

## CHAPTER I

*Meditation and monasticism: making  
 the ascetic self in Thailand*

Meditation practice has only become available to large numbers of Thai laity since the 1950s. In that time Buddhism in general and meditation specifically have been incorporated as representative markers in the presentation of Thailand as a modernizing nation state and a self-consciously 'traditional' kingship. The widespread adoption of meditation by the laity since the 1950s is identified by some scholars as the greatest single change to have come over Theravāda Buddhist countries since the Second World War (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 237). Today meditation is taught in monasteries throughout Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma and, latterly, Nepal and is a widely popular and influential movement. Furthermore, the global interest in meditation practice is leading to its inclusion in varied syncretic and often secular practices. However, such inclusion is also feeding and informing the ways in which such practice is understood and propagated in the emblematic religious institutions of Buddhist monasteries.

I take the ethnographic study of a meditation monastery in northern Thailand, Wat Bonamron, as my window on the process of renunciation, forms of which are found in all major religions. This study analyses the impact and meaning of renunciatory moral practice from the perspective of the Buddhist renouncer. I consider monastic practitioners' experiences and understandings of themselves, the significance of renunciation, ascetic discipline, rituals and duties as well as the place of community in the renunciatory project and the historical development and changes in monasticism and meditation.

## THE PROPAGATION OF VIPASSANĀ MEDITATION

Theravāda Buddhism has been a powerful influence in Thailand for over 700 years. Thailand has a population of 69 million, the majority of whom are ethnic Thais. While there is total religious freedom in Thailand, Buddhism is followed by over 90 per cent of the population. Buddhism is

also closely associated in the minds of Thai people with Thai national identity and it is an important part of Thailand's self-representation to outsiders. There are approximately 33,000 Buddhist monasteries in Thailand, which act as the focal point for the formal practice and reproduction of Thai Buddhism. As Kirsch (1985: 305) puts it, the practices of almsgiving and ordination are 'key socialisation mechanisms for the introduction of abstract Buddhist values into the everyday life of ordinary Thais'.

In many ways the monastery where I lived and carried out fieldwork is a typical Thai monastery where monks and *mae chee* (Thai Buddhist nuns) live lives of renunciation and contemplation. The idea of detachment is central to the monastic community's imagining of itself. At the same time, much daily activity surrounds collective commitment to the monastery's well-being and observance of monastic hierarchy. Moreover, Wat Bonamron is set apart from other similar institutions in Thailand by the teaching of *vipassanā* meditation. It has functioned as a *vipassanā* meditation centre since it was re-founded in the 1970s. It has a stable monastic community, the largest *mae chee* population in the region and each year thousands of lay people attend the monastery to do a retreat. For individual monastics, periods of retreat are tempered by long periods of time in which they work and teach. The scale of teaching, and the work involved, makes extended periods of isolation difficult for members of the community and as such monastics have relatively little opportunity to do retreat themselves, though all work in the monastery ideally provides an opportunity to develop the state of mind engendered by meditation: mindful awareness. The work of teaching also fosters a great sense of community among people who feel that they are doing good by combining engagement with and withdrawal from the world.

The burgeoning popularity of *vipassanā* practice as both a lay and a monastic responsibility has had important implications for the ways in which monastic subjectivity and community are understood. Rather than revealing meditation practice as a predefined entity, I begin Chapter 2 by tracing the historical development of Thai lay meditation practice in its current form. Processes of nationalism, internationalism and engagement with practice have made meditation what it is. This should seem obvious, but it is often the case that meditation (certainly in the popular imagination) is presented as timeless and without history. In contemporary meditative practices, as in Yoga (Alter 2004), we see a historically specific converging of religion, cosmology and philosophy with concerns for physiological and psychological well-being. I trace the historical context in which some monasteries in Thailand became devoted to the propagation of meditation

to the laity and I locate this in the context of hybrid processes of reform in Thai Buddhism. I begin with a historical account of the introduction of Burmese *vipassanā* to Thailand in the 1950s in the context of sectarian rivalry and the popularization of alternative forms of meditative discipline in a changing religious landscape. The Mahanikai sect of the Thai ordained monastic community (sangha) has enlisted monasteries as ‘satellites’ in its project of promoting meditation as a practice appropriate for lay people as well as monastics since the 1950s. This intensification of lay practice was linked to increasing standards of literacy and the rise of a nascent middle class. Many urban meditators became attracted to meditation because it was promoted as a Buddhist intellectual response to Western Scientific theory. Meditation centres were modelled as ‘research centres’ and meditation was presented as a ‘rational’ and ‘authentically’ Buddhist practice for salvation.

