

The Traditions of the Noble Ones

An Essay on the Thai Forest Tradition and its Relationship with the Dhammayut Hierarchy

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One of the most intriguing issues in the social history of the Dhammayut Forest Tradition founded by Phra Ajaan Sao Kantasilo and Phra Ajaan Mun Bhuridatto has been its conflicted and volatile relationship to the Dhammayut administrative hierarchy. The conflict between the two groups first broke into the open in 1926, when Somdet Mahawirawong (Tisso Uan) ordered a student of Ajaan Mun's – Phra Ajaan Singh Khantiyagamo – together with a following of 50 monks and 100 nuns and lay people to leave a forest at Baan Hua Taphaan, in Ubon Rachathani province, an area under Tisso Uan's jurisdiction. Ajaan Singh refused to comply, and drawn-out negotiations were required to prevent civil action against him and his following. The relationship between the two groups remained tense for more than two decades, during which time Tisso Uan repeatedly ordered the Forest monks to settle down, study the curriculum of texts sponsored by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and then devote themselves to becoming teachers and administrators. Even after Ajaan Mun's death in 1949, Tisso Uan continued to insist that Ajaan Mun was unqualified to teach.

The tide turned in the early 1950's, when Phra Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo – another student of Ajaan Mun – was able to teach meditation to Tisso Uan, causing him to reverse his formerly low opinion of the Forest tradition. Tisso Uan began actively promoting the teachings of Ajaan Lee. Following his lead, other highly ranked Bangkok monks, including a later Supreme Patriarch (Juan Utthayi) of Wat Makutkasatriyaram and the current Supreme Patriarch (Charoen Suvattano), became avid supporters of the Forest tradition. Later generations of Dhammayut administrators continued this support through the end of the 20th century. Part of this support seems to have been based on genuine respect for the obvious mental powers of the Forest monks – tales of their psychic powers and the purity of their conduct filled the press – while another part has been ascribed to the useful function the Forest monks played in the 1970's in helping to ease the Communist threat by converting large numbers of Communists in the forests of the Northeast.

The parliamentary election of 2001, however, caused a marked turnabout. In that election, the government of Chuan Leekphai fell partly because it had tried to thwart Phra Ajaan Mahabua's Save the Nation campaign aimed at

underwriting the Thai currency. Chuan's fall alerted the Bangkok hierarchy to the new-found political influence of the Forest tradition, which many in the hierarchy found threatening. The Mahanikaya hierarchy, which had long been antipathetic to the Forest monks, convinced the Dhammayut hierarchy that their future survival lay in joining forces against the Forest monks, and against Ajaan Mahabua in particular. Thus the last few years have witnessed a series of standoffs between the Bangkok hierarchy and the Forest monks led by Ajaan Mahabua, in which government-run media have personally attacked Ajaan Mahabua. The hierarchy has also proposed a series of laws— a Sangha Administration Act, a land-reform bill, and a “special economy” act— that would have closed many of the Forest monasteries, stripped the remaining Forest monasteries of their wilderness lands, or made it legal for monasteries to sell their lands. These laws would have brought about the effective end of the Forest tradition, at the same time preventing the resurgence of any other forest tradition in the future. So far, none of these proposals have become law, but the issues separating the Forest monks from the hierarchy are far from settled.

The dynamics of this relationship are of more than mere institutional interest. They have had an impact on the spread of the Forest Tradition and on the way it has expressed its ideals orally and in written form. Given the past role of forest traditions as sources for reform in Thai Buddhism, if this conflict leads to an end of the possibility for any forest tradition to survive in Thailand, the long-term prospects for the health of Thai Buddhism are grim.

Although many books and articles have been written on the Forest tradition, none have adequately explained the reasons for the volatility of the tradition's relationship to the Bangkok hierarchy. At least four hypotheses have been proposed to explain this relationship, but there are problems with each.

Ferguson and Ramitanondh, in their article, “Monks and Hierarchy in Northern Thailand,” argue that the Forest monks were simply an advance guard for the spread of more sedentary Dhammayut monks into the Northeast. In their eyes, the Forest monks served to establish monasteries in outlying areas, which, as the areas became more settled, they would then abandon to seek still more isolated areas in which to practice. Meanwhile, town and village Dhammayut monks would then move into the abandoned monasteries, changing them from centers of meditation to centers of study and administration. Although many instances of this pattern can be cited, the problem with this thesis is that it does not explain the intense conflict that has periodically arisen between the Forest and the administrative monks.

