

CHAPTER II

WHAT IS “PATIBAT THAM” (*PATIPATTI DHAMMA*)?

“*Patibat tham*” is one of those terms, like “globalization”, which is commonly used, making it seem so familiar that one gets the impression one knows what it means. Yet on closer inspection, one realizes it is quite a nebulous term, with many possible meanings and usages. The most common colloquial usage is the narrowest one – to go to a cave, forest, mountain, temple, retreat center, or any remote place removed from society, in order to practice meditation intensively.

It would be an errant, and misleading, oversimplification, however, to leave it at that. Because in fact, the term “*patibat tham*” – even at the literal level – has a much wider meaning than the narrow definition of “going to the forest.” This wider meaning in turn encompasses several other specialized understandings of the term. In actual conversation, the phrase is used by people in many ways and in different contexts, especially by those who themselves “*patibat tham*” consciously. Even monks and dhamma teachers employ the term in various senses in their teachings. They may not, however, make it clear that they are utilizing it in different ways. Indeed, they tend to use it rather liberally in a catch-all manner, which can be rather confusing.

My task is to try to discern and delineate more systematically the different dimensions of meaning of “*patibat tham*” as real-life practitioners understand and practice it. Given the complexity of the term, I will approach it from several different angles in this chapter.

Etymology and Actual Usage

First, it is useful to make recourse to the linguistic underpinnings of the term. The Thai word “*patibat*” comes from the Pali word “*patipatti*” which means “way” or “following the way.” A closely related Pali word is “*patipada*”, which means “path.”

According to Payutto, when used in the term “*patibat tham*” (*patipatti dhamma*) the literal meaning of “*patipatti*” is transmuted into a metaphorical one, such that “*patibat*” is understood not in terms of a physical way or path, but the way of life. “*Patibat tham*” thus can be interpreted as “bringing dhamma to use in one’s way of life”. More specifically, it means to use dhamma to help conduct one’s life in the right way (Payutto 2533: 2-4).

What is “the “right way” or “right path”? The Middle Path, or “*majjhima patipada*”, which is in fact synonymous with the Noble Eightfold Path. It is the way of dhamma. Interpreting “*patibat tham*” as “following the way of dhamma” resonates well with the contemporary meaning of the Thai word “*patibat*” – “to practice”. “*Patibat tham*” thus means “to practice dhamma”.

But what does “dhamma” mean, exactly? In fact, there is no exact definition. “Dhamma” is a very fluid term that can be understood in various dimensions. It can refer to the Buddha’s Teachings; the Law of Nature; the Truth or Ultimate Reality; quality, virtue, or morality; or principle, norm, or rule; among other usages (Payutto 2546: 329).

As “dhamma” can be used in so many, albeit related, ways, “*patibat tham*” is thus rendered a loose term with many potential interpretations.

That may be the technical explanation, but of course language takes on its own life in actual usage. To arrive at a real working definition of “*patibat tham*”, one needs to go straight to the source and listen to how *phu patibat tham* themselves speak of it. From investigating their understandings – both explicit and implicit – of “*patibat tham*”, certain common elements emerged. At the same time, even within my small group of informants, ideas also differed, sometimes very distinctly.

Narratives on Becoming a *Phu Patibat Tham*:

From Nominal Buddhist to Dhamma Practitioner

One way to start getting a sense of what it means to “*patibat tham*” is to explore the point at which my informants begin to consider themselves to *patibat tham*, or identify themselves as *phu patibat tham*. Is there a clear demarcation point

or does identification involve a process? If there are many kinds of Buddhist practice, which kinds constitute and distinguish *patibat tham*?

Ascribed vs. Achieved Buddhist Identity

The concept of “ascribed” versus “achieved” spiritual identity offers a useful lens for analysis. Wendy Cadge, in her study on Theravada Buddhism in America, uses this idea to explore a similar question of how American Buddhists identify themselves as “Buddhist”. She defines the concept as follows:

Ascribed identities [are] the religious or spiritual identities people inherit at their birth and often develop through their childhood or young adulthood. At different points in their lives, people choose to accept or reject their ascribed religious identities.

Achieved identities, on the other hand, are those that people may or may not construct, in response to the tradition of their birth or another tradition. These identities are generally constructed in response to a period of change or transition, and their defining feature is that they involve choice (Cadge 2005: 157).¹

She finds that the majority of Thai-American Buddhists reflect a combination of accepting their ascribed religious identity and constructing an achieved religious identity. Many may have considered that they had been “born as Buddhists”, but at some point they realize that they were not “real Buddhists” and subsequently took steps to become such. Cadge characterizes this process as a “movement [from a purely ascribed Buddhist identity] to an ascribed and achieved Buddhist identity that, while still Buddhist, means something very different to them than the ascribed Buddhist identity of their birth” (Ibid: 158).

In my analysis, I would refine Cadge’s approach to explore not only “who is Buddhist?” but who is a specific kind of “achieved Buddhist” – *phu patibat tham*.

¹ Cadge’s conception of “Ascribed and Achieved Identities” draws on the ideas of Ralph Linton (1936) and Talcott Parsons (in Mayhew 1982).

Also, I would prefer to adapt the term from ascribed and achieved “spiritual identity” to ascribed and achieved “spiritual practice”, or at least use the term “identity” in a qualified sense. Cadge herself points out that a few of her informants demurred to speak in terms of Buddhist “identity” because they felt Buddhist practice is precisely aimed at letting go of personal identifications and labels.

Many of my informants likewise talked of the dangers of attaching to ideas of themselves as “*phu patibat tham*.” Attachment to anything is an obstacle to practice. In addition, doing so can build up a sense of ego by promoting pride or a sense of superiority. Proudful or not, any sense of identity is itself contrary to the dhammic law of “no selfhood” (*anatta*). Thus, my informants rarely spoke of themselves as *being* “*phu patibat tham*” but rather in terms of *doing* “*patibat tham*”. As my informants had explained their resistance to the term “identity” with greater complexity than reported by Cadge, I feel there is particular importance in highlighting this difference in nuance.

The way ascribed and achieved identity plays out among my informants echo Cadge’s observations of the experiences of immigrant Thai-American Buddhists (who had grown up in Thailand), but their stories go into greater depth.

Ascribed Buddhist Identity and Practice

In a country where the vast majority identify themselves as Buddhist,² almost all my informants (with the exception of Fai, who was raised as a Catholic) were “born Buddhists”, i.e. inherited an ascribed Buddhist identity, growing up in families that practiced some form of traditional Buddhist customs: giving monks alms in the morning or going to temples to make merit occasionally, especially on Buddhist holy days or their birthdays. Even if they did so only minimally, simply being surrounded by a culture embedded with Buddhist traditions contributed to a sense of being Buddhist. Those who were not particularly religious in their youth seemed to identify as Buddhist by default, as their families clearly did not practice another religion like Christianity or Islam. This sort of nominal Buddhist is often described by the popular

² According to the latest national census (2000), ninety-four percent of Thais identify themselves as “Buddhist.” See <http://web.nso.go.th>

catchphrases “Buddhist by birth certificate” or “Buddhist by national ID card” – the religious identification they put down on such official documents, without any significant connection to it.

Daeng uses such a term to describe her upbringing as a “Buddhist” – “I was just a Buddhist by ID card. I didn’t really understand much about Buddhism. Even though we learned some things about it in school, it was just memorization. I could recite the Four Noble Truths, but didn’t really know what they meant.” She did do some basic Buddhist practices such as saying bedtime prayers and making donations to monks on her birthday (*thawai sangkhatan*) but that was the extent of it.

My other informants came from families that were not just casual Buddhists but were very active in their Buddhist practice. The families of Noi, Waew, and Thep were major supporters of particular temples (*phu upatham wat*), donating on a large scale and on a regular basis. Mi’s family meanwhile has a long tradition of promoting Buddhism, with her grandfather having started a local chapter of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, which her father currently chairs.

Beyond such support, Thep and Noi’s parents were also serious about keeping the five precepts and impressed its importance on their children. In addition, some went further and practiced meditation. Thep and Waew’s mothers meditated regularly, and encouraged their children to do so. As a child, Thep’s mother would lead him into short, ten-minute meditation before bedtime instead of telling stories. As a teen, upon her mother’s suggestion, Waew went to seven-day meditation retreats a couple of times.

However, my informants did not believe that such involvement, even significant familial support of religious establishments or some meditation, amounted to being “real” or practicing Buddhists yet.³

³ The exception would be Thep, who said he considered himself a practicing Buddhist since he was a child because he had already begun to meditate. Yet, he admitted that this was only “kiddie-style” practice, and he only became a more seriously practicing Buddhist when he started meditating regularly at the age of twelve.

Achieved Buddhist Practice: Beginnings of *Patibat Tham*

At what point, then, did they feel they had begun to actually *patibat tham* and achieved real Buddhist practice, or dhamma practice, as some now preferred this more specialized term? While there may not have been one exact turning point, a growing sense of getting started grows out of a combination of choosing the Buddhist Path and doing certain activities that constitute the initial components of *patibat tham*.

Choosing the Buddhist Path

As Cadge noted, achieved identity hinges on choice. Thus, one clear marker of starting to construct an achieved Buddhist identity is when my informants personally chose to delve deeper into Buddhism out of their own interest, not just because they followed along with their parents' Buddhist activities. Some of my informants first went through a phase of religious exploration. Although Mi's family on her father's side were staunchly Buddhist, her mother's side was Christian (although her mother chose to be Buddhist). As a child, she enjoyed going to church with her maternal grandmother and aunts and was intrigued by Christianity. Pok meanwhile also explored Christianity after being given pamphlets and bibles by Christian missionaries. Struck by existential questions as early as the age of nine, as he got older he started to read philosophical works by a wide range of thinkers, from Khalil Gibran to Sartre and Camus. In high school, he even went so far as to declare himself to have no religion.

Whether they actively explored other religions or simply had only a minimal interest in Buddhism, at some point, all my informants turned towards Buddhism for answers, especially as they matured and started to experience more painful "slings and arrows" in life. As they grow increasingly disillusioned with their lives, they wonder whether there is more to life than just the typical trajectory of studying, working, marrying and starting families, and begin to question in earnest what the true purpose of life actually is.

Waew says, "When I was a kid, I never really experienced much suffering (*dukkha*). For the most part, I got everything I wanted. It was only when I got older,

especially when I faced problems at work, that I realized so many things were beyond my control. I saw that so-called ‘happiness’ was always only temporary.”

In addition to the common experience of work pressures, an interesting recurring feature in many stories was going overseas to study, which proved an important instigator for exploring Buddhism. In part, the difficulties of adjusting to their new environment and feeling isolated caused them to seek solace. Noi recalls, “When I went to Europe to do my Ph.D., I felt a lot of emotional turmoil. There were periods when I felt sad and lonely, but I also noticed how these feelings would change with the seasons. When I was finishing my dissertation and about to defend it, I felt very anxious. Would I pass? Would I pass with honors? Then, a Thai friend of mind suggested going to a Thai temple in England.⁴ I decided to take a break from the books and went there and did my first ever ten-day retreat. For the first time, I learned about real Buddhist teachings in depth and learned to meditate. After that, I wanted to learn more about Buddhism and decided that I would do so when I returned to Thailand.”

For others, exposure to a foreign environment made them want to turn back to their roots. When Ko felt homesick while doing her Master’s degree in London, she sought out the familiarity of a Thai-style temple there. At a deeper level, her exposure to many cultures and ways of looking at the world through her anthropology studies made her want to understand “universal truths” and she was curious to learn what insights her native Buddhist tradition offered. At the same time, paradoxically, she admits latching on to Buddhism was a way for her to assert a unique identity, to show her Western classmates and professors that she had her own cultural perspective that was different from theirs.