Subsequent decades have witnessed a proliferation of diverse religious movements within and peripheral to the sangha. Through providing a brief overview of the reformist trends that have characterized Thai Buddhism in recent decades I account for the concurrent patterns of localism, commoditization, engagement and soteriological imperative. Trends have included a critique of Buddhism by reformist thinkers, fundamentalist movements, the commercialization of Buddhist practices, the decentralization of religion, increasing numbers of spirit-cults, and social and environmental reform movements based upon Buddhist ethics. Such trends are often accompanied by discourses of localism, in which Buddhist practice and philosophy are interpreted as an ‘authentically Thai’ response to the pressures of the capitalist world economy. Locally relevant forms of economic development and self-sufficiency are promoted as being founded on core Buddhist values.

Religious resurgence and revival can be seen in the increasing popularity of alternative forms of religiosity. With such variance in practice and focus, the concerns of the laity and monastics become to discover the moral purity of ‘true’ Buddhism and the extent to which individual monastics are able to embody the *dhamma* (teaching of the Buddha; lit.: law/truth). The laity seek out monastics who are renowned for their ethical and ascetic purity. The relatively recent meditation movement is incorporated into a landscape of localist and nationalist concerns. The shift towards lay proselytizing is reflected in different Buddhist traditions around the world (Gellner and LeVine 2005; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Houtman 1990). The meditation movement has led to a changing responsibility and role for the laity and monastics. In the plurality of practices and statuses in contemporary Thai Buddhism it is possible for people outside the official sangha

hierarchy to be defined as ‘monastic’ without this calling into question the authority or hierarchical superiority of the official institutional sangha.

MONASTIC COMMUNITY AND THE CHANGING  
 STATUS OF MAE CHEE

In Chapter 3 I focus in detail on Wat Bonamron. I examine the monastic routine and the duties of monastics, considering the daily routine of the different members of the community and the very differently structured routine of those doing retreat. Of significant interest in Thailand is the part that women, in the ambiguous role of ‘nuns’ (*mae chee*), are now playing in monastic religion. The twentieth century saw rising numbers of women, particularly young women, becoming precept-holding ‘nuns’ (on Thailand see Collins and McDaniel 2010; on Nepal see Gellner and LeVine 2005; on Sri Lanka see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). The monastery on which this work is based has the largest *mae chee* community in the north of Thailand. I argue that the propagation of meditation to the laity has been crucial in the development of monastic identity for these *mae chee*. I show that these changes offer a radical reform and may be interpreted as the monasticization of popular Buddhism. A marginal and institutionally unrecognized group, *mae chee* have been gaining growing respect and prestige in recent years and are increasingly recognized as monastics, even though they are debarred from full ordination.

Although full ordination for women, known as *bhikkhunī* ordination, was once widespread in Theravāda Buddhism, the practice died out around the tenth century and has never existed in Thailand. *Bhikkhunī* ordination was only to be found in the Mahayana countries of Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan and China. In order for a woman to receive full ordination it is formally necessary to have a quorum of fully ordained monks and a quorum of fully ordained nuns to conduct the ritual. Because the Theravāda order had died out it was believed to be impossible to find the *bhikkhunī* to perform the ordination ceremony.<sup>1</sup> Women who wish to take ordination in Theravāda traditions do so by taking 8 or 10 precepts rather than the 10 for novice monks, the 227 precepts taken by monks, the 311 precepts taken by fully ordained Theravāda nuns, or the 5 observed by lay people (lay people may also take 8 or 10 on religiously significant occasions). In Thailand these precept-holding nuns are known as ‘*mae chee*’: they commit themselves to a life of renunciation, living in monasteries and nunneries. This commitment is also marked on their bodies: they shave their

<sup>1</sup> As we shall see in Chapter 8 a new movement is currently under way to introduce *bhikkhunī* ordination in Theravāda countries.

