

Tourism, Nature, Healing, and Dissent: The Plurality of International Meditators in Thailand¹

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that the international experience of and response to meditation retreats in Thailand has many faces – from travelers who mix meditation with a beach vacation to serious practitioners with hopes of becoming ordained; from accidental religious tourists to people who intend to change their lives. All of this diversity illustrates the various routes by which hybrid religiosities are created. The portraits of international meditators discussed here illustrate the extent to which meditation has become divorced from the Thai Buddhist context. International meditators selectively appropriate aspects of the meditation retreat according to their personal motivations and goals. An experience of the exotic, a connection with nature, a way to recover from addiction, and catharsis are all discourses with which international meditators engage when participating in a meditation retreat.

¹ This article is adapted from the author's PhD dissertation, published May 2012, titled "Constructing Religious Modernities: Hybridity, Reinterpretation, and Adaptation in Thailand's International Meditation Centers." 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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Introduction

The popular appeal of meditation leads many international travelers to explore opportunities to practice in Asian Buddhist countries. With the rise of lay meditation and many meditation centers already catering to Thai Buddhists in Thailand, some Thai temples and meditation centers have sought to accommodate an international audience by providing English instruction. This shift has created the need for separate English-speaking teachers to manage the international groups while physically separating international meditators from the Thai meditators. The language barrier is not the only reason to separate international meditators; since their cultural frameworks are different from Thai meditators, international meditators receive separate, decontextualized teachings.

This phenomenon of international meditation centers is evident throughout different regions of Thailand. International meditation teachings began in Central Thailand along with tourism, as Bangkok has been a hub for international travel. When tourists arrived in large numbers to Southern Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s, group retreats later developed in that region. When tourists discovered the ‘Lanna’ culture of Northern Thailand via tourism promotion for Thai tourists in the 1980s,³ meditation centers for Thais using the method of Ajarn Tong transformed to become international centers soon afterward.

This article demonstrates that the experience of and response to meditation retreats in Thailand has many faces – from travelers who mix meditation with a beach vacation, to serious practitioners with hopes of becoming ordained; from accidental religious tourists, to people who intend to change their lives. All of this diversity illustrates the various routes by which hybrid religiosities are created. The portraits of international meditators discussed here illustrate the extent to which meditation has become divorced from the Thai Buddhist context. International meditators selectively appropriate aspects of the meditation retreat according to their personal motivations and goals. An experience of the exotic, a connection with nature, a way to recover from addiction, and catharsis are all discourses with which international

³ Evrard, “Staging the Nation”, 244.

meditators engage when deciding to attend a meditation retreat. Some seek conversion and rejection of their own cultures, while others select aspects most familiar to their own way of life.

Along with having different motivations and reactions, interpretations of the meditation experience can also be varied. Some meditators interpret the experience as cathartic, relaxing, an engagement with a foreign culture and practice, a religious experience, or a once in a lifetime opportunity. Some meditators discuss their experience of a meditation retreat in Thailand in terms of a tourist and cultural experience; for others it is a secular practice meant for therapeutic purposes, with many variations in between. Using semi-structured interviews with international meditators during fieldwork from August 2009 to September 2010, correspondence with former international meditators, writings from international meditators' travel blogs and participant-observation during fieldwork experiences, this article looks at the variety of these experiences toward understanding the nature of postmodern hybrid religiosity.

Many travelers have posted their experiences in blog format or on a website dedicated to their travels. It is clear from these sources that meditation is one part of a larger cultural experience of Thailand. Meditators often participate in meditation retreats alongside elephant training camps, massage courses, cooking classes, or even the all-night full moon party on Koh Phangan, one of the southern islands. Despite or even because of these various tourist activities, travel blogs document the experiences of modern international meditators and helped to augment the participant-observation and semi-structured interviews I conducted with dozens of meditators at each site. It would have been quite difficult to obtain a representative sample of international meditators through my individual research efforts as there is such a variety of sites, large numbers and diversity of participants, and a long history of participation as well. Therefore, the information presented here is not comprehensive or exhaustive, yet meaningfully speaks to the modern-day experiences of international travelers.

Through my conversations with international meditators, I have found that some attend retreats because a friend recommended it or they have just experienced something difficult like a relationship breakup or

the death of a loved one and believe this practice will help. Others have no particular reason other than the practice is part of the cultural zeitgeist. For some it seems a good way to begin or end a travel tour of Asia. As well, learning about meditation can be part of any tourist experience that searches for difference and the ‘exotic.’ Many international meditators begin the practice this way and for some it is transformative. The discourses and popular image of meditation and Buddhism have motivated this trend of experimentation. In her memoir of a mid-life existential crisis called *Devotion*, Dani Shapiro writes about her experimentation with meditation and defines her religious identity as a meditating, Jewish yogi. She writes, “For years, I had wanted to be someone who regularly meditates. I had a sense that sitting quietly – for five or two minutes every day – was key to a sense of inner peace.”⁴ Her words demonstrate how far meditation has penetrated into the popular imagination, as well as the possibility and ease of hybrid religiosity. Through the variety of ways to engage with the Buddhist tradition while participating in a retreat at an international meditation center, international meditators experience shifting and expanding possibilities of their own religiosity.