S. J. Tambiah's explanation of the relationship between the two groups in his book, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, suffers from a similar drawback. Tambiah states that although the Dhammayut order originated as a reformist, ascetic movement, its Bangkok hierarchy eventually was overwhelmed by its political alliance with the royal family and so eventually became more lax and “mainstream” in its practice; the Forest monks, on the other

hand, being further from the political center, were able to maintain the ascetic aspect of Prince Mongkut's vision [Tambiah, p. 165]. There is a kernel of truth to this characterization, although it accepts unquestionably the idea that the decline in Bangkok Dhammayut practice was inevitable, and does not look into whether this decline was the result of conscious choices from the top. Tambiah's thesis also shares the same problem as Ferguson and Ramitanondh's thesis in that it cannot explain the animosity that developed between the Dhammayut hierarchy and the Forest monks in the 1920's. In fact, Tambiah seems ignorant of any animosity in the relationship at all. In his eyes, the Dhammayut hierarchy originally adopted a policy of benign neglect toward the Forest monks, moving to a policy of more proactive support when this served its political purposes in the 1960's. (Tambiah bases this part of his characterization, as he does so much of his portrayal of Bangkok ecclesiastical politics, on the testimony of "Mr. X," a Mahanikaya informer. In this case, his dates for the hierarchical support for Forest monks are about ten years off.) Both Taylor [pp. 272-273] and Kamala [pp. 228, 287-288] accept Tambiah's thesis that the rapprochement between the hierarchy and the Forest monks can be fully described in terms of Bangkok politics, ignoring the fact that the original impetus for the rapprochement came from the Forest monks themselves. Finally, Tambiah's thesis cannot explain the volatility of the relationship between the two groups.

J. L. Taylor, in *Forest Monks and the Nation State*, gives two separate analyses to explain the conflicted relationship between the Forest monks and the Dhammayut hierarchy. The first analysis follows the work of R. J. O'Connor in attributing the conflict between the two groups to Bangkok's suspicion that the Forest monks deviated from orthodox Buddhist teachings to engage in magic and other indigenous practices; once the Forest monks had proven their orthodoxy, the hierarchy accepted them [Taylor, pp. 126-128]. This thesis, however, does not explain why the Bangkok hierarchy took so long to determine whether the Forest monks were orthodox or not – Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo had published a very orthodox description of the meditative path in 1936, and yet Tisso Uan did not accept his teachings until the early 1950's.

Taylor's second explanation for the conflicted relationship between the two groups is based on his observation that the Theravada tradition has had a long history of distrust between monks who follow the scholarly vocation and those who follow the meditative one. He points out, accurately, that even during the period of relatively calm relations between the Forest monks and the Dhammayut hierarchy, there were still individual monks who maintained this sense of distrust [pp. 272, 284]. However, he undercuts his thesis by noting that certain scholarly monks were favorably inclined to the Forest tradition even during the period of strained relations [pp. 53, 58]. Thus, this second analysis has very little explanatory power. And nowhere does Taylor try to combine the two analyses to present an overarching explanation for the dynamic of the relationship between the two groups.

Kamala Tiyanich, in her book, *Forest Recollections*, offers the most extensive attempt to explain the ups and downs in the relationship between the two groups. The conflict between the two she explains by turning Tambiah on his head, asserting that the Dhammayut Forest tradition was further away from the original Dhammayut vision than was the later Dhammayut hierarchy. She proposes that the Forest tradition began with a rejection of the reforms instituted by the Dhammayut movement and a return to pre-reform practices and ideals in five areas: meditation practice, *dhutanga* (*thudong*) practice, the use of traditional medicine and chants to cure disease, a lack of interest in the particulars of Vinaya practice, and a tolerant attitude toward practices that diverged from theirs. Because of the vast chasm she sees between the Forest monks and the Dhammayut hierarchy, she attributes the hierarchy's about-face in the 1950's to a particularly cynical motive, simply to tap into the popularity of the Forest monks after the Dhammayut order had lost its main source of support with the fall of the absolute monarchy.

Just as Kamala's thesis is by far the most complex and extensive of the four, it also is by far the most problematic, for two orders of reasons. The first is that the thesis presents many logical problems. It cannot explain why a pre-reform reactionary meditation movement would develop within a reform sect. It also cannot explain why, if the Forest monks felt pressure from the Dhammayut hierarchy, they didn't turn to the Mahanikaya hierarchy for protection. It also doesn't explain why the Forest monks would be willing to compromise with the Dhammayut hierarchy at a later date.

The second order of problems with Kamala's thesis is that it simply does not accord with the facts. Much of the evidence she cites to support her thesis that the Forest monks represent a return to pre-reform ideals and practices is either taken out of context or actually disproves what she is trying to assert. Moreover, there is an overwhelming body of external evidence to prove her wrong. To take each of her points one by one:

Meditation. Kamala notes correctly that pre-reform monks practiced *khaathaa aakhom* or *vichaa aakhom* meditation [Kamala, p. 280] and that Ajaan Sao studied meditation with some of them [Kamala, pp. 263-264]. From this she argues that the simple fact that they practiced meditation typifies the Forest monks as pre-reform. She fails to note, however, that the early Dhammayut movement also sponsored meditation practice, and that the practices it sponsored differed radically from the quasi-tantric *khaathaa aakhom* meditation of pre-reform monks. She also fails to note that Ajaan Sao, before becoming a teacher of meditation, repudiated the *khaathaa aakhom* meditation he learned from pre-reform monks, and instead took up the practice of meditation topics that the Dhammayut movement had revived from the Pali Canon in Prince Mongkut's time: the practice of *buddhanussati* (recollection of the Buddha), *anapanasati* (mindfulness of breathing), *maranassati* (mindfulness of death), and in particular, *kayagatasati*, or mindfulness immersed in the body. This last practice, in fact,

became one of the defining practices of the Forest movement, in that it is also known as the *kammattana*, or basic occupation of a monk, a meditation practice taught by each preceptor to each new ordinand. Thus, the Dhammayut forest monks were often called “*kammattana*” monks to distinguish them from pre-reform forest meditation monks.