At first it may seem counter-intuitive that going abroad would spark their interest in Buddhism rather than lead them to forget their own culture and adopt Western ways. Yet it actually is logical that being faced with otherness would trigger them to look back at themselves and investigate their own identity and cultural

⁴ Wat Amaravati, a temple following the tradition of northeastern Thai forest monks, was set up by Ven. Achan Sumetho, a disciple of Ven. Achan Cha.

heritage. And realizing they actually knew very little about their Buddhist roots, they felt galvanized to go back home and learn more.⁵

Another striking trope in their stories was having amazing experiences during meditation, often during their first retreat. Some experienced epiphany-like moments of great clarity that are very distinct and crucial turning points where they choose to follow the Buddhist path. Perhaps the most dramatic case was that of Fai, who remembers a very specific incident during her first seven-day retreat. At that point she was still Catholic, and had only acquiesced, not very enthusiastically, to going out of obligation to a well-wishing client. She knew little about Buddhist teachings and had never meditated. However, she had a breakthrough during meditation. “At one point while I was doing walking meditation, I noticed I could not keep track of how many steps I had taken because I was caught up in thoughts. I suddenly realized how thinking causes suffering.” Buddhist teachings powerfully “clicked” with her and she decided that henceforth this was the path she would follow. She says with solemn conviction, “I profoundly understood (*tranak ru*) that the point of life is to get out of suffering.” In the case of previously Catholic Fai, there was actually a conversion from another religion, and thus a clear demarcation of when she achieved a new Buddhist “identity.”

For a religiously undecided “seeker” like Pok, there was also a clear moment when he finally chose the Buddhist path. After his second year of college, he went with a Buddhist student group on a seven-day retreat at a temple.⁶ “On the third and fourth day, I felt my mind had become very calm and concentrated. I was aware of every movement. My body felt light,” he recalls with a sense of wonder. “After having this real experience of higher mental development (*samadhi*) I felt like ‘Yes! I have found the way for me!’ I felt like a horse that was tamed, and I surrendered. At this point, I declared myself a Buddhist.”

Even someone who had grown up in a strongly Buddhist family like Waew was only inspired to become seriously committed to dhamma practice after having a

⁵ Cadge’s research corroborates this view, having found similar kinds of experiences among Thai immigrants to the US. Being exposed to diverse religious traditions in the US led them to reflect on their own religious background and develop achieved religious identities (Cadge 2005: 162-163).

⁶ Wat Sathonthamawutcho in Kanchanaburi, a forest temple in the lineage of Luang Pu Man.

spectacular, clarifying experience during a retreat. “I had been to meditation retreats as a teenager, but back then I just did it without really understanding it and didn’t really get into it. But when I was twenty-seven I went to a seven-day retreat again [after several years without going at all] looking for answers, after having seen how over the past few years my life cycled between happiness and suffering. During this retreat, while meditating, for the first time I reached a deep understanding of what the real purpose of life is. People are born to have the opportunity to *patibat tham* to free themselves from suffering. I really felt this from the inside, from the heart. I felt true happiness. On the seventh day, I told myself that my life has changed. The experience really touched me (*pratap jai*). It still sticks with me today.” As she tells this story, Waew is positively radiant, face aglow and eyes bright. Her story almost sounds like the Buddhist equivalent of tales of born-again Christians “seeing the light.” She may have been a “born Buddhist,” but now she was a “born-again Buddhist.”

For some, it is not a particular moment during the retreat but the cumulative effect of seven days spent in silent meditation that convinces them of the efficacy of the Buddhist path. Noi recalls, “Through meditation I was able to observe my mind for the first time, and to still it. After the retreat, I saw the power of the mind that is still. When it came time to defend my dissertation, I was no longer anxious and it went really well.”

Going a step further than retreats, a few informants had experiences ordaining. Thep ordained as a novice for one summer when he was twelve and Pok ordained as a monk for one month after graduating from university.⁷ Pok enjoyed the peaceful life in the temple, which gave him the idea for the first time that he may want to ordain permanently in the future. Thep did not go that far, but his experience as a novice inspired him to intensify his practice post-ordination. Mi was the only female informant who had an experience “ordaining.” In her third year of university, she joined the *Thamacharini* summer program for women organized by the school’s Buddhist Association. They went to a temple and were “ordained” for three weeks,

⁷Thep was ordained at Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram in Ratburi. Pok was ordained at a forest temple in Udon Thani.

where they engaged in meditation and some aspects of ordained life like going on morning alms rounds.⁸ Mi says it was her first time to have real contact with Buddhism. It also let her experience a Buddhist lifestyle, which she found appealing. “It felt liberating to live a completely different kind of life from the one I was used to, filled with expectations and pressures to perform well. Living this way I felt at ease, not having to carry around the burden of ego.”

Following the Buddhist Path: Initial Components of Patibat tham

Once they have realized that the Buddhist path is “the way” or “the answer” for them, they resolved to dedicate themselves to following it. In beginning on the path, their first step was to study Buddhism more deeply, to go beyond basic Buddhist rituals to find out what the heart of the Buddha’s teachings really are. This was closely followed by, or paired with, learning about meditation and establishing a regular meditation practice. At the same time, they also put more assiduous effort into keeping the five precepts.

Taking such actions, which diverged from mainstream Buddhist practice, provided concrete indicators to themselves as well as others that they have moved beyond being ascribed Buddhists. Studying dhamma and meditating has the distinct sense of training in skills, which further set them apart from the “unskilled.” Moreover, as these practices required effort and discipline, they served as barometers of increasing commitment. At this point, their notion of *patibat tham* was still very vague, but they could roughly conceive of it as starting to do these practices. Their understanding of what *patibat tham* means would become more refined with time, as they progress further on the Path.

⁸ The program was held at Wat Santi Maitri in Surat Thani, led by Phra Visuttijari, a disciple of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. It was also taught by Khun Ranjuan, a famed female lay meditation teacher who was also a disciple of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

Study of Buddhist Teachings

In learning more about Buddhism, they did so in earnest. Rather than just reading basic dhamma books, Pok and Noi both also read *Buddhadhamma* by Payutto, the highly scholarly text delineating Buddhist teachings in a systematic fashion. Mi meanwhile read volume upon volume of books by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, whose works are philosophical and complex. In addition to reading, some started attending dhamma lectures and classes. Thep and Waew visited monks more often to consult them about their questions about Buddhism, both theory and practice

Such activities demonstrate deepening interest in Buddhism and the growing conviction that it is possibly the way for them. Study is also considered according to the Noble Eightfold Path as the necessary initial step to develop some degree of right understanding and right thought, if only at the intellectual and not experiential level, in order to properly set out on the Path.

Stricter Upholding of Five Precepts

As their understanding of Buddhism deepened, they also became stricter with upholding the precepts. A widely held view among many, or most, laypeople is that it is not very practical, and far too difficult, to keep the five precepts while living in mainstream society. Conventional wisdom holds: drinking alcohol is an unavoidable part of social and professional fraternization, a bit of bending of the truth is necessary to navigate bureaucracy or survive in the business world, careless speech is the acceptable norm in typical conversation, and extramarital affairs are common practice. Thus, most laypeople do not take the five precepts that seriously or set it as a realistic, or even necessary, goal to strive for, with perhaps the exception of the more weighty ones against killing and theft.

Many of my informants admit to holding such views in the past. However, when they started to become more committed to *patibat tham* they all realize the importance of maintaining the five precepts. All of them agree on and stress this point. While it is of course impossible for anyone less than an arahant to perfectly keep even just the five precepts, and many informants freely admitted that they slip up

(especially on the alcohol and wrong speech precepts), they are distinguished by their strong effort and commitment to do their best.

It should be noted that none of them believe they need to uphold the eight precepts in daily life, although they may do so during meditation retreat periods, given how it aids in meditation.

Meditation

However, the real clincher is starting meditation practice. One could even say that this step separates the “wheat from the chaff” – the serious dhamma practitioners from the more casual “Buddhists.” It is because of the centrality of meditation that, in popular colloquial usage, “*patibat tham*” simply means “meditation.”

Simply considered at a technical level, meditation involves particular skills and techniques that must be developed. Those who intend to practice meditation have to invest the time and effort for training and practice. A few of my informants started out reading books about meditation, but the most common introduction to meditation was through an organized retreat held at a temple or retreat center. There, they had the opportunity to learn under the supervision of teachers and practice intensively for seven to ten days. As discussed previously, in many cases it is a special experience that occurred during this kind of concentrated meditation period that motivates them to follow the Buddhist path.

All my informants have attended retreats and almost all (except Thep, who had been introduced to meditation since he was a child by his mother) only began meditating after attending a retreat. It rather seems like a rite of passage for the contemporary lay practitioner to have passed through at least one such retreat.

As meditation retreats have become more popular, it is necessary to distinguish my informants from other retreat attendants. As Phra Phaisan observed, an element of faddishness may enter in, and even dominate, motivations to attend retreats. Some people go to retreats mainly out of a desire to “consume” the “retreat experience” (Phra Phaisan 2546: 157-159). My informants did not reflect such a motivation, however. Many did not have much prior knowledge about retreats: Noi, Fai, and Ko for example stumbled onto their first experiences upon the urging of

others. One informant, Daeng, did admit to feeling excited about doing something so “out of the ordinary” during her first retreat, but after satisfying that initial curiosity, she kept on going to retreats consistently with the genuine motivation to further her meditation practice.

In any case, the most telling test of how serious a practitioner is is what they do *after* their first retreat. Of the large number of laypeople who attend such retreats, a great many may manage to grit their teeth and stay throughout the whole seven to ten day period, if they even last that long, but then head home with a feeling of great relief, plans to sleep till noon and indulge in a hearty steak after a week of vegetarian food – and no pressing desire to go back anytime soon, if ever. Such participants may be characterized as “fad retreatants.”

However, there are also those who are so inspired by their retreat experience that they resolve to continue their meditation practice beyond the retreat. Indeed, some of my informants were so deeply moved they were even eager to go on another retreat as soon as possible. The most extreme were Fai and Ko. After Fai’s first 7-day group retreat, she went on two more in rapid succession, and then moved on to intensive solitary retreats, doing one every seven to eight weeks in her first two years of practice. Ko meanwhile followed up her first seven-day group retreat with two more in the next two months, and then an intensive seven-day solitary retreat in the third month. While others may not have been quite as assiduous – for some because of less flexible schedules, not less enthusiasm – they all did give importance to returning to do more retreats and doing so on a regular basis, at least once a year.

Furthermore, those who became serious about meditation not only want to practice during retreats, but strive to establish a daily meditation practice as well. While retreats can be grueling, many actually find it even more challenging to meditate everyday. Managing to stick to a daily practice takes real work and discipline. It is a sign of commitment – of prioritizing meditation in one’s daily schedule and being serious about actually doing it.

In Summation

The journey from being an ascribed Buddhist to becoming an achieved *phu patibat tham* is eloquently described by Noi:

“In the beginning, I didn’t know what *patibat* meant. At first, I searched for the definition of *patibat tham*, and read works by various teachers who explained it.⁹ In the first two to three years [after I got interested in Buddhism], I questioned it a lot. At a certain point, I stopped asking, because I felt I’d come to an answer.

“If you ask me now, I’d say to *patibat tham* is to make it part of your way of life (*withi chiwit*). In one sense, I’ve made it part of my life activities. The time I have left over outside of doing my job, I believe I should use to keep developing myself on the inside. I have an intention to develop these skills (*thaksa*), because really, there are skills in *patibat tham*.

