

# Two Meditation Traditions from Contemporary Thailand: A Summary Overview<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article explores two meditation practices from contemporary Thailand: the *vijjā dhammakāya* which is associated particularly with Wat Paknam and Wat (Phra) Dhammakaya, and the *samatha-vipassanā* attributed to former Supreme Patriarch, Suk Kai Thuean (1733-1822) of Wat Ratchasittharam, Thonburi. Both these practices are remarkable in that they contain elements which conflict with what is generally considered to be mainstream Theravāda meditation. This article explores the emergence and history of the two practices, their current spread and a summary description of their salient features, considering common elements and possible areas of overlap. The article concludes by suggesting directions for further research, arguing that scholarly enquiry into meditation traditions needs to move beyond text-based assessments and can only be enriched by knowledge of context and lineage.

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<sup>1</sup> This article summarises some of the key findings of my doctoral thesis, “Monks, Meditation and Missing Links: continuity, “orthodoxy” and the *vijjā dhammakāya* in Thai Buddhism, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2008. I use the term ‘meditation’ throughout to denote the various Buddhist concepts and practices aimed at calming, insight, transformation and healing suggested by this English word, which has no direct equivalent in Thai or Pali. In general in this article I have drawn from Thai texts or English material translated by Thai authors which leads to some inconsistencies, particularly in transliteration of Pali and Sanskritised Pali. Some authors have omitted diacritics from words which would normally necessitate their usage, thus I will use *vipassanā* which is often presented without the diacritic, as it is used in the Burmese Vipassana Movement.

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## Introduction

This paper considers two lineages of meditation practice from contemporary Thailand: the *vijjā dhammakāya*, associated particularly with Wat Paknam and Wat (Phra) Dhammakaya,<sup>3</sup> and the *samatha-vipassanā* attributed to former Supreme Patriarch, Suk Kai Thuean (1733-1822) of Wat Ratchasittharam, Thonburi. The *vijjā dhammakāya* emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is described by practitioners as the “rediscovery” of Thai abbot Sot Chandassaro Bhikkhu (1896-1956). Despite sustained scholarly attention on Wat Dhammakaya, the account of the provenance of the meditation practice which gave the temple its name has barely been queried. Studies of Wat Dhammakaya are usually by anthropologists who treat it as a new religious movement or a modern prosperity religion, failing to investigate the history of its teachings. To my knowledge, Suk Kai Thuean’s *samatha-vipassanā* has been described only once in published scholarly literature in Thai or European languages;<sup>4</sup> however, this study was based on textual material describing the practices and made no reference to it as a living tradition. The two systems are notable in that they do not meet what we may cautiously term canonical or standard interpretations of Theravāda meditation. The systems share nomenclature and taxonomy with classical Theravāda Pali sources such as the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* and the *Visuddhimagga*; however the combination and use of these, alongside unique interpretations of the role of the body in meditation seem to suggest that they have more in common with tantric meditation techniques associated with Indo-Tibetan traditions.

In this article I summarise these two meditation systems, outlining key features, historical emergence, contemporary practice and possible provenance. I then consider the relationship between the two, arguing that the “rediscovery” of the *vijjā dhammakāya* was in

<sup>3</sup> The temple inserts the honorific “Phra” into its name, but is more generally known in popular and scholarly literature as Wat Dhammakaya. The temple appears to favour this simple Romanization rather than using the Pali diacritic which would render the name Wat Dhammakāya.

<sup>4</sup> Mettanando, *Meditation and Healing in the Theravada Buddhist order of Thailand and Laos* (PhD Dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1999).

fact a repackaging of part of the earlier Suk Kai Thuean *samatha-vipassanā* system, thus making it anything but a “new religious movement.”

My research is based upon fieldwork, interviews, instruction in both techniques, translation of contemporary texts and older material and the identification of objects used in meditation practices. In conclusion, I suggest the most fruitful directions for further study and consider the ways in which we can expect these to challenge and ultimately inform standard assessments of Theravāda Buddhist doctrine, practice and diversity.

In contemporary Thailand, a number of meditation techniques are taught and practised by lay and ordained Buddhists. Some are particularly associated with certain monks, such as Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu’s promotion of *ānāpānassāti* and Luang Pho Thian’s “dynamic meditation.”<sup>5</sup> Some have emerged relatively recently, notably the Burmese Vipassana System taught by Mahasi Sayadaw which arrived in Thailand in the 1950s and was actively promoted by Mahanikai monk, Phra Phimontham. In each case we can perceive a different kind of authority legitimating the practice – ranging from the Burmese Vipassana’s relationship with the canonical *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* to Luang Pho Thian’s system which, while lacking any obvious relationship to canonical authority, nevertheless became popular because of its perceived efficacy and connection to Japanese practice. The most cursory consideration of the issue of orthodoxy in Theravāda meditation shows that there is in fact no single authority on what constitutes “orthodox” in Theravāda meditation. This is the case even if we interpret “orthodox” simply to mean “canonical” – while the Tripitaka is replete with references to meditation experiences, these are largely described in narrative form rather than presented as a total system. For fuller systematised explanation of meditation, scholars of South and Southeast Asian Buddhism generally turn instead to the *Visuddhimagga*, which has become functionally canonically despite being an account from only one strand of

<sup>5</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu with Chien Nurn Eng and James Ratana Nantho Bhikkhu, eds. and trans., *A Handbook for a Perfect form of Ānāpānasati-Bhāvanā Meditation* (Bangkok: Mental Health Publishing House, 2003).

