

Examining and Analyzing the Meditation System Passed Down by the Supreme Patriarch Suk Kaithuean, Now Taught at Wat Ratchasittharam¹

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Abstract

This article examines the living tradition of the meditation system inherited from the Venerable Suk Kaithuean at Wat Ratchasittharam. It is believed that Venerable Suk belonged to a lineage of forest monks whose meditation practices were passed down over many centuries from the historical Buddha and his son Rahul. When he was appointed the abbot of Wat Ratchasittharam, the Venerable Suk played an important role in contributing to the establishment of the early Bangkok period. He was the head of meditation instruction during the reign of King Rama I and held the appointment of the Supreme Patriarch under King Rama II. During this period, his method of meditation

¹ This article is based on the author's Masters thesis titled "The Meditation System of the Supreme Patriarch Suk Kaithuean as a Living Tradition at Wat Ratchasittharam" which was submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts Program in Thai Studies (2011) at Chulalongkorn University. The research for this article was partially funded by the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF).

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was promoted throughout the kingdom. Two hundred years later, the meditation system as propagated by the Venerable Suk can hardly be found in the modern Thailand. Today, it is named *Matchima* meditation and is only taught at Wat Ratchasittharam. My aim is to provide a holistic understanding of this ancient, but living tradition.

This article addresses an understanding of the meditation system in terms of its philosophy, techniques and how it is currently practiced, as well as provides a background understanding of the practitioners. This article also addresses the discourse used by the practitioners that justify their commitment to the practice and how they see it vis-à-vis other contemporary meditation systems in Thailand.

Background to the Study

When the old capital Ayutthaya was invaded by the Burmese in 1767, a forest monk, known as Venerable Suk (1733-1822), was undertaking the *dhutanga* (Thai: *thudong*) or ascetic practice of wandering around the forests of mainland Southeast Asia. His intention was to develop himself spiritually via meditational techniques inherited from various teachers of the forest tradition and also to flee the onslaught of the Burmese army.

While in his 40s, during the reign of King Taksin (1767-1782), the Venerable Suk settled in Wat Thahoi situated around the outskirts of the old capital. It seems that his meditational practices bore fruit as his loving-kindness attracted fowl from deep within the forest to dwell around him and his residence.³ As his fame started to grow, he was

³ Mettanando Bhikkhu, "Meditation and Healing in the Theravada Buddhist Order of Thailand and Laos" (PhD Dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1998) 19.

often referred to as Suk Kaithuean [สุก ไก่เถื่อน], roughly meaning ‘wild chicken’ Suk.⁴

The early rulers of the Bangkok era who were collectively establishing the foundations of the new capital at Bangkok tried various means to ‘tame’ this ‘wild chicken’ and harness his charisma, which was believed to derive from Buddhist meditational practices considered authentic and commonly practiced during Ayutthaya times. For instance, King Rama I invited him to reside at Wat Phlab, now known as Wat Ratchasittharam and appointed him the head of meditation instruction (1782). During the second reign, he was appointed the Supreme Patriarch (1819). In addition, he was also the preceptor and meditation instructor to the young princes Jessadabodindra and Mongkut, who eventually became Kings Rama III and Rama IV, respectively.⁵ During the reign of King Rama II, the Venerable Suk’s system of meditation was promoted as the main medium of instruction for the monastic community in the kingdom. This occurred during a monastic conference convened by the king in 1821, where the Venerable Suk was appointed head of the council.⁶ The importance of the Venerable Suk’s contributions to the establishment of the early Bangkok period thus should not be underestimated.

Two hundred years later, propagation of this ancient meditation system can hardly be found in the modern Thai nation-state. Fortunately, the Venerable Suk had in his possession records of this meditation system in the form of ‘*samut khoi*’ [สมุดข่อย], a traditional Thai folded manuscript book.⁷ These spiritual practices were based on

⁴ Mettanando 20-23.

⁵ Catherine Sarah Newell, “Monks, Meditation and Missing Links: Continuity, ‘Orthodoxy’ and the *Vijja Dhammakaya* in Thai Buddhism” (PhD Dissertation, Department of the Study of Religions, SOAS, 2008) 183-184.

⁶ Phra Khru Sangkarak Wira Thanwiro, *The Main Fundamentals Of Samatha-Vipassana Meditation of His Excellency, the Sangharaj Suk Kaithuean* (N.p: n.p, 2006) Foreword.

⁷ The manuscript has been translated into English by Dr Mettanando as part of his PhD dissertation.

collective knowledge, transmitted from a lineage of teachers.⁸ Far from being an extinct tradition, this meditation system is still taught at Wat Ratchasittharam. Practitioners today refer to it as the *Matchima* [มัชฌิมา] meditation system.

Aims and Methodology

In this article, I examine the *Matchima* meditation system – the ‘living tradition’ of the meditation teachings inherited by the Supreme Patriarch Suk Kaithuean and currently taught at Wat Ratchasittharam. To achieve this, I used a combination of textual and field resources for my research.

Textual Research: I examined existing academic literature written about the *Matchima* meditation system, derived from two main sources, namely, *Meditation and Healing in the Theravāda Buddhist Order of Thailand and Laos* by Mettanando Bhikkhu⁹ and “Monks, Meditation and Missing Links: Continuity, ‘Orthodoxy’ and the Vijja Dhammakāya in Thai Buddhism” by Catherine Newell. I also examined books and publications produced by the temple.¹⁰

Field Research: I made myself a disciple of the meditation teacher of the temple, Luang Pho Wira [หลวงพ่อวีระ]. My initiation as a disciple commenced on 28 July 2010 and I made regular trips (average of three times a week for half a year) to the temple for

⁸ The need to record this tradition in a manuscript was because of the perceived threat of its extinction owing to the Burmese invasion which had resulted in the decimation of temples and libraries in Ayutthaya. Newell 160.

⁹ At the time his dissertation was written, Mano was an ordained monk who served under Wat Dhammakāya. He is now a layman known as Mano Mettanando Laohavanich and is currently a researcher at the Pridi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University.

¹⁰ These publications include, *The Main Fundamentals of Samatha-Vipassana Meditation of His Excellency the Sangharaj Suk Kaithuean*; *Morning and Evening Chanting Book for the Matchima System of Meditation*; *Meditation For Healing Kamma And Treating Diseases*; and *How To Practice Calm and Insight Meditation by Somdech Phra Sangharaj Nanasamvara (Suk Kaithuean), Wat Rajasiddharam*. (Refer to the References for more detail). The first three publications are in Thai, compiled and authored by the meditation teacher Luang Pho Wira, while the fourth is written in English.

meditation practice and fieldwork. As a practitioner of the *Matchima* meditation system and an analytical observer of the space where it is taught and the pedagogical methods used, my intention was to understand how the meditation is currently taught today from an insider's perspective. I also conducted interviews with lay and monastic practitioners to understand how they themselves view this meditation system.

My research interests for this article are as follows:

- An understanding of the meditation system in terms of its philosophy, techniques and how it is currently practiced.
- A background understanding of the practitioners: Comprising the meditation teacher, monks and laypeople in how they came into contact with this meditation system and their perceptions of the system.
- What is the discourse used by the practitioners that justify their commitment to the practice and how they see it vis-à-vis other contemporary meditation systems in Thailand.

