

Dharma on the Rise: Lay Buddhist Associations and the Traffic in Meditation in Contemporary Thailand¹

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Abstract

From bookstores to television, on the posters hanging in coffee shops and printed on t-shirts, meditation is everywhere in Thailand. Long considered an esoteric practice among ascetics, meditation is now celebrated as a technique to cultivate a “better you” and centrally featured in a nascent religious renewal that sees the rise in mindfulness meditation, active lay mobilization, proliferation of meditation centers and retreats, and thriving religious media economies. In order to examine such aspects critically, the objective of this article is twofold: first, I propose that these developments be considered in a larger historical context connected to the formation of modern state Buddhism, different waves of religious reform and shifting political-economic forces. In doing so, I hope to show the background as to why mass meditation is an important arena where religious change and its social and political impact could be studied. Second, I suggest that lay Buddhist associations (LBAs) represent a location from which the spread

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of meditation can be concretely explored, not the least due to their role in organizing religious learning and formulating innovative cultural practices aimed at cultivating ethical subjectivity of Buddhist masses. The profiles of two prominent institutions, Young Buddhist Association of Thailand and Buddhadāsa Indapanno Archives, are presented to illustrate the significance that LBAs have in the current meditation trafficking. Studying these sites, I argue, presents a unique opportunity to see mass meditation from a standpoint that has by far received little scholarly attention.

Introduction

This article starts from a research premise that the growth of mass meditation in Thailand represents changes in the interpretation of Buddhism that result from broad shifts in cultural sensibilities and social attitudes. Underlying this assumption is the recognition that while mass meditation serves as an arena for religious change, these changes, particularly in the Theravadin world, also shape social and political realities.³ In order to explore such claims in the Thai context, this article attends to the changing status of meditation over time to understand the historical and social context of contemporary mass meditation and suggests LBAs as a location where development of meditation resurgence can be constructively assessed. Given the role of LBAs in organizing religious learning and formulating innovative measures to cultivate ethical subjectivity of Buddhist masses, the profiles of two prominent LBAs – Young Buddhist Associations of Thailand (YBAT) and Buddhadāsa Indapanno Archives (BIA) – are discussed in order to highlight lay activism, an underappreciated subject that demands close examination.

³ Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*; Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*.

Contemporary Mass Lay Meditation

From bookstores to television, on the posters hanging in coffee shops and printed on t-shirts, meditation is everywhere in Thailand. Celebrated as a method to cultivate a “better you”, the practice is a key feature in a popular development, sometime called “*thamma intrend* (trendy dharma)”, that sees a renewed interest in Buddhist piety and the rational application of Buddhist ethics to worldly concerns among urban lay contemporaries.⁴ Techniques of mind management hold the key to not only spiritual wellbeing – its mastery is also assumed a gateway to success and status.⁵ The dramatic rise of meditation is characterized by the popularization of mindfulness meditation and active lay mobilization, the latter responsible for the proliferation of meditation centers and retreats, as well as thriving religious media economies that promote the “applied dharma” theme through new media platforms and prints.⁶

These variations are a result of the negotiated process from which the normative religious roles have shifted. While generally recognized as an integral part of the Buddhist praxis, in doctrinal terms, monastic and lay engagement with meditation is differentially acknowledged. According to P.A. Payutto, a prominent intellectual

⁴ *Thamma intrend* is a term coined by a marketing magazine, *Positioning*, in 2010 to explain the contemporary resurgence of Buddhism from a marketing perspective. Attributing the impetus of religious boom to workplace, economic and social pressures experienced by the urban populace, the magazine makes a case that in sociological terms, changing marital choice among young professionals, global trends in corporate social responsibility and the growth of new media are key factors that facilitate this religious revival. In cultural terms, the boom is popularized through the easily accessible writing style and commercialization of Buddhist prints; attitudinal change that sees meditation and dharma practice as forms of merit-making and behavioral management knowledge; and the recent availability of meditation centers with clean comfortable and aesthetically pleasing environments. In addition to public endorsement by celebrities, the magazine notes, corporations and governmental agencies have also favorably responded and hosted public dharma talks in their offices. “Trendy Dharma”.

⁵ Nophakhun, “His Holiness’ Mind Management Techniques”.

⁶ For example: Apinya, “Urban Logic and Mass Meditation in Contemporary Thailand”; Zeamer, “Buddhism ‘Updated’”; Narupon Duangwises, *Reading News Reading Thai Society in 2010*.

monk, such division can be observed through the doctrinally differentiated pursuit of the Noble Eightfold Path, or the ultimate path to enlightenment, which largely represents three modules: *sīla* (ethical conduct), *samādhi* (mental discipline) and *paññā* (wisdom).⁷ Severing the worldly life and responsibilities, the vocation of the monastic is to adhere strictly to ethical conduct and vigorous meditative practice. The laity, on the other hand, materially supports the monastic community (*sangha*) and meditates only as part of the triadic base of meritorious action consisting of *dāna* (giving), *sīla* (moral conduct) and *bhāvanā* (mental cultivation). *Bhāvanā*, in this regard, is a broad, generalized category for meditation practiced by laypeople and seems to suggest a lesser level of morality than their monastic counterparts. As monks pursue spiritual progress on the path of *samādhi*, laypeople are instead assumed to take on *bhāvanā* as a form of merit-making. Such doctrinal distinction thus entails a division of labor distinguishing the role and responsibilities of the monastics from laity.⁸

The current interest in meditation problematizes such doctrinal basis. As laypeople have increasingly acquired the position of religious authority, their commitment fosters a mass basis. Recent scholarships document a growing number of laypeople, especially the educated and relatively affluent, as well as teenagers and the middle aged, who are deeply interested in active spiritual practice and pursue meditation in earnest.⁹ New social and institutional technologies

⁷ Nissara, “Living the Dhamma”. The Noble Eightfold Path consists of: 1) right view (*sammā-ditthi*); 2) right intention (*sammā-sankappa*); 3) right speech (*sammā-vācā*); 4) right action (*sammā-kammanta*); 5) right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*); 6) right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*); 7) right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*); 8) right concentration (*sammā-samādhi*). The first two principles constitute the module of ethical conduct (*sīla*), which functions as the foundation for mental cultivation; the next three are for mental discipline or meditation (*samādhi*); and the last three are paths of wisdom (*paññā*).

