MEDITATION IN MODERN BUDDHISM

In contemporary Thai Buddhism, the burgeoning popularity of vipassanā meditation is impacting upon the lives of those most closely involved with its practice: monks and mae chee (lay nuns) living in monastic communities. For them, meditation becomes a central focus of life and a way to transform the self. This ethnographic account of a thriving northern Thai monastery examines meditation in detail, and explores the subjective signification of monastic duties and ascetic practices. Drawing on fieldwork done both as an analytical observer and as a full participant in the life of the monastery, Joanna Cook analyses the motivation and experience of renouncers, and shows what effect meditative practices have on individuals and community organization. The particular focus on the status of mae chee – part lay, part monastic – provides a fresh insight into social relationships and gender hierarchy within the context of the monastery.

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Notes on language

Thai is a tonal language with a number of vowel and consonant sounds not found in English. While Thai has its own phonetic script, there is no generally agreed system for transcribing Thai words using the Roman alphabet. In this book a modified version of the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) from the Royal Institute is adopted. I have transliterated words from standard Thai without the use of diacritic marks. Tones are not marked and vowel lengths are not distinguished with the exception of certain long vowel sounds. In order to avoid confusion, in some cases *ee* is used to transcribe the long vowel sound written as *i* in the Royal Institute System. For example the title for a Thai Buddhist nun is written *mae chee*, not *mae chi*.

Buddhist terms are based on Thai transcriptions of Pali. Diacritical marks are included for the Pali wherever possible. Pali and Thai words are italicized (e.g., *wat, kamma*) throughout the text.

It is customary for Thai names to be arranged alphabetically by first name, not surname. All Thai titles are prefixed to given names rather than surnames (e.g., Dr John, not Dr Smith). Bibliographies in Thai-language publications also reflect this, while most English-language publications follow the English system. In this volume Thai authors are entered into the bibliography and text according to their first names.

The name of the monastery has been changed, as have all names of individuals. I have chosen to use pseudonyms in order to preserve the anonymity of those who have shared information with me that was not in the public domain or that might cause embarrassment if its source were to be identified.