Examination of the Meditation System – Technical Aspects, Philosophy and Practice

Existing temple literature and information gathered from Luang Pho Wira states that the *Matchima* meditation system is intricate and complex comprising many steps and levels known as rooms or hong [ห้อง] aimed in building the spiritual aspirant's concentration abilities (*samatha*) before the advancement to insight (*vipassanā*).¹¹ There are 13 levels for *samatha* meditation and nine levels for *vipassanā* meditation:

¹¹ According to the Buddhist scriptures, the main aim of meditation is to develop oneself in accordance with the eight-fold path, cumulating in the release from suffering. A pivotal aspect of this is *vipassanā* or the cultivation of insight into the three marks of existence – impermanence, suffering and non-self, which define all mundane phenomenal existence. It is through this insight that one is released from this mundane existence and achieves a state of *nibbāna*.

Figure 1: Levels of *Samatha* (Concentration) Meditation

Basic Foundation

1. Five kinds of rapture (*piti*)
2. Six pairs (*yugala*)
3. Pleasurable concentration (*Suksamadhi*)

Development of Form Absorptions

4. Mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati*)
5. Mindfulness on the 32 parts of the body (*kayagatasati*)
6. Ten meditation devices (*kasina*)
7. Ten Loathsome objects of meditation (*asubha-kammatthana*)
8. Absorption of the 5th *Jhana* (*rupajhana*)

Development of Formless Absorptions

9. Recollections (*anussati*)
10. Four divine abidings (*brahmavihara*)
11. Ten contemplations on the loathsomeness of food (*aharepatikulasanna*)
12. Contemplation on the four elements (*catudhatuvavatthana*)
13. Four absorptions of the formless sphere (*arupajhana*)

Figure 2: Levels of *Vipassanā* (insight) Meditation

1. The seven stages of moral purification
2. The three characteristics
3. Reflection on the three characteristics
4. The three conditions of deliverance
5. Reflections on the three conditions of deliverance
6. 10 aspects of insight absorption (Vipassana Jhana)
7. 37 qualities contributing to enlightenment
8. The 10 bonds/fetters (Sanyot)
9. The opening of the lotus of the Brahmavihara- The path, the fruit and Nibbana

For one to advance to the next level, it is essential to have the correct *nimit* [นิมิต],¹² roughly translated as ‘inner signs’ and experience. The instructor would then determine, based on what he has himself experienced and learnt from his own predecessors, whether it is correct. There are also exercises one has to perform at each room or level in order to strengthen the mind so that one’s mind becomes progressively more stable and concentrated.

This tradition is considered esoteric, as information about the characteristics of the *nimits* is not revealed to the public. Temple publications, which make a passing reference to *nimits* as bright lights and a brief mention of them as consisting of three stages, is similar to other Buddhist teachings concerning meditation.¹³ In the only English publication (a thin chanting booklet) produced by the temple, the introduction section explains that the ‘inner signs’ or the *nimits* cannot be revealed openly and practitioners should consult an experienced meditation teacher about the authenticity of their *nimits*.¹⁴

As for the nature of the exercises the practitioner has to conduct, they are only revealed for the first four levels.¹⁵ One main exercise, characteristic of the basic levels of the system, is the use of a meditation device comprising the alms bowl. The alms bowl is supported by a structure below while a wooden T shape structure is placed flat along the mouth of the bowl. A candle is balanced on the T

¹² I use the Thai transliteration instead of the word transliterated from Pali, which is referred to as *nimittas*.

¹³ Phra Khru Sangkarak Wira Thanwiro, *Main Fundamentals*, 62-63. The three stages of *nimits* one would experience comprise the ‘preparatory sign’, the ‘acquired sign’ and the ‘counterpart sign’ where the practitioner enters into access concentration or beginning stages of meditative absorption known as *jhāna*. This teaching is recognized in most schools of Buddhism. For more information, see Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 182-183.

¹⁴ Suchitra Ronruen, Bruce Evans, and Phaisan Nangnoi, *How to Practice Calm and Insight Meditation (Samatha-vipassana Kammahana) by Somdech Phra Sangharaj Nanassamvara (Suk Kaithuean), Wat Rajasiddharam* (Bangkok: Sahathamik Ptd Ltd, n.d.).

¹⁵ This comprises the foundational stage (first three levels) and the *ānāpāna-sati* stage. Refer to Figures 1 and 2 for a list of all the stages.

shape structure and studded with lead weights known as *luk sakot*¹⁶ at two-inch intervals, attached to the candle by matchsticks (See Figure 3). While the meditator practices, the candle is lighted and the lead weights fall periodically with a loud cracking sound. I was informed from some laypeople who have gone through this practice that it is aimed at training the practitioner's mind to withstand loud noises so that the mind continues to remain deep in concentration. According to the temple's publication, the sound is also meant as an auditory signal for the practitioner to move his mind to a new position as specified by the particular exercise.¹⁷ It is noted that the use of the *luk sakot* for meditation practices has not been observed in contemporary meditation practices in Thailand.¹⁸

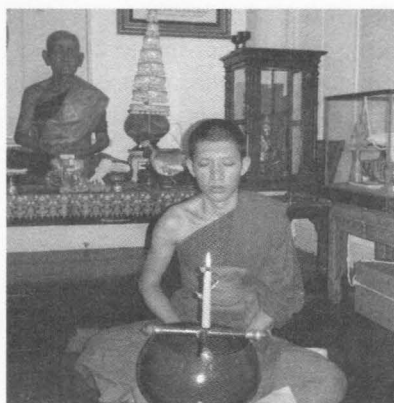


Figure 3: Meditating with a Monastic Device

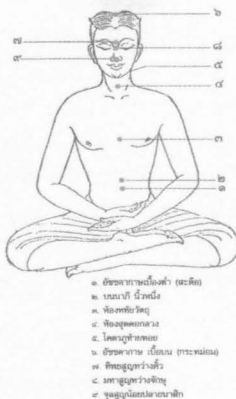
¹⁶ ลูกสะกด - According to Newell, it was probable that these were previously made from the seeds or pips of fruit in the past instead of lead. Newell 200.

¹⁷ Phra Khru Sangkarak Wira Thanwiro, *Main Fundamentals*, 72-73.

¹⁸ Newell 201

One interesting aspect of the *Matchima* meditation system is that it possesses a separate modality on healing.¹⁹ According to Luang Pho Wira, the practitioner is qualified to learn the healing techniques once they have passed the foundational stage or the first three rooms. Although Luang Pho Wira claims to have taught this modality to quite a number of his disciples, I get the impression that it is not a required field of study and only taught on request. This is because one other layperson I interviewed mentioned that he was not taught this system because he did not ask Luang Pho Wira about it, even though he had passed the foundational stage two years ago.

The healing modality teaches that the human body consists of nine bases that are aligned according to the path of the breath from the tip of the nose to the navel. These nine bases have specific characteristics and attributes (see Figure 4).