Theravāda Buddhism (5<sup>th</sup> century Mahāvihāra Sinhala) and which makes reference to, but does not describe other meditation methods.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Vijjā Dhammakāya*<sup>7</sup>

The *vijjā dhammakāya* or “knowledge of the *dhammakāya*” meditation system is promoted by a number of high-profile Thai temples and is also taught by a growing number of meditation centres and temples internationally. This meditation system is well known as the practice of contemporary Bangkok temple Wat Dhammakaya, although it is associated with a number of temples which self-identify as “*dhammakāya*.”<sup>8</sup> The practice named *vijjā dhammakāya* actually emerged in 1917 when monk Sot Chandassaro Bhikkhu is believed to have “rediscovered” it during his meditation practice. Practitioners and followers of Sot present *vijjā dhammakāya* as the method which had been practised by the historical Buddha himself, but had been somehow lost in the 500 year period following his *parinibbāna*. Sources for the method are the various teaching aids distributed by the

<sup>6</sup> This is illustrated by the fact that Edward Conze and Sarah Shaw – scholars separated by 50 years – depend upon and prioritise the same sources for their comments on Theravāda Buddhism. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation* (London: Unwin, 1956); Sarah Shaw, *Buddhist Meditation: an Anthology of Texts from the Pāli Canon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). On the question of allusions to secret manuals in the *Visuddhimagga*, see L. S. Cousins, “Aspects of Esoteric Southern Buddhism,” *Indian Insights: Buddhism, Brahmanism and Bhakti*, eds. Peter Connolly and Sue Hamilton (London: Luzac Oriental) 185-207. Another key text is Upatissa’s *Vimuttimagga*, historically associated with the rival Sri Lankan order Abhayagiri-vihāra, an association which has been challenged in Kate Crosby, “History versus modern myth: the Abhayagirivihāra, The *Vimuttimagga* and *Yogāvacara* meditation,” *Journal of India Philosophy* 27 (1999): 503-550.

<sup>7</sup> Immediately prior to submitting this article, I became aware of two important new publications which I was unable to consult: Phra Rajyanvisith, *Samatha Vipassana Meditation in accordance with the four foundations of mindfulness to reach Lord Buddha’s Dhammakayas and Nirvana* (Damnoen Saduak: Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram, 2011) and Phiyadassi Bhikkhu, *Vimuttidhamma: From Chakra to Dhammachakra* (Wat Tham Doi Tone, Chiang Mai. Dhamma Publication Fund, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> I prefer to describe these simply as “Dhammakāya Temples” rather than suggest a single “Dhammakāya movement” given that there are considerable differences in emphasis, expression and style of teaching between the temples.

temples, such as CDs and cassettes, online tuition guides, temple histories and biographies and exegetical texts.

The “*dhammakāya*” described in *vijjā dhammakāya* teachings should not be confused with the concept as it is understood more broadly in Buddhist philosophy, either the equation of the historical Buddha with the body of Dhamma or the later systemisation of three Buddha bodies developed by Yogācarā thought.<sup>9</sup> Texts specific to Southeast Asia enumerating the qualities of the *dhammakāya* have been described by Coedès, Swearer and Bizot, but these relate to the construction and consecration of actual Buddha images and seem to have no clear relation to the practice of meditation generally or the development of these qualities by a practitioner.<sup>10</sup>

Dhammakāya meditation incorporates three *kammaṭṭhāna* familiar from mainstream Theravāda meditation sources in particular combination. These are:

1. The *ānāpānassati* (concentration upon breathing);
2. The use of a *buddhānussati* mantra, *sammā araham*; and
3. The use of the *āloka-kasiṇa* (concentration upon a bright object).

The phrase “*sammā araham*” is one of the phrases describing the Buddha in the *tiratanavandanā*, one of the most common formulae for praising the qualities of the three gems of Buddhism. Its use as a mantra in meditation practice has been described in at least one

<sup>9</sup> On the former, see Frank E. Reynolds, “The Several Bodies of the Buddha: Reflections on a Neglected Aspect of the Theravāda Tradition,” *History of Religions* 16, no. 4 (1977): 374-389.

<sup>10</sup> François Bizot, *Le Chemin de Lankā* (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1992); George Coedès, “Dhammakāya,” *The Adyar Library Bulletin* Vol XX (1956): 248-259; Donald K. Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004). See also Hiram W. Woodward, “The Emerald and Sihing Buddhas: Interpretations of Their Significance,” *Living a Life in Accord with Dhamma: Papers in Honor of Professor Jean Boisselier on his Eightieth Birthday*, eds. Natasha Eilenberg, MC Subhadradis Diskul and Robert L. Brown (Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 1997) 502-513.

account from Northern Thailand.<sup>11</sup> *Ānāpānassati* and the use of the *āloka-kasiṇa* are both commonly found in other forms of Theravāda Buddhism. Here, the practitioner focuses upon the breath as a preliminary calming technique. The student repeats the mantra *sammā araham* and then visualises a sphere of light – which is often presented as a kind of crystal ball on temple altars and in collectible memorabilia. The light-sphere is then controlled by the meditator who visualizes it entering at the nostril (right for men, left for women). The light-sphere advances through a series of bodily bases, first to the bridge of the nose (again, right for men, left for women) and through the third, fourth and fifth bases, that is, the middle part of the head, the roof of the mouth and the throat. The practitioner holds the focus at each of the bases it passes through, repeating three times the *sammā araham* mantra, before moving to the next. From the sixth base at the navel, the focus then moves upwards to the place two fingers width above the navel. This seventh position is the location of the “dhamma sphere” and the centre of the body.<sup>12</sup> The sphere should become brighter and clearer, and the focus should move to its centre. The student should observe its qualities. Here the student will observe for the first time the sphere of *paṭhama-magga*, the preliminary sign of concentration.

This *paṭhama-magga* sphere may be seen to contain five further spheres, one at the centre and four at the cardinal points. These are the four elements: water, earth, air and fire which surround the central cognitive element or *viññāpadhātu*. Deeper focus upon the *paṭhama-magga* will lead to yet more spheres emanating from its centre, ultimately leading to the emergence of the first of a series of bodies. This is the *pañīta-manussakāya* or refined human form, described by Phra Rajyanvisith as a body which “appears identical to the meditator, but is finer than the ordinary form.”<sup>13</sup> The meditator then tries to

<sup>11</sup> In Swearer’s account of Bhikkhu Pannawong’s (1871-1956) teaching. Donald K. Swearer, “The Way to Meditation,” *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) 207.

<sup>12</sup> Phra Rajyanvisith, *The Heart of Dhammakāya Meditation* (Damnoen Saduak: Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram, 2009, 3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition) 80.

