

## **Meditations on the Foul in Thai Manuscript Art**

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### **Introduction**

Meditation is an essential part of Buddhism. Texts on meditation form a small but important fraction of canonical as well as post-canonical literature. Meditation aims to develop mental discipline and to cultivate a wholesome, awake state of mind which eventually expands to practice of the Dhamma. It is regarded as a world-renouncing activity and, sometimes combined with chanting and visualization methods, helps to reach a mental state of happiness or delight (*pīti*) that is one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (*satta bojjhaṅgā*), which apart from happiness include mindfulness, investigation, effort, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

Happiness in the Buddhist sense, however, is not to be misinterpreted as a state of individual happiness or temporary emotional contentment. Happiness cannot be self-centered or selfish in the Buddhist context. It is rather a peaceful state of mind that has overcome all desire (*taṇhā*) and attachment to worldly things, situations, persons and even one's own body, which are the principal causes of suffering (*duḥkha*). *Duḥkha* is often described as suffering or emotional pain, but it also refers to the effects of impermanence and change, as well as conditioned states of the mind; referring to the human mind that is dependent on, or affected by, something/someone or an event/situation. Meditation is one powerful tool to overcome conditioned states of the mind by focusing in different ways on the body, on emotion, on the conscious mind as well as unconscious states of the mind. Common methods are contemplation of the breath and body movements, contemplation of a meditation device like an image (for example image of a Buddha in *samādhi* posture, mandala drawing, yantra design, mosaic, painting), or an object (for example Buddha statue, *kaṣiṇa*/meditation disc, candle flame, water, beads, a natural object, or the empty space between two objects), but also contemplation of sounds and smells in order to reflect on one's own senses and emotions. To advance their meditation skills, monks can choose to enter an unfavorable or polluted environment to practice meditation, where they are exposed to unpleasant temperatures, darkness, harmful animals, as well as disturbing smells and noises. Examples of such places are (tropical) forests, caves, mortuaries or cemeteries (charnel grounds). The theoretical foundations on the latter can be found in Buddha's discourse on the practice of mindfulness (*Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*). Buddhaghōṣa, a 5<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist scholar active in Sri Lanka compiled extensive commentaries on major texts of the Pali canon, including texts on meditation. His commentaries are constantly used and quoted in Southeast Asian Buddhist countries where his *Visuddhimagga* is regarded as the principal text on meditation. (Shaw 2006, p. 5)

### **Meditations on the foul in Thai manuscript art**

Meditations on the foul, or morbid meditations, may be the most efficient of all meditation practices that aim to overcome conditioned states of the mind, attachment

to the world and to one's own body, and emotionality - particularly the emotion of disgust which is perhaps one of the strongest human emotions.

The highest state of meditation is reached when both attraction and repulsion cease to exist. *“In the arahant, there is neither liking nor disliking: he regards all things with perfect equanimity, as did Thera Maha Moggallana when he accepted a handful of rice from a leper.”* (Francis Story)

The method of meditation on the foul belongs to the earliest teachings of Buddhism, as laid down in the before mentioned Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which in the Theravāda tradition forms the tenth discourse in the Majjhima Nikāya. Navasivathikapabbam, the section of the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta on the “nine charnel-ground observations”, gives detailed explanations of meditations on the nine states of decay of the dead human body.

Meditations on the foul were widely practiced in Thailand. It is a topic that is very well documented in Thai manuscript painting of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many manuscripts containing the popular story of the monk Phra Malai include one or more scenes of morbid meditations. Phra Malai is the well-known legend of a Buddhist monk who is believed to have travelled to heavens and hells by his acquired merit and the power of meditation. These manuscripts were often commissioned by families of deceased persons as funeral presentation books or commemoration volumes. The Thai, Lao and Cambodian Collections of the British Library hold over 20 such manuscripts, all of them beautifully illustrated with scenes from the monk's encounters and his teachings to the lay people. But not only Phra Malai manuscripts contain illustrations of meditations on the foul. There are also other manuscripts containing small collections of extracts from the Pāli canon or post-canonical texts that are illustrated with scenes of monks meditating on the foul. Manuscripts containing pictures of all nine or, according to Buddhaghosa, ten types of meditations on the foul are relatively rare, compared to manuscripts that include only one or two such paintings. However, looking through a variety of manuscripts, it is possible to find depictions of most of the nine or ten types of morbid meditations.

### **Illustrations of meditations on the foul according to the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta**

The oldest manuscript in the British Library collections dealing with meditation is actually just a fragment of a folding book dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The manuscript, as far as one can see from the fragment in Pāli language written in Khmer script, deals with various states of knowledge, or levels of insight. The illustrations in this manuscript seem to be similar to a 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscript that was found in Chaiya (Surat Thani Province) and described by Achārya Buddhādāsa Indapaṇṇo (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu 1969, pp. 68-93). Another comparable but more extensive manuscript in Sinhalese script from Sri Lanka, though without illustrations, was described by T. W. Rhys Davids as a “Yogavacara's manual of Indian mysticism as practiced by Buddhists” (Rhys Davids 1896).

The illustration below on folio 4 of the British Library manuscript depicts a Buddhist monk contemplating the unavoidable exposure of the human body to suffering, here shown as illness and death. The latter is symbolized by the bloated corpse by the riverside. Until the early Bangkok period, the Thai practiced a variety of methods to treat the physical remains of the dead: they cremated or buried their dead, dropped the corpses in rivers, or fed them to vultures before the leftovers were cremated if the deceased wished to offer his body to wild animals.