1. Lower space surface: Quenching all pain
2. A finger-breadth above navel: Origin of all evil thoughts
3. Chamber of the heart: Mixing place of the wholesome and unwholesome mental phenomena assembling ground of elements
4. A chamber of the throat: The origin of the sleeping, tastelessness point of breaking apart of thoughts and the truth of cessation
5. Lower back of the head: The sanctuary from pain and evil, especially useful at the dying moment, also used for the quenching of poisons and boils
6. Upper space surface: Home of forbearance
7. Divine center between the brows: Destroys all harm, origin of power and authority
8. Major center between the eyes: Origin of wisdom and seeing of falsehood
9. Minor center at the nose tip: Origin of joy and awareness of rebirth

Figure 4: The 9 Bases used for healing and their attributes

¹⁹According to Dr Mettanando's research into the original manuscript inherited by the Venerable Suk, the manuscript is divided into three parts, with the first two dealing with the chants and the philosophy of meditation. The third component focuses on using meditation for healing. According to Mettandano's analysis, the personalized and informal manner in which the third part was written seemed to be based on individual experience. This indicated that it could have been the work of the Venerable Suk himself, in contrast to the other two parts of the manuscript, which is written in formal language and probably passed down by earlier teachers. Mettanando 318.

By directing one's attention to any of them individually or in a specific combination while in a state of meditative concentration, one will be able to heal various physical, emotional and mental conditions afflicting oneself or another.²⁰ The temple has produced one book explaining the location of the bases and the categories of healing that is possible via this method.²¹ However, as with all its publications, this book is not meant to be a self-help manual since it is impossible for anyone to commence without proper personal supervision and without achieving the correct *nimit* (which is derived from the foundational stage and conformed by the instructor). All this is only possible after the practitioner has been formally accepted as a disciple of the meditation instructor via an initiation ceremony.

Wat Ratchasittharam and the Meditation Center- Khana 5 [ฅน๕] or Section 5

The temple is located in the Thonburi district of Bangkok. It is considered a second-class royal temple founded by King Rama I.²² Originally named Wat Phlab, the temple's name was changed under King Rama III to Wat Ratchasittharam. The temple was a well-known center for meditation training during the early Bangkok period where Kings Rama II, III and IV studied meditation. This was confirmed by historical documents kept in the museum at Khana 5, such as letters written by abbots recommending their pupils study at Wat

²⁰ By moving the mind along the nine bases, one is able to facilitate the movement of 'wind' or lom [ลม], which aids in the healing process. According to Luang Pho Wira, illness is related to the stagnancy of 'wind' in the body, which might not circulate properly because of blockages as a result of various emotional and mental distresses arising from one or several of fourteen unwholesome states. It is fascinating that this philosophy is related to the practice of the Indian Ayurvedic medicine, which is claimed to have reached Thailand around the same time as Buddhism in the 2nd or 3rd century BC. This ancient medical practice shares similar concepts on the manipulation of energy along invisible lines as seen in the 10 sen [เส้น] used in Thai massage.

²¹ Phra Khru Sangkarak Wira Thanwiro, *Meditation for Healing Kamma and Treating Diseases*.

²² Some brief information about the temple can be found at: <http://www.mybuddha108.com/wats/bangkok/w_ratchasihatharam.html>.

Ratchasittharam and diaries written by monks recording their meditation experiences there.

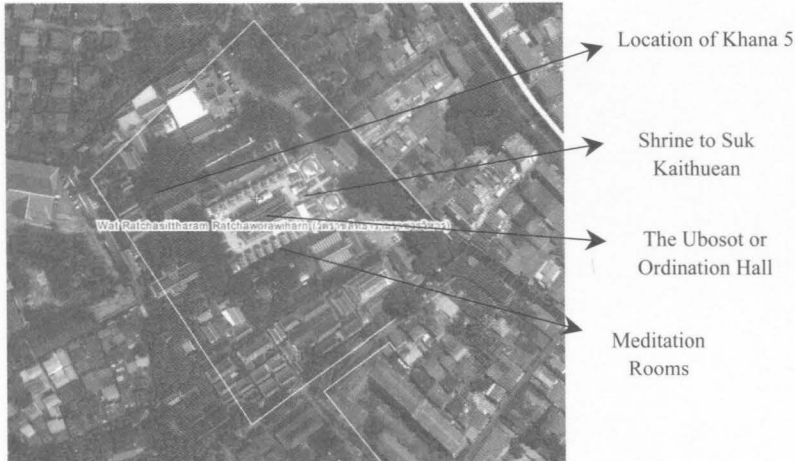


Figure 5: Map of Wat Ratchasittharam

The temple comprises a main section, the ordination hall or the Ubosot flanked by two large chedis and surrounded by several miniature huts around the Ubosot in a rectangular shaped design (see Figure 5). The front entrance of the temple, located between the two chedis, houses a shrine to the Venerable Suk. The image in the shrine was built by Rama III in honor of his late preceptor. This shrine is watched over by the temple's *mae chis* who take separate shifts in the day to attend to lay devotees and clean the shrine when necessary. I spoke to an elderly *mae chi* named Mae Chi Chinda [แม่ชีจินดา] who is 78 years of age. From her, I learnt that the miniature huts around the ordination hall were actually used as meditation rooms in the past by monks who were studying meditation at the temple. A close observation of each of the huts, however, indicates that they have not been utilized for a long time and are kept under padlock (see Figure 6). This was confirmed by Mae Chi Chinda who claims to have been living in the temple since 1964. She commented that she could hardly remember any of these huts being used when she first arrived to reside at the temple.

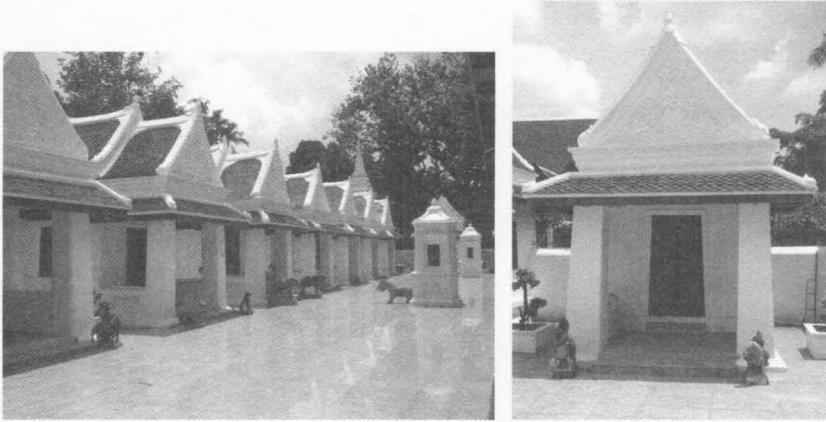


Figure 6: Meditation Huts

Khana 5 is presently the only section of the temple that continues to teach the *Matchima* meditation system. There are in total 10 *khanas* that surround the perimeter of the main temple ground. The other *khanas* are involved primarily in scriptural and Pali studies. According to the practitioners I interviewed, including Luang Pho Wira and Mae Chi Chinda, they claimed that the other *khanas* used to teach the *Matchima* meditation system. However, the teachers in these *khanas* passed on because of old age and were unable to find a suitable successor.

