

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION



### Background

A hallmark of the Buddhist approach to leading the spiritual life is the high degree of flexibility. Each individual is given wide berth in following the Buddhist path. One can exert oneself as much or as little as one wishes, so long as basic rules of moral conduct are not violated. There can thus be considerable diversity in the way Buddhism is practiced, and indeed life itself is led, even among monks. All monks, however, are bound by the Vinaya, or 227 precepts, a comprehensive set of regulations governing in detail their daily lives. Because these rules are shared by all monks, they provide some level of commonality in way of life amongst monks, even if they may live in entirely different environments or focus on different pursuits.

The guidelines for lay practice are much vaguer. Laypeople are expected to uphold only the first five precepts of the monks' 227 – abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, wrong speech, and taking intoxicants. Even these few precepts are formulated quite generally, with little elaboration as to specific situations. Moreover, they do not form part of a collection of instructions or general code of discipline given specifically for laypeople and enforced with authority, unlike the Vinaya for monks (Payutto 1990: 34-35).

In terms of spiritual development beyond upholding precepts, there are even looser expectations. As monks have renounced the lay life to take up the spiritual life as a vocation – becoming, so to speak, “spiritual professionals” – they are expected to devote themselves to practicing dhamma vigorously, at least in theory. Laypeople, however, must still make a living and bear other responsibilities to family and society that monks have been liberated from. Spiritual training is not as easy for them to pursue, nor can it be their only responsibility. As such, although the Buddhist view is that all beings ought to develop themselves to some degree, higher spiritual training is not set as an expectation for laypeople as it is for monks.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that laypeople are disqualified from such training. The Buddha himself had many dedicated lay disciples and the scriptures tell of several laypeople who even became enlightened. Still, laypeople committed to deep dhamma practice are exceptions rather than the norm. For the majority of laypeople, the standard for leading a good life is basically set at maintaining the five precepts and sharing wealth by donating to monks and the poor (performing *dana*). Higher pursuits like meditation are widely considered the purview of monks. Many scholars have observed that this has been the conventional view in traditional Thai society.<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary Thai society, however, a growing number of laypeople are taking a different view and becoming interested in more active spiritual practice. In particular, there has been rising interest in practicing meditation among laypeople. While they still constitute only a minority of the wider population, the number of laypeople practicing meditation has appreciably increased.<sup>2</sup>

A closely related development is the emergence of mass meditation retreats, which can be considered a distinctly modern phenomenon. Meditation centers run by lay foundations have been established and have become an important source of meditation training for laypeople, and even monks. Among the most popular mass courses, attended by thousands each year, are those held year-round by two lay foundations: the Young Buddhists Association of Thailand (YBAT), which began offering courses in 1983, and the Foundation for the Promotion of Vipassana Meditation (as taught by S.N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagi U Ba Khin) in 1986. Organized meditation courses or facilities for self-conducted retreats are now also offered by more temples, many established to meet the growing demand.<sup>3</sup> Meditation teaching has thus become more easily accessible and readily available to interested laypersons. Courses make it easier for laypeople to find teachers, provide the convenience of “pre-packaged” retreats, and afford the opportunity to experience

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Mulder 1992, Payutto 1984, Phra Phaisan 2546, Terwiel 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Exact statistics for this do not exist, but this observation has been made by many observers of religious trends. See for example Phra Phaisan 2546: 179.

<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive listing of meditation centers in Thailand has been published by the World Fellowship of Buddhists. See Pataraporn 2004.

intensive practice, with standard retreats typically lasting seven to ten days, and more advanced courses lasting even longer.

With its popularization, meditation has become less esoteric and has entered the mainstream culture. Some observers point out that laypeople who take up meditation may not necessarily be driven by lofty spiritual aims, but are more commonly seeking ways to relieve stress, cope with major life problems, or deal more effectively with daily life concerns in general – even including, ironically, becoming more successful in accumulating wealth rather than practicing dhamma for its true purpose of renunciation. Phra Phaisan Visalo also notes that some are drawn by a desire to “consume” religious or supernatural experiences, use religious activities to assert their Buddhist or Thai identity, or follow a fashionable trend (Phra Phaisan 2546:157-159).

Whatever their initial motivations may have been, for some lay practitioners, meditation experiences lead to an awakening that inspires them to pursue dhamma practice more deeply, for the ultimate aim of spiritual development. Meditation courses are thus key, in providing laypeople with opportunities to improve their understanding of dhamma and meditation and potentially have such revelatory experiences. Moreover, they provide those who have become, or already were, interested in serious practice a channel for pursuing it further.

Not only are laypeople becoming more active in spiritual engagement at a personal level, they are also taking on a larger public role. Lay meditation teachers are growing in both number and prominence. This is partly related to the growth of meditation centers founded, funded, and led by laypeople. At the YBAT, the meditation retreat program was spearheaded by a laywoman, Khun Mae Siri Krinchai, and is thus widely referred to colloquially as “Khun Mae Siri’s course.” Over the years, as the course grew exponentially in popularity, she has gained a large following of lay disciples. A considerable number, many of whom are women, have gone on to become the next generation of lay meditation teachers. Meanwhile, the movement promoting vipassana meditation as taught by S.N. Goenka has since its inception been entirely lay-led. S.N. Goenka was a successful businessman and his own teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin a high-ranking civil servant in the Burmese government. The worldwide network of meditation retreat centers in this tradition, including those in

Thailand, are run by lay foundations. Teachers in the courses are all laypeople, selected from those who have trained exclusively in the tradition for long periods of time. Outside of lay meditation centers, there are many lay meditation teachers who teach in various other venues: temples, monks' residences (*samnak song*), ashrams, private homes, and other "dhamma venues" (*thamasathan*). Notably, some of these lay meditation teachers even teach monks, a striking reversal of roles.

There are also growing ranks of laypeople who not only teach meditation practice (*patipatti*) but also dhamma theory (*pariyatti*). At the YBAT seven-day retreat, for instance, the daily lectures expounding in depth on various aspects of Buddhist philosophy are all given by lay speakers. At various other dhamma venues, such as the Chulalongkorn University Thamasathan and the World Fellowship of Buddhists headquarters, laypeople also give dhamma talks and teach courses in Abhidhamma, the highly abstract rendering of Buddhist teachings. Lay experts even teach some classes at the two monks' universities, Mahachulalongkorn and Mahamakut. The latest trend that has emerged is the publication of popular dhamma books by lay authors. Some have become runaway bestsellers, turning authors into respected – and famous – "dhamma experts."<sup>4</sup>

Phra Phaisan points out that actually, historically there have long existed laypeople that were learned in dhamma and even taught monks, with accounts dating back to the early Bangkok or even Ayudhya period. However, such lay people had all been previously ordained. What distinguishes the lay dhamma teachers today is that they have studied dhamma on their own, outside of the monastic (*sangha*) system. He observes that laypeople are increasingly moving in on what used to be considered the province of monks, taking on more of their traditional roles. In the future, the importance of monks in religious life is likely to wane further while that of laypeople grows. As monks become more and more out of touch with contemporary society, people will seek out lay teachers and only progressive-minded monks who are able to convey dhamma in more relevant ways. At the same time, the number of monks who want to practice meditation seriously has actually declined, even while the numbers of

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see *Khem Thit Chiwit* by Thithinat Na Pathalung (2547) and *Chet Duean Banlu Tham* by Dungtrin (2546). For Dungtrin's complete works in PDF or mp3 format, see <http://dungtrin.com>

lay meditators – and meditation teachers – has risen. Furthering the monks' declining spiritual leadership is their own intensifying interest in worldly affairs, with more monks studying worldly subjects and engaging in commercial activities such as selling sacred objects or charging for rituals. Major financial and sexual scandals involving monks have also done much to tarnish their image. Phra Phaisan further observes that with lay practice focusing less on rituals and making merit with monks, the need for monks to mediate between laypeople and religious life diminishes. The growing sentiment among laypeople is that they can reach the true heart of Buddhism by themselves directly, without having to pass through the sangha system. They can learn dhamma or meditation on their own, or with guidance from lay teachers alone, and can keep progressing to higher levels of practice as laypeople. Thus, at both the personal and public level, the line between monks and laypeople is blurring, and the two spheres of the otherworldly (*lokuttara*) and worldly (*lokiya*) are converging (Phra Phaisan 2546: 178-182).