head and eyebrows once a month, wear a white shirt and skirt with a large white robe over the top, which goes underneath the right arm and pins on top of the left shoulder. Collins and McDaniel (2010: 7) report that the word *mae chi* (Romanized here as *chee*) consists of the word *mae*, mother, often used as an honorific in hierarchical as well as familial relationships and the word ‘*chi/ji*’, an honorific used for persons who occupy positions of respect, including male and female ascetics. The first records of *mae chee* date from the seventeenth century when their presence was noted by a French missionary (La Loubere 1986 [1691]: part 3, p. 113).<sup>2</sup> Today, there are perhaps twenty thousand *mae chee* living in temples or nunneries throughout Thailand (Lindberg Falk 2007). The monastic office of ‘*mae chee*’ is complicated. It is conveyed through the ritual adoption of religious vows and is usually undertaken for life. However, *mae chee* ordination is only partial and its status is far below that of monks. In Thai law *mae chee* are regarded as pious lay women (*upāsikā*) and the Department of Religious Affairs does not mention them in its annual report. Because of this they do not receive the same benefits as monks, such as reduced fares on public transport. Even so, because they are said to have renounced the world they do not have the right to vote.

There is variance in the practice and status of *mae chee* throughout Thailand. While some *mae chee* go on daily alms rounds, others are debarred from doing so. The institutional marginalization of *mae chee* means that their options are considerably more constrained than those of monks. On the one hand monastic practice seems to confirm dominant modes of gender difference and separation, while on the other it dissolves them. *Mae chee* engage positively evaluated Buddhist practices that confer prestige and respect: meditation (Tambiah 1984: 38), controlled comportment, shaving the head, continuing commitment to the sangha (religious community), and wearing white robes, all are expressions of purity and renunciation of sexuality (Tambiah 1970: 104; Keyes 1986: 73, 78).

Whereas some reports of *mae chee* give information on groups of women living as ‘temple-servants’ (Sanitsuda 2001), living lives of ‘hardship and poverty’ (Barnes 1996: 268), more recent research has revealed that the status of *mae chee* is influenced by age, social background, educational level, aspirations and motives (cf. Collins and McDaniel 2010; Lindberg Falk 2007; Seeger 2009). There is variance in the roles and

<sup>2</sup> I have never found reference to either vernacular or foreign-language texts prior to this time. The lack of evidence of *mae chee* prior to the seventeenth century is perhaps telling of the historical lowliness of the institution.

responsibilities of *mae chee* throughout Thailand. *Mae chee* are taking active roles as meditation teachers and practitioners (see Adiele 2004; Brown 2001; Van Esterik 1996), in social welfare work (McDaniel 2006a) and as teachers (Brown 2001; Collins and McDaniel 2010; Lindberg Falk 2000; 2007). These developments are related to a broader expansion of educational and professional possibilities for women in Thailand (cf. Van Esterik 1996; Mills 1999; Wilson 2004; see also Ockey 2005).

While monastic identity and ascetic practices such as *vipassanā* meditation have historically been the preserve of monks, requiring full ordination and celibacy, in contemporary Thailand ‘monastic’ and ‘lay’ are not fixed or mutually exclusive categories: temporary ordination for short periods of time has always been available to Thai men; large numbers of laity now enter monasteries as meditation students for short periods and accept monastic precepts for the duration of their retreat; and finally, the subsequent monasticization of popular Buddhism is enabling *mae chee*, though outside the ordained monastic community (*sangha*), to define themselves in ways which are, critically, religious, monastic *and* associated with prestige. Moreover, as this ethnography will show, *vipassanā* is providing a vehicle for the actualization of renunciation through the monastic duty to teach and embody the principles of meditation. The involvement of *mae chee* in teaching and practising meditation is leading to the incorporation of women in religious and monastic roles; *mae chee* are able to define themselves and be defined by others as monastics. While monks are controlled by the 227 precepts of the *vinaya*,<sup>3</sup> the relative lack of formal rules for *mae chee* means that their *performance* of monastic identity is crucial in their self-placement between the *sangha* and the laity. Even though or indeed partly because the status of *mae chee* is ambiguous, they are playing a decisive role in transformations in Thai Buddhism.

I examine the heterogeneity of the monastic community by looking at the difference between the ordination rituals for monks and *mae chee*, some of the diverse reasons people choose to ordain, variance in age, educational attainment and social background prior to ordination and the ways in which such prior experiences influence ordination and the distribution of monastic duties. For all members of this community, however, ordination is conceptualized as an opportunity to ‘do work’ on oneself through meditation.

