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Cambodian Forest Monks



The Forest Tradition is still practiced today in some regions of Cambodia, such as Phnom Sruoch in Kampong Speu, Phnom Tbeng in Preah Vihear, and Phnom Bokor in Kampot. These places are as popular now as in the past among Forest Monks and white-robed ascetics.

The forest monk of Cambodia, known as *lok thudong*, was a potent protector, adept, or a “magician.”

In Cambodian Buddhism, the monk is expected to apply himself to the *Trisiksa* (threefold practices),

of *sila* (morality), *Samadhi* (meditation), and *panna* (wisdom), also *gantadhura* (study-traditions) and *vipassanadhura* (meditation-traditions). The monks practiced the two *dhuras* according to local traditions, but not in a formal centralized manner. They studied Pali, Dhamma and Vinaya, on palm leaf manuscripts under the guidance of a *dhammacarya* (Dhamma-teacher), who could be a monk or a lay teacher. The monk practiced *vipassanadhura* whether individually in the form of *Samadhi kammattana*, or in group retreats usually during the Rains Retreat (*vassa*).

The Thudong monk, or forest monk, way of life includes certain ancient traditions that emphasize (1) Presence and attention to observance days; (2) discussion of Dhamma on observance days; (3) Meditation (*bhavana*) on a daily basis; (4) destroying the impediments; (5) searching for suitable places for meditation; (6) searching for Kalyanamitta (teacher); (7) Learning the 40 *khammathana* meditation subjects.

The thirteen *dhutanga* (ascetic practices) are practiced by forest monks in Cambodia, though now the austere practices are no longer as prevalent as before. The civil war in Cambodia was devastating to the forest monks tradition of Cambodia. Also, young men often become monks to attain an education or escape poverty, and are not interested in the ascetic practices and meditation traditions today.

“According to Cambodian beliefs, this type of monk is called Thudong (Lok Tudong) if they live in the forest, mountains, or far from the cities. People believe that Tudong monks are obliged to practice austerity, one of which is to be honest, and as a result of that are protected from harm if they encounter by chance any wild animals such as tigers, elephants, or poisonous snakes. Thanks to purity in practice and conduct they are assisted and protected by the divinities and ‘honest’ spirits (*neak saccam*). Also, if practice Thudong, one must have a calling and must renounce the world, paying no heed to one’s own life.”

Traditionally, the thudong monks would gather at a well-known wat which specialized in meditation and study under a specialized meditation teacher. They practiced either *samathakhammatan* or *vipassanakhammatan*. Sometimes the practice of *Samadhi* happened in the forest wilderness or in the mountains far from cities, calm and quiet places conducive to the practice of *vipassanadhura*.

In traditional custom, the three-month Rains Retreat was dedicated to meditation; not retreats

throughout the year as is the practice today. Wat Ang Praleung in Oudong District, Kompong Speu, was one such meditation center formerly covered with dense forests, the abode of many kinds of wildlife such as elephants and tigers. However, the jungle cover has disappeared and meditation can no longer be practiced there today.

The Khmer-Lao wandering monks were revered by the traditional people as especially potent “fields of merit” or powerful spiritual presences. In their bodies, they contain potency, vitality.

The sacred knowledge (Dhamma) is held in their bodies, through memorization of chants and ceremonies, and observations of precepts.

The memorization of gata is more than simply magic spells. It is the inward transformation that comes from learning “by heart” – “embodying” – the words of the Buddha, Dhamma. The chants, words, teachings give “protection” (*paritta*) –

invulnerability. The invulnerability and protection of the Dhamma is Nibbana.



Knowledge is built up in layers within the body – for example through traveling to distant places, pilgrimages, visiting gurus (teachers), ordination as Buddhist monks who have time and opportunity to accumulate attainment – Enlightenment.

Monkhood is attainment of knowledge as experience, knowledge is power.

Traveling masters (lok thudong) have attained much more potency and knowledge (*vijja*), and are able to influence and benefit others. The adept must have not only rational knowledge, but be attained, i.e. be transformed by that knowledge, be virtuous by observing the Buddhist precepts. The adept maintains balance between mind and external objects (equanimity, equilibrium). He is able to embody, incarnate, enlightenment.

These were not written scriptures. They were spoken sounds in Khmer-Pali. They were heart-to-heart (mind-to-mind) transmissions. Theravada Buddhist monks are united not by a written scripture, but by a chanted sound.

In the body of the adept thudong monk, this sacred knowledge (enlightenment) can cross boundaries, is portable. The Lao Ajahn Lee, for example, was a deeply informed by this “potency” vitality aspect of Buddhist practice.

Phra Paisal, abbot of Sukhato Forest Monastery in Chaiyaphum Province of Thailand criticized the modern attitude that dismisses the ancient traditions. He criticized that modern-rationalist Buddhism has a lot of information, but lacks the sacred (*saksit*). This word *saksit* comes from Sanskrit *sukti* meaning status and *siddhi* (power). As Phra Paisal explains, “The sacred here refers to that which is beyond the five physical senses, and it is inaccessible and unexplainable by more rationality, but which, nonetheless, can be attained or realized by the mind. It is a quality of power that those who access it can receive and benefit from. It is a refuge or security for those who believe. Its dynamism is beyond social codes and is comprehensible to the untrained mind. The ways to realize it are diverse, just as there are many ways of conceiving of it.”