With this development comes a growing sense of empowerment among increasing numbers of laypeople and a greater vigor to exert themselves in their own spiritual practice and in the wider dhamma arena. As more and more highly realized laypeople become prominent, they provide inspiring role models that further encourage other laypeople to take up spiritual endeavors. The attitudes of increasing numbers of laypeople have shifted towards the belief that it is not only monks that can follow the path to reach the ultimate goal. They can as well.

Laypeople holding this view still constitute only a minority, however. Thus, one can find two sharply contrasting conceptions of higher dhamma practice in the current public discourse, as I learned from talking to people from a variety of backgrounds. On the one hand, the conventional stereotype of dhamma practice that seems most widely held conceives of it as something separate from regular lay life. It is mainly the work of monks, as one has to withdraw into the forest, cave, or temple, or any other place secluded from society in order to do it. This notion I will abbreviate as “forest” practice, wherein the otherworldly and worldly are considered separate. On the other hand, the minority view asserts that the otherworldly and worldly can be seamlessly integrated, and to think of the two as incompatible is overly simplistic. Many active lay practitioners I spoke with insist that the lay status

does not necessarily conflict with or pose major obstacles to serious dhamma practice. It can successfully be done in everyday life without having to go somewhere special or make any major changes in one's lifestyle. According to this rhetoric, dhamma can be practiced "anytime, anywhere, in anything" – at home, at work, at the mall, in the car, and not only in the "forest."

The striking dissonance between these two conceptions and the fact that neither view sounded entirely convincing, especially when taken to extremes, invited further investigation. Particularly intriguing were the ideas held by the minority, who appeared to form a distinguishable subgroup of laypeople that reflected a more empowered and spiritually engaged spirit – those who wanted to pursue higher dhamma practice, even at levels of intensity and complexity typically associated with monks, without leaving the lay world.

This breed of laypeople is so distinctive that there is even a special term for them. They are not simply "*chao phut*" or "Buddhists," but "*phu patibat tham*" or literally, "ones who practice dhamma." The name implies they are more active in their spiritual life. "*Patibat tham*" signifies the particular form of Buddhism they practice, which diverges from the mainstream forms of Buddhism basically centered on merit-making and Buddhist festivals.

## **Research Objectives**

The fascinating puzzle I first set out to investigate was how *patibat tham* is done by laypeople – how they go about integrating *patibat tham* into their daily lives and to what extent they encountered difficulties in attempting to do so. In order to answer these questions, it naturally followed that I would also have to examine the closely intertwined issue of what "*patibat tham*" actually means. These questions turned out, gratifyingly, to be far from simple.

One major complication is that interpretations of "*patibat tham*" differ from person to person, depending on a host of different factors influencing each individual. My starting premise was that this diversity is inevitable, given how intrinsically individualistic the Buddhist path is, or indeed how ultimately personal any spiritual

practice is. I thus sought to explore subjective or personal, rather than objective or authoritative, explications. I would argue that trying to arrive at the latter would probably be impossible. Instead, I focused on delineating how *patibat tham* is understood and practiced by *phu patibat tham* themselves.

While cognizant of the broader context of contemporary trends in lay practice, my project was to research at the level of the individual. I also chose to study only eight people, because I felt it would be more meaningful and revelatory to probe in-depth, given how complex both *patibat tham* and individuals are. I wanted to be able to immerse myself in their personal life worlds, internal and external. At the same time, eight case studies afforded a degree of breadth to get a sense of the great diversity that exists and explore its ramifications.

As I intended to examine *patibat tham* at both the conceptual and actual levels – both how it is understood and how it is practiced – I used a combination of philosophical and anthropological approaches, examining both doctrinal Buddhist teachings and how real-life people actually interpret them.

To elaborate on the “practice” part in greater detail, it is useful to consider that there are mechanics to integrating *patibat tham* into daily life. It involves making choices in concrete aspects of one’s lifestyle, e.g. daily routine, jobs, and social relations. These points will be further discussed in the theoretical framework section to follow.

## Research Questions

My central research questions and their embedded subquestions are:

- 1) How do eight individual laypersons understand what *patibat tham* (to practice dhamma) means?
  - a. What are different dimensions of *patibat tham*?
  - b. How does *patibat tham* differ from mainstream Buddhist practice?
- 2) How do their interpretations reflect or revise doctrinal Buddhist teachings?
  - a. How do they update teachings to fit contemporary urban society?
  - b. How are they influenced by the interpretations of contemporary monks or lay teachers?

- 3) How do they integrate *patibat tham* into daily life?
  - a. How do they conceive the relationship between *patibat tham* and daily life? Are there cases where the two are incompatible?
  - b. To what extent do they encounter difficulties or limitations in attempting this integration? How do they deal with them?
  - c. What, if any, concrete changes do they make in their lifestyle?
  
- 4) What are major points of convergence/divergence between different people, both in understanding and practice?
  - a. To what extent do convergences cohere into a distinctive form of Buddhist practice with an associated lifestyle?
  - b. Are there any identifiable factors to explain divergences?

## **Literature Review**

In this section I provide a brief review of the existing literature on Buddhist practice, particularly in Thailand but also more broadly, including anthropological, historical, and biographical works. Studies focused specifically on lay practice in Thailand are limited, all the more so when it comes to contemporary urban laypeople. The group I am particularly interested in, Bangkok laypeople committed to higher Buddhist practice, especially meditation, has thus far been little examined. Moreover, there are few examples of academic research that have studied Buddhist practitioners in-depth at the individual level, rather than at the societal or community levels. Thus, my research is largely exploratory, both in terms of topical focus and methodological approach.

Major anthropological studies of Buddhism in Thailand that have been done largely focus on rural Buddhist practice, offering a view of the religious customs, rituals, and concerns of villagers (Kaufman 1977; Tambiah 1968, 1970; Terwiel 1975). One exception is Bunnag (1973), who studies urban monastic organization – albeit in Ayutthaya, not the larger city of Bangkok. In her discussion of urban Buddhist laymen, however, she still focuses on merit-making activities, without any mention of meditation. Nonetheless, these studies are useful in providing a picture of mainstream Buddhist practice oriented around religious ceremonies and merit-making that can serve as a basis of comparison for my study.



Although based on fieldwork in Burma, Spiro's (1970) study of Burmese Buddhism and society is also helpful in providing ways of schematizing Theravada Buddhist theory and practice that can arguably be extended to use in the Thai setting, particularly the distinction he delineates between the two "soteriological systems" of merit-centered "kammatic Buddhism" and *panna*-centered "nibbanic Buddhism". Spiro asserts that laypeople interested in "nibbanic Buddhism" are but a tiny minority – but it is precisely because they are a minority, and a rarely examined one, that I find them an intriguing object of study.