Selective Appropriation and Engagement

The selective appropriation and engagement of the international meditators creates these new religious possibilities. Vicente Rafael’s *Contracting Colonialism* explores the strategies of receiving a missionizing religion in the context of the early encounter between the Spanish and the Tagalogs in the Philippines from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries.⁵ Rafael concludes that the Tagalogs were able to select their conversion, appropriating only fragments of the Christian teachings that were understood, and subverting others. For example, Rafael writes how the repetition of the term *Jesus Maria* was turned into a protective phrase. He finds:

⁴ Shapiro, *Devotion*, 9.

⁵ Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*.

What this amounts to is a recasting of the Christian Sign into something that can be torn away from the linguistic commerce that originates from and returns to the Father. It is instead rendered into an amulet-like object that does not result in the subjection of the speaker to the language of God.⁶

In this context, the sacraments of confession and death rites, untranslatable terms, and translations into the vernacular show the Tagalogs' agency and the plurality of conversions that took place. Rafael argues that conversion happened rapidly because the Tagalogs did not fully understand the faith they were accepting; instead, they placed what they could comprehend into their own cultural framework. In a similar way, it is the cultural backgrounds of international meditators that inform and create unique hybrids that recast the meditation practice into contexts outside of Buddhist frameworks and goals. In order to understand the selective appropriation of international meditators, it is useful to take account of the diverse qualities of the travelers' experiences and the orientations people bring with them when they travel and engage in other cultures.

Nature and Tourism

Adaptations are necessary as the depth and difficulty of a meditation retreat is often not part of the stock images and narrative tropes of meditation. Buddhism and its meditative practices become equated with nature and, for some, this is the primary impetus for attending a retreat. These Romantic ideas of meditation move to the forefront as Buddhist teachings and rituals become less prominent. In this context, the feeling of being at peace in nature is the goal of the practice. Natural settings within a forest, along with ancient temple structures, are part of the fascination and desirability surrounding meditation. These signs emerge when discussing with international meditators their initial motivation and choice to participate in a meditation retreat in a particular temple.

⁶ Rafael, "Confession, Conversion, and Reciprocity in Early Tagalog Colonial Society", 328-329.

Tourism has fueled much of the development of international meditation centers. International meditators are attracted to those temples situated within tourist destinations, both in the beaches of the South and the scenic mountains of the North. My recordings of the histories of international meditation centers reveal that through visiting a temple, often by chance, travelers become interested in staying and learning about meditation. The creation of international meditation centers often began with frequent inquiries about meditation from travelers inspired to practice in natural settings. This helped pave the way for international meditators today who are able to plan their retreats in advance. Nature and being within natural settings is an important discourse that connects meditation with tourism and shows the selective appropriation of spiritual tourists.

The connection with nature that meditation is commonly thought to provide is a noted theme in the appropriation of Buddhism by Euro-Americans,⁷ as well as a characteristic of modern Buddhism. David McMahan argues that:

... many staples of Buddhist modernist literature – the exaltitude of nature, the idea of spiritual experience as identifying with the natural world or a universal spirit...owe much to the intertwining of Buddhism and Romanticist-Transcendentalist stream of thought.⁸

McMahan goes on to assert that modern Buddhist ideas have mixed with Romanticism so that society and nature have become opposed. In this discourse, the West becomes identified with consumerist city life and the East offers hope for a more natural lifestyle.⁹ Therefore, some modern Buddhists look to the East for a less artificial way of life, corresponding with Romantic thought. Michael Carrithers argues that Romanticism influenced the well-known German

⁷ This theme is elaborated by Thomas Tweed in his typology of Euro-American Buddhist sympathizers and adherents that includes esoterics, rationalists, and most importantly here, romantics. See Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912*, 48-77.

⁸ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 76.

⁹ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 77.

forest-monk in Sri Lanka, Nyanatiloka.¹⁰ He finds that some European monks originally had an interest in German Romanticism, which later developed into an interest in Buddhism. The tropes of Romanticism and being ‘at one’ with nature continue into the present and can be seen especially when international meditators in Thailand decide to undertake a meditation retreat. In this context, Buddhist teachings and meditation practices are placed within a framework of affection for nature, as well as cultural exploration.