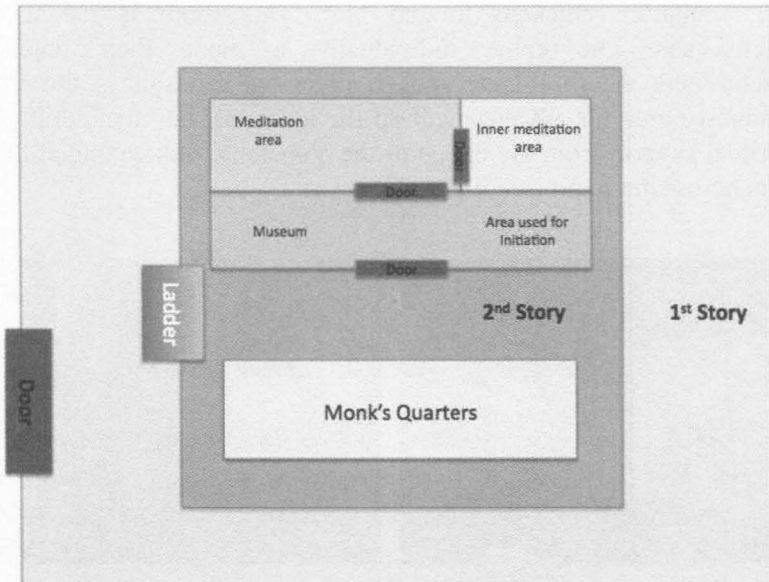


Figure 7: Map of Khana 5

Khana 5 is located in an obscure northeastern corner of the main temple. It consists of an elevated floor, comprising three rooms in one section opposite the monk's quarters, where the residential teacher Luang Pho Wira resides (see Figure 7). The rooms are organized in such a way that one has to cross the first two rooms in order to enter the third, innermost room. It is not a particularly big area, stretching to the size of a normal one-bedroom apartment in Bangkok, around 60 square meters. The first room is divided into two segments. One end houses the museum and its artifacts, while the other contains a Golden Buddha image and an open area for conducting the initiation ceremony. The second room contains more Buddha images and images of the Venerable Suk. This area is often used by both monks and laity who come to the temple to meditate in groups and/or are undertaking the eight precepts from Luang Pho Wira. The innermost room is the smallest of the three rooms and houses the largest and most lifelike image of the Venerable Suk seated on a raised platform

with miniature chickens around him. This room is meant for practitioners who come individually to hone their practice. Practitioners whom I have spoken to claim that this is the most conducive area for advancement up the levels as they feel additional spiritual support from the image of the Venerable Suk gazing at them from across the room (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Meditation Rooms in Khana 5

Experiences with the Initiation Procedure, Commencement of Meditation Practice and General Observations

Initiation is the necessary first step prior to learning the meditation system. I learnt about this requirement during my first trip to the temple. I spoke to a few laypeople practicing meditation in the inner meditation chamber and asked them what was so distinctive about this system. They all replied that that it was the initiation ceremony that was unique and could not be found elsewhere.²³

²³ On the same day, I met Luang Pho Wira and he informed me that I could contact him by his mobile phone to make arrangements on the appropriate time to conduct the initiation ceremony. He seemed excited on learning that I was a foreigner and interested in writing about the *Matchima* meditation system. He commented that there have been some foreigners in the past who have enquired about the system for research, but have declined to be initiated as they have other religious convictions. He added that I am the first to examine the system from a practitioner's point of view and expressed that he was pleased.

The initiation itself is an ancient practice and, according to Luang Pho Wira, was performed since the time Buddhism arrived in Thailand. In Thai, it is referred to as the *Khuean Khammathan* [ขึ้นกรรมฐาน]. In the ceremony the new initiate pays respect to five entities, three of which comprise the triple gem – the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. The additional two are the teacher and the meditation system itself, known as the *Phra Kammathan* [พระกรรมฐาน].²⁴

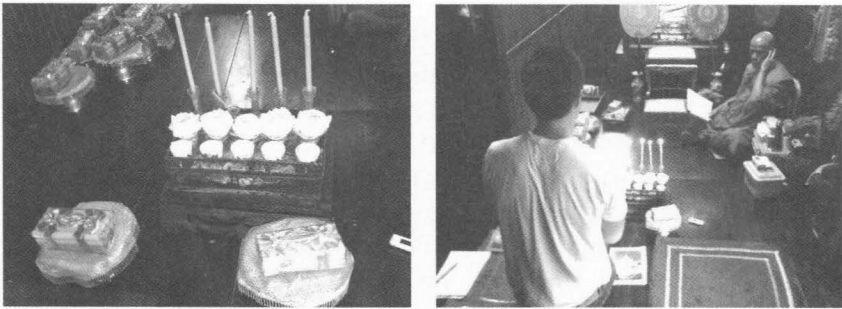


Figure 9: The Initiation Ceremony

The ceremony is performed with a tray consisting of lotus flowers, yellow candle sticks, popped rice (ข้าวตอก) in little cups and incense sticks arranged in rows of five (see Figure 9). The prospective student kneels in front of a Buddha image and the meditation teacher, with the ceremonial tray placed between. According to Luang Pho Wira, the ceremony was traditionally performed on Thursdays, as this is the day dedicated to teachers in Thai tradition. This was adhered to in the past where most people were farmers and different days were accorded different significance. Today, the ceremony can be

²⁴ My initiation ceremony took place on a weekday morning. I was accompanied by a Thai friend who assisted with translation work during my first few trips to the temple. Both of us were initiated into the meditation system at the same time. Together with Luang Pho Wira, there were only three people involved in the ceremony. To document this, I had brought my camera along. Luang Pho Wira noticed it and enthusiastically offered to take pictures for us. He also offered to pose for shots to facilitate the documentation.

performed any day of the week. In the past, the prospective pupil would have to prepare the ceremonial tray himself. However, in today's context, Luang Pho Wira mentions that it is easier for the temple to make the preparations and the pupil would usually offer a monetary donation for the effort.

To assist the prospective disciple in reciting the required chants for the ceremony, a book specially prepared by the temple, titled *Handbook for the Observance of Buddhist Chants for Morning/Evening and Chants for Meditation Practice*,²⁵ is provided. The meditation teacher instructs the student to turn to the relevant pages and repeat the verses. At the same time, the candles and the incense sticks are lighted and offered to the five entities mentioned earlier. The chants are performed in Pali and then in Thai, which include taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha of the past, present, future and for them to expedite one's meditation progress. The verses also implore one to seek forgiveness for any past transgressions one may have committed against the triple gem. This was then followed by the teacher himself chanting Pali verses and accepting the request of the prospective disciple to learn the meditation discipline.

My ceremony lasted for around half an hour. This was followed by the first meditation session. I was instructed that for my first attempt, the session would last for no more than 15 minutes. Before beginning to meditate, more verses had to be chanted. I was informed that the pre-meditation chants could be done out loud, especially if one was to meditate in a group or quietly, if done individually. The chants could be found in the same meditation handbook. The chants briefly seek forgiveness from the Buddha for one's bad kamma in the past and setting one's intention for a fruitful meditation session. The chants also invoke assistance from the triple gem, coupled with spiritual assistance from the meditation masters of the past. Similarly, one is to recite the post-meditation chant after the meditation. This

²⁵ Phra Khru Sangkarak Wira Thanwiro, *Morning and Evening Chanting Book for the Middle System of Meditation*.

deals with offering the merits generated from meditation to all sentient beings.²⁶

The initial phase of meditation begins with focusing one's attention two-finger breadths below the navel. I was told to do this in combination with reciting the mantra '*buddho*',²⁷ while breathing in and out. According to Luang Pho Wira, and, supported by books published by the temple,²⁸ this is necessary for the generation of energy that would serve as the foundation for later meditational practices.²⁹ According to Luang Pho Wira, the generation of energy in this region is possible because of the location of the body's elements (the four elements of earth, wind fire, water) around the navel, which comprise the basic constitutions of the human body.³⁰

The impression I had of the initiation ceremony was that it seemed to be a pre-packaged, 'theme-park' experience what was tailored for visitors who had no prior knowledge or need to prepare for it. This was not only reflected in the tray and the verses, which were prepared beforehand for the initiate, but also the fact that there was no

²⁶ This is based on the belief that stilling the mind in meditation results in the highest forms of merit one can achieve.