Another limitation of these previous studies is that they are quite dated, based on fieldwork conducted in the 1960's and 1970's. There have been few anthropological studies of similar length since then, and information on Buddhist practice in the last three decades can mainly be found in shorter works and journal articles. Concerning this time period, much attention has been given to the three major Buddhist movements which have emerged since the 1960's-70's and gained large followings among the urban middle-class, signifying a Buddhist revival concerned with making Buddhist teachings relevant to the modern context – Suan Mokkh (led by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu), Santi Asoke, and Wat Dhammakaya (Apinya 1993, Jackson 1989, Suwanna 1990, Taylor 1993). Other scholars have focused on the new "prosperity cults," including those centered around the goddess Guan Yin, King Chulalongkorn, and "powerful" monks like Luang Por Khoon and Luang Por Ngern (Jackson 1999). By contrast, little has been written about lay groups like YBAT and the Foundation for the Promotion of Vipassana Meditation (as taught by S.N. Goenka) whose activities have contributed greatly to the popularization of meditation in Thailand and influenced many lay practitioners such as my informants.

A more overarching view of modern Thai Buddhism can be found in Phra Phaisan (2546), which provides a comprehensive historical treatment tracing developments from the rationalizing religious reforms of King Rama IV until the present day. Particularly relevant to my research, he also offers observations on trends in contemporary lay practice such as the blurring line between monks and laypeople, increasing individualism among practitioners, growing diversity in schools of practice, and expanding roles of Buddhist women. While this discussion provides valuable insight into the broader landscape of lay practice, his work does not include

the voices of actual lay practitioners, real-life examples that would illustrate more vividly his general observations. This may have been beyond the scope of his work, but it is an element I hope my research will add.

Indeed, in addition to focusing on urban lay practitioners, another major way my project differs from previous studies is in terms of methodological approach: I seek to research at the level of the individual, delving in-depth into their lifeworlds. By contrast, Spiro's sweeping study aims to analyze at the societal and cultural levels, asking such broad questions as how Burmese Buddhism can be explained by features of Burmese culture and society, and conversely how Burmese culture and society has been shaped by Buddhism. Although less grand in scope, the studies of Tambiah, Terwiel, and Bunnag are still framed at the level of the village or community rather than the individual.

A number of more recent works, still based on an ethnographic approach, have offered more intimate views of individual practitioners. Falk's (2002) study of Buddhist nuns in Thailand is broadly concerned with issues of gender and religious agency and is based on interviews with over a hundred nuns. However, she also collects a few full-length life stories of key informants she had interviewed in-depth, and devotes a chapter to themes drawn from their stories, as told in their own voices. While her informants are nuns and not laypeople, the stories they tell about their lives prior to ordination and their reasons for choosing the religious vocation provide insight into concerns that may well resonate with those of laypeople engaged in serious Buddhist practice.

Another study that is more closely related to my project is Cadge's (2005) ethnography of two Theravada Buddhist communities in contemporary America, one centered on a Thai temple and composed mainly of Thai immigrants and the other centered on an insight meditation center and composed mainly of Caucasian converts. She explores different interpretations of Buddhist teachings and practice, both at the level of the communities – what she conceives of as “organizational containers” holding certain beliefs and practices – and at the level of individual practitioners. Her main concern is analyzing how Buddhism has been adapted to fit American culture and society. While at first this may seem far removed from a study of Theravada Buddhism in its native locale, in actuality interesting parallels can be drawn between

the Buddhism of Caucasian converts and that of urban, middle-class, educated and to some degree Westernized Thais, who are both drawn to a rational approach that de-emphasizes rituals and focuses on meditation.

Even as Cadge explores the larger issues of immigration and cultural assimilation, we never lose sight of the individual practitioner as she has artfully woven quotes and narrative sketches of her informants throughout her study. However, while colorful, the stories she conveys did not strike me as running very deep. Quotes are used in an impressionistic way, and are drawn rather randomly from a large number of informants, which does not allow us a more intimate view of the quoted individual. In a way this is an unavoidable consequence of her research methodology, which involved interviewing almost a hundred lay practitioners. This approach may have been necessary to yield the sort of broad picture appropriate for her purposes, but is not in-depth enough to develop a rich, holistic understanding of an informant's life and practice.

There are only a few examples of research that has leaned towards reaching that kind of understanding. Van Esterik (1982) comes closer, interviewing three rural Thai laywomen and drawing individual portraits that offer more information on their personal and family background in which to contextualize her discussion of the ways they bring Buddhist ideas and practices to bear in their lives. Cadge, Falk and van Esterik all bring to light the great diversity that exists among Buddhist practitioners, but van Esterik's work has the added dimension of offering a more coherent view of individual practitioners' lives. However, as her study was small in scale, it was still limited in the depth to which she got to know her informants.

Another example is the work of Kritsadarat (1999), who studies how six Buddhist teenagers conceptualize a "virtuous Buddhist self" and use everyday consumption to create it. Unlike the previously mentioned researchers, she adopts a phenomenological rather than ethnographic approach and immerses herself deeply in the lifeworlds of six Buddhist teenagers, not only interviewing them but joining them in their Buddhist activities and even exploring their homes and personal possessions. Her research is useful in reflecting this more in-depth research methodology as well as in showing how dedication to Buddhist practice is accompanied by particular lifestyle choices. However, her narrow focus on consumption means other elements

of their lifestyles – especially major ones, such as jobs – that may have also been guided by Buddhist practice are not explored. Another limitation is her problematic conceptual approach. By viewing consumption decisions purely as a means of consciously constructing a “Buddhist self” she does not consider the possibility that they may on some level be unconscious and natural outgrowths of Buddhist practice. Indeed, her overriding concern with issues of self-representation and social symbolism overshadows any attempt to truly understand their spiritual practice.

To find sources that would contain both rich life stories as well as deeper explanations of spiritual practice, I had to look outside of the academic literature and read biographies, autobiographies, or personal essays of Buddhist practitioners. In this department, there is a wealth of material. The autobiography of famous lay meditation teacher Ranjuan Intharakamhaeng (Ranjuan 2547) provides an interesting perspective, its title – *Chiwit Lok, Chiwit Tham (Worldly Life, Dhamma Life)* – speaking right to the fundamental issue of how a serious Buddhist practitioner balances between the mundane and the supramundane spheres. In addition to full-length autobiographies, there are also collections of shorter accounts, either interviews or personal essays (Batchelor 1996, Dhammika 1990, Pikul 2547). These have the advantage of offering views of a diverse range of Buddhist practitioners – in Thailand and the West, lay and ordained – and their accordingly varied views and experiences of Buddhist practice. Through them, one gains insight into the major issues they grapple with and some recurring themes. However, when each individual’s story is told separately, as is the case in this genre as a whole, there is no comparative analysis between different people’s experiences provided.

My aim is to carve a middle ground – probing deeply into personal stories but also processing them analytically, yet delineating this analysis in a way that still captures the freshness of their voices. I also want to ground that analysis in issues of religiosity, rather than shifting primary emphasis to other analytical lens such as gender or cultural adaptation as in many anthropological studies related to Buddhism, including some of those previously discussed. That is not to say I will not touch on these other concerns at all, but rather that I will consider them in a way that grows out of the issue of what it means to lead a spiritual life, which remains the crux of my research.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The Noble Eightfold Path (*Atthangika-magga*)**

Conceived most broadly, to practice dhamma is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path (*Atthangika-magga*).<sup>5</sup> Comprising the last of the Four Noble Truths (*Ariyasacca* 4), the Path is the Buddha's essential teaching on the way to ultimate liberation from suffering. The entirety of dhamma practice can be summarized in the eight aspects of the Path. In addition, some scholars such as Payutto highlight two prerequisites to the Path, which provide conditions for the arising of Right View (Payutto 1990: 46-47). Given its all-encompassing centrality, I shall use the Noble Eightfold Path as the overarching framework in this thesis.