⁸ Because of the purpose of this article, I use “meditation” in this context as a broad category that refers to a diversity of contemplative methods and practices pertaining to those in the Buddhist world, which also includes both *samatha* (tranquility) and *vipassana* (insight) practices. For a comprehensive introduction of meditation, see Shaw, *Introduction to Buddhist Meditation*.

⁹ Nissara, “Living the Dhamma”; Thitima, “Gen Y and Lay Buddhism.”

contribute to this growth. The emergence of retreat courses and centers has made meditation unprecedentedly accessible to a large number of people through both informal and formal forms that include weekly or bi-monthly meditation sessions in privately-run spaces and LBAs open to the public. These distinctly modern forms of institutions and practices contribute to an exceptional number of people participating in mass meditation, as laypeople can now find teachers and enroll in retreats with rationalized curriculum and well-planned schedules. According to the national surveys conducted by the National Statistical Office of Thailand, the number of people reported to meditate continually increases over the years, even if there is a wide range in motivation, frequency and level of commitment.¹⁰

In a larger context, contemporary trends in meditation reflect the increasing religious status of laypeople beyond just the realm of participation and mobilization, but also in the areas of propagation and knowledge production. Coming into prominence is the growing influence of lay “dharma experts,” who publish widely-read meditation manuals and life-coaching bestsellers with creative appropriation of Buddhist discourses. Considered religious teachers, these “gurus” regularly give meditation classes and dharma talks, while gaining in popularity and number in parallel to celebrity monks that publish popular dharma books and teach meditation. Their writings underscore a blossoming media culture that see a widespread circulation of prints, as well as audio and video recording by both monastic and lay teachers. With technological advancements in communication, internet forums and social media become the channels where contemporary Buddhists interact with each

¹⁰ National Statistical Office of Thailand, *The 2011 Survey on Condition of Society and Culture*. The inclusion of meditation in the survey is very telling, not the least because it is featured alongside such common religious practices as alms-giving and precepts-keeping. According to the survey, the number of self-identified Buddhists, age 13 and older, were reported to have meditated more and more from 35.6% in 2008 to 40.5% in 2011, or an increased rate of 4.9% over three years. There were 26,520 households surveyed in this report, and out of this pool, Buddhists were accounted for 94.5% of the total number of the sample.

other as they exchange information on dharma knowledge, teachers, techniques and places for retreat.¹¹

The interest in meditation highlights not only the appearance of new forms of practice and emergent religious entrepreneurs, an important aspect is also how change in power relations allows lay engagement to become a critical force in religious change. These situations resonate with a broader global trend that sees the development of mass religious movements as at once a response to conditions of modern life and an attempt to redefine the identity and place of the adherents in a globalized world.¹² Trends in meditation, at any rate, are path dependent: they are an effect of the processes of change that have produced conditions of possibility for a religious praxis and idea, once deemed fitting for world renunciation, to be regarded as part of popular and public culture. The next section thus situates the current experience of meditation in the historical context of the development of “modern Thai Buddhism.”

Rationalizing Buddhism

Although meditation is doctrinally a hallmark of the Buddhist praxis, its status has not always been assumed so. When the nineteenth-century religious reform in Bangkok was shaping up, scriptural learning and administration were prioritized over local religious practices, and meditation was not within the purview of official religious repertoire.¹³ Only recently, meditation assumed the character as more than just an individualized practice, but also an object of popular culture and rallying point for social engagement. This section outlines the position of meditation before and after the hegemonic rise of official Buddhism, whose role in constructing

¹¹ Taylor, *Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand*.

¹² For discussions of mass meditation movements in the Theravadin World, see: Gombrich, *Buddhism Transformed* and Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 177-190. In terms of Islamic piety movements, see Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* and O’Neill, *City of God* for an example of Christian charismatic movements in the Global South.

¹³ Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*.

religious normativity at once marginalized and later paradoxically popularized the practice.

Despite the view that practicing meditation was customarily a vocation for ascetics and recluses seeking salvation or to uncover the occult, meditative exercise had been recognized as a common aspect of both monastic and lay practices until the modernization of Buddhism by the Siamese court. In the pre-modern period, numerous regional Buddhist traditions thrived in areas throughout what is now considered modern Thailand from which the mutual relations between monastics and laypeople were emphasized. The *wat* (monastery) was the center of communal life, and monks were expected to engage with the community and perform labor works, while teaching *samatha* (tranquility) meditation and dharma from palm-leaf texts to villagers.¹⁴

The laity, in turn, lent monks and *wats* their labor and material support. Buddhist women and men not only meditated on observance days and important religious occasions, they also participated in meditation retreats with monks, especially during the cool season (from December to February) in the north and northeast, and there were different types of lay ascetics, like male and female *pha khaw* (white-robed ascetics), whose meditative practice commanded respect among the villagers. “Regional traditions,” Kamala submits, “emphasized the needs of householders and the community rather than those of monks and the monastery,”¹⁵ a characteristic that foregrounded the importance of lay asceticism and posited meditation as part of local religious life similar to other practices. The aspects of *pariyatti* (theoretical learning) and *patipatti* (dharma practice) in this arrangement were not clearly separate, but rather interwoven as part of the fabric of village life.

This configuration was disrupted when Bangkok started implementing the reform measures that sought to centralize the monastic administration under a single ecclesia and instituted a standardized educational system and monastic conduct. The reform movement was initiated with the formation of the Thammayut sect by King Mongkut in 1833 for whom the intention to purify the sangha was realized

¹⁴ Kamala, *Forest Recollections*.