<sup>13</sup> Rajyanvisith 87.



become the refined human form, continuing to develop his or her focus through the emergence of subsequent spheres and *kāyas* (bodies). Including these first two stages described here, these are:

1. The *Manussakāya*, the crude human body (i.e. the meditator's own body);
2. The *Panīta-manussakāya*, the refined human body (the first to emerge in meditation);
3. The *Dibbakāya*, the crude celestial body;
4. The *Panīta-Dibbakāya*, the refined celestial body;
5. The *Rūpabrahmakāya*, the crude form Brahman body;
6. The *Panīta-Rūpabrahmakāya*, the refined form Brahman body;
7. The *Arūpabrahmakāya*, the crude formless Brahman body; and
8. The *Panīta Arūpabrahmakāya*, the refined formless Brahman body.<sup>14</sup>

From these increasingly refined bodies emerges the ninth, the *Dhammakāya-Gotrabhū* [sic]. This is described by Sermchai thus:

The lap width, height and sphere diameter are each nine meters. *Dhammakāya-Gotrabhū* [sic] is the first of ten *Dhammakāyas*. *Dhammakāyas* appear like diamond Buddha statues, crowned with a budding lotus. They are luminous, radiant and as clear as a pure, perfect, first-rate diamond.<sup>15</sup>

At this point, the meditator focuses upon yet more spheres arising from the central space sphere of this *Dhammakāya Gotrabhū*. These produce (over sessions of sustained practice) more *dhammakāyas* of increasing refinement and size. The final four stages correspond with the four levels of attainment in Theravāda Buddhism: *soṭāpanna*, *sakadāgāmi*, *anāgāmi* and *arahant*, i.e., stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner and *arahant*. *Dhammakāya* meditation

<sup>14</sup> As illustrated in Rajyanvisith 88-89.

<sup>15</sup> Rajyanvisith 91.

master Phra Rajyanvisith explains progress through the system with reference to the *nimittas*, the sights or visions anticipated in meditation.<sup>16</sup> The crystal ball as visualized at the commencement of practice is the *Parikamma-nimitta*. As the practitioner develops, this preliminary vision will become more refined and become the *Uggaha-nimitta* or learning sign. Once the practitioner is able to manipulate the crystal ball and alter its size, the *Patibhāga-nimitta* will emerge, again resembling a crystal ball in appearance. This echoes descriptions of the use of different types of *nimitta* in the *Visuddhimagga* and other commentaries. It diverges from the approach described in the *Visuddhimagga* in which an individual, guided by his/her *kalyāṇamitta*, is assigned one of 40 *kammaṭṭhāna* based on personality type.

*Dhammakāya* meditation has sometimes been described as the “18 Bodies Technique” denoting the bodies emanated during practice. It was presented this way by the British Buddhist Richard Randall (1906-1971), who ordained as Kapilavaddho Bhikkhu at Wat Paknam in 1954 with Luang Pho Sot as his preceptor.<sup>17</sup> Kapilavaddho taught *dhammakāya* meditation to students in the UK during the 1950s, and at one point was made the official technique of the English Sangha Trust, which is now associated with Ajarn Chah’s forest monk lineage.<sup>18</sup> British practitioners also seem to have historically described this system as the *solasakāya* system. Later Kapilavaddho returned to teaching mindfulness meditation to his English students.

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<sup>16</sup> Rajyanvisith 24.

<sup>17</sup> Randall was born William August Purfurst, but changed his name in the 1960s for reasons unknown. His experience at Wat Paknam are described in his autobiography *Life as a Siamese Monk*, published posthumously in 1990 by Aukana Press, Bradford on Avon. He gives some superficial description of his tutoring in *dhammakāya* meditation by Sot, but in nothing like the detail one might hope. For an enjoyable popular appreciation of Kapilavaddho, see Terry Shine’s self-published *Honour Thy Fathers*, Nov 22 2011 <[http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/honourfathers.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/honourfathers.pdf)>.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this aspect of the EST’s earlier history is generally overlooked by historical overviews of Buddhism in Britain, such as Stephen Bachelor’s *The Awakening of the West* (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1994). I am currently finalizing outputs on a British Academy-funded project into the international monastic ordinations and their impact upon Buddhism in the UK.



### ***Dhammakāya* Meditation: Historical Emergence and Contemporary Practice at Wat Paknam**

The appellation “*Dhammakāya* meditation” is understood to have first been used to describe this method when it was “rediscovered” by Sot at Wat Bot Bon Bangkuwiang temple in Nonthaburi, northeast of Bangkok. Sot’s biography and scenes from his life are described in a growing body of hagiographical literature in Thai and European languages, which is constantly augmented, not only by new editions, but also by accounts of the lives of Sot’s students and contemporaries.<sup>19</sup> Sot is described as having experienced a number of meditation traditions as a student in the greater Bangkok area, including temples now well known in contemporary Bangkok, such as Wat Po (Chetuphon), and those which now have a lower profile, such as Wat Ratchasittharam.<sup>20</sup> After his discovery of the *vijjā dhammakāya*, Sot began teaching a number of students and his reputation began to grow. He was approached to take over the abbotship of Wat Paknam where he remained until his death in 1959. During his lifetime he transformed the temple, instituting regular meditation classes for lay and ordained Buddhists, establishing new facilities for the growing monastic community and managing the building of the Pali Institute. Sot had the reputation of being able to help individuals suffering from ill health even without meeting them in person by utilizing the power of *dhammakāya* meditation to heal them. During Sot’s abbotship the temple’s *mae-chi* community flourished and today many *mae-chi* are particularly involved in the teaching and practice of meditation. One group of *mae-chi* is always on duty at the temple, meditating in order to maintain the global

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<sup>19</sup> Terence Magness, *The Life and Teaching of Chao Khun Mongkol-Thepmuni and the Dhammakāya* (n.p., 1960) Nov 11 2011 <[http://www.triple-gem.net/LP\\_Biography\\_01Nov07.pdf](http://www.triple-gem.net/LP_Biography_01Nov07.pdf)>; The Dhammakaya Foundation, *The Life & Times of Luang Phaw Wat Paknam* (Bangkok: Dhammakaya Foundation, 1998); *Luang Pho Sot: his work and his Dhamma teaching* (Bangkok: Dhamma Institute Publishers, n.d.) (in Thai); *Biography and Achievements of Reverend Father Wat Paknam, Phra Mongkol Thepmuni (Sot Chandassaro)* (Ratchaburi: Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram, n.d.) (in Thai).

<sup>20</sup> Magness 5.

balance between good and evil and in order to prevent possible disasters affecting Thailand.