#### ***Pre-Magga Factors***

1. Association with Good Friends (*kalyanamittata*)
2. Systematic Attention (*yonisomanisikara*)

#### ***Magga***

##### **Wisdom (*Panna*)**

1. Right View (*samma-ditthi*)
2. Right Intention (*samma-sankappa*)

##### **Morality (*Sila*)**

3. Right Speech (*samma-vaca*)
4. Right Action (*samma-kammanta*)
5. Right Livelihood (*samma-ajiva*)

##### **Mental Discipline (*Samadhi*)**

6. Right Effort (*samma-vayama*)
7. Right Mindfulness (*samma-sati*)
8. Right Concentration (*samma-samadhi*)

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A for the full text of the sutta that expounds on the Noble Eightfold Path.

The various parts of the Path will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapters. Here, I will provide here a general overview and elaborate on key concepts.<sup>6</sup>

The Noble Eightfold Path is properly understood not as a linear sequence of steps, but as a holistic system. All the factors are mutually supportive, much like individual strands of a rope that intertwine to give it strength. At beginning stages of practice, there does need to be some sequence in following the Path, but ultimately all factors have to be developed in tandem.

The Path can be subdivided into three modules: wisdom (*panna*), morality (*sila*) and mental discipline (*samadhi*).<sup>7</sup> *Panna* is placed first, because a preliminary level of Right View and Right Intention, based on intellectual understanding, is necessary to set off on the Path. *Panna* also informs all the other parts of the Path, ensuring they are practiced properly. *Sila*, or restraint from unwholesome actions, prevents the expression of defilements. Once their hold on the mind is weakened, *samadhi* can be achieved. *Samadhi* in turn is the foundation for the development of *panna*. All three modules are developed together until one reaches the highest type of *panna*, that which is based on insight and brings full liberation. Thus, the Path both begins and culminates with *panna*, coming full circle. However, as *sila* is seen as the basic practice, the Path is often expressed in the sequence of *sila-samadhi-panna* (morality-mental discipline-wisdom).

The three modules can be further grouped into two categories: external and internal development. *Sila* is considered the external aspect, pertaining to actions of body and speech, which have impact on the outside world. *Panna* and *samadhi* are considered the internal aspects of practice, pertaining to actions of the mind. Although the latter are technically “internal,” I will also consider concrete, externally observable ways they are cultivated and integrated into daily life.

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<sup>6</sup> Further explanations of the Noble Eightfold Path can be found in Payutto 1990: 46-48 and Bhikkhu Bodhi 1984.

<sup>7</sup> *Samadhi* is also sometimes translated as “meditation” or “concentration”.

In the course of this thesis, I shall examine all eight parts of the Path, as well as the pre-requisite of Good Friendship (*kalyanamittata*), given how integral a part of daily life it is. Chapter II will discuss all three factors of *sila-samadhi-panna* in general, but focus particularly on the factors of internal development, *samadhi-panna*. The factor of *sila* will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters III and IV, which examine how it is practiced in two external fields of daily life – Right Livelihood (*samma-ajiva*) and Good Friendship (*kalyanamittata*), respectively. The latter chapters will, however, also include discussion of *samadhi-panna* as they are intertwined with *sila*.

### **Conceptualization and Actualization: Understanding and Practice**

I have previously stated that my intention is to investigate at two levels: how *patibat tham* is conceptualized and actualized. In reality, the two levels cannot be so clearly divided, and can more accurately be regarded as a two-way process. Each influences the other in a back-and-forth interaction as one's *patibat tham* constantly evolves.

At times, the two can be out of sync. For example, one's conception of *patibat tham* may be impossible to actualize given factors like one's life circumstances. Adjustments may then be made on either, or both, fronts to restore a balance. Accordingly, I will try to weave the two levels together in my analysis. However, in writing my discussion, I will at some points have to separate them into different sections for the sake of clarity.

The interdependence between the two is consonant with the nature of the Noble Eightfold Path. In fact, the conceptualization – actualization process can be schematized in terms of the Path. Conceptualization can be associated with *panna*, which both informs and is informed by the actual practice of *sila* and *samadhi*.

To be more precise, the use of the word “conceptualization” is actually problematic. It implies a purely cerebral or intellectual exercise. A better word to use would be “understanding,” which can encompass non-intellectual, i.e. experiential,

processes as well. It would reflect the Buddhist view that both intellectual and experiential knowledge contribute to the development of *panna*.

In part, my informants' understanding of *patibat tham* comes from studying dhamma and intellectually reflecting on it. However, from actually practicing it, they gain experiential insights that can revise or deepen their intellectual understanding. Ultimately, *patibat tham* can only be truly understood through practice. In order to comprehend as fully as possible their understanding, I asked them to explain theoretical dhamma in their own words (which I supplemented by my own reading of Buddhist texts) as well as relate stories about their experiences. I realize, nevertheless, that at some level their understanding cannot be expressed in words.

### **Integration of *Patibat Tham* into Daily Life**

The integration of *patibat tham* into daily life can be more clearly understood as a balance of two possible approaches: changing *how* one leads one's life and *what* makes up one's life. The *how* relates to the internal factors of *panna* and *samadhi* while the *what* relates to the external factor of *sila*. As such, the latter can be more directly observed, although both aspects will be considered.

Again, the two are not neatly divisible, nor easily delineated. How the possible combinations play out can be complicated algorithms. Sometimes, the right *what* (e.g. a Right Livelihood) can be done in a manner that is not the right *how* (e.g. without Right Mindfulness), and vice versa. In addition, a single person may reflect different balances of the two in different areas of their lives.

The following figure shows how these key concepts can be represented within the framework of the Path, rearranged here for the purpose of clarity:



**Figure 1.1 Theoretical Framework**

Practice (Actual)	<b><u>Morality (<i>Sila</i>)</u></b>	External Development “What” Changes
	Right Speech ( <i>samma-vaca</i> )	
	Right Action ( <i>samma-kammanta</i> ) Right Livelihood ( <i>samma ajiva</i> )	
Understanding (Conceptual)	<b><u>Mental Discipline (<i>Samadhi</i>)</u></b>	Internal Development “How” Changes
	Right Effort ( <i>samma-vayama</i> ) Right Mindfulness ( <i>samma-sati</i> )	
	Right Concentration ( <i>samma-samadhi</i> )	
Understanding (Conceptual)	<b><u>Wisdom (<i>Panna</i>)</u></b>	
	Right View ( <i>samma-ditthi</i> ) Right Intention ( <i>samma-sankappa</i> )	

**Approaches to Following the Path*****Dana-Sila-Bhavana vs. Sila-Samadhi-Panna***

While the Noble Eightfold Path is the universal way for any individual to reach enlightenment, there are certain particularities in the version geared towards laypeople which differ from that for monks, at least according to doctrinal explication and conventional practice.

The three modules of the Path (*sila-samadhi-panna*) also comprise the Threefold Training (*tri-sikkha*), which is composed of training in higher morality (*adhisila-sikkha*), training in higher mentality (*adhicitta-sikkha*), and training in higher wisdom (*adhipanna-sikkha*). The work of this higher training is traditionally prescribed especially for monks (e.g. A. I.229).

According to Payutto, what is more widely taught for the laity in Thai and other Theravada cultures, however, is the triad of giving or generosity (*dana*), morality (*sila*) and mental cultivation (*bhavana*). They comprise the popular lay Buddhist practices, which are, moreover, commonly understood as ways to make

merit. In the Pali canon, the triad is called the three bases of meritorious action (*punnakiriyavatthu*) or the threefold training in the good (*punna-sikkha*) (It. 15, 51). They may be considered the lay version of the Threefold Training, a rearrangement of the monastic training triad made to suit the laity (Payutto 1990: 48).