¹⁵ Kamala, *Forest Recollections*, 38.

through restoring monastic discipline to an orthodox form and rid what he deemed as the unethical and superstitious elements that had corrupted Buddhism. Similar to other Buddhist reform movements in Sri Lanka and elsewhere that took a “rational” turn in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,¹⁶ the Thammayut saw itself returning to the original teaching of the Buddha by way of its strict monastic code and adherence to the study of canonical texts, a distinct attribute that positioned the scriptural learning as the source of orthodoxy and authority. Other monastic traditions, as a result, were lumped together under the label of the Mahanikai sect, and religious pluralism became regulated.¹⁷

During the fifth reign, the top-down restructuring eventually grew to be a cultural basis for a political project that sought to consolidate Bangkok’s authority over other vassals. The looming threats posed by Western colonial powers meant that the creation of a homogenous body politic became a priority, and the response from the center was to look at both coercive and cultural measures. Aside from instituting central Thai as the official language, religion afforded another important channel to forge a common outlook among the population with diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Building on his father’s legacy, King Chulalongkorn and his half-brother, Prince Wachirayan, the abbot of Wat Bowornniwet in Bangkok and later a supreme patriarch, undertook modernizing efforts that led to the establishment of a hierarchical structure of monastic administration and comprehensive educational practices formalized through the issuance of the sangha laws, both of which were centered on Bangkok.¹⁸

In doing so, Buddhism became the official religion as the state-religion nexus was created. The focus on national administration and scholarship came not only at the expense of pious practices and monasteries that used to function as a socio-cultural institution vital to local religious life; such stance also led to a hegemonic control over

¹⁶ Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*; Obeyesekere, “Buddhism and Conscience”.

¹⁷ Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*.

¹⁸ Ishii, *Sangha, State, and Society*.

monastic conduct and lay religiosity. More importantly, the alignment of Buddhism with the state meant that the central ecclesia and other Buddhist institutions became state apparatus with political legitimation function. Because Buddhism was identified as the source of national identity, official Buddhism was fundamental in constituting the governing ideology for modern Thailand under a tripartite concept of “nation”, “religion” and “king” that would later be promoted by the state as a dominant civic religion.¹⁹ The reform irrevocably broke the *wat*-community intimacy, transformed Buddhism from a *wat*-localized to sangha-based religion and “turn the laity out of the *wat*, breaking them out of communities and making them into religious free agents.”²⁰

Because meditation was an experience-based practice, its place in modern state Buddhism was suspect at best. While the practice was still a subject of discussions, meditation was omitted from the newly created monastic curriculum because Prince Wachirayan deemed the practice “the subject with no criteria for testing.”²¹ Such position demonstrated a changing attitude from action to abstraction that reflected the declining recognition of meditation.

The Spread of Meditation

After the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the status of meditation in popular religious repertoire began to make headway. One of the pivotal moments in the revival of meditation was generally attributed to the import of Burmese *vipassana* (insight) meditation technique to Wat Mahatat, a prominent Mahanikai temple in Bangkok in the early 1950s by Phra Phimontham (At Asapa, 1903-1989), a charismatic Mahanikai monk who established an urban meditation center at the temple that offered equal opportunity to monastics and laypeople alike.²² As a result, Wat Mahatat soon attracted a large

¹⁹ Reynolds, “Civic Religion and National Community in Thailand”; Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 120-123.

²⁰ O’Connor, “Interpreting Thai Religious Change”, 335.

²¹ Phra Paisal Visalo, *The Future of Thai Buddhism*, 29.

²² Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism*.

following, but it was not the only place to promote the practice. The ongoing promulgation of Thammakai meditation at Wat Paknam, another Mahanikai temple, by Luang Por Sot (1884-1959) together with the subsequent appearance of other popular lay meditation teachers in Bangkok, many of whom studied meditation at Wat Mahatat, were also spontaneously facilitating the growth of urban lay meditation.²³ Religious learning focused on meditation practice enabled the emergent religious renewal that saw Mahanikai initiatives dominate the religious landscape and necessitated a response from Thammayut administrative monks, who looked to promote forest meditation teachers as a counter measure. Such tension thus unexpectedly fueled the interest in meditation, and the effect was particularly felt among the urban and educated.²⁴

Aside from meditation teachings becoming available en masse for the first time, another remarkable development aiding the meditation revival was the changing nature of the control over religious knowledge that used to fall within the hands of the monastic and royal subjects. In the late nineteenth century, non-royal laypeople, such as K.S.R. Kulap (1834-1921), Thianwan (1842-1915) and Narin Prasit (1874-1950), who had worked in foreign and local trading firms and had familiarity with Western knowledge and cultural influences, were engaged in intellectual debates and discussions of dharma and social affairs.²⁵ Their publications presented a dialogue that, while limited in public impact, provided a foundation to evolving lay involvement in Buddhism. Around the mid-twentieth century and coinciding with the then urban religious renewal, a cohort of monks also began to write prolifically and give public lectures that encouraged public discussion of dharma among monks and laypeople, which expanded the field of religious participation.

²³ Kamala, *Forest Recollections*, 197; Van Esterik, "Cultural Interpretation of Canonical Paradox", "Women Meditation Teachers in Thailand".

²⁴ Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*.

²⁵ Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, 20-21.

Among these intellectually-minded, “reformist” monks was a renowned Thai Buddhist teacher, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993), who started coming into his own in this period and regularly published his interpretation of key Buddhist discourses, which were rational, practical and accessible to general audience, unlike the canonical texts filled with difficult Pali terms. Advocating that spiritual liberation was possible for all who practiced dharma, Buddhādāsa’s writings had much currency among the urban middle class, who found his teachings relevant to their experience of modern life, while paving ways for how Buddhist ethics was discursively engaged and socially applied. This is especially so among his lay followers, who are still playing an important role in promoting Buddhism in the present time.²⁶

The momentum came to a halt when the authoritarian regime of General Sarit Thanarat assumed power in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. Thai cooperation with the US intensified during the Sarit regime, while the national development plan and influx of foreign aid became the defining characteristics of the era that led to rapid economic growth, urbanization and the rise of the urban middle class.²⁷ This social group, variegated as it was, eagerly embraced meditation practice, and many went to Wat Mahatāt and Wat Paknam, while others sought out books written by Buddhādāsa and other intellectual monks. The popularization of urban meditation was, however, disrupted by the growth of the nation-wide, anti-communist hysteria from which the accusation of being communist was an effective political weapon against those with dissenting views, not the least those with dissenting religious views.²⁸

Because Phimontham was a nonconformist monk who had voiced opinions unpopular among those in power and at times seemed to sympathize with radical political ideas, his reform efforts to

²⁶ Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*; Jackson, *Buddhādāsa*. Other important reformist monks that emerged at this time are Phra Panyanandha (1911-2007) and Phra Thepwethi (1938-present) as detailed in Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*.

