



## Thai Buddhist Meditation Practice Tradition and a Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

Thai Buddhist meditation practice tradition has its long history since the *Sukhothai* Kingdom about 18th B.E., until the present day at 26th B.E. in the Kingdom of Thailand. In history there were many well-known Buddhist meditation master teachers, i.e., *SomdejPhraBhudhajaraya (To Bhramarangsi)*, *Phraajarn Mun Puritatto*, *Luang Phor Sodh Chantasalo*, *PhramahaChodok Yanasitthi*, and *Buddhadasabhikkhu*, etc. Buddhist meditation practice is generally regarded by Thai Buddhists to be a higher state of doing a good deed than doing a good deed by offering things to Buddhist monks even to the Buddha. Thai Buddhists believe that practicing Buddhist meditation can help them to have mindfulness, peacefulness in their own lives and to finally obtain *Nibbana* that is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. The present article aims to briefly review history, and movement of Thai Buddhist Meditation Practice Tradition and to take a case study of students' Buddhist meditation practice research at the university level as an example of the movement of Buddhist meditation practice tradition in Thailand in the present.

### A Brief History of Thai Buddhist Meditation Practice

Meditation plays an important role in Buddhism (*Buddhasasana*) by the name of right meditation (*Sammasamadhi*) being the last category of the Eight-Fold Path (*Atthanghigamagga*) which can be concluded into three categories under that name of *Trisikkha* that consists of Personal Discipline (*Adhisila-sikkhā*), Mental Perfection (*Adhicitta-sikkhā*), and Wisdom (*Adhipaññā-sikkhā*), to obtain the ultimate goal i.e., *Nibbana*. In the Buddhist tradition, there are 2 forms of meditation i.e., tranquility meditation (*Samathakammathanna*) and insight meditation (*Vipassanakammathanna*). Tranquility meditation will yield the calmness and concentration of mind, while insight meditation will yield cessation of human suffering. Tranquility meditation is a very famous tradition in India in the time of the Buddha. Historically the Buddha learned tranquility meditation from yogins of India, but he rediscovered *Vipassana* (insight) meditation.

In Thailand, Buddhism was legally introduced to this area called *Suwannabhumi* since 3rd B.C. However, there was no evidence to prove the existence of Buddhist mediation at that time, but it does not imply that there were no Buddhist meditation practice traditions at that time. Then since the beginning of the history of Thailand at *Sukhothai* kingdom about 18th B.E., the reform of Buddhism was implemented by *Ramkhamkaeng* King, who rejected *Khmer Mahayana* Buddhism imported *Srilanka Theravada* Buddhism (*Lankavamsa*) into his kingdom. Hence Buddhist meditation also was introduced to this kingdom, because there were many shreds of evidence to prove its existence, namely, Buddhist monks who practiced meditation in the temple in the forest called "*Aranyavasisangha*" as founded in the form of archeological evidence of temples in *Sukhothai*, *Chiengmai* and *Lampoon* Province. Again, *Lankavamsa Theravada* Buddhism was introduced to the area called Thailand at the present, in the *Ayudhya* Kingdom about 23rd B.E. There was evidence to prove the existence of Buddhist meditation i.e., His holiness *Somdejphrayanasangvora (Suka)* and *Phravisuddhacharayathera*. The tradition of Buddhist meditation practice played a dominant role in Thai Buddhism until *Ratanakosintara* Kingdom 24th B.E. (19th A.D.) as evidenced by the name of the most well-known monk *SomdejPhraBhudhajaraya (ToBhramarangsi)*, *Phraajarn Mun Puritatto*, *Luang Phor Sodh*, *Buddhadasabhikkhu*, *PhramahaChodok Yanasitthi*, etc. However, among the name of these meditation practice teacher monks, *Phra Aajrn Mun Puritatto* (B.E.2413/A.D.1873-B.E.2492/A.D. 1949) was the most contributor to Thai Buddhist meditation practice traditions more than 100 years till the present as he was the meditation teacher of many contemporary meditation teacher monks of Thailand such as, *Phra Ajaan Chah Subhaddo*, (2461/1918-2535/1992) *Loungpu Viriyang Sirintharo* (2463/1920- in the present) who is the founder the *Palangcittanubhava* Meditation Center well known around the world, etc. In this period, *Luang Phor Sodh* (2427/1884-2502/1959) or Venerable *Phra Mongkol-Thepmuni* of *Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen*, Bangkok, taught his disciples to practice meditation by using the technique of concentration on a point inside the body in the center of the abdomen which is 2 inches above the navel. This point is said to be the place where consciousness has its seat and the words "*Samma Araham*" can be repeated mentally to aid the initial development of meditation. *Buddhadasa*