²⁷ This is a popular mantra for concentration or *samatha* training in Thailand since ancient times. It can be considered a form of '*anussati*' or one of the recollections of the Buddha, which is mentioned in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* or *Path of Purification*. Another popular Thai mantra is '*samma araham*' or the 'enlightened one', which is used in Dhammakāya meditation.

²⁸ This claim is mentioned in Phra Khru Sangkarak Wira Thanwiro, *Main Fundamentals*, 59.

²⁹ This philosophy is similar to Chinese and Japanese '*qi/ki*' or energy work exercises which believes that this is the location for the physical center of gravity of the human body and is the seat of one's internal energy, known as *dan tien* or *hara* in Mandarin and Japanese. This region also roughly corresponds to the Indian concept of the *manipura*, or navel *chakra*. In yogic philosophy, it is thought to be the seat of *prana* (energy in Sanskrit) that radiates outwards to the entire body. See Da Liu, *T'ai Chi Ch'uan and Meditation* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1987) 91-92.

³⁰ This is similar to the Dhammakāya meditation founded by Luang Pho Sot, which also teaches that one has to focus one's attention two-finger around the navel, which comprises of the body's four elements. However, in contrast to the *Matchima*, which focus below the navel, Dhammakāya meditation teaches the practitioner to focus two fingerbreadths above the navel.

special requirement to even chant the Pali verses properly. I remember stumbling over several verses that were Thai transliterations of Pali with no requirement to repeat them. It would not be far fetched to believe that the initiation ceremony in the past was a more solemn affair, perhaps requiring the initiate to prepare the tray himself and memorize the verses prior to the actual event.

In my subsequent visits, Luang Pho Wira would guide me in the pre and post meditation chants in Pali and Thai. For the first few weeks after the initiation ceremony, the duration for practice was extended from 15 minutes to half an hour to a maximum of three hours. I was advised to change my position from the usual seated, cross-legged position to a walking position, while continuing to maintain my attention two finger-breadths below the navel. This was to mitigate the dull ache that developed in my legs after sitting in the same position continuously. I was, however, advised not to perform this in bed, before sleep, as it keeps one awake.

In each session after the meditation practice, I would be asked if I experienced any *nimits*. This is essential; individuals who had finished their meditation session would consult Luang Pho Wira privately and relate their experiences to him. He would, in turn, give them advice on how to progress further. I was to later learn that the *nimit* was a critical aspect of this meditation system as it determined one's progression in the *Matchima* meditation system. Luang Pho Wira also advised me to practice at home and to consult with him about any *nimits* or experiences that I might have via hand phone. I have observed that he carries a personal hand phone with him at all times, 24 hours a day.³¹

Since the commencement of my field research and meditation practice at Khana 5, I have not observed any meditation group with more than fifteen people. Any group activity seemed to be amongst family members who would be dressed in white and undertake the eight precepts, as compared to the usual five for most laypeople. This could occur during the *uposatha* days know as *wan phra* in Thai.³² It

³¹ I have noticed that his hand phone ringing tone is set to a cock's crow, in line with Venerable Suk Kaithuean's affinity with cockerels.

³² A further elaboration of *uposatha* days can be found in <Wikipedia://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uposatha>.

could also be an allocated day set aside in a week for the lay person to undertake additional precepts aimed at spiritual cleansing via leading a more ascetic lifestyle in the temple. For this group of people, I have observed that Luang Pho Wira would usually lead them in chanting the pre and post meditation chants together with receiving the eight precepts. Luang Pho Wira also mentioned that a large number of his initiates practice at home. This is with reference to practitioners living in other provinces, who are unable to make frequent trips to the temple.

In most cases, the meditation at Khana 5 is performed individually. Practitioners would sit at the main meditation area or the inner meditation area, take the chanting book from a shelf nearby and conduct the procedure by themselves. Luang Pho Wira would usually lead new initiates in the pre and post meditation chants. He would enter the mediation rooms from time to time to check and provide assistance when necessary. I also noted that practitioners who come to the meditation rooms at Khana 5 are in different levels of advancement in the *Matchima* meditation system. A high level practitioner could thus be practicing moving a *nimit* around his body (a requirement after the foundational stage) while seated next to a beginner who is still struggling to experience the *nimit* below his navel.

In contrast to other meditation centers and temples in Thailand, which have scheduled group meditation sessions, this aspect is absent in Wat Ratchasittharam. According to a layperson I spoke to, the only time when people arrive to meditate in larger numbers are during Saturday or Sunday in the last week of the month or during important festive occasions, such as Visakha Bucha Day or Mother's Day. Even then, my interviewees report that these groups do not number more than 30 people.

People Involved in the Meditation System

The Meditation Instructor – Luang Pho Wira

Luang Pho Wira is the sole meditation instructor in the temple. He is 63 years of age and became the official meditation instructor of Khana 5 in 2001 after the death of the previous instructor. A layperson I interviewed claimed that there was another teacher teaching the system a few years back at Khana 4, but he has since passed away.

Interviews with other practitioners indicate that there are instructors still alive who taught the system in the past, but have ceased to do so now. This was seen in the case of Mae Chi Chinda who claimed to be a former instructor of the system and who had even traveled overseas to Singapore for a few months to teach at a Thai temple there. She has since stopped teaching because of old age.

Luang Pho Wira has been rather hesitant to provide me with a detailed account of his own background before he became a monk and how he encountered this meditation technique, often changing the subject when I inquired about this a few times. It seems that he prefers to direct attention mainly towards the meditation system. He did mention briefly that when he was a layman, he was already aware of the existence of the temple and was a regular visitor there. He has also learnt various meditation techniques from different schools and had chosen the *Matchima* system as he found it effective in producing results. Despite Luang Pho Wira's hesitation in relating his own life background, I was able to gather some information about him from a chatty layman, who mentioned that Luang Pho Wira's meditation teacher was his own biological father. His father had been the former meditation instructor at Khana 5 who ordained as a monk subsequently after marriage and two children. He personally coached Luang Pho Wira on the details and esoteric knowledge of this meditation technique when Luang Pho Wira was still a layman. Other devotees in the temple indicate that Luang Pho Wira is currently the most qualified person to teach the *Matchima* meditation system, as he is believed to have passed all the levels which had taken him about 20 years to accomplish. While there are other laymen and monks who play a minor role and assist in the meditation instruction, they have yet to reach such a high level of attainment.

Luang Pho Wira is extremely passionate in propagating the *Matchima* meditation system and has taken some steps to disseminate knowledge of the system to the general public. This first started with the construction of a small museum in 1997. This museum is situated just before the entrance of the meditation hall for visitors to examine the various personal belongings of Venerable Suk, such as his walking staff, his alms bowl, honorary fan, the palm leaf manuscripts he

inherited, as well as other items detailing the significance and importance of the temple and the meditation system in the past. These items are all kept neatly in a glass case with explanations in Thai. In addition to the Venerable Suk's belongings, there are other artifacts on display showcasing manuals dealing with traditional Thai healing methods with pictures showing the various energy lines in the human body resembling diagrams used for Thai massage or related healing treatments. From my impression, the display of these items is an attempt to show the relationship between the *Matchima* meditation system and its healing component with a much broader tradition of healing practices that were once dominant in the region.