Taylor provides information on one *khaathaa aakhom* monk, Samretlun, who was popular in Laos and Northeastern Thailand in Ajaan Sao’s day. He notes that Ajaan Sao publicly repudiated Samretlun’s teachings and was able to attract many of the latter’s former students to switch to the Dhammayut style of meditation [Taylor, pp. 54, 111-112]. Strangely, Kamala herself, in one of her footnotes, cites a comment by a student of Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Chaa, deriding monks who use rosary beads (one of the basic practices of *khaathaa aakhom*) as looking like Chinese merchants calculating with an abacus [Kamala, p. 325, n.66].

Dhutanga. The original Dhammayut movement had inherited a definition of *dhutanga* from their Mon predecessors, one that derived from the Pali Commentaries and had roots in the Pali Canon. In this definition, *dhutanga* denotes a series of thirteen ascetic practices that monks could adopt as optional restrictions on their behavior, above and beyond the Vinaya rules, such as going on alms, eating only one meal a day, eating from the alms bowl, etc. This is in contradistinction to the meaning of *dhutanga* (or *thudong*) in the context of pre-reform Thai Buddhism: the practice of leaving the monastery and wandering, sometimes on pilgrimage, but without any reference to the thirteen commentarial *dhutanga* practices. As Kamala herself notes, this second form of *dhutanga* practice was an opportunity for monks and novices to let off steam after being cooped up all year in their monasteries [Kamala, p. 38]. Prince Mongkut, the founder of the Dhammayut movement, is reported to have observed the first form of *dhutanga* and, on occasion, to have gone wandering in the forest [Tambiah, p. 160; Taylor, p. 48]; and this was the practice of *dhutanga* that the Forest monks followed.

Kamala confuses this issue in two ways. First, she does not acknowledge that *dhutanga* was a feature of the original Dhammayut movement. Second, to portray the pre-reform *dhutanga* tradition as an ascetic practice, she conflates it with the practice of *khao kam* [p. 37], which is actually a pre-reform tradition for undergoing the penalty of having committed a *sanghadisesa* offense and has nothing to do with either definition of *dhutanga* at all. Once these two misperceptions are corrected, Kamala’s assertion that the *dhutanga* followed by the Forest monks was a sign of their pre-reform orientation [p. 263, 269] cannot stand.

Vinaya. The Forest monks were renowned for their observance of the most detailed rules of the Pali Vinaya as explained in the *Pubbasikkhavannana*, a text based on the Pali Canon and Commentaries, authored by Phra Amarabhirakhit, a student of Prince Mongkut, in 1860. In fact, by the Sixth Reign, when Prince Vajirañana’s more relaxed interpretation of the Vinaya – the *Vinayamukha* – had

become the standard text for Vinaya studies for both Dhammayut and Mahanikaya monks, the Forest monks refused to accept the relaxed standard, and thus their practice of the Vinaya was stricter than that of Dhammayut town and city monks [Kamala, p. 186]. Mahanikaya monks who became followers of Ajaan Mun often mention that they were first drawn to his movement because of the strict and meticulous way in which all of the monks practiced even the most minor rules of the Vinaya. As Ajaan Lee states in his *Autobiography*, he then felt compelled to reordain in the Dhammayut order “in order to make a clean break with my past wrongdoings,” i.e., the lax way in which he had observed the Vinaya while living in a Mahanikaya monastery [The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee, p. 9; see also, Kamala, p. 67]. Ajaan Fuang Jotiko reports learning of the importance of the minor rules directly from Ajaan Mun: “Don’t think that the small disciplinary rules aren’t important. As Ajaan Mun once said, logs have never gotten into people’s eyes, but fine sawdust can – and it can blind you” [Awareness Itself, p. 27].

So when Kamala opines that the Forest monks were not concerned with the particulars of the Vinaya, we have to look carefully at her evidence. And it turns out that she is basing her claim on two points. One is a statement made by Ajaan Mun, that he “observed only one *sila* (virtue, precept): the mind” [Kamala, p. 270]. This statement, however, has been taken out of context. The Dhamma texts authored by Prince Vajirañāna had asserted that *sila* was simply an external matter of word and deed, with no mention that the state of mind behind the word and deed was of any importance. Ajaan Mun, in many of his talks, had repudiated this idea on the grounds that it reduced *sila* into a matter of ritual or custom, with no role in the training of the mind. To contradict this view, he emphasized that in keeping strict watch over the mind, one would automatically keep watch over one’s words and deeds, and thus the mind was the “one *sila*” that covered all the rest.

The second point is an incident where she claims that the Forest monks broke the rules of the Vinaya in order to get rice from ignorant forest villagers [Kamala, p. 154]. As it turns out, however, the monks were acting completely in line with a rule in the Sekhiya section of the Patimokkha [Vinayamukha, Vol. 1, p. 203].

