

Book Review



Traditional Theravada Meditation and its Modern-Era Suppression

By Kate Crosby. Hong Kong: Buddha Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, 2013, xiv+194pp, ISBN 978-9881682024 (paper), HK\$120

Reviewed by Laurence Cox, *National University of Ireland Maynooth*

It is just as if a man, traveling along a wilderness track, were to see an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by people of former times. He would follow it. Following it, he would see an ancient city, an ancient capital inhabited by people of former times, complete with parks, groves, & ponds, walled, delightful. ([SN 12.65](#), translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

The extraordinary story contained in Kate Crosby's *Traditional Theravada Meditation and its Modern-Era Suppression* (henceforth *Traditional Theravada Meditation*) has echoes of the Pali Canon's archaeological parable. There are oral accounts collected from elderly practitioners who survived the Khmer Rouge in rural Cambodia; manuscripts in the National Library in Bangkok that survived centralising attempts to destroy regional Buddhisms; a British Library collection including texts from a 1767 transmission to Sri Lanka; and a 1549 Thai inscription, which as Crosby notes "is an earlier date of attestation than for any other living meditation tradition in the contemporary Theravada world" (69).

The parable, of course, relates to the Buddha's awakening; the notional hero recommends to the king to restore the city just as the Buddha reveals the Dhamma "so that this holy life has become powerful, rich, detailed, well-populated, wide-spread, proclaimed among celestial & human beings." Meditation, in other words, can provide a foundational legitimacy for institutional formation within Buddhism; and never more so than in the modern period. While a naive view often reproduces this legitimating myth, and sees contemporary Theravadin meditation practice as standing in an unbroken line of transmission from the Buddha, scholarly accounts have often posited the opposite: that the modern-era revival dominated by Burmese vipassana and the Thai forest tradition represent a fresh start prior to which meditation was largely or completely defunct as a living practice.

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This book argues something very different: that a widespread tradition can be shown to have existed in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Sri Lanka *up to* modern times; if its last traces are rural and regional, earlier evidence shows it well-placed in eighteenth century royal courts and dominant nikayas. This *borān kammaṭṭhāna* (traditional meditation practice) was not universal; its introduction into Sri Lanka can be dated to the 1767 Ayutthaya transmission that launched the Siyam Nikāya, while the tradition is not (yet) documented in Burma, unless *weikza* practice proves to be related. The Dhammakaya Foundation, meanwhile, follows an adapted and modernised form of this same tradition, derived from practices previously taught at Wat Paknam. While other scholars, and Crosby in earlier work, have noted isolated aspects of the practice, often without being able to interpret them fully due to the esoteric and practice-oriented nature of the texts, *Traditional Theravada Meditation* is the first systematic presentation of the practice and interpretation of the reasons for its suppression.

To argue for the existence of a major meditation tradition hitherto almost unsuspected by scholars is a strong claim, and much of the denseness of this deceptively compact volume is accounted for by the need to present and interpret a complex and, at times, fragmentary body of evidence. Chapter one begins where *borān kammaṭṭhāna* starts to fade into history, with the growing power of a series of cultural dichotomies that accompanied Western colonialism in Buddhist Asia. These constructed specific roles for “science” and “religion,” and asserted the superiority of western science over Asian, irrespective of the empirical evidence: for example, Crosby shows how vaccination, the use of injected cowpox, was often less effective and with more significant problems than the traditional use of variolation, the nasal inhalation of pulverised smallpox scabs, in preventing smallpox, but became a key signifier of Western scientific—and not simply military—superiority (23–32). As such it became favoured by British and French colonial authorities as well as missionaries, but also by Asian modernisers, notably the Thai monarchy, which used the introduction of compulsory vaccination to outlaw local medicine in the 1920s.

If this dichotomy (and associated discourses of progressive/primitive, rational/superstitious, etc.) assigned greater power to colonial knowledge in matters *physical*, it however left the way open for Buddhists as well as Western sympathisers to claim superiority in “mental science,” meditation—and hence, too, to position Buddhism on the side of reason and progress. In the hands of a figure like Ledi Sayadaw, this entailed a strict disavowal of *samatha* practice as pertaining to the mundane and the physical (whether medicinal or magical), and advocacy of an essentialised *vipassanā*, related to the supramundane and the psyche: “The sphere of Vipassanā was located safely above the physical realms over which scientists/colonial powers claimed dominance” (43). In this process, earlier traditions which did not separate the somatic from the spiritual found themselves in a weakened position vis-a-vis both the growing power of Western science and the new Buddhist modernisms.

Chapter two presents the various types of evidence available for *borān kammaṭṭhāna*. The evidence best represented in earlier scholarship, as noted, has tended to be textual: manuscripts produced as aids to practice and memory and hence often incomprehensible to outsiders. These include, interestingly enough, the first meditation manual published in the

West (35): the *Yogāvacara's Manual*, encountered by Anāgārika Dharmapāla in the course of his exploration of meditation, published by T. W. Rhys Davids in 1896 with a comment as to the difficulty in interpreting it and dismissed by Caroline Rhys Davids in the foreword to F. L. Woodward's 1916 translation as reflecting seventeenth century decadence. French scholars and Thai and Sri Lankan reformers published a number of manuscripts in the early twentieth century. However, it was only in 1976, just before the Khmer Rouge, that François Bizot could combine textual and anthropological scholarship in a living tradition, and only in the 1990s did teachers begin to publish. In the aftermath of the Khmer disaster and with increasing question marks over the future of the tradition in both Cambodia and Thailand, practitioners have become concerned to preserve the teaching. Crosby's own work in the area dates back twenty-five years, and her current research in the area is a model of collaboration with these often elderly practitioners in the preservation and digitisation of documents.