There are several books that have been written by Luang Pho Wira. He claims to have compiled them from the teachings and the manuscripts bequeathed to the temple by the Venerable Suk. These books include basic information about the requirements for learning the meditation technique, such as the importance of undergoing the initiation rite, the levels of the meditation system and the usefulness of this system for addressing emotional and physical ailments. In addition to books about the meditation technique, Luang Pho Wira has also written books about the Venerable Suk's biography in three separate books divided according to three periods of his life in Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Rattanakosin or early Bangkok. The books also contain information about the origins of the meditation technique which Luang Pho Wira claims to have been inherited from the Buddha and have been part of traditional Thai practice since ancient times.

A website, <http://www.somdechsuk.com>, was also created with the assistance from a lay disciple. The website contains information on the history of Wat Ratchasittharam, pictures and biographies of the abbots of the temple, a resume of Luang Pho Wira's credentials, pictures of the museum in Khana 5 and brief information on the meditation system. I observed that the website functions as a focal point of contact and communication for the practitioners of Khana 5 and is also a means of promoting and advertising the *Matchima* meditation system to the general public. This is evidently seen in the front page of the site that has a picture of a popular female newscaster and actress named Khun Po meditating. I have also observed that

Luang Pho Wira takes pride in displaying the names of foreigners who have consulted him about the *Matchima* meditation system for their research purposes. This is listed in his resume in the website. On the day of my initiation, Luang Pho Wira requested me to write my name in Thai for him. I found my name listed, together with the names of two other foreigners in the webpage the following day.

The publication of the books and the website commenced in 2003 and according to Luang Pho Wira, there has been an increase in the number of visitors to the temple and lay practitioners undertaking the practice. He claimed that because of his promotional efforts, the number of initiates had increased to around 10,000 people since he became the official meditation instructor 10 years ago. Prior to this, the number of practitioners was on the decline.

From his point of view, the system is in danger of dying because of the popularity of other schools of meditation, particularly the Burmese Vipassanā technique that was introduced into Thailand since the 1950s. This was in contrast to the time of King Rama III where this meditation system was the main method of practice within the monastic community. According to Luang Pho Wira's own words, it would be a great pity if this tradition were allowed to become extinct as not only is it worth saving on account of its importance to Thai traditional customs and heritage, it is also the 'correct' practice directly transmitted from the Buddha via a long lineage of teachers.

For a spiritual practice to survive, in addition to promoting awareness of it via the use of books and websites, it is also equally important that the ability to transmit this teaching continue into the future. With this in mind, I asked Luang Pho Wira if he is in the process of grooming a potential successor in the temple. His response was that it was extremely difficult to find one who would fulfill the requirements of having successfully progressed to all the stages in the system and who possessed the sincerity of keeping the integrity of the teachings intact with no modifications. It seems that most monks and lay people he instructed were not able to climb up and complete the highest *vipassanā* stage because this requires long-term commitment. Many have left to reside in other temples or have gone on to teach a modified system after finding that they were not able to progress to

the highest levels within an expected time frame. Another layperson confirmed this as he remembered that there was one other monk who had reached a high level and was probably teaching a modified version at another temple.

I inquired of Luang Pho Wira whether the healing modality in the *Matchima* system was considered 'orthodox', as there is no evidence of this in the Pali scriptures. Luang Pho Wira claims that there is no conflict with the scriptures, as even though what is taught is not found in the Pali canon, it is nonetheless a tradition that has been passed down from a lineage of teachers going all the way back to the historical Buddha. He also added that the techniques taught for healing and avoidance of calamities can be seen as an aspect of *samatha* development as it makes the mind calm and peaceful. As such, a calm and peaceful mind is the foundation for *vipassanā* or insight. The act of healing oneself and others through this technique should also be seen as providing loving-kindness towards living creatures (including oneself) and that by itself is an act of tremendous merit, thus contributing towards one's spiritual evolution in the long-run.³³

The Practitioners – Monks and Lay People

I interviewed a total of 21 practitioners, the majority of whom could be considered as part of the middle-class, with occupations ranging from doctors to teachers. My aim was to understand how they found out about this meditation system, their general views and their interest in it.

Most of them (16 practitioners) learned about the *Matchima* meditation system through family members or close friends who have tried the technique and have benefited from it. They have usually just begun their meditation practice and are at the basic levels of the system. Most of the interviewees in this group have not been interested in different styles of meditation before, or have tried a few others briefly. The *Matchima* system is their first serious attempt in

³³ This comment was also echoed in one of the temple publications, *Meditation for Healing Karma and Treating Diseases* under the Foreword section

making meditation a part of their daily life. Two practitioners encountered this system as their homes were located near the temple. One of the novice monks had learnt about this system 12 years back as his house was situated across the road and he was brought by a *mae chi* of the temple to Luang Pho Wira who coached him in this meditation system. Another two were searching for a meditation technique that resonated with them and what they felt was the 'right' practice. This group had attempted different schools of meditation that are prevalent in Thailand today, such as Dhammakāya, *vipassanā*, and *ānāpāna-sati* (according to the forest monk tradition of Lung Pu Mun or Buddhadasa).

From the 21 practitioners I interviewed, the primary reasons why they continued with the *Matchima* meditation system was that they liked the personalized style of instruction, which catered to their individual needs and inquires. This was unlike other meditation schools that are held in huge groups making it difficult to seek one-on-one advice from the meditation instructor. In some of these large group settings, individual doubts would have to be shared via a microphone with everyone. The *Matchima* system, on the other hand, emphasizes privacy of one's individual experiences and visions encountered while meditating. In addition, they also found it more systematic and liked the idea of knowing where they stood, which could be measured by which levels that they had attained.

Their Perspectives about the *Matchima* Meditation System as Opposed to Other Meditation Systems

From my interviews with the teacher and the community practicing the *Matchima* meditation technique, I noted the discourse used by them in justifying their dedication and commitment to this practice. This is often done in opposition to other meditation schools that are widespread in contemporary Thailand.

Almost all practitioners would allude to the fact that the meditation system preserved by Venerable Suk was a technique taught during the time of the Buddha. According to Luang Pho Wira, this complex system, comprising many levels was passed down from the Buddha to his son, the Venerable Rahul, who in turn disseminated it to

a lineage of teachers, from India and then into Suvarnabhumi. This took place during the time of the emperor Asoka who dispatched missionaries such as the Venerable Sona and Uttara to these distant regions with the purpose of proselytizing Buddhism and the practice of *samatha-vipassanā*.³⁴ In mainland Southeast Asia, the practice of this meditation system became established in the Mon Empire of Dvaravati and eventually spread to areas now known as Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Burma. In Thailand, the practice has remained intact and transmitted by an unbroken lineage of teachers until the present day.³⁵ In one interview session where I had asked about the history of this meditation system, Luang Pho Wira excitedly went to his room to fetch a book with the cover of a lay practitioner in Sri Lanka practicing meditation using a device similar to the *luk sakot* that is used for the first three levels of the *Matchima* meditation system (see Figure 10). According to Luang Pho Wira, the use of the *luk sakot* and the levels one has to progress in the *Matchima* meditation system can be found in the regions that have been traditionally Theravāda Buddhist. In addition, he is also aware of ancient meditation manuals found in Cambodia and Laos depicting similar practices.