Buddhadāsa Indapañño explains this scene as follows: “Auf dieser Wissensstufe hat man die Einsicht, das alle Seinsgebilde die Ursache des Elends sind, die man daher stets fuerchten soll, als wenn man einem Loewen begegnete. Der Leichnam am Boden erinnert den Uebenden daran, in welchem Ausmass das Leben dem Leiden unterworfen ist.” (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu 1968, p. 75) (Translation: At this stage of knowledge one has the insight that all forms of being are the cause of suffering, which one should fear as if one met a lion. The corpse on the ground reminds the exercising person to which extent life is subject to suffering.)



Manual of a Buddhist mystic on meditation practices (yogāvacara).  
British Library Or.14447, fol. 4

This illustration also refers to the first of the nine charnel-ground meditations according to the Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta, describing the observation of the bloated, blue-black and festering corpse.

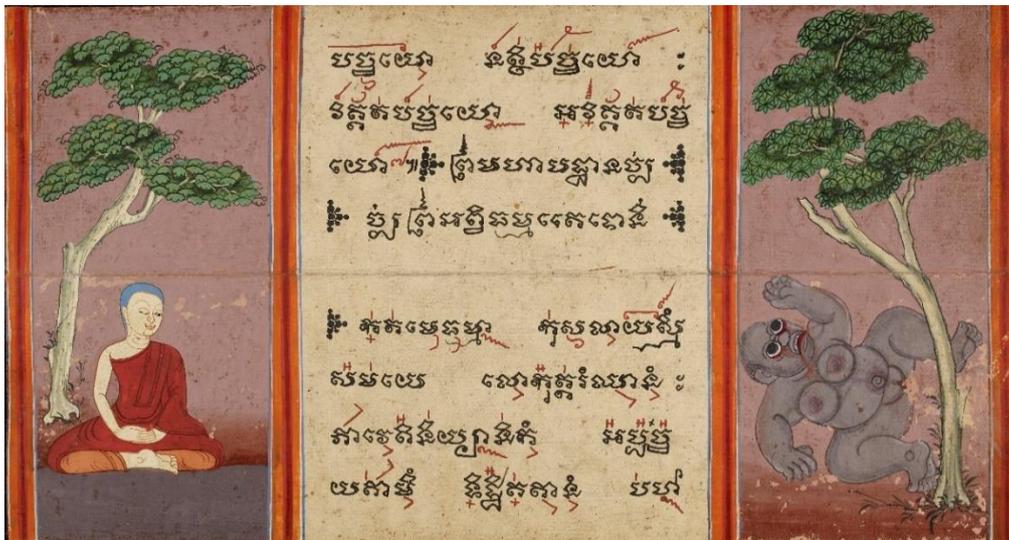
**1) Bloated, blue-black and festering corpse**

*Puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ ekāhamataṃ vā dvihamataṃ vā tīhamataṃ vā uddhumātakaṃ vinīlakaṃ vipubbakajātaṃ. So imameva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanattīto’ ti.*

*Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a dead body that has been thrown in a charnel-ground, dead for one, two or three days, swollen, blue and festering, regarding his own body considers thus: “Indeed, this body is of the same nature, it will become like that and cannot escape it.”*

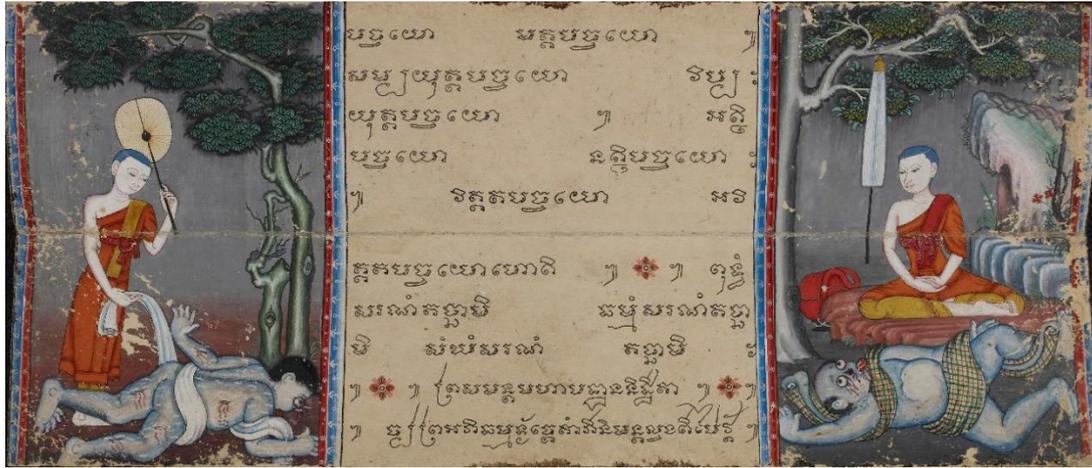
(Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (Pali-English version):  
<http://www.tipitaka.org/stp-pali-eng-parallel> )

Meditation on this first stage of the decomposing human corpse is among the most frequently depicted scenes of meditations on the foul in Thai manuscript painting. Such illustrations often follow a similar structure: there is a bloated, blue or festering corpse on the ground, usually with bulging eyes and a painful facial expression. Sometimes the corpse is partly covered with a piece of cloth, but usually it can be identified to be a female or male corpse. Shown either in the same painting or in a separate painting on the same folio is a monk, either in sitting or standing meditation. Near the monk one can usually see a tree, but often the corpse is also placed near a tree as shown in the illustration below from a central Thai folding book from the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century containing a selection of extracts from the Tipitaka together with twenty pairs of illustrations depicting scenes of various meditation methods, teaching of monks or novices, illness and death, and scenes of traditional healing methods. The texts may have been chosen for the purpose of recitation at a funeral or memorial service as the recitation marks in red color suggest.