Strangely enough, in other contexts Kamala herself mentions that the Forest monks attributed their ability to survive unharmed in the wilderness to their strict observance of the Vinaya rules [pp. 91, 125]; that the early Forest ajaans carried detailed Vinaya texts on their wandering [p. 358, n. 29]; and that at least one of Ajaan Mun’s students who converted from the Mahanikaya sect memorized the Patimokkha so as to be a “true disciple” of his new teacher [p. 268].

Tolerance. The Dhammayut movement began primarily as an attempt to return to the Pali Vinaya, the only Vinaya known in the Theravada world. There are reports that some members of the first generation of the Dhammayut monks showed intolerance for the lax Vinaya practice of non-Dhammayut monks, but

by the time of the Fifth and Sixth Reigns, the Dhammayut hierarchy had developed a much more casual attitude toward lax modes of practice outside their order. This may have been due to political reasons: Dhammayut monks had been placed in charge of King Rama V's program to unify the governance of the Sangha after the Sangha Act of 1902, and the hierarchy may have wanted to create as little controversy as possible in their efforts to carry out this program. Attitudes within the hierarchy varied from person to person, but the word from the highest levels was to let sleeping dogs lie. Both of these facts can be seen in an exchange of letters between Tisso Uan and Prince Vajirañana in 1912. Tisso Uan reported, in a censorious tone, the lax behavior of Mahanikaya monks under his jurisdiction in the Northeast. In response, Prince Vajirañana counseled tolerance, saying that forbidding monks from cutting grass would make them more idle; forbidding them from eating after noon is advisable only in those parts of the country where lay people see it as wrong [Taylor, pp. 120-122].

Thus it is unfair to the Dhammayut hierarchy to present them as holding an attitude of unremitting intolerance toward other Vinaya practices.

Similarly, it is inaccurate to present the Forest monks as holding to an attitude of sweeping tolerance. Ajaan Mun was willing to teach Mahanikaya monks, but insisted that they fully observe the Pali Vinaya while studying with him. He also strictly observed the Dhammayut directive not to include Mahanikaya monks in his Patimokkha recitations, the formal ceremony that defines the Sangha in a particular location. This was one of the reasons why most of his Mahanikaya students reordained in the Dhammayut sect, so as to become part of his community.

In a passage drawn from a biography of Ajaan Waen, Kamala cites a story in which a novice encountered by Ajaan Waen in his travels kills and barbecues a chicken for him to eat in the evening. Ajaan Waen politely refuses the offer, and Kamala commends his politeness as a sign that Ajaan Waen understood that monks in different traditions would follow different but equally valid Vinayas [Kamala, pp. 165-166]. Strangely, she continues the quote from the relevant passage, where Ajaan Waen states two paragraphs later that the traditions of eating in the evening in Northern Thailand and before dawn in Shan states are both wrong because they deviate from the Vinaya [Kamala, p. 166]. In other words, Ajaan Waen was explicitly passing judgment on the monks' behavior as deviating from the only Vinaya he knew. Similarly, Kamala tries to show the tolerance of the Forest monks by citing the tolerant behavior of a Phra Pan toward a Mahayana monk. She then notes that Pan was not a member of the Forest tradition, but somehow typified the tradition [Kamala, p. 171]. This is no proof of anything at all. In other chapters, she relates stories of Forest monks burning spirit shrines and denouncing the worship of spirits, which hardly qualifies as tolerant behavior [Kamala, pp. 203-209].

Traditional medicine. Why Kamala describes the use of traditional medical treatments as a sign of a "pre-reform" mentality is hard to fathom, for even the

Vinayamukha allows for monks to practice traditional medicine, and outdoes the *Pubbasikkhavannana* in allowing for monks to practice medicine as an occupation [Vinayamukha, Vol II., pp. 121-125]. Ironically, when Kamala mentions a “pre-reform” herbal cure used by one of the Forest monks, she notes that he learned the cure from the *Pubbasikkhavannana*, which as we have already noted was a standard Fourth Reign Dhammayut text [Kamala, p. 213-214].

So it is obvious that Kamala has not proven her point that the Forest monks represent a return to pre-reform Thai or Lao values. And when we turn to look at how the Forest monks themselves explained their attitudes toward indigenous customs, it becomes even more obvious that her thesis cannot stand.

As many of Ajaan Mun’s students have noted, his Dhamma talks stressed two topics more than any others: the traditions of the noble ones (*ariyavamsa*), and the practice of the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma (*dhammanudhammapatipatti*). Both topics emphasize the importance of not following a particular practice simply because it is customary. Ajaan Mun himself, on his travels through the Northeast, was often attacked for not following local Thai or Lao traditions. His response was that Thai and Lao traditions, like the customs of any nationality, were the traditions of people with defilements. If one wanted to go beyond defilement, one had to practice the traditions of those who had gone beyond defilement. In other words, one had to follow the traditions of the noble ones.