“To *patibat tham* means you have the commitment or determination (*khwam tang jai*), to make it the most important thing in your life. It’s not temporary, but permanent. You want to keep on doing it continuously into the future. In the beginning, I might have felt strange if someone were to call me a *phu patibat tham* because I didn’t feel I had enough determination yet. But now, if someone were to ask, I’d say yes. I do *patibat tham*.”

Hierarchies of Merit/Practice: Goals and Priorities

The stories my informants told about the start of their dhamma practice provide a narrative understanding that begins to sketch the outlines of what it means to *patibat tham*. While we now know that generally speaking, starting to study Buddhist teachings, uphold precepts, and meditate are markers that they – and thus we – can use to identify the beginning of their *patibat tham*, I wish to delve deeper into their aspirations, values, and worldviews behind these pursuits. What are their goals in dhamma practice or merit-making and how do they prioritize different forms of practice accordingly?

⁹ One book that was particularly influential for her was *Patibat Tham Hai Thuk Thang (The Right Way to Practice Dhamma)* by Payutto (2533).

I shall begin with an anthropological approach to ascertaining such priorities by looking at the actual religious practices of laypeople and how they explain them, and then place this discussion in the context of the Buddhist conceptual schema of dhamma practice or merit-making previously delineated in the theoretical framework.

Mainstream Forms of Buddhist Practice

Before turning to my informants' accounts of their style of *patibat tham*, I will first examine mainstream forms of Buddhist practice to serve as a basis of comparison. A useful case study of a northeastern Thai village in the early 1960's conducted by S.J. Tambiah¹⁰ offers a window on traditional lay Buddhist practice that can serve as a useful point of departure. Although it is only based on a single village, his discoveries are generalizable to some extent.

Priorities in Merit-Making

The main purpose of merit-making as discussed by villagers was to ensure a good rebirth, one blessed with happiness, prosperity, and wealth.¹¹ In addition, they also mention how merit-making induces a "happy and virtuous state of mind" in this life. As for its contribution to attaining *nibbana*, Tambiah says "the achievement of salvation or final extinction (nirvana) is not usually stated as a goal nor for that matter does it have any personal relevance for them" (Tambiah 1968: 68-69). This sort of practice can be considered "kammatic" or aimed at the first to second levels of purpose in merit-making (*ditthadhammikatta* and *samparayikattha*.)

These different ways of making merit can be placed in categories to form a "hierarchy with graded values." In his study, a sample of seventy-nine family heads

¹⁰ Study of the village Ban Phran Muan in Udon Province, Northeast Thailand. See Tambiah 1968 or an abbreviated version in Tambiah 1970.

¹¹ Tambiah de-emphasizes concern with rebirth in heaven. Although also desirable, it is far-removed from villagers' immediate experience and thus less compelling a motivator. Besides, rebirth in heaven is considered merely a temporary phase before rebirth as a human.

were surveyed and asked to rank eight types of religious acts. The overall results yielded the following hierarchy:

1. Completely financing the building of a *wat* – this is the act par excellence that brings most merit
2. Either becoming a monk oneself or having a son become a monk
3. Contributing money to the repair of a *wat* or making *kathin* (post-Lent ceremony) gifts.
4. Giving food daily to the monks
5. Observing every *wanphra* (holy day, four per lunar month)¹²
6. Strictly observing the Five Precepts.¹³

It is evident that donations of material objects to the sangha – it seems, the larger the financial outlay, the better – are valued most. What is surprising is that more involved Buddhist practice like observing the precepts or holy days (which entails practice on a regular basis rather than merely during the special period of a man's temporary ordination) ranks the lowest. One would think it is these higher spiritual practices that would be seen as more important.

However, as Tambiah explains it, it is not so much that the villagers deem these acts unimportant, but rather irrelevant to their lives:

Strict observance of the five precepts (especially that exhorting avoidance of killing) and meditation on the philosophical assertions of the Dhamma have little positive interest for the villager, either because lay life is not possible without breaking some of the prohibitions or because one must renounce lay life altogether to pursue such aims. He therefore rates these pursuits, in so far as they have relevance for his life, low on the merit-making scale; this is not because he devalues them but because they are not normally open to him. Moreover, these pursuits, the core of the Buddhistic striving, are thought to have pertinence primarily for the monk and secondarily for the aged approaching death. The way of the monks is different from that of the householder.

¹² By offering food to monks, spending all day at the temple, taking the eight precepts, listening to sermons.

¹³ For statistical details, see Tambiah 1968: 68-69.

The villagers' actual practice corresponds to these ideas about merit-making. Although few are wealthy enough to perform the highest act of financing a temple's construction, Tambiah's survey of 106 households found that the most common form of merit-making practiced was feeding of the monks. Major merit-making centered on annual Buddhist calendrical events such as the day of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha (*visakha bucha*), the start of Lent (*khao phansa*), and the end of Lent (*ok phansa*). Very few people, mostly elderly, observe weekly holy days (*wanphra*) by receiving the eight precepts and spending the whole day at the temple, listening to sermons and maybe doing some meditation. Indeed, on the whole meditation and other forms of higher practice aimed at *nibbana* have a very low incidence (Tambiah 1968: 66-70).

Overall, it appears that for ordinary villagers, *dana* – defined as giving to monks – is the most emphasized form of merit-making or Buddhist practice. This is distantly followed by the practice of *sila*. The large majority do not even approach *bhavana* (meditation or even the lower *bhavana* practice of listening to dhamma sermons), and it is mostly the elderly who make the effort to train in *sila* and *bhavana*. For the most part, the maintenance of the five precepts is seen as the upper limit of lay practice – and even this, few are able, or indeed attempt, to uphold.

Phu Patibat Tham's Forms of Buddhist Practice

While Tambiah studied villagers, the general picture he paints can arguably also apply to urban laypersons who adhere to mainstream forms of practice rooted in rural traditions. Although in Bangkok temples may have a more marginalized role than in rural areas, having lost their function as the center of community life,¹⁴ the salient point is that there is still a recognizable type of urban Buddhist that, much like her counterpart in the village, is kammatic in orientation and chiefly emphasizes performing *dana* in their Buddhist practice. While less bound to temples in a communal sense and more wary of monks' purity and thus more selective in choosing "good monks" to support, they still focus on making merit by donating to monks.

¹⁴ This development has been analyzed in greater depth by many scholars. See for example O'Connor 1993, Phra Phaisan 2546, and Taylor 1999.

However, there is also another type of Buddhist: the *phu patibat tham*, who follow a particular style of Buddhist practice. How they differ from the pattern of popular Buddhist practice will now be explored.

Nibbanic Aspirations and the Quest for Panna

Almost all my informants say they are not motivated by worldly benefits in this life. There is a sentiment that treating dhamma practice instrumentally, as a way to achieve certain practical gains, somehow cheapens it. In talking about meditation, Mi is rather dismissive of those who take up meditation in order to increase concentration and work more effectively, viewing them as not really meditating for the right purpose or failing to recognize its true value. Pok meanwhile says that his primary concern is not achieving worldly goals like promotions at work, but believes success in work is a byproduct of progress in spiritual practice.

Insofar as they do hope for anything in this life, it is more for intangible, spiritual benefits. Noi says she practices in order to “be able to live in this life without suffering.” Or as Fai puts it, after she started to *patibat tham* she still experiences difficulties in life, but she has learned how to not suffer because of them. Pok adds that he does not want to get attached to either happiness or suffering. Indeed, all are in agreement that they seek “real happiness” – spiritual happiness from the inside, which is more refined than mere “worldly happiness.”

As for the matter of rebirth, my informants do have concerns, but they are not so focused on ensuring a rebirth in heaven or a prosperous human rebirth in and of itself. Rather, they are most concerned with being able to continue their progress in *patibat tham* in the next life, and thus seek to be reborn as a human, for the human realm is believed to be the only one where *panna* can be developed. Prosperity as a human meanwhile is seen as useful not so much for comfort’s sake, but to provide them with the requisite material welfare needed to enable them to devote time to *patibat tham*. Moreover, their way to ensure a good rebirth is not by assiduously performing *dana* and accumulating merit as in traditional lay practice. Rather, they emphasize the importance of one’s state of mind in the last moment before death in determining one’s next rebirth. A negative state of mind filled with anger or other

defilements will lead to an unfortunate rebirth whereas a peaceful mind at death will lead to a favorable one. They thus focus their energy on training the mind, to start the work of eradicating old mental defilements and preventing new ones from arising so they will be well prepared for meeting death calmly.¹⁵

The way their approach to rebirth has shifted towards mental cultivation and their overriding concern with the continuity of their dhamma practice sheds light on their ultimate aim in practice. In talking about it, one of the most common expressions they use is “self-development” (*pathana tua eng*), by which they mean more specifically spiritual self-development (*pathana tua eng dan phai nai*). Others also speak of seeking to “lessen defilements” (*khad klao kilesa*), to “elevate their minds” (*yok radap chit hai sung khuen*) or to “let go of ego” (*ploi wang atta*). In terms of the three levels of purpose in merit-making, their practice is aimed at both the second level or spiritual development (*samparayikattha*) and ultimately the highest level or liberation (*paramattha*).

They do not, however, immediately speak of “*nibbana*” per se. To state outright that the attainment of *nibbana* is their goal in *patibat tham* is something many of my informants shied away from. Thus, while guided by Spiro’s theoretical distinction between “kammatic” and “nibbanic,” I found that the actual term “nibbanic” needs to be used carefully. “*Nibbana*” itself is a loaded term, heavy with meaning yet at the same time shrouded in mystery. Striving for *nibbana* likewise comes with various connotations that can be problematic. For most ordinary laypeople, *nibbana* is seen as remote and unreachable, and thus a dhamma practitioner may feel that others would view them as strange if they talked about it. Says Mi, “I’ve learned long ago not to talk about *patibat tham* with others [who don’t practice]. They’ll just think you are odd. Let alone talking about *nibbana*! You especially can’t do that!” Or they might feel it would be too presumptuous of them to talk in terms of such a lofty goal. When I broached the topic with her, Waew laughed with embarrassment and hesitated, saying “I don’t really dare to say it, in case I can’t actually do it [reach *nibbana*].”

¹⁵ It is certainly striking how many of my informants take great interest in the subject of death. To outsiders this might seem morbid, but amongst *phu patibat tham* it is considered a normal, interesting, and indeed highly important concern to think about, and they do so with a constructive rather than morbid attitude.

Actually, in Waew's case, she not only wants to attain *nibbana*, she actually wants to do so in this very life, if possible. "My teacher teaches that if you really have a strong intention, you can do it in this life. It's not in every life that you can be born human, find dhamma, or find good teachers. I could be stuck in *samsara* for so long. So now that I've been born in a life where I have everything I need to support me in practice, I ought to take advantage of it and try to finish the job."¹⁶

Waew stands out as the only informant to have such an ambitious timeframe. The others do not want to set any timeframe for achieving *nibbana* or fixate on it as a target because they are careful to avoid falling into the trap of desiring *nibbana* and practicing dhamma with craving (*tanha*). Rather, they say their aim is to keep on practicing continuously (*tham pai rueai rueai*). "What's more important is continuity and consistency over time. Just keep doing it. When you reach it [*nibbana*], you reach it," Daeng says, summing up well their common attitude.