Many meditators report that a visit to the scenic temples of Thailand, often set on top of mountains with dramatic views, was not enough. This concern for nature is exemplified at the International Meditation Center at Wat Prathat Doi Suthep where I attended a ten-day retreat in July 2009 and interviewed the international meditators there. Through this, I learned that some meditators attend the retreat just for the experience of living in a temple and interacting with monks. These tourists wander into the International Meditation Office and make an appointment to return for the ten-day retreat. I spoke with a young Canadian female tourist who came to Thailand because she was inexplicably fascinated by the country, especially its Buddhist traditions. She had some meditation experience and enjoyed learning more about monks’ lifestyles and Buddhist teachings.

A young woman from Holland who was traveling around Asia had just completed a yoga retreat in Bali and wanted to try a meditation retreat as well. Clearly, meditation is seen as an essential part of an experience of ‘Eastern wisdom.’ A young Irishman had had enough of late nights drinking with his buddies and took this meditation retreat as a further symbol of his renunciation of that lifestyle. These motivations and responses convey the discourse of looking to the East for answers in the face of modernity. For some, the experience of living in a temple environment can inspire ordination, as one annual visitor, a Brazilian woman, told me she would like to take steps to be a *mae chi* at Wat Doi Suthep. The natural setting of this temple and desire for cultural exploration, despite the different motivations and levels of engagement, attracted these travelers to meditate in this location. The discourses of

¹⁰ Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, 29.

meditation as a quiet practice most suitably done within nature are both part of the motivation and formation of hybrid religiosities.

Meditation and nature are intertwined and semiotically linked for many international meditators. International meditators often seek centers located in forests and mountains and avoid busy city meditation temples. In response to my research website,¹¹ I have received many emails inquiring about which meditation retreat in Thailand to attend. The criteria given almost always include a center in a quiet, natural setting.

Another temple known for its scenic location is Wat Pah Tam Wua. Many visitors stumble upon this temple while visiting the touristy spots along the beautiful and windy scenic drive of Highway 1095 in Northern Thailand, the route that runs from Chiangmai to Pai, and through to Mae Hong Son. After some of these interested tourists stopped by, the abbot, Ajarn Luang Ta, put up signs in English welcoming foreign tourists. Now many hear about this temple through word of mouth and its picturesque scenery, as well as the charismatic Ajarn Luang Ta, who has learned English from many of the tourists he has taught. Since then, international meditators from over 100 countries have stayed to practice here. The tourist path along Highway 1095 created a trail for international meditators looking to spend time in a scenic spot and converse with a Thai monk meditation teacher.

International meditators often mix beach holidays with spiritual travel so that meditation is part of a broader context of the tourist experience. An increasing minority of beach travelers are not as interested in relaxing in a beach resort as they are in mental development. Some meditators relate that at the beginning of their retreats they felt they were missing out on more stimulating activities, such as recreation by the beach. However, others stated that they wanted to attend the retreat precisely because the beach and other tourist activities were ultimately unsatisfying. The International Meditation Center at Wat Kow Tahm on Koh Phangnan is another interesting example of tourism that leads to a spiritual vacation. Koh Phangnan has

¹¹ See wanderingdhamma.org.

been known as a destination for backpacking with a reputation for social recreation, especially on full moon nights.

Before the meditation center at Wat Kow Tahm was established, many tourists visited this temple on top of a hill near Baan Thai Beach to ask the head nun there, Mae Chi Ahmon, how they could learn meditation. She discovered a way to share the practice of meditation when Rosemary and Steve Weissman arrived in 1987 in order to visit Wat Kow Tahm and practice meditation. They were soon asked to lead retreats and they have continued to do so for over twenty years. The particular groups of meditators that travel to Koh Phangan are often used to bungalows, partying, and traveling, but not necessarily living in a temple. But after more than 20 years of running these retreats, the Weissmans know their audience well and have many warnings in the form of notices that must be read before attending the retreat. Signs posted on the notice boards declare, "This is not a bungalow;" "You must be willing to work hard." Steve Weissman likens the creation of the many rules for this center to the creation of the monastic rules by the Buddha, as situations arose, more rules were added. Therefore, tourism created particular adaptations for this international meditation center where participants learn how to behave in a temple and often combine this with beach holidays before or after the retreat.

Over a twenty year period of teaching in a ten-day retreat format, Steve and Rosemary have built their program in such a way that a large majority of participants complete the retreats, and many return multiple times. After a ten-day beginners retreat in early January 2010, many international meditators said they were ready to leave after the first few days, but it was always the evening talk that kept them motivated to stay. Each night the topic seemed to address the problems they were facing that day, such as tiredness, homesickness, doubt, and unpleasant physical sensations. The techniques and teachings offered the solutions, as well as the knowledge that what each meditator was experiencing was typical. Often this information gives the beginner the confidence and motivation to complete the retreat.