The main difference between these two renditions of the Threefold Training is the point of emphasis. In the monks' version, individual cultivation is stressed, while in the laypeople's, the social aspects of life are prioritized. Still involved in the worldly life, laypeople are necessarily more concerned with good social relations and more tangible contributions to the social good, particularly given their duty to materially support the sangha. As such, while the single factor of *sila* covers the monks' general social responsibility, it is split in the lay version into the more concrete social act of *dana* as well as *sila*. Conversely, the two internal and more individual factors of training in *samadhi* and *panna* are for laypeople combined in the broader, more generalized term for mental cultivation, *bhavana* (Payutto 1990: 48-49). For the monk, both of the factors of *samadhi* and *panna* are explicitly laid out, which implies they are concerned with a higher level of technical mastery than laypeople, and that it is their dedicated vocation to do develop this, whereas it is not highlighted as such a crucial focus of lay practice.

### ***Three Levels of Purpose in Merit-Making***

Another way to delineate different approaches to Buddhist practice is provided by the doctrinal view on three different levels of goals in merit-making (*Attha*). I draw on both Payutto's classical definitions in his *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Payutto 2546: 110; with further elaboration in Payutto 1990: 50) and the interpretation set forth in the popular book *Chalad Tham Bun*, co-written by Phra Chai Woratham and Phra Phaisan Visalo, which represents a modern take on making merit (Phra Chai and Phra Phaisan 2548: 23-25).

The first level (*ditthadhammattha*) is, as stated by Payutto, for the purpose of "benefits obtainable here and now; the good to be won in this life; temporal welfare" such as prosperity, health, and good social relations.

The second level (*samparayikattha*) is for the purpose of “the good to be won in the life to come; spiritual welfare.” This includes peace of mind, a blameless life, and confidence with regard to future lives. In Phra Chai and Phra Phaisan’s version, it is also described more broadly as spiritual self-development, such as the cultivation of morality, virtue, and compassion.

The third level (*paramattha*) is for “the highest good; final goal, ie. *nibbana*.” In Phra Chai and Phra Phaisan’s version, it is explained without using the word “*nibbana*” but rather in terms of liberation as a mental state, having a radiant mind free from suffering, obtained when one sees reality as it is.

Just as the higher training of the mind (*tri-sikkha*) is generally considered the work of monks but not necessarily of laypeople, so it is less expected of laypeople to make merit for the third level of purpose.

### **“Kammatic” vs “Nibbanic” Buddhism**

To borrow Spiro’s (1970) terminology, the difference between focusing practice on *dana-sila-bhavana* and on *sila-samadhi-panna* or the difference between making merit at just the first and second levels of purpose and at the third level as well can be conceived as the difference between being “kammatic” and “nibbanic” in one’s Buddhist practice. Kammatic Buddhists are primarily concerned with karma, with their aim being to accumulate merit or good karma to attain happiness in this life and the next, rather than ultimate liberation. Nibbanic Buddhists aim instead at attaining *nibbana* in this life – or at least, in as few lives as possible.

Spiro finds that in Burma the vast majority of laypeople were kammatic, although a small minority may be nibbanic. Being nibbanic was widely considered to be the province of monks, but not a norm for laypeople. Even though Spiro’s study is based on fieldwork conducted in Burma, one can argue that the Burmese and Thai Theravada Buddhist cultures are similar enough that his findings can be extrapolated to the Thai case. Thus, Thai laypeople who are interested in meditation and nibbanic in orientation form an atypical minority, although their numbers are growing.

## **Methodology**

In conducting this research, I have adopted an inductive approach. I have used two main qualitative methods: in-depth interviews and participant-observation. The data collected was then analyzed to identify emerging themes. To deepen my analysis I have also conducted documentary research on doctrinal Buddhist teachings as well as those of contemporary teachers.

### **Interviews**

#### ***Preliminary Interviews***

Laying the groundwork for the thesis, I conducted preliminary interviews with Buddhist practitioners and dhamma teachers to gain insight into the experiences of lay practitioners and common issues they grappled with, as well as identify possible informants.

#### ***Informant Selection***

A limited sample size of eight people was used in order to insure depth, while also providing room for breadth. The common selection criteria used were:

- 1) Education of at least bachelor's degree
- 2) Middle to upper level income bracket
- 3) Currently living in Bangkok<sup>8</sup>
- 4) Considered themselves serious dhamma practitioners

Beyond these basic criteria, I aimed to assemble a sample that reflected diversity in the following:

- 1) Age (20-50 years)
- 2) Gender

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<sup>8</sup> One informant currently lives in Phuket but comes regularly to Bangkok, where she is in enrolled in a Ph.D. program. She had moved back to Phuket in 2002 after many years living and working in Bangkok.

3) Professions

4) Schools/teachers of dhamma practice followed

A combination of snowball and purposive sampling was used. Of those I interviewed in the preliminary stages, I decided to continue further interviewing two persons in-depth. The remaining informants were recruited through referrals from others I had spoken to during preliminary interviews, contacts made at Buddhism-related events I attended, my own personal network, and existing thesis informants.

Rather than identify eight people right at the outset, I let the selection process unfold according to themes that emerged. I started with a few people, and let what I discovered from interviewing them help determine the profile of the remaining informants, e.g. finding a representative from a career mentioned disapprovingly by a previous informant.

Regarding age, I strived for a roughly equal distribution – three in their twenties, three in their thirties, and two in their forties.

As for gender, I did not think it was necessary to achieve a fifty-fifty split between males and females, and in fact it may be more representative of reality not to. In practical terms, I found it difficult to find male informants – which itself serves as an indicator of there being proportionately more women than men among serious lay practitioners. This imbalance was most easily observable at retreats, where women consistently outnumbered men.

The profiles of my informants are summarized in the following table.

**Table 1.1 Informant Background**

Informant *	Sex	Age	Approx. Age Started P.T.	Approx. No. of Yrs. P.T.	Approx. Yr. Started P.T.	Schools of Practice **	Educational Background	Profession	Marital Status
Thep	M	24	12	12	1994	Dhammakaya, Forest Tradition	B.A. Religious Studies; M.Phil. Buddhist Studies†; LLB Law†	University Program Coordinator; Student	Single
Pok	M	27	20	7	1999	S.N. Goenka, Forest Tradition	B.A. Psychology; M.A. Counseling	Counselor, Drug Rehabilitation Program of the Department of Probation	Single
Waew	F	29	27	2	2004	YBAT, Forest Tradition	B.A. Architecture	Managing Director, Retail Company	Single
Daeng	F	33	29	4	2002	YBAT, LP Pramot	B.A. Political Science; M.A. Organizational Management	Managing Director, Publishing Company	Married
Ko	F	34	29	5	2001	YBAT, Plum Village, L.P. Pramot	B.A. English; M.A. Anthropology	Freelance Writer; Coordinator, Constructive Media Project; Moderator, Contemplative Workshops	Single
Mi	F	36	29	7	1999	Suan Mokkh, Plum Village, Forest Tradition	B.A. & M.A. Accounting; M.B.A; M.A. Translation; Ph.D. Buddhist Studies†	Finance Manager, Hotel; Student	Single
Fai	F	46	38	8	1998	YBAT, L.P. Pramot	B.A. Mass Communications	Dhamma Teacher; Writer (Dhamma Books and Others)	Married 2 child.
Noi	F	47	32	15	1991	S.N. Goenka, Forest Tradition, Suan Mokkh	B.A., M.A. & Ph.D. European Literature	University Professor	Single

\* Names changed to preserve anonymity

\*\* Currently practicing in; influenced by; or had past experience in, even if no longer practicing in that tradition

† Currently pursuing.