Extracts from the Tipitaka, British Library Or.13703, f. 14

Another frequent appearance is the combination of two opposite paintings, one of them showing a meditation on the foul scene, the other depicting a scene where a monk pulls the *pamsukula* cloth that is wrapped around the corpse. The *pamsukula* cloth, according to the Mahāvagga, can be used as a robe by monks.



British Library Or.14838, fol. 7

The illustration above is from a 19<sup>th</sup> century central Thai manuscript containing the legend of the monk Phra Malai together with extracts from the Tipitaka. The painting on the right side, again, shows a monk in sitting meditation, but this time included in the same painting is a blue-greyish, bloated corpse. This time, the monk is shown with some of his utensils, including a meditation mat, alms bowl and folded umbrella. On the opposite side, the monk pulls the *pamsukula* cloth from the corpse with his right hand while holding his fan in his other hand. This act is an important part of traditional Thai funeral rites and is often seen as a method of transferring merit to the deceased in practical Thai Buddhism. The second method of charnel-ground meditation is explained as follows:

## 2) Corpse gnawed by wild animals

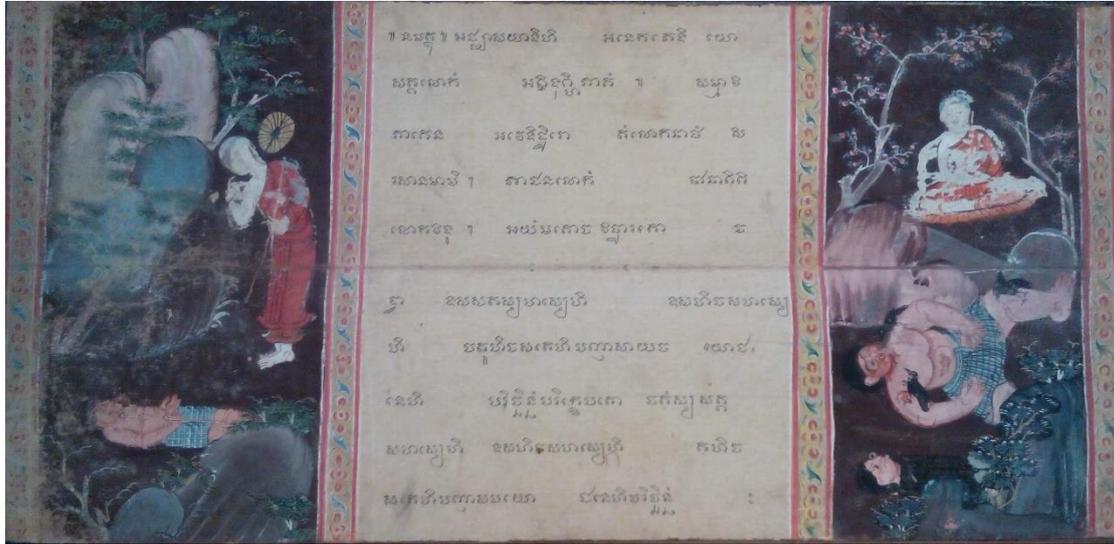
*Puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ kākehi vā khajjamānaṃ kulalehi vā khajjamānaṃ gijjhehi vā khajjamānaṃ kaṅkehi vā khajjamānaṃ sunakhehi vā khajjamānaṃ byagghehi vā khajjamānaṃ dīpīhi vā khajjamānaṃ siṅgālehi vā khajjamānaṃ vividhehi vā pānakajātehi khajjamānaṃ. So imameva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanatīto’ ti.*

*Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a dead body that has been thrown in a charnel-ground, being eaten by crows, being eaten by vultures, being eaten by falcons, being eaten by herons, being eaten by dogs, being eaten by tigers, being eaten by leopards, being eaten by jackals and being eaten by different kinds of creatures, regarding his own body considers thus: “Indeed, this body is of the same nature, it will become like that and cannot escape it.”*

(ibid.)