²⁷ Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand*.

²⁸ Bowie, *Rituals of National Royalty*.

popularize meditation were seen as a challenge to the status quo and made him the target of harassment.²⁹ Phimontham's insistence on individualistic spiritual cultivation was subversive in the eyes of religious authority because it ran counter to the normative religious practices at the time and undermined the institutional character and political function of modern state Buddhism. The Sarit regime was heavily reliant on official Buddhism as a source of cultural legitimacy for the "Thai-styled democracy," and Phimontham's growing popularity became a cause of concern that needed to be dealt with.³⁰ According to Phimontham, Sarit saw meditation practice as slothful and was reported to have proclaimed that "if everyone closed his eyes in meditation all [the] time nobody would be able to keep watch for the communists!"³¹ The tension escalated, and in 1962, Phimontham was arrested and put in jail on charges of sexual misconduct and communist sympathy.³² The program at Wat Mahatat was dismantled, and the case of Phimontham was made an example for others, thus putting a brake on the revival of meditation. Religious activities in this period were closely monitored and regulated by the state.

²⁹ Born in 1903 in the province of Khon Kaen, Phimontham was the oldest of the four children, whose father and mother were Phim and Jae Duangmala. Phimontham was first ordained as a novice at the age of 14 in Khon Kaen and later moved to Bangkok to attend a monastic school at Wat Mahatat, where he became fully ordained as a Mahanikai monk and quickly rose through the ecclesiastic ranks. Renowned for his scholarship and innovative approaches to administration and propagation, Phimontham was an outspoken figure whose reform attempt to democratize the sangha and insistence on protecting the rights of those suspected to be Communists got him into trouble with the religious and secular authorities. During the period of anti-communist hysteria in the 1960s, he was charged with allegations of sexual impropriety and being a Communist sympathizer, before the military court acquitted him in 1969. Phimontham was then reinstated and ascended through the ecclesia to become at one point an acting supreme patriarch. For more information, see Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, and Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest*.

³⁰ Thak, *Thailand*.

³¹ Quoted in Kamala, *Forest Recollections*, 231.

³² For details, see Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict*, 103-111.

The situation would alter in the 1970s when the American war efforts in the region subsided, and the domestic political atmosphere opened up to allow for democratic and radical political movements. During this period, fundamental changes in modern Thai Buddhism began to materialize. Among others, forest meditation teachers, previously looked down by Bangkok ecclesiastics, rose to prominence and gained much admiration among urban dwellers because of their meditative power as well as the visits from the royal family.³³ Former students of Wat Mahatat became renowned lay meditation teachers with large followings, and thammakai meditation was an integral part of a mass religious movement.³⁴ Buddhādāsa's writings were also popularized among the educated in the urban domain. Underlying these developments was a growing understanding proposed by the forest tradition and emergent reform movements that meditation was for ordinary people; that women and men alike could achieve the ultimate enlightenment (*nibbhana*) in this life; and that practicing meditation was the approach toward that goal.

Since the 1980s, the relevance and authority of the sangha began to diminish. Multiplying cases of monastic corruption, sexual scandals and immoralities contributed to the perception of a moral crisis within the sangha.³⁵ The state interest in controlling forms of Buddhist religiosity also waned as new arenas of political legitimation appeared. "While the historical centre of Buddhism, the *sangha*, is suffering organisational decline," writes Peter Jackson, "there is a flowering of religious expression at the margins of state control" from which religious normativity gave way to new Buddhist movements and popular religions on the fringes,³⁶ whose novel interpretations of

³³ Kamala, *Forest Recollections*.

³⁴ Scott, *Nirvana for Sale?*.

³⁵ The development and details of multiple cases have been profiled by Keyes, "Moral Authority of the Sangha and Modernity in Thailand".

³⁶ Jackson, "Withering Centre, Flourishing Margins", 76.

Buddhism catered to the tastes and needs of the nascent middle class.³⁷

These developments reflect a crystallization of a new consciousness that indicates a broader, ongoing process of religious liberalization through which rationalized Buddhism is also subject. Meditation has pervaded these currents and become a crucial part of the popular religious imagination as different meditation lineages proliferate in this “spiritual marketplace” where the expanding middle class enthusiastically pick and choose.³⁸ Particularly in the case of the Thammakai movement, the significance of meditation is in its facility to mediate the relations between religion and wealth.³⁹ Recent years have also seen meditation lauded for its capacity for self-reflexivity that could be beneficial to both individual and community at large.⁴⁰ These trends signify changing understandings of Buddhism and are background to the current resurgence.

Locating the Subject

While some may meditate for religious merit, happiness and good fortunes, others look to meditation as a social practice to cultivate spirituality and combat consumerism and behavioral maladjustment. Such aspect of reform is historically ubiquitous. From Wat Mahatat to the Thammakai movement and the socially engaged Buddhist movement led by Sulak Sivaraksa, the organized efforts to create

³⁷ These “prosperity religions” are conspicuous in their commercializing aspects. Their promise of fast fortune and power protection powerfully correspond to the changing demand of the newly industrialized society and could be observed through “the invocation of magico-religious protection through the use of amulets, fortune-telling, magical and traditional healing, ‘instantly effective merit-making’, meditation and the rise of new religious movements such as Santi Asoke and Thammakai.” Pattana, “Beyond Syncretism”, 471. For discussions on “new religious movements” in Thailand, see Suwanna, “Religious Movements in Contemporary Thailand”; Taylor, “New Buddhist Movements in Thailand”.

³⁸ Jackson, “The Enchanting Spirit of Thai Capitalism”, “Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods, and Magic Monks,”; Pattana, “Buddha Panit”; Pattana, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*; Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Modernizer*; Wilson, “The Sacred Geography of Bangkok’s Markets”.

³⁹ Apinya, “Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune”; Scott, *Nirvana for Sale?*

⁴⁰ For example: Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*.

change underscore an important aspect of meditation revival in Thailand. Principal to this process are LBAs, whose actions intermediate teachings of dharma to Buddhist publics through retreat, media products and spiritually-oriented activities.