Although they do not set any time limits, they all do have a clear sense that they want to start working towards it beginning with this life and onwards. They range in their sense of urgency, with some wanting to achieve *nibbana* in the fewest lives as possible and a few who just see it as an ultimate but not immediate objective. Many report their conviction had deepened as they progressed in their practice. They echo similar sentiments – they come to realize that life is an endless cycle of ups and downs, ultimately nothing but suffering, and become profoundly tired of the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) and seek to escape it. While these may sound like stock phrases, my informants spoke of them with palpable feeling. During one conversation with Fai, for instance, her face took on an expression of such utter fatigue and even melancholy as she said plaintively, "I see absolutely no point (*rai sara*) to worldly life. No point at all. The only thing worth doing is to work on lessening our defilements."

Thus, for all their equivocations, it certainly sounds like they are ultimately "nibbanic" after all. They may say they just want "self-development" but really it is

¹⁶ It is possible that as it has only been two years since Waew started to *patibat tham* seriously, she could still be in the beginning phase during which new initiates often adopt an extremist attitude towards their practice and may tone down in the future.

development towards *nibbana*, or whatever they choose to call it.¹⁷ Working at this is their goal in *patibat tham*. Moreover, *patibat tham* is now seen as their real purpose – some even say duty – in life.

If their overarching goal is *nibbana*, then their more specific primary concern in dhamma practice is to develop *panna* for, of the three parts of the Noble Eightfold Path (*sila-samadhi-panna*), it is *panna* that leads to final liberation.

Priorities in Patibat Tham

Understanding their goals helps define what kind of practices they are most interested in. Again, comparison with Tambiah's study of villagers' ranking of merit-making acts is helpful. Without being too bound by his scheme, I seek to ascertain the valuations of different forms of merit making given by my group of *phu patibat tham* – although one point that bears remarking is that my informants rarely talk in terms of “merit making” but rather in terms of “*patibat tham*.” Thus, here it may be more appropriate to consider different “forms of dhamma practice” rather than “merit making acts” per se.

When compared, my informants' priorities clearly diverged from that of villagers and by extension mainstream urban lay practitioners. For the most part, they do not put much weight on traditional ways of performing *dana* such as giving morning alms, making donations to monks and temples (*tum sangkhathan* or *tod pha pa*) or observing holy days (*wanphra*). If they spoke of it, it was only in passing. This is not to say that they don't do these activities at all, but that they tend to do them as the occasion arises rather than as a regularized and emphasized part of their *patibat tham*.

Only two, Waew and Thep, specifically mentioned making merit at the temple as being part of their *patibat tham* routine. Perhaps this is because they happen to come from families with a well-established tradition of doing so. Both well-off, their

¹⁷ Various alternative expressions were used: “getting out of samsara” (*ork jak samsara*), “not be reborn” (*mai kerd eek*), “end suffering” (*dub dukkha*), “eliminate all defilements” (*dub kilesa*), “be liberated” (*pen issara*).

families are major patrons of particular temples.¹⁸ Even so, they de-emphasize purely ritualistic aspects of merit-making. In one telling incident, I had asked Waew for recommendations on special activities I could observe on the day marking the end of the Buddhist Lent (*ok phansa*) but she replied, “I really couldn’t say. I just don’t know much about rituals (*pithi kam*).”

Others showed a distinctly dismissive attitude towards just making donations, or as Pok calls it, practicing “plain” (i.e. ordinary) Buddhism. “My mother just goes to the temple to give offerings. She thinks as a regular layperson she can’t be enlightened, so the best she can do is make merit. I tell her there is more to Buddhism than that.” He says he wants to *patibat tham*, by which he means to do the kind of practice that does lead to enlightenment.

The prioritization of practice that develops *panna* is even more clearly expressed by Fai, who says outright, “I emphasize *panna*.” One night, she complained that she had to wake up very early the next day to accompany a friend to a temple in the provinces to make merit. “I’m really going for the chance to discuss dhamma (*sonthana tham*) with the monk. That’s more important [than making donations] because that’s where you get *panna*. I’d rather not wake up so early just to make it in time to donate food if it means I’ll be too tired I won’t be able to concentrate during the dhamma discussion.”

Of the traditional forms of *dana*, they value most highly the building and maintenance of temples, like Tambiah’s villagers. Unlike in his analysis, however, it is not so much because of the large financial outlay required. It is rather because building temples helps in the spread of dhamma and creating opportunities for others to study and practice dhamma to develop *panna*. Further, they don’t limit themselves to traditional temples, but religious establishments housing specific monk-teachers (*samnak song*) or of lay meditation retreat centers like those under the auspices of the YBAT or Foundation for the Promotion of Vipassana Meditation.

¹⁸ Thep’s family was one of the major sponsors when their teacher at Wat Pak Nam in Bangkok established a new temple in Ratburi, Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram and go regularly to the temple on Buddhist holy days to make donations. When I accompanied Thep and his family there on Vesaka Day on May 12, 2006, his parents were seated in the front in special VIP seats. During the day’s proceedings, the abbot and the temple’s lay committee leaders repeatedly announced their names, and those of other major patrons of the temple, highlighting the importance of their role.

Indeed, this is connected to the greatest importance they place on giving dhamma (*dhamma-dana*). According to scripture, this is considered the highest gift, yielding the most merit. My informants keenly home in on this point. Just as my informants are themselves most interested in cultivating *panna*, they similarly feel that helping others cultivate *panna* is the best way to ease their suffering. Wishing that others may also bring dhamma into their hearts, my informants are especially energetic about contributing to the publication and distribution of dhamma books and other media, teaching dhamma, serving as organizers or staff of meditation retreats, or simply guiding others to see things in a dhammic light. In addition, as Mi puts it, the best way to spread dhamma is to be a good living example of it.

Their interest in helping people achieve the highest happiness reflects a deeper understanding of Buddhism. So also does the way they speak of performing *dana* as helping to eliminate defilements (*khad klao kilesa*) and reduce a sense of ego (*lod atta*). Thus, even in performing *dana*, they put a self-development spin on it, rather than thinking of it in terms of accumulating merit.

As far as merit goes, they similarly go beyond the narrow definition equating merit-making with performing *dana*. As Phra Chai and Phra Phaisan explain, making merit actually means purifying one's mind. There are in fact ten ways to make merit, with *dana* being just one of them. The ten reflect the *dana-sila-bhavana* triad and comprise of:

1. giving (*danamaya*)
2. keeping precepts (*silamaya*)
3. mental development (*bhavanamaya*)
4. humility (*apacayanamaya*)
5. rendering services (*veyyavaccamaya*)
6. sharing merit (*pattidanamaya*)
7. rejoicing in others' merit (*pattanumodanamaya*)
8. listening to dhamma or right teaching (*dhammassavanamaya*)
9. teaching dhamma or showing truth (*dhammadesanamaya*)
10. forming correct views (*ditthujukamma*)

(note: numbers 4 and 5 are categorized as part of *silamaya*, 6 and 7 in *danamaya*, 8 and 9 in *bhavanamaya*, and 10 in all 3 modules.)

(Payutto 2546: 94. Also see Phra Chai and Phra Phaisan 2548: 12-32).¹⁹

My informants are interested in going beyond *dana* to also develop the *sila* and *bhavana* forms of merit. In other words, they want to develop not simply the *dana-sila-bhavana* triad typically ascribed to laypeople, but want to seriously train (*sikkha*) in the higher *sila-samadhi-panna* triad typically ascribed to monks. If *dhamma-dana* is the highest form of *dana*, developing the mind is the highest form of merit or practice. Thus, their valuation of merit – in both theory and practice – actually turns that of the traditional rural Buddhists on its head: *bhavana (samadhi-panna)* is highest, followed by *sila* and then *dana* rather than *dana* then *sila* then *bhavana*. Although it should be noted that all of these parts work in tandem rather than in linear progression.

Regarding *sila*, maintaining the five precepts may popularly be seen as the most that is incumbent on “good” laypeople to practice. In fact, for most Buddhists, it is rather like a “bonus” beyond performing *dana*, with meditation being a bigger bonus. However, for my informants, it is not seen as optional or “advanced” practice, but actually the minimum or basic first step. While keeping precepts carefully – and indeed, in increasingly refined ways – does require considerable effort, it is only a prerequisite for higher practice, an essential foundation for progress in meditation. Upholding precepts is also a crucial part of pursuing Right Livelihood and Good Friendship, and thus a more in-depth discussion of *sila* will be reserved for Chapters III and IV.

Indeed, if their ultimate goal is to reach *panna*, they must go beyond the first module of *sila* to practice *samadhi*, which is required to develop *panna*. *Samadhi* is comprised of mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (also called *samadhi*), but there is a heavy emphasis on *sati*, as will be explained further in the following section.

¹⁹ Interestingly, at a seven-day retreat held at YBAT, a dhamma talk was given specifically on making merit, delineating this broader understanding of it. This testifies to the influence of this view on urban laypeople.

They do say that developing *sati* (*charoen sati*) alone is not enough, and it is still important to do *dana*, but their primary concern is the former. As Waew puts it, “A single minute of *sati* produces much, much more merit than donating money, no matter how big the amount.” There are several reasons. First, it is hardest to do, much harder than opening one’s wallet and making a monetary donation. Moreover, in every moment in which one is mindful, defilements cannot arise in the mind and the mind is wholesome (*chit pen kusala*). Most importantly, developing *sati* is the path to developing *panna*, and thus ultimate awakening.

To tie this discussion back to the narratives of my informants’ journey to becoming *phu patibat tham*, their “ascribed identity” as Buddhists can be associated with mainstream kammatic practice, predicated on the *dana-sila-bhavana* triad, while their “achieved identity” as *phu patibat tham* can be associated with more rarefied nibbanic practice, aimed at the third level of spiritual goals (*paramattha*) and oriented around the *sila-samadhi-panna* (*trisikkha*) training. It is possible to delineate the distinction as “lower” vs. “higher” forms of Buddhist practice – as my informants seem to imply, though they do take pains to disavow any sense of elitism.

Meditation: Cornerstone of Patibat Tham

As my informants consider meditation the cornerstone of their *patibat tham*, it will be considered in detail here. While meditation technically refers to the *samadhi* module of the path, it is in fact closely tied to the *panna* module as well.

There are three levels of *panna*. Intellectual *panna* (*cintamaya-panna*) derives from reflection and thinking. Received *panna* (*sutamaya-panna*) derives from study or what is taught by others, such as by reading or listening to dhamma. The third and highest level is experiential *panna*, (*bhavana-maya-panna*), which derives from one’s direct experience, or the direct observation of reality. My informants aim to reach the level of experiential *panna* because according to Buddhist philosophy it is only this kind of *panna* that can truly cut off all mental defilements and end suffering once and for all. While the first two levels of *panna* pave the way for the development of experiential *panna*, it is only through higher training of the mind through meditation

that the latter can be achieved, which is why my informants place such emphasis on meditation.²⁰

The Primacy of *Vipassana*: True *Patibat Tham*

To be more precise, they give primary importance to practicing insight (*vipassana*) meditation. The Buddha is said to have taught two types of meditation. *Samatha* meditation leads to calm or tranquility, deep levels of which are attained by developing strong states of mental absorption called *jhanas*. *Vipassana* meditation leads to insight through the development of moment-to-moment *sati*. As my informants are not content to meditate just to “de-stress,” develop calm, or improve concentration, without gaining *panna*, they all agree that it was not enough to do just any form of meditation. One must also do *vipassana* for one’s practice to qualify as true *patibat tham*.

“*Vi*” means special, deep or clear and “*passana*” means seeing. Thus, “*vipassana*” can be defined as seeing clearly, with insight (*hen duai panna*), or seeing reality as it is (*hen tam kwam pen jing*).²¹ “*Vipassana-panna*,” then, means the *panna* of seeing reality as it is. It entails recognizing the three characteristics (*tilakkhana*) of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), non-self (*anatta*) inherent in all things. As one arrives at this *panna* through direct experience – the direct observation of reality – “*vipassana-panna*” is sometimes used interchangeably with “*bhavana-maya-panna*.”