The traditions of the noble ones is a concept with a double provenance. One source is a passage in the Pali Canon [Anguttara IV.28]:

“There is the case where a monk is content with any old robe cloth at all. He speaks in praise of being content with any old robe cloth at all. He doesn’t, for the sake of robe cloth, do anything unseemly or inappropriate. Not getting cloth, he isn’t agitated. Getting cloth, he uses it unattached to it, uninfatuated, guiltless, seeing the drawbacks (of attachment to it), and discerning the escape from them. He doesn’t, on account of his contentment with any old robe cloth at all, exalt himself or disparage others. In this he is diligent, deft, alert, & mindful. This is said to be a monk standing firm in the ancient, original traditions of the noble ones.

[Similarly with almsfood and lodging.]

“Furthermore, the monk finds pleasure & delight in developing [skillful mental qualities], finds pleasure & delight in abandoning [unskillful mental qualities]. He doesn’t, on account of his pleasure & delight in developing & abandoning, exalt himself or disparage others. In this he is diligent, deft, alert, & mindful. This is said to be a monk standing firm in the ancient, original traditions of the noble ones.”

The other provenance for the concept is in the Commentary’s account of an incident in the Buddha’s life: Not long after his Awakening, he returned to his

home town in order to teach the Dhamma to the family he had left six years before. After spending the night in a forest, he went for alms in town at daybreak. His father the king learned of this and immediately went to upbraid him. "This is shameful," the king said. "No one in the lineage of our family has ever gone begging. It's against our family traditions."

"Your majesty," the Buddha replied, "I now belong, not to the lineage of my family, but to the lineage of the noble ones. Theirs are the traditions I follow."

As for the practice of the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, the best-known provenance for this term is in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta [Digha 16], in which the Buddha states that worship with flowers, incense, and praise is not the true worship of the Tathagata. The only true worship of the Tathagata is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. Ajaan Mun would use this concept to stress that one's practice should be an attempt to bring one's own behavior up to the standard of the Dhamma, rather than trying to bring the Dhamma down to the level of one's own customs and preferences. This standard thus precluded any argument that time or place could excuse behavior that did not live up to the standards established by the Buddha's Dhamma and Vinaya.

Because both of these teachings were known to Ajaan Mun through the textual recovery conducted by the Dhammayut reforms, and because he used them to attack pre-reform deviations from what was known of the Buddha's life and teachings in the Pali Canon, the idea that the Forest tradition represented a return to pre-reform ideals is totally untenable.

This leaves us, however, with the question of how the volatile relationship between these two reform groups – the Dhammayut hierarchy and the Forest monks – can be explained. The answer lies in noting two points. The first is that scholars who have written about the Dhammayut order have failed to note that the order underwent a radical change during the Fifth Reign, and that it is wrong to conflate policies of the Fifth Reign and later – the period in which the Forest tradition grew – with the original vision of the order. In other words, we are dealing here not with two groups but with three: the Dhammayut order of the Third and Fourth Reigns, which is the parent group; the Dhammayut order of the Fifth Reign and later, which is the royal child of the parent group; and the Forest tradition, which is the parent group's peasant child. As is the case with any sibling relationship, the shared heritage explains the potential for unity between the siblings; the potentially different ways of applying that heritage to new events explains the potential for conflict.

The second point is that the scholars who have written about these groups have portrayed them as relatively static in their ideals, when in fact those ideals evolved over time in response to events. To help understand those changes, it is illuminating to view all three groups as religious revival movements, whose dynamic of growth and interaction can be understood under the rubric of Anthony Wallace's analysis of the stages through which religious revival movements typically grow: vision, communication, organization, adaptation,

cultural transformation, and routinization. To look at the vision of each group will give us a sense of the potentials for both conflict and unity among the groups. To look at the later stages in their development will give us a sense of how and why those potentials were actualized.

The vision of each group focused on two primary questions. The first was this: How can adulterations in the true Dhamma (*saddhammapatirupa*) be detected and overcome? This question was based on a prophecy in the Vinaya (Cullavagga X.1.6) that the true Dhamma would last unadulterated for only 500 years. For anyone seriously interested in the practice of the Dhamma, this possibility calls for a principle for weeding out the adulterations to guarantee the validity of one's practice. The second question was this: To what extent are the noble attainments still possible in this day and age? This question grew from a tradition, started in Sri Lanka, that the noble attainments were no longer possible because of the degeneracy of the human race. Any answer to this question would shape one's vision of the ideal life for a monk at this point in time.

Prince Mongkut, in founding the Dhammayut movement in 1829, answered the first question in a manner that had become traditional within the Theravada world since the 11th century: seek out a valid ordination lineage— from abroad, if necessary; recover texts— again, if necessary, from abroad; and revive Pali studies. In other words, purify the ordination lineage and establish reliable versions of the texts. Prince Mongkut seemed confident that the most reliable version of the Pali Canon could form a trustworthy basis for judging what was and was not genuine Dhamma-Vinaya. In a missive to the Sangha of Sri Lanka, he explained why he was asking them for reliable versions of the Canon:

“Good people should not stay fixed in their original beliefs, but should give their highest respect to the Dhamma-Vinaya, examining it and their beliefs throughout. Wherever their beliefs are right and appropriate, they should follow them. If they can't practice in line with what is right, they should at least show their appreciation for those who can. If they encounter beliefs and practices that are not right and appropriate, they should judge them as having been remembered wrongly and then discard them” [Dhammayut History, p. 42].