Historically, Buddhist associations first emerged at the height of imperialism when the integrity of Buddhist identity was under threat from internal and external forces. These forms represented a new style of organization that was borrowed from the Christian counterpart. In Sri Lanka and Burma, the associations were the institutional framework for lay mobilization that functioned as sites of protest and cultural struggle where monastic and lay activists sought to construct new national and Buddhist identities.⁴¹

In Thailand, the formation of LBAs was also characterized by the desire to uphold Buddhism, and the early period started out as a progressive effort by lay intellectuals, mostly elites, to reform Buddhism during the time when non-royals dabbling in religious affairs were still viewed by the authorities with disdain. One of the earliest associations to appear was *Phutthaborisat Samakhom* (Buddhist Association) founded in 1912 by Narin Phasit, a social critic and advocate of radical Buddhist idea, who would go on to establish more associations to promote the restoration of “true” Buddhism.⁴² In 1934, soon after the end of the absolute monarchy, a group of bureaucrats, three of which were members of the People’s Party, founded *Phuttasa Samakom* (The Buddhist Association of Thailand: BAT). With deep interest in Buddhism, the objective was to foster the traditional role of the laity in supporting the sangha, while also seeking to actively propagate dharma. The motivation came when the core members met while studying and working abroad.⁴³

⁴¹ Obeyesekere, “Buddhism and Conscience”; Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*; Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjectures in Myanmar*.

⁴² Sakdina, *The Life, Thought, and Struggle of “Narinklung”*.

⁴³ These members were “Luang Siriratmaitri (former secretary of the Embassy of Thailand in London and a member of the People’s Party), Luang Woraphakphinit (secretary-general of the Board of Audit), Phra Ratchathamnithet (Phian Ratchathamnithet; 1891-1965; the director of the Department of Religious Affairs), Luang Ronasithiphichai (the director of the Department of Publicity and a member of the People’s Party), and Sanya Dhammasakdi (then an assistant judge at the Civil Court).” Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*, 65.

In England, they learned about the British Mahā Bodhi Society,⁴⁴ whose promotion of Buddhism in the West impressed them greatly, and sought to create such association when back in Thailand.

The proselytizing aspect would prove to be a highly innovative role that exceeded the traditional lay practices as the association published Buddhist journals, distributed books with no charge, hosted radio programs and public lectures of dharma talks, and provided religious instruction in schools, among others. Another prominent LBA soon emerged. In 1942, *Yuwaphutthika Samakhom* (Young Buddhist Association of Thailand) was established to promote Buddhism among young people through activities similar to what BAT had earlier initiated. These two establishments became important meeting places where laypeople, curious to learn about dharma, could seek out teachings directly from monastics, as well as lay teachers. Intellectual monks like Buddhādāsa, who was invited to give lectures regularly at BAT, now had the place and opportunity to communicate their views to a larger public. Such encounters unequivocally contributed to the formation of a Buddhist public sphere that was marked by an unprecedented lay involvement.⁴⁵

The growth of today's mass meditation witnesses the involvement of a magnitude of individual and collective lay Buddhists. Lay mobilization can take such forms as informal meditation groups that meet regularly, or large associations that provide meditation retreats and instruction year-round. In particular, the latter has become an alternative to monastic spaces where one could learn more about meditation and how to be a modern Thai Buddhist.⁴⁶ For many, meditation can be a coping mechanism or effective way to deal with concerns arising in everyday life, but for proponents of meditation, the practice is a spiritual approach to social improvement that responds to the predicament of development and growing consumerism.

⁴⁴ The Mahā Bodhi Society was founded by Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864-1933), considered a crucial figure in the formation of modern Lankan Buddhism and the spread of Buddhism in the West. For more information, see Obeyesekere, "Buddhism and Conscience" and Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*.

⁴⁵ Ito, *Modern Thai Buddhism*.

⁴⁶ Nissara, "Living the Dharma"; Apinya, "Urban Logic and Mass Meditation in Thailand".

One such advocate is Prawet Wasi, a distinguished physician and social activist, who argues for a culturalist approach to development. Prawet proposes that because of the compartmentalized nature of the development paradigm, Thailand is now facing a crisis that has exposed the inherent flaw in the overemphasis on material growth at the expense of social and spiritual well-being. In order to transform development into a holistic category, a new consciousness is necessary, and only through cultural and spiritual reform can development become an ethical and moral project. With strong socio-cultural emphasis, this vision of social renewal finds Buddhism as the missing link that constitutes the source of inspiration and expression for social change.⁴⁷ Meditation is thus viewed as a modality of self-cultivation accorded with the principles of change. With much appeal among NGOs and many in civil society, Prawet's proposal provides a guiding principle to many promoters of meditation, who have worked closely with him and are now actively involved in lay Buddhist institutions around the country. It should be noted that Prawet's plan only represents an influential strand of thought among others, some of which highlights their intention in straightforward religious terms that equates the promotion of meditation to a defense and nurturance of dharma.

While the number of meditation centers and the exact scope of mass meditation are not known,⁴⁸ the fortitude of lay mobilization can be observed from the sangha's response. The Council of Elders has recently begun to implement nation-wide initiatives to promote the

⁴⁷ McCargo, "Populism and Reformism in Contemporary Thailand"; Parnwell, "The Relocalization of Buddhism in Thailand". Prawet has published widely, and his public lectures have also been turned into publications, all of which reiterate and elaborate his stance on culture/development debate and the place of spirituality in social reform. See, for example, Prawet, *The Path of Human Development in the 21st Century*.

⁴⁸ For a glimpse into the growth of meditation centers, please see a highlight of a hundred of temples, associations and centers that offer meditation retreat in Ronnayut, *Map of Happiness*.

practice through its monastic networks.⁴⁹ Monastic-led meditation centers accordingly have multiplied throughout the country, concentrating particularly in urban centers and Bangkok,⁵⁰ and providing avenues where religious interpretation, exchange of ideas and formation of social networks occur, and the ecclesiastic campaign to propagate meditation increasingly informs the dynamics of mass meditation. Reaching a significant number of participants through their programs, LBAs are also public spaces where religious ethics is communicated to practitioners aspiring to learn how to embody Buddhism. Given their role in organizing religious learning and facilitating the traffic in meditation, LBAs represent sites where processes of change can be critically examined.