These adaptations are necessary for some meditators, as being in nature is one of the main criteria for choosing an international retreat center. Much mental discipline is needed to complete a retreat, contrary

to popular ideas of peacefully sitting among trees and viewing natural settings. Through these Romantic motivations, the feeling of peace is the goal of the practice, as Buddhist teachings and devotional activities are disregarded. Another prominent motivation for seeking out a meditation center is the goal of therapeutic healing and well-being.

Therapy and Health

For some international meditators to Thailand, the discourse between psychology and meditation has led to entering a meditation retreat as a means for therapy and healing. Many meditators arrive at an international meditation center not only because of its beauty or its convenient location within a tourist area, but in order to deal with a specific problem or difficult period in their lives. The idea that meditation can aid their problems leads international meditators to seek out a place with a recommended teacher, usually found through a friend or by word of mouth. One American meditator named Steve who I met at a meditation retreat at Wat Chom Tong, Chiangmai, commented to me that he became interested in meditation while he was coming out of a long-term and difficult relationship and had lost his job. Because of this situation, he felt that there was nowhere else to go but a meditation retreat. In his state, he did not have any expectations of the retreat, only hoping that the experience could be healing. Steve was trying to let go of some painful experiences and found that the meditation technique helped him to be less reactive and more detached from his thoughts. He attended a 21-day course and then a ten-day review retreat a few months later. He continues to meditate a short period every morning and goes back to the breathing technique every time he is stressed.

Some meditators use the practice as a way to deal with emotional trauma. After meeting Sally from Ireland at the Wat Kow Tahm meditation retreat, we communicated via email about her experiences. She first arrived at Wat Kow Tahm because she was deeply unhappy suffering periods of depression. She also had a drinking problem and was in an abusive relationship. Her first retreat and experience meditating was transformative as she reports she was able to see suffering in her own body clearly. After this, she attended many more

retreats and became a teacher's assistant. Although moving back home to Ireland, Sally still remains an enthusiastic meditator.

International visitors may also use the discipline of meditation as a substitute or complement to twelve-step programs to combat addiction. Paul Garrigan writes about his specific reason for wanting to practice meditation in Thailand, "My life had become unbearable because of an alcohol addiction, and it was my goal to beat it at this Thai temple."¹² He had read about *vipassanā* meditation, but since Wat Rampoeng was his first retreat experience in Thailand, he did not know what to expect. He discusses his goals for the retreat writing, "At that time, I would have been ecstatic if they could just help me to get and remain sober – Enlightenment was far too ambitious a goal for me."¹³ For those looking for therapy and recovery from addiction, the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering is not considered. Garrigan, who is now a recovering alcoholic, writes of his experience after the retreat, "For the next few days my mind felt wonderful and free; the world was so much simpler. Unfortunately it didn't last as I once again began drinking ... still I really give the meditation retreat in Chiang Mai a lot of credit. It created a taste in me for mental freedom that once tried could never be forgotten."¹⁴ Those interested in therapy, healing, and recovery are searching for mental freedom and distance from their problems and addictions.

Apart from recovering from addiction and learning how to deal with difficult personal relationships, meditation is also used to boost health. A significant discourse surrounding meditation is its ability to reduce stress and improve one's overall well-being, and scientific studies are often cited. In a phone conversation with Al from America,¹⁵ I learned that he is a frequent visitor to Wat Suan Mokkh's International Dhamma Hermitage, and practices the long-breathing technique taught there, strictly for health benefits. Being out of shape and overweight, Al first attended an International Dhamma Hermitage retreat through the

¹² Garrigan, "Wat Rampoeng", no page.

¹³ Garrigan, *Dead Drunk*, 138.

¹⁴ Garrigan, "Wat Rampoeng," no page.

¹⁵ Through my contacts at the International Dhamma Hermitage, I arranged an email correspondence and phone conversation with Al.

recommendation of a friend as a way to detoxify. He did not find the retreat psychologically challenging; he simply followed the schedule and reaped the positive health benefits. His weight has reduced significantly, he incorporates the mostly vegetarian diet he learned from the retreat, and continues the long-breathing practice for at least a half hour each day. In six years, he has gone on the retreat eight times and continues to use it as a time to detoxify, saying he is not interested in *nibbāna* or anything spiritual. He writes in a *Nation* article that, “Three strengths of Buddhism stand out that no other religion or way of life offer collectively. They are deep mental meditation, extremely healthy long breathing exercises, and environmental awareness.”¹⁶ Through medical tests, he has found that he has improved liver function and lower cholesterol level. His main purpose in his first trips to the International Dhamma Hermitage was strictly for weight loss. The last five retreats Al attended he instead sought to explore his ‘inner self’ and the benefits of a spiritual vacation focused on the health aspects of long breathing. Al told me that he does not attend for the Buddhist teachings, as these are too complex for him. For health reasons, the meditation retreat lifestyle stands out as the most important part.