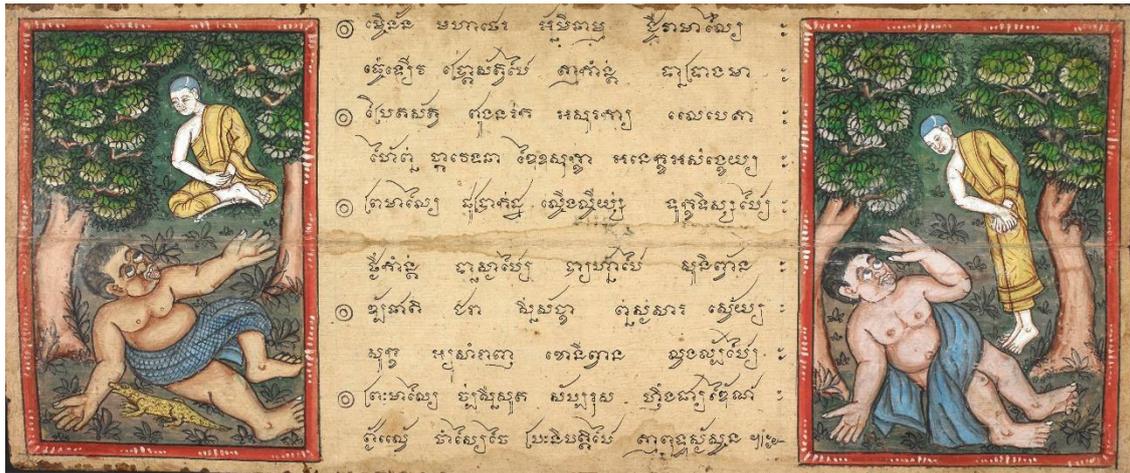
Scenes of this method can be frequently found in Thai manuscript illustration, too. Often stray dogs or black colored birds, perhaps crows, can be seen gnawing on the corpses. In the Thai tradition, it was regarded as an act of merit if the dying person dedicated the flesh of his dead body to wild animals. Sometimes funeral assistants were hired to cut off the flesh from the skeleton to make it easier for the wild animals to feed on it. A report from the May 1866 edition of the Bangkok Recorder explains: “The

corpse was first to be offered to the vultures, a hundred or more... the sexton seemed to think that he too was making merit by cutting off parts of the body and throwing them to the hungry dogs, as the dying man had done in bequeathing his body to these carrion-feeders. The sexton gathered up the skeleton and put it back into the coffin, which was lifted by four men and carried around the funeral pile three times.” (Bradley 1884, p. 267)



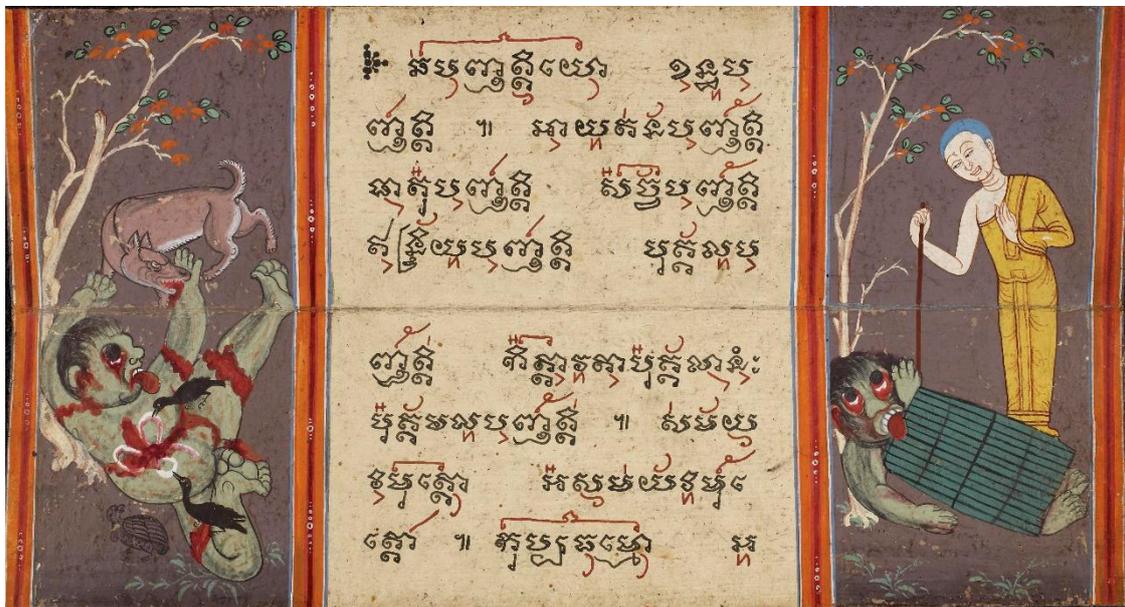
British Library Or.15372, f. 28

The illustrations above are from a central Thai folding book dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century containing the legend of Phra Malai with a selection of short texts from the Tipitaka. On the right side, a monk is sitting in meditation in front of two corpses: one is bloated with bulging eyes and crows feeding on it. The other corpse is wrapped in a cover woven from long bamboo sticks and cotton rope. On the left side, a monk is practicing meditation while standing in front of a corpse that is bound by one long cotton string from the legs going up to the hands and neck. This was part of traditional Thai treatment of corpses which also helped to keep corpses in shape that had to be fitted in a seated position in large urn-like containers before they were driven on a carriage to the cremation ground. However, also smaller wild animals were used to illustrate this type of meditation as shown in the image below, which again is from a 19<sup>th</sup> century central Thai manuscript containing the legend of Phra Malai and short extracts from the Tipitaka. While the monk in the painting on the right side stands in meditation by a bloated corpse, on the left side the monk is practicing meditation in front of a bloated corpse that is chewed on by a small reptile. This is a relatively rare variance from the usual representation of dogs and wild birds in such meditation scenes.