What, then, is *borān kammaṭṭhāna* as a form of meditation? At its simplest, as chapter three shows, it is an esoteric and somatic form of Theravada meditation, which takes substantially the same meditation subjects recommended by the *Visuddhimagga* but "internalises" them. Once the practitioner has achieved the *nimitta* (eidetic image) of each subject of meditation in turn, they mentally draw it through the nostrils into their own body, locating it at various energy centres in turn, and then deposit it in the womb (*garbha*). The various *nimittas* are then combined in complex permutations which are understood as constructing an internal Buddha as well as enabling the ability to affect external reality. In this sense, of course, it is reminiscent of Indic tantra. Crosby shows, however, that the terms used are derived specifically from Theravadin Abhidhamma, with no evidence of any previous underlay; Tantric deities are absent, as are the ritual reversals surrounding death, sex, food, and the like familiar from tantra.

Where, then, does this similarity derive from? Much of chapter three is devoted to answering this question within the framework of an understanding of Buddhist practice as a "technology of transformation." If *borān kammaṭṭhāna* is orthodox in a doctrinal sense, the conflict with other meditation schools revolves around the question of orthopraxy, and specifically the relationship between the *lokuttara* (supramundane), in modernity equated with the psyche and "science of the mind," and the *lokiya* (mundane), now equated with the body and hence the subject either of legitimate Western science or of illegitimate magic. Crosby situates the underlying logics of the *borān kammaṭṭhāna* system in relation to ayurvedic medicine, but also Pāṇinian grammar, group theory mathematics, and alchemy. In premodern Southeast Asia, these acted as mutually reinforcing systems of knowledge (hence some of the similarities with tantra) and offered powerful cultural underpinnings for *borān kammaṭṭhāna* around the permutations of *nimittas* and the substitution of one thing for another. (Lest we be tempted to adopt the colonial assumption that Victorian science was obviously superior to Asian sciences in every area, Crosby notes that the products of the latter systems included the number zero, generative grammar and advanced plastic surgery.)

In particular, *borān kammaṭṭhāna* adopted imagery from ayurvedic obstetrics. As in other Buddhist contexts, embryology served as a model of transformation (146–147). In *borān kammaṭṭhāna* obstetrics becomes a "practical technology applied to a new, religious end":

an embryonic Buddha is developed in the practitioner's "womb," and medicine is applied nasally in order to manipulate the various factors conducing to (spiritual) health. This was one area where I as reader wished for more extensive discussion, particularly in relation to debates over feminist readings of *Tathāgatagarbha* theory. As Crosby observes in the introduction, "the female perspective of the mother is the perspective of the meditation practitioner" (xii); but chapter three suggests that the practitioner's perspective is (also?) that of the obstetrician, often a monastic (99). The question of the cultural construction of gender in normative religious traditions is obviously the subject of wide debate, and this analysis sheds tantalising light on our assumptions about pre-modern Theravada in this respect.

Chapter four, finally, discusses the various conditions leading to the suppression of the old meditative method. Most obviously, the cultural shifts discussed above meant that *borān kammaṭṭhāna*'s combination of body and mind, samatha and vipassana, now rendered it vulnerable. Text-based reform movements and the "mental science" of vipassana traditions both gained ground in the complex interplay of *nikāya* formation and sangha centralisation at the expense of the older tradition, which died out in the Sri Lankan Siyam Nikāya and was marginalised in Thailand by the Thammayutika Nikāya. If the cultural power of Asian forms of medicine and so on was waning, this both undermined the structures of cognitive plausibility of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* for monks but also the practitioners' income, in large part derived from offering blessings, healings, and other rituals which Western education and medicine now undercut in various ways.

War in Indochina had massive effects on what remained: the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, repression in Communist Laos, and the forced relocation of three to five million Thai forest dwellers (132), hurt the remaining practice traditions badly. Today, only a handful of active temples survive; other than the modernised Dhammakaya tradition, even those which have significant popular support do not necessarily have a new generation of teachers. As Crosby notes, *borān kammaṭṭhāna* finds it hard to compete with modernist forms of meditation that can be taught in public classes rather than in retreat from the world, in one-to-one relationships with a teacher, and with lengthy initiatory processes (141). Conversely, *borān kammaṭṭhāna* and its associated practices may have served as forms of discursive resistance to modernity for the rural poor (148–9).

Crosby's remarkable account naturally raises many questions for our understanding of Theravada and what we thought was known history: "In reality a pan-regional culture has been virtually erased within the space of less than two centuries, and it might seem miraculous that it has survived at all given the vicissitudes outlined in the final chapter" (150). Or, put another way, the apparent simplicity of present-day Theravada owes more to the colonial context and the purging of previous tradition than to any inherent purity (149). *Traditional Theravada Meditation* also adds significantly to our understanding of the history of Buddhist *meditation*, and, with the material available for research, offers a model of how to combine textual and ethnographic scholarship, the changing politics of knowledge, and the wider social context.

If I have a criticism of this book, it is simply in the necessary complexity of the material covered, which will be a challenge to most non-specialist readers in one or another

aspect—be it Southeast Asian monastic and colonial history, the nature of the textual evidence, the various traditional systems of knowledge discussed, or the actual workings of the *borān kammaṭṭhāna* system, insofar as they can be explained to outsiders. This is a pity insofar as it restricts the readership of the book. However it is to be hoped that the findings presented here will gradually find their way into presentations of Theravada history and Buddhist meditation for wider audiences. It is also to be hoped that the book, and associated research, will contribute to avert “an absolute and final loss from the inventory of human cultural artefacts” (150).

At present the book is only available directly from the publishers (<http://buddhadharma.co>); the book and the field deserve international distribution arrangements, which are apparently being put in place.