As seen from these international meditators, when the purpose of attending a retreat is for health, Buddhist goals such as *nibbāna* are not mentioned. The meditation practice is exclusively devoted toward aims of therapeutic or bodily well-being. Because of the discourses of meditation regarding these benefits of the practice, international meditators seek to meditate in a secular way. Therefore, international meditators select the parts of the meditation retreat that cohere with their goals and motivations. For those interested in health, the long-breathing and vegetarian food is appropriated, and for those wishing to live in nature and explore the culture beyond the beaches, the natural settings experiences of living in the temple are most significant. Discourses of Romanticism create routes of hybridity which focus on natural settings and seeking out ‘Eastern wisdom.’ Selective engagement and appropriation melds secular and psychological discourses with Buddhist meditative practices. These are the avenues through which

¹⁶ Eberhardt, “Investigate Buddhism”, no page.

many international meditators come to Thailand's international meditation centers, showing the extent to which meditation has become divorced from its Thai Buddhist context. However, for some, the Buddhist teachings are also incorporated into one's religiosity, where a long-term engagement with meditation is formed.

Portraits of Long-Term International Meditators

Long-term meditators have the most sustained engagement with Thai Buddhism. The roles they take on show the deep commitment possible for international meditators who engage with the practice over time. This section demonstrates how the same routes of tourism, cultural curiosity, and interest in meditation that lead to hybrid religiosity can also lead to a deep engagement with Thai Buddhism. In Thailand's international meditation centers, spaces have been created for long-term international meditators to volunteer and teach meditation. It is not only Thai monks who are authorized as meditation teachers, but Thai meditation teachers also allow foreigners to teach other foreigners hoping that the teaching will be well-suited to the audience of a similar cultural background and language. From recording the history of many international centers, it is clear that when an experienced English-speaking teacher is available, Thai meditation leaders often ask them to teach or be in charge of the foreigners in some way. Whether these meditators choose ordination or remain lay Buddhists, it is possible to become meditation teachers within international meditation centers. Others seek temporary sustained visits and become cultural brokers who return to the same temple and community each year. After one visit, some travelers now make the pilgrimage to Wat Pah Tam Wua through Highway 1095 every summer vacation in order to meditate with Ajarn Luang Ta and teach English to him and the other Thai monks. It is the meditation that attracted them to Buddhism and their experience with the practice that has led them to incorporate meditation into their lives in a significant way.

These long-term meditators sometimes began their practice as tourists interested in understanding the culture and people of their

destinations. Phra Ofer, an Israeli monk,¹⁷ has practiced meditation since 1983. He related to me that he first practiced at Wat Rampoeng in Chiangmai as a traveler.¹⁸ Early on, he was not interested in meditation or the spiritual life; he was more interested in traveling and learning about other cultures. He found at Wat Rampoeng he could further this interest through observing Thai Buddhists and living in the temple with them. At some point Phra Ofer's interest in travel turned into a desire to learn meditation. Upon returning to his native Israel, he became sincerely interested in meditation and continued to practice. After this, he started to take the practice of meditation more seriously, and practiced with Ajarn Tong at Wat Chom Tong. After some time Ajarn Tong gave him permission to teach and Phra Ofer started in Israel, still as a layman. He wanted to become a monk at that time, but knew he needed permission from his parents and that it would be hard for them to understand his decision.

For international meditators from non-Buddhist countries ordination can be a difficult choice to explain to one's family and friends. In this social context, renouncing the lay life and becoming part of a foreign religion is not usually met with joy, as it would be in most Thai families. Phra Ofer temporarily ordained at first, but after his father passed away, his mother gave him permission to ordain fully. After his ordination, he taught in Germany for several years and began teaching again in Israel in 2005. Since then, he spends half the year in Germany and the other half in Israel fulfilling his duties as a meditation teacher. Therefore, he is part of the movement and exchange of Thai Buddhist meditation to other parts of the world. Phra Ofer's case shows one of the avenues for international meditators. Arriving with an interest in Thai culture can transform into a desire to ordain and teach meditation.

Ordination was similarly a difficult choice for Austrian *mae chi* meditation teacher, Mae Chi Brigitte, most recently of Wat Prayong Gittavararam.¹⁹ Mae Chi Brigitte was married while in her 20s, but because of a strong fear of death that emerged following the birth of her

¹⁷ See biography: http://www.vipassana-dhammacari.com/weitere_eng.html.

¹⁸ Phra Ofer, Wat Chom Tong, Lineage of Ajarn Tong, 22 March 2010.