To develop this *panna*, they unanimously agree that *samatha* alone is insufficient. However, my informants reflect various views on how *samatha* is related to *vipassana*, and how important practicing *samatha* is. What is striking is how many seem to almost privilege *vipassana*, to the point of de-emphasizing or even slightly denigrating *samatha*, particularly at the level of *jhanas*. My concern here is not to debate which view is right or wrong, but to report the diversity. It should be

²⁰ Discussion of these basic concepts can be found in most books on meditation. For examples of explications given by some of my informants’ teachers, see Luang Pho (or Phra) Pramot Pamotcho (2548 and 2549) and S.N. Goenka (www.dhamma.org).

²¹ Synonyms for “seeing” are “observing” and “knowing.”

borne in mind that the variance is partly due to their use of different primary meditation methods, with their associated schools of thought. How some interpretations may be particularly geared towards contemporary urban practitioners will also be explored.

On one end, there are some who conceive of *samatha* and *vipassana* as being two very distinct practices, and evince a somewhat dismissive attitude towards *samatha*. To be clear, it is not that they hold that doing *samatha* is wrong, it is just that it is not enough. In their view, problems arise not when practitioners do *samatha*, but when they do *samatha* and misguidedly think they are doing *vipassana*. This is the mistake they are most concerned about avoiding. Daeng is the clearest example. Throughout our talks, she constantly labels this or that practice as being “only *samatha*” and not “real *vipassana*.”²² She makes it sound as if all aspects of practice can be categorized into those two groups. She explains how a lot of popularly taught practices can be misconstrued as “real *vipassana*” when they are really not. Even she herself fell into this trap, at least until she found her present teacher. “I was originally taught to mentally label (*parikamma*) every action and thought, but now I realize this isn’t real *sati*.” Such evaluations of other methods hints at some contention between different schools of practice.

In a way, it is a legitimate concern to ensure one is properly doing *vipassana*, because as has been previously discussed, *vipassana* meditation is needed to reach the highest *panna*. Yet, it is notable how Daeng and Fai de-emphasize *jhanas* to such a great extent, at least in their own style of meditation practice (observation of mental conditions or thoughts known as *cittanupassana*), and interesting how they justify this according to urban conditions. Daeng says that practicing a lot of *samatha* and developing *jhanas* may be suitable for forest monks. But it is not easy for urban people to practice *samatha* because the city is filled with noise and stimulation, whereas a peaceful environment is needed to reach calm. Moreover, she says that urban people who are intellectuals tend to think a lot, so it is difficult for them to gain deep concentration. It is easier for them to proceed directly to doing *vipassana*,

²² Daeng’s concern seems heavily influenced by her teacher, Luang Pho (or Phra) Pramot, whose books and CDs spend a lot of time discussing and correcting misunderstandings of what constitutes “real *vipassana*” and “real *sati*.” For example, see *Withi Hang Kwam Ru Jaeng*, a basic guide to *patibat tham* (Phra Pramot 2548).

particularly using the technique of *cittanupassana*, as they have a lot of thoughts to work with. In her view, *cittanupassana* is the most direct way to reach *panna*; practicing *jhanas* is roundabout and unnecessary, and at any rate, unfeasible for urban people to do.

That is not to say there is no place for *samatha* in her practice at all. However, it seems to have only a supplementary role in support of the real work of practice, *vipassana*. Both Daeng and Fai talk of doing *samatha* meditation as a form of “rest” (*phak*) or for “energy” (*phalang*). Daeng says, “When you do *vipassana* the whole day, it’s like working all day. So you need to rest also, by doing *samatha*.”

Others give *samatha* a little more importance and do not speak of it quite so marginally as merely rest. Still, it is considered to serve only a secondary function, and seems to be used in only an instrumental way to build the foundation for *vipassana*. For example, Noi explained that in the retreats given in her practice tradition, as taught by S.N. Goenka, the first one third is devoted to *samatha*, but two thirds is devoted to *vipassana*, which indicates that *vipassana* is more important, albeit it requires reaching a certain level of concentration first before it can be developed. Outside of retreats, teachers in this tradition recommended that one devote daily sittings to *vipassana*, which is a more productive use of one’s limited time than “wasting” it on *samatha*. *Samatha* need only be done when it is truly necessary, when one lacks the concentration to do *vipassana*. In this method, *jhanas* are not completely ignored, although they are not spoken of at all in the beginning-level ten-day courses. She says that they are possibly taught at the higher level and longer 30-day courses but she herself has not gone on one yet. She considers it impractical for working laypeople outside of retreats to develop *jhanas*, which requires a lot of time, and echoes Daeng’s concern about the lack of a peaceful environment in the city. However, she differs in saying that it is still valuable to develop deeper *samatha* to *jhannic* levels, as it does lead to deeper *vipassana*.

A minority voice was Thep, who uses the Dhammakaya method of meditation and also admires the practice of forest monks, which emphasizes *jhanas*. Although he similarly believes it is necessary to practice *vipassana*, he was the only one of my informants to extol the intrinsic value of developing the *jhanas*. “It’s possible to be enlightened with just minimal *samatha* – that’s the ‘bare insight’ school. But I think

jhanas are important. You gain more *panna* in *jhana*, not just the basic *panna* needed to become a regular *arahant* (one who attains *nibbana* but not a Buddha). The Buddha learned many important things while doing *jhanas*.” He also believes that the special abilities that can be attained in *jhanas* are valuable because they allow a person to be of greater help to other beings. If one is able to read other people’s minds, for example, one will be able to teach them or help them in ways one otherwise couldn’t. He even sees it as selfish in a way to just develop enough *samatha* to be enlightened oneself and not develop these higher *jhanas*.”

For the overwhelming majority of my informants, however, *vipassana* was elevated to supreme importance – the ultimate *patibat tham*. *Samatha*, though not done away with entirely, was at best seen as the handmaiden to the queen. And so-called “*vipassana*” techniques that were not “*real vipassana*” were dismissed, sometimes with a trace of condescension, as mere impostors to the throne.

The strong consensus on this point makes it all the more interesting to consider a different interpretation of the doctrine offered by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, a respected scholar of the Pali canon. Citing various suttas, he argues:

Only rarely do [the discourses] make use of the word *vipassana* – a sharp contrast to their frequent use of the word *jhana*. When they depict the Buddha telling his disciples to go meditate, they never quote him as saying ‘go do *vipassana*,’ but always ‘go do *jhana*.’ And they never equate the word *vipassana* with any *sati* techniques. In the few instances where they do mention *vipassana*, they almost always pair it with *samatha* – not as two alternative methods, but as two qualities of mind that a person may ‘gain’ or ‘be endowed with,’ and that should be developed together...in the eyes of those who assembled the Pali discourses, *samatha*, *jhana*, and *vipassana* were all part of a single path. *Samatha* and *vipassana* were used together to master *jhana* and then – based on *jhana* – were developed even further to give rise to the end of mental defilement and to bring release from suffering...In every case where the discourses are explicit about the levels of concentration needed for insight to be liberating, those levels are the *jhanas*. (Thanissaro 1997)

My intention in including this quotation is not to dispute the views of my informants or their teachers, but merely to show that they are, in fact, only views, and there exist alternative ones. For indeed, Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s reading itself is also

just a view.²³ Having it in mind, however, helps one to recognize that there is something distinctive about my informants' fascination with and privileging of *vipassana* – a meditation above all other practices. The equation of *vipassana* practice, or at least the lopsided emphasis on it, with dhamma practice may not be the definitive definition, but it certainly appears to be the interpretation that is currently in vogue – an earmark of contemporary *patibat tham*.

Hence, one can observe a few trends among *phu patibat tham*: the huge popularity of meditation retreats and courses, which must be tagged “*Vipassana* meditation” given the term's cachet; the avid search for meditation teachers, both monk and lay, who are known to be accomplished practitioners of *Vipassana* meditation; and correspondingly, a lot of hubbub – bordering on contestation – around determining which of all these “*Vipassana*” offerings are real and not real *Vipassana*, which schools of practice are leading the “right way” (*thuk thang*) or not.

Development of Mindfulness (*Sati*): Heart of *Patibat Tham*

If *vipassana* is the ultimate practice, developing mindfulness or *sati* (*charoen sati* or *fuek sati*) is the heart of the ultimate practice.²⁴ Several informants made reference to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipatthana 4*, as taught in the *Satipatthana Sutta*) as the “direct” or “only” way to attaining *nibbana*.

As components of the *samadhi* module of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Mindfulness (*samma-sati*) and Right Concentration (*samma-samadhi*) are closely related. *Sati* is attention to an object, whereas *samadhi* is sustained attention. A commonly used simile likens moments of *sati* to drops of water and concentration to a basin of water. As the essential building block of concentration, *sati* is thus key.

Sati can either be sustained while directed at one object to yield one-pointed concentration (as in *samatha* meditation) or at shifting objects (as possible in *vipassana* meditation). In every moment that one has *sati*, one sees reality as it is.

²³ It is possible that their views can be reconciled in some ways with Thanissaro Bhikkhu's, but deeper understanding of my informants' various schools of practice was beyond the scope of this thesis.

²⁴ To be more precise, what is called for is *sati* that is informed by clear comprehension (*sampajanna*).

Thus, if “doing *vipassana*” means to see reality as it is, it can also be conceived of as having *sati* in the present moment. Indeed, many informants used the terms “developing *sati*” (*charoen sati*) and “doing *vipassana*” interchangeably. The more continuously one has *sati*, the more one sees reality, which helps one to develop *panna*. Thus, the goal is to work one’s way up towards having *sati* (i.e. seeing reality as it is) at all times.

All of my informants agree on the crucial importance of *sati*. In fact, many summarize their definition of *patibat tham* as simply “developing *sati*” (*charoen sati*), “seeing reality as it is” (*hen tam khwam pen jing*) or “observing the reality of the body and mind” (*ru kai jai tam khwam pen jing*), and to do so as continuously as possible. This is their main job in *patibat tham*.

Formal Meditation vs. Development of Continual Moment-to-Moment *Sati*

The emphasis on maintaining *sati* at all times raises the question of the relative importance of formal meditation (sitting or walking) versus developing moment-to-moment *sati* continually throughout the day, which can also be considered a form of meditation – a kind of “*vipassana*-in-action.” Unlike *samatha*, it is possible to do *vipassana* at all times, not only during formal meditation sessions, although the nature of *vipassana* experience during and outside of formal meditation may differ. As usual, my informants had divergent views on the matter. While all of them recognized that both kinds of meditation are valuable, they differ on degree of emphasis. They range from those who particularly stress developing *sati* continually as the most crucial component of their *patibat tham* to those who insist on the necessity of devoting considerable time to formal meditation. In part, differences can be attributed to the varying requirements of their preferred meditation techniques. However, the rationales they provide for their views also reveal how some may be interpreting *patibat tham* in such a way to fit their current lifestyle, in its contemporary urban context. Such interpretations can help empower laypeople to practice, yet possibly justify practice that is too lax. Interesting conflicts of opinion arose between my informants on this point.

The ones who most strongly emphasized the importance of moment-to-moment *sati* included Fai, Daeng, and Ko. Partly, this view derives from their use of a common meditation technique, the observation of mental conditions (*cittanupassana*), as their anchoring practice.²⁵ It relates to the previous discussion on *samatha* versus *vipassana* in that they see formal meditation as most useful for *samatha* practice. If they relegate *samatha* to a secondary or merely supportive role, to rest, re-fuel, and sharpen the mind, then they accordingly do not place as much ultimate value on formal meditation. They said it is not strictly necessary in and of itself; people whose five controlling faculties (*indriya 5*)²⁶ are very strong are able to maintain *sati* at all times without needing to do any formal meditation. Although they believe most people, themselves included, are not quite so advanced and still have to do some formal *samatha* meditation, what is most important is the *vipassana* done by maintaining *sati* continually as this yields *panna*.