British Library Or.14559, f. 81

Another example of wild animals that could mangle a corpse is shown in the already mentioned central Thai manuscript with extracts from the Tipitaka, Or. 13703 from which the image below originates:



Extracts from the Tipitaka, British Library Or.13703, fol. 9

These two illustrations show two corpses, one being eaten by a dog, black birds (representing crows or vultures) with a tortoise nearby; the other corpse is wrapped in a sheet made from bamboo sticks, with a monk touching the wrapped body with his walking stick while rapt in standing meditation. The third method of morbid meditations is described in the section on meditation on a skeleton with flesh, blood and sinews.

### 3) Skeleton with flesh, blood and sinews

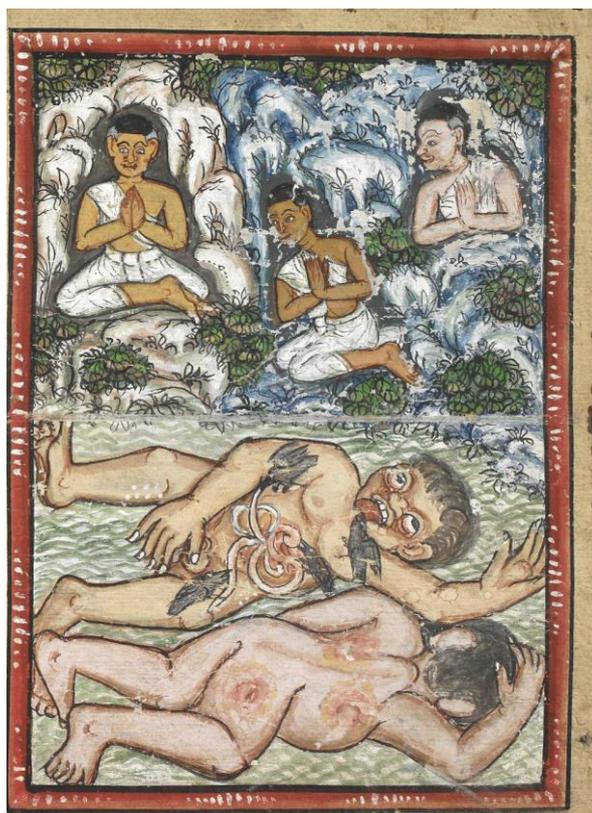
*Puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chadditaṃ aṭṭhikasankhalikaṃ samaṃsalohitaṃ nhārusambandhaṃ. So imameva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃnatīto’ ti.*

*Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a dead body that has been thrown in a charnel-ground, reduced to a skeleton with some flesh and blood attached to it and held together by tendons, regarding his own body considers thus: “Indeed, this body is of the same nature, it will become like that and cannot escape it.”*

(Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta (Pali-English version)

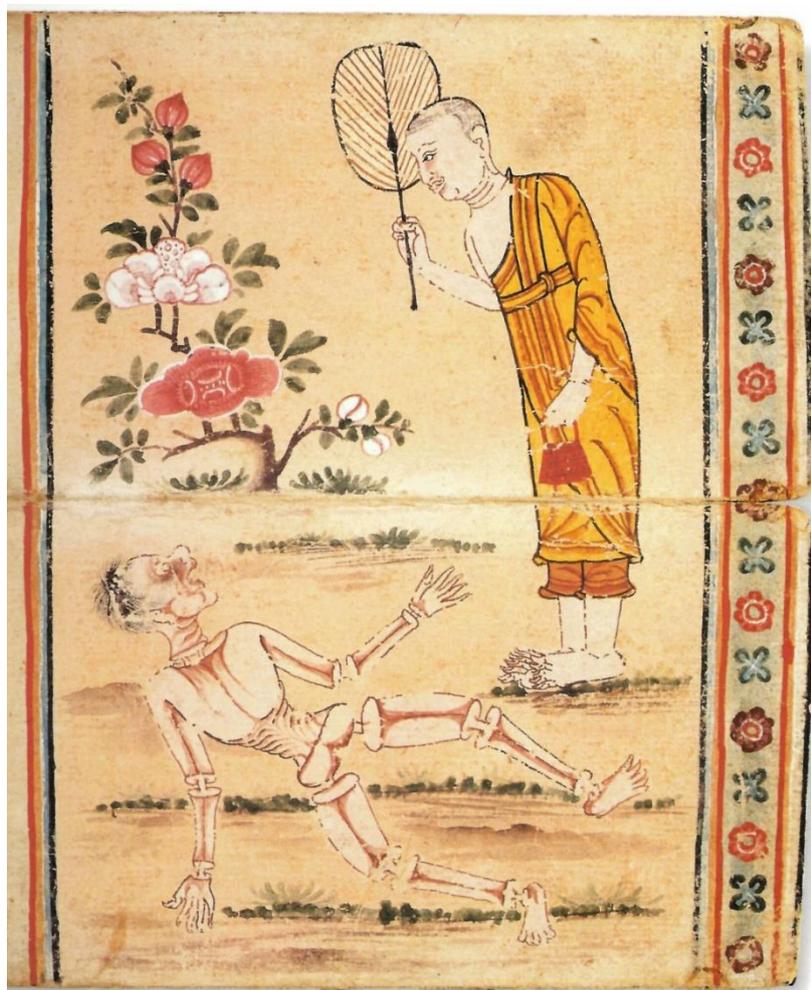
<http://www.tipitaka.org/stp-pali-eng-parallel> )

Illustrations of further decayed or partially destroyed corpses appear less frequently in Thai manuscript art. Where such paintings exist, the corpse usually is still complete with flesh attached to the bones, but it could be torn open with the innards hanging out. One illustration (seen below) in the above mentioned Phra Malai manuscript from the 19<sup>th</sup> century depicts three lay people meditating over two corpses of people who have been killed in the final battle of humans against humans before the coming of the future Buddha Metteyya. One of the corpses is torn open, clearly showing the intestines which are being eaten by dark-grey colored birds. The facial expression on this body appears very painful, with one bird pulling at the tongue.