¹⁹ For more of her biography see: www.meditationthailand.com/.

children, she started to explore ways to cope with this. She discovered meditation and completed her first two-month intensive retreat in 1989. But this was not enough for her and soon she was back, wanting to become a nun. She eventually decided to leave her children with her husband after they lived with her for a short time in Thailand. She did not want to disrobe and even though it was very difficult, she felt it was the best decision for her life and her family. When I spoke with Mae Chi Brigitte, she related to me that since this time she has given her life to meditation and the monastic life.²⁰ Taking up the lifestyle of an ordained person and leaving family are evocative themes of the life of the Buddha. In the social context of her native Austria, this was an unusual choice, which would have been viewed with suspicion and concern by her family. Foreign monastics usually face negative reactions from family because of the unfamiliar choice of becoming a renunciate. This emulates the Buddha's life story, as in both instances there is a high social cost to renunciation and conversion. In this case, Mae Chi Brigitte felt monasticism was a valuable choice as her commitment to meditation grew into a profound dedication to Thai Buddhism.

Some long-term meditators choose to move to Thailand and then become interested in its variety of Thai Buddhist practices. In speaking with Phra Frank,²¹ an American monk, I learned that he came to the dhamma through teaching English in Thailand and meeting his first teacher, Ajarn Helen of the House of Dhamma. Today, he teaches the foreign meditators at Wat Sanghathan in Bangkok. I also recorded the story of a lay meditation teacher at Wat Chom Tong.²² He traveled to Bangkok in search of a master and at Bangkok's Wat Mahathat he was instructed to seek out Ajarn Tong in Chiangmai. After he finished the basic course at Wat Chom Tong and then sat five more retreats, he was asked to start teaching. It was through traveling to Thailand and first being an international meditator or working in Thailand that led these dedicated practitioners to stay and teach others.

²⁰ Mae Chi Brigitte, Wat Prayong Gittivararam, 10 March 2010.

²¹ Phra Frank, Wat Sangathan, 18 June 2010.

²² Lay meditation teacher, Wat Chom Tong, 28 April 2010.

Foreign meditators often experiment with different teachings as sampling is the norm for long-term international meditators. In speaking with Luang Pi River,²³ a British monk at Wat Dhammakaya, during the Middle Way retreat, I learned his route to finding a temple where he wanted to ordain. He had tried a number of meditation methods prior to attending Wat Dhammakaya's Middle Way retreat. Luang Pi River attended two retreats at the International Dhamma Hermitage, taught at a spa in Koh Phangan, and sat an Ajarn Tong retreat in Chiangmai during his travels. During this sampling, he heard of Wat Dhammakaya and went there to practice. He attended the Middle Way retreat and this experience caused him to seek ordination at Wat Dhammakaya because he wanted to be a part of developing this retreat program. He has been teaching at Middle Way since October 2009. It is often the connection with a certain place, community, practice, or teaching method that leads to sustained engagement and participation.

But, one does not have to ordain to teach meditation at Thailand's international meditation centers. Often international meditators who are frequent attendees are asked to volunteer to help manage group retreat centers that accommodate a large number of retreatants at once. Thus, there are opportunities for further involvement and exchange, and a few international meditators take advantage of these roles. Reinhard, a German layman, is an example of a meditator who contributed to a retreat center through volunteering and teaching.²⁴ In my communication with him, I learned that he had been attending retreats each month at the International Dhamma Hermitage for a few years, and living at the main Suan Mokkh monastery between the ten-day retreats. In this way, he became very familiar with the retreats and the people responsible for the organization. From 2004 to 2008, he lived permanently at the retreat center and was asked to take responsibility for the organization of the monthly foreigner retreats. Similarly, a German laywoman, Nancy, had a transformative first experience at the International Dhamma Hermitage retreat and continued to participate in many of the following

²³ Phra Luang Pi River, *The Middle Way Retreat*, 10 June 2010.

²⁴ Reinhard, International Dhamma Hermitage, via email, 22 February 2010.

retreats.²⁵ She related this story in a dhamma talk to the participants at the Dipabhavan Meditation Center retreat I attended, in which she was a volunteer.²⁶ Her first retreat experience caused her to reevaluate her life, which she changed to focus more on meditation and living a simpler life in Thailand.

These processes of selective appropriation illustrate the variety of motivations for undertaking a retreat, as well as the new social spaces created for those long-term practitioners. Popular ideas of meditation connected with nature, healing, relaxation, as well as meditation's connection to the current cultural zeitgeist, have created the phenomenon of experimenting with Thai meditative practices while traveling and engaging at various levels. For curious tourists, meditation can be a one-time trial or become a lifelong commitment. Some international meditators have made a life out of the practice, becoming ordained or full-time meditation teachers in Thailand, demonstrating that the same routes that lead to hybrid religiosities can also lead to a deep engagement with Thai Buddhism. It is the selective appropriation of the retreat experience which leads to hybrid religiosity. Only the parts of the meditation retreat that cohere with the international meditator's goals and motivations are given value. As well some aspects of the retreat are intentionally avoided and questioned.