### ***Informant Interviews***

In-depth interviews were conducted with each informant over multiple meetings. On average, I interviewed each informant three times, for a total of eight hours. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The interviews were semi-structured. To serve as a loose discussion guide (see Appendix C), I had devised a set of general themes and associated questions based on preliminary interviews and a literature review of similar studies and biographies of Buddhist practitioners. I began with the most open-ended questions to allow informants to bring up on their own what they themselves found important. I did not ask all the more detailed questions in the discussion guide outright, but kept them in mind and raised relevant issues as the conversation naturally progressed. I then generated more follow-up questions in an iterative process. After each interview, I would review my notes and identify particularly interesting points, emerging themes, or omissions that I wished to explore further in the subsequent interview.

To address clarification questions and further questions that emerged after having done one level of data analysis, I conducted additional follow-up interviews, mostly over the phone. These averaged 2 hours per informant.

### **Participant Observation**

#### ***Meditation Retreats and Classes***

To better comprehend the different schools of practice influencing my informants, I went to various retreats, meditation classes, and dharma talks associated with them. I chose retreats that my informants had themselves previously attended.

Retreats were particularly useful in not only improving my theoretical grasp of each school's approach to practice, but gaining an experiential understanding, the importance of which was highly emphasized by my informants. Many had told me,

“you have to also practice in order to understand what I am talking about.” By attending, I was also able to have a first-hand taste of the “retreat experience,” a key component of their *patibat tham*.

I did almost all of these activities on my own, given the difficulty of coordinating schedules with my informants. Besides, I did not see the necessity of being accompanied by my informants as activities like retreats are more suited to going by oneself. I have also included retreat experiences I had prior to beginning my formal thesis research as they still served to inform my understanding of informants’ stories and views. My experiences with different schools of practice are summarized in the following table.

**Table 1.2 Schools of Practice Experienced**

School of Practice	Informants Associated With*	Activity	Date
Vedananupassana (S.N. Goenka)	Noi, Pok	10 Day Retreat	March 2006, January 2007
Young Buddhist Association of Thailand (Khun Mae Siri)	Fai, Daeng, Waew, Ko	7 Day Retreat	August 2004**
Plum Village (Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh)	Ko, Mi	3 Day Retreat	April 2005**
		1 Day Retreat	September 2006
Forest Tradition (Ven. Achan Cha and others in lineage of Luang Pu Man)	Tom, Mi, Thep, Noi, Waew	3 Day Retreat	December 2003**
Dhammakaya† (Luang Pho Sot)	Thep	Half-Day Meditation Class	October 2006
Cittanupassana (Luang Pho Pramot)	Daeng, Fai, Ko	Dhamma Talk, Visit	March 2006
Suan Mokkh (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu)	Mi, Noi	Dhamma Talk, Visit	May 2006, November 2006

\* Currently practicing in; influenced by; or had past experience in, even if no longer practicing in that tradition

\*\* Prior to beginning thesis research proper

† Dhammakaya meditation method, not Wat Dhammakaya



### *Other Dhamma-Related Activities*

I also wanted to explore other dhamma-related activities accompanied by my informants. I went with them to various dhamma venues in order to participate in the activities, observe the environment, and hear teachings by their teachers. I also experienced special activities on two Buddhist holy days. My experiences are summarized in the following table.

**Table 1.3 Dhamma-Related Activities Experienced**

Venue	Informant Accompanied	Activity	Date
Luang Pho Pramot's Dhamma Center (Kanchanaburi and Cholburi)	Daeng	Opening Day of Venue, Dhamma Talks	March 2006, May 2006
Chulalongkorn University Thamasathan (Bangkok)	Noi	Group Meditation Sitting, Dhamma Talks	May – October 2006
Sathien Thamasathan (Bangkok)	Noi	Tour, Dhamma Talk	March 2006
Wat Luang Pho Sot Dhammakayaram (Ratburi)	Thep	Vesak Day Celebration	May 2006
Wat Patum Wanaram (Bangkok)	None*	End of Lent Celebration	October 2006

\* Went without accompaniment, but this temple is frequented by a few informants

Other events I attended which were not held at typical dhamma venues included seminars/lectures about Buddhism (with Fai, Ko, Noi, and Thep); dhamma/self-development workshops (with Fai and Ko), prayer ceremony (with Noi), and dhamma book launch (with Fai and Daeng).

### ***Work***

As background to understanding their views on jobs (Right Livelihood), I visited or interviewed my informants at their workplaces or observed them in work-related activities.

### ***Social Activities***

To have a glimpse of their social relations (Good Friendship) in action, I joined some informants in social activities that included other friends of theirs, such as meals, yoga classes, and movies.

### **Research on Buddhist Teachings**

To provide a broader framework in which to understand the information gleaned from interviews and participant observation, I also did research on relevant Buddhist teachings. [e.g. on the Noble Eightfold Path, Precepts, Meditation, Right Livelihood, and Good Friendship]. First, I “went back to the source” and examined doctrinal teachings, drawing on both direct reading of passages from the Tripitaka as well as on scholarly exegesis. For the latter, I relied most heavily on the works of Payutto, chosen because he is one of the leading Thai monk-scholars whose readings of the Pali canon are regarded as representing an orthodox Theravada view. Further, with his writings being popular among educated Bangkokians, most of my informants have read at least some of his works.<sup>9</sup> As their understanding of Buddhist teachings have been significantly informed by his explications, it would be conceptually consistent to use him as a reference on Buddhist doctrine for the purposes of this thesis.

Using the same logic of reading sources that have influenced my informants, I also examined the works of contemporary teachers who have had particular impact on them. I read written works and listened to talks (recorded on CDs or video) of

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<sup>9</sup> Two informants have even read Payutto’s *Buddhadhamma*, a massive work that delineates essential Buddhist doctrine in a highly systematic and scholarly fashion.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Ven. Achan Cha, Phra Phaisan Visalo, Luang Pho Pramot Pamotcho, Ven. Thich Nhat Hahn, and S.N. Goenka. By studying their teachers, I was able to understand more fully and accurately the explanations of Buddhist concepts my informants had given during interviews citing their teachers but conveyed, often in abbreviated form, in their own words. More broadly, I was able to gain insight into their teachers' overarching approaches to interpreting Buddhist teachings, which may have influenced them in a general sense even if they had not specifically cited them.

### **Data Analysis**

As I used an iterative approach to interviewing, I was concomitantly performing data analysis as I proceeded with successive rounds of interviews. In this way, I was continually developing and refining categories in which to organize data. I began with the broad preliminary categories I had conceived prior to interviews (see headings in Discussion Guide in Appendix C), retaining, reshaping or discarding them according to how relevant they proved to be. In addition, new categories were added as interviews uncovered new lines of inquiry.

Once the main round of interviews had been completed, I highlighted the most important categories (e.g. *History of Buddhist Practice*, *Components of Patibat Tham*, *Job/Right Livelihood*, *Social Relations/Good Friendship*, *Ordination*, etc.) and mapped them conceptually to explore possible connections between them (e.g. *Components of Patibat Tham: Precepts*  $\leftrightarrow$  *Right Livelihood*). I then organized the data into these categories and identified emerging patterns that ran across different informants or categories. There were two stages of organization and analysis. First, I organized the information collected over multiple interviews for each person according to the established categories. After doing this for each informant, smaller sub-categories of meaning within each category emerged (eg. *Components of Patibat Tham*  $\rightarrow$  *Meditation*  $\rightarrow$  *Formal Meditation* vs. *Continual Mindfulness* or *Job/Right Livelihood*  $\rightarrow$  *Goals in Job*  $\rightarrow$  *Self-development*) I then further organized the data into tables comparing these categories and sub-categories across informants, allowing me to examine points of convergence and divergence with greater precision. From this

step, more detailed themes, trends, and possible factors contributing to such convergences/divergences could be teased out (e.g. reasons why some informants emphasize *Formal Meditation* while others emphasize *Continual Mindfulness*).