Although they also sometimes use formal meditation for *vipassana*, and not just *samatha*, and explain that the *nature* of *vipassana* done during formal meditation and during moment-to-moment *sati* throughout the day does differ,²⁷ they still maintain there is little difference in the *quality* of *vipassana* between the two, for the three universal characteristics (*tilakkhana: anicca, dukkha, anatta*) can be seen in everything. Fai goes so far as to say, “I’m doing the same thing whether my eyes are closed or not.”

Why were they attracted to this technique in the first place? Fai says she began to doubt the efficacy of her initial approach, which revolved around a heavy formal meditation regime. “In the beginning, I did an hour each of sitting and walking meditation – I took it really seriously. I thought this is what it meant to *patibat tham*. But then, I saw that outside of those meditation sessions, I would just be mindlessly

²⁵ Daeng and Fai are both disciples of Luang Pho Pramot, who teaches this technique. While not a regular disciple, Ko says she has been highly influenced by his teachings. She also has practiced in the Plum Village tradition, which emphasizes *sati* in daily life.

²⁶ Confidence (*Saddha*), Energy (*Viriya*), *Sati* (*Sati*), Concentration (*Samadhi*), Wisdom (*Panna*)

²⁷ During formal meditation, the sense-objects (*arammana*) one makes contact (*phassa*) with from the outside world are fewer, so one will mainly deal with thoughts, a more refined sense-object.

lost (*plœ*) the rest of the day!” She realized how misguided it was to neglect all the time spent outside of formal meditation, if it actually constitutes the bulk of the day. Likewise, being too zealous about formal meditation was also unwise. It was stressful, as she put too much pressure on herself to progress quickly.

By easing off on formal meditation and devoting more energy to developing moment-to-moment *sati*, she felt she had finally found the right way. “It felt natural, not forced. I realized it was less important to practice intensely than to do it continuously. I now see developing *sati* at all times as more important.” While she currently still did try to do a short (30 minute) formal sitting every day, she had a much more relaxed attitude, saying one shouldn’t be too attached or extreme about it. She says, “If I am too tired, busy, or just don’t feel up to it, I may not do it. But I won’t feel bad about missing it. It doesn’t mean I’m not *patibat tham*, because I’m being mindful of my thoughts the whole day anyway,” which very clearly indicated what she now considered the heart of her *patibat tham*.

As this last statement hints, the shift in emphasis in favor of developing *sati* throughout the day was not simply a question of technique, or correcting improper attitudes in *patibat tham*. It was also one of practicality, because this interpretation enables busy laypeople to still engage in *patibat tham* seriously. This point was explicitly made by one main speaker at the opening day of Luang Pho Pramot’s new dhamma center on May 7, 2006, “This style of *patibat tham* [*cittanupassana* as taught by Luang Pho Pramot] is suited to the modern lifestyle, which is fast-paced and hectic, leaving no time to sit and meditate formally. This way is better suited to usage in everyday life.” The approach seems particularly tailored for urban people, hence its wide popularity among Bangkokians, several hundreds of whom attended the event. Its appeal lies in making *patibat tham* more “user-friendly” and less daunting or burdensome. Yet it almost sounds like a way to “squeeze in” *patibat tham* into hectic lives. Whether this is enough is debatable.

Fai holds the view that it is. “If you *patibat tham* by developing *sati* all the time, you don’t have to wait until you can sit and meditate everyday or go to a retreat to start *patibat tham*. You can already start doing it in your everyday life. This also works.” Significantly, in her explanation de-emphasizing formal meditation comes across not just as a way to enable laypeople to engage in some *patibat tham* within the

constraints of their lifestyles, but to empower them to practice seriously. For this interpretation not only serves to simplify *patibat tham* and make it more convenient, but also to completely internalize it and make it less tied to temples and monks. Laypeople are just as capable of practicing *sati* at work or at home as monks can at the temple, according to this view. *Patibat tham* becomes something all in the mind – one can do it anywhere. Here lies the crucial linchpin of the “anywhere, anytime, in anything” conception of *patibat tham*.

Even as this approach allows laypeople to practice seriously, it allows them to have fun doing it. As Fai and Ko both put it, formal meditation begins to “feel like a chore” but trying to maintain *sati* continually makes *patibat tham* “fun.” “I feel like it’s a challenge. It’s fun to follow (*tam ru*) my actions and thoughts throughout the day. For example, just walking around normally becomes a form of walking meditation (*cankama*). I try to collect every meter!” Ko laughed, meaning she tries to make every “meter” of walking mindful.

Yet, just wanting to do what is “fun” and easing up on the “chore” of formal meditation begs the question of whether this attitude is rather too relaxed. Daeng at first had her doubts about this new approach. Having spent many years associating *patibat tham* with exerting a lot of effort in intensive retreats and formal meditation, she said that at first she couldn’t believe that being mindful throughout the day was all she had to do to practice. “I wondered, that’s it? Surely there must be more to *patibat tham* than this! Could this really be enough? Is it too lax? Too easy? But then you realize, it’s so easy it’s hard. It looks simple, but it is actually really hard to do.”

Ko, however, reveals some doubts as to whether she may now be overly self-indulgent (*ao jai tua eng*). Like Fai, she claims that she doesn’t feel delinquent in her *patibat tham* if she skips her daily meditation sitting or yoga so long as she is cultivating *sati* the rest of the day. “But, maybe I’m rationalizing,” she later admits, smiling a bit sheepishly. “I could just be lazy. This way [focusing practice on continuous *sati*], you don’t have to sit and meditate.”

This is precisely the criticism raised by those on the opposite end of the spectrum, who hold that regular formal meditation practice is highly important. Developing *sati* continually is also key, but focusing only, or mainly on it is not enough. Pok is a particularly strong proponent of this position. He says, “When

people find they can't meditate everyday because it's hard to, they start saying 'It's not natural. It's forcing. Dhamma should be relaxed (*sabai sabai*).'⁷ Really, they just don't have self-discipline. They're just finding ways to justify themselves. I admit that I myself still can't do my formal sitting everyday, but I'm not going to make excuses for myself. Just because I can't do it, doesn't mean I don't have to. I still believe it is the proper way to practice."

While Fai asserts that once a practitioner has progressed to the point where continual *sati* comes naturally it is less crucial to do formal meditation, Pok maintains that it still is. "Even if you are advanced, if you meditate formally, you will develop further. If you don't sit formally, you'll just stay at the level you are at." Indeed, Noi, who has practiced the same technique as Pok for many years – perhaps qualifying for what he calls "advanced" – still gives importance to daily sittings.

Pok believes that doing the formal meditation sitting is the first step, with continual *sati* following naturally as a product of the sitting. "I suppose you could have *sati* during the day without sitting, but the quality would probably be better if you did the sittings. Yet, it's true the two do feed into each other. Because if you don't have *sati* all day long, you won't be able to stick to a schedule that would enable you to do the evening sitting."

He also argues that formal meditation is necessary for developing deeper *panna* than can be attained by developing *sati* throughout the day. Thep supports this view. "You need to do formal meditation to get to deeper levels of *samadhi*, which is necessary in order to develop the level of *vipassana* that leads to enlightenment. It's a really massive transformation of the mind. You have to really sit and concentrate." He is dismissive of practice that only emphasizes developing moment-to-moment *sati*, scoffing, "Well, people who do that are not going to get it [enlightenment]." He later softens his tone a bit, saying "*Sati* is very important, I agree. I just mean that practicing that alone is not enough. You also have to meditate [formally]. Otherwise, you are just a very mindful person...Monks meditate for hours and hours. Even the Buddha meditated." Thep seems to imply that there is a very significant difference in the level of mental development that can be attained by laypeople as compared to monks, who have more time for intensive formal meditation. His view differs markedly from Fai's vision of spiritually empowered laypeople.

To be fair, the discrepancy between the views of Thep and Pok and those of Fai and the continual *sati* camp partially derive from the different requirements of their respective meditation techniques. Pok faithfully adheres to the *vipassana* technique taught by S.N. Goenka, which focuses on observing sensations. This approach requires formal sittings as it takes time to develop a sufficiently calm and sharp mind to feel subtle sensations. S.N. Goenka's teachings repeatedly emphasize the necessity of lengthy one-hour formal meditation sittings not once but twice a day.²⁸ Thep's preferred technique, Dhammakaya meditation taught by Luang Pho Sot, also requires many hours of meditation to practice at a deep level. His meditation teacher, the abbot of Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram in Ratburi, teaches that doing meditation sittings both in the morning and at night is ideal.

Lying in between these distinctly contrasting positions on the continuum are Waew and Mi. On the one hand, Waew stresses the importance of *sati* throughout the day and mainly focuses her efforts on awareness of the body's minor postures (*kayanupassana* focusing on *iriyabot yoi*) – partly because she lacks the time to meditate daily. Like Fai and Ko, she says if she does this, she considers herself to still be adequately *patibat tham*. On the other hand, she notes that when she also does formal meditation in the morning, her *sati* is firmer throughout the day, a point not as clearly emphasized by Oh. Mi like Waew highlights the lasting effects of her morning sitting on the rest of the day's *sati* but more strongly words her prioritization of it – “it is a must.”

Taking *Patibat Tham* “Out of the Forest”:

Integration of *Patibat Tham* Into Daily Life

How to balance formal meditation and moment-to-moment *sati* segues directly into a central issue of this thesis: how *phu patibat tham* integrate *patibat tham* into daily life. For as my informants matured in their practice, they came to realize that

²⁸ In fact, in the “Guidelines for Practicing” handed to all participants at the end of a ten-day retreat, it is written that twice-daily sittings of one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening form part of “the minimum” needed to “maintain the practice,” a very clear, and one might say rather strongly-worded, directive.

patibat tham in the most complete sense means to lead a dhammic way of life. In the beginning, however, most had adopted a bifurcated approach. Informed by the common stereotype of *patibat tham* as “going to the forest” or anywhere removed from society, they set *patibat tham* in its own special “otherworldly” sphere separate from their normal “worldly” life. They associated *patibat tham* with dedicated “dhamma venues” like the retreat center or the temple for doing “dhamma activities” like meditating and listening to dhamma talks, during “dhamma timeslots” like Sunday mornings or retreat weeks.

The disconnect between their “*patibat tham* life” and their daily life can most jarringly be felt at times when they first leave a meditation retreat. After seven to ten days of silence, intensive meditation, and periods of amazing clarity – a rather surreal or even magical experience – they must return to their regular routine. Waew says, “When I first come out of a retreat and am really ‘into’ dhamma, I feel like my job is pointless and don’t feel like working anymore, and want to dedicate myself to *patibat tham*.” She pauses and says ruefully, “But the worldly forces (*krasae lok*) are very strong, and soon they pull you back.” While others might not have such an extreme reaction, they still find it difficult to continue their practice once outside the rarified retreat environment. Daeng says, “I couldn’t keep doing everything slowly in order to maintain *sati*. It was impossible in normal life. So I felt like I had to keep going back to retreats in order to do it.”

Over time however, the unsustainable nature of their practice became more perplexing and they began to question their overly narrow “forest” view of *patibat tham*. To *patibat tham* fully, they now believed, they had to expanding practice “out of the forest” and integrate it comprehensively into their daily lives.