Phra Malai manuscript, British Library Or.14559, fol. 73

In Thai manuscript painting, meditation on the foul is not reserved for monks alone. Frequently one can find lay people practicing morbid meditation, particularly in manuscripts containing the story of Phra Malai as this is one popular scene in the legend. Some older manuscripts with paintings in the Ayutthaya style also sometimes show morbid meditation scenes involving hermits or ascetics. Caves play an important role in the history of Thai Buddhism, not only as places for meditation but also as hiding places for Buddhist relics during times of war and political conflict.



Manuscript from Wat Suwannaphum, Changwat Suphanburi  
(Source: Samut khoi 1999, p. 377)

A manuscript found at Wat Suwannaphum, Changwat Suphanburi, that contains extracts from the Abhidhamma Pitaka is illuminated with a variety of paintings in the Ayutthaya painting style. One folio is illustrated with scenes of two monks, one of them pulling the *pamsukula* cloth from the corpse and the other, shown in the image above, is standing in meditation in front of a corpse in further decay, only with sinews and some of the flesh remaining. The corpse is no longer bloated, but rather dried up especially around the area where the intestines would have been located. The explanations regarding meditations on the foul continue in the *Navasivathikapabbam* of the Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta with:

#### 4) *Skeleton stripped of flesh, but with blood and sinews*

Puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu  
seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya  
chadditaṃ aṭṭhikaṃkhalikaṃ  
nimamsalohitamakkhitaṃ  
nhārusambandhaṃ. So imameva kāyaṃ  
upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo  
evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanātīto’ ti.

Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a  
dead body that has been thrown in a  
charnel-ground, reduced to a skeleton  
without any flesh but smeared with blood  
and held together by tendons, regarding  
his own body considers thus: “Indeed,  
this body is of the same nature, it will  
become like that and cannot escape it.”

(Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta (Pali-English version)  
<http://www.tipitaka.org/stp-pali-eng-parallel> )

...and, though no matching illustrations could be found as examples from Thai manuscripts, further on:

#### 5) *Skeleton without flesh and blood, but sinews*

Puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu  
seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya  
chadditaṃ aṭṭhikaṃkhalikaṃ  
apagataṃsalohitaṃ  
nhārusambandhaṃ. So imameva kāyaṃ  
upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo  
evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanātīto’ ti.

Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a  
dead body that has been thrown in a  
charnel-ground, reduced to a skeleton  
without any flesh or blood, held together  
by tendons, regarding his own body  
considers thus: “Indeed, this body is of  
the same nature, it will become like that  
and cannot escape it.”

(ibid.)

The sixth section of the *Navasivathikapabbāṃ* describes details of meditation on scattered bones, which is illustrated in several central Thai manuscripts from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The text goes on as follows:

#### 6) *Scattered bones*

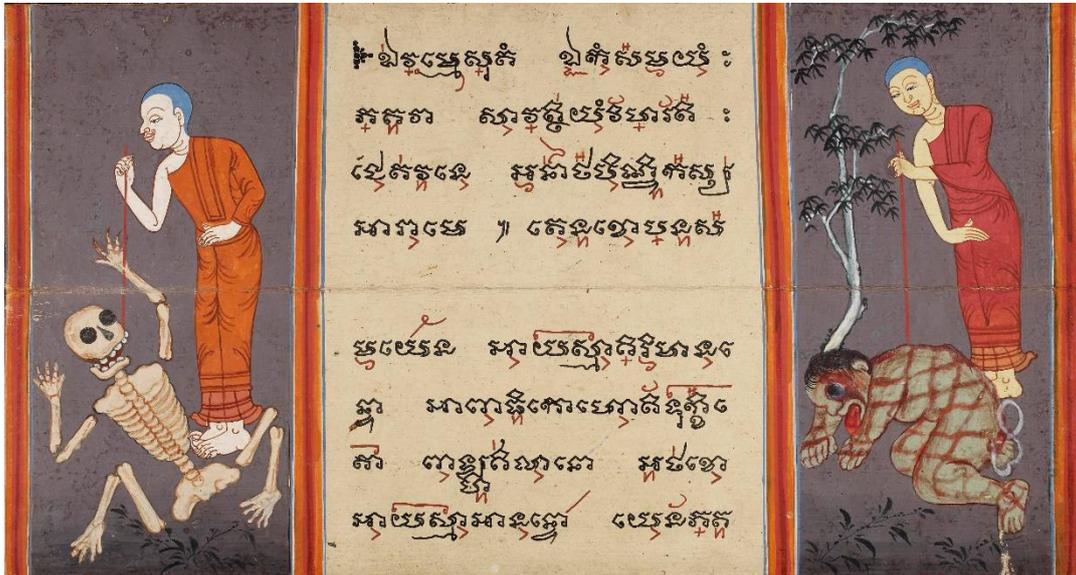
Puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu  
seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya  
chadditaṃ aṭṭhikāni apagatasambandhāni  
disā vidisā vikkhittāni, aññena  
hatthaṭṭhikaṃ aññena pādaṭṭhikaṃ aññena  
gopphaṭṭhikaṃ aññena jaṅghaṭṭhikaṃ  
aññena ūruṭṭhikaṃ aññena kaṭiṭṭhikaṃ  
aññena phāsukaṭṭhikaṃ aññena  
piṭṭhiṭṭhikaṃ aññena khandhaṭṭhikaṃ  
aññena gīvaṭṭhikaṃ aññena  
hanukaṭṭhikaṃ aññena dantaṭṭhikaṃ  
aññena sīsakaṭṭhikaṃ. So imameva kāyaṃ  
upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo  
evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanātīto’ ti.

Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a  
dead body that has been thrown in a  
charnel-ground, reduced to disconnected  
bones, scattered in all directions, here a  
bone of the hand, there a bone of the foot,  
here a bone of the ankle, there a bone of  
the knee, here a bone of the thigh and  
there a bone of the pelvis, here a bone of  
the spine, there a bone of the back, again  
there a bone of the shoulder, here a bone  
of the throat, there a bone of the chin,  
here a bone of the teeth and there a bone  
of the skull, regarding his own body  
considers thus: “Indeed, this body is of

the same nature, it will become like that and cannot escape it.”

(ibid.)

The image below is from the aforementioned central Thai manuscript (Or.13703) dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> or late 18<sup>th</sup> century which contains a selection of extracts from the Tipitaka.



British Library Or.13703, fol. 35

The pair of paintings show monks standing in meditation while touching with their walking sticks a bloated corpse bound with red rope in seated position (right side) and a scattered skeleton (left side). Again, this expresses the Thai belief that the act of touching a corpse or skeleton with a rope or a stick during meditation can transfer merit from the monk to the deceased person. The following two sections of the *Navasivathikapabbam* concern more advanced states of decay of human bones and include:

**7) Bones white like sea shells**

Puna caparam, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīram sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ aṭṭhikāni setāni saṅkhavaṇṇapaṭibhāgāni. So imameva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanaṭṭito’ ti.

Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a dead body that has been thrown in a charnel-ground, reduced to bleached bones of conch-like color, regarding his own body considers thus: “Indeed, this body is of the same nature, it will become like that and cannot escape it.”

(ibid.)

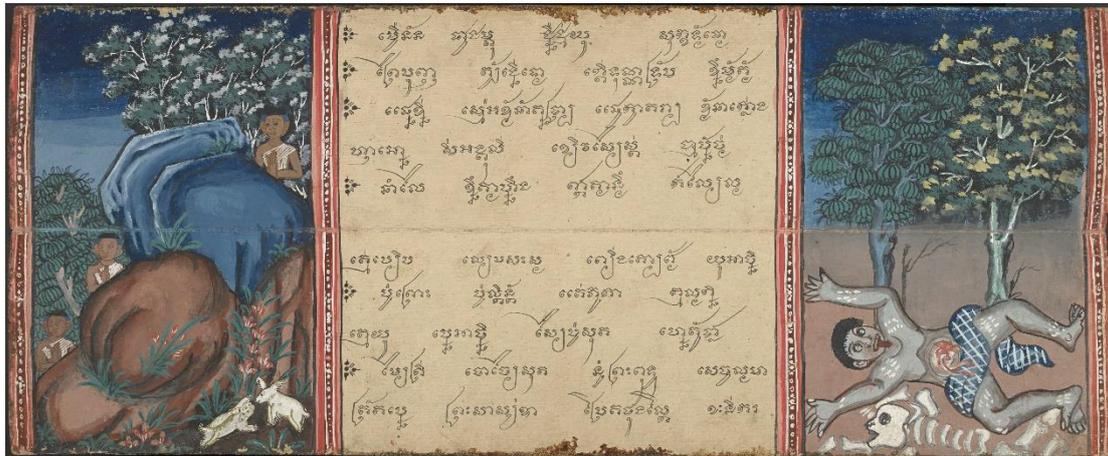
**8) A heap of bones**

Puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ aṭṭhikāni puñjakitāni terovassikāni. So imameva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanattīto’ ti.

Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a dead body that has been thrown in a charnel-ground, of bones that are piled up in a heap more than a year old, regarding his own body considers thus: “Indeed, this body is of the same nature, it will become like that and cannot escape it.”

(ibid.)

Illustrations involving further decayed human bones are rather rare in Thai manuscript painting, though not completely absent. The pair of paintings in the image below is from a 19<sup>th</sup> century central Thai manuscript that covers the legend of Phra Malai in combination with some selected texts from the Tipitaka.



British Library Or.14664, f. 79

On the left side one can see once more the popular scene of lay people meditating in the wilderness, here hiding between huge rocks from the ongoing fight of humans against humans. The painting on the opposite side shows one bloated corpse with parts of the bowel hanging out, and by its side a heap of white bones, though the shape of a skeleton is still perceptible. The last part of the *Navasivathikapabbam* describes meditation on the final stage of bone decay, that is:

**9) Powdered bones**

Puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ aṭṭhikāni pūtīni cuṇṇakajātāni. So imameva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: ‘ayaṃ pi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanattīto’ ti.

Again, monks, a monk, when he sees a dead body that has been thrown in a charnel-ground, the bones having rotted away to powder, regarding his own body considers thus: “Indeed, this body is of the same nature, it will become like that and cannot escape it.”