To deepen my analysis, I took the further step of placing what my informants said in the larger context of Buddhist teachings and practice. At one level, I determined how their conceptions of *patibat tham* fit into the framework of the Eightfold Path and Three Levels of Purpose in Merit Making. At another level, I compared their understanding of different aspects of *patibat tham* to doctrinal teachings, to analyze how they may have departed from or revised traditional understandings. Further, I explored how such departures can be traced to influences from the interpretations of Buddhist teachings put forth by contemporary monks and lay teachers.

### **Data Checking**

I cross-checked my data analysis in two ways. Firstly, I compared data from my informants with the life stories of practicing Buddhists found in biographies and published interviews to see if the experiences of those in my small sample resonated with that of other lay practitioners. Secondly, I returned my analysis to one trusted informant for critical review to check if I had understood and rendered her views accurately, and to receive feedback about my conclusions.

### **Scope and Limitations**

As I chose to study a small number of people in-depth, it was not my purpose to produce a broad survey of lay practice in contemporary Thailand, or even Bangkok. I aimed to provide richly drawn portraits of individual practitioners, and to discuss “trends” insofar as their stories reflected striking themes, whether points of convergence or divergence. I do not attempt, nor believe it possible, to extrapolate my observations conclusively to the larger population of lay practitioners. However, if one believes microcosms reveal some truths about the larger macrocosm, certain

features described about my informants may be common to other *phu patibat tham* as well.

Yet even within my limited scope, I did try to reflect diversity in different factors that could influence informants' *patibat tham*, particularly different schools of practice. To achieve this level of breadth, however, I had to sacrifice some depth. Having several schools represented made it unfeasible to understand the teachings of all of them in great depth or to explore every school equally, given time constraints. Still, I did read up on and have some practice experience of all the major traditions. This provided a more systemic understanding of each approach that went beyond a superficial view based purely on observation or casual conversation.

If dhamma practice can only be fully understood through experience, I was also constrained by my own level of practice. While I did engage in some practice prior to and during my thesis work, I could only reach so much depth. Beyond this, I could only comprehend what my informants talked of at an intellectual level. Nonetheless, I found that my practice experience, however limited, did enrich my understanding significantly.

Experiential constraints pertained particularly to technical aspects of practice, especially meditation. In any case, this thesis was not intended to be a technical manual on how to practice dhamma. As such, I did not wish to go into great detail about practice technique. I discuss it only as needed to provide sufficient background to understand my informants' own explanations of practice.

Regarding points of contention between informants, it was not my concern to judge which view was right or wrong. My aim was to report the diversity and explore the ramifications their differing views had on their practice. At most, I sought to capture how my informants themselves spoke about others' views, to convey the indirect "conversation" between their varying opinions.

## **Terminology**

Throughout the thesis, the Thai term "*patibat tham*" ("*patipatti dhamma*" in Pali) will be used instead of the possible English translation "dhamma practice" in

order to indicate it is a specialized term. As the objective of the thesis is to tease out its meanings, no conclusive English translation can be decided on at the outset. Using the Thai term will also capture the sense that we are exploring different ways real Thai practitioners actually use the term. When referring to Buddhist practice in the general sense, I will use the English term “Buddhist practice”.

There are several possible Thai phrases to indicate a person who “*patibat tham*”: “*phu patibat tham*”, “*khon patibat tham*”, or “*nak patibat tham*”. “*Khon patibat tham*” is not so commonly used in colloquial language. “*Nak patibat tham*” can be problematic because “*nak*” has the connotation of someone who is “professional” or “expert”. Some informants mentioned they were uncomfortable with the suggestion they were somehow “expert” at *patibat tham*. Thus, I have chosen to use the term “*phu patibat tham*” throughout the thesis, as it is the most neutral-sounding and commonly used of the three. Again, I will use Thai when referring to *phu patibat tham* in its specialized sense, and will use English when referring to “Buddhist practitioners” or “Buddhists” more generally.

Pali terms for Buddhist concepts will be introduced in the first usage in parentheses after the English translation. Afterwards, key terms that are frequently used throughout the thesis will be rendered in Pali to preserve the integrity of their meanings, as English translations can be imprecise. Infrequently used terms will continue to be rendered in English for simplicity.

In the English translations of quotes from informants, the original Thai word will be included in parentheses in cases where particular nuances may be lost in translation. Thai terms will be transcribed using the romanization system of the Royal Institute.

### **Introducing Eight *Phu Patibat Tham***

As my informants, eight *phu patibat tham*, are at the heart of my thesis, it is important, and only polite, to introduce them first before delving into their lives. Here I offer brief sketches of my impressions upon meeting them, that the reader may “meet” them as well, and have a “face” to put to the name when hearing their voices

in the following chapters. I also include basic information about their backgrounds and, when appropriate, important aspects of their personal histories that are helpful in providing context for their stories (elaborating on data previously presented in Table 1.1).

Thep, 22, is a slightly built and almost delicate-looking young man. Stylishly dressed, he wears a finely textured button-down shirt and designer slacks, with expensive-looking leather shoes buffed to a shine. His hair is trendily cut rather like a pop star, a bit long, layered, and dyed light brown. Despite his youth, he comes across as remarkably self-assured. He speaks earnestly, in a slow, measured way. Yet at the same time he has an impetuous air about him, reflective of his self-characterization as a person driven by feelings. Educated in England since he was ten, he had only returned to Thailand two years ago. Highly active, he is concurrently working full-time as a program coordinator at a university, completing his Master's thesis in Buddhist Studies, and attending night school to earn a bachelor's in law degree, not to mention singing in a choir and performing in the occasional opera in his spare time. As common for people his age, he does not have a clear sense of direction about his future – he is preparing for a career in law, the path his father chose for him, but is also interested in possibly pursuing a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies for his own personal fulfillment. Currently single, he says he would like to have a boyfriend, but would also be content if it did not happen.

\* \* \*

Pok, 27, has limpid, light brown eyes, with which he maintains a placid and steady gaze. Overall, he emanates a sense of calm, his voice gentle and his manner thoughtful. With his close-cropped hair, one can almost picture him as a monk. In fact, he is seriously considering ordaining by the age of thirty-five, eight years from now. And yet, rather discordantly, he tells stories of going out drinking and smoking, chasing girls and even cheating on his girlfriend. Recognizing the incongruity, he admits he is a person who went to both extremes. Indeed, once the formal interview is over and we are chatting more casually, his voice becomes somewhat gruffer and

his demeanor more boyish. Currently, he serves as a counselor in a government drug-rehabilitation program. He had taken a master's degree in counseling because he wanted to enter a profession that helped people, rather than just making money. As his father had also been a civil servant, he is satisfied with a modest income. He had recently moved from home to live at the residential rehabilitation center on the outskirts of Bangkok. He says the peaceful and natural environment reminded him of a temple. While he sometimes feels bored he is also partly glad to be removed from the sensory stimulation and temptations of the city. For all his romantic escapades, Pok ultimately does not find such relationships truly fulfilling and is growing increasingly tired of them. He is now single, having recently broken up with his girlfriend.