<sup>3</sup> Literally: discipline, training, guidance; the monastic precepts; the first ‘basket’ of the *Tipiṭaka*. The *Tipiṭaka* (Pali: *ti*, ‘three’, + *piṭaka*, ‘baskets’), or Pali Canon, is the collection of primary Pali-language texts which form the doctrinal foundation of Theravāda Buddhism.

## PRACTISING AND LEARNING

This book aims to examine the ethical significance for monastic practitioners themselves of teaching wide swathes of people. A nexus of community, individual and lay interests, I argue that meditation practice is also the fulcrum around which this religious monastic community is structured and by which the monastic self is formed. Through an examination of meditative practice I examine the domain of ‘the self’ as it is meaningful for Thai monastics in the context of rapidly developing global and national discourses about the benefits of meditation for all. It is an account of the ways in which people come to understand themselves through ascetic practice and of how subjectivity is reshaped through religious experience. I argue that meditation, which is often thought of as an asocial activity, has an important social dimension and that this profoundly influences the psychological benefits that people experience and intend to experience as a result of practice.

In Chapter 4 I examine the practice of *vipassanā* meditation in the monastery in order to understand what it is that people do when they meditate, why this is an appropriate practice, what is achieved by it and what changes are effected by it. Meditation practice is intended to bring about a change in perception in the meditator, one that is consistent with Buddhist ethical principles. In order to understand these principles and their significance for individuals in other areas of monastery life it is necessary to understand how these specific bodily and mental practices bring about the experiences that are recognized and valued as religious in this context. I consider in detail the very specific techniques by which the religious tenets that inform practice are actualized through the meditation practice. A central argument of the book is that monastics learn to engage with experiences in specific ways: they learn to reinterpret subjective experiences and responses in ways that are consonant with religious principles. These principles then become the context in which all apperceptions of phenomena are carried out and the renunciate learns to experience her activities, both physical and mental, as evidence for the importance of renunciation.

I begin with the basic meditation course, the first introduction to meditation that most people in the monastery have, both lay and monastic. I describe the experiences of the basic meditation course as it would be learnt by a novice meditator. It is through these introductory disciplines that the compelling importance of renunciation is first realized for those who later come to understand their renunciation in terms of the imperative

to cultivate mindfulness. I examine meditation as a ‘technology of the self’, a practice through which people intend to effect a change upon themselves that is consonant with religious tenets. The practitioner wills, observes and experiences the changing nature of the mind and the body through a very conscious process of self-fashioning. I focus on the paradox of will and spontaneity in religious attainment. I demonstrate that the spontaneous experience of meditative attainment at the end of a meditation retreat is an embodiment of the ideal telos of Buddhist practice. The insight into non-self, impermanence and imperfection that is thought to be attainable through the retreat provides an experiential resolution between Buddhist soteriology and ascetic practice for meditation practitioners.

In Buddhist philosophy all things are thought to be ‘causally interdependent’: everything is interconnected and everything affects everything else. Thus, no phenomena are independent or self-originating. This principle extends through all things, and all aspects of existence are thought to be connected and interrelated, from physical conditions, to events in a person’s life, and happiness or suffering in the mind. Thus, how the world is experienced and lived is, in part, how it is created; acting in a morally good or bad way creates the conditions and causes for future experiences and actions.

The three tenets at the heart of Theravāda Buddhism are impermanence, suffering and non-self (Pali: *anicca, dukkha, anattā*):

Impermanence: *Anicca* refers to the ever-changing nature of all phenomena. All conditioned things are in a state of flux and eventually cease.

Suffering: Sometimes translated as suffering, pain or unsatisfactoriness, *dukkha* is philosophically closer to disquietude. Nothing in the physical or psychological realms can bring lasting satisfaction or happiness.

Non-self: Not only does Buddhism teach that there is no external salvation (no theistic deity) but also that there is no essential core of identity (no soul). What is normally thought of as ‘self’ is revealed through Buddhist teaching and practice to be a conglomeration of changing mental and physical constituents. Clinging to a delusional sense of self is thought to lead to unhappiness and suffering. The Buddha declared that all things are not-self (*anattā*).