As for the second question, that of the possibility of reaching the noble attainments in this day and age, the early Dhammayut movement never arrived at a settled answer. For all their efforts in Vinaya, study, the ascetic practices, and meditation, none of the early Dhammayut monks could say with confidence that they had reached jhana, much less the higher attainments. Thus they left the question open.

During the Fifth Reign, Rama V together with his monk-brother, Prince Vajirañana, instituted far-ranging reforms in the Thai Sangha. To many outsiders, these reforms looked suspiciously like an effort to impose Dhammayut

norms on the rest of the Thai Sangha, but actually they also affected great changes in the Dhammayut order itself. Their vision was informed by two concerns. The first was political. France and Britain both had designs on the country, and Rama V saw his primary aim as maintaining Thai independence in the face of this threat. This, he saw, required reorganizing the country as a nation-state, on European lines, and the example of Meiji Japan had shown him how Buddhist monks might be useful in this attempt. The second concern was intellectual. Both Rama V and Prince Vajirañana were trained by European tutors, from whom they had absorbed Victorian attitudes toward rationality, the critical study of ancient texts, the perspective of secular history on the nature of religious institutions, and the pursuit of a “useful” past. As Prince Vajirañana stated in his *Biography of the Buddha*, ancient texts, such as the Pali Canon, are like mangosteens, with a sweet flesh and a bitter rind. The duty of critical scholarship was to extract the flesh and discard the rind. Norms of rationality were the guide to this extraction process. Teachings that were reasonable and useful to modern needs were accepted as the flesh. Stories of miracles and psychic powers were dismissed as part of the rind.

Thus the Fifth Reign reforms approached the question of saddhammapatirupa in light of these Victorian norms. For them, the Pali Canon was not necessarily a reliable document. Only the rational “flesh” could be considered as genuine Dhamma. In support of this position, Prince Vajirañana cites the passage from the Kalama Sutta, saying that one should not simply go by ancient texts, (although – like many English Victorian Buddhists – he conveniently forgets to cite the passage from the Kalama Sutta saying that one shouldn’t go simply by logical inference) [Vinayamukha, Vol. 1, pp.v-vi]. Secondly, only principles that were useful for the present need be adopted from the texts. Because the main need in the present was to unite the nation, many principles of the Vinaya that might thwart that need – such as the questions of how preceptors were to be authorized and how trials of monks should be conducted – were changed to suit government policy [Vinayamukha, Vol. 2, p. 51; Vol. 3, p. 144].

As for the question of the possibility of the noble attainments, Rama V had ordered his Dhammakaan Ministry to conduct a survey of the meditation monasteries known to them, to see if any monks could provide convincing claims that they had reached such attainments. The official report found evidence of none. Thus the implicit position of the Fifth Reign reforms was that these attainments were no longer possible. This position was rarely stated explicitly, for fear of sparking controversy, but the implicit message is scattered throughout Prince Vajirañana’s writings. For instance, in the introduction to the first volume of the *Vinayamukha*, he states that he will explain only those rules that are relevant to the present. When he reaches Pacittiya 8 – the rule forbidding monks to make true claims to superior human attainments (jhana and the noble attainments) – he leaves the rule unexplained [Vinayamukha, Vol. 1, p. 128]. The

message is that the rule is no longer relevant inasmuch as no such claims could be true.

The upshot of this vision is that Rama V felt no compunction in ordering monks to abandon their traditional roles as students of the Pali Canon and meditators, and to devote their time to helping advance the government program of a centralized educational system. In 1896, after visiting a secular school founded by Prince Vajirañana and staffed by monks, he wrote to the prince,

“Having looked at everything, I am very satisfied and I ask your forgiveness for the disdain I have held in my heart. It’s not that I have felt disdain for the Buddha, for the Dhamma he taught, or for the Sangha of those who have practiced to the point of purity. I’m speaking here of ordinary monks who study the texts and meditation or chant simply for the sake of their own personal happiness. Those who study the texts do so for the sake of their own knowledge, without a thought to teaching others to the best of their ability. This is a way of looking only for their own happiness. Those who meditate are even worse, and those who devote themselves to chanting are the worst of all. This is the disdain that I’ve felt in my heart. But now that I have gazed at what you have accomplished, I see that the elders and their followers in the committee have redeemed themselves from my disdain, and I ask your forgiveness. What you have established is a blessing to the religion, an honor to King Rama IV, and a benefit to the people, from the King on down” [Dhammayut History, p. 104].

In 1898, the king asked the prince to turn his attention to founding a national education system, which succeeded in founding 231 schools throughout the nation in the following two years. In 1928, at the beginning of the Seventh Reign, the idea that the highest vocation for a monk lay in helping the nation through assisting in secular education was fully implemented in an order from the then Supreme Patriarch, Prince Chinawongsiriwat, that all Thai monks help in national education effort by teaching in schools [Taylor, p. 132].