The temple continues to teach and promote *dhammakāya* meditation, through regular classes and the production of teaching tools, but also by supporting it in a more general sense: the practice of *dhammakāya* meditation and its perceived efficacy is simply woven into the fabric of the temple. Wat Paknam also promotes *dhammakāya* meditation via its support of international temples such as Japan's Wat Paknam Yipun in 1999<sup>21</sup> and Wat Mongkol Thepmuni in suburban Philadelphia.<sup>22</sup> Within Thailand, centres such as the one in Ratchaburi established by the remarkable *mae-chi* Wan Cai both promote *dhammakāya* meditation and have embedded it within mainstream Theravāda teachings by presenting associated imagery, such as the refined *dhammakāya* bodies, alongside images from the life of the Buddha and scenes from Jātaka stories. This is also the effect of the areas of Buddhamonthon Buddhist Park in Salaya, Nakhon Pathom, which features portraits of Luang Pho Sot, floating among celestial *dhammakāyas* alongside Buddha images and the marble presentations of the Tripitaka. Wat Paknam, its patrons and the practitioners of *dhammakāya* meditation have, in often subtle ways, consistently worked to bring the practice of *dhammakāya* meditation within the sphere of typical Thai Buddhist environments and experiences.

### At Wat Dhammakaya

Although the *vijjā dhammakāya* meditation technique emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is perhaps associated most famously – certainly in scholarly literature from outside Thailand<sup>23</sup> – with contemporary Wat (Phra) Dhammakaya, located in the Bangkok suburb of Rangsit. Wat Dhammakaya emerged from the activities of a student group in the late

<sup>21</sup> The temple was officially opened by Wat Paknam abbot, Phra Maha Racha Mangkalajarn, with a website: <http://kawai.servebeer.com/~masahiro/wat/annai.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Partly the focus of Wendy Cadge's study *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravāda Buddhism in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> For example, Rachele M Scott, *Nirvana for Sale?* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009); Rory Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

1970s who had originally studied *dhammakāya* meditation at Wat Paknam. The group's teacher was a senior member of Wat Paknam's *mae-chi* community (Upasika) Chandra Khonnokyung, known affectionately as "Khun Yai". Two of the original students subsequently took ordination and now serve as Abbot (Phra Dhammajayo Bhikkhu) and Vice-abbot (Phra Dhattajivo Bhikkhu), respectively.<sup>24</sup> There are no *mae-chi* residents at Wat Dhammakaya. The temple is at the centre of a network which has grown at an exponential pace in recent years. *Dhammakāya* meditation is taught at centres throughout Thailand, many of which seem to be targeted at international "gap year" travellers, by locating them in popular tourist spots Koh Samui, Phuket and Chiang Mai and promoting them with English language material. Beyond Thailand, Wat Dhammakaya has financed the building of temples on every continent, all of which promote *dhammakāya* meditation and emphasise the central role of the saintly Luang Pho Sot, reproducing his likeness in image halls and so on. These temples in my experience present themselves as simply Buddhist, preaching the Middle Way, often with no particular emphasis on their association with Wat Dhammakaya and its perceived peripheral place in the Thai Buddhist spectrum.

The temple employs a wide range of innovative strategies, many of which seem at odds with what Buddhists and scholars expect from a temple. While their encouragement to practice meditation is not unique in contemporary Thailand, where the benefits of meditation are routinely described by high-profile Buddhists, Wat Dhammakaya's presentation of the potential powers of practising its meditation system is unusual both in its style and in the ways in which it is explicitly linked not only with self-transformation and spiritual advancement, but also with readily noticeable improvements in one's health and one's personal financial growth.

Meditation at Wat Dhammakaya, and particularly at its international centres, is presented as a practice independent of a culturally or doctrinally specifically Buddhist context, appropriate and, indeed, beneficial to all practitioners, regardless of their religious

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<sup>24</sup> Within Wat Dhammakaya, Khun Yai is described as pre-eminent among Sot's students and considered his heir, but this interpretation is not shared by the other temples.

affiliation. The meditation features in every religious ceremony and is described as having a range of positive impacts upon practitioners. The temple's many websites and DMC TV channels offer basic meditation instruction and imagery of meditating monks feature in every setting imaginable.

### **At Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram**

Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram is generally overlooked in discussions of *dhammakāya* meditation, but it is in many ways the most obvious expression of Luang Pho Sot's style. This temple was established as a satellite of Wat Paknam, and is the realised vision of Phra Rajyanvisith (born Sermchai Jayamangallo in 1929). Phra Rajyanvisith had been a lay meditation teacher at Wat Paknam before in his retirement leading a successful project to establish a meditation centre in Ratchaburi, Central Thailand. The meditation centre was declared a temple during the 1990s and regularly attracts visitors for its meditation retreats, including significant numbers of international students. In the temple's English-language publications, the benefits of *dhammakāya* meditation regardless of religious affiliation are emphasised.<sup>25</sup> The temple also promotes the teaching of *dhammakāya* meditation through its role as National Coordination Center of Provincial Meditation Institutes, of which Rajyanvisith became coordinator in 2008. The temple directs a monastic training programme in which young monks from throughout the central Thai region participate before returning to their temples. Financial support is then made available to establish meditation centres, enabling the teaching of *dhammakāya* meditation in new communities by placing it at the centre of the temple's practice. The temple is notable for its exoteric teaching style which speaks far more openly about experience and progress in meditation, and also its successful efforts to have *dhammakāya* recognised as an acceptable practice by sangha authorities. Thus, the temple has been perhaps the most effective of all in bringing *dhammakāya* meditation to the centre of doctrinal authority, while gradually spreading its influence through

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<sup>25</sup> Phra Rajyanvisith writes "very few of our students are Buddhist. Most claim 'no religion'." Rajyanvisith 218.

the personal support of mentored individual monks and the sponsorship of their temples.

### Summary

We should understand that *dhammakāya* meditation in its historical context and its contemporary presentation incorporates a number of features. Among contemporary practitioners in Thailand and overseas there are a number of sources of authority, though these all trace back to the original teaching of Sot, contested lineages notwithstanding. The system as taught by Sot has existed for almost a century and has become integral to the practice and presentation of three distinct strands of teaching. The system itself is a fully-systematised technique enabling practitioners to obtain powers beneficial within the mundane setting but also enabling the practitioner to transcend it. Different traditions emphasise its practice and purpose in different ways.