Organized Lay Activism⁵¹

Among a substantial number of LBAs operating at the moment, YBAT and Buddhādāsa Indapanno Archives (BIA) are two of the most prominent. Located around Bangkok with provincial affiliation, they put together a substantial number of meditation retreats, public lectures on dharma practice and merit-making ceremonials, as well as

⁴⁹ In 2008, the Council of Elders passed a resolution to establish a center that would coordinate and provide a coherent frame of action for all the temples, hermitages and monastic places that had already applied for and become provincial meditation centers affiliated with the central authority. The legal body enabling this was already in place since 2000. The National Co-ordination Center of Provincial Meditation Institutes of Thailand was created as a result and is now located at Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram in Ratchaburi Province.

⁵⁰ The exact number of meditation centers cannot be verified, but according to the statistics provided by Office of National Buddhism, there are 1,510 registered meditation centers across the country, which operate out of temple grounds. See National Office of Buddhism, *Names of Provincial Meditation Centers*. Even though the number of lay-run meditation centers cannot be approximate, there are many LBA and small, autonomous groups that regularly hold events with consistent membership. The magnitude, at any rate, would at most not exceed that of its monastic counterpart.

⁵¹ This section is based on the research on a survey of three select LBAs: Baan Aree, the Young Buddhist Association of Thailand and Plum Village, that I have completed for Buddhādāsa Indapanno Archives. For more information, see Prakirati, *Learning from Baan Aree*.

produce media products with far-reaching circulation throughout the year. This section presents brief sketches of these associations as examples of lay mobilization and its role in religious engagement that comes to characterize contemporary religious change in Thailand today.

The Young Buddhist Association of Thailand

In January 1949, a group of like-minded young adults, who shared deep interest in promoting the study and practice of dharma among Thai youth, formed an informal group under the name of *Khana Yuwaphutthika* (Young Buddhists Group). They obtained permission and support from then Phra Srivisudhiyana, the abbot of Wat Kanmatuyaram,⁵² to use the temple space temporarily for meeting and activity. Having met through the public dharma talks that BAT organized, these individuals represented a new cohort of lay intellectuals and activists who were knowledgeable of the international Buddhist missionary works of the Maha Bodhī Society, for example, and increasingly receptive to the new role of the laity as proselytizing agents through the works of BAT, which saw the educated middle class engaged in propagating the dharma.⁵³ They were in agreement that there needed to be another associational body that would prove relevant to young people.⁵⁴ In the 1950, the group became formally registered as *Yuwaphutthika Samakhom* (the Young Buddhist Association of Thailand), and their early venture focused on two primary objectives: to propagate dharma among the youth and carry out charity work.

⁵² Phra Srivisudhiyana later disrobed, but remained active in religious affairs as a lay person. His lay name is Sucheep Boonyanupab (1917-2000).

⁵³ The members of the initial group of Young Buddhists Group, further, were also part of the new social elites who were of non-royal heritage and had business and literary background. Boonyong Vongvanij, for example, was educated abroad, while Sathian Phothinantha was a lay intellectual who had written and translated on books on Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhist ethics and history of religion.

⁵⁴ The core members consist of Boonyong Vongvanij, a young business man, Sathian Phothinantha, a lay intellectual who gave lectures on Buddhism at the Buddhist Association Thailand, and Supoj Saengsomboon.

In the early period, the association attended closely to education and humanitarian issues that found them branching out into regional and international scenes. Aiming to cultivate morality and raise awareness of the role of dharma in young people's lives, the association commenced a wide range of religious and social activities.⁵⁵ These works earned the association much accolade, and in 1960, having built a network of affiliated associations in twenty four provinces, the association received royal patronage. The association was given a piece of land by Her Majesty the Queen in 1975 from which its first building was constructed and completed in 1980. This period also saw YBAT working on a humanitarian project with the World Fellowship of Buddhist Youth, an international group, to assist those displaced from the unrest on Thai-Cambodian border.

The association's focus was to change radically in the 1980s when one of the YBAT directors attended a meditation retreat hosted by Khun Mae Dr. Siri Karinchai (1917-2011), a renowned lay meditation teacher,⁵⁶ and came back convinced that meditation practice would be of significant benefit to the religion and its adherents. Having successfully persuaded others in the association, YBAT started its first seven-day meditation program in 1983 at Wat Wachiratham Sathit in Bangkok with fifty attendants. In 1984, the program was moved to Wat Khao Sukim in Chantaburi Province in eastern Thailand with around seventy participants. The project was to later relocate to Wat Amphawan in Sing Buri Province for the next seven years when YBAT received the support from Luang Phor Charan, the abbot, to host the retreat on the temple ground. Throughout these formative years, Khun Mae Siri played a significant role in popularizing YBAT, and her brand of meditation represented a

⁵⁵ These activities range from the organization of dharma talks at the headquarters or in schools and other provincial centers to production of radio programs and television shows; publication of books for free distribution; hosting of meditation classes and essay competitions; providing scholarships and assistance to children, monks and those in need; creating youth volunteer programs; initiating mass novice ordination for students during summer recessions; and setting up branches in provinces around the country.

⁵⁶ Khun Mae Siri was a highly esteemed meditation teacher, who studied meditation at Wat Mahatat and is now known for her Burmese-influenced vipassana meditation technique and 7-night-and-8-day retreat called "Mental Development for Wisdom and Peace (พัฒนาจิตให้เกิดปัญญาและสันติสุข)".

localized form of Burmese *vipassana* meditation, which was originally propagated at Wat Mahatat and gradually became the basis for mass following through the directives of YBAT, Khun Mae Siri and others who studied meditation at Wat Mahatat.⁵⁷ The number of participants increased significantly from a hundred to hundreds during this period to the point where YBAT had to build a new retreat building within the temple to meet the growing demand.⁵⁸

Even so, the interest far exceeded the capacity of the meditation center at Wat Amphawan such that the association had to move its operation to a newly constructed center located at its headquarters in 1994, which could hold up to four thousand people. With this capacity, YBAT increased the number of meditation retreats and introduced programs on different meditation techniques to better accommodate a wide spectrum of laypeople from schoolchildren, teenagers, young professionals to middle age and seniors. Currently, YBAT hosts meditation retreats consistently throughout the year in their five meditation centers, one in Bangkok and four in the provinces designed to assist the regional demand. Intending for YBAT to be the “supermarket of dharma practice” where people, who seek out YBAT for meditation instruction, have the convenience of choosing from various styles of meditation lineage, the association has diversified its curriculum and invited monastic and lay meditation teachers from outside to host their own retreats. As a result, in 2010, there are more than twenty thousand participants in the retreat programs alone, and if accounting for those attending merit-making ceremonial and other functions that the association holds, the number goes up to as high as around fifty thousand people.⁵⁹ The persistent effort to prioritize meditation by YBAT thus proves to be a critical part of the growth in mass lay meditation.