Meanwhile, in the forests, Ajaan Sao and Ajaan Mun had been practicing largely unaffected by the Fifth Reign reforms. The Forest tradition maintains that Ajaan Mun reached the penultimate noble level in his meditation while residing in Sarika Cave, Nakhorn Nayok province, in 1915. He returned to the Northeast the following year, to teach his teacher, Ajaan Sao, how to reach the noble attainments as well. He then stayed on in the Northeast, attracting a large number of students, until 1928 when—concurrent with the Supreme Patriarch’s order that all monks teach in schools—he left for the more remote forests of the North, where the tradition claims he reached arahantship in the early 1930’s.

For obvious reasons, Ajaan Mun answered the second of the two main questions with a yes: the noble attainments were still reachable, and the primary duty of a monk ordained in the Buddha’s dispensation was to exert every effort

to attain them. As for the first question, Ajaan Mun agreed with the Fifth Reign vision that not everything in the Pali Canon was genuine Dhamma. But his approach for sifting through what was and what wasn't genuine was much more traditional. In fact, it was even more traditional than Prince Mongkut's approach, in that it was drawn from the Kalama Sutta (Anguttara III.66) in the Canon itself: the test for any Dhamma teaching was the result it gave when adopted and put into practice. If it led to the end of defilement, it was genuine; if not, it wasn't. Thus, only a noble disciple could know which teachings were genuine Dhamma and which were not. Even with the teachings that noble ones had guaranteed, a person who had not yet reached the noble level could not fully understand their meaning. Thus the adulterations of the Dhamma were not a matter of textual transmission. They were the result of the defilements in each person's mind.

In the latter years of his life, a number of Ajaan Mun's teachings were gathered in a small manual, *Muttodaya (A Heart Released)*. Although some of his students later complained that this collection did not convey the full subtlety of his teaching, this may be due in part to a political agenda on the part of the compilers, who were eager to emphasize where Ajaan Mun's vision differed from that of the Fifth Reign reforms, which were still dominant in the Thai Sangha. For instance, the first two sections refute the Fifth Reign attitudes toward *saddhammapatirupa* and the need for a monk to adopt the role of a teacher.

§ 1. Practice is what keeps the true Dhamma pure.

The Lord Buddha taught that his Dhamma, when placed in the heart of an ordinary run-of-the-mill person, is bound to be thoroughly corrupted (*saddhamma-patirupa*); but if placed in the heart of a Noble One, it is bound to be genuinely pure and authentic, something that at the same time can neither be effaced nor obscured.

So as long as we are devoting ourselves merely to the theoretical study of the Dhamma, it can't serve us well. Only when we have trained our hearts to eliminate their 'chameleons' – their corruptions (*upakkilesa*) – will it benefit us in full measure. And only then will the true Dhamma be kept pure, free from distortions and deviations from its original principles.

§ 2. To follow the Buddha, we must train ourselves well before training others.

*purisadamma-sarathi sattha deva-manussanam buddho
bhagavati*

Our Lord Buddha first trained and tamed himself to the point where he attained unexcelled right self-awakening (*anuttara-sammasambodhiñāna*), becoming *buddho*, one who knows, before becoming *bhagava*, one who spreads the teaching to those who are to be taught. Only then did he become *sattha*,

the teacher and trainer of human and divine beings whose stage of development qualifies them to be trained. And thus, *kalyano kittisaddo abbhuggato*: His good name has spread to the four quarters of the compass even up to the present day.

The same is true of all the Noble Disciples of the past. They trained and tamed themselves well before helping the Teacher spread his teachings to people at large, and so their good name has spread just like the Buddha's.

If, however, a person spreads the teaching without first having trained himself well, *papako saddo hoti*: His bad name will spread to the four quarters of the compass, due to his error in not having followed the example of the Lord Buddha and all the Noble Disciples of the past.

The seventh section directly repudiates the notion that the noble attainments are no longer reachable, for all that is required for these attainments is the human state, which does not change over time.

§ 7. The supreme position: the foundation for the paths, fruitions, and *nibbana*.

aggam thanam manussesu maggam satta-visuddhiya:

'The supreme position is to be found among human beings: the path to the purification of living beings.' This can be explained as follows: We have received our legacy from *namo*, our parents – i.e., this body, which has taken a human birth, the highest birth there is. We are supreme beings, well-placed in a supreme position, complete with the treasures of thought, word, and deed. If we want to amass external treasures, such as material wealth, money, and gold, we can. If we want to amass internal treasures, such as the extraordinary qualities of the paths, their fruitions, and *nibbana*, we also can. The Buddha formulated the Dhamma and Vinaya for us human beings, and not at all for cows, horses, elephants, and so on. We human beings are a race that can practice to reach purity. So we shouldn't be discouraged or self-deprecating, thinking that we are lacking in worth or potential, because as human beings we are capable. What we don't have, we can give rise to. What we already have, we can make greater....

Comparing the vision of these three movements, it is easy to see the potential for the conflict between the Forest tradition and the post-Fifth Reign Dhammayut hierarchy. The Forest monks insisted on their religious duty to focus on the practice of meditation, while the hierarchy wanted them to focus on what it saw as their social duty to help strengthen the nation state. However, the potential for rapprochement between the two groups is also present in the fact that they based their respective visions on a common source: the knowledge of the Pali Canon recovered by the Dhammayut movement of the Third and Fourth Reigns.