### The *Samatha-Vipassanā* Attributed to Former Supreme Patriarch, Suk Kai Thuean (1733-1822)

#### Historical Sketch and Emergence<sup>26</sup>

The *samatha-vipassanā* meditation technique(s) taught at Wat Ratchasittharam (Phlap) are associated with the temple's former abbot, (Somdet Phra Sangha-Raja) Suk Kai Thuean, who is believed to have brought the teachings with him from Ayutthaya in the form of his own knowledge and also within manuscripts. Wat Ratchasittharam is a temple in the Thonburi district of Bangkok. Its monastic community belongs to the contemporary Mahanikai order, but historically the temple was associated with the *araññavāsin* order of forest monks, an administrative division of the monastic order which was eradicated

<sup>26</sup> Biographical information here is taken from the temple's own publications: from Sangiam Khumbawas, *The Supreme Patriarchs of the Chakri Dynasty* (Bangkok: Ruamsan, 1979) (in Thai); Mettanando 3-14; and *Somdet Phra Sangkharat (Yansangwon) Suk Kai Thuean Phra Prawat Somdet Phra Sangkharat* (Bangkok: Wat Ratchasittharam (Phlap), n.d).

during elite-led reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> The temple's *khana* (division/section) 5 is where meditation teaching and the temple's historical role as a centre of meditation is retained. The temple was already established as an *araññavāsin* temple – the head of the division according to some accounts – by the time of the establishment of Bangkok as the new capital of Thailand in 1782. The temple's former abbot, Suk Kai Thuean, had been a monk living in Ayutthaya at the time of the Burmese attacks in 1767 where he had been abbot of Wat Tha-Hoi, an *araññavāsin* wat. Under Rama I he was brought to Bangkok and he took up residence at Wat Phlap, as it was called then.<sup>28</sup> He was appointed head of the *samatha* meditation. According to one account, Suk's personal relationship with Rama I predated the birth of the new capital, the monk having been the religious instructor of the king-to-be at Wat Tha-Hoi, but the assertion is as yet not corroborated by another source.<sup>29</sup> In 1819, under Rama II, Suk was made Supreme Patriarch after a scandal enveloped the proposed candidate for the position, another senior *araññavāsin* abbot, Somdet Phra Wannarat At of Wat Saket. At this point Suk's official residence became Wat Mahathat, seat of the Supreme Patriarchs, though Wat Phlap continued to teach his meditation system. Suk served as preceptor and meditation teacher to Rama III and Rama IV during the period they spent as novices at Wat Ratchasittharam, in honour of which Rama IV built two small memorial buildings at the temple, in respect of Rama III and Suk. The temple and its most famous abbot can thus be understood to have had significant historical prominence, though this appears to have waned in more recent decades.

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<sup>27</sup> This order is quite distinct from the forest monk movement which emerged in the 20th century and which is particularly associated with monks such as Acharn Mun and Acharn Cha. This distinction has not always been apparent to scholars writing about monastic vocation, lineage and administration, who often blur the relationship between the contemporary forest lifestyle and the historical order.

<sup>28</sup> The temple retains its former name thus: Wat Ratchasittharam (Phlap).

<sup>29</sup> Suggested in ML Surasawat, Victor Kennedy and Chamnong Srinuan, eds., *Wat Ratchasittharam* (Bangkok: Muang Boran Publishing House (Mural Paintings of Thailand Series), 1982) 30.



Since Suk's death, there has been an uninterrupted sequence of meditation teachers down to the present day; currently the position is occupied by Phra Khru Wira Thanwiro. The temple preserves the teaching in material form, as books – histories, exegeses and study materials – and a series of displays dedicated to Suk's memory.<sup>30</sup> This functions as both a kind of monastic museum – common throughout Thailand<sup>31</sup> – and as the site of meditation tuition. Alongside images and statues of Suk, the museum contains items from his life – his alms bowl and honorary fans – and materials from the temple's broader history as a meditation teaching centre, including letters of recommendation for would-be students and accounts of meditation experiences there. I first visited the temple in 2005, returning most recently in 2010, and noted that it had enjoyed a significant financial boost between my visits: new editions of key texts had been produced, the teaching area had been spruced up, there were new Buddha images in the hall, banner advertisements announcing meditation retreats were hanging outside and a website had recently been launched.<sup>32</sup> The temple has sought to promote its teaching more actively, for example, via the website and the organised retreats, and attracts participants from beyond Bangkok. Patrick Ong reports that there has recently been at least one high-profile participant in a meditation retreat, popular Thai newsreader Khun Po.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Phra Khru Sangkharat Thanweero, ed., *Somdet Phra Yansangwon's (Suk Kai Thuean) Teaching on Rupa Jhāna and Arupa Jhāna* (Bangkok: Wat Ratchasittharam (Phlap), 2546 [2003]) (in Thai).

<sup>31</sup> See Louis Gabaude, "Where Ascetics get Comfort and Recluses go Public: Museums for Buddhist Saints in Thailand," *Pilgrims, Patrons and Place: Localizing Sanctity in Asian Religions*, eds. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (Vancouver, University of British Columbia, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Nov 22 2011 <[www.somdechisuk.org](http://www.somdechisuk.org)>. The site features PDFs of various texts, updates on meditation retreats and videos of Phra Khru Wira teaching.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Ong, "The Meditation System of Supreme Patriarch Suk Kaitheuan as a living tradition at Wat Ratchasittharam," MA Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2011, 121.

### Sources and Scholarly Accounts of Wat Ratchasittharam

I became aware of the temple's historical reputation as a centre for meditation teaching via Mettanando Bhikkhu's 1999 dissertation *Meditation and Healing in the Buddhist Order of Thailand and Laos*. Mettanando had translated sections of two related texts associated with the temple as part of a broader project to understand the provenance of *dhammakāya* meditation, although he did not discuss the temple's current teaching.<sup>34</sup> The first was a funeral volume dated 1993, a reissue of a funeral volume issued in 1935, based upon manuscripts from the temple's former abbot and meditation master, Chawkhun Phrasangwaranuwongthera (Chum).<sup>35</sup>

In 1935, a manuscript of the Suk Kai Thuean method was published in *Book of samatha and vipassanā-kammaṭṭhāna during The Four Reigns*.<sup>36</sup> This was a collection of various texts relating to healing and meditation, compiled by a monk named Chai Yasotharat initially under the direction of Phra Ubāli, abbot of the Thammayut temple Wat Boromniwat.<sup>37</sup> This collection brought together descriptions of a diverse number of traditions associated with named teachers, many of them unknown to contemporary scholarship.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mettanando was at that time a senior monk at Wat Dhammakaya. His dissertation is remarkable both for the achievement in identifying and translating these texts, and also in the curious fact that he falls short of a full analysis of their contents vis-à-vis *dhammakāya* meditation, despite this being his stated aim. It is possible that his caution was due to the anticipated response from fellow Wat Dhammakaya monks – he left the organisation soon after.

<sup>35</sup> Mettanando's transliteration. Mettanando 14.