(ibid.)

Manuscript paintings illustrating this method of meditation could not be found in the consulted materials. The reasons why some sections of the *Navasivathikapabbam* are not at all or only rarely illustrated in Thai manuscripts remain speculation due to the fact that 19<sup>th</sup> century or earlier painters hardly ever revealed their names nor did they provide any written explanation of their works. However, one explanation may be that perhaps from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on Buddhist cremation rites became more and more widespread and eventually replaced traditional Thai/Tai burial methods in earth or water. The availability of corpses in a further decayed state therefore became scarce.

### **Illustrations of meditations on the foul according to the Visuddhimagga**

Buddhaghosa, in his *Visuddhimagga*, worked out certain amendments to the meditations on the foul. He described the object of meditation, the human corpse, in ten different forms which to some extent are similar to the explanations in the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta* (Shaw 2006, p. 103). Each of the ten forms of morbid meditations described by Buddhaghosa are illustrated in one central Thai manuscript that has been discovered in Chaiya (Surat Thani Province). Its creation date was estimated to be in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although the painting style has some elements from the Ayutthaya period. It could be possible that this manuscript is a copy of an earlier original. In the Thai manuscript tradition, heavily used and worn out manuscripts were re-produced in order to preserve their contents. The manuscript seems to be a rare example of illustrated manuals which were used to explain Buddha's teachings. Most of the paintings are highly metaphoric and require special insider knowledge in order to be interpreted.

The following ten forms of meditations on the foul, also called *asubha-kammaṭṭhāna*, are illustrated in the above mentioned manuscript. The explanations were provided by Achārya Buddhādāsa Indapañño.

#### **1) *Bloated corpse* and 2) *Blue-black corpse***



*“This image shows two corpses: the bloated corpse (uddhumātakam) on top and below the corpse that has changed its color from green to dark blue (vinīlakam). This type of meditation shall lead the monk to insight towards the impermanent nature of the own body.”* (in: Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu 1969, p. 57)

**3) Festering corpse and 4) Corpse with cracked skin**



“At the top we see a festering corpse (*vipubbakka-jātam*), and below a corpse that is cut open (*vicchiddakam*). Both serve the purpose of contemplation of the foul.” (ibid. p. 59)

**5) Corpse gnawed and mangled and 6) Corpse cut to pieces**



“The corpse in the upper part of the image is called *vikkhāyita*, which means that it is being gnawed and eaten by dogs. The second one is known as *vikkhitta*, which describes a corpse that has been mutilated and destroyed because it was left to the wild animals and to adverse weather conditions.” - (ibid. p. 61)

7) Mutilated corpse and 8) Bloody corpse



“The corpse at the top is called *hatavikkhattaka*: the corpse was cut badly with a sword. The corpse at the bottom is called *lohitaka*, smeared with blood and festering.” - (ibid. p. 63)

9) Corpse infested with worms 10) Skeleton



“The corpse in the upper part is being eaten by worms (*puḷuvaka*), and of the corpse in the lower part of the picture remain only the bones (*aṭṭhika*).” - (ibid. p. 65)

In this series of manuscript illustrations only four of the meditating figures are dressed as monks, the others have the appearance of hermits or ascetics, and particularly the latter represent the Ayutthaya painting style.

## Conclusion

In most cases, the meditation scenes in Thai manuscript paintings depict one monk (in the context of the legend of Phra Malai this could be the monk Phra Malai himself) sitting or standing in meditation near one or more decaying corpses. The monk sometimes has his paraphernalia like a fan, an alms bowl, an umbrella or a walking stick.<sup>1</sup> In practice, the walking stick fulfils various purposes: to scare away small animals when the monk is walking to avoid harming them, or to provide support during standing meditation, but sometimes the monk can be seen touching a corpse with his walking stick which is believed to be a method to transfer merit to the deceased during the process of meditation on the foul.

The artists have always paid great attention to detail when it comes to the facial expressions of the meditating monks, which consistently show calmness, peacefulness and kindness. There is never a sign of disgust, fear or distress. This may be the artists' way to express what Achārya Buddhādāsa Indapañño put into words as follows: "*True renunciation is only achieved when one has overcome all desire and attachment; because it is not the (worldly) things that are attached to us, but our attachment to (worldly) things.*" (ibid. p. 55) The facial expressions of the meditating monks could be interpreted as an artistic visualization of *pīti*, the Buddhist concept of happiness.

The corpses of the dead are mostly shown bloated and in a blue, black or greyish color, often with wounds discharging blood and pus, wide bulging eyes, and in various states of decay. Sometimes animals can be seen feeding on the corpses. The condition of the corpses is used in manuscript paintings to illustrate one particular method of meditation on the foul as described either in the Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta or in Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga.

In Thai manuscript paintings, not only monks are shown practicing meditation on the foul, but also hermits or ascetics. The story of Phra Malai often includes a scene where the monk teaches the lay people what he has heard from the future Buddha, Metteyya, about the future of mankind: while violent humans would kill each other, those who follow the Dhamma – lay people and monks alike - would be hiding in caves meditating, and in some cases practicing meditation over corpses, until the fighting and murdering is over and Buddha Metteyya is coming.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: This could also suggest that the setting for the episode is not a temple, but a forest, since these requisite-items are taken out when the ascetic is roaming. If he is residing in the temple, many items are left in his residence (kuti).

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