⁵⁷ For details on Khun Mae Siri’s biography and work as well as the meditation program at Wat Mahatat, see Wariya, et al., *Meditation in Tripitaka*.

⁵⁸ Luang Phor Charan has continued the meditation program until today, which makes Wat Amphawan one of the leading meditation centers in Thailand that attract tens of thousands annually.

⁵⁹ The Young Buddhist Association of Thailand, *The 2010 Annual Report*.

The continual growth of YBAT reflects an increasing appeal of meditation practice among laypeople that runs parallel to the expanding middle class. In recent years, YBAT has started considering channels other than the retreat to propagate the dharma. Focusing on reaching out to a wider population, who may not have time to attend meditation retreat or are not accustomed to the dharma, YBAT publishes quarterly journals and dharma comics books, operates a public library filled with dharma books, as well as audio and video recording of sermons, produces radio and television programs and sets up social media platforms as communication channels between the association, its members and general public. With a high degree of attendance, a wide range of programs and tens of thousands of participants, YBAT has set itself as an exemplar relative to any religious association engaged with propagating task.

Buddhadāsa Indapanno Archives

Neighboring the shades of green and a large pond in Watchirabenchatat Park in the middle of Bangkok sits Buddhadāsa Indapanno Archives (BIA), a three-story center that houses the archives of Buddhadāsa's works along with exhibition halls, seminar rooms, a museum, a Zen stone garden, a library with a digital database and a theatre for spiritual performances. Open to the public in 2009, BIA is a non-profit foundation established by Buddhadāsa monastic and lay followers who see the necessity of creating a permanent place to put in safe keeping and make publicly available the collection of works and miscellaneous writings by Buddhadāsa. Even though the project is a collaborative effort between monastic and lay groups, the laity plays a leading role in managing the day-to-day operation, as well as policy formulation. The archives also consist of sketches, photos, audio recording and other works that Buddhadāsa left behind. With a budget of one hundred and eighty-five million baht and support from monastic, private and public sectors, particularly by such influential figures as Phra Paisal Visalo, a renowned intellectual monk, Prawet Wasi and Kasem Watanachia, a privy councilor who

chaired the committee for the establishment of the center, BIA was completed in three years.⁶⁰

Working to sway contemporary minds from cultures of consumerism toward living a morally fulfilled life, BIA is intended as a spiritual fitness and edutainment center where the process of learning and practicing dharma is beneficial, fun and exciting. Rather than focusing on preserving the works of Buddhādāsa, the center looks to provide comprehensive dharma services that come in the forms of a variety of religious and cultural programs for self-cultivation, stressing critical contemplation, direct engagement and collaboration. The architecture of the center is designed to have spatial arrangements for multiple functions where the dharma can be engaged through such diverse platforms as a museum, exhibitions, performances, merit-making and meditation. The adjacent park adds to the allure as BIA presents itself as an enchanting location for family and young people looking for alternatives to shopping malls, and the physical structure emphasizing simplicity and open space makes available an opportunity for visitors to slow down, dwell and reflect on their state of mind.

For those interested in learning more about the life and work of Buddhādāsa, the archives are publicly accessible, and the bookstore on the first floor carries pocketbooks and writings by Buddhādāsa, as well as books on the history of Buddhism, life-coaching and dharma books with the self-checkout counter and a box for suggested donation. Promoting the pursuit of knowledge, visitors are encouraged to visit the store and pick up any book to read at the designated area furnished with sitting futons and rugs. One can also go on a tour around the center where murals, sculpture, trees and stones exemplify the pictorial and material interpretation of dharma; or enter the *Taste of Nibbhana* room on the second floor, an interactive exhibition divided into two parts: the first of which is a meditative space with light, visual and bell sounds as the background to induce the experience of the temporary state of stillness, while another presents the biography of and works by Buddhādāsa in multimedia forms.

Even though BIA organizes their own activities on a regular basis, the center also functions as a coordinating body between

⁶⁰ “Becoming Spiritually Fit”; Aree, “Mindfulness over Matter”.

different groups and networks. The common programs organized by BIA include prayer, meditation, yoga, dharma talks, merit-making, exhibitions, movie screenings and regional tours to various pilgrimage and religious sites, in addition to many other programs. Principal to these endeavors, meditation is an integral part of the center's effort to promote *bhāvāna*, or spiritual cultivation, among the general public. BIA organizes daily chanting and a short meditation session every evening and invites monks from Suan Mokh and other temples to teach meditation every Sunday afternoon. These events are open to the public, and oftentimes parents are encouraged to bring their children along in hope that the experience will plant the seed of goodness in young hearts. BIA also collaborates with other Buddhist groups, particularly those in the networks of Suan Mokh, to organize retreats within and outside of Bangkok. Plum Village, for example, hosts its Day of Mindfulness event at BIA once a month,⁶¹ and Phra Vor Vachiramethi, a celebrity monk, also convenes his renowned course on the management of *kilesa*, or mental defilement, at BIA. On important religious and secular holidays, BIA arranges for eventful days that provide families and those looking for a place to go and things to do during the weekends and holidays with meaningful pastime.

These activities reflect the changing character of religious participation and knowledge practices among the educated urban. While Buddhādāsa has long been considered an important figure among the middle class intelligentsia, BIA accommodates a new group of audience who may have only casually heard of or read

⁶¹ Plum Village is a community of practice founded by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk who is heralded for his role in global peace movements and his teaching on mindfulness, located in northern France. With branches in more than thirty countries, Plum Village represents a global network that plays a critical part in the development of socially engaged Buddhism, or the contemporary movement of Buddhists seeking to incorporate Buddhist ideas, values and practices into the basis for social action. For more information, see King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Plum Village in Thailand began in 2007, and one of its main activities is Day of Mindfulness, which, crudely speaking, is a day-long event that the participants spend time together practicing mindfulness through both organized meditation sessions and informal settings such as during lunch in order to perform mindfulness into everyday life in the real-life setting.