There are many facets to integration, just as there are many aspects of daily life and corresponding dimensions of *patibat tham*. How *patibat tham* relates to the specific areas of work and social relations will be explored in greater detail in Chapters III and IV, but I shall deal below with more general, overarching issues. While the conceptual issues related to formal meditation and continuous *sati* have already been discussed in the previous section, here I intend to elaborate on how these elements are actually put into play in practice.

Establishing Daily Formal Meditation Practice

One of the most basic ways to bridge retreat and daily life is to establish a daily meditation practice to further develop, or at least maintain, their new skills. There will naturally be some difference in how this is implemented depending on the degree to which the individual emphasizes formal meditation. Interestingly, the shape *patibat tham* concretely takes in people's daily routine can vary considerably depending on their conceptions.

Those who stress the importance of doing formal meditation have to make more definite changes in their daily schedules to carve out one or two hours out of their busy lives for meditation. It affects the whole day because as Pok says, "in order to do it, I would have to really rearrange my life. Establish a planned daily schedule and have the discipline to manage my time during the whole day according to it so that I will be able to do my nightly sitting."

It is not easy. In actuality, Pok still cannot do it. Inadequate discipline is a real obstacle for almost all my informants. One after another, my informants own up to "lacking discipline" or "laziness". "I suppose I could wake up early to also do a morning sitting [in addition to my nightly meditation]. But I'm not that disciplined!" Thep says with a snort.

The matter of discipline inside, dedicating time for meditation often means having to give up more worldly pursuits, which is also difficult. Noi says, "Sometimes I want to watch DVDs at night, and then I run out of time to do meditation." Pok, meanwhile, may have to scale back his romantic activities. "But if you're out on a date at night and the two of you are having a good time, how are you going to say, 'Oh, sorry, I have to go home now so I can meditate'? No girl is going to put up with that!"

By contrast, those who stress developing *sati* continually do not feel as torn. Although they still recognize their need to do some formal meditation, they do not require as long a session or feel their *patibat tham* suffers that much if they miss it. Accordingly, they tend not to alter their existing life routines that drastically. After all, if their main concern is simply to have *sati* throughout the day, it does not matter so much what the contents of their day may be.

Ko and Waew continue to work long hours, even though it means they end up unable to do their daily meditation. When they are feeling particularly overburdened, they do wonder if they should cut back. But they console themselves with the thought that they are adequately “compensating” for missing formal practice by being extra-vigilant in maintaining *sati* during the day.

Ironically, it turns out that although Pok was the one who was most adamant about the necessity of doing two hours of formal meditation, he was actually the one who does the least in practice – managing only one sitting a week, on Saturday or Sunday. While setting a high standard can be motivating, it can also backfire and make practice too daunting, and thus he winds up not being able to do much at all. And if he cannot do his formal meditation, he also does not try to develop moment-to-moment *sati*, as he believes the latter is predicated on the former – so he misses out on both counts (partly vindicating Fai’s warning not to wait until you can meditate everyday to start *patibat tham*). On the other hand, it is Daeng, one of the proponents of developing moment-to-moment *sati*, who is most successful in sticking to a comprehensive daily meditation regimen (1-2 hours of walking and sitting meditation daily, plus more on weekends).

This curious situation also suggests that the way one’s daily practice actually shapes up can perhaps be more influenced by other factors like one’s personality and life circumstances than one’s concept of ideal *patibat tham* – or conversely that one’s concept of ideal *patibat tham* can be significantly influenced by one’s life circumstances and personality.

My impression of Daeng’s personality is that she is naturally more methodical and disciplined than Pok. Also, at twenty-seven, Pok is six years younger than Daeng and still at the age where he wants to go out at night to party and date. At his age, Daeng herself was quite the night owl as well. Now, however, she is married and leads a quiet domestic life, which probably makes it easier for her to meditate so regularly.

Another revealing foil to Daeng is Fai, which shows that even those who share the same approach to *patibat tham* can realize it quite differently. Fai set her daily meditation regime at only 30 minutes, much shorter than Daeng. Between these two, the main difference could be professions. Daeng’s work life is more routinized as she

runs her own business, which has regular office hours, providing conditions conducive to maintaining her meditation schedule. By contrast, Fai is a freelance writer whose days are much more unpredictable, and subject to the vagaries of deadlines and artistic inspiration. (Although it could also be argued a freelancer's flexibility ought to allow her to schedule time for more formal meditation, if she exercised more discipline.) Another possible factor is Fai's free-spirited personality, which does not lend itself to routine.

The following table summarizes their daily "*patibat tham* routine," which for a few informants also includes prayer and listening to dhamma.

Table 3.1 *Patibat Tham* Routines

	Formal Meditation (Goal)	Formal Meditation (Actual)	Prayer	Listening to Dhamma
Thep	1 hour at night.	Mostly did 30-45 minutes.	30 minutes everyday.	-
Pok	1 hour in morn. 1 hour at night.	Did once a day, only on Saturday or Sunday.	Before meditation.	-
Waew	1 hour in morn.	Did not do when work was busy. (Frequently was). Sometimes did 1 hour mindful yoga instead of meditation.	-	-
Daeng	1-1.5 hours in morn.	Did everyday. When had time, also did another 30 min in evening.	-	Listened to dhamma CD every morning (while showering).
Ko	1 hour a day and 1 hour mindful yoga.	Not everyday, and mostly did 30 min.	Occasionally.	-
Mi	1 hour in morn. 30 min at night.	Did morning meditation, but did not do night meditation if too tired or not enough time.	-	Listened to dhamma tapes before bed every night.
Fai	30 min at night. But not strict routine.	Did 30 min but not everyday.	-	-
Noi	1 hour in morn. 1 hour at night.	Mostly did once a day, but did not always manage to.	-	-

Developing Continual Moment-to-Moment *Sati*

Even those who emphasized formal meditation still recognized the importance of cultivating continuous *sati*, however. If they were to focus exclusively on formal meditation as the totality of their *patibat tham*, they would be unable to integrate *patibat tham* into their lives beyond just the time they spend meditating every day. Developing continuous *sati* is a powerful way to take *patibat tham* not only “out of the forest” or retreat center, but “off the meditation cushion” and into the rest of the day. Indeed, given the fundamental role of *sati* in *patibat tham*, developing it continuously is arguably the most important and all-encompassing mechanism for infusing a dhammic approach into *how* they do every activity in every moment of daily life.

At least, that is the ideal. Of course, in practice it is actually very difficult to be mindful in every waking moment. As an intervening measure, many have devised little tricks, wherein they reserve particular situations for practicing *sati* – while waiting in queue at a shop, sitting in a taxi, stopping at a red light, walking up the stairs, or even going to the bathroom – so that they may have at least a few instituted pockets of *sati* during the day. Also, in this way even the mundane bits of everyday life become opportunities to practice.

Mi even resorts to technological help. She wears a small “*sati* clock” on a chain around her neck. It is an innovative gadget that vibrates periodically. Each time it does, she is reminded to turn her awareness to her breath briefly. She has purposefully set it at a high frequency – every few minutes – to aid her in being mindful as often as possible.

When they can manage to be mindful, it yields practical benefits in many everyday situations. It serves as a “brake” on unwholesome actions like losing one’s temper, talking without thinking, making mistakes in work, or even eating too much.

Moving From Rigid Forms to Free Approach

Going beyond formal meditation and developing continuous *sati* is part of the more general pattern of moving away from rigid forms of *patibat tham* towards a freer

approach. As they progressed, my informants shed standardized patterns (*rup baeb*) like strictly choreographed walking meditation or exaggeratedly slow movements, often taught to beginners, and instead tried to make their *patibat tham* as natural as possible. Daeng said, “I used to think that *patibat tham* meant doing things that were somehow higher or better than what you are naturally like (*nuea thamachat*). You have to breathe really carefully or be really serene. You try to alter nature. But really when you do that, you’re creating something artificial.” Fai seconds her sentiments, “You don’t need to pose or ‘get ready’ to practice (*tang tha patibat*).” As they become more skillful in their practice, particularly in maintaining *sati*, they say it becomes “like second nature,” a part of their “flesh and blood,” an organic part of their lives. More and more, they start to live and breathe their *patibat tham*. They no longer have to go about it in such a deliberate way anymore. A common trope is the comparison to learning to swim or ride a bike. They just start to do it naturally, let it flow, and have fun with it.

Cultivating Virtues

Complementing the practice of *sati* is the cultivation of virtues or wholesome qualities (*gunadhamma*) and applying them in daily situations. Several people cited the Four Sublime States of Mind (*Brahmavihara 4*): loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). Of these, practicing loving-kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) were particularly emphasized as an important part of *patibat tham*. Many do loving-kindness meditation (*metta-bhavana* or *phae metta*) as part of their formal meditation. This not only elevates their mind in a general sense, but affects how they interact with people in daily life. Noi says doing loving-kindness meditation during a morning sitting helps condition her to deal with people at work compassionately. Ko also uses it outside of formal meditation in daily situations when she is angered by someone. She will reflect on compassion and generate loving-kindness towards that person. Waew also talked of developing the Four Bases for Success (*Iddipada 4*) in how she does her work: zeal (*chanda*), energy (*viriya*), thoughtfulness (*citta*), investigation (*vimamsa*).

A Whole Way of Life

In the broadest sense, however, combining *patibat tham* and daily life means seeing it all as an integrated whole. *Patibat tham* becomes not just one part of their life, but their very way of life. All aspects of their lives can, and indeed should, fall under the rubric of *patibat tham*. Ko says, “Spiritual development is like the big umbrella, covering everything in my life. I want to have a holistic approach – my life is like a pot of stew that I’m trying to blend together into a smooth mixture. Any activity you do in life has to go with your life philosophy otherwise you will feel conflicts.”

Retreats: Retaining Elements of “Forest” *Patibat Tham*

No matter how much my informants are able to progress in incorporating *patibat tham* into their daily life, all of them still considered it important to take some time out each year to do a retreat, for it provides conditions for more concentrated practice that daily life cannot. A retreat is akin to the “forest” style of *patibat tham*, where one leaves behind one’s normal existence to practice meditation intensively in seclusion. Thus, they do actually need to include an element of the “forest” as an important part of their overall *patibat tham* regime. Indeed, they sometimes use the term precisely in that specialized way, as in “I am going to *patibat tham*” to mean “I am going on a retreat.”

The great value of retreats is that they allow for continuity of practice. Being freed from daily life concerns, they can focus their energies entirely on practice. Also key is the chance to get out of the city and withdraw to a more peaceful and natural environment, believed to be more conducive to practice.

Some subtle differences in approaches to retreats do exist between individuals depending on the relative importance given to formal meditation and continuous *sati*. Those who focus on formal meditation tend to see retreats as a special opportunity to do intensive meditation, where they can reach deeper levels of *samadhi* required to do more powerful *vipassana*. Meanwhile, those who stress continuous *sati* do not see a pronounced difference between practice in and outside retreats, as they do *sati*

training at all times anyway. Retreats are used to “exercise” their *sati*, improving speed and precision. Fai likens it to periodically sharpening a knife that grows dull with use.

Either way, they all value retreats highly enough to allocate considerable time in their yearly schedules to doing retreats. All do at least one seven or ten-day retreat a year. In fact, most devote several weeks a year, whether for multiple week-long retreats or retreats of longer periods of time. Even those like Fai and Daeng, who said that they felt less of a need to go to retreats once they started practicing *sati* in everyday life, still ended up going several times last year. Some even invest in traveling far away. Ko went to the Plum Village monastery in France to immerse herself for three weeks, while Noi went to India for a fifteen-day retreat. As they become more advanced, they may no longer need to go to an organized program at a retreat center. Many prefer a freer approach and choose to conduct their own, either independently or with friends, at temples, private homes, or anywhere quiet and secluded.