*Bhikkhu* (2449/1906-2536/1993) of *Suan Mokkh* Temple, *Suratthani* province who himself directly learned Buddhist meditation from the *Pali Canon (Tripitaka)* was a Buddhist meditation teacher and preached the Buddha teaching especially “*Sunyata*” that shacked normative Thai Theravada Buddhist teaching at his time. *Suan Mokkhabalarama* (Garden of the Power of Liberation) is the chosen place to represent the meditation center in Southern Thailand. This place is internationally famous because it was once the hermitage of *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu*. The meditation technique used here is the mindfulness of breathing. (Pataraporn Sirikanchana, 2010).

Again, in this period, there also was one of those famous meditation teachers in Thailand was named *Phramaha Chodok Yanasiddhi* (2461/1918-2531/1988) of *Watmahathatu* in Bangkok who learned Buddhist meditation form Myanmar. According to *Phramaha Chodok Yanasiddhi*, the meditation techniques are based on Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipatthana*) described in the *Maha Satipatthana Sutta*. Concentration is developed on the rise and fall of the abdomen, then awareness is directed to physical and mental sensations. (Pataraporn Sirikanchana, 2010).

Briefly, Thai Buddhist Meditation of these traditions has contributed to Thai Buddhists till the present. It might be said that this period of 2440/1897-2540/1997 can be regarded as the age of enlightenment of Buddhism in Thailand, because all these senior Thai Buddhist meditation teachers have awaked people from superstition then taught Thai Buddhists to turn back to the essence of the Buddha teaching i.e. mind purification by the method of Tranquility and Insight Meditation that leads those who paid attention to appropriate practice obtain the cessation of suffering (*Nibbana*).

### **Movement of Thai Buddhist Meditation Practice Tradition in the Present**

As contributed by those previous meditation teachers, the trend of Buddhist meditation practice has been increased more and more in Thailand. Now there are more than 1,000 institutes of Buddhist meditation. Willpower Institute, for instance, of *Phra Dhammongkolyarn (Luangphor Viriyang Sirintharo)* who has followed the Buddhist meditation practice tradition of *Phra Ajarn Mun Puritatto* consist of 145 branches. Many people from Thailand and other counties, especially from Europe and America follow the meditation practice of this institute and also have been trained to be a Buddhist meditation teacher. Those people who interested in this institute can follow this website: <http://www.willpowerinstitute.com/>. International Meditation Center of *Watmahathatu*, Bangkok, follows the Buddhist meditation practice tradition of *Phramaha Chodok Yanasiddhi* who leaned Buddhist meditation practice tradition from Myanmar. Those people who interested in this institute can follow this website: <http://www.msarc.info/>. Also, *Suanmokkhapalaram* of *Suratthani* Province follows Buddhist meditation practice tradition of *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* who directly learned Buddhist Meditation practice from the *Pali Canon* or *Tripitaka*. This is the link to the website of *Suanmokkha*: <http://www.suanmokkh.org/>.

Recently, in Thailand, there are not only Buddhist monks are Buddhist meditation practice teachers, but there are many Buddhist laymen are Buddhist meditation practice teachers, for instance, *Sathira Dhammasathan* Buddhist Meditation Center founded by Ms. *Sansanee Satirasuta* since 2530/1987 as the website: <http://www.sdsweb.org/sdsweb>. *Sathian Thamma Sathan* may be quite a special place for female meditation practitioners because the owner and the leader are a famous nun in Thai society today. Nun *Sansanee* is an engaged Buddhist and a meditation practice leader. As to the meditation practice, she uses the technique of mindfulness on breathing (*Anapanasati*). And the center of Meditation of Dr. Siri Krinchai in Surin Province as the website: <http://junromsurin.org/menu03.html>. Dr. Siri Krinchai learned the Buddhist meditation practice method from *Phramaha Chodok Yanasiddhi* of *Watmahathatu*, Bangkok.