Subversion and Dissent

Webb Keane theorizes about Christian conversion in his ethnographic monograph, *Christian Moderns*. He defines semiotic ideology as cultural concepts that mediate between selves and signs that contain moral and political assumptions.²⁷ He shows how Calvinist

²⁵ This is a shared trait of many long-term international meditators and demonstrates one of several avenues that create religious hybridity. For some, this transformative experience entails an insight into one of the three characteristics of suffering, impermanence, or non-self. For others, as international meditation center teachers have related to me, this can be a spontaneous entrance into the first *jhāna*. This kind of initial attainment is motivation to continue to practice meditation in a serious and dedicated way.

²⁶ I attended the June 20- 27, 2010 retreat.

²⁷ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 16-18.

missionaries and Sumbanese Indonesians have differing semiotic ideologies. The two groups have different assumptions about the moral and political aspects of their communicative acts, and about the relationship between self and signs, words and objects. Noel Salazar finds similarly that travel destinations are places where multiple imaginaries clash. Tourism can help to shape the frameworks for these encounters yet cultural differences remain.²⁸ The issues highlighted in this section demonstrate the semiotic ideologies of international meditators, which are sometimes at odds with the purpose of the retreat center and international meditation center teachers.

There are small ways in which international meditators can dissent from the rules of the meditation retreat. In some centers meditators are watched closely and told that, if they are caught using their phone, they will be expelled from the retreat. But at other centers the meditation teacher is not always present and meditators have more time amongst themselves. In the latter situation, first-time international meditators who are not motivated often find other activities. One young Canadian woman confided to a small group of international meditators at Wat Doi Suthep that she found the meditation technique too difficult. Instead of practicing, she stayed in her room watching DVDs on her computer for a few nights and left earlier than she had intended. The reality of a meditation schedule with 7-8 hours of meditation per day is too much for some international meditators. Some report feeling trapped on the monastery grounds and this is another reason for leaving the retreat early. In this way, international meditators' ideas of personal freedom are in conflict with the meditation retreat structure, which has constraints in place for optimal meditation progress.

For international meditators, meditation often conjures images of a peaceful environment with the ability to relax and relieve stress. Even though some international meditators would like the ability to talk freely, they still seek a center that is quiet. This can be difficult at some of the busy temples that are also meditation centers. International meditators, to a large extent, enter the retreat in order to rest and clear the mind. Many expect silence and tranquility and are disappointed

²⁸ Salazar, *Envisioning Eden*, 15.

when distractions arise, such as the noisiness of ceremonies and Buddhist holiday celebrations, as well as construction around the center. When the meditation center is not situated within an idyllic environment, spending ten days meditating is less appealing. Before each monthly ten-day retreat at the International Dhamma Hermitage, foreign meditators are allowed to stay at Wat Suan Mokkh, the monastery adjacent to the retreat center. Some meditators use this as a time to consider whether they want to join the retreat or not, spending time at the temple for a night or two. In speaking with some travelers staying in Wat Suan Mokkh, I learned that some choose not to enter the retreat. The commerce they see around the temple detracts from the natural, ideal experience of meditation and relaxation international meditators often envision. The semiotic linkages between meditation and relaxation are too strong for some international meditators to adjust their expectation of what a meditation retreat might entail.

Commodification of anything connected to the Buddhist temple or meditation center is in direct contrast to the international meditator's vision of an 'authentic' culture and religious tradition, which should be 'pure' and 'untainted' by commerce. The presence of market items, such as amulets and even street food and drinks, is seen by some international meditators to mark an inauthentic or unnatural space to practice meditation. As Peter Moran found concerning Western travelers to Bodhanath's Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, international meditators in Thailand fear that meditation will become "yet another 'commodity' produced by the monstrous forces of modernity ..."²⁹ Moran's study reveals that the presence of money was disturbing in contrast to the supposed spiritual ideals and the traditions of Tibetan Buddhists and an imagined 'pure' Buddhism.³⁰ The relationship of the economy and meditation are seen to be antithetical to some international meditators. Therefore, the desire to experience meditation can easily become disillusionment when ideals do not match expectations.

My discussions with international meditators revealed that many do not realize that monasteries are a social organization and part of a

²⁹ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 58.