<sup>36</sup> Chai Yasotharat, *Book of samatha and vipassanā-kammaṭṭhāna during The Four Reigns* (Bangkok: n.p., 1935) (in Thai).

<sup>37</sup> Phra Ubāli (1885-1932), best known for his efforts as an important Thammayut administrator, was also clearly involved with the preservation of older manuscripts such as these, challenging some who would characterise active Thammayut monks of this period as very much opposed to the preservation of this kind of material. Ubāli passed away before the book was published.

<sup>38</sup> The collection is over 500 pages long and presents a significant challenge for translation and interpretation due to the poor quality of the print, the many errors in transliteration of the original material for print and frankly the obscure nature of the material itself. I am currently working on translations of selected parts of the text with Potprecha Cholvijarn of the University of Bristol.

While biographical details of Suk appear in accounts such as the *History of the Supreme Patriarchs*, I have not located any substantive scholarship which deals with the teachings associated with him.<sup>39</sup> The silence around Suk can be understood as the consequence of a number of factors. First, Suk's reputation rested on his prowess as a practitioner and teacher of a highly complex meditation system which has, for whatever reason, subsequently fallen out of favour with the Thai elite, lost its institutional approval and been eclipsed by methods in which rapid progress is possible.<sup>40</sup> Justin McDaniel, who discusses Suk with reference to almost-contemporary Somdet To, suggests that reputation emerges as a combination of such forces as "royal lineage, teachings, magical power, hagiographic force, and nationalism."<sup>41</sup> Moreover, there is no photographic record of Suk, and he is not associated with particular amulets to the same degree as Somdet To and other contemporaries.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> He is mentioned by James Taylor in "Cosmology, Forest Monks and Sangha Reconstruction in the Early Bangkok Period," *Journal of the Siam Society* 89. 2 (1992).

<sup>40</sup> In fact, as the method of the *araññavāsīn* order, we might reasonably suggest it had lost its institution, not only its institutional approval.

<sup>41</sup> Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) 70.

<sup>42</sup> Save for this reference in McDaniel's most recent study, Suk and his meditation teaching(s) have been, to my knowledge, almost entirely overlooked by non-Thai scholarship. French EFEO scholar, Olivier de Bernon, has visited the temple and interviewed Phra Khru Wira, but, to my knowledge, he has not yet published his findings, although he has described manuscripts detailing what is clearly the same system at Wat Ratchathiwat, another former *araññavāsīn* wat. Olivier de Bernon, "Le Mūl Kammathan du Wat Ratchathiwat daté de 1661 AD: Presentation et traduction," *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol 90 (2002):149-160. Wat Ratchasittharam's manuscript collection is being catalogued in stages by Professors Kazuko Tanabe and Yohei Shimizu of Otani Buddhist University. I am grateful to Mme Jacqueline Filliozat for making me aware of this and to Professor Tanabe for taking the time to discuss the project. While finalising this article, I received Chulalongkorn student Patrick Ong's Master's thesis, by far the most in-depth English-language study of the temple's teaching. Ong's study represents an important development in the long overdue research into Suk's teaching and the broader fabric from which it emerged and I have, where possible, sought to include his comments in my discussions.

The temple produces a range of material which describes and records the meditation teaching techniques, their application and history. Save for technical language in Pali the material is presented in standard Central Thai. For the summary of the meditation teaching described below I have drawn on all of this but in particular from a text named the *Cetovimutti* (i.e., *The Liberation of the Mind*),<sup>43</sup> plus a short English summary.<sup>44</sup> The latter offers a simple overview explaining in the introduction that:

the account given in this book...might be difficult to understand for many people. In this book, only the words to be recited before starting meditation practice and the names of each of the meditation levels and conditions are given; there is no explanation of *nimittas* (the inner signs), which are the conditions encountered in each step. Therefore, practitioners who need to know whether or not a *nimitta* is correct should seek guidance from an *ācariya* (a meditation teacher) or research the relevant parts of the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>45</sup>

The texts broadly agree, at least for our purposes, on the “lower” level of meditation, though the English translation omits the visualisation sections and makes only oblique reference to some of the other practices. In the *Cetovimutti* the text is supplemented by diagrams showing a layman performing certain exercises, which

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<sup>43</sup> A 1997 reissue of Somdet Phra Sangharat Suk Kai Thuean, *Chetovimutti Baep Lamdap Samrap Wat Arunwasi* (Bangkok: Wat Ratchasittharam, 2540 [1997]) (in Thai). In the introduction, the techniques are described as the official method(s) of the *araññavāsīn* order as agreed at a council in 1821, the year before Suk’s death, when he was Supreme Patriarch. Suk Kai Thuean 3.

<sup>44</sup> Suchitra Ronruen, Bruce Evans and Phaisan Nangnoi, eds. and trans., *How to practice Calm and Insight meditation (Samatha-vipassanā kammaṭṭhāna) by Somdech Phra Sangharāj nanasamvara (Suk Kaithuan)* (Bangkok: Wat Ratchasittharam, n.d.). I was informed that the translation project was undertaken under the former abbot, Luang Pho Sam who travelled to Singapore and wanted to propagate Suk’s teachings there, some 10 years earlier, which would date it to around 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Suchitra 7.

enables the reader to better understand the explanations given in the texts.<sup>46</sup>

In some respects the Suk method is typically “orthodox” Theravāda and reflects the language and structure of the *Visuddhimagga*. The practice is clearly meant to be undertaken alone and not as part of a larger group. The candidate takes the three refuges, then begins his/her practice with an initiation ritual and a verse in which the candidate respectfully requests teaching from the meditation master.<sup>47</sup> The candidate is advised that:

every time you are going to meditate, inform the meditation teacher first and, in doing so, offer him flowers, joss-sticks and candles.<sup>48</sup>

The student is advised to ask *kalyāṇamitta* (here, the student’s meditation teacher) for the topic which is most suitable for his personality, and to find the most appropriate location for their practice. In all these respects the system is typically Theravāda. Here the *kammaṭṭhāna*, the grounds for meditation, are separated into two categories of practice: *samatha-kammaṭṭhāna* (concentration) and *vipassanā-kammaṭṭhāna* (insight) meditation. The *kammaṭṭhāna* will be chosen on the basis both of personality type and of current level of progress in instruction.