Going to retreats thus becomes a major part of their lives, to the extent that it becomes a distinguishing feature of the *phu patibat tham* lifestyle. It is an easily identified concrete change to *what* goes into lives that goes beyond adopting a dhammic approach to *how* they deal with daily affairs. Because of the serious time commitment involved, they must make special arrangements in their normal routine to accommodate them. In a way, this is the expanded version of carving time out of their daily schedule to do formal meditation. Fai has had to cut down on time she spends with her children and “train” them to accept her long absences. Ko even says one reason she decided to go freelance was to have more flexibility to go on retreats.

While some are more systematic than others in scheduling retreat time, to some extent all plan their yearly calendars around it. Waew and Daeng plot out their work projects in such a way that they can take time off. Noi meanwhile says her semester breaks are reserved for retreats. Indeed, retreats become their preferred way of spending their free time – the *phu patibat tham*’s form of holiday.

Their prioritization of retreats points to how they ultimately do believe that to *patibat tham* at a serious level, one has to withdraw from everyday lay life, at least for some periods of time.

Choosing One Boat: *Patibat Tham* at the Highest Level

Is there a point when temporary withdrawals are not enough? When *patibat tham* and living daily life as a layperson become too much at odds? Waew was the most upfront about this, one of the few to bring up the issue unbidden. She says, “At first, if you just want to balance *patibat tham* and regular worldly responsibilities, then it is possible to *patibat tham* in everyday life. But if you go deeper, you will feel more and more conflicts. If you really want to practice so you won’t be born again, you will have to separate the two worlds – the dhamma world and worldly world. It’s like having two feet on two different boats. In the end, you’re going to have to choose. To practice to be truly liberated, you will have to go into seclusion (*plik wiwek*) and practice.”

She has insightfully pointed out how a person’s level of practice influences their requirements for *patibat tham* and their views on the compatibility of *patibat tham* and everyday life. Thus, when many of my informants (Fai, Daeng, Ko, Noi) dismiss the notion that *patibat tham* and everyday life cannot go together and insist that in fact mature practitioners can integrate the two seamlessly and *patibat tham* “anytime, anywhere, in anything” perhaps they are only talking about a certain level of maturity or commitment. For those who are not dead-set on attaining *nibbana* as soon as possible and have a “just keep doing it” (*tham pai rueai rueai*) approach to *patibat tham*, it may be enough to practice with dedication as a layperson. However, at the highest level of *patibat tham*, when a practitioner is seriously working towards achieving *nibbana* as soon as possible or even in this very life, it may be necessary to ordain.

Naturally, the two male informants equate the highest level of *patibat tham* with monkhood. They carry in their heads an idealized picture of the ultimate, most “real” *patibat tham* – living as a monk in a solitary hut (*kuti*) in a quiet temple in the lush forest. Because for men, ordination is feasible and common enough not to seem outlandish, it is a conceivable possibility they can reserve for later in life. That their ideal version of *patibat tham*, cut off from laylife, is potentially realizable lends them to conceptualize the otherworldly and worldly spheres perhaps more distinctly than

women. As they can always ordain in the future, it is less pressing for them to try so hard to *patibat tham* in daily life in the meantime. Pok became enamored of the life of a monk during his experience temporarily ordaining for a month after college. Even today, he still believes lay practice cannot compare to that of a monk, which he feels is “practice one truly lives in the flesh and blood, one hundred percent.” He is currently seriously considering ordaining before the age of thirty-five. Even though Thep, who does not hold *nibbana* as an immediate goal, has no plans to ordain in this life, he still views it as an ideal form of *patibat tham*.

The men’s views provide a revealing foil to the women’s. In contrast to men, there are no clear ordination options for women in Thailand. The issue of female monks (*bhikkhuni*) is still controversial – although one Thai woman has been fully ordained as a monk in the Theravada tradition and has her own temple, she is not recognized officially by the mainstream sangha. Acceptance among the general public is also limited, though growing. The traditional option available to women is to become an eight-precept or ten-precept white-robed nun (*maechi*), although they typically are not given much respect, at least not equal to that shown a monk.²⁹ Because they do not have any solid prospects for living an ordained life, they do not have an “ordination fantasy” of future *patibat tham* as a monk to count on. Perhaps this is why they put such emphasis – certainly more so than the two men – on getting started *patibat tham* rigorously even as laypeople. Fai is one of the most convinced of this view. She says, “We can already *patibat tham* as laypeople, without ordaining. If you shave your head and you don’t *patibat tham*, you don’t develop *sati* (*charoen sati*), then there’s no use. It’s better to be a layperson who *patibat tham*.” To an extent, examples of less-than-impressive monks do offer laypeople grounds for feeling entitled or empowered to *patibat tham* as laypeople. Yet perhaps her defense of laypeople’s *patibat tham* as being just as valid and of equal (if not higher) quality

²⁹ For a more in-depth historical account and discussion of options for Thai women to lead the spiritual life, see Chatsumarn 1991, 1998; and Virada and Nicholas 2002; for discussion of *maechi* in particular see Falk 2005. For more philosophical and text-based analyses of the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination, see Suwanna 1999, 2001; and Chatsumarn 1991 chapter 3 in particular. News coverage of the controversy surrounding the ordination of the first Thai *bhikkhuni* in the Theravada tradition, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni (formerly Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh), center around the months after she was ordained as a novice (*samaneri*) in February 2001. See for example Pravit 2001.

as that of a monk is really a way of justifying her own status as a layperson because, being a woman, she cannot ordain.

Aside from the gender issue, for Fai and several other informants, personal circumstances also pose major hindrances to ordination. Fai says she would have to wait until her two children are grown before she could consider it. On the other end of family obligations is caring for parents. At one point, Noi had wanted to resign from her job to join a full-time five-year program of dhamma study geared for women, the *Dhammamata* program at Suan Mokkh, but was met with opposition by her siblings, who wanted her to share in the responsibility of caring for their elderly mother. For a while, she relates, the conflict between family needs and dhammic aspirations caused her grief, until she “realized I could also *patibat tham* as a layperson. I learned how to *patibat tham* in a such a way that I could remain as a layperson without suffering.”

Yet, when I pushed the issue a bit further and asked them to disregard current real-world constraints, and consider in theory whether it is ultimately better for a person to *patibat tham* as an ordained person rather than a layperson, they all agreed it is. Despite all her earlier hedging, even Fai admits that “an ordained person who *patibat tham* is still better than a layperson who *patibat tham*. I do think it’s necessary to ordain to practice at the highest level.” Several reasons are given. They were quick to dismiss ordaining just to adopt external forms (*rup baeb*) like the monastic robes. Rather, they emphasize how ordination provides conditions conducive to practice such as complete freedom from worldly concerns; the peaceful environment offered by temples, often situated close to nature; a community of supportive peers; and indeed a whole way of life set up expressly for the purpose of dedicated spiritual practice. These reasons echo their explanations for going on retreats. Ordination can be likened to going on a permanent retreat.

Their views are consistent with the Buddha’s extolment of the ordained life. As Bhikkhu Bodhi explains:

Invariably in the suttas the exposition of the gradual training begins with the going forth into homelessness and the adoption of the lifestyle of a bhikkhu, a Buddhist monk. This immediately calls attention to the importance of the monastic life in the Buddha’s pragmatic vision.

In principle the entire practice of the Noble Eightfold Path is open to people from any mode of life, monastic or lay, and the Buddha confirms that many among his lay followers were accomplished in the Dhamma... Theravada commentators say that lay followers can also attain the fourth stage, arahantship, but they do so either on the verge of death or after attainment immediately seek the going forth. The fact remains, however, that the household life inevitably fosters a multitude of mundane concerns and personal attachments that impede the singlehearted quest for liberation (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005: 226).

As it turned out, despite their initial evasiveness, not only did my female informants agree that ordained *patibat tham* was theoretically best, they all eventually came forward as having some notion of possibly committing themselves to it full-time to *patibat tham* in the future. This was quite surprising given their reticence on the topic, with few bringing it up unless I did. Perhaps they hesitated because they wished to avoid sounding too extreme or found the issue too personal. Yet in part it seems that the lack of clearly defined options for women makes it difficult for them to picture, let alone talk about, a life completely dedicated to *patibat tham*.

Although they thus have differing, and rather vague, ideas of what it would entail, they still reflect remarkably strong convictions in their own ways. Unfazed by the controversy surrounding the *bhikkhuni* issue, Mi firmly states that she would like to ordain as a Theravada female monk in the future, although she says she still “has to research” where and how to do it. Fai and Daeng, who have a more “keep on doing it” (*tham pai rueai rueai*) approach towards *patibat tham* are not currently planning to ordain, but they say they could see themselves doing it “if the time comes or right conditions arise.” While Daeng is all right with being a *maechi*, Fai stresses that if she were to ordain, she would only consider doing so as a monk. Waew is less concerned about becoming technically ordained or not, but is seriously thinking about going to live at a temple for an extended solitary retreat of intensive meditation – even setting a deadline of next year (although she admits she might not actually be able to follow through on this). Noi meanwhile is pondering other non-ordination options, such as devoting herself full-time to serving at a lay retreat center. Ko is the most insistent in asserting that she could find creative ways to set up “conducive conditions” for serious *patibat tham* even as a layperson such as living in a quiet place and maintaining only the most minimal livelihood. But even she finally concedes that

perhaps once she is ready to commit firmly to one particular spiritual tradition, she would consider ordaining in order to practice it in depth. Actually, she says her ideal *patibat tham* is to be a wandering forest monk (*den thudong*). “Too bad I’m a woman, though!” she says with a wry laugh.

Whatever permutation of “full time *patibat tham*” they may have in mind, the bottom line is that they all do ultimately believe that to *patibat tham* at the highest level, one has to leave behind the everyday life of a layperson for good, and some are already contemplating it for themselves.

A Recap: Coming Full Circle

A person’s understanding of “*patibat tham*” thus shifts over time. With deeper levels of practice come better understanding of dhamma, stronger faculties (*indriya 5*), greater discipline and commitment, higher aims, and greater sense of urgency in pursuing those aims.

It appears my informants’ way of understanding *patibat tham* in relation to daily life eventually comes full circle. To recapitulate, when they first start out, they relegate *patibat tham* to the retreat center, separate from their normal everyday lives. But as they grow in their practice, they seek to integrate it into every aspect – and in fact every moment – of their lives, especially by striving to maintain *sati* as continuously as possible. As they become more skillful at practicing this kind of continuous *sati* and “*patibat tham* sinks into their flesh and blood” and is naturally done all the time, not just on specified retreats, they no longer view going to retreats as the crux of their *patibat tham*. Nonetheless, they still value retreats highly enough as a part of their practice regimen to commit up to several weeks a year to them. They still do need some elements of the secluded and intensive “forest”-style *patibat tham* to practice at a higher level. Indeed, they believe that at the highest level, to practice seriously towards achieving *nibbana*, *patibat tham* and everyday lay life can no longer go together. Once again, the two are separated, but this time it is in a more profound and permanent sense. Here, separation is not about unnaturally compartmentalizing *patibat tham* but embracing it so fully that lay life is relinquished.

Ultimately, the only way *patibat tham* can be completely integrated into daily life is to lead the daily life of an ordained person. Even laypersons like my informants who argue that it is possible to *patibat tham* rigorously as lay practitioners ultimately do subscribe to this view, and quietly nurse aspirations to ordain or otherwise pursue *patibat tham* full-time.