³⁰ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 78.

community that needs monetary funds in order to function. Temples are part of the surrounding community and abbots allow laypeople to sell food, drinks, lottery tickets, and sometimes massage within temple grounds. The meditation teaching within Thailand's international meditation centers is, for the most part, offered freely and by donation. Meditation teaching by donation is a traditional aspect of Buddhist teaching. In Thailand, and elsewhere in Theravādin Southeast Asia, there is a history of monks acting in this role as a source of donation for the temple. Therefore, the temple has its own economy and sources of income through the reciprocity of exchange and consumption. Through this lack of knowledge concerning the economic functioning of temples, some international meditators criticize temple practices among each other while attending a meditation retreat or decide not to engage at all, disenchanted by this seeming lack of authenticity.

Besides the external circumstances of the retreat center, some international meditators find it difficult to execute the rules and regulations one is required to follow in order to participate in a meditation retreat. Although it is not recommended that people talk during most of the popular international retreats in Thailand, this is often not observed fully. At international retreat centers some people come and go quickly, never speaking to anyone, but some collect everyone's email addresses, promising to keep in touch as if in summer camp. It is natural to be curious about the other meditators – to want to know their reasons for taking on a meditation retreat. Foreign tourists are often lonely and looking for others to travel with. At international retreat centers, no one talks during meditation or in the meditation halls. Often, however, there are times when these rules are broken and meditators talk during afternoon tea breaks, at night before bed, or before leaving. These are times when international meditators discuss their motivations for coming, their backgrounds and their travels around Thailand and Southeast Asia. Foreign tourists are used to meeting other travelers and conversing about their plans, and often do not understand the significance placed on remaining silent. Danny from Ireland discussed why he decided to speak during the retreat at Wat Doi Suthep. Here are his sentiments from my fieldnotes:

Danny told me that he could tell that talking affected his practice but the meditation was too boring and difficult to maintain throughout the evening. He also stated that he started to feel trapped in the temple. He was anxious to discuss this with the other meditators. He felt better knowing that many of the others felt the same way.

Depending on the meditation center, the response to talking can be silent disapproval, or a warning of expulsion from the retreat. It is clear from the orientation and written instructions that one of the rules of meditation centers is to remain silent. However, some international meditators do not think this rule is significant and choose to ignore it. Others, like Danny, understand that silence aids one's concentration practice, but still feel compelled to share one's experiences with others.

The lack of sleep is a particular problem for many travelers who attend the Ajarn Tong retreats in Chiangmai, who are not expecting this aspect of their lives to be disrupted. One of the rules is to remain wakeful and in a meditative state throughout the day, with decreasing hours of sleep as one progresses. International meditators dissent by waking up after the morning bell, and napping after breakfast and lunch. Lack of sleep is one problem that is often cited as a reason for leaving or causing difficulty with the practice. After talking with Paul at Wat Chom Tong, I wrote this in my field notes:

Paul didn't know that a major challenge of this retreat for him would be the lack of sleep. This aspect of the rules was not explained to him in full when he arrived. He was very surprised when the meditation teacher continually asked him to sleep less and less.

Although Paul obeyed the rules, it is clear that some international meditators assume that certain aspects of the meditation retreat are not important, especially those that interfere with the freedoms they are more accustomed to.

Some aspects of the retreat are demanding for international meditators who did not expect this challenge involved in living in a

Buddhist temple. This is a measure of the degree and quality of cultural communication. Points of subversion expose the semiotic ideologies of international meditators that have different assumptions and place importance on aspects of the retreat experience divergent from the design of the retreat program. These moments of dissent reveal hybrid spaces, as meditators not only participate in the practice, but also the experience of living in a temple setting. The rules and regulations international meditation centers impose challenge international meditators' capacity for difference. The resulting dissent underscores selectivity and appropriation. International meditators then are not only appropriating Thai meditation techniques, but also rejecting cultural settings with their statements of selectivity and refusal to participate in particular aspects of the retreat. This is part of the consequences that occur when the idealized version of meditation and Buddhism is encountered in reality.

Conclusion

The avenues by which international meditators come to attend a meditation retreat in Thailand lead to a variety of hybrid religious formations, as well as the possibility of deep and long-term engagement through an initial transformative experience. It is not only the meditation itself, but also the schedule, surroundings of the retreat center, and other activities of living in the center, that makeup the content of the experience. From an accidental religious tourist who happens upon a scenic temple and is invited to learn meditation, to one who plans a retreat to deal with a certain problem in his or her life, there are many different kinds of international meditators. For those interested in therapy and healing, the 'Buddhist' aspects of living in a temple can be a challenge, but for others interested in cultural exploration and being in nature, the experience of living in the temple is a highlight. Some international meditators have found a place where they benefited and eventually become teachers and volunteers at these sites. Others find ways to dissent from the strict meditation program through not acknowledging the ban on speaking or sleeping during the day. Only a small minority of international meditators come to Thailand with the intention of becoming deeper or more devout Buddhists as

many do not mention Buddhism at all. This shows the extent to which meditation has become divorced from its Buddhist context within the popular imagination.

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