\* \* \*

Waew, 29, says that as a young girl she loved dressing up. Apparently, the penchant has remained. She wears an artfully put together outfit – a gauzy, but modest, white blouse worn with a bohemian white skirt, accessorized with lacy white headband, trendy high-heeled shoes, and funky jewelry. Her pretty features are highlighted by soft make-up. For all the fashionable accoutrements, what is most striking is the natural radiance of her face, and her exceptionally bright eyes. Although she had sounded brisk and business-like on the phone, she is warm and solicitous in person. Born into a wealthy family that owns a large real-estate development company, she had not coasted on her inherited privileges. She had been a diligent student in the demanding architecture program at university and at twenty-five branched off from her family's main company to start her own retail firm. As its managing director, she works extremely hard, often late into the night and on weekends. Despite her hectic schedule, she finds time to write dhamma books, her first one having become a bestseller. In addition, she has a regular dhamma column in a business magazine and occasionally is invited to speak about integrating dhamma into management. Still single, she is certain that she does not want children and has little interest in romance.



\* \* \*

Daeng, 33, is tall and lithe, dressed simply in a solid-colored t-shirt and pants. She wears no make-up and her hair is pulled back in an unfussy ponytail. But if one looks closely one can see it is actually fashionably cut with layers and blondish-brown highlights. She appears prim and proper, with a soft, highly feminine voice. Yet as she loosens up, her serene-looking face takes on a more playful cast and she occasionally lets out a husky laugh, offering glimpses of the party girl she once was. With amusement, she recalls that from her late teens to her mid-twenties she had enjoyed going out drinking with friends several times a week. After she started to *patibat tham*, she quit drinking and smoking and now prefers the quiet life. Having worked for several years at her family's publishing business, two years ago she and her brother started their own publishing firm, which produces educational books and dhamma books. As the owner and managing director, she can set her own schedule, which she has managed in such a way to allow her plenty of time for dhamma-related activities. She is married to a fellow *phu patibat tham*, but does not want children as she considers them an unnecessary burden that can prove an obstacle to serious *patibat tham*.

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Ko, 34, wears her naturally wavy hair long, pinned to the side by a decorative flower hairclip that matches her purple shirt. While her voice is sweet and gentle, a glint of mischief dances in her eyes, especially when she smiles. Carrying a heavy bag of work-related documents slung over her shoulder, she admits feeling overloaded at the moment. Last year, she had quit her job as a newspaper journalist to work on spirituality-related social action projects. The two main ones are a program to promote a more constructive and spiritually-conscious journalistic approach among media professionals and a project to educate people on how to deal with death peacefully. In addition, she still writes freelance articles on spiritual topics, helps run an art school she partly owns, and is inundated with offers to do other smaller projects, which she often cannot resist taking on. "It's a kind of greed on my part,"

she says with a laugh. She seems very open, freely admitting her flaws, putting forth her opinions, and discussing her life. Currently she has a girlfriend, but used to think romantic relationships would hamper her *patibat tham*. Now she feels that having a romantic partner may actually strengthen her *patibat tham*, as the often highly emotional interactions with someone that close provide very valuable tests for her practice.

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Mi, 36, walks slowly, her unhurried gait suggesting a patient nature. She looks a bit disheveled, with her ponytail having slipped off-center and her button-down flower-patterned shirt not quite matching her skirt. “I don’t really put much thought into my appearance. I sometimes shock people when I show up in public places dressed quite sloppily!” she later says jokingly. She certainly seems comfortable going against the norm in many areas of life. Although she appears mild-mannered, I can detect, behind her glasses, a steely determination in her eyes. “My voice may be soft, but my ideas aren’t!” she says. Still, her gentleness does seem genuine; she is simply firm in her unconventional views. Currently, she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at a major Buddhist university in Bangkok. Most of her classmates are monks and she had surprised many when, as a laywoman, she had topped the entrance exams. She balances her studies with her duties as the finance manager at her family’s hotel. Coming from a well-to-do family in Phuket, her parents had always expected her to work in the family real estate business and socialize with the local elite society. But when she returned to Phuket four years ago upon their request, she found that, try as she might, she just could not fit in. She does not enjoy her hotel work, but endures it for her parents’ sake. Over time, however, they have slowly come to accept her feelings, and no longer expect her to continue in the business. She instead plans to devote herself to do work spreading dhamma after finishing her degree. She has no desire to marry and considers romantic relationships ultimately insubstantial and a powerful source of attachment to the world. Although she is currently fielding an admirer, she says she is doing her best to resist becoming entangled.

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Fai, 46, has a short, no-fuss hair cut and no make-up on. She is wearing her customary white shirt and black pants, a style of dress often associated with religious people. She says that for her it is not a symbolic statement, but simply a matter of convenience – as she has to wear white and black when she goes to give her frequent dhamma talks at the Young Buddhists Association of Thailand, she figures she might as well put them to use on other days as well. And yet, it does make her “look the part” of a dhamma and meditation teacher, her current vocation. It also contrasts sharply with the expensive outfits she said she used to wear as a badge of status in her previous life as a businesswoman. She had once owned a thriving import business but it went bankrupt when she was swindled in a scam eight years ago, after which she began to *patibat tham*. After two years of intense practice, she no longer had any desire to return to business. Instead, she decided to devote herself to teaching dhamma and writing books, mostly related to dhamma. She describes herself as an “extreme” person, who goes “all the way” with whatever she takes on. That strength of conviction comes across in the way she speaks. She has a powerful, resonant voice and betrays no diffidence when stating her views. (However, in conversations with friends, she does talk of some doubts and frustrations.) Yet, her palpable self-confidence is undeniable, and I can easily believe it when she says she had been a headstrong child. She is married with two children. Though she has no regrets about her life now, she admits that she has made a wish (*aditthana*) not to be married in her next life, as she believes romantic love and children are like “sticky glue” binding people to the cycle of rebirth.

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Noi, 47, wears the standard attire of a university professor – conservative blouse, pleated skirt, and pumps – but keeps it simple with a short hair cut and no cosmetics or jewelry. Although a senior lecturer, she does not maintain a distant air, but seems approachable and good-humored. She smiles easily and has a light-hearted

manner of speaking. At times she can sound a bit brief, but her voice remains even-tempered and she peppers her speech liberally with “*kha*” (a word indicating politeness in Thai). She must not have forgotten this cultural habit despite the many years she spent in Europe pursuing her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. Since returning to Thailand, she has spent her career in academia and has taught European language and culture at her current university for over ten years. In addition, she sometimes works as an interpreter, including for well-known Buddhist teachers. She is not married, having never had much interest in domesticity, but has not entirely closed off the option for the future.

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Even upon meeting my informants for the first time, it was evident that they defied any pigeon-holing into one-dimensional stereotypes of preternaturally serene, austere, or even saintly *phu patibat tham*. While I could sense in each of them some form of inner calm, there also seemed to be much more to them than that. There was certainly no uniform mold for all of them, with the distinct differences in the way each looked, sounded, and acted holding the promise of an interesting diversity in approaches to *patibat tham*. There also appeared to be internal diversity within each individual, certain dissonances in their personalities and contradictions between their worldly and otherworldly impulses, their higher and baser instincts. For instance, in some ways they seemed genuinely simple and unassuming, but at times many also betrayed traces of pride in being different from the mainstream. The complexity they revealed this early on gave an inkling of the many complications and contradictions that are possibly involved in their attempts to *patibat tham* seriously as laypeople. Rather than rushing to premature conclusions, it would seem sounder, and more fun, to exercise a little patience, leave a lot of room for surprise, and let the twists and turns of their journeys unfold.