³⁴ This is also mentioned in a book about the meditation system written and compiled by Luang Po Wira. Phra Khru Sangkarak Wira Thanwiro, *Main Fundamentals*, Foreword.

³⁵ If so, this would mean that the practitioners see themselves as adhering to a Buddhist practice pre-dating the spread of the Sinhalese Theravāda 'orthodox' Buddhism with its strict adherence to the Pali canon which occurred in the 10th-11th centuries via trading routes that were linked to the Mon cities of Thaton and Pegu in Coastal Burma. On the spread of Sinhalese Buddhism to the region, see David K. Wyatt, *Thailand- A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 31.

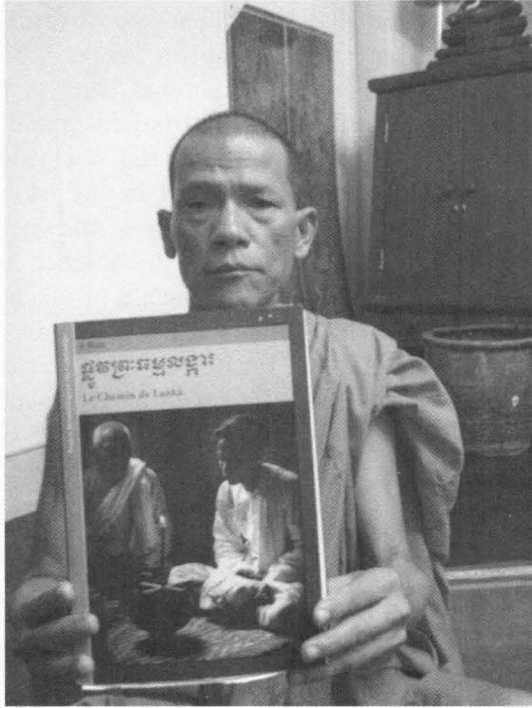


Figure 10: Luang Pho Wira with Bizot's Book

All the practitioners emphasize that other meditation systems popular in Thailand today are modified or simplified versions of the complete meditation tradition that was kept intact by the Venerable Suk. These contemporary meditation systems are depicted as trimming certain aspects of the system, which they considered unimportant. For instance, practitioners would often highlight the importance of the initiation ritual, which is unheard of in other more modern meditation traditions where signing up for a course or joining a meditation group is all that is required to learn it. Luang Pho Wira mentions that other contemporary meditation systems do not possess this critical ceremony as the founders of these systems either do not see it as important or are unaware of its significance.

These practitioners also mention that famous meditation masters, such as Luang Pho Sot, the founder of Dhammakāya meditation and Luang Phu Man, the founder of the modern forest monk tradition, learned the *Matchima* meditation system at Wat Ratchasittharam and have adapted this system and started their own lineages. According to Luang Pho Wira and other monks I spoke to, Luang Pho Sot had only mastered the foundational stage or the first three levels of the *Matchima* system. He did not complete his training at the temple and used what he was taught to propagate a new method, known as Dhammakāya from Wat Paknam. This is why Dhammakāya meditation only emphasizes directing ones attention near the navel as a means to acquire the *nimit* (similar to the early stages of the *Matchima* system) even for its highest levels, while the *Matchima* system teaches the need to move the *nimit* acquired from the foundational stage to other bases in the body in the more advanced levels.

The Burmese Vipassanā system is also viewed with disdain. This system came into Thailand in the 1950s and was propagated to the rest of the country starting from Wat Mahathat. Practitioners of the *Matchima* system see the *vipassanā* technique as not following the teachings of the Buddha who emphasized the importance of performing *samatha* as a necessary prerequisite for *vipassanā*. Burmese Vipassanā, on the other hand, is often called the ‘bare-insight’ method as it jumps straight into the contemplation of all mundane phenomena without first cultivating high levels of concentration.

Analysis of Findings

From my observations on the physical layout of the temple, coupled with investigations into the oral and historical accounts, I have determined that the *Matchima* meditation system was once popular in Thai history, reaching its peak in the early Bangkok period and declining in popularity after the reign of King Rama IV (around the early 19th century). Today, it is a system that is, according to Luang Pho Wira, a dying tradition. One reason for this decline, which is hinted at from the oral accounts of practitioners, is the increasing

popularity of lay mass meditation movements, which occurred around the mid 20th century.³⁶

This was seen first with the promotion of Dhammakāya meditation in the 1930s and later *vipassanā* meditation in the 1950s. It is interesting to note that the nature of this promotion was unprecedented in Thai history. Meditation has always been considered as a solitary activity, done in the forest and based on individual initiative.³⁷ Contemporary meditation movements were less complex, and embodied concepts easy for the laity to understand. For instance, the Burmese Vipassanā method was perceived to provide the practitioner with quick results. Contemporary meditation styles were also more popular in the sense that they focused on achieving ‘inner peace’ or mental health or as a technique in reducing stress.³⁸ This naturally attracted the middle-classes who saw it as beneficial to their lifestyle. Unfortunately, this was not the main focus for pre-modern meditation practices such as the *Matchima* method, which emphasized rituals, chants and complex exercises for training the strength of the mind.

Modern meditation movements were also seen as more inclusive and inline with the world-view of the rising middle-classes, whom Peter Jackson claims were ideologically against the metaphysical royalist form of Buddhism which legitimizes the hierarchical establishment through justifications of one’s *kamma*.³⁹ This was because the practice of the Burmese Vipassanā did not require one to dedicate a tremendous amount of time to developing *samatha*, of which success depended on the possession of an insurmountable amount of spiritual resources.

³⁶ Kamala Tiyanich, *Forest Recollections – Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997) 197.

³⁷ Mae Chi Amphai Tansomboon, “An analysis of Phra Mongkol – Thepmuni’s (Sodh Candasaro) Buddha Dhamma Propagation” (MA Thesis (Buddhist Studies), Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2004) 53.

³⁸ Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words – Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkwork Books, 2008) 253.

³⁹ Peter A Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimization and Conflict – The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990) 49.

Despite the decline in the popularity of the *Matchima* meditation system, my research indicates that it continues to serve a niche in Thai society today. People who are committed to the practice are those who are attracted to the systematic and personalized method of instruction that is rarely found in modern meditation movements. In addition, some are also interested in a practice that is perceived as traditionally Thai. Those who have successfully passed the first three levels (the foundational stage) are even more committed to it as they claim to have personally experienced how the mind can be activated to perform feats that are not recognized in other contemporary meditation systems. One lay practitioner I interviewed who has experienced this excitedly calls it the ‘science of mind’.

Ekachai Sanitsuda in *Keeping the Faith – Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads* mentions the appeal of alternative spiritual practices imported into Thailand because of the demystification of Thai Buddhism.⁴⁰ Buddhism thus became “dry and lacking the charm needed to meet the people’s emotional needs which go beyond rationality.”⁴¹ In addition, the monastic reforms have resulted in an increasing alienation of monks in urban areas who have become more interested in monastic projects and catering to the wealthy as a source of funds for temple development, resulting in the decline of their role as educators and their ability to meet the spiritual needs of the laity.⁴² From my perspective, the *Matchima* meditation system and the way it is taught provides an answer to this spiritual vacuum.