In above mentioned Buddhist meditation tradition, the question may arise that which one is the real tradition that follows the real Buddha tradition as the Buddha’s main doctrine of the Threefold Learning or the Threefold Training (*Trisikkhā*) namely, training in higher morality (*Adhisila-sikkhā*) training in higher mentality (*Adhicitta-sikkhā*) and training in higher wisdom (*Adhipaññā-sikkhā*). All these traditions have followed the doctrine of *Trisikkhā* of the Buddha. There is some difference of method of teaching among them, for example, the characteristic of Buddhist meditation tradition of *Phra Ajarn Mun Puritatto* and *Phramaha Chodok Yanasiddhi* seems to be focused on *Adhicitta-sikkhā*, while of *Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* seems to be focused on *Adhipaññā-sikkhā*. However, all these Buddhist meditation traditions still follow the *Trisikkhā* as taught by the Buddha.

Also, with the impact of Buddhist mediation, there are many movements of Buddhist meditation in academic institutions in Thailand in the present. There are many courses of the Buddhist meditation practice in curriculums used to teach students in many universities, for instance, CRRS 318 Practice of the Buddhist Meditation course of the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University since 2540/1997 till the present. More than 700 graduates were trained in this course for 17 years since the course was set by the college as on the website: <http://www.crs.mahidol.ac.th/>. 265481 Meditation courses of the Department of Religion and Philosophy of Burapha University as on the website: <http://www.huso.buu.ac.th/>. And 01388323 Buddhist Meditation of the Department of Philosophy and Religion of Kasetsart University as on the website: <http://philos-reli.human.ku.ac.th/>, etc. For the advanced academic study of the Buddhist meditation practice, there are many research paper



works done by scholars, for example, the research paper entitled “Effect of Meditation on Mental Health Measured by Center for Epidemiology Studies-Depression Scale” of Kasantikul D., Suttipan C. and Worakul P. (1986, pp. 177-190) of the Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University. It studied a series of one hundred and thirty-six youths who spent one month during their summer vacation in the Buddhist center to practice meditation by utilizing the CES-D scale to evaluate their mood changes. The results have shown that there was a significant reduction of CES-D scores between pre- and post-training groups (t-test= 4.58) significant at  $\alpha = .01$ ).

### A Case Study of Thai Buddhist Meditation Practice

In this paper, CRRS 318 Practice of the Buddhist Meditation course of the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University will be taken as an example as a case study of the practice of Buddhist meditation at the university level. College of Religious Studies (CR) was founded in 2542/1999 and is located at 999 College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Salaya, Phutthamonthon 4, Nakhorn Prathom, 73170, Thailand. The college is dedicated to study and do research in the field of religious studies and fosters mutual understanding, cooperation, and respect among people of different religious traditions both in Thailand and throughout the world. The College of Religious Studies is currently offering Bachelor's and postgraduate degrees in Religious Studies to produce competent teachers and scholars of religion as well as chaplains/ counselors to serve the modern needs of Thailand and the wider global community. (College of Religious Studies, 2016).

In 2556/ 2013, I have done the research by studying the learning achievement of the practice of the Buddhist meditation of the course CRRS 318 Practice of Buddhist Meditation. The research aimed to 1) compare learning achievement of Practice of Buddhist Meditation Course by comparing the achievement before joining the project, and after joining the project and 2) study the comments and suggestions regarding teaching and learning management. The samples are 66 students of B.A. degree, who learned Practice of Buddhist Meditation Course in 2nd Semester/2013. The tools of the research are questionnaires and a formal interview. The statistics are mean ( $\bar{x}$ ), Standard Deviation (SD), and Paired Samples T-Test. The results of the research indicated that learning achievement before and after participating in the project of Buddhist meditation practice course can vary significantly by 0.05. Learning achievement after joining the project is higher than before joining the project ( $t = 12.718$ ). For the study of the comment and suggestion, the samples show the comments appreciated the project that it develops their minds to concentrate more and helps them get inner peace more than ever before. There are comments for development the project given by samples that should adapt to sitting meditation and walking meditation (*chongkrom*) during the first 2-3 days, with the number of drops and add more time to the following days for adjusting of the participants, and the discussion period should be added to query the mood from the meditation experience. (Somboon Watana, 2558/2015).