When we turn to look at the later stages in the development of these two movements, the reasons for conflict and rapprochement become apparent. In the 1920's, when the conflict developed, the Fifth Reign reforms had reached the stage of cultural transformation, integrating the Northeast into the nation state, converting many monks to the role of secular teacher. The Forest tradition, still in the incipient phases of communication and organization, ran afoul of the much stronger movement from Bangkok through its insistence that monks should focus on the noble quest. Thus conflict was inevitable. After the Supreme Patriarch's decree of 1928, Ajaan Mun retired to the forest and left a more combative and organizationally astute student, Ajaan Singh, to head the Forest movement in the Northeast.

In the early 1950's, however, the Fifth Reign reforms were largely spent. After devoting their lives to establishing the national education system, the monks of the Dhammayut hierarchy had been shunted aside while lay educators took over the system. This had a twofold effect. First, it removed the major bone of contention between the hierarchy and the Forest monks. Now that there was no role for monks as teachers in the secular educational system, there was no need to pressure the Forest monks into adopting that role. Second, now that the monks of the hierarchy were deprived of any meaningful role in the nation state, they were in a personal position to listen more favorably to the message of the Forest tradition: that the way to the noble attainments might be open after all. Strangely – given her general suspicion about the motives of the Dhammayut hierarchy, and of Tisso Uan in particular – Kamala gives a detailed description of how this personal perspective played a part in his change of heart about the Forest monks. Tisso Uan, she notes, finally became attracted to meditation because of grave illness and his fear of approaching death; his encouragement for Ajaan Lee to teach in Bangkok in the early 1950's came from the good results he had received under the latter's guidance [pp. 294-296].

By this time, the Forest tradition had entered a stage of adaptation and cultural transformation in the Northeast and the province of Chanthaburi in the Southeast, and had begun to penetrate the South in Phuket and Phang-nga. In all these areas, Forest monks had encountered resistance from local Mahanikaya groups. In some cases, their monasteries had been burned down; people – sometimes monks – had stoned them while on their alms rounds; their food had been poisoned; some of them had been charged groundlessly with sexual and financial misconduct; and in at least one case, a monk had been attacked with a machete. Many of the Forest ajaans were convinced that these attacks were not only tolerated but actually encouraged by the Mahanikaya hierarchy. Evidence to prove or disprove these claims is unavailable for scholarly perusal. What concerns us here is the Forest ajaan's perception of the situation and their felt need to have the Dhammayut hierarchy on their side in the event that any of the incidents led to larger controversies. Thus the Forest monks and the Dhammayut hierarchy were both in a position to focus less on the issues that divided them

and more on those that united them. This led to the rapprochement that opened the way for the Forest tradition to gain national recognition and respect.

By the late 1990's, however, the Forest tradition had clearly entered a stage of routinization. It had a canon composed of the teachings of the great ajaans. Many of its monasteries were endowed not only with lavish buildings, but also with royally sponsored memorials to ajaans who had developed a national reputation. Members of the Forestry Bureau, seeing that the only way to protect the few remaining forests lay in turning them into Sangha property, had deeded huge tracts of forests to the Forest monasteries, putting them in the position of owning extremely valuable land. One blatant sign of the routinization of the tradition was the success of Ajaan Mahabua's Save the Nation campaign, together with the way the political fallout from that campaign helped determine the results of the 2001 election. But perhaps an even clearer sign of the routinization of the tradition is the fact that economic and bureaucratic interest groups now view it as fair game in their attempt to retake the forests that were deeded to the Forest monasteries.

Because the parallel education system for monks and novices, founded by the Bangkok hierarchy, has recently received full accreditation to offer graduate degrees, the Dhammayut hierarchy now finds itself in a solid social position where feels no need to lean on the reputation of the Forest tradition. And the Forest tradition, having become more tightly organized as a result of the Save the Nation campaign, feels no need to follow the Dhammayut hierarchy. This helps to explain the way in which the Dhammayut hierarchy has closed ranks with the Mahanikaya hierarchy in siding with the economic interests that would like to see the Forest monasteries stripped of their lands. It also explains why many of the Forest monks have closed ranks behind Ajaan Mahabua in taking on a hierarchy that – in point of law but not of Vinaya – has legal power over them.

The danger here is that at some point, Thailand may have no more forest left to fight over. If that is the case, the country will lose one of the major sources of reform for Buddhist practice. For centuries, the forest has provided an alternative to the inevitable domestication of Buddhism in the cities, towns, and villages. In times when the ruling elites felt a need for reform in the cities, they often turned to monks whose practice had been tested in the forest. Thus, just as many wild animals require a certain amount of wilderness habitat in order to survive, Buddhism in Thailand has required a forest habitat of sufficient size and wildness. Without that habitat, one of the major sources of new life for the tradition will be gone. If the current conflict between the Forest tradition and the Bangkok hierarchy is not resolved successfully, the detrimental effects for the religious life of the country will be felt for a long time to come.

Dhammayut History = *Prawat Khana Thammayut*. Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalai Press, 2004.