particular religious practice, that one can see such a distinction, and
with that, perhaps, the willingness to ‘risk’ personal change through one’s
engagement. And if one looks further, one might also discern that this
willingness lies in another distinction: the personal drive that brings the
researcher to meditation. Just as a researcher may have multiple motives,
often relating to their interests and employment, motives of practitioners
also vary. Many (non-scholarly) practitioners are driven by a commitment to
a trusted path or by a need – an existential need, if you like – whether that is
preparation for death, release from direct suffering, to fulfil expectations of
themselves or their community, or a desire to understand their experience
of the world or of their own nature.

Following these considerations, we leave the reader who has travelled
with us this far with two questions: ‘What would be the purpose of
undertaking scholarly research on high-level soteriological practice?’ and
‘How does one reconcile the personal commitment that would be
required to get there with the need to record, etc. in ways of interest
and value to the broader academic world?’ The detailed methodology and
ethics of research on high-level meditation participation remain to be
articulated.

Notes

1. The Cavendish is a cloned cultivar and, lacking genetic diversity, its commer-
cial future is threatened by a number of diseases, especially the banana
bunchy top virus. This was the fate of its commercial predecessor, the Gros
Michel, which succumbed to Panama disease.
2. Definitional methods are usefully discussed in the context of defining
Mahayana Buddhism in Silk (2002).
3. See Nancy Eberhardt (2017) on how localised meditation practices have
changed and been replaced by more structured Vipassana meditation in
a rural Shan community in Mae Hong Son province of Thailand, and how
such Vipassana meditation is adversely affecting older practitioners; and also
Khur-Yearn’s contribution to this volume for a discussion of changes to Shan
meditation practices over the past century in relation to Vipassana.
4. We paraphrase here Stephen Pattison’s phrasing from his discussion of theol-
ogy in the public sphere (Pattison 2007, 227).
5. Maggie Ross comments, on the difficulty of writing about the Christian con-
templative tradition, ‘It is folly to examine texts that teach contemplation
using the very system of thought against which they are written. To use
a methodology that demands closure on a text that is leading the reader
into infinite openness not only destroys it, but also locks the reader into lesser
beholdings’ (Ross 2013, 50). It may be that scholars working on Buddhist
meditative traditions can look for precedents and guidance from authors
such as she.
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