In 2557/2014, again, after development the teaching management of CRRS 318 course, based on the results of previous research in 2556/2013, I have done the research entitled “A comparison of learning of achievement of the Buddhist Meditation practice course” The research aimed to 1) compare learning achievement of Practice of Buddhist Meditation Course by comparing the achievement before joining the project, and after joining the project and 2) study the comments and suggestions regarding teaching and learning management. The samples are 66 students of B.A. degree, who learned Practice of Buddhist Meditation Course in 2nd Semester/2014. The tools of the research are questionnaires and a formal interview. The statistics are Means, Standard Deviation, and Paired Samples T-Test. The results of the research shown that learning achievement before and after learning the Buddhist meditation practice course differed significantly by 0.05. Learning achievement after joining the project is higher than before joining the project ( $t = 11.040$ ). For the study of the comment and suggestion, the samples appreciated the course because it developed their minds to concentrate more, helps them get inner peace more than before, and lets them more understand and more recognize teachers and friends, therefore the program should maintain this course forever. The interviews showed that the teaching of all teachers helped students to gain knowledge and intellect for a better life. To practice *Anapanasati* Meditation along with a count of the number is useful for having mindfulness and cessation of anxiety in the last 3 days of the practice. All of them acknowledged that after 4 days the practice of the Buddhist Meditation Course helped them to more realize friendship among teachers and friends. They all suggested to keep this course for the future and to extend the course to the first and the third-year students of the program. (Somboon Watana, 2560/2017). In addition to supporting the finding, 10 students have been purposively interviewed. They said that they have learned how to have mindfulness in their own thinking and acting, breathing meditation with the help of counting number along with breathing made them more having concentration, for the earlier practicing this technique they felt they have very short concentration, however after practicing meditation more and more they found that they have more and more concentration and found mindfulness and peacefulness.

As now in the age of globalization, there are many interesting things that can inspire and please young people mostly in the material and mental realm. However, it seems that there is no room for young people to have a chance to develop themselves in the spiritual realm. Hence, to systematically provide a Buddhist meditation course in higher education or university level is a way to fill the gap. The college of Religious Studies, Mahidol University play this significant role by





teaching and training all 70-80 students in the college to have learned and practicing Buddhist meditation. Therefore, it can be said that it is a way to maintain the Buddhist meditation tradition for the sake of the next generations to have a chance of experience of spiritual well-being which can lead to moral desirable society. Furthermore, to teach and practice Buddhist meditation at the university level should be supported and extended to many universities due to its significance and utility for human beings.

### Conclusion and Discussion

Thai Buddhists are familiar with a statement of the Buddha about the sustainability of Buddhism that Buddhism can exist as long as human beings appropriately practice the Buddha's teaching, i.e., to practice in accordance with *Adhisila-sikkhā*, *Adhicitta-sikkhā* and *Adhipaññā-sikkhā*, and vice versa. To practice meditation is one way of practicing the Buddha's teaching and is regarded to be the best way to develop the human mind to have the higher state of virtue and *Nibbana* in the last. Most Thai Buddhists who well understand the essence of the Buddha's teaching recognize meditation practice to be the appropriate way to achieve the perfection of *Sila*, *Citta*, and *Paññā*.

However, as at the present, Thai people are mostly influenced by materialism and consumerism, hence most of them practice meditation do not want to achieve the final goal, i.e., the perfection *Sila*, *Citta* and *Paññā* called *Nibbana*, but most of them practice meditation just for having good health and escaping from their boring lives at family and office in a peaceful place like the temples or hermitages. Among those people practicing meditation are the middle class who are traders' freelancers. They have good finance to support themselves and free time to go off to other places. Regarding the meditation practice of the middle class, the research of Pataraporn Sirikanchana (2010) has criticized this phenomenon "as long as the middle class does not take the *dhammic* practice seriously, their activities in meditation centers are still a waste of time. The *dhammic* practitioners should prepare themselves with some basic knowledge of the Buddhist teachings, e.g., the teachings of suffering and the cause of suffering, before going to join the meditation practice in a temple or in a hermitage. The owners of the meditation centers and the Masters of meditation should equip the *dhammic* practitioners with basic Buddhist teachings according to the Buddhist Scriptures in order to prepare them for a practical meditation. The Masters should be aware that practitioners should not be all expected to attain the highest goal of meditation as stated in the Buddhist Scriptures. They thus should set proper methods and procedures of training for their followers. Though a *dhammic* practitioner cannot attain the Buddhist highest goal, he/she can apply the *dhammic* expertise for his/her best and the society." However, in my view, to be qualified for the benefit of those people learning the Buddhist meditation practice the Buddhist meditation teacher masters must have experience of meditation in the sense of religious experience and well education in meditation theory and practice or for the highest benefit they should have experience in the higher goal of Buddhism. Again, the fashion of practicing Buddhist meditation for benefit of healthy may mislead Buddhist meditation practice to serve the only worldly need and decrease the higher value of Buddhist meditation that the Buddha taught for the ultimate goal i.e., *Nibbana*. This should be a big question to challenge the entire Buddhist meditation practice teacher master in Thai Buddhism in the present.

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