These three principles are thought to characterize all phenomena. By bringing the three characteristics (as they are referred to) into their awareness on a moment by moment basis through the mental discipline of meditation the Buddhist monastics with whom I work explicitly intend to change their

world view, cut attachment to a sense of self and thereby attain enlightenment, the perfect peace of a mind that is free from craving, aversion and anger. It is believed that through the practice of meditation it is possible to realize and experience ultimate truth: that there is no self that exists, that all things are imperfect and impermanent.

These Buddhist renunciates *learn* to recognize the principles of Buddhism in their bodies and in their minds. Of interest to me were the ways in which people learn to use cognitive concepts to interpret their experiences and responses. For example, as an interpretation of physical sickness or mental restlessness, impermanence, suffering and non-self come to be compellingly in evidence: the uncontrollability, imperfection and transience of mental and bodily states are readily enough available. Interestingly, through the dedicated practice of meditation each mental and physical movement becomes evidence of religious principles at the same time as people actively learn to interpret their subjectivity through such principles. People engage in specific practices in order to change their experiences in relation to religious concepts, that is, they learn and practise with intent and in so doing, religious tenets become real.

The experience of non-self arises through meditation as it is taught and learnt. Practitioners are encouraged to interpret the everyday flow of their own awareness in terms of impermanence, suffering and non-self and to see in it evidence of these religious truths. Thus, people are encouraged to experience moments of their own subjectivity as illustration of religious concepts. Life in this monastery is centred on a specific practice that is focused upon developing awareness of interiority. The meditation technique is intended explicitly to enable the practitioner to attend to internal phenomena and to cut involvement in external or sensorial stimuli. The practitioner learns to engage with and interpret internal and external sensory phenomena in specific ways. The development of monastic identity and meditative discipline involves a process of both learning to reinterpret subjective experiences and learning to alter subjectivity. On the one hand, monastics recognize their pre-trained experiences to be replete with the suffering brought by ignorance and attachment, and on the other, they recognize that their subjectivity has changed as a result of the practice.

The point of *vipassanā* meditation for these monastics is to achieve awareness of the tenets of Buddhism, such that one experiences that there is no self which exists and that attachment to a delusional sense of self is the result of ignorance and the cause of all suffering in the world. Thus, the goal is to develop a very specific and vivid subjective awareness. This meditative development occurs in the context of community interaction. I consider

narratives of the lives of monks and nuns within the larger context of social norms, monastic duties and discourse in Thailand, taking into account theoretical considerations of renunciation as a practical and ongoing process.

In Chapter 5 I examine understandings of language in ritual, meditation and daily monastic life. I consider in more detail the cognitive impact of meditative practice for monastics and laity through a consideration of the advanced meditation technique. I examine understandings of Pali and language use in the monastery more broadly and I then consider the ways in which use of Pali is understood as a method for self-improvement. Pali language is thought to have an immediate physical and psychological effect upon meditators. Each time the practitioner does retreat he or she gains more insight into the nature of the words summoned in Pali, through cultivating mindful detachment. The cultivation of mindfulness is understood as an ongoing fostering of forms of perception. Practitioners intend to move progressively towards a realization of ultimate truth. This requires particular subjective responses to the experiences of meditation in the ongoing cultivation of such perceptual capacities.

Use of language in the monastery reflects an emphasis on non-verbal or non-conceptual knowing. On the one hand, meditation is learnt and becomes important through solitary practice and in this sense language is insufficient as a pedagogic aid. On the other, Pali provides the meditator with an unmediated experiential access to ultimate truth. The experience of truth through Pali language is distinct from the rationality or irrationality of beliefs in that truth. This reflects broader culturally specific distinctions between the heart/mind (*jai*) and the brain, knowledge and wisdom, behaviour and speech. I suggest that belief may not always be prior to religious experience and that private meditative experience is often taken as persuasive evidence of changes in and by the meditator.

A central focus of the book is the ways in which monastic involvement becomes compelling. I consider how becoming a monastic changes one's relationship with mental, physical and emotional processes as well as how one interprets subjective experiences. My argument is that in this monastery monastics' subjectivities are shaped by the 'work' that they do on themselves and that this creates a personal commitment to practice, precept and community that operates simultaneously on several different levels – psychological, social and political – as understanding of the ascetic self and relation to others (both at close quarters and more widely) develop. In some ways these changes are similar to those engendered by ascetic practice for laity, but there are also ways in which they are crucially different.