Buddhadāsa's writings prior to coming to BIA, or has never practiced meditation seriously, but still finds participating in the programs organized by BIA within manageable reach. Such may be a result of the rationalization of ideological and practical aspects of the Buddhist praxis to fit the changing demands and lifestyle of the urban middle class, who likes nice, clean places for dharma practice, easy-to-reach locales, well-defined programs with clear timelines, a de-emphasis on ritualistic practice, comprehensive meditation teaching, interactive participant experiences and the understanding that the dharma is within everybody's grasp. These attributes, at any rate, stand in contradistinction to conventional practices in the temples where ceremony is emphasized, and the mood is more solemn, while conduct is regulated under the monastic-lay hierarchy.

The effort by the center also represents a new approach to networking and synergy that sees BIA entering into a collaborative effort with other Buddhist collectives, whether in terms of providing activity space or sharing resources. BIA takes on the role of the intermediary that coordinates flows between different groups, both lay and monastic, as well as between Buddhism and the urbanites as the center organizes religio-cultural activities and disseminates dharma in such novel forms as documentaries, television shows, social media platforms and applications on smart phones. BIA thus comes to signify a new model of dharma propagation from which meditation practice figures as a primary vehicle of religious learning and social engagement.

Conclusion

This article has outlined changing expressions of meditation practice, as well as the development of how the practice has subsequently become an important object of intervention by various religious agents. Such discussion provides the context to consider LBAs as the sites where processes of cultural interpretation, knowledge dissemination and representation of meditation can be critically examined. In comparative terms, YBAT and BIA share common features with a strong emphasis on meditation propagation and are committed to extensive media engagement to spread the dharma with

creative approaches to planning and organizing. Both have volunteer programs and are embedded in larger networks of Buddhist activists that regularly communicate and collaborate with each other. Agreeing that propagating the dharma is not only spiritual, but also social, these organizations look to propagate meditation in parallel to or direct cooperation with the monastics.

As the academic examination of Buddhism has moved in recent years from the analytical focus on text to context and lifeworlds,⁶² contemporary scholarship has sought to understand the development and consequence of religious practices and experiences, paying particular attention to the dynamic process of how the practice is realized in actuality and within power relations. In this line of inquiry, the ethnographic approach has been a popular methodology that negotiates the boundary between structural forces and subjectivity, and recent works have produced an exciting, if not still somewhat limited, body of literature. Directions in the study of the spread of meditation share an agreement that the practice holds significance beyond just a private practice and can afford a perspective into a wide variety of issues from gender, media, modernity, history, globalization to consumption and aesthetics. The engagement with meditation hence proves to be a fertile ground for emergent scholarly production.⁶³

In order to engage fully and ethnographically with contemporary trends in meditation, at any rate, a critical attention must not only focus on how mass meditation is sociologically constructed, but also on the cultural underpinning and consequence of such formation on the notions of personhood, citizenship and community. One of the areas for further examination, for example, lies in the changing

⁶² Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*; McDaniel, "Buddhists in Modern Southeast Asia"; McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*.

⁶³ In the case of scholarship on contemporary Thai mass meditation, these works include Apinya, "Urban Logic and Mass Meditation"; Bond, "The Contemporary Lay Meditation Movement"; Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*; Klima, *The Funeral Casino*, as well as several master theses and dissertations by Nissara, "Living the Dharma"; Newell, "Monks, Meditation and Missing Links"; Zeamer, "Buddhism Updated"; Schedneck, "Constructing Religious Modernities" and Thitima, "Gen Y and Lay Buddhism." In the case of Burma, see Houtman, "Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma" and Braun, "Ledi Sayadaw".

cultural conceptions that shape the instrumentality of meditation practice. Nithi Ieosiwong, a renowned Thai historian, notes that the categorical meaning of *karma* and *bun*, the latter roughly translated as “merit” and both of which constitute a theory of moral action and consequence, has undergone a radical transformation from being oriented toward the next life to the here-and-now focus in this very life.⁶⁴ Such development is part of a historical shift in the Buddhist cosmographical imagination that could be observed as far back as the nineteenth century in some social quarters.⁶⁵ A few research questions could be: to what extent do changes in the theory of moral action and consequence affect the attitude toward the function of meditation practice; how do these changes transform a religious praxis embedded in local ways of life into what Pattana calls “instantly effective merit-making,”⁶⁶ or a modern, scientifically compatible approach to mental health and well-being; what are other dominant ideological strands that guide trends in meditation; and what are historical consciousness and sociopolitical basis present in the practice and propagation of meditation?

Aspects of organized lay activism within Thai mass meditation are still relatively unexamined, even if scholarship in other Theravadin societies and the West see lay mobilization as a key feature in mass meditation.⁶⁷ One of the exceptions is Apinya Feungfusakul, who seeks to outline sociological changes and cultural logics of contemporary mass meditation.⁶⁸ Still, the ideological position of practitioners and promoters of meditation, as well as social and political consequences of mass meditation, are questions left largely unanswered. As diverse religious forms circulate, and new groups of religious entrepreneurs, primarily the urban middle class, new middle class from the provinces and non-administrative monastic intelligentsia, emerge with wealth,

⁶⁴ Nidhi Eosewong, *Buddhism in a Changing Thailand*.

⁶⁵ Reynolds, “Buddhist Cosmography in Thai History”.

⁶⁶ Pattana, “Beyond Syncretism”.

⁶⁷ Bond, “The Contemporary Lay Meditation Movement”; Gombrich, “From Monastery to Meditation Centre”; Gombrich, *Buddhism Transformed*; Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*; Maquet, “Meditation in Contemporary Sri Lanka”; Queen, *Engaged Buddhism*.

⁶⁸ Apinya, “Urban Logic and Mass Mediation”.

status and confidence to assume the positions of religious and cultural leadership, LBAs become a mediated site that these processes can be rendered concrete. Studying these sites thus presents a unique opportunity to see mass meditation from a standpoint that has by far received little scholarly attention.

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