There are thirteen levels of *samatha* (concentration) meditation:

1. Five kinds of rapture (*pīti*);
2. Six pairs (*yugala*);
3. Physical pleasure (*kāyasukha*) and mental pleasure (*cittasukha*);
4. Mindfulness on breathing (*ānāpānasati*);
5. Mindfulness on the thirty-two parts of the body (*kāyagatāsati*);
6. Ten meditation devices (*kaṣiṇa*);

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<sup>46</sup> See particularly Suk Kai Thuean 32-55.

<sup>47</sup> The necessity for initiation is rarely a feature of contemporary meditation teaching styles.

<sup>48</sup> Suchitra 20.

7. Ten loathsome objects of meditation (*asubha-kammaṭṭhāna*);
8. Absorptions of the fine-material sphere (*rūpajhāna*);
9. Recollections (*anussati*);
10. Four divine abidings (*brahmavihāra*);
11. Ten contemplations on the loathsomeness of food (*āhārepaṭikūlasaññā*);
12. Contemplation on the four elements (*catudhātuvavatthāna*); and
13. Four absorptions of the formless sphere (*arūpajhāna*).<sup>49</sup>

Successful completion of the *samatha* stages will mean that the candidate has achieved the *jhāna*. The categories of *vipassanā* meditation to which they progressed are then enumerated, thus:

1. The seven stages of moral purification (*sīlavissuddhi*);
2. The three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*);
3. Reflection on the three characteristics (*anupassanā*);
4. The ten kinds of insight-knowledge (*vipassanā*);
5. The three conditions of deliverance (*vimokkha*);
6. Reflections on the three conditions of deliverance (*anupassanā-vimokkha*); and
7. The noble path, the noble fruit and the supreme goal (*magga, phala* and *paccekaniibbāna*).

The *samatha* categories are described in some contexts as *hong* (in standard Thai, meaning chamber or room) of progressive achievement and are further separated into three broad categories.<sup>50</sup> Levels 1-3 are the foundational stage, levels 4-9 develop the (form) *rupa jhānas* and levels 10-13 develop the (formless) *arūpajhāna*. The student's progress is dictated by their experience of *nimitta*, something in which they are evaluated and guided by the teacher, without whom only minimal progress can be made.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Suchitra 7-8.

<sup>50</sup> Other metaphors are used to explain progression describe entering and leaving the *wat* and opening the gate or door (*pratu*) to the *kammaṭṭhāna*.

<sup>51</sup> Recalling the point made in the English language text about the necessity of an appropriately-qualified teacher or *kalyāṇamitta*.



Ascribed to each of the first three *samatha* stages are complex visualisation exercises in which the practitioner moves the point of concentration around focus points within the body.<sup>52</sup> The locations described vary depending upon the exercises being performed. Various ‘maps’ of these points are also presented.

Each of these three *samatha* stages features a final exercise which requires a monastic alms bowl and special equipment to perform. The practitioner employs special lead weights called (*kammaṭṭhāna*) *luk sakot* which are attached along a candle using matchsticks. This is then placed over the empty bowl by means of a simple T-shaped construction. *Luk* here acts as the classifier of the *sakot*. *Sakot* has a number of meanings; as used here it may be glossed as both to suppress or control, and to hypnotise. The compound *luk sakot* does not appear in any of the modern reference works I have accessed, although it does appear in Pallegoix’s dictionary as “consecrated grains...an amulet that preserves from evils.”<sup>53</sup> While the meditator practices the candle burns down, and the *luk sakot* will periodically fall into the metal bowl. This serves two purposes. It startles the inexperienced practitioner who is yet to sufficiently cultivate his/her concentration, but it is also a tool to enable the development of this skill. In some exercises it is used to time the sections of the exercise and mark the moment at which the focus should move to the next point in the body. The use of *sakot* has not been described in contemporary Thai practice in any source that I have found, although similar exercises have been noted in Cambodia and historically in Sri Lanka.<sup>54</sup> I have been able to obtain *luk sakot* from other temples in the greater Bangkok area,

<sup>52</sup> As illustrated by a drawing of a meditating layman in the Suk Kai Thuean 32-34, 40-43, 47, 50-51, 55.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Baptiste Pallegoix, *Dictionnaire Siamois Français Anglais* (Bangkok: Printing Office of the Catholic Mission, 1896), 696. I am very grateful to Dr David Smyth who advised me of the presence of this dictionary entry. The fact that I was able to find these *sakot* with relative ease suggests that the practice in which they were used may once have been far more widespread than it is now.

<sup>54</sup> See the cover illustration of Bizot; F.L. Woodward, *The Manual of a Mystic* (1916), *English translation of T.W. Rhys Davids, The Yogāvacara’s Manual* (London: Pali Text Society, 2003); the exercise is discussed on page XII. In the Sri Lankan material it appears to describe only pieces of wood which are placed along the candle and drop into the bowl. I have not found the word *sakot* in Sinhala dictionaries to date.

where they are sold as a kind of amulet rather than a tool for meditation practice.<sup>55</sup> One of the temples where a friend obtained such an amulet was Wat Bot Bon Bangkuwiang, Nonthaburi, which we may recall was the site of Luang Pho Sot's "rediscovery" of the *vijjā dhammakāya* technique. This suggests that identification of these *luk sakot* and the temples and lineages with which their producers are associated could prove a very beneficial direction for research.

It is impossible to make significant progress in the system without the guidance of a knowledgeable and experienced teacher. The written accounts, although highly detailed, in fact describe only the earliest preliminary stages of this complex multi-part journey. The role of the *nimittas* is crucial in advancement – in the sense of what the practitioner sees, but also how it is interpreted by the teacher, and how effectively it is utilised. Ong argues that there are conscious differences in the way the temple now presents its teachings and the way in which it retains them. Thus its most recent teaching textbook will only summarise detail on the possible anticipated *nimittas*, while elsewhere there are references to "various colours, sensations, animal signs and Buddhas of the cosmos associated with each of the...[five] joys."<sup>56</sup> Ong posits the persuasive suggestion that this means the older manuscripts were the tool of the teacher, rather than the student. It is clearly impossible to make any significant progress in the technique without the agreement and guidance of a very experienced *kalyāṇamitta*.

## Summary

The meditation technique(s) associated with Suk Kai Thuean is a highly complex system in which the student must dedicate considerable prolonged effort in order to make significant progress. Such progress necessitates the agreement of a teacher with considerable personal experience in the same system. The gradual style of progress and particularly the private nature of teaching and transmission – as opposed to the shared, public teaching of *Dhammakāya* and Burmese Vipassana styles – threaten the very survival of the technique(s), which by

<sup>55</sup> I have also found some for sale online – again, sold as amulets with no reference to their use on meditation practice.