While this tradition does not seem to be dying out because of a lack of interest, the main danger of the tradition becoming extinct, as I analyze it, is its rigidity and strict requirements, which the potential successor has to fulfill before he can be recognized by Wat Ratchasittharam as a qualified instructor. For instance, in addition to the innate requirement of possessing enough spiritual resources, the

⁴⁰ Refer to the chapter, “Shopping for Spirituality” by Ekachai Sanitsuda, *Keeping the Faith – Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads* (Bangkok: The Post Publishing Plc, 2001) 237-246.

⁴¹ Quotation from Phrs Paisal in Ekachai 243.

⁴² Phra Rajavaramuni, *Tradition and Change in Thai Buddhism*, *Bulletin for the Center for the Study of World Religions* (Harvard University, 1981) 20.

potential teacher is also required to invest a tremendous amount of time and commitment to mastering all the levels. In this regard, we observe that Luang Pho Wira has trouble finding a candidate that is dedicated to the system or will commit to ensuring that the integrity of the entire teachings are kept intact.

Another interesting finding is the discourse used by practitioners to define what constitutes 'right' practice in Thai Buddhism. Today, there is debate regarding the correct practice as taught by the Buddha according to the instructions of the eight-fold path, particularly in the 7th and 8th aspects of 'Right Concentration' and 'Right Mindfulness'.⁴³ 'Right Concentration', according to established interpretations, is often interpreted to mean the practice of *samatha* and entering meditative absorption known as *jhāna*.⁴⁴ We see that the *Matchima* meditation system places vital importance in mastering the system to the highest levels before one can proceed to insight. This is not shared by other schools of meditation, particularly the Burmese Vipassanā, which claims that it is not important for one to develop intensive states of concentration for advancement to insight. This dispute is inevitable because there is no clear instruction in the Pali *suttas* on how much concentration one should develop before applying it to achieve insight.⁴⁵

The *Matchima* meditation system claims its legitimacy from the aspect of lineage. Luang Pho Wira sees himself as the heir to a tradition going back to the Buddha and once part of the larger Theravāda Buddhist world. In the past decade, Kate Crosby has drawn attention to this tradition of Buddhist practice by terming it the *Yogāvacara* tradition. She highlighted the works of Francois Bizot who called it Tantric Theravāda Buddhism based on his research work

⁴³ The notion of how Buddhism should be rightly practiced reflects the wider debate on how the differing groups define the state of *nibbāna*, either as self or not-self. This would naturally have implications for the practice of meditation as well since the nature of the goal (Buddhist salvation) determines the means (practices) to achieve it. This is seen in the case of Dhammakāya meditation as opposed to other schools such as *vipassanā* meditation.

⁴⁴ Gethin 81.

⁴⁵ Gethin 188.

into pre-modern Buddhist practices performed mainly in Cambodia and Sri Lanka.⁴⁶ Luang Pho Wira has also made reference to this affinity of practices that existed around the mainland Southeast Asian region and Sri Lanka by collectively terming these as '*Phra Yokawacara*' [พระโยคาวจร].

This claim to legitimacy of Buddhist practice on account of lineage overrides the sole reliance on textual authority. Contemporary meditation methods, on the other hand, base their legitimacy mainly on how closely they adhere to the words of the Buddha in the canonical texts. For instance, practitioners of Dhammakāya and the Burmese Vipassanā method claim that the basis of their technique can be found in the *Mahasatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*).⁴⁷ In contrast, the techniques employed by the *Matchima* meditation system do not need to prove that they come from the Pali canon. This was observed when the practitioners were asked to justify whether the healing component or the emphasis on attaining the required *nimit* in advancement was considered 'orthodox'. Luang Pho Wira's reply was that in the lineage tradition, there were some teachings of the Buddha which were not mentioned in the texts; this was why reliance on a reliable teacher is of paramount importance as there were esoteric aspects that could not be revealed to the public.

According to McDaniel, this was similar to how Buddhism was transmitted traditionally in the past in Thailand and Laos. The teacher monk is considered the representative of the Buddha and is empowered to interpret the words and texts of the Buddha. He does not need to prove that his lessons come from a legitimate edition of the Pali canon.⁴⁸ In my view, interpretation of Buddhist practice in this aspect is derived from knowledge inherited from the lineage of the

⁴⁶ See Kate Crosby, "Tantric Theravada: A Bibliographical Essay on the Writings of Francois Bizot and Others on the *Yogavacara* Tradition," *Contemporary Buddhism* 1:2 (2000).

⁴⁷ This can be explained by the fact that these meditation practices arose in response to the availability of canonical texts as a consequence of the introduction of the printing press, which had made them available to the public in the 1830s.

⁴⁸ McDaniel 180.

Venerable Suk coupled with Luang Pho Wira's own meditative experiences.

From my perspective as a participant observer, I discovered just how different the *Matchima* system is from contemporary Thai meditation methods that are popular in Thailand. This tradition emphasizes *nimits* one must experience from the basic to the most advanced levels. This is a closely kept secret in the tradition because individuals, despite their differences, should all experience the same visions. Another closely guarded secret are the techniques that are employed for further mind development, particularly after the first four rooms or levels. This esoteric secrecy is not a common feature of most meditation schools today, where, even if the practitioner is required to experience similar visions as an indication of progress, as seen in the case of Dhammakāya meditation,⁴⁹ all the information is revealed in books and shared openly with the general public. Practitioners of the *Matchima* meditation system whom I interviewed are critical about revealing the *nimits* openly, as in the Dhammakāya case, as they believe that the aspiring practitioner's mind might self induce these visions, which would impede their progress along the Buddhist path.

As such, while it would be possible for an aspiring practitioner of one of these contemporary meditation methods to learn the technique himself and check his progress based on what is written, this is impossible in the case of the *Matchima* system which places importance on the role of the meditation instructor and the esoteric aspects of the teachings. As we have seen, even though there are books published by the temple promoting the meditation system, such books leave out the characteristics of the *nimits* and what techniques the practitioner should execute, particularly for the higher levels.

⁴⁹ In Dhammakāya meditation, the practitioner has to go through 18 bodies that include being in the celestial, brahma, arupa-brahma and nibbanic realms. Books published by temples and meditation centers teaching this method would usually describe the features, characteristics and size of these bodies.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to examine and analyze the meditation system that was preserved by the Venerable Suk Kaithuean and taught as a living tradition at Wat Ratchasittharam. In studying this living tradition, I have undertaken the initiation ceremony to become a disciple of the main meditation instructor in the temple, Luang Pho Wira. Through this personal instruction and transmission of knowledge, coupled with examining the temple publications and interviews with fellow practitioners, I have obtained a holistic understanding of this living tradition not only in terms of how it is taught, but also how it is perceived and the discourse used to justify its teachings in the context of Buddhist practice in Thailand. Equipped with this understanding, I am able to suggest possible reasons for its decline from a once widely practiced and royally sanctioned meditation system to an obscure tradition taught only at one section of the temple. In my analysis, I have determined that this tradition is a victim of its own complexity because of the difficulty in finding a teaching successor who would inherit it and pass it onto the next generation. If this can be accomplished, I believe that the tradition will continue to have a niche in the future because of the element of esotericism and traditionalism that appeals to a segment of Thai people who do not find contemporary meditation systems appealing and are disenchanted with the usual rationalistic and doctrinal Theravada Buddhism which had developed alongside the formation of the Thai nation-state.

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