<sup>56</sup> Ong 146.

definition can only persist with the dedicated effort of individuals. The lower levels of *samatha* techniques reflect the categories enumerated in the Sri Lankan manuscript published as the *Yogāvacara's Manual*. Suk Kai Thuean material and the *Yogāvacara's Manual* describe almost identical practices which employ monastic paraphernalia to carry out a specific exercise employing visualisation of locations within the body. The range of techniques grouped together as the teaching of Suk Kai Thuean are so complex and varied it suggests that they may not all be part of a single path of teaching through which one progresses, but rather a corpus of related practices retained by the temple.<sup>57</sup> The practices describe themselves as (*mag*) *pālimut* (Pali: *magga pāli mutto*) which we can translate literally as outside of the Pali path. This can be understood as denoting (initiation into) methods which are free from or outside the canonical texts. In this interpretation of this curious phrase, I follow Crosby who argues that it suggests a tradition which exists outside the canonical texts, rather than simply one recorded in a language other than Pali.<sup>58</sup> In this sense it echoes Cousins' description of secret material mentioned by, but not described in, the *Visuddhimagga*. It also hints at why the system may have declined under the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century reforms which emphasised the authority of Pali canonical material above all other legitimating factors. Ong describes to the temple's teaching as *Matchima*, i.e., the middle way.<sup>59</sup> Practitioners and some texts use the term *yogāvacara* to describe the technique(s), again echoing the Sri Lankan *Yogāvacara's Manual*.

### Comparison

From reviewing these two techniques it is clear that there are significant overlaps. The concepts of the bases in the body are similar and indeed one map of the Suk system reflects the bases in the *Dhammakāya* system exactly. Such concepts of the body are not found in the *Visuddhimagga*. In respect to its teaching style, the *Dhammakāya* technique is characteristic of popular contemporary

<sup>57</sup> This was my assessment in Newell and is echoed by Ong.

<sup>58</sup> Kate Crosby, "Sāriputta's three works on the *Samantapāsādikā*," *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, XXVIII (2006): 49-59.

<sup>59</sup> Ong, echoing the way in which Wat Dhammakaya presents its meditation teaching.

methods such as Burmese Vipassana. No initiation is necessary in *Dhammakāya* meditation, which serves to devalue the role of the teacher to some degree. The role of the *nimittas* and the way in which they denote progress are also similar, although in the *Dhammakāya* system these seem to be prescribed – the crystal ball – while in the Suk Kai Thuean system there is more space for variety and no expectation or recommendation of identical *nimittas*. Instead, the individual's experience is interpreted and guided by the teacher. As Ong notes, the two systems also share the interpretation of “the nucleus of the body [in which the]...spherical elements... [group] around the navel area.”<sup>60</sup>

Biographical accounts describe Sot as a former student of meditation at Wat Ratchasittharam, and my experience of obtaining *luk sakot* from the temple at which he “rediscovered” *dhammakāya* meditation suggest that his discovery was at least in part related to his experience in meditation methods current in Central Thailand at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Dhammakāya* meditation appears to be an adapted form of the preliminary *samatha* stages of the Suk Kai Thuean method in which the same *nimittas* are prescribed for all practitioners, rendering the one to one teacher-student relationship unnecessary and enabling the practice and promotion to groups and in turn the faster spread of the particular system. In my interviews with practitioners at Wat Ratchasittharam there was a clear consensus that this was the case, and Ong reports similar findings. The *Dhammakāya* temples continue to emphasise the narrative of “rediscovery” in talking about the provenance of the *vijjā dhammakāya*, instead of any connection to the teachings of Suk Kai Thuean or other former meditation teachers, in part because this legitimating tactic – linking the historical Buddha to the contemporary saint and meditation master – sidesteps the possible criticisms inherent in any more mundane history. I have doubts that the leadership of Wat Dhammakaya or other monasteries connected with the teachings of Luang Pho Sot will acknowledge their ties to the teaching of Suk Kai Thuean. However, I

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<sup>60</sup> Ong 159, 142. Potprecha suggests that this is echoed in Acharn Man's teaching on the *Buddho* sphere, personal communication Nov 28 2011.

hope in examining these connections I will have taken a step towards questioning the use of the term “rediscovery,” as well as connecting this “new religious movement” to an much older tradition.<sup>61</sup>

## Future research

The meditation systems considered in this article are both worthy of considerably more scholarly focus than they have enjoyed to date. The system attributed to Suk Kai Thuean is particularly compelling. The present article represents only an initial review, and the descriptions and assessments given here may well in time be shown to be partial and premature. Fortunately, there are already a number of young scholars besides the author who are actively engaged in research of these systems and whose findings will enrich our appreciation of the historical diversity within Thai meditation traditions, and also help us to understand the factors which have led to some practices being celebrated while others are threatened and have disappeared. Scholarship which incorporates engaged practice and interviews, which appreciates the potential of the *sakot* amulet as much as the text, will help us understand the place, function and appeal of meditation practice for Thais of the present and the past. It may be that in time suggestions of a pan-Theravāda trend will emerge, or suggestions of how certain practices were spread and by whom, but my feeling is that at present this is a premature and largely unhelpful direction. While there may be some scholarly benefit in exploring the prevalence of the term *yogāvacara* to describe the meditation practice(s) and the practitioner, attempts to apply this as a label to practices beyond meditation seem premature. I hope to return to reading Phra Malai texts in the expectation that they may help inform our understanding of historical, popular representations of monastic meditation practice, and how these have changed. It is hoped that

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<sup>61</sup> For the vast majority of *dhammadkāya* meditation practitioners, the question of provenance is at best an irrelevance – they experience the benefits of the practice and see in its most famous teacher, Luang Pho Sot, the ultimate evidence of its efficacy. In time there may be more acceptability for a number of different historical accounts and investigations.

scholars will see the benefit of approaching the study of meditation through the lens of lineage and experience, rather than attempting to reconstruct a method from texts only. Finally, we should be mindful of the important ethical considerations in identifying and describing individuals and explicitly associating them with practices. While my experience, and more recently that of Ong, is that Wat Ratchasittharam positively encourages academic enquiry – quite possibly considering it the means of survival – we need to tread very carefully and remain mindful of our own potential to derail and disrupt as